



ORTH ADAMS HAD BEEN a peaceful community ever since it was incorporated as a village more than one hundred years before. And even though its character was trans-

formed from farming to manufacturing during the 1860s, when the population doubled to 12,000 residents and more than a dozen factories were built to meet the demands of Civil War contracts, North Adams' isolation from the urban centers of the East helped keep it rural. But on this late spring afternoon in 1870, possibly the first angry crowd in North Adams' history had gathered and was swirling around the last two cars of a train that had just pulled into the depot.

Inside those cars was a sight nobody in the town had ever witnessed: Oriental men, scores of them, peering fearfully out of the windows. Most residents of the town had never seen *one* Chinese face let alone a throng such as this. For although more than 60,000 Chinese resided in the United States at that time, only a few lived east of the Mississippi River, so few, in fact, that the 75 in the train comprised fully one-quarter of all the Chinese in the eastern United States.

But the truly astonishing matter was that these Chinese were not passing through on their way to Boston or New York, but instead had come to North Adams to live.

As armed constables cordoned off the platforms of the cars and the mob pressed forward — some people craning their necks curiously, others cursing and brandishing brickbats — the door to one car was flung open. Onto the platform stepped a bearded, ramrod-erect figure. Though his hands were empty, the pockets of his well-tailored coat bulged with pistols, six

in all. As soon as he emerged into the beams of smoky sunlight, the crowd fell silent. The man's keen blue eyes swept the sea of faces below him. Then he ordered: "Make way. I'm bringing these Chinamen off the train!"

There was no movement in the crowd, no reply.

An angry flush spread across the man's face. His neck muscles above his starched white collar bulged as he barked: "I said I mean to take these men to my factory."

Laughter rippled through the crowd. Somebody shouted: "Sampson, take those damned heathen Chinese back where they came from!"

Sampson shouted back: "I've hired these men to work for me. Make way! I'm coming through!"

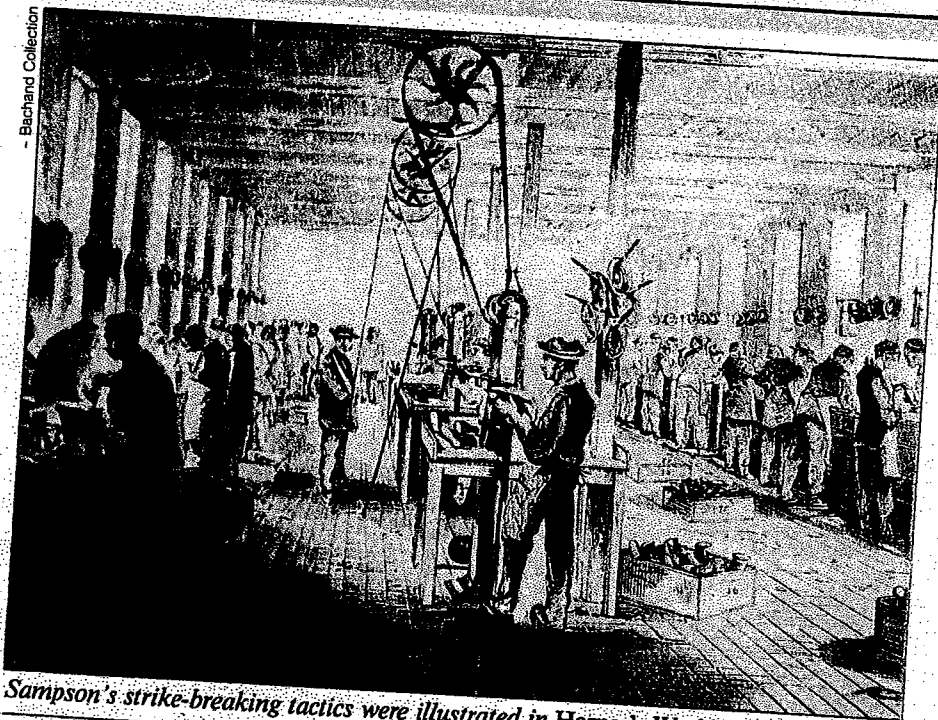
And with that, he bounded down the steps and into the crowd.

Certainly, jumping off that train into a hostile crowd was an audacious move, but then 44-year-old Calvin T. Sampson was nothing if not audacious. For it was only the most supreme kind of audacity that would allow this New England shoe manufacturer to resist a walkout at his factory (organized by the largest union in the United States) with one bold stroke, unprecedented at that time in the East: the importation of Chinese strikebreakers.

But Sampson, who grew up on a Vermont farm, was a driven man. The retail proceeds from his first shoe shop, though sufficient to provide him with a comfortable living, could not put enough distance between him and his farm upbringing. The substantial profits, he perceived, came not from selling shoes but from *making* them. In 1858 he purchased a two-story wooden building and began in a modest way to turn out women's shoes.

It was a fortuitous time to be a shoe manufacturer. Tariffs were high. The war to

In Sampson's factory men were paid \$1.70 per 10-hour day, women 90¢, and children, an abundant pool of labor, 50¢.



Sampson's strike-breaking tactics were illustrated in Harper's Weekly.

come would create an unparalleled demand for footwear. Cheap labor abounded. (Nearly one-third of the residents of North Adams were immigrants from Ireland and Scotland. In Sampson's factory men were paid \$1.70 per 10-hour day, women 90¢, and children, an abundant pool of labor, 50¢.) By the time he had purchased his second factory in North Adams in 1868, a spacious, three-story brick structure, the enterprising Sampson had become a wealthy man, the sole owner of an operation producing 5,000 shoes a day and employing some 600 full-time workers.

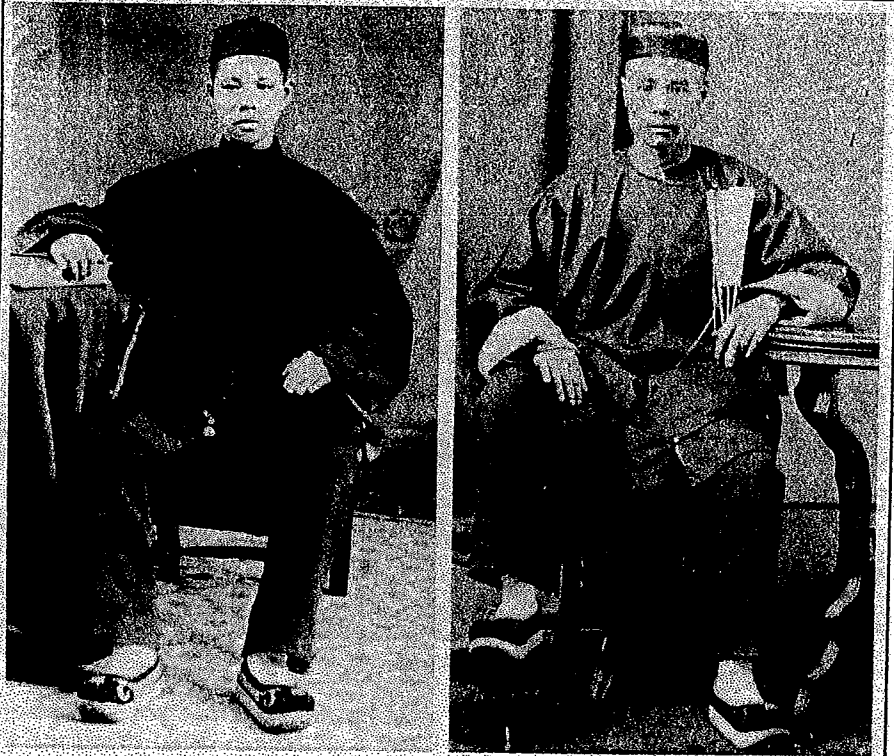
But embedded in his success were the seeds of labor unrest that would nearly come to prove his undoing. For example, in 1861, when he introduced a Wells pegging machine to fit the bottoms of shoes to

the tops, his workers walked out, declaring that the machines would circumvent the need for skilled labor. However, the ever-persuasive Sampson convinced the workers that the machines meant that more orders could be filled and thus more work made available; the workers returned to their benches. And of course, during the war more work was available. But after Appomattox, when the American labor market was flooded with young men mustering out of the army, men who could just as quickly learn to operate pegging machines as could a skilled hand-pegger, the power of Sampson's persuasive arguments was considerably dimmed.

Unlike the war years when unrest in the factory was scattered and unorganized, the postwar era's new economic climate of



Courtesy of North Adams Public Library



A local photographer, probably H.D. Ward of North Adams, made tintypes like the two shown above of a number of workers, perhaps to send to families in China.

falling demand and rising numbers of workers provided a fertile arena for what unbridled capitalists such as Sampson considered the supreme anathema: trade unionism.

And the luck of the draw went against Sampson in this regard. For it so happened that the nation's largest, most militant union formed after the Civil War was none other than a shoemakers' union: The Secret Order of the Knights of St. Crispin. Founded in 1867 to resist the use of unskilled labor on machines and to obtain fair wages, the Knights of St. Crispin organized a number of strikes and walkouts in

factories on both coasts.

By 1868 all but one of Sampson's workers in the bottoming room (where the pegging machines were utilized) were members of the union. When Sampson refused to accede to Crispin demands that he dismiss that worker, the union men walked out. For three weeks Sampson ran his factory with only one man in the bottoming room. However, eventually the man was beaten up so severely by the strikers that he refused to return to work. Undaunted, Sampson hired more nonunion workers, extracting their pledge not to join the Crispins. But by 1870, their pledges notwith-

As soon as the Chinese boarded emigrant cars bound for the East, Sampson ordered a wooden fence erected around his factory.

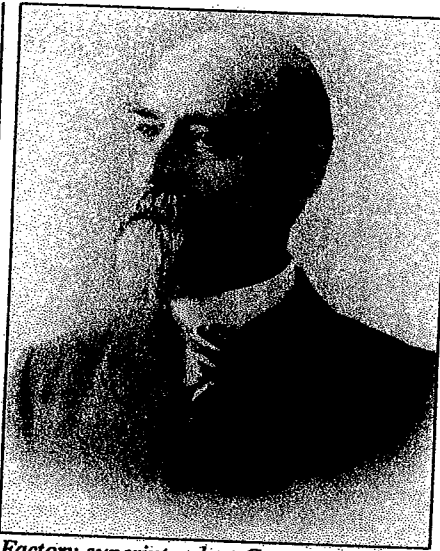
standing, all the workers in the bottoming room had taken the Crispin oath. Thus the stage was set for another clash between Sampson and the increasingly powerful trade unionists.

In the spring of 1870, when Sampson dismissed Crispin workers in the bottoming room, alleging that they were purposely turning out inferior work, the final act began. The Crispins struck, demanding an eight-hour day (the first time an American union had rallied for this demand), wages of two dollars per day, the right to dismiss employees who were delinquent on union dues, and finally (and most outrageously in Sampson's eyes) the right to inspect the manufacturer's accounts in order to adjust wages to profits.

Sampson's fierce temper rose to the occasion. He angrily fired all the Crispins in the bottoming room, then immediately wired Boston for workers to replace them. But no sooner had these men arrived in North Adams than a delegation of Crispins talked them into returning to Boston.

The meeting in Sampson's office during which the Crispin foreman broke the news that "the (Boston) men were not quite ready to go to work" was blustery, and it ended with Sampson bawling: "I shall just as surely enter a wedge that will destroy your order in five years." (Sampson was wrong. The union would not be annihilated in five years but in three.)

After the Crispins stormed out, vowing to continue the strike, Sampson removed a newspaper clipping from the drawer of his desk. The clipping described how Chinese labor was successfully being employed in San Francisco shoe factories. Stroking his beard thoughtfully, Sampson scanned the article once again, then walked straight to the office of his superintendent, George W. Chase, and said, "Chase, pack your bags. I want you to pre-



Factory superintendent George W. Chase was sent west to recruit the laborers.

pare to go to San Francisco tonight."

Till then, Chinese labor had been utilized exclusively in the territories and the states of the West. A writer for *Scribner's Monthly* magazine noted during the summer of that year that the Chinese in the West "have found employment in almost every branch of domestic and skilled labor and in some departments of agriculture. They do all the laundry work and make the cigars, lucifers, and paper collars for San Francisco. They are the best house painters, the most economical harness-makers, and the quickest carpenters and joiners in California; and the latest information represents that they have taken to making watches, displaying marvelous alacrity and delicacy of touch in handling the implements of the jeweler."

But the 1870 census lists only 368 Chinese living east of the Mississippi while 63,199 lived in the West. Apparently the

(continued on page 133)

- Courtesy of North Adams State College Library

CALVIN SAMPSON'S CHINESE EXPERIMENT

(continued from page 97)

cultural and monetary costs entailed in an eastward migration did not make it an attractive option for the Chinese.

In San Francisco, Chase was introduced to a Chinese employment agent. But for several days the agent refused to help Chase obtain Chinese laborers, prompting the frustrated Yankee to wire Sampson: "There are no Chinese to be had."

But Sampson wired back: "Wait till there are some."

As it turned out, the agent's evasion was a ploy to buy time during which Sampson's financial credentials were investigated. Concluding that the factory owner was both serious and capable of hiring the laborers, the agent struck a bargain.

Seventy-five Chinese from 18 to 28 years of age were recruited off the streets of San Francisco. (Actually, several hundred Chinese answered the handbill that the agent displayed outside his office, Chase being afforded the opportunity to select the ones he considered the fittest). Sampson paid a dollar per man to the agent's recruiting firm. He agreed to pay each man \$23 a month (half the pay that the Crispins were receiving before they struck) for the first year, and \$26 a month the second and third years of their three-year contract. In addition, Sampson paid for their train passage. Finally, he contracted to send back any man who died in North Adams to his home in China.

As soon as the agreement was concluded and the Chinese boarded emigrant cars bound for the East, Sampson ordered that a wooden fence be erected around his factory and that foodstuffs be stored on the grounds.

Feelings ran high in North Adams during the days that the train made its way across the continent toward New England. Workers in five other shoe factories in the town were staging sympathy strikes, and rumors of violence being planned against factories, their owners, and sympathizers circulated freely.

On June 13th Sampson received a wire that the emigrant cars had gone through Troy and in an hour or so would be approaching North Adams. After stuffing pistols in his pockets and ensuring that the 30 constables hired to meet the train were prepared to be deployed, he took a carriage to the next station up the tracks, boarded the train, then rode with its Chinese passengers into North Adams.

Certainly that moment when Sampson stepped off the platform of the emigrant car into the midst of the crowd was electric. Despite his pluck, Sampson surely must have entertained some doubt as to whether or not he could even get the Chinese off the train, let alone set them up in his factory. Sampson surely knew that the consequences of even a few drops of Caucasian blood being spilt upon that depot platform because Orientals had been hired to break a strike would have triggered profound reverberations across a nation already bitterly torn by racial strife. But at that moment he acted like a man who had no doubts at all. Stepping down into the crowd, he thrust open his coat, shoved his hand threateningly toward a pistol inside, clapped his free hand on the shoulder of the nearest man, and looking him squarely in the eye, growled, "Make way there. Stand aside!"

For a moment, the man stood firm. But then his eyes wavered. He dropped his head and stepped aside. Men behind him gave way, and Sampson led his Chinese off the train and to his factory.

For weeks after the Chinese were locked behind Sampson's factory gates, the residents of North Adams speculated not about *if* his operation would be burned to the ground by Crispin activists, but *when*. But there were no serious attempts at arson. Sampson and his lieutenants walked the streets with impunity, but some six months passed before the Chinese were allowed outside the gates.

All of the Chinese workers were quartered in a one-story building behind the factory. The quarters contained a kitchen, a dining room with wooden tables and

CALVIN SAMPSON'S CHINESE EXPERIMENT

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benches, and a dormitory resembling the steerage of a ship, lined as it was with three rows of wooden bunks, four tall and curtained for privacy. Behind the quarters was a small dirt area, "a playground" some journalists called it, where the men spent their leisure hours flying kites, playing games, and engaging in conversation.

As for work, the Chinese were employed in the bottoming room exclusively, all other work in the factory being done by nonunion North Adams residents. Dressed in work clothes of blue cotton overalls, cotton shirts, and thick-soled slippers, and overseen by Caucasian foremen, the Chinese labored at their work benches in teams of three or, singly, at the belt-driven pegging machines.

Though the Chinese had never worked on shoes before, they quickly picked up the knack. In the first few months they were taught by Sampson's skilled workers (who obtained \$75 a day for the purpose). At the end of the first three months, the 75 workers were producing more shoes than had been turned out by the same number of Crispins (120 cases as opposed to 110 per week). By producing shoes faster, the Chinese saved Sampson \$2 on each case.

During their first year in the factory, the workers saved Sampson some \$40,000. If similar savings had been applied industry-wide throughout the state, the yearly gross savings for shoe manufacturers would have been some \$3.5 million. It was clear that the use of Chinese labor could transform the industry.

Sampson's "Chinese experiment" quickly became a hot news item. One journalist wrote of the Chinese laboring at their benches in the bottoming room: "A few eyes are raised toward us, and there is a bewildering sensation, as if the population of an entire willow-pattern dinner service tranquilly turned and looked at us."

A *Harper's Monthly* observer wrote: "They look with long slit eyes turning up

at the ends as in the pictures in the earliest geographies that we remember. The general impression as we look around the room is that of extreme delicacy and effeminacy. The workmen do not seem to be men. They are generally small, and the breadth of face, with the flatness and fullness of nose in many of them, gives an inscrutable expression."

Curiously, the term journalists most commonly used in describing the Chinese was "celestials," as if these men had come to New England from the heavens.

But to many people the presence of Chinese in Calvin T. Sampson's bottoming room exceeded the exotic. On one hand commentators such as Wendell Phillips denounced the situation. He said: "The importation of human freight is an unmixed evil. That dollar now left after all the bills are paid on Saturday night means education, independence, self-respect, manhood. . . . The importation of Chinese labor seeks to take that dollar away from the working man."

On the other hand Frank Norton, writing in *Scribner's Monthly*, echoed the thoughts of a large segment of American opinion when he observed: "The introduction of skilled labor from China could not but be of the greatest possible advantage to the (American) culture." He added that the "advent into the West of the Heavens Chinese" would be the "final solution" to labor unrest in the United States.

Meanwhile, the editor of the prestigious *Harper's Monthly* tried to strike a more balanced view. "... there is no domestic life for the celestial shoemakers . . . no wives and sisters and daughters and sweethearts; and, of course, no country can be benefited by an increase of population without any domesticities. Labor that can contentedly live in this way is not labor for America . . ."

More fuel was injected into the fires of this debate when, a few months after the arrival of the Chinese in North Adams, a New Jersey laundry owner hired 68 Chinese workers from the same San Francisco agency to clean and press some 3,000 doz-

CALVIN SAMPSON'S CHINESE EXPERIMENT

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en shirts a week. The owner, an ex-sea captain, had consulted with Sampson and consequently simply fired all his regular workers in order to employ the Chinese.

Back in North Adams, the resentment that many citizens felt toward the Chinese workers lessened as the months passed. Some began attending local Sunday schools, so that by the time they celebrated their New Year eight months after arriving, they had established friendly enough relationships to provide a sumptuous banquet for their Sunday school teachers and other local lights.

It is doubtful the Crispins shared such warmhearted perceptions of the Chinese, but the union men did not while away their hours in idle resentment. Instead, they chipped in \$196 apiece and formed a small cooperative shoe factory.

Furthermore, the North Adams Crispins sent speakers to New York, Boston, and Albany labor rallies and a delegation to the National Labor Union Convention in Cincinnati to elicit support for the abolishment of Chinese labor in the East.

But despite the Crispin counterattacks, which included an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the Chinese to join their union, Sampson prevailed. The Chinese workers stayed on in Sampson's factory for the full three-year length of the contract. Sampson's bold stroke had shattered the Crispin organization in North Adams, a fact that became evident only a week after the Chinese arrived, when workers striking at the five other factories in town elected to return even though their pay was cut by ten percent.

The audacious Calvin T. Sampson had won. Afterward, he encountered no further serious labor unrest at his factory. As the unchallenged captain of shoe manufacturing in the region, he spent his remaining years in benevolent prosperity.

The Knights of St. Crispin did not fare as well. They endured two severe blows — one delivered by Sampson's hiring Chinese and the other imparted by the Depression of 1873 — and by 1874 the union had just about vanished.

As for the Chinese, their employment provided such a boon for Sampson that within a year after their arrival he hired another contingent, this one numbering 50. After the end of three years, many of the 125 Chinese returned to California or to their native land, some having saved upwards of \$2,000 each. Others stayed on, laboring side by side with whites and drawing pay equal to theirs. As the years passed and machinery was increasingly used in the factory, as union activities disappeared, and as North Adams workers replaced the Chinese who left the area, working conditions there gradually reverted to what they generally had been before the Chinese arrived.

Furthermore, the predicted deluge of Chinese into the East never materialized. On one hand, the hiring agency refused to send men to the major urban centers where the possibilities of their encountering violence were more likely than in North Adams. On the other hand, the net effect of Sampson's "experiment" was to turn public opinion against the Chinese. Even the most dollar-minded eastern factory owner was reluctant to risk imitating Sampson for fear of public backlash.

Overall, the *Harper's Monthly* journalist had been right: without family and community ties, the workers were not content to remain. In 1882, when Congress passed the Exclusionary Act barring Chinese immigration to the United States, there was only one Chinese worker in North Adams; he no longer labored as a shoe bottomer but as a gardener. So by the time Sampson died of diabetic complications in his home in 1893, there had been no Chinese in North Adams for nearly a decade; and the drama was nothing more than a memory. □ □