

Sampson's Chinese
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In 1870, the North Adams shoe manufacturer Calvin T. Sampson moved into a newly built factory on Marshall Street. Sampson was a businessman in the Old New England sense, hard-nosed and shrewd. His grandfather, on whose Stamford, VT farm he was born and raised, was a participant in Shay's Rebellion and fled to Vermont to avoid prosecution. When Calvin T. was a young man, a cousin hired him to peddle shoes, providing him with a wagonload. Calvin sold them so quickly, his cousin offered him a permanent job, but Calvin declined. Instead, he took his earnings and bought another wagonload of shoes, which he sold for his own exclusive profit. After selling shoes in this way for a time, he saved up enough money to open a shoe store, on Main Street in North Adams, and after a while, he began making shoes himself, in his back room. Eventually, he was able to open a shoe factory on Eagle Street, first on the corner of Center Street and later on the present location of the LaValley Oil Company. By 1870, he was rich enough to design and build a factory to his own specifications and move his operations into it. Sampson's (male) employees were members of the Knights of St. Crispin, the most powerful shoemaker's union in the country; indeed, according to some, the most powerful labor union in the country. No sooner had the company moved into its new quarters, the Crispins went on strike, protesting over low wages and the introduction of machines that would eliminate jobs.

Sampson's reaction to the strike was bold, imaginative, and focused national attention on North Adams. Everyone, in both labor and management, wanted to see the results of his gamble. Determined to break not only the strike, but the union as well, Sampson dispatched one of his managers, George W. Chase, to San Francisco, California with specific instructions. He was to recruit "scab" labor; strike-breakers. But not just any strike-breakers. On June 13, 1870, the train carrying Mr. Chase and the strike-breakers pulled into Union Depot. Sampson is alleged by some accounts to have greeted it wearing a pair of six-guns. Whether this is true or not, he was accompanied by a small army of private police, who would escort his laborers to the factory. The Crispins were out in force, determined to prevent the new recruits from getting off the train. According to the Rev. Washington Gladden, then minister of the First Congregational Church, the one thing that prevented violence from happening was curiosity. The laborers Chase had recruited were 95 Chinese coolies from San Francisco, so alien in appearance that the Crispins were more inclined to gawk at them than attack them. They were escorted to the factory without incident. Once there, they were brought outdoors and posed along the factory's south wall, and photographed.

An out-building on the east side of the mill was converted into a dormitory, where the Chinese would live and eat. Being completely new to the shoe trade, they trained on the job, their interpreter being their foreman, Charles Sing, who was the only one of them who spoke English. In spite of this limited system of communication, they proved so apt and willing that they were soon running the factory as efficiently as any crew of more experienced workers would have. Indeed, Sampson later brought in another 95 Chinese. His gamble had paid off in a very big way; the strike was broken, the Crispins were broken, and national trends in both labor and race relations were set into motion. In labor circles, unions would go to war with management until well into the next century; in race relations, Sampson's success with the "Chinese Experiment" became one of the contributing factors in the U.S.'s decision to ban Chinese immigration.

The Knights of St. Crispin notwithstanding, the community took an immediate interest in the Chinese. Under the leadership of the Rev. T.A. Griffin of the Methodist Episcopal Church, an ecumenical Sunday School was established to teach the Chinese to read and speak English.....and convert them to Christianity. The

“teachers” ran the gamut, from business leaders to children; one is described as “...not yet requiring two figures to write down her age....” So many citizens volunteered to teach, most were paired off with only one pupil each. The best known (today) of these tutors was Fannie Amelia Burlingame, daughter of the local industrialist turned merchant, Salmon Burlingame. She was forty four years old, a teacher by profession, and a staunch Baptist. Many of the Chinese, including her own student, Lue Gim Gong, would become Baptists as a result of these efforts. The Chinese, for their part, took an active interest in the community. On Thanksgiving Day, 1870, Charles Sing (no doubt acting on behalf of all his co-workers) went out early in the morning and visited several butchers, purchasing their best turkeys and having them delivered to the homes of prominent men in the town, including Mr. Sampson, Mr. Chase, Sylvander Johnson, and A.C. Houghton. Thirty of them paid local taxes. They went to church, eventually moved out of the mill and into apartments nearby. They held a kite contest every summer, delighting their neighbors with the brilliant colors and fanciful designs.

Sampson’s contract with the Chinese ended in 1873, but the Chinese remained in North Adams another seven years, at least. Seven of them died here, and were buried in a lot in Hill Side Cemetery, purchased by Charles Sing in 1870 when the first one, Quain Tung Tuck, died. Two headstones remain, though it’s doubtful that anything else does; it is most likely that their remains were exhumed and shipped back to China for reburial. Circa 1879, the Chinese began leaving North Adams. There’s some talk that they moved on to Boston and established a China Town there, but modern scholars believe that most headed back to California. Only two made an effort to remain here: Charles Sing and Lue Gim Gong. Sing married an American woman and opened a store in North Adams, but couldn’t make a success of it. He moved away circa 1883, and ended up in New York City, where he ran a grocery store. Lue Gim Gong was luckier. One of the youngest of the Chinese (about 12 years old in 1870) he had formed a very close relationship with Fannie Burlingame, and in time, she adopted him. He lived in the Burlingame home on Church Street, working in their garden and greenhouse, and in the winter, traveled to Fannie’s winter home in Deland, Florida, where he worked in her orange grove. Upon her death in 1903, he inherited the Florida property and it was there in 1909 that he unveiled the Lue Gim Gong orange, upon which the modern Florida orange industry is based.