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Late-Nineteenth-Century Chinese Farm Workers in the California Mother Lode

ABSTRACT

Most archaeological studies of Chinese immigrants have focused on enclaves in cities, towns, villages, and work camps where insular tendencies are expected. This article focuses instead on the adaptations of Chinese immigrants employed at a small farm in the California Mother Lode region where they lived and worked in more ethnically mixed settings. Investigations at CA-AMA-364/H provide insights into adjustments made by the Chinese immigrants between 1851 and the turn of the century. Examination of a ledger left at the site in 1857 by a Chinese cook enhances those interpretations.

Introduction

Mid-19th-century Chinese immigrants who lived in California are often characterized as members of an insular group that resisted pressures to assimilate. The prevalence of traditional materials in their archaeological assemblages lends support to the idea that the Overseas Chinese were more culturally conservative than other immigrants. That assumption also makes sense as an outgrowth of the sojourner perspective many Chinese immigrants held, the debt bondage and contract labor schemes that overshadowed their lives, and the racism they faced within the host culture (Barth 1964; Lyman 1974). Yet traditional tendencies may obscure the significance of new materials, identities, and social roles adopted by the Chinese as their motivations and opportunities evolved.

Archaeological perspectives on Chinese immigrants in the American West have largely concentrated on places where they aggregated in cities, towns, ethnic villages, and insular work camps. That focus is understandable because few Chinese actually lived apart from their compatriots during initial immigration, partly because of the language barrier but also because an outgrowth of the debt bondage system obligated

most arrivals to work for the merchants who sponsored their passage to the golden mountain, *Gum San*. More significantly for archaeologists, group settings proffer tidy and unambiguous ethnic associations, making them enticing places to examine cultural adaptation and engagement in the multicultural milieu of the frontier.

Focusing research on groups of Chinese immigrants presents only one aspect of the Chinese immigrant experience. For example, traditional behavior was probably reinforced in those group settings. Surrounded by compatriots, familiar patterns and social roles were undoubtedly perpetuated. Interpretations focusing on Chinese enclaves often reveal culturally conservative behavior. Some Chinese merchants diverged from that pattern in an effort to engage the host culture (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1997). It is essential to cast the net wider than such enclaves if the goal is to understand in broader terms the processes of adjustment, accommodation, and social engagement.

One place to look is in multicultural settings where Chinese individuals were thrown together with other ethnic groups in relative seclusion from their compatriots. In those situations, the Chinese faced greater pressures to adapt. For example, a growing number of Chinese immigrants took work as servants, cooks, and agricultural laborers on farms and in white farm households in the late-19th century. There, they were embedded in living situations with other groups where reciprocal influences could take place. That pattern was particularly prevalent in the northern San Joaquin Valley (Chan 1986). Chinese workers were also commonly employed on farms in other regions such as at the Haggarty farm (CA-MNT-1382/H), near the outskirts of Castroville in Monterey County, and at the Carnduff Farm (CA-SMA-368/H) in San Mateo County (Van Bueren et al. 1996; Van Bueren 2004).

Decisions to take individual work assignments probably contributed to a pervasive shift in the outlook of Chinese immigrants over time. Whether trapped by economic circumstances or motivated by new opportunities, many immigrants came to view America as a destination,

rather than a place to make a fortune before returning to China. Those not already acknowledging the sea change were eventually forced to confront it with the passage of Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.

This article considers the lives of Chinese workers hired at a small farm in Amador County, California. Chinese immigrants were employed there from 1851 until after the turn of the century, along with members of other ethnic groups. During the lengthy operation of the farm by two families between 1848 and 1917, the character of the agricultural workforce and Chinese life in the Mother Lode region changed dramatically. Recent archaeological investigations at that site offer some provisional glimpses of those changes.

The Brown and Sanderson Farm

Archaeological site CA-AMA-364/H is located about a mile west of the town of Sutter Creek in the upper Horse Creek watershed (Figure 1). The site encompasses the physical remains of a farmstead complex and a contiguous prehistoric village. Nestled in a shallow valley, the farmstead and its surrounding acreage were strategically located near the gold-laden deposits of the Mother Lode. U.S.-born physician James Anderson Brown established the farm in 1848, just months after word of the gold discovery at John Sutter's lumber mill got out.

Ignoring the fact that the farm and many leagues of land around it had been granted to Teodocio Yerba in 1840 by the Mexican government as the Arroyo Seco Rancho, Brown hired a carpenter on 15 May 1848 to construct a house at CA-AMA-364/H (Amador County Archives 1848). He returned to Warsaw, Missouri, for his family in 1850, making the trip back by ox team with his wife, Margaret, and infant son, John. The family arrived at the newly established farm in Sutter Creek sometime before 8 November 1850. When title to the Arroyo Seco Ranch was confirmed in a protracted court battle, Brown and other squatters were eventually forced to pay for their claims (Amador County Recorder 1856). The metes and bounds of the 372-acre farm were finally surveyed in June 1860 to quiet the title (Brown 1860).

During the Brown ownership, agricultural operations focused on cattle, dairy, grain, potatoes,

and the production of hay. Chinese immigrants and indigenous people worked on the farm in the 1850s, and three white laborers were enumerated in the 1860 census. Those three workers were native born, Irish, and Scandinavian. After two decades of profitable operation, Brown sold the farm to Irish immigrant John Sanderson in 1869 for \$3,000 (Amador County Recorder 1869). Sanderson made his fortune gold mining in the local area and married Catherine Hughes in 1863. The couple had eight children between 1864 and 1879. Seven daughters survived into adulthood, while the couple's only son, born in 1879, died the following year. Laborers hired during the Sanderson tenure include a Chinese servant, enumerated in the 1880 census, and native-born workers, listed in a letter dated from 1890 and in the 1900 census.

While production of cereal crops and forage continued during the Sanderson ownership, the economic strategy shifted to raising sheep and chickens, with some limited production coming from a small orchard. The 160 acres encompassing the core area of the farm were patented as a homestead in 1880, while the adjacent 160 acres were patented as a cash entry (Amador County Recorder 1880a, 1880b). In 1909, John deeded the farm to his unmarried daughter Mary (Amador County Recorder 1909). He died fall 1910, shortly after the census listed him living with Mary and grandson Edwin Morris (one of daughter Emma's children). Mary sold the farm in 1917. Available archaeological evidence suggests it was no longer occupied after she departed (Amador County Recorder 1917).

Archaeological Studies

Two phases of archaeological excavation were carried out at CA-AMA-364/H to take into account impacts from planned realignment of State Route 49 (Figure 2). No standing structures remained on the site when it was first discovered and recorded in the early 1990s. Test excavations undertaken in 1998 established the site's eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places, based in part on the research value of anticipated pit features such as a privy mentioned in the 1880 homestead certification file (Van Bueren 1998).

Data recovery excavations subsequently focused on the farmstead compound, while the

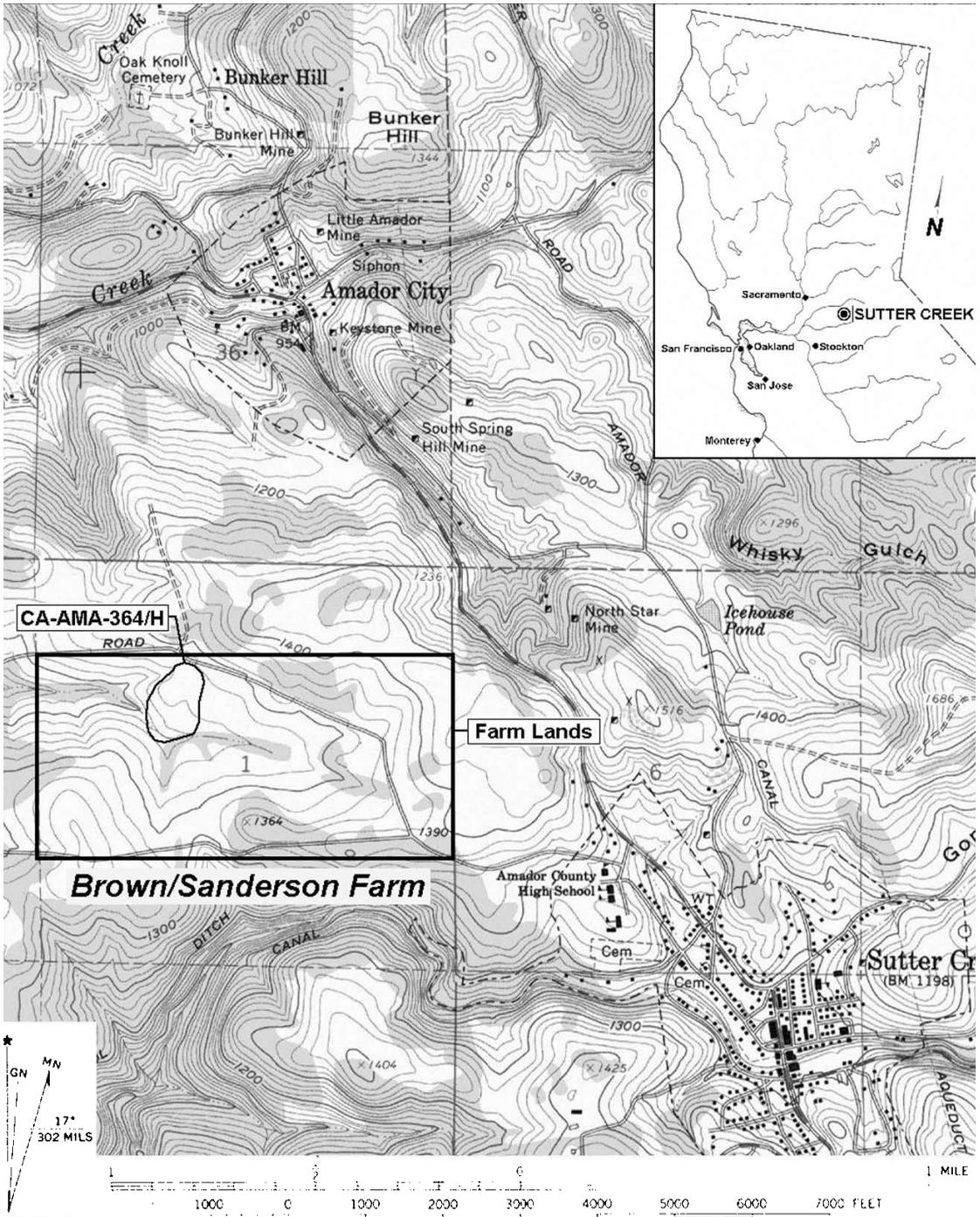


Figure 1. General location of site CA-AMA-364/H within the region. (May by author, 2006.)

prehistoric component was preserved outside of the project footprint (Van Bueren 2005). To assist in pinpointing buried historic pit features in the project impact zone, a gradiometer survey was first conducted in a large portion of the rear and

side yards of the farmstead compound. Several promising magnetic anomalies were identified, yet explorations of those loci failed to reveal any discrete pit features. A program of controlled mechanical grading was then implemented to

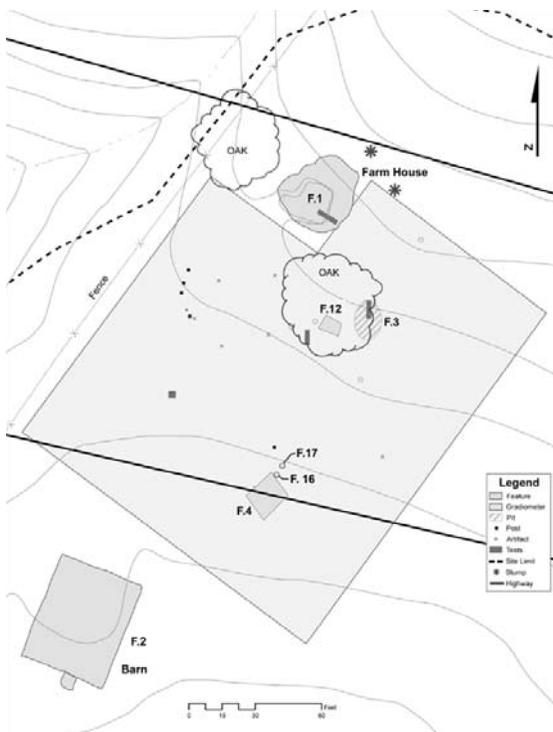


Figure 2. Detailed plan of the investigated portion of CA-AMA-364/H. (Map by author 3, 2006.)

identify features and concentrations of artifacts in the project's entire impact zone.

The broad area exposure resulted in the identification of two structures that apparently housed workers, several modest trash pits, a temporary camp near the west edge of the site used by indigenous visitors in the late 1880s, and an extensive sheet refuse scatter in the farmyard behind the main farmhouse. The two workers' dwellings were used sequentially. Feature 12 was a semisubterranean dugout, occupied from the 1850s into the 1880s. It was situated close to the two-story main house designated as Feature 1 in Figure 2. Feature 4 was an aboveground wood-frame structure inhabited by workers from the 1890s until the farm was abandoned in 1917. Three modest pit features were found in association with the Feature 4 structure. Features 16 and 17 were both located outside of the structure and were filled after 1897 and 1901, respectively. A pit under the building was filled sometime after 1908.

Archaeological evidence of Chinese workers is indicated most strongly in Feature 12 and the

surrounding farmyard sheet refuse scatter. Use of that structure also coincides with documentary evidence for their presence between 1851 and 1880. Materials found from Feature 12 that were associated with the Chinese included a nearly complete, large brown-glazed globular storage jar, a Bamboo pattern porcelain rice bowl, a 1 mil coin minted by the British in 1863 for use in Guangdong (Gwongdung) Province, and a white improved earthenware plate with pecked Chinese characters on the interior surface. The large globular jar was a type "usually used for liquids—hard liquor, soy, and oils—and ... commonly reused for water storage or sometimes as pickling crocks" according to Julia Costello and colleagues (1999:252). That find, together with the Bamboo rice bowl and other Chinese ceramics from the surrounding farmyard and a nearby pit filled with yard debris (Feature 3), all point to the maintenance of traditional dietary practices. The coin mimics traditional Chinese forms, although this British example has a round perforation instead of a square one (Figure 3).

The discovery of pecked Chinese characters on the interior surface of a white earthenware plate from Feature 12 also has significant interest (Figure 4). The British maker's mark in production throughout the farm occupation and, regrettably, offers no basis for refining its age. Priscilla Wegars and Sylvia Minnick translated the Chinese symbols as the characters *shen hao* (*seng hahp*). Minnick suggests the inscription indicates a blessing, with a meaning of "communal" or "familial past shared by all," while Wendy Jorae interprets the characters to mean "grow together" (Van Bueren 2005:108).

Pecked inscriptions on the interior surfaces of vessels are commonly interpreted as assignations of personal or group ownership, or as blessings (Greenwood 1996; Michaels 2005). They are most common in earlier Overseas Chinese contexts when ceramics may have been more difficult to obtain (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1997:156). In modern China, marking ownership is not practiced, but blessings are still commonly used. Gina Michaels (2005) studied 16 pecked vessels from the Market Street Chinatown in San Jose, an enclave dating between 1866 and 1887. Among 12 translated examples, half represented names, while the rest appear to be blessings. Those vessels included two white

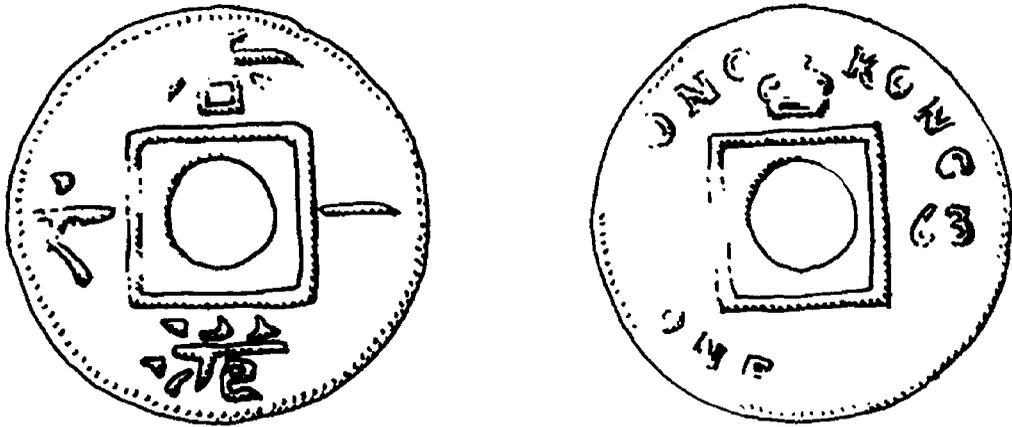


Figure 3. 1863 British 1-mil coin from Feature 12 circulated in Hong Kong. (Drawing by Faith Haney.)

earthenware pieces marked “sir,” recovered from a restaurant.

Minnick suggests the inscription on the specimen from Feature 12 might be appropriately placed on a shared dish used for informal group meals. This could thus reflect meals taken together by a Chinese work gang. Other examples of vessels marked with the term “together” are present in the Market Street Chinatown (Michaels 2005:129) and in a late-19th-century Chinese vegetable seller’s compound in Los Angeles (Costello et al. 1999:250). In nearby Drytown, several pecked blessings were also found on Chinese porcelain dishes from a Chinese neighborhood occupied during the same general period as Feature 12 at CA-AMA-364/H (Tordoff 1987).

The sole evidence that one or more Chinese workers were still present at the Sanderson Farm later in time is another 1 mil coin minted by the British in 1863 for use in China. It was recovered from Feature 17, a deposit created after 1901. That feature consisted of a shallow trash pit, reflecting a stove cleanout event. No other items attributable to Chinese workers were present in the small assemblage of household materials in Feature 17, nor were any found in other deposits associated with Feature 4. Interestingly, the Feature 4 complex also produced evidence of Italian, Mexican, French, and Balkan immigrants in addition to the native-born white workers indicated in the documentary record between 1890 and 1900. That increasingly diverse workforce is suggested by a Saint

Francis medallion with Serbian lettering, an 1861 Italian 5 centesimo coin, an 1882 Mexican 5 centavo coin, and an 1899 French 10 centime coin found in several different contexts associated with the structure. Those coins were not found in a cache and had no exchange value in the U.S. after the 1860s.

While the one-mil coin constitutes slim evidence, there are several reasons why it is credible that Chinese workers still visited the farm as late as 1901. Despite their diminishing population in Amador County, the Chinese took agricultural work in increasing numbers in the adjacent San Joaquin Valley during the last quarter of the 19th century (Chan 1986). The Sandersons probably continued to hire Chinese workers because they often accepted lower wages than white laborers and typically returned year after year. The obsolete 1 mil coin may have retained exchange value in the parallel economic system developed by Chinese businessmen in California but would have had no value to others. Alternately, it may have served as a simple memento or talisman brought to recall connections with a distant home. In both scenarios, it most likely arrived at the site with a Chinese immigrant.

Comparisons of the assemblages from features 4 and 12 reveal some important changes in the lifestyles of Chinese workers over time (Table 1). As might be expected, hired hands generally led relatively austere existences and left little behind. For example, few furnishings and decorations were found in association with either



Figure 4. Chinese blessing, translated as "communal" or "grow together," pecked onto the interior surface of a white earthenware plate from Feature 12. (Photo by Trish Fernandez.)

dwelling, and other evidence is limited. Yet some noteworthy differences can be discerned between the early and later assemblages. The most pronounced contrasts involve currency, firearms, alcohol consumption, health and grooming artifacts, and foodways.

Foreign currency is most common in the assemblages associated with the later worker housing. Foreign coins were widely circulated in California before the San Francisco Mint began production in 1854, and an 1857 law outlawed the circulation of foreign currency (Farris 1984, 1990; Chandler 2003:242). The examples found at CA-AMA-364/H are all low denominations. Lacking exchange value after ca. 1860, they were probably left behind by recent immigrants. The two 1-mil specimens from features 12 and 17 were produced by the Royal Mint in London in 1863 for use in Hong Kong, a British colony

since 1841 (Leungn 2004). The coins were each worth 1/10 of a cent. They were designed to facilitate trade with Guangdong (Gwongdung) Province but went out of production by 1866. The coins perhaps retained exchange value among the Chinese and may imply direct exposure to the English language, an advantage for immigrants bound for California.

Firearms and ammunition are completely absent in the Feature 12 assemblage, while many different kinds of weapons are indicated in later worker assemblages from the Feature 4 complex. Materials from Feature 4 included a revolver, hundreds of .22 caliber percussion caps used for reloading, and a half dozen different sizes of ammunition used in a variety of rifles, shotguns, and revolvers. In contrast, the only hint that the occupants of Feature 12 hunted consists of flaked stone debitage and a deer bone, both consistent with other evidence that Native Americans also used the structure.

Alcohol use also differs dramatically between the earlier and later assemblages. While 21 alcoholic beverage bottles were found in Feature 12, only 4 were recovered in association with the Feature 4 complex. Since it is unlikely most farmhands favored sobriety, this may imply later workers went to town to imbibe, while earlier workers drank on the premises. Alcohol bottles from Feature 12 included several hard liquor bottles, 10 wine and champagne bottles, and 9 other bottles that held beer or ale. If the bitters bottles included in the health category are also considered, the proportion of alcoholic beverages in Feature 12 rises to 24% of all items used to tabulate the assemblage MNI.

Clothing, health, and grooming articles were more prevalent in later assemblages, but that pattern is skewed in an unexpected manner. The pit under Feature 4 includes an unusually large assortment of hard rubber irrigators ($n=7$), glass fountain syringes ($n=2$), Vaseline jars ($n=4$), cosmetic jars, and other artifacts most commonly associated with women. Those materials were unexpected in housing used by an all-male workforce. Since the assemblages at Feature 4 do not appear to reflect the presence of families, these items instead seem to imply visitation by female companions. Only 13% of the assemblage from Feature 12 consisted of health, grooming, and clothing items in comparison to the 32% present in the Feature 4 complex.

TABLE 1
COMPARISON OF ASSEMBLAGES AT CA-AMA-364/H*

| Artifact Classes | Feature 12 | | Feature 4 Complex | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------------|-----------|---------------|--------------------|
| | | Internal Pit | F. 16 Pit | F. 17 Pit | Structure Pad | All F. 4 Materials |
| | 1850s–1880s | Post 1908 | ca. 1897 | ca. 1901 | 1890s–1917 | 1890s–1917 |
| Alcohol | 21 (18%) | 0 | 1 (6%) | 1 (6%) | 2 (4%) | 4 (2%) |
| Clothing & footwear | 6 (5%) | 16 (13%) | 5 (28%) | 2 (13%) | 4 (8%) | 27 (13%) |
| Firearms | 0 | 21 (17%) | 2 (11%) | 5 (31%) | 2 (4%) | 30 (14%) |
| Food & nonalcoholic beverages | 4 (4%) | 12 (10%) | 0 | 0 | 2 (4%) | 14 (7%) |
| Food prep/serve | 32 (28%) | 9 (7%) | 5 (28%) | 1 (6%) | 14 (26%) | 29 (14%) |
| Food storage | 3 (3%) | 3 (2%) | 0 | 1 (6%) | 4 (8%) | 8 (4%) |
| Grooming | 0 | 9 (7%) | 0 | 0 | 1 (2%) | 10 (5%) |
| Native American tools | 5 (4%) | 1 (1%) | 0 | 0 | 4 (8%) | 5 (2%) |
| Health | 9 (8%) | 22 (17%) | 0 | 3 (19%) | 5 (9%) | 30 (14%) |
| Coins | 1 (1%) | 3 (2%) | 1 (6%) | 1 (6%) | 0 | 5 (2%) |
| Tools | 3 (3%) | 4 (3%) | 1 (6%) | 0 | 0 | 5 (2%) |
| Writing | 1 (1%) | 1 (3%) | 0 | 0 | 3 (6%) | 4 (2%) |
| Other personal | 8 (7%) | 6 (5%) | 3 (17%) | 0 | 3 (6%) | 12 (6%) |
| All other | 15 (13%) | 19 (15%) | 0 | 2 (13%) | 12 (23%) | 33 (15%) |
| Total MNI | 114 | 126 | 18 | 16 | 53 | 213 |

*Excludes structural, unknown, and faunal materials.

Food and food preparation, serving, and storage vessels are present in modest numbers but still reflect one of the largest groups of material associated with worker dwellings throughout time. The earlier worker housing (Feature 12) produced 39 of these artifacts, comprising 34% of the assemblage; while the later housing (Feature 4) produced 51 artifacts, accounting for one-quarter of all recovered artifacts. Feature 12 also produced limited evidence of beef, deer, and wheat. Regrettably, no hearth or cooking area produced deposits suitable for microconstituent analysis. In contrast, the pit features associated with Feature 4 produced seeds and pollen in addition to the bones of beef, chicken, and codfish and the shells from chicken eggs and

mussels. Botanical remains from features associated with the later worker housing included evidence that turn-of-the-century workers consumed tomatoes, figs, raspberries or blackberries, elderberries, grapes, strawberries, cherries, wheat, and possibly hazelnuts.

Those significant differences suggest the earlier structure (Feature 12) was probably not used by white hired hands, while the later one (Feature 4) housed workers of all backgrounds, as well as female visitors. Feature 12 contains distinct evidence of occupation by Chinese and indigenous people. The Chinese workers who lived there seem to have maintained a diet that was at least partly traditional. Indigenous materials recovered inside of Feature 12 consisted of

two handstones for grinding (manos), a milling slab, two pestles, and four pieces of chert debitage. In sharp contrast to the pattern at Feature 4, the semisubterranean structure lacked coins used in countries other than China. Firearms and ammunition were also absent.

Perhaps white workers listed in the 1860 census boarded inside the two-story main farmhouse until Feature 4 was built. Feature 12 may have been considered adequate for Chinese and indigenous laborers but unsuitable for white workers. That kind of segregation was certainly consistent with period attitudes as well as systems of patronage that applied to both Chinese and Native American workers. Moving workers to a more distant location (Feature 4) later in time was probably deliberate and significant. The increase in social distance may have been a response to the changing character of the workforce and the Sandersons' desire to protect their daughters from questionable moral influences.

The Chinese and Native American workers who likely made up much of the farm's hired help earlier in time were generally considered more compliant and less threatening than the so-called "bindle stiffs" who came to dominate the agricultural workforce by the turn of the century. California farmers patronized Chinese and indigenous groups heavily in the decades following statehood, offering protection in exchange for cheap labor. Farmers also coerced indigenous labor between 1850 and 1863 under California's first law (Street 2005:115–160), although there is no direct evidence that the Browns took advantage of their Native American workers.

The patronage of the earlier period gave way in California to a transient multiethnic workforce whose moral character was often considered suspect. Although the Chinese turned to agriculture in growing numbers in the adjacent San Joaquin Valley in the late-19th century (Chan 1986, 1995; Minnick 1988:90), their presence becomes less visible on the Sanderson Farm during that period. None of the Chinese listed in Amador County's fourth district (Sutter Creek and its vicinity) in the 1880 census was a farmer or farm laborer, although some may have taken seasonal work in agriculture (Table 2). Sam Woo is listed in the manuscript population census of 1880 as a "servant" on the Sanderson Farm. The dwindling Chinese materials from later deposits at the farm may be linked in part

to the declining Chinese population in Amador County (Table 3). It could also reflect more pronounced accommodation and adaptation to the multicultural milieu present at Feature 4.

*A Snapshot of Chinese Workers
on the Brown Farm in 1857*

A unique artifact provides additional insights into the lives of Chinese workers on the Brown Farm during the late 1850s. It consists of a ledger created by the Browns' Chinese cook in 1857 (Figure 5). The ledger was abandoned at the farm and later donated to the California Section of the California State Library in Sacramento as part of the papers of Dr. James A. Brown. The ledger offers remarkably detailed insights into the timekeeping, commerce, diet, and employment of a small Chinese work gang that apparently divided its time between mining and working on the Brown Farm. Those details add significant depth to the interpretations of Feature 12 at CA-AMA-364/H.

The ledger is handmade from torn pieces of an English language magazine and is overprinted with black painted Chinese characters. Fourteen pages were sewn together with a string binding, and both sides of each page were then used to record purchases of groceries, receipts for gold, and cash transactions. Donated to the library by Margaret Brown sometime after her husband's death in 1876, she attributes the account book to 1851. That date is contradicted by more reliable evidence derived from the document itself. Margaret's attribution may reflect her associations with the initial date the Chinese gang came to work on the farm, rather than the year the book was left behind. The year 1851 was probably strongly etched in her memory because she arrived on the farm in November 1850.

The ledger is made from the recycled pages of the July 1856 edition of *Graham's Illustrated Magazine of Literature, Romance, Art, and Fashion*, a fact that firmly establishes its TPQ. While the Browns' Chinese cook probably had some English proficiency to facilitate communications, it is doubtful he purchased the magazine. More likely, it was either given as a gift or salvaged following discard by the Browns. Chinese entries in the book permit more precise dating and offer insights into the way the Chinese scribe integrated a traditional

TABLE 2
EMPLOYMENT IN THE SUTTER CREEK AREA, JUNE 1880*

| Nativity | Unemployed | Farmer | Farm Hands | Teamster | Miner | Laborer | Servant | Skilled | Business/ Professional | TOTALS |
|------------------------|------------|--------|------------|----------|-------|---------|---------|---------|---------------------------|--------|
| Austria | | | | | 7 | 1 | | | | 8 |
| Belgium | | | | | | | | 1 | | 1 |
| Canada | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | | | | 2 | 10 |
| Chili | | | | | | 1 | | | | 1 |
| China | | | | | 11 | 17 | 4 | | | 32 |
| England/Wales/Scotland | | 1 | | 1 | 22 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 32 |
| France | 1 | 2 | 1 | | | 1 | | | | 5 |
| Germany | | | | | | 1 | 6 | | 2 | 9 |
| Holland | | | | | | | | 1 | | 1 |
| Ireland | 2 | 1 | | | 15 | 16 | 2 | | 1 | 37 |
| Italy | 3 | 8 | 3 | | 21 | 13 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 55 |
| Mexico | | | | | 2 | | | | | 2 |
| Portugal | | | | | 3 | 1 | | | | 4 |
| Prussia | | 4 | | | 2 | 1 | | | 1 | 8 |
| Switzerland | | 1 | | | 1 | 4 | 1 | 5 | | 12 |
| Native Born* | 6 | 24 | 20 | 10 | 7 | 41 | 8 | 15 | 8 | 139 |
| TOTALS | 13 | 43 | 25 | 13 | 93 | 99 | 25 | 26 | 19 | 356 |

* U.S. Census District 4, Amador County; no indigenous workers were listed.

calendar with the timekeeping practices of the host culture. The document was translated into Cantonese by Winnie (Yuk Hoi) Yeung with help from Peter D. Schulz, based on the presumed geographic origin of the Chinese writer. The entries appear to reflect a fairly continuous series of notations made over a brief period, a finding consistent with the type of information that was recorded.

Most Chinese entries list only the day of the month, but some also include the character *libai* (*lai bai*) and the name of the month. *Libai* (*lai bai*) means, literally, “the week,” but according to Yeung, it is often used to indicate Sunday. That use acknowledged the need to synchronize traditional Chinese calendrical reckoning with

the dominant system of the host culture where Sundays had special significance. Reading *libai* (*lai bai*) as “Sunday,” two entries in the ledger specify Sunday the 26th day of the seventh month and Sunday the second day of the ninth month. Those references almost certainly reflect use of the traditional Chinese lunisolar calendar, rather than the Gregorian system of the host culture (Giles 1892; Wikipedia 2006:2–3). If the two dates were Gregorian, the entries had to span three years or more—an interpretation deemed unlikely for several reasons.

The Chinese calendar has evolved over more than four millennia and is based on lunar cycles, corrected periodically to synchronize with the solar year. Because there are more than

TABLE 3
AMADOR COUNTY POPULATION TRENDS, 1860–1900*

| Population | 1860 | 1870 | 1880 | 1890 | 1900 | 1910 |
|-------------------|--------|-------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| Chinese | 2,535 | 1,619 | 1,106 | 315 | 594 | n.d. |
| Native-born Men | n.d. | n.d. | n.d. | 4,028 | 4,607 | n.d. |
| Foreign White Men | | | | | | |
| All | 4,846 | n.d. | n.d. | 1,653 | 1,798 | n.d. |
| Balkan | n.d. | n.d. | n.d. | 225 | 817 | 544 |
| French | n.d. | 152 | 132 | 74 | 6 | 26 |
| German | n.d. | 326 | n.d. | 253 | 1 | 120 |
| Irish | n.d. | 490 | 417 | 263 | n.d. | 87 |
| Italian | n.d. | 475 | n.d. | 619 | 17 | 983 |
| Native Americans | n.d. | n.d. | 256 | n.d. | n.d. | n.d. |
| Total for County | 11,143 | 9,582 | 11,384 | 10,320 | 11,116 | 9,086 |

*Source: U.S. Census.

12 lunations in a solar year, various adjustments had to be factored into the calculations as time went on. The most significant change was the addition of a 13th or intercalary month at various intervals within a 60-year repeating cycle. The year 1857 coincides with the 54th position in the 76th cycle. The Chinese New Year occurred on 25 January and an extra fifth month (intercalary) was included in that year. The 26th day of the seventh month in the Chinese system coincides with a Sunday in the Gregorian system on 13 September 1857 and the second day of the ninth month in the Chinese system coincides with a Sunday on 18 October 1857. The dated entries thus make sense as a fairly continuous set of accounts spanning the period from late April to late October 1857.

That interpretation makes sense, not only because the entries in the ledger reflect short-term accounting activities but also because of the importance of the traditional calendar in ordering life and maintaining connections with the homeland. Keeping track of dates in the traditional system provided direct connections to the homeland where most Chinese planned to return after making their fortunes. It also provided a way to keep track of traditional religious events. The Chinese in California observed at least five of the six main celebrations in the

traditional annual cycle, with the New Year celebration typically most prominent (Barth 1964:120). In that regard, it is noteworthy that the only prepared food on the grocery list was a cake purchased on 11 October 1857, just 10 days after the Moon Festival. Moon cakes were traditionally eaten during that period.

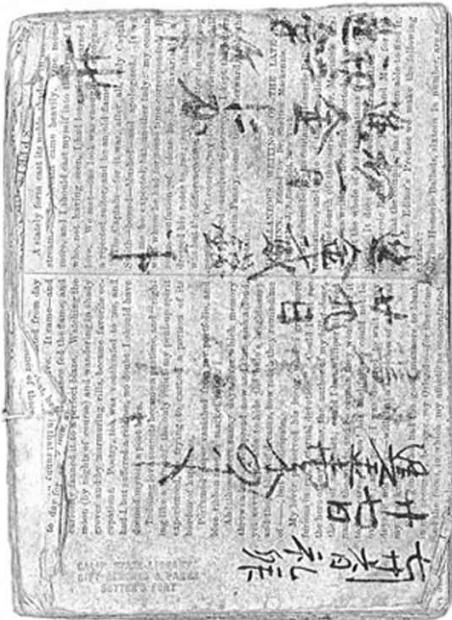
Grocery lists and entries of payments for meals are listed on pages 1–18 of the account book, while pages 19–28 record gold received and deposited. The gold entries reflect proceeds from mining between 29 April 1857 and 18 September 1857. The meals reflect a series of entries starting slightly before 23 August 1857 and continuing through the end of October. It seems likely the Cantonese writer acquired the magazine used to make the account book while working for the Browns in fall or winter 1856–1857, left to carry on gold mining with a gang of his compatriots between April and mid-September, and then returned to work for the Browns in fall 1857 with his work gang.

Transactions listed in the Chinese account book include specific references to Chinese measurements of precious metal as well as references to currency. Amounts paid for groceries are in all cases preceded by a character translated as “money” and entries translated as “change tendered” also appear to reference cur-



Front

Hand Sewn Spine



Back

FIGURE 5. The front and back covers of an account book created by the Browns' Chinese cook in 1857. (Courtesy of the California State Library, Sacramento.)

rency. The units are decimal and may generally reference the monetary system prevailing in the host culture. That conclusion is based on prices for items such as lemons that correlate closely with contemporary English-language price lists.

While use of foreign currency was banned in 1857, foreign coins continued to circulate for several years. The two 1-mil British examples from features 12 and 17, both minted in 1863, were probably not subject to general circulation but may have been used in exchanges within the California Chinese community. Based on the contents of the grocery lists, shopping was almost certainly done through Chinese merchants. The total spent on groceries was \$112.675 U.S. dollars, while “together food money” totaled \$133.75 dollars. Half-cent units are specified in many cases.

In addition to references to currency that reflect transactions for meals, 38 entries in the Chinese ledger reflect traditional weight measurements used in trading precious metals. Those entries consist of gold received and deposited as well as two entries in the grocery lists for “change, gold.” The units of measure include the tael (37.7 grams or 1.2 troy ounces), mace (1/10 tael), fen (1/10 of a mace, also known as a candareen), and li or liang (1/10 of a fen) (Webster and McKechnie 1979:287,1856, and [n.p.] “Tables of Weights and Measures”). Most entries reflect relatively modest amounts of gold totaling the equivalent of 52.33 troy ounces, worth about \$837.33 dollars at the going rate of \$16 dollars per troy ounce paid by the mint in San Francisco. However, two pages contain references to much more substantial quantities of gold.

The amount “10,000 taels” is written boldly three times on one page in May 1857, and the same amount appears on another page annotated in April. The roundness of these numbers and their significance in some Asian cultures both suggest they are not literal references to specific quantities of gold but, instead, reflect expressions of hope for prosperity. The number 10,000 is often used in the Chinese and Japanese cultures to reference a large quantity. For example, the term “ten thousand” is used to reference all the named things in the world by Lao Tsu (1972) in the *Tao Te Ching*, a foundational work of Taoism written in the sixth century. By combining that term with a reference to the largest unit of weight measurement commonly used for gold (taels), the four characters comprising this expression reflect a wish for a prosperous future. Taken literally, 10,000 taels of gold would be equivalent to 12,120 troy

ounces, worth an astounding \$193,920 dollars at the prevailing market rate of the period.

A deposit was made at the Chiu (Chew?) Kee store after the first 10,000 tael entry in April, but the full amount is uncertain. Only an initial number, four, can be distinguished for that deposit. The store may have been run by the same Chew Kee who later ran a business in nearby Fiddletown (Russell 1988, 1991). Despite the good fortune implied by the two pages listing these large entries, the four-person Chinese crew continued to mine gold for several more months and then presumably worked on the Brown farm from late September until early October before entries ceased. Perhaps the writer and his associates eventually realized their dream of making a fortune in the gold fields of the Central Sierra Nevada region and returned to China. That would handily explain the abandonment of the account book at the Brown farm. It is unlikely the proceeds of their 1857 mining activities amounted to much more than \$900.00 dollars.

The shopping lists in the Chinese cook's ledger specify items indicative of traditional Chinese cuisine, not materials that would have been used to make meals for the Brown family (Table 4). The fact that the writer was cooking for a Chinese work gang is amplified by repeated entries on a weekly or bimonthly basis that indicate payments of "meal money together," change tendered, and money owed. Meals were still being made for work gang members during late September and October 1857 after entries for gold ceased. Meals were prepared for at least three people in addition to the man who maintained the book. One reference mentions "three, each owe" and the names Taat, Yick Who, and Chew are intermixed with purchases of groceries in the first 18 pages of the account book. The name of the writer remains unknown, although his leadership role is clear. This work gang thus likely comprised four Chinese men. In two cases, Taat paid for specific items, which could imply they were either acquired for his sole use or contributed to the group meals as part of his share.

The shopping lists provide rich details concerning diet, food costs, and commerce of the period. They can be usefully compared to other detailed analyses of diet such as the one published by Michael Deihl and colleagues (1998).

The 162 items include at least 59 different kinds of products, some of them present in both dried and fresh forms. The grocery budget was divided among beverages (21.2%), condiments and oils (10.0%), fresh fruit (0.8%), grains and bakery products (28.3%), a variety of meats (26.3%), fresh and dried vegetables (12.0%), and a few non-food items (1.9%). Expenditures on beverages are dominated by alcohol (90.6%). That alcohol consisted mainly of "earth" wine (*dei tsao*), but also includes two bottles of a potent fermented rice drink flavored with herbs (*ng gaa pei*). No information was found concerning the type of drink indicated by the term *dei tsao*.

Materials on the grocery lists reflect a mixture of Chinese imports and materials that were available from local and regional sources. The sheer diversity of the indicated diet is a tribute to the rapid development of many far-flung Chinese agricultural and fishing enterprises quite early in time. The only items almost certainly originating from China are the beverages, black fungus, Chinese ginger, rice, and perhaps most of the specialty processed foods such as fermented dried soy beans, soy milk sticks, and cured meat (*laap yuk*). In contrast, the fresh fruits and vegetables were undoubtedly grown in the local area. Some materials such as beef, pork, poultry, and game birds may have come from sources outside of the Chinese supply system. Seafoods such as abalone, squid, and seaweed were harvested by the Chinese along the northern California coast from the early 1850s, and Chinese shrimp fisheries developed around the San Francisco Bay during the same period (Armentrout-Ma 1981; Collins 1987; Schulz 1988, 1996). It is likely the abalone and squid on the grocery list were dried or salted rather than fresh, although that treatment is not specified.

Concluding Thoughts

Most archaeological studies of the Chinese have focused on enclaves where cultural conservatism was more pronounced and assemblages have unambiguous associations. Efforts to understand the progressive shift from sojourners to immigrants demand broader consideration of Chinese experiences in other settings. Growing numbers of Chinese immigrants took separate work as servants and cooks on California

TABLE 4
GROCERIES LISTED IN 1857 CHINESE LEDGER, BROWN FARM

| Description | No. of Entries | Mean Unit Price | Total Quantity Total Quantity | Total Paid | Percentage of Budget | |
|-------------|--|-----------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------|
| Beverage | "Earth" wine (dei tsao) | 20 | 1.500 | 13.75 gal. | \$20.63 | 18.30 |
| | Good tea | 2 | 0.500 | unknown | \$1.00 | 0.89 |
| | Ng Gaa Pei (rice alcohol) | 1 | 0.875 | 2 bottles | \$1.75 | 1.55 |
| | Tea leaves | 2 | 0.250 | unknown | \$0.500 | 0.44 |
| Condiments | Chinese ginger | 1 | 0.125 | unknown | \$0.125 | 0.11 |
| | Citrus peel | 2 | 0.125 | unknown | \$0.250 | 0.22 |
| | Dry citrus peel | 11 | 0.625 | unknown | \$0.625 | 0.55 |
| | Dry soy milk sticks | 1 | 0.625 | unknown | \$0.625 | 0.55 |
| | Garlic | 1 | 0.125 | unknown | \$0.125 | 0.11 |
| | Ginger | 3 | 0.104 | unknown | \$0.313 | 0.28 |
| | Lard | 1 | 0.250 | unknown | \$0.250 | 0.22 |
| | Lard oil | 5 | 0.350 | unknown | \$1.750 | 1.55 |
| | Raw oil | 3 | 0.750 | 3 bottles | \$2.250 | 2.00 |
| | Raw salt | 1 | 0.375 | unknown | \$0.375 | 0.33 |
| | Sesame | 1 | 0.250 | unknown | \$0.250 | 0.22 |
| | Soy oil | 1 | 0.625 | unknown | \$0.625 | 0.55 |
| | Soy sauce | 1 | 0.625 | unknown | \$0.625 | 0.55 |
| | White oil | 1 | 0.625 | 1 lb. | \$0.625 | 0.55 |
| White sugar | 10 | 0.250 | unknown | \$2.500 | 2.22 | |
| Fruit | Lemons | 1 | 0.250 | each | \$0.250 | 0.22 |
| | Melon seeds | 1 | 0.125 | unknown | \$0.125 | 0.11 |
| | Watermelon | 1 | 0.500 | each | \$0.500 | 0.44 |
| Grain | Cake | 1 | 0.500 | each | \$0.500 | 0.44 |
| | Fermented, dried soy beans | 1 | 0.750 | 1 catty ^a | \$0.750 | 0.67 |
| | Fermented soy beans | 2 | 0.125 | unknown | \$0.250 | 0.22 |
| | Mung bean noodles | 1 | 0.625 | unknown | \$0.625 | 0.55 |
| | Rice noodles | 1 | 0.375 | unknown | \$0.375 | 0.33 |
| | White rice (340 catties ^a) | 7 | 0.173 | 206 kg | \$29.375 | 26.07 |
| Meat | Abalone | 1 | 0.250 | each | \$0.250 | 0.22 |
| | Beef | 10 | 0.675 | unknown | \$6.750 | 5.99 |
| | Beef liver | 5 | 0.275 | unknown | \$1.375 | 1.22 |
| | Birds | 1 | | 3 birds | \$2.250 | 2.00 |
| | Chicken | 4 | 1.238 | 4 birds | \$4.950 | 4.39 |
| | Cured meat (<i>laap yuk</i>) | 2 | 0.750 | unknown | \$1.500 | 1.33 |
| | Dried shrimp | 3 | 0.750 | unknown | \$2.250 | 2.00 |
| | Pig head | 1 | 0.850 | each | \$0.850 | 0.75 |
| | Pork | 5 | 0.725 | unknown | \$3.625 | 3.22 |
| | Pullet | 1 | 1.000 | 1 bird | \$1.000 | 0.89 |
| | Salt fish | 4 | 0.375 | unknown | \$1.500 | 1.33 |
| | Salted little fish | 1 | 2.000 | unknown | \$2.000 | 1.78 |
| | Squid | 2 | 0.500 | unknown | \$1.000 | 0.89 |
| | Tripe | 1 | 0.375 | unknown | \$0.375 | 0.33 |

TABLE 4 CONTINUED
GROCERIES LISTED IN 1857 CHINESE LEDGER, BROWN FARM

| Description | No. of Entries | Mean Unit Price | Total Quantity Total Quantity | Total Paid | Percentage of Budget | |
|-------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|------------|----------------------|------|
| Vegetables | Bean sprouts | 3 | 0.250 | unknown | \$0.750 | 0.67 |
| | Bitter melon | 3 | 0.292 | unknown | \$0.875 | 0.78 |
| | Black fungus | 1 | 0.250 | unknown | \$0.250 | 0.22 |
| | Bok choy | 3 | 0.500 | unknown | \$1.500 | 1.33 |
| | Bottle gourd | 1 | 0.750 | unknown | \$0.750 | 0.67 |
| | Cabbage | 1 | 0.250 | unknown | \$0.250 | 0.22 |
| | Celery | 1 | 0.250 | unknown | \$0.250 | 0.22 |
| | Dried lily | 1 | 0.250 | unknown | \$0.250 | 0.22 |
| | Dried scallions | 1 | 0.125 | unknown | \$0.125 | 0.11 |
| | Dried vegetables | 1 | 1.500 | unknown | \$1.500 | 1.33 |
| | Kudzu root | 1 | 0.500 | unknown | \$0.500 | 0.44 |
| | Leeks | 2 | 0.438 | unknown | \$0.875 | 0.78 |
| | Lily buds | 1 | 0.375 | unknown | \$0.375 | 0.33 |
| | Long beans | 1 | 0.250 | unknown | \$0.250 | 0.22 |
| | Mung beans | 4 | 0.188 | unknown | \$0.750 | 0.67 |
| | Mustard greens | 11 | 0.330 | unknown | \$3.625 | 3.22 |
| | Raw ginger | 2 | 0.125 | unknown | \$0.250 | 0.22 |
| Seaweed | 2 | 0.188 | unknown | \$0.375 | 0.33 | |
| Other | Candles | 4 | 0.250 | unknown | \$1.000 | 0.89 |
| | Cigarettes | 1 | 0.125 | unknown | \$0.125 | 0.11 |
| | Matches | 1 | 0.250 | unknown | \$0.250 | 0.22 |
| | Hairy tree [sic] | 1 | 0.750 | unknown | \$0.750 | 0.67 |
| Totals | 162 | | | \$112.675 | 100.00% | |

^a One catty=605 gr or 1.33 lbs.

farms in the late-19th century, and those places may provide new perspectives on acculturation because individuals faced greater pressures to adjust in such settings.

Discerning the behavior of individuals and small groups of ethnic workers in multiethnic situations remains problematic. The behavior of diverse donors is often blended in places like the later worker housing at the Sanderson Farm (Feature 4). Presented with few culturally distinctive materials, the challenge is to refine the tools used for comparing assemblages as a way to discriminate the subtleties of acculturation and association. Readers must judge for themselves how effective such efforts have proven in this analysis. The apparent segregation of Chinese and Native American hired

hands at Feature 12 does seem to make sense within the context of the tumultuous move from a system of agricultural patronage during the early decades of California statehood to one that exploited new waves of immigrants and other disadvantaged groups through a strategy that became increasingly focused on industry by the end of the 19th century.

The maintenance of distinct Chinese traditions evident in the initial decades of farm occupation becomes invisible in CA-AMA-364/H's archaeological deposits by the turn of the century. Even floral analysis of the post-1901 deposit containing a coin circulated in Guangdong (Gwongdung) Province (Feature 17) produced no distinctively Chinese plant remains. Does that negative evidence imply pronounced adapta-

tion later in time, or merely a light footprint or poor preservation? A ledger maintained by the Browns' Chinese cook has given detailed insight into the traditional diet of the four-member crew that probably worked on the farm in 1857. It also reveals accommodations made in traditional time reckoning and monetary systems, while underscoring the early development of Chinese agriculture, fisheries, and mercantile systems.

The reasons for investigating the experiences of the Chinese on farms are legion. As places where people of diverse backgrounds came together, deposits from farms can be compared and contrasted with those from Chinese enclaves to improve understandings of adaptation processes. Interactions between the Overseas Chinese and Native American populations also deserve greater attention. Was Feature 12 cohabited or used at different times by Chinese and indigenous workers? The discovery of a Chinese brown-glazed stoneware sherd at an indigenous camp (CA-AMA-440) one-half mile east of the farmhouse and inside of the farm property adds to the mystery. Both groups were victims of widespread discrimination that may have contributed to social alliances between them. While it may be challenging to approach issues of cultural hybridity and accommodation among subaltern groups like farm workers, the effort remains crucial because most people lived in such rural places before World War I.

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