

Oregon's Chinese focus of award-winning heritage project

The Columbia Press and news services

Emigrants from China were an essential part of rail expansion and other large public works projects in the United States during the 1800s.

The role of Chinese Oregians in the state's history is at the forefront of an archaeology project underway in the Cascade Siskiyou National Monument.

Buck Rock Tunnel, high in the mountains on Bureau of Land Management land, is being excavated by students from Southern Oregon University under the supervision of BLM Archaeologist Lisa Rice.

Rice has worked for years to increase public access to the rail tunnel – a project abandoned before completion – as well as awareness of the Chinese laborers who built it.

Rice, in partnership with Chelsea Rose of SOU, has hosted summer field schools for archaeology students. The immersive programs provide field experience excavating and preserving the tunnel and associated history. The site features a trailhead and kiosk with plans for interpretive signs that help connect visitors with the past.

The tunnel is one of several parts of the Oregon Chinese Diaspora Project. In April, the project was recognized with a 2020 Oregon Heritage Excellence Award. Renovation of the Astoria YMCA, unrelated to the diaspora project, also earned an award last month.

Contracted Chinese laborers began excavation of the Buck Rock Tunnel in August 1883.

Anti-Chinese sentiment began to grow and the federal Chinese Exclusion Act became law, restricting Chinese laborers from entering the



Above: A student holds an old whiskey bottle found last year.



Top right: How Black Rock Tunnel looks today.



Right: Chinese laborers working on the O&C line in 1880.

United States.

Work on Buck Rock ended in February 1884 when the Oregon & California Railroad Company exhausted its capital.

The rail line ultimately was finished with much fanfare in December 1887, but along a different route.

Long since abandoned, the 1,750-foot Buck Rock Tunnel was rediscovered in 1966 by Mark Lawrence, a BLM for-

ester. In 2014, the federal government purchased the surrounding land and added it to the BLM-administered Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument.

After acquiring the property, BLM began studying the tunnel and quickly recognized its historical importance.

Today, 135 years after construction ceased, Buck Rock Tunnel functions as a portal

TO LEARN MORE
More photos and the story of the Buck Rock Tunnel can be found at [facebook.com/notes/blm-oregon-washington/buck-rock-tunnel-portal-to-the-past/2617197001635416](https://www.facebook.com/notes/blm-oregon-washington/buck-rock-tunnel-portal-to-the-past/2617197001635416).

to other sites within the Chinese diaspora in Oregon.

Informational signs and a gravel parking lot now welcome visitors at the trailhead for the 4.5-mile trek to the tunnel.

From the parking lot, a steep climb along a logging road through a canopy of oaks – and, as the elevation increases, conifers – offers cross-canyon glimpses of the I-5 corridor and the rail line on the course it ultimately took.

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