

# Chinese laborers did not use bosun's chairs and hanging wicker baskets in the railroad construction at Cape Horn

Colfax, California

September 2018

[museum.colfax@gmail.com](mailto:museum.colfax@gmail.com)

[www.colfaxhistory.org](http://www.colfaxhistory.org)

[www.facebook.com/colfaxmuseum](http://www.facebook.com/colfaxmuseum)

(530) 346-8599

**Summary:** Chinese laborers for the Central Pacific Railroad working at Cape Horn, California, did not hang over cliffs supported by ropes, bosun's chairs, or hand-woven wicker baskets. These well-known stories which are incorrect and are not supported by primary historical sources.

## Correcting legends and folklore about how the railroad rounding Cape Horn was constructed

Much has been written and speculated on the construction methods used in carving the railroad bed at Cape Horn, east of Colfax, California. The stories and legends have Chinese workers suspended by ropes, seated on rope-supported "bosun's chairs", or hanging in mid-air in hand-woven baskets as they chipped away at the rocky hillside.

In recent years numerous articles have been published questioning the stories or in some cases debunking those stories as myths. A careful review of those articles and further review of primary sources does indeed appear to disprove any truth behind the legends. Primary sources can be first-hand accounts from someone who was there, or documents, letters, etc., written or published at the time of the event and not colored by the intervening years.

The Chief Engineer's Report submitted to the Central Pacific Railroad's Board of Directors in November 1864 noted that the work at Cape Horn was likely not going to be as formidable as first thought. "The construction of the Road around this point [Cape Horn], will involve much heavy work, though the material encountered is not of a very formidable character, being a soft friable slate, which yields readily to the pick or bar."

With the roadbed construction at Cape Horn nearly complete, the Chief Engineer's Report dated November 1865, notes, "The work at Cape Horn has proved less difficult and expensive than was first anticipated. The line was thrown into the hill sufficiently to form the

road-bed in solid cutting, with the exception of two points, where ... heavy retaining walls have been built and the road made as secure as if upon the solid ledge."

There was no mention in either of these reports of the need for ropes, bosun's chairs, or workers in baskets hanging in mid-air. However, the Chief Engineer did laud the work ethic of the Chinese workers involved in the construction. In his 1865 report, he noted that the hiring of Chinese workers "has proved eminently successful. They are faithful and industrious, and under proper supervision, soon become skillful in the performance of their duties." Commenting on the heavy work at Long Ravine and beyond, The Chief Engineer stated, "The rapid accomplishment of this heavy work can only be obtained through the medium of that class of labor heretofore alluded to." He added, "Judging from what has been accomplished during the past season, I confidently predict that within the year 1866 your trains will run to the summit of the Sierras...."

The construction of the railroad was big news in 1865. Newspaper reports from that time noted the progress of the construction and the "swarms" of Chinese workers on the construction sites, but made no mention of ropes, bosun's chairs or hanging baskets. Likewise, no reports have been found documenting loss of life during the initial construction at Cape Horn, either by Chinese workers or others.

So where did the stories come from? The first reports of use of ropes at Cape Horn appeared in some of the early tourist guides, which were compiled and published to make the trip more interesting to early travelers on the new transcontinental railroad. *The Great Transcontinental Railroad Guide*, published by Crofutt and Eaton in 1870, a year after the new railroad was completed and five years after Cape Horn construction, included among its flowery wording this note about Cape Horn: "When the road-bed was constructed around this point, the men who broke the first standing ground were held by ropes until firm foot-holds could be excavated in the rocky sides of the precipitous bluffs."

The mention of only ropes in these early promotional documents effectively disproves the use of bosun's chairs or hanging baskets at Cape Horn.

The first known mention of bosun's chairs to support the workers at Cape Horn appeared in the May 1927 edition of the *Southern Pacific Bulletin*, in an article written by SP's public relations department. "It was at Cape Horn that workers were lowered over the cliff in 'bosun's chairs' and did the preliminary cutting, suspended 2500 feet above the American River."

The first known publication to reference wicker baskets was the 1962 book, *A Work of Giants*, by Wesley Griswold. The book stated: "Here Strobridge had to lower Chinese from the top of the cliff in wicker baskets to chip out holes for the initial charges of powder."

In summary, the Legend of Cape Horn started with references in early tourist guides about construction workers supported by ropes. The legend was expanded in later publications to include the use of bosun's chairs and, eventually, hanging baskets.

The construction methods at Cape Horn have been studied extensively and documented by numerous well-credentialed historians researching all primary sources at their disposal. Their findings have failed to lend credence to the stories of Chinese workers using ropes, bosun's chairs or hanging baskets at Cape Horn. Unless information to the contrary is found in similar primary sources such as documents or letters written at or near the time of construction, or photos (not sketches) of the actual construction activity at Cape Horn, the Colfax Area Historical Society must conclude that the initial construction of the railroad roadbed at Cape Horn was completed by conventional construction techniques. There were no ropes, nor bosun's chairs, nor hanging baskets, nor known loss of life by the Chinese crews who worked on the Cape Horn slopes. However, CAHS does recognize that the construction was significantly augmented and accelerated by the industrious work ethic of the Chinese workers, and we salute their contributions toward carving the roadbed at Cape Horn that is still in use today.

CAHS further acknowledges that the plaque that was placed by the Society at the Cape Horn overlook on Highway 174 is not correct in stating that bosun's chairs were used by the Chinese workers in the construction of the railroad at Cape Horn.

## To learn more

*Editor's note:* The history of building the railroad at Cape Horn was the subject of the CAHS's quarterly meeting in May 2018. In his presentation that evening, historian and engineer Jack E. Duncan explained how the construction was done and how tracks were added, moved, and reinforced as rail traffic increased and engine weight increased from 70 tons to 250.

Duncan is the author of the book *A Study of Cape Horn Construction on the Central Pacific Railroad 1865-1866* (2005). An 11-page summary of the book can be downloaded as a PDF file from a discussion page on the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) Photographic History Museum's web site, at <http://discussion.cpr.org/2005/10/new-book-study-of-cape-horn.html>. The web page also includes information about ordering the book and contacting the author.

The CPRR Photographic History Museum (<http://cpr.org/Museum/index.html>) contains "thousands of digitally restored period stereoviews and photographs, engravings, illustrations, maps, original photographs, ephemera, exhibits, and annotated complete transcriptions of primary source materials such as period and modern articles, first person accounts, and a wide selection of CPRR, UPRR, and government documents, reports, and railroad related federal and state statutes" (<http://cpr.org/about.html>).

The CPRR site also includes an online copy of a 12,000-word illustrated book by Edson T. Strobridge that traces the history and development of the stories about Chinese laborers working from wicker baskets hung over the cliffs. See "The Central Pacific Railroad and the Legend of Cape Horn 1865-1866," by Edson T. Strobridge, 2001 ([http://cpr.org/Museum/Cape\\_Horn.html](http://cpr.org/Museum/Cape_Horn.html)).

## Why this position paper was written

This paper was researched and written by Roger Staab at the request of the Colfax Area Historical Society board, in order to clarify the legends and folklore about some of the construction methods used by Chinese workers at Cape Horn, and to identify and confirm the details using primary sources. The exact origins of these stories are unknown, but the history of their embellishment into folklore and legends is traceable.