

SETTLEMENTS OF _____

*Uintah
County*

Digging Deeper

Doris Karren Burton

1998
Uintah County Library

little, oilcloth, drawstring bags, and the mailman hung them on posts. Whiterocks, which had the largest quantity of mail, was provided with a real mail bag. The driver delivered the mail bags to the outlying communities every day with a small team of horses and a light rig with no top. At that time, Roosevelt only consisted of about three houses and a little weather-beaten restaurant with a false front to make the building appear larger, a common practice for frontier stores. When homesteaders began to arrive in 1905, the volume of mail increased considerably.⁹⁶

The post office was first operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the building was located on the south end of Fort Duchesne. It closed temporarily in 1959 and reopened across the street in a new building built by the Ute Tribe. Leo Walker was postmaster when the old building closed and the new one opened. In August 1996 a new post office was built east of the old Wong Sing store at 7299 East US Highway 40. The present post mistress is Ellen Nelson.



Wong Sing (left) and his son, Wing, operated the first private mercantile in Fort Duchesne. They had an excellent reputation for honesty throughout the west and could acquire any merchandise needed.

(UCL-RHC collection)

excerpt from *Settlements of Uintah County: Digging Deeper* by Doris Karren Burton, 1998

In the early days no road crews were available to keep the roads open. Horses and mules pulled massive, heavy-timber freight wagons with canvas tops lashed over the freight. They often traveled in a wagon train. Army wagons, drawn by four to six mules each, brought groceries in for the commissary. In winter wagons wheels creaking on the heavy, frozen snow were heard coming for miles. The noise was often troubling to the drivers' ears. During those cold winter months, stage drivers often arrived with icicles hanging from their frozen beards and mustaches. The government employees who lived at Fort Duchesne never ventured far from the fort in the wintertime. During the summer, however, a driver and buckboard were available from the commanding officer for touring around the country.⁹⁷

The first private store in Fort Duchesne was owned and operated by Wong Sing, a Chinese immigrant from Canton, China, who came to the fort about 1889—three years after the fort was established.⁹⁸ His influence on the soldiers, Indians, and white men is still felt in the Uinta Basin. Though he could hardly speak a word of English, this enterprising Oriental established a primitive laundry on the Uinta riverbank near the post. His business was patronized by the 275 soldiers then stationed at the post, including the black troops of the 9th Cavalry. As his business expanded, Wong obtained a supply of chinaware which he packed in a little red wagon and sold to the

officers' wives and homesteaders as he delivered their laundry.

The English language proved difficult for Sing, and he never mastered some words. On the other hand, he easily grasped the Indian tongue, and he conversed with the Utes with great fluency. One story is told of a white woman, Lydia Evans, going into Sing's store to buy a bottle of Mercurochrome, which was then commonly used as an antiseptic on cuts and scratches. When she asked him for this item, Sing came out with a curry comb, used to brush horses. She said no and repeated the word rubbing up and down on her arm to indicate she could put the medicine on her arm. "Curry comb" he repeated, and ran the brush up and down his arm as if he were currying a horse.⁹⁹

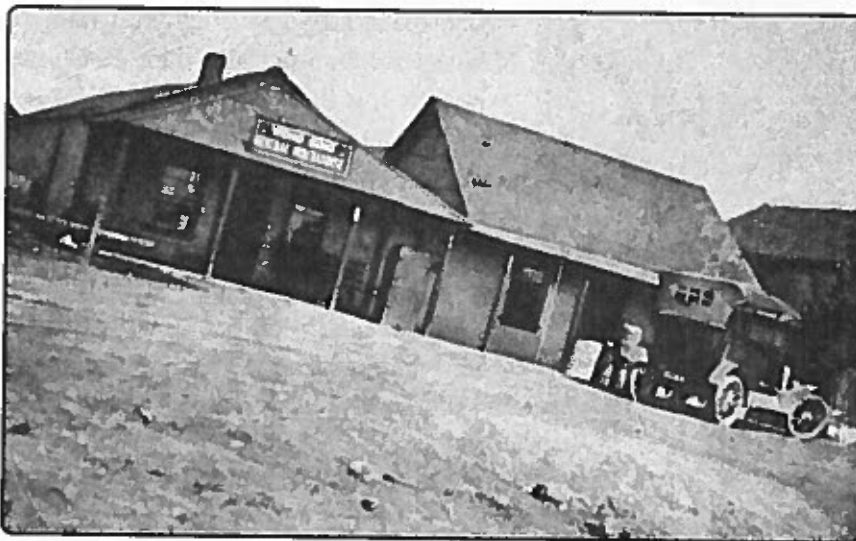
Maude Anderson, a homesteader's daughter, remembered seeing Wong Sing when she was a child riding in a wagon with her family. They had just bounced over the cobblestones of the river bottom and were crossing the big red bridge straight east of Fort Duchesne that spanned the Uinta River, when her father said, "Look at the Chinaman!" He stopped the team, so the family could take a closer look at this exotic being. Maude recalled:

I can see him now as he was then—a small slender fellow with a funny shirt, which we thought was fascinating. He had a small, close-fitting cap and a long queue of black hair hanging to his waist. He was bending over a washtub doing laundry for the soldiers at the fort. He lived in a very small house—my father called it a shanty—with a stovepipe extending through the roof. Tubs and buckets were near the side of the shanty which had been built on a small island. Water could easily be dipped at this site to fill his wash tub. His clothesline was the rose bushes and trees where he would drape his washing."¹⁰⁰

It was a common sight to see Wong Sing carrying large baskets of laundry on his head or shoulders to the soldiers.¹⁰¹

No one is certain exactly how or why Sing first came to Fort Duchesne. Some believe he had immigrated with his father to San Francisco and was then hired as a handyman by an army officer who brought him to the post. Others claimed he traveled to Utah to join an old Chinese laundryman who had become too old to pick up and deliver laundry himself. All of these accounts have him in the area beginning in 1889. One account even says he came as a houseboy with Captain Randlett in 1894, having originally arrived at Green River, Wyoming, to help his uncle Wong Wee in a restaurant business.¹⁰²

An enterprising pair of troopers rented a room in the hotel at Fort Duchesne and opened a poker parlor. Sing became a master at the game, and his earnings flourished. It was said he could hold four aces and keep a straight face. After he had accumulated sufficient capital, he opened a restaurant at the fort. It proved to be very



Wong Sing's store was a series of buildings he moved and patched together.
(Maurine Freestone collection)

profitable, and he was later able to establish a small store next to the restaurant. He wanted to secure the Indian trade along with the soldiers' business. By dealing fairly and honestly with all of them, he won their combined patronage. He became so popular with the Indians that several white traders, resenting his competition, had him removed from the reservation. The Indians refused to have anything to do with the white merchants, and shortly thereafter, their establishment mysteriously burned down. Sing established a new store, across the river

to the east, just off the reservation. After he was firmly established in the mercantile business, Sing learned that both Indians and soldiers loved the fantastically embroidered silk mufflers, shawls, and robes he carried.

When Sing announced he would open a store on the "Strip" away from the center of Fort Duchesne, his competitors, who were in the mercantile business and had licenses to do business with the Indians, laughed at him. They predicted failure for the "Chinaman's store." Fairness, good prices, and a knowledge of human nature soon won Sing a place in the hearts of the Indians and of most white men, however. His reputation for integrity grew, as did his business, especially after the reservation was opened to white homesteading in 1905. The only thing that Sing changed was his mode of dress and his hair style. He chose modern, western styles and cut off his long braid, sporting a short haircut instead. His trade extended to stockmen, businessmen, and farmers from every section of the Uinta Basin, and he shipped supplies and equipment to customers far beyond eastern Utah and the reservation. His trading post, located twenty-five miles west of Vernal, was the most fully-stocked of any store to be found in either Vernal or Roosevelt. All of his freight was hauled in by team and wagon from Price, the closest railroad station. As his enterprise grew, he required additional space. Sing added one section after another onto his store without any regard for style. Some of the additions were actually vacant buildings, including an old saloon, he moved from the Strip when it was abandoned. The buildings were tied together with a plank porch and a hitching rail. Sing lived in a small river-stone house located behind his trading post in a grove of trees. He provided a camping area for the Indians with water available for their horses. Next to the store was a stand of trees growing on a patchy lawn, which served as a picnic spot and playground for the women and children who waited outside while the men did their trading and visiting in the store. Sing provided a large wooden picnic table and a standpipe of clean drinking water for his customers.

Despite the haphazard appearance of the store, customers remembered it as a pleasant place to shop. A pot-bellied stove warmed the building and provided a cozy place for the men to sit and discuss business. Narrow aisles were stacked to the ceiling with merchandise, including exotic-smelling teas, and virtually every other item imaginable. Sing's uncle, Wong Wee, worked behind the counter on the sawdust covered floor of the butcher shop. Sacks of flour and sugar were stacked in rows in the grocery department. Piled on the counter were wheels of cheese, tins of crackers, and colored candy in glass jars. Burlap sacks filled with grain and seed were piled along one wall. A large scale hung from the ceiling over bins filled with nails and hardware supplies. Shoes and boots hung from an overhead line. Bolts of silk and cotton covered a large table. Dried herbs and medicines were kept in wooden drawers. Bars of soap, tins of spices, and exotic glass jars filled the shelves, creating a potpourri of scents. A glass case held strings of pearls, glass beads, perfumes, folding ivory fans, coloring books, crayons, and paper dolls. Wong Sing moved silently around the worn board floor in his moccasin-shod feet, while his son, Wong Wing, sat on a stool in a bamboo-like cage, clicking his abacus beads and painting characters on long slips of paper with a brush dipped in ink.

Furniture and farm equipment filled the adjoining buildings. Hanging from large pegs were horse collars, harnesses, saddles, and wagon wheels. Indian rugs, blankets, and shawls were piled between wooden chairs and iron bedsteads. Indian drums, spears, baskets, beaded saddle blankets, leggings, gloves, and other items taken in trade for food and tobacco hung on the walls.¹⁰³

Sing personally handed children an all-day sucker and often tucked a sack of candy, apples, oranges, or nuts in with purchased groceries. Any stock that had been on the shelves for a while inevitably ended up being given to poor families. By the mid-1920s the store carried about \$70,000 worth of stock.

When Wong Sing first started his business, he thought everyone was as honest as himself. A number of residents, however, thought it was funny to trick him. William Tembroeck, who had a store and a saloon on the opposite side of the military reserve, was a good friend of Sing's and told of one incident. A family who lived down toward Randlett would drive to Tembroeck's place, tell him they were on their way to Sing's, and ask if they could buy something for him. He would give them a list of goods he wanted and the money to pay for them. They would then buy the goods for him, charge the cost of the goods to their own account, and pocket the money. They were that much ahead since they did not intend to pay Sing. After a few similar experiences, Sing altered his opinion of his fellow men and purchasers paid cash. A few individuals were allowed to pay every

thirty days, but only after Sing was convinced they were responsible. When the Depression set in in the 1930s, Sing reduced his workforce, and eased up on his credit policy. When a hard-pressed rancher asked for more time to pay a bill, Sing said, "It is not my policy to extend credit, but you need the goods, so take them."¹⁰⁴

Sing's word was his bond; he had excellent credit in every section of the nation. His method of accounting was a mystery to all. One day an adding machine salesman came to the store and wanted to sell him a machine, but Sing said he could beat the machine with his Chinese abacus, which was made of wire and chips. The race was on. Sing and the salesman were given long lists of figures to add simultaneously. Sing used a pool cue to work the abacus and had the answer almost instantly. After the adding machine finished the computations, Sing looked at the answer and said, "It's wrong." Sure enough, the numbers had not been entered properly. He bought one of the machines anyway, explaining that his clerks needed one since they could not figure out how to work the abacus.

Sing's clerks fondly remembered him as a patient man who corrected them simply by saying, "Let's do it this way."

"I was kinda backward," one clerk confessed, "and [Sing] brought that out of me. He taught me to figure, and he taught me to write better, and how to treat people and how to meet 'em. He really made something out of me." Another clerk, Elsie Jordon, worked for Sing for sixteen years. She said that in conjunction with his store, he built a nice frame house with a large dining room which a relative "Old Wee," [his uncle Wong Wee] operated as a boarding house. All of his clerks ate their noon meal at the house. Jordon said the store was a long, low building with very little ventilation. "During the Indian pay days when the store was packed, it seemed as if we would be overcome with the sweaty peculiar odor from the people shopping in the store. 'Safe-Guard' was unknown."¹⁰⁵

Sing never forgot a friend and would stand by one through thick and thin. He was a staunch friend of L. W. Curry, and it is said that Mr. Curry's funeral was the first Christian rite Sing ever attended.

For many years Wong distributed calendars, illustrated with full-color Indian motifs, to his customers and friends. The distribution portrayed the extent of his operations. Dr. E. A. Pritchard, in charge of emergency conservation work for the western states, commented on Sing's calendars. "Wherever there are Indians in the west, you can find Wong Sing's calendars. I have seen them on the reservation on Raft River, at Fort Hall, at Camp Jacks on the Flathead Reservation, at the Sacaton Agency in Arizona, at Shiprock, New Mexico, and at a hotel in Glacier National Park. Wong Sing enjoyed a wider acquaintance among western Indians than any other individual."¹⁰⁶

By 1927 Sing's business was really booming. During this period, he employed eight clerks, operated a furniture store, a general merchandise store, a meat market, became a dealer for machinery and was disbursing agent for other firms. Sing was respected by all and his reputation for honesty was undisputed. Superintendent L. W. Page of the Fort Duchesne Indian agency, also was loud in his praise of Wong Sing, "He was the only individual I ever met whose personal check was accepted as cash by the post office department. If I wanted a double record of a transaction, and would attempt to purchase a postal money order with my personal check, the postmaster would tell me to exchange my personal check for one of Wong Sing's and the transaction could be made." Fort Duchesne Postmaster Wilson once said he handled up to nine hundred dollars in Wong Sing's personal checks monthly that were forwarded to the Federal Post Office in Salt Lake City, which never refused to accept the checks as cash.¹⁰⁷

When Uintah County wanted to build a new hospital, Sing was the first to make a contribution. He also did welfare work among the Indians, assisted them in business transactions, and learned their history and culture, eventually becoming so accepted that he was allowed to photograph tribal customs. He then lent these pictures to Indian Service officials in an effort to increase their understanding of the tribes they served.

Wong Sing suffered from rheumatism and, in 1924, sent for his son, Wong Wing. After some time, Wing arrived in Fort Duchesne to help his father bear the burden of his extensive business operations. As a merchant, Sing would have been entitled under the federal Exclusion Laws to have his wife and children join him, but the process was considered risky and frequently humiliating, since all Chinese immigrants were detained for weeks, and sometimes years, at immigration stations. They were forced to verify identities through interrogations and

physical examinations. In one case a woman was denied entrance because the contour of her ears was supposedly different from that described on her affidavit. Another time, public health doctors concluded that an applicant's age was twenty, not sixteen as claimed, and the young woman was therefore "fraudulent beyond question."¹⁰⁸ In another case, a mother was admitted, but her children were turned back. After a few years in this country, her husband sent his pining wife back to China to join their children. When drunken miners in Fiddletown, California, tried to abduct the daughter of a Chinese merchant, the merchant shot one of them. He was imprisoned, but the miners were not. Chinese were not permitted to testify in court, and the merchant had to depend on the corroboration of white residents to support his testimony of self-defense.

Knowing the situation, Sing could not guarantee the safety of his family in America, and he never sent for his wife or daughter, only his son. As he feared, immigration officials in San Francisco initially refused to admit Wing. Fortunately, a friend and influential Vernal resident, William H. Siddoway, telegraphed Senator Reed Smoot, who convinced the officials that "things were as represented," and Wing was released.¹⁰⁹ When Sing introduced the young Chinese man as his son, some Fort Duchesne residents were shocked. Many people claimed Sing had never left the Uinta Basin and that Wing was really his nephew. Others believed he had gone back to China, married, and fathered a son and daughter before returning to Utah alone. Nevertheless, father and son worked side by side for the next ten years.

In March 1934, Wong Sing was killed in an unfortunate automobile accident as he drove to Salt Lake City for supplies and medical attention. Wing was notified and arrived in Park City that afternoon to make arrangements for the body, which was taken to Denver for cremation. No funeral services were held, since the Chinese were adverse to such rites and preferred to bear their grief alone. *Salt Lake Tribune* headlines at the time read: "Indians Mourn the Death of Wong Sing, Pioneer of Fort Duchesne." Although no official funeral was held, sixty Ute braves met in a solemn tribal council at the office of the agency superintendent of Fort Duchesne to extol Sing's virtues. His passing was deeply mourned.¹¹⁰ Wong Sing had functioned as an early one-man Chamber of Commerce for eastern Utah. Numbered among his mourners were many high government officials, as well as ranking army officers who had conducted business with him while at Fort Duchesne.

The *Vernal Express* report of the accident described Sing as "the merchant prince of the Uinta Basin," and his friend, William Tembrock, promised, "He will never die in the memory of his acquaintances and the residents of Uinta Basin." Wong Sing never achieved acclaim outside his own environs, but who can measure the greatness of a man's soul, or his influence on others by his dedication to absolute honesty? Wong Sing's "rags to riches" story was built on integrity and fair play. The Indians never had a better friend.¹¹¹

Wong C. Wing continued his father's business. (Note that a Chinese family name is written before the given name.) The store was moved after the Victory Highway (US 40) was built, and a new building was constructed; however, many of the old buildings which were moved from the former site are still lined up behind the new building. The store remains on Highway 40 and is now being operated as the Outpost Mercantile by Mark and Marilyn Larsen. Wing followed his father's example and had a large business and many friends. His wife, Jennie, also Oriental, became his helpmate and was a lovely woman.

During World War II in the 1940s, many things were hard to buy, but Wong Wing had connections all over the country. If he liked a person, he found what they wanted somewhere. He would say, "No, I don't have it, but I have it next time." The next time the individual came to his store, he would, indeed, have the item. The author remembers one instance when her rancher father, Victor Karren, needed a 30-30 rifle. Guns could not be purchased at that time, but Wing indeed obtained one for him "next time."

Wing died November 1952 at the age of 52. His death, like that of his father before him, was mourned by Indians and white men throughout the Basin and the west. Both father and son built reputations for honesty and dependability that placed them in high standing among their customers and anyone else who had business dealings with them.

A post trader store was also in operation at the fort, run on a government contract which was held by a private merchant. Before 1890 George Jewell was the trader. By 1890 three structures owned by civilian contrac-

Wong Sing operated the first laundry for the soldiers. Later, after he opened his store and restaurant, he gave up the laundry business and women were hired to wash and iron the soldiers' clothes. Civilian workers washed their own clothing, usually heating water on an outside fire. The clothes were boiled, soaped, scrubbed on a washboard, rinsed, blued, and hung out to dry. In the winter the clothes "freeze dried" on the line or were hung to dry around the stove in the house.

Money being scarce, Peggy Pierce said that Christmas presents were rarely given. Only a turkey dinner was served to celebrate the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. She received one pair of shoes each year, a light summer dress, and a woolen winter dress. She did have the opportunity to take piano lessons from Dr. Ford's wife. She rode five miles on horseback and cleaned house for Mrs. Ford in exchange for her lesson. She received permission from the commanding officer to practice on the piano in the post dance hall.

Minister Hersey, a circuit rider from the Randlett Episcopal Church, traveled to Vernal, Jensen, Whiterocks, and Fort Duchesne once a month to hold church services. He drove a buggy to these outposts, then traveled back to his church in Randlett.

School at Fort Duchesne

A government school, dating from about 1890, was supported by officers at Fort Duchesne. Henry Harris, a part-blood Indian educated in the east, taught the white children and some of the soldiers, who attended the school to further their educations. Indian children were sent to boarding schools at Whiterocks, Randlett, and Grand Junction, Colorado.

When Peggy Pierce arrived in Fort Duchesne, the school had closed and it remained closed for the first two years after she moved in. Then three boys came to the community, making a total of four eligible students, so an army private was detailed to teach the children. Peggy had attended school in Salt Lake City before moving to the fort, so she began studying in McGuffie's Sixth Grade Reader. The children were also taught geography and arithmetic. After the homesteaders arrived in 1905, twenty-two children were enrolled in the school.¹²³

When the soldiers left the fort in 1912, the white children still living in Fort Duchesne attended school at Gusher, Randlett, or Independence, but two women, Phoebe Lister and Mrs. Fred Davis, began a movement to open a new school there. Superintendent Earl Thompson met in Vernal with Albert Goodrich and William Henderson, members of the school board, and the first public school for the fort was authorized. The first teachers were Addison Naylor and Eva Loy.¹²⁴

In 1915 school classes were held in the guard house—with the permission of Indian Agent A.H. Kneale. The cells were still intact then, but the building was remodeled and a four-room public schoolhouse was created. V.T. Rice became the school's first principal in 1916. In 1924 there were three teachers and an enrollment of seventy-five pupils.¹²⁵ Lloyd Panter was principal in 1928. A more modern school facility was built, and in the 1930s classes were held in Fort Duchesne for students in the first through tenth grades. In 1951, when Union High School opened, younger students were sent to Alterra, which served as a combined junior high and elementary school, while high school students attended Union. Students were transferred to Todd Elementary in 1957, and to West Middle School in 1963 after those schools were built. At present, a federally-funded Head Start school for pre-school age children is located in Fort Duchesne on the hill southwest of the former fort site.

Road Building and other Activities

Fort Duchesne soldiers spent their early years at the post constructing buildings and improving and maintaining the vital roads that brought supplies in and out of the Uinta Basin. Four major roads became important both to the fort and the surrounding communities: the Vernal-Duchesne Road, which connected Vernal, Fort Duchesne, and Duchesne; the Nine Mile Canyon or Price-Myton and Indian Canyon roads, both of which connected the Basin with the railway station at Price; and the Thornburgh/Carter Road, which had been improved during the days Fort Thornburgh was operating at the mouth of Ashley Canyon. Thornburgh/Carter