

Zheng He

The Chinese Transcontinental Railroad Worker

In 1865, Zheng He, ethnically a Hakka from the Toishan area of China, left his homeland for the United States after a war broke out between his people, and the Punti, in 1855. He had heard of California called the Golden Mountain from the trade and harbor towns near his village and he left China with the high hopes of finding riches and adventure, as well as a safe haven, in America.

Unfortunately, Zheng He found out that the Californian streets were not paved with gold. Instead, he eagerly responded to ad in a San Francisco newspaper looking for Chinese workers to help build sections of the new transcontinental railroad in the west. Zheng He found it difficult to adjust to the job at first. He was often ridiculed by his white coworkers for his small stature, quite temperament, peculiar, imported food, and strange bathing and dress habits.

Defying his coworkers' stereotypes, Zheng He was an extremely diligent worker and eventually advanced his position to foreman of his Chinese railroad worker gang. He even devised a way of blasting roads through insurmountable mountain side from his knowledge of how the Great Wall of China was built. He approached James Strobridge with his idea, who was skeptical, but agreed to try the plan in the end. Zheng He volunteered to be one of the laborers to be lifted up in the woven baskets and dangled over the cliff's edge to place dynamite in the mountainside. Zheng He's plan, although extremely dangerous, effectively worked.

Zheng He attended the Last Spike ceremony in Promontory Summit, Utah on May 10, 1869. He continued to work on joining railroad lines in the west that had yet to be completed in 1869. With increasing anti-Chinese discrimination in the late 1800s, Zheng He eventually left his job at the railroad and became self-employed.