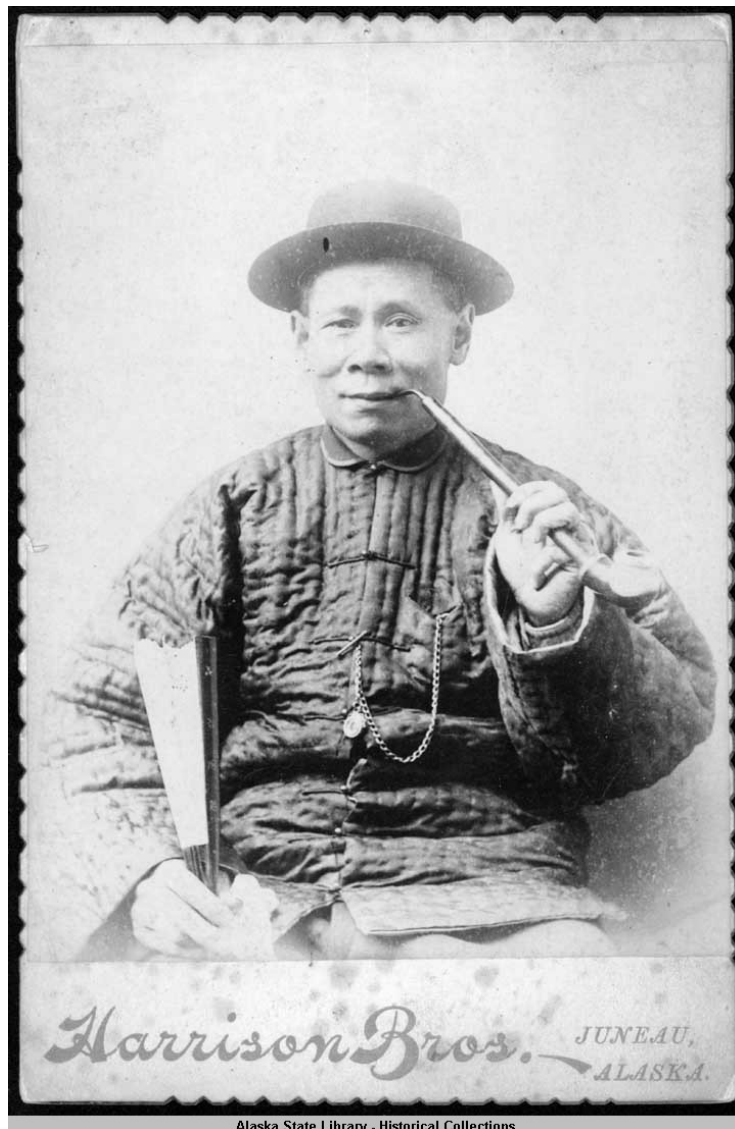


Alaskans / Pioneers

By Jennifer Houdek

LEE HING, a.k.a. "China Joe"

The Man Without an Enemy



Collection Name:



Identifier:



Title:

Early Prints of Alaska. Photographs, ca. 1870-1920. ASL-PCA-297

ASL-P297-118

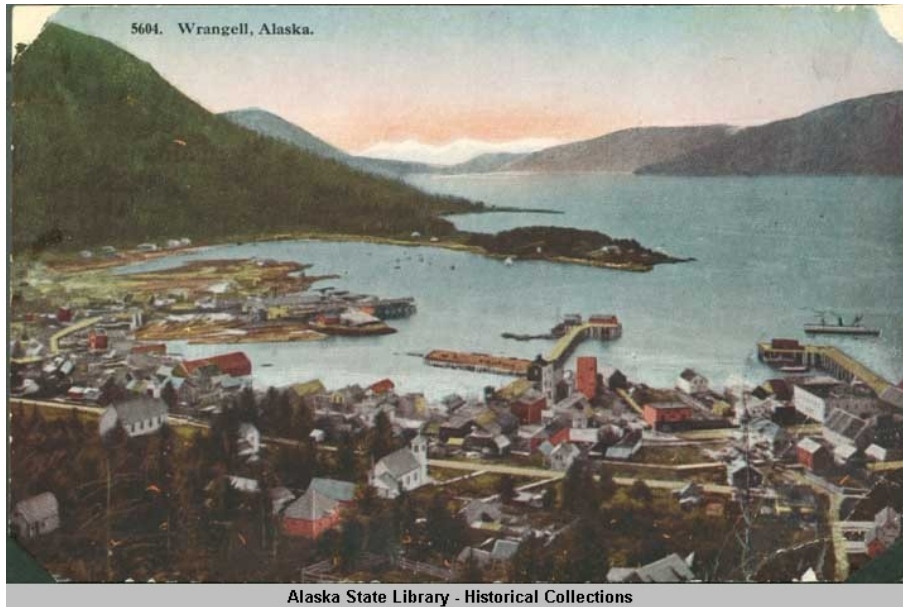
China Joe.

 **Description:**

China Joe, a baker, prospector, and store keeper in Juneau during the gold rush period. Studio portrait in hat, quilted jacket, holding fan and pipe.

 **Creator:**

Harrison Bros.



An early-day image of Wrangell, Alaska. Alaska State Library.

Collection Name:

[Postcards. Alaska, and other Northern Places, ca. 1890 - 1980's.](#)
[ASL-PCA-145](#)

 **Identifier:**

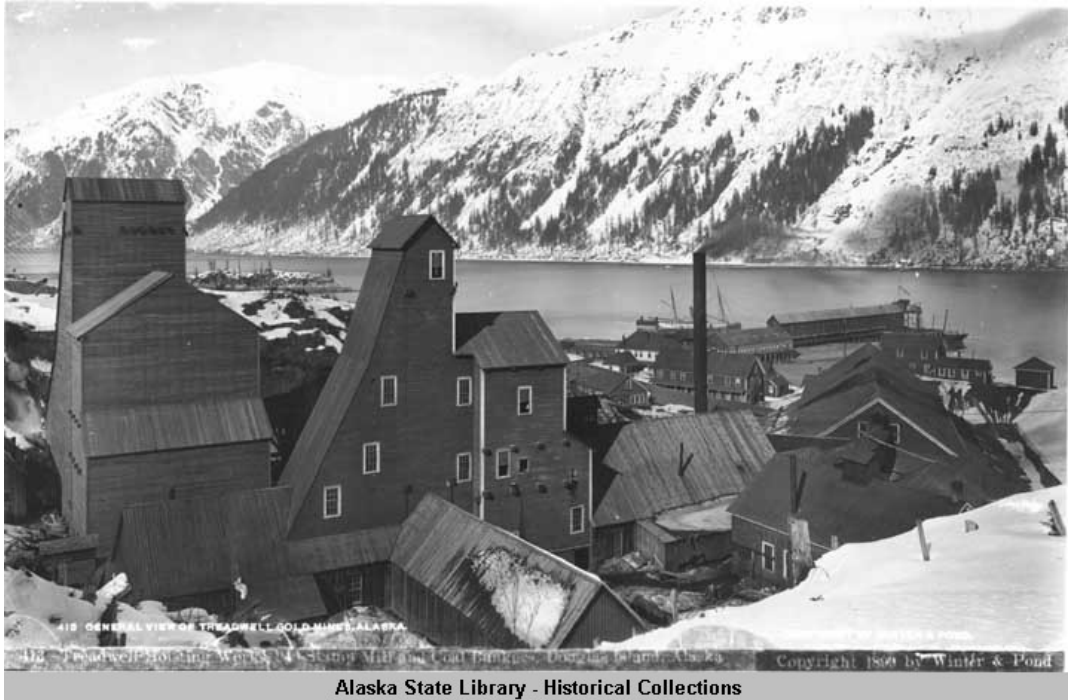
[ASL-P145-71-4](#)

 **Title:**

[5604. Wrangell, Alaska.](#)

 **Description:**

[Looking](#) down on the [city](#), [waterfront](#), and [harbor](#), with [water](#) and [mountains](#) in [background](#).



In May 1882, John Treadwell opened the Alaska Mill & Mining Company, which became known as the Treadwell Gold Mines. The mine would produce more than \$70 million in gold before it closed in 1917. Alaska State Library.

Collection Name:

[Winter and Pond. Photographs, 1893-1943. ASL-PCA-87](#)



Identifier:

[ASL-P87-0333](#)



Title:

[General view of Treadwell Gold Mines, Alaska, c. 1899.](#)



Description:

[Treadwell Hoisting Works, 240-Stamp Mill and Coal Bunkers. Douglas Island, Alaska, c. 1899. Photographer's number 413.](#)



Creator:

[Winter & Pond](#)



John Treadwell is identified as the man seated second from right in this Edward DeGroff photograph. Alaska State Library.

Collection Name: [Louis L. Stein. Photographs, ca. 1886-1912. ASL-PCA-172](#)
Identifier: [ASL-P172-16a](#)
Title: [Six men, with John Treadwell seated second from right.](#)
Creator: [DeGroff, Edward, 1860-1910](#)

<http://www.juneaualaska.com/visit/images/junhistory3.jpg>



Image of South Franklin Street, ca. 1890. Alaska State Library.

More about Lee Hing, or “China Joe”:

The man remembered as “China Joe” in Southeast Alaska lived during the Gold Rush era in a time and place where the motto was “Every man for himself.” However,

the humble baker and storekeeper known as “China Joe” refused to live by that motto. Instead, he was ready to give generously for people in need, and throughout his long life, he saved many a miner from despair and starvation. Time and again, his good-natured selflessness rose above the level of many around him. By the time he died, he was known as “the only man in Alaska without an enemy.”

His given name was Lee Hing, yet none of the miners knew him by anything other than “China Joe.” He had come to San Francisco from China at the age of eighteen to work along other Chinese immigrants connecting the Central Pacific Railway with the Union Pacific Railway. As construction of the railroad drew to a close, many Chinese emigrants stayed in California and went to work as cooks in mining camps or in the large mansions that overlooked San Francisco. Others opened restaurants and laundries. No matter where they worked, the people often experienced abuse and prejudice. Having heard that his countrymen fared better in the North, Lee Hing sacrificially saved his earnings and eventually was able to purchase a ticket to Alaska.

Lee Hing arrived in Fort Wrangell near the mouth of the Stikine River, with enough money to buy a small cabin. Immediately he turned his little cabin into a business and began cooking for hungry prospectors and trappers. Word of his restaurant traveled fast and the miners nicknamed him “China Joe.” Lee Hing seemed to take no offense. As his reputation spread, his friends among the miners implored him to open a hotel where they could spend their off-season relaxing and eating well.

Lee Hing liked the idea, but building and furnishing a new place would have been too costly. Instead, he purchased a derelict steamer that was lying in the Wrangell harbor and converted it into a hotel. With the help of the men, Lee Hing pulled it up onto the beach, leveled and blocked it for stability, and opened for business.

The business flourished despite Lee Hing’s unconventional business methods. He insisted that all customers, regardless of their ability to pay, receive the same treatment. Some miners would rack up a \$500 bill by spring and leave on a promise to pay when they found the gold. Lee Hing simply wished them luck and told them to pay when they could. True to their word, most miners did settle their accounts as soon as they hit gold.

In 1872, news arrived of a gold strike in Cassiar, a Canadian town near the headwaters of the Stikine. Lee Hing’s friends were among the first to lay claims. And as

payback for his Lee Hing's kindness, the men put a few of their claims in the name of "China Joe" then sent for him. He arrived bringing with him a large quantity of supplies, ready to open business again.

That year was a bad weather year in the Cassiar district. Before the first snow, supplies were scheduled for transport upriver by sternwheeler, then packed in over the mountain trail. It was crucial for supplies to reach the Cassiar camp before the start of winter. However, in the winter of 1872-73, the upper Stikine froze weeks earlier than usual and snow lay deep in the mountains, thus eliminating the option of packing supplies overland. The shippers had to abandon their efforts.

Isolated miners knew they couldn't make it through the winter; starvation was inevitable. Everyone had plenty of gold, but the little yellow rocks were useless. Two men in particular were not going to starve without a fight. They had arrived at the start of the Cassiar rush and knew of Lee Hing and all the supplies he had brought with him. They decided to force the Chinese man to sell them his supplies with a plan to resell to the starving miners for double. Lee Hing was not interested in selling. The duo doubled their offer again and again, but still were met with a firm and polite no. Then came threats to kill "China Joe." Friends of Lee Hing overheard the threats, and the criminals soon found themselves looking down gun barrels and told to leave. Yet, like the rest of the men in the camp, they had nowhere to go until spring.

Lee Hing knew that for one winter, the men's lives were in his hands. He could have demanded all the gold and become rich. Instead he called a meeting in which he divided his supplies equally among all of the men—including the two who had threatened his life. All that Lee Hing asked in return was that with each sack of flour, coffee, tea and sugar, the recipient would return the like amount in the spring when his goods arrived.

Soon the strike in Cassiar played out, and "China Joe" returned to Wrangell to run his store in the same way: Consistently refusing the customary amount of compensation to outfit a miner—one half of the miner's earnings—the Chinese man instead asked only for the cost of supplies. Pay for his services seemed the least of his concerns. In 1881, hearing of the boomtown at Juneau, Lee Hing and many other Wrangell-area miners

headed to the future capital of Alaska. Lee Hing continued to enjoy all the business he could handle, paying and non-paying customers alike.

However, the gold strike in Juneau had brought in a different class of men. Lee Hing's benevolence was wasted on those who took advantage of the Chinese man's willingness to help anyone in need. Still, year after year, Lee Hing saved many starving miners, never asking for recognition or payback.

In 1886, hundreds of Chinese immigrants were shipped North by the operators of Juneau's Treadwell gold mines to work as cheap laborers. Disgruntled white workers complained that the immigrants were taking over their jobs, and schemed to chase them out. A steamer and a barge were secretly chartered from Seattle to Alaska. The racist men rounded up and forced the Chinese workers aboard, warning them to never return. But before the ship left, word came that there was one Chinese man left in Juneau. An angry group assembled to grab "China Joe" and put him on the outgoing boat.

Lee Hing also had a few friends who worked in the Treadwell mines. Hearing of the insidious plan, they immediately acted. When the mob arrived to seize Lee Hing, they found a line drawn across the road and one man standing on a stump outside the bakery. The man told of how many miners' lives "China Joe" had saved through his generosity and kindness. As the man talked, more and more supporters appeared, and when he concluded, the sound of cocking rifles was heard all around the mob. The racist miners retreated without a word. However, the barge left with the other helpless workers, leaving Lee Hing as the sole Chinese man left.

Lee Hing continued to leave his mark on every life he touched. Before there was electricity in Juneau, he routinely lit a candle in his window for the night. "Joe's Beacon," the locals called it. Even with the advent of electricity, the candle in the window remained. Lee Hing had so many friends that he was asked to serve as pallbearer at nearly every funeral. In fact, in 1899, when town founder Joe Juneau lay dying in Dawson, he made it clear that upon his death, he wanted his body returned to Juneau and he wanted China Joe as one of his pallbearers. Juneau's friends saw to his last request.

Lee Hing, Juneau's beloved "China Joe," died of a heart attack during the night of May 18, 1917, at the age of eighty-three. He had long been a wealthy man, and if he wanted to, he could have returned to China to live out his years in comfort. And yet he

stayed in frontier Alaska, leading a gentle, selfless life, with discrimination toward none and generosity toward all. He had spent most of his life far from his mother country in a foreign place where none spoke his language or understood his customs. Still he made a home in Juneau, where he became a leading citizen and was called “the only man in Alaska without an enemy.”

LINKS:



Gold Stories, Alaska State Library:

<http://library.state.ak.us/goldrush/STORIES/chinajoe.htm>

Wrangell history:

www.wrangell.com/visitors/attractions/history/wrangell/

Juneau history:

www.juneaualaska.com/history/



“China Mary” of Sitka, Alaska

The Center for Educational Telecommunications, Viewer Guide to “Ancestors in the Americas: Chinese in the Frontier West”:

www.cetel.org/viewer_guide2.html

Visit the library for more information:

Alaska's libraries include audio, visual, and written material about China Joe and the Wrangell and Juneau of his era. You may be interested in learning more about the hardships and prejudices faced by Chinese emigrants to the United States. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window.

Go to the Keyword field, and type in **CHINA JOE**. Also try **WRANGELL** or **JUNEAU GOLD RUSH** to learn more about early life in these frontier communities. To research the plight of Chinese emigrants in U.S. and Alaska history, type **CHINESE LABOR** in the Keyword field.

Other Reading:

Guimary, Donald and Jack Masson, "The Exploitation of Chinese Labor in the Alaska Salmon Industry," *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (1990):91-106. Role of Chinese immigrants in the salmon industry.

Gyory, Andrew and Stanford M. Lyman, "An Exchange: Organized Labor and Chinese Immigration," *New Politics* 29 (2000):151-167. Contrasting interpretations of attitudes of early American unions toward Chinese immigrant workers.

Hyphen magazine, Summer 2005 issue, "Lonesome Land: When the Chinese were forced out of Alaska China Joe was the only one left," by I-Chun Che. For more information, see: <http://hyphenmagazine.com/features/issues/summer05/>