

A3679

INDEX TO CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT CASE FILES,
INS OFFICE, HELENA, MONTANA,
ca. 1899–ca. 1933

Compiled by Claire Prechtel-Klusken

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INTRODUCTION

On the single roll of this microfilm publication, A3679, is reproduced a card index to Chinese Exclusion Act case files in the INS office at Helena, Montana, ca. 1899–ca. 1933. These records are part of Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group (RG) 85.

BACKGROUND

Early records relating to immigration originated in regional customhouses. The U.S. Customs Service conducted its business by designating collection districts. Each district had a headquarters port with a customhouse and a collector of customs, the chief officer of the district. An act of March 2, 1819 (3 Stat. 489), required the captain or master of a vessel arriving at a port in the United States or any of its territories from a foreign country to submit a list of passengers to the collector of customs. The act also required that the collector submit a quarterly report or abstract, consisting of copies of these passenger lists, to the Secretary of State, who was required to submit such information at each session of Congress. After 1874, collectors forwarded only statistical reports to the Treasury Department. The lists themselves were retained by the collector of customs. Customs records were maintained primarily for statistical purposes.

On August 3, 1882, Congress passed the first Federal law regulating immigration (22 Stat. 214); the Secretary of the Treasury had general supervision over it between 1882 and 1891. The Office of Superintendent of Immigration in the Department of the Treasury was established under an act of March 3, 1891 (26 Stat. 1085), and was later designated a bureau in 1895 with responsibility for administering the alien contract-labor laws. In 1900 administration of the Chinese exclusion laws was added. Initially the Bureau retained the same administrative structure of ports of entry that the Customs Service had used. By the turn of the century, it began to designate its own immigration districts, the numbers and boundaries of which changed over the years. In 1903 the Bureau became part of the Department of Commerce and Labor; its name was changed to the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization when functions relating to naturalization were added in 1906. In 1933 the functions were transferred to the Department of Labor and became the responsibility of the newly formed Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Under President Roosevelt's Reorganization Plan V of 1940, the INS was moved to the Department of Justice. The INS was abolished, and its immigration and naturalization record-keeping functions were transferred to the new Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services within the new Department of Homeland Security,

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established January 24, 2003, by the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (116 Stat. 2135, 2205).

The Chinese Exclusion Act (22 Stat. 58), enacted May 6, 1882, barred skilled and unskilled laborers and miners from entering the U.S. for 10 years. Subsequent legislation enacted in 1884, 1892, and 1902, extended its duration and restrictions. Chinese who left the U.S. had to obtain certificates for reentry, and Chinese residents were required to register and obtain a certificate of residence or risk deportation.

RECORDS DESCRIPTION

This microfilm publication reproduces a typewritten card index to Chinese Exclusion Act case files, ca. 1899–ca. 1933, held in the office of the INS District of Montana and Idaho, located at Helena, Montana. The cards are arranged in alphabetical order from A to Y; a card may include two or more persons with the same or similar name.

The card index will, at minimum, inform the researcher that a Chinese person (1) had a local file in the Helena, Montana, INS office, which file may not now exist; (2) made at least one entry into the U.S. at the U.S.-Canada border in Idaho or Montana; and (3) entered sometime before October 10, 1957.

The index is arranged alphabetically by surname, then roughly alphabetically by first name. People with the same name, or similar names, are grouped on one card. For each person, the Helena INS office “local file” number is given. For half of the people, additional comments provide further information. These are typical entries typewritten on the cards:

3/322 AH DUCK, Pierce, Idaho, 1901

2/695 AH GEE (Applicant for laborer’s return certificate, 24 W. Mercury St.,
Butte, Mont.)

3/1304 FONG FUN

3/1694 FONG FUN

3/751 FONG JIM WUEY (Minor son of Fong Lee, Fong Lee Co., Boise,
Idaho)

3/906 FONG JIM YICK (Minor son of Fong Lee, Fong Lee Co., Boise, Idaho)

The INS target (information) sheets at the beginning of the roll and the original box label *incorrectly* describe these records as an “alphabetical index of Chinese arrivals.” However, “arrival” dates are not given for all persons in the index. The first index card—an original record—identifies the files as being from:

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M I C R O F I L M P U B L I C A T I O N S

Department of Commerce and Labor
Immigration Service
Office of Inspector in Charge
District of Montana and Idaho
Helena, Montana

The identifier "Department of Commerce and Labor" suggests that the typing of the index began between 1903 and 1913 although completion of typing could have ended much later, as late as October 10, 1957, the date the index was filmed.

RELATED RECORDS

Chinese Exclusion Act case files from the INS District of Montana and Idaho office, Helena, Montana, are located (in 2009) at NARA-Pacific Northwest Region, 6125 Sand Point Way NE, Seattle WA 98115. The Helena file numbers span 2/1072-2/1119, 3/914-3/1247, and 4/110-4/394, but only 188 case files are extant.

Persons mentioned in this index *may also* have one or more INS files now in the custody of other National Archives regional facilities. For the period 1903-1943, resident Chinese nationals and Chinese Americans who wished to visit China made their application for a return certificate at the nearest INS office. If the office was inland and not a port of entry and departure, then copies of the application paperwork (if approved) were sometimes forwarded to the planned port of departure. Consequently, a person who traveled during that era may have two or more INS case files.

For example, this microfilm publication includes an entry for "3/906 FONG, JIM YICK (Minor son of Fong Lee, Fong Lee Co., Boise, Idaho)." There is a file (10420/100) for this same man in the San Francisco INS district office files located (in 2009) at NARA-Pacific Region (San Francisco), 1000 Commodore Drive, San Bruno, CA 94066, which includes carbon copies of some papers from his District of Montana and Idaho file 3/906. Fong's brother, Jim Wuey/Wee Fong, who is also mentioned in this microfilm publication, also has a San Francisco INS case file.

Please note that INS file numbers used at the district office for the port of departure will be different than the file numbers used by the INS District of Montana and Idaho.