

## Placer County Men and the Recruitment and Supply of Chinese Workers

Many of you are familiar with the sign over the door of the replica storefront in the Gold Rush Museum that says "Egbert's Store." But who was Egbert? John Knox got interested in the Egberts when researching some background on Gordon Chang's book, *The Ghosts of Gold Mountain*. Chang gives the Egbert brothers connection to Chinese railroad workers just a brief notice, but it turns out that they and other Placer County men were much more influential in recruiting and supplying Chinese labor than Chang had any idea about. The research for this article comes mainly from John's sixty page resource paper. It is available at the Archives or digitally upon request.

### Beginning with the Egbert Brothers

There were four Egbert brothers, John, Robert, Oliver, and Haines. The first three brothers arrived in Illinoistown, or Alder Grove as it was then called, in the winter of 1849. Robert Egbert and his brothers took over the business of Mayhall and White and soon "had a cabin filled with miner's supplies and were ready to trade in those or any other articles going." Haines joined them in 1852. *T & W p. 357 – 1852 census-Sacramento Daily Union 27 Aug. 1911*

The brothers soon opened a hotel in conjunction with their trading post. The California Stage Company made a regular stop at the hotel. *PH 29 Sept. 1855 - Sac Daily Union 24 Aug. 1854*

The Egberts also had a store in Iowa Hill. It burned in the huge fire of 1857 and the Egberts sustained losses of \$3,500. That would be over \$100,000 in today's dollars. By 1861 Robert Egbert was in partnership in Illinoistown with William Wallace and John Craig as wholesale and retail dealers in "groceries, provisions, wines, liquors,(sp) mining tools, &c, &c." It is notable that the population of Illinoistown in 1860 was 692, of those 535 were Chinese. At this very early stage the Egberts must have had a close relationship to the Chinese in Placer County that would later serve them well. *Placer Co. Directory 1861 – 1860 census - T & W p. 391*

When the Sacramento, Placer and Nevada Railroad was completed to Auburn Station, at the present-day location of Auburn-Folsom Road and Whiskey Bar Road in Loomis, in 1862, Egbert & Company were quick to join other merchants building warehouses and running stage and teaming lines. *T & W p. 275*

In 1865, the Central Pacific Railroad made its way to the new railroad town of Colfax. It was reported the "Messrs. Egbert & Co., of Illinoistown, are erecting a large fireproof brick on Front Street. This building still stands on what is now called Main Street, right across from the railroad tracks. It was the first brick building in the new town.

*PH 14 Oct. 1865 - Colfax Record 17 Aug. 2011*



Egbert and Company were busy in the late 1860s. They were running mule trains loaded with supplies connecting the Pioneer Company stage line with mines in the upper Sierras. More importantly though, Egbert, mainly Robert, was involved with Albert Sisson and they were contracted by the Pacific Railroad Company to recruit Chinese laborers to work on laying the tracks for the ever-growing railroad line. Egbert and Sisson began bringing in Chinese workers, hastily erecting stores and bringing in all the supplies that the workers might need. They moved up the tracks bringing in goods and selling to the workers. As more and more workers were needed, Sisson and Egbert recruited Chinese from mainland China, put them on the steamship the *John L. Stephens* that they owned and transported them to California to work on the tracks. *Sac Daily Union 14 Feb. 1868 - Sac. Daily Union 27 March 1868.*



*Chinese workers building a cut and a bank at Sailor's Spur in the Sierra foothills for the Central Pacific Railroad in California, 1866.*

For some background on the family: the brother's father, John Egbert Senior had a saw mill and grist mill in Indiana, so likely the young men grew up knowing how mills worked. *Biographical & Historical Record of Kociusko Co. Indiana p.706*

**John Wadsworth Egbert**, born in New York in 1824, was reported to have been a soldier in the Mexican war, but that is unsubstantiated. He did go to California with his brothers in 1849, leaving behind a wife and son in Indiana. John married his second wife in Sacramento in 1857. He didn't stay long in California and returned to Indiana in 1865. He ran a saw mill and grist mill like his father and was also the sheriff of Elkhart County. He died in Indiana in 1893. *20<sup>th</sup> Century History of Elkhart Co. Indiana pg.. 596 - Census*

**Oliver Perry Egbert**, born in New York in 1827, was with his brothers John and Robert, on the trip to California in 1849. He also didn't stay put for long and in 1851 went to southern California where he bought cattle and then drove them back to Solano County. He then had a store in Rio Vista and had a large ranch running cattle. Oliver retained an interest in Egbert and Company in the supply of Chinese railroad labor. He would later be known for the huge land reclamation projects he directed and was one of the largest land owners in Solano County. He died in 1902 in Rio Vista. *History of the State of Ca. and Biographical Record Coast Counties p. 436 - Census - findagrave*

**Haines Lewis Egbert**, the youngest brother, was also born in New York in 1833. Little is known about this brother. but he was in Placer County in 1852. In 1860 he was in Solano County as a stock raiser, and by 1870 he was in Rio Vista, Solano County near his brother working as a stock dealer. He died in 1914. *Findagrave - census*

**Robert Seeley Egbert** was born in New York in 1825. Robert was the brother most notable for activities in Placer County. When the brothers, Robert, John and Oliver, first arrived in California, they tried mining but failed to find a fortune in that line of business. They quickly began to "mine the miners" by selling supplies at their store in Illinoistown then in Colfax when the railroad came through. As a young man in Placer County, Egbert helped Theodore Judah map out the route for the Central Pacific over the Sierra Mountains. When the railroad arrived, Robert began recruiting local Chinese to work on the railroad and erecting temporary stores along the route of the railroad to keep the Chinese workers supplied. Later, his company would venture far and wide to recruit workers. This part of Egbert's life is little noted but his involvement with Albert Sisson and William Wallace was hugely important in the building of railroad tracks all over California. See more on the Chinese labor importing business later in this article. Robert Egbert must have had close ties to people in Auburn as several are involved in his business ventures and in 1869 he, along with Auburn residents John and Harriet Crandall, Mrs. Judge Hale and Capt. S. B. Woodin, all made the trip together, by rail to the East Coast. Robert was also associated with his brother Oliver in the cattle and ranching business in Solano County and eventually moved to a large ranch in Rio Vista. He died in 1896. *History of the State of Cal. and Biographical Record of Coast Counties p. 1304-ancestry - census, S. F. Examiner 21 Nov. 1888 - Stockton Independent 17 April - PH 18 Sept. 1869*

**Albert W. Sisson** was also an early Placer County pioneer. He too came from New York where he was born 1828. He crossed the Plains and was supplying miners from his store at Taylor's Ravine, south of Auburn, in 1858. He married Bridget Sherry in 1859. He held a mining claim with Jacob Neff near Colfax in 1871. Later, he had a large ranch near Rocklin. He was shipping cattle to the Golden Gate Fair in 1884 and in that same year he was buying Cavalry horses in Reno. He died in 1888. By the time his estate was settled in 1890 his worth was estimated at almost \$500,000. That would be about 14.5 million in today's money. He modestly listed his occupation in the census reports as "grocer." J. H. Strobridge, the superintendent of the Southern Pacific Railroad was a pallbearer at his funeral.

PH 16 Dec. 1871 - Daily Alta California 18 March 1890 - S. F. Examiner 21 Nov. 1888 - Census - 30 Aug. 1884 Oakland Tribune-4 Oct. 1884 Weekly Nevada State Journal

**William Henry Wallace** was also a Placer County pioneer and in 1853 kept a hotel called the Mountain House on the Auburn-Illinoistown Road, close to Colfax. He was also a clerk for Egbert and Co. Eventually the partnership of Sisson, Wallace and Crocker (Clark, a brother of Charles Crocker of the Big Four) had a monopoly on recruiting Chinese laborers and supplying them with goods. They also advanced money to the builders of the Central Pacific. By 1880 Wallace and his wife Emeline (whose father ran a hotel near Colfax in the 1850s & 1860s) lived in San Francisco with their children, a coachman, a chambermaid and a cook. Wallace died at the early age of 52, in 1881, his widow, Emeline Brickell Wallace would sue the company revealing how the whole system of recruitment worked. One fascinating tidbit about Emeline Brickell Wallace was her attendance and graduation from the University of the Pacific in Santa Clara in 1858. Quite an unusual feat for a young woman at the time.

Truckee Republican 5 Oct. 1881 - PH 23 July 1853 - geni.com - Visalia Times 26 May 1896- ancestry.com - census

Albert Sisson is the man leaning on the post on the far right. His wife is standing next to him. Notice the Yosemite Falls in the background, right above the lady in the dark dress. Casual attire?

Taken June 7, 1873





**Samuel Speedy** was born in Ohio in 1830 and was still there in 1850 when he was 20 years old. He appears in Auburn in the 1860s and not yet married to Mary Catherine Salsig. By 1862 he was buying land in Auburn and during the 1860s he established himself in the butchering business in town. He has several partners, Weimer, Palmer, Siefert, but mostly is involved with Metcalf Dodsworth. Samuel and Metcalf would soon establish themselves as the main suppliers of pork and beef to the Central Pacific Railroad Company from their very beginnings in Sacramento until they reached Ogden Utah. He married Mary in 1867. Sam was also maintaining a meat market in Auburn in the 1870s. By 1880, the Speedy family were in Los Angeles where Sam was in partnership with Dodsworth, Sisson, and Wallace in the Los Angeles Pork Packing Company. Speedy and Dodsworth were also held together by way of family ties as their wives were sisters. In 1888 there is a sad story titled "Became A Slave to Drink" in the *Los Angeles Examiner* telling the tale of the dissolution of the Speedy marriage. In spite of the showplace home they had in East Los Angeles, after Sam sold out of the business with Dodsworth in 1884, he took to drinking. His wife banished him to Phoenix, Arizona hoping he would reform. She sent him \$3,000 (why she had control of the family finances is unclear) and he returned to Los Angeles. Unfortunately his "libations began again, and when intoxicated, he is said to have added brutality to his other shortcomings. Mrs. Speedy has now filed a suit for divorce, and means to push it." Sam died in 1910 in Kern County. It is a little unclear when Sam died, findgrave lists 1910 but in 1895 Mary is listed in the Los Angeles Directory as widow of Samuel. When she died in 1901 there was no mention of Sam in her obituary. findagrave.com - *Los Angeles Herald* 2 Nov. 1881 - 12 June 1883, *Los Angeles Herald* - 9 Aug. 1883 *Weekly Republican - Placer Herald* 19 May 1888, 1875 *Auburn Directory* - Census - 1895 *Los Angeles Directory* - PH 14 Nov. 1874 - PH 16 Oct. 1868 - *Daily Alta California* 23 April 1867 - *L.A. Herald* 21 Dec. 1901

**Metcalf Dodsworth** was born in 1828 in England. He and his family were in Ohio by 1850 and he was mining on the South Fork by 1852. In 1860 he was a butcher living in Auburn in the American Hotel. In 1861 he was working as a butcher for George Bishop of the Traveler's Rest. During the later 1860s he and various partners including Sam Speedy were supplying the Central Pacific with meat. It appears that Sam specialized in cattle while Metcalf raised and butchered hogs. In 1866 he sold his old stock yard to the IOOF and it is now part of the Old Auburn Cemetery. Metcalf married Awilda Salsig, sister of Mary Catherine Salsig Speedy. The Dodsworths would eventually move to Los Angeles where Metcalf was again in business with Speedy and Sisson and Wallace in the Los Angeles Pork Packing Company. A newspaper article in 1880 describes the packing company as a large operation employing some 40 men and shipping pork products all over the country. The partnership changed hands at a dizzying rate. In 1883 Dodsworth owned it with William Wallace's widow Emeline. By 1890 Dodsworth was out of the pork packing business and was owner of the Hendricks Ice and Cold Storage Company. Another newspaper article described Dodsworth as a "Los Angeles Millionaire" at the time of his daughter's wedding at their mansion in 1890. The newspaper stated that "until they built a big house in Los Angeles, the 'elite' of the city cut them dead, when they occupied their fine mansion, the Dodsworths became a social power." It is unclear what happened but soon after the heralded wedding, Dodsworth was selling all kinds of property all over Los Angeles and finally in 1892 Dodsworth was so insolvent that he lost the title to his mansion to Mrs. Clark Crocker for debts owed. Dodsworth died in 1898.

findagrave.com- census - Deed Bk M p. 725 4-21-1866 - 1861 *Directory* - *Los Angeles Times* 12 Oct. 1882 - *Pacific Rural Press* 3 April 1880 - *Argus* 29 March 1890 - *S.F. Call* 5 April 1892 - *L.A. Herald* 12 Oct. 1883

**Henry Kohn and Henry Kind** were both in the Placer County area when the railroad was making its way through. They were dry goods merchants in Auburn and San Francisco in the 1860s. Not much is known about these two men. Henry Kind shows up in census rolls as being born in Bohemia and in his mid-twenties when he had the store in Auburn. Henry was married in Colfax to Eliza Lobner in 1874 and then he and Eliza and his brother Jonas show up in 1880 in Eureka, Nevada. Eureka was a boom town with a population of almost 10,000 in 1878 but today has a population of 480. Henry Kohn, also born in Bohemia, was in San Francisco in 1870 selling dry goods and in 1880 working as a furrier. The claim to fame for these two men is two-fold. First, in 1865 they bought the entire town of Colfax that had just been laid out by the Big Four of the Central Pacific Railroad. The deed shows Charles Crocker selling the town plat to Kohn and Kind for a stunning \$17,500.00! About \$285,000 in today's money. A huge amount for two dry goods salesmen. It turns out that these two were also involved in selling supplies to the Chinese workers on the Central Pacific Railroad and made a huge sum of money. There is a court case with an incredible inventory of goods that Kohn and Kind sold to Ah Coon and the Lun Yek and Company, contract suppliers to the railroad. The bill for three months came to \$16,360. (\$215,000) with a commission of \$820.00 to Kohn and Kind about \$13,300 today. If they were doing that kind of business regularly, it is no surprise they could afford to buy the town of Colfax!

Deed Bk. L. pg. 424 - District Court Case Sept. 30, 1865 - census - ancestry.com - PH 29 July 1865



All these Placer County men were involved in supplying the railroad with workers and supplies and all became very wealthy, at least for some time. This local involvement in the process of supplying the railroad has been little known until John Knox got curious!

### **Chinese Labor and Supplying the Railroad Workers**

Initially, there were enough Chinese available locally to provide workers for the railroad. But by 1867 and 1868, Egbert was recruiting Chinese from the Marysville and Red Bluff areas. Soon, the demand was so great that Egbert and Company were recruiting Chinese directly from China. *Marysville Daily Union 12 May 1867, Sac. Daily Union 1Feb. 1868*

Although they were not directly paid for furnishing the Chinese workers, the various configurations of the original Egbert Company (the company) were guaranteed by the railroad companies that "the company" had the monopoly on supplying food, clothing and tools. "The company" was allowed to charge the workers as much as possible for their goods and the Chinese workers were mandated to buy "from the company store" only. The prices they charged were outrageous, a sack of rice that would normally sell for \$3 to \$3.50, the company sold for \$4 to \$6. Boots that would sell for \$2.00, the company would sell for \$5 to \$7.50 a pair. The Chinese would be fined if they tried to buy merchandise elsewhere and the fines withheld from their pay. Sometimes the fine was a hefty \$20 in gold. On the railroad, the payroll was paid directly to Sisson, Wallace & Company. They retained the amounts due them from the Chinese for supplies then paid out the remainder to the foreman of the Chinese gangs.

*5 July 1883 S. F. Examiner - 20 Feb. 1881 Weekly Independent - 19 Feb. 1873 Nevada State Journal*

Sisson, Wallace and Crocker had saw mills and mills for burning coal for charcoal for use in mining silver. In the high Sierra they had Chinese workers cutting thirty-thousand cords of wood annually for the railroad companies. The Chinese were involved in teaming and providing services in restaurants, boardinghouse, hotel and laundries. The Chinese workers also constructed and operated flumes. The company had a packing company in Los Angeles, (Auburn residents Metcalf Dodsworth and Samuel Speedy were copartners in the packing company) and a salmon trading and fishing post in Klawock Alaska, the first in the state. "The company" provided Chinese laborers for the salmon cannery in the first years of its operation. "The company" had extensive land holdings in Tulare, Nevada, Placer, Sierra and Los Angeles Counties in California, property in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. To get an idea of the amount of money to be made from these enterprises, after the death of William Wallace, his widow, Emeline, sued the company and testimony showed that the importation of 1,800 Chinese would bring a profit of \$450,000 to the company, some 14 million in today's dollars. The company imported thousands of Chinese workers. In one year they brought in 6,000 workers from China and realized a profit of \$10 per month for each man. Alfred Sisson even acknowledged that it was "not exactly a legitimate business."

*LA. Herald, 2 Nov. 1881, PH 13 April 1872 Alaska's first Cannery, Klawock by Pat Roppel AHS blog, Chinese in the Woods by Sue Fawn Chung, trial testimony in Wallace et al v Sisson et al.*

The extent of the little firm that started in Illinoistown in Placer County grew to be a monopoly engaged in recruiting Chinese labor, running merchandise stores to supply those workers, running saw mills, lumber companies, charcoal businesses, packing companies, cattle companies, hotels, and on and on.

Here are some of the known enterprises of the Egbert, Sisson, Wallace Company and Sisson, Wallace Company and Sisson, Crocker Company over the years.

- 1861 Store in Illinoistown and teaming business
- 1864-1869 Chinese workers to build the Central Pacific Railroad
- 1866 Brick store in Colfax, Pacific Saw Mill, Cape Horn Saw Mill
- 1870 Store in Truckee
- 1871 Palasade Store
- 1872 600 Chinese burning charcoal in Truckee
- 1872 Store in Pleasanton
- 1872 Timber business in Truckee
- 1873 Warehouse in Corrine, Utah
- 1873 Chinese workers to build Texas branch of railroad
- 1874 Coal mines and merchandise store in Ogden Utah
- 1875 Store in Winnemucca area
- 1875 Chinese workers at Tehachapi Canon
- 1875 Store in Sacramento's Chinatown
- 1876 Chinese workers at San Fernando Railroad tunnel
- 1876 Store at Colorado Station near Fort Yuma
- 1877 Store on railroad cars on Colorado River
- 1877 Timber Company in Truckee
- 1878 Cannery in Klawock, Alaska
- 1878 Cannery on steamship
- 1878 Timber logging on federal land on Mendocino Coast



1880 Chinese workers on Southern Pacific Railroad in Reno area

1881 Chinese Strike in Arizona against Sisson, Crocker & Company

1881 Chinese workers at Texas Railroad for Sisson, Crocker & Company

1881 Moving village with store on rails in Texas

1881 Pork packing plant in Los Angeles

1881 Hot Springs Hotel in Lake Tahoe

1882 Stores in Sacramento, Truckee, Mojave, Los Angeles, Yuma, Benson, Camp Rice, Terminal Station, End of Track, Galveston-San Antonio Railroad

1883 Butter production in Truckee area

1883 Warehouse in Tulare County

1883 Warehouse in Benson, Arizona

1884 Chinese workers on Oregon Branch of Central Pacific Railroad

1884 Sisson importing sheep and cattle from Australia to Oregon

1884 Chinese workers on railroad extension in Shasta County

1884 Two stores above Redding

1884 Store in Yuma

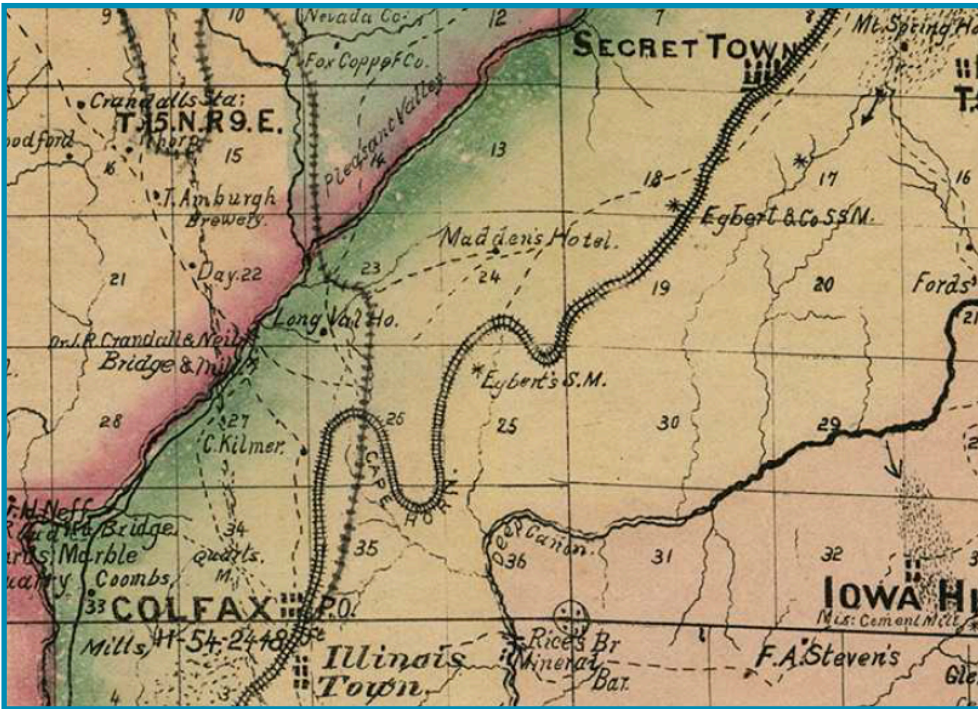
1884 Cattle at Golden Gate Fair

1884 Sisson in Reno buying Cavalry horses

1885 Store in Caliente

1887 Chinese laborers on O and C Railroad

1891 Store in Sacramento



Location of Egbert's two  
Mills on the 1868 Doolittle  
Map.

Ad for Sisson and Wallace & Co. from the Railroad  
Gazetteer - 1870

from CPRR.org





*Chinese laborers at work on construction for the railroad built across the Sierra Nevada Mountains, circa 1870s.*