



The Forgotten Warriors



The group pictured above is a typical view of Civil War veterans, gathered to reminisce about the great conflict of long ago. In almost every way, this group of men from Connecticut resembles any other gathering of comfortable and confident veterans from the War Between the States. Except for the man at the far left end of the second row. Look closely at his face. To this day, his identity remains unverified. But he is clearly a person of Asian ethnicity.

Asians in the Civil War

A small group of part-time historians has made a startling discovery: Asian Civil War soldiers. Motivated by a desire to establish a personal connection with America's past, these researchers have traded information over the internet and uncovered something long ignored by the deans of the profession. The great American conflict gathered up immigrants from China, Hawaii, the Phillipines, India and elsewhere in Asia.

Confusing names and spotty enrollment data make it hard to determine for certain the

ethnicity of many soldiers. Asians often mustered in to the armed forces using anglicized names. But researcher Terry Foenander has identified on his website perhaps as many as 200 Asian Civil War soldiers. See www.tfoenander.com/asians.html.

Asians were found on both sides during the war. Some fought in the war's bloodiest battles. Many Asians joined the U.S. Navy, which had a tradition of ethnically diverse sailors even before the Civil War.

Asians in America

The swelling economic power of Europe and the United States in the 1800s allowed western influence to spread throughout Asia. The growing sea power of the West forced open once-isolated trading markets in China and Japan. American ship captains were frequent visitors to the leading Asian ports and were thoroughly at home in those exotic cities.

In the United States, the expanding economy created a pressing labor shortage. Meanwhile, the long, slow decline of the Chinese Empire, burdened with a vast population to feed, persuaded some Chinese to emigrate.

In the years just before the Civil War, the gold mines of California drew thousands of Chinese immigrants. Many of these immigrants ended up working on western railroads. While the Chinese migrants solved a labor shortage, their presence generated a racist backlash among many Americans.

In 1880, the governor of California declared a legal holiday for state residents to attend anti-Chinese protests. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 outlawed the immigration of all Chinese and prohibited them from becoming

U.S. citizens. Due to this law, Chinese Civil War veterans could not legally gain U.S. citizenship. The Exclusion Act was not fully repealed until 1943, when China was fighting as an ally of the United States in World War II.



This Thomas Nast cartoon from 1879 is entitled, "Every dog (no distinction of color) has his day." The caption reads: "Red gentleman to yellow gentleman, 'Pale face 'fraid you crowd him out, as he did me'."

Courtesy of Jeffrey P. Magout

Library of Congress

Edward Day Cohota

In December 1845, a Massachusetts ship captain sailing out of Shanghai discovered two little Chinese boys aboard. One died at sea. The other was raised by Captain Day as his son and named Edward Day Cohota. Cohota was the name of the ship on which the small boy was found.

The touching and dramatic story of Cohota's life has been documented by researcher Ruthanne Lum McCunn.

Raised in Gloucester, Mass., Cohota enlisted in the Union Army in 1864 in his early 20s. He fought in the bloody battles of General Grant's



Edward Day Cohota

Virginia campaign of 1864. At Drewry's Bluff in Virginia, Cohota survived the battle unscathed despite seven bullet holes through his clothing. At the battle of Cold Harbor, he saved the life of a comrade by hiding the wounded soldier behind a rock. After the war, he re-enlisted in the Army, served for 30 years, married and had six children.

Cohota always believed in the government's promise that Civil War service automatically qualified a veteran for citizenship. Then, when he applied for a homestead in 1912, he was told that "he was not a citizen of this country and could never become a citizen."

He repeatedly pressed for his rightfully earned Army pension. Cohota spent his final years at a veterans' home in South Dakota, where he routinely stood "uncovered and at attention with reverence and respect" for the lowering of the U.S. flag.

Cohota died in 1935 in his early 90s. He had finally obtained his Army pension. But due to the Exclusion Act, he was never granted citizenship.

Joseph Pierce



Courtesy of the Michael J. McAfee Collection

In the chaos of Imperial China, a small boy ended up aboard the ship of Connecticut sea captain Amos Peck. Re-named Joseph Pierce (for President Franklin Pierce), the young boy was raised as a son in the Peck's home.

At about 20 years old, Pierce joined the 14th Connecticut Infantry and fought through some of the war's bloodiest battles, including Antietam and Gettysburg. As researcher Gordon Kwok wrote on his website, "What motivated Joseph Pierce to enlist to fight in the Union Army, to risk his life for a country that was not [the one of] his birth, where racial prejudice was far more openly manifested than it is now?"

Promoted to corporal, Pierce returned to Connecticut after the war, where he became an engraver. He married, had four children and died in Connecticut in 1916 at age 73. His life is chronicled on the internet at www.cof14thcvi.com/Joseph_Pierce/Joseph_Pierce.htm.

The Pride Lives On

Many of the researchers on Asian Civil War soldiers are themselves of Asian heritage. They are interested both in American history and Asian contributions to that history.

Irving Moy is a good example. "I am of Chinese ancestry and my interest in Joseph Pierce stems from my interest in the American Civil War," Moy writes on his website. "As the son of immigrants, I lay claim to the inheritance from the Civil War. As an American, I am proud to be able to share in this chapter of its history." Researcher Gordon Kwok maintains an excellent website about Asian Civil War soldiers at <http://sites.google.com/site/accsacw>.

In July 2008, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution belatedly recognizing the contributions of Asians as soldiers during the Civil War. Asian soldiers in the Civil War personify one of the war's enduring legacies--that of individual strength and perseverance in the face of great adversity. It is this legacy that continually inspires new generations of Americans.



Courtesy of Karen Purrone

Irving Moy stands proudly at the newly re-dedicated grave of Joseph Pierce at Walnut Grove Cemetery in Meriden, Conn.