

Elyse: Our first story investigates a tale of drugs and gold on the American frontier. It's 1850, and in California, the first cries of "gold!" are heard. It's the beginning of the gold rush and heralds the arrival of tens of thousands in search of their fortune. But it isn't just Americans that strike out in search of riches; news of the Gold Rush spreads around the world to the Guangdong Province of China. Over the next 50 years, more than 300,000 poor and unemployed Chinese from this single province will sail to America. They arrive seeking gold but become merchants, doctors, railroad workers, and eventually play a major role in building the American West. One hundred fifty years later, a woman in Montana has stumbled across what she believes may be a fragment of this frontier past.

Judy: In 1967, a friend invited me to go to an estate sale in Butte. And we found a peculiar container. And the woman doing the sale said it had contained an opium scale. And I'm still wondering was it what she said it was?

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray, and I'm in Butte, Montana, to investigate this relic from the days of the Gold Rush. Well, it looks like a violin case.

Judy: It opens up, and there are these compartments inside. The woman who was selling it at an estate sale said that it was used to contain an opium scale in the 1800s. I guess if the scale went in here, it must have gone into these tiny, little compartments. I'd like to know if it really did contain an opium scale.

Elyse: Judy tells me the woman who sold the case told her it had probably been brought over to America by Chinese immigrants. But she's never had the story verified. Okay: opium and opium scales. Kind of surprised. [Laughs] but I'll see what I can do. I'm going to need to take it with me.

Judy: Please do.

Elyse: It's an intriguing idea that this once held an opium scale and that the drug was being used in Montana in the mid-19th century. But is the box from the right period? the carving inside tells me that it has age to it, it was made by hand, and particularly up here, if you look at this brass piece right here that's holding it together, that's original to the piece, and that dates it to the 1800s. But the case really could have held anything. There's nothing to suggest it once held scales and much less scales to weigh opium. I'm not an appraiser of Chinese works of art, so the first thing I need to do is to contact somebody who is. I'm sending off an email to a few colleagues. Meanwhile, I want to find out more about Chinese migration to America and figure out how our little case could have made it to Montana. In 1850, China is in turmoil. Years of droughts, floods, and population increase have spawned widespread poverty. The news of California's gold offers a glimmer of hope. America becomes known as "gam san," or "gold mountain." the new arrivals set up camp in northern California and join the gold rush. But racism forces Chinese miners away from the more lucrative rivers dominated by whites. Instead, they work streams previously abandoned, sifting for gold the white miners may have overlooked. By 1860, more than 35,000 Chinese had arrived in California. And San Francisco's Chinatown is booming. With few women in the city to perform traditional female roles like washing and cooking, Chinese entrepreneurs pick up the slack. By 1880, San Francisco has 7,500 Chinese laundries. But as the California gold rush begins to run dry, miners head across the Rockies to Montana, where gold had been discovered in the early 1860s. Dory Scrukard is board member with Butte's Mai Wah Chinese History Museum.

Dory Scrukard: Well, we're headed west on Mercury Street here, and we're walking into the heart of Butte's Chinatown.

Elyse: Okay. Dory says the massive influx of miners to Montana in the early 1860s included thousands of Chinese. It was about an eight-block area, and this was covered with businesses and residences where the Chinese lived. Proprietors would have their businesses on the first floor and lived above. It wasn't just Butte that became home to large Chinese communities. The western states: Colorado, Wyoming, Oregon, Washington, all had Chinese working the gold camps. So how many Chinese people lived in Butte?

Dory: In the 1870s, the Chinese comprised 10 percent of the population of the Montana territory. In the mid-1890s in Butte, there were upward of 2,000 to 3,000 Chinese living in the community. We're walking down China Alley, which was the main street for Chinatown. There was an herb shop here, restaurants. It was really the central marketplace for Chinatown.

Elyse: I tell Dory a little about the story I'm working on. Was there opium being used in Butte?

Dory: We know there was opium being used in Butte. We've found artifacts in and around the community: opium tins and pipes and those kinds of things. In fact, there's an 1882 newspaper account of an opium den, and it was just due north of here.

Elyse: So I have this case, I'm told that an opium scale may have once been inside. Have you ever seen anything like this before?

Dory: No, I haven't. You know, we've found things in excavations associated with opium use but I've never seen anything like this.

Elyse: I want to see what else I can learn opium use in Butte in the 19th century. And I'm curious about what happened to this once-thriving community. Dory points me to the local Butte archives. This is interesting. By the end of the 19th century, opium was used socially around the country by a variety of ethnic groups. The federal government didn't make it illegal until 1909. But some western states banned opium much earlier amid a surge of anti-Chinese sentiment. Montana declared opium-smoking illegal in 1891. Listen to this account from a Butte newspaper the following year. "White men and even white girls cannot make an honest living with the Chinese around. They have their own opium dens and sell opium and smoke it, and when apprehended as criminals, escape into their underground dens, which are of mammoth proportions and cannot be found." Such news accounts of Chinese opium use helped fan the flames of racial antagonism not just in Butte but across the country. Congress passed the Chinese exclusion act. The railroads were built, the gold mostly exhausted, and the once-welcoming United States now slammed its doors to Chinese workers. The law read, "Whereas in the opinion of the government of the United States, the coming of the Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities. Therefore, it shall not be lawful for any Chinese laborers to come to the United States." This national anti-Chinese prejudice soon arrived in Butte. On January 13, 1897, Butte trade unions placed this ad in a local newspaper: "A general boycott has been declared upon all Chinese and Japanese restaurants, tailor shops, and washhouses. All friends and sympathizers of organized labor assist us in this fight the lowering asiatic standards of living and of morals." It seems clear that opium was being consumed in Butte and that drug use was being used to drive a wedge between the Chinese and the rest of the community. I wonder if our scale was somehow connected to this story. I've made an appointment at the Montana state crime lab where forensic scientist Bonnie Kleats is testing our scale for traces of opium.

Bonnie Kleats: Well, residues are kind of tricky. We don't always see what we're trying to analyze. We need to actually do a cotton swab with solvent and see if we can pick up any of the residue that's on there.

Elyse: Bonnie digs into the crevices of our case, hunting for some ancient evidence.

Bonnie: Well, we're going to actually inject this sample into a gas chromatograph that's interfaced with a mass selective detector. And we'll be able to molecularly identify each component.

Elyse: Okay, so in laymen terms... going to see what's in here. [Both laugh]

Bonnie: What I'm going to do is pull up one microliter. And then I'm going to put it into the injection port.

Elyse: Bonnie explains that once our sample is inside, it's bombarded with electrons, shattering it into individual molecules. So we're going to take two of the compounds that are found in opium, codeine and morphine, and do an extracted ion chromatogram to see if any of those have shown up.

Elyse: And what are you finding?

Bonnie: I'm finding some nicotine, fatty acids, but no opium.

Elyse: Nicotine. The nicotine finding is a little surprising. I want to show our scale to Diana Omid of the University of Missouri in Rolla. Hi, Diana.

Diana Omid: Hi, how are you?

Elyse: She's the author of a book chronicling opium's use in the American West.

Diana: What we have here is a sample of fake opium. This is just a ball of clay, but this is about the size opium would have been imported in. You could buy smoking opium in different sizes. You could buy it in a tin, and this is a real opium tin, and you could go to a Chinese store, and you could buy some opium and take it home. Most people went to an opium den and would pay about 25 cents for about a pea-size shape of opium. If opium balls were sold by physical size and value, rather than weight, I'm not sure why a dealer would have needed a scale at all. The proprietor would take this tool. This is a real opium tool. And he would scoop out this little wad of opium and plaster it into the bowl. And then the smoker would take it and... [Inhales deeply] draw it right in. And it would go into his lungs, and then it would go straight into his bloodstream he could get the dreams that you wished to have.

Elyse: I have this case, and it may have held a scale for opium. I'm wondering if you've seen anything like this.

Diana: I've seen a lot of opium paraphernalia, but I've never seen anything like this.

Elyse: In fact, Diana tells me she's never heard of an opium scale. Just as Judy's story seems to be unraveling, I get a call back from a colleague. She's located an expert on Chinese artifacts who has something I might be interested in. Priscilla Wegars is the curator of the University of Idaho's Asian-American collection. I was wondering if you've ever seen a case like this before.

Priscilla Wegars: I have, and when I knew you were coming over, I got something out that I think you'll like to see.

Elyse: Okay. Oh, wow, it looks just like ours. So it does hold a scale. Look at that.

Priscilla: Now, where was this one found?

Elyse: This one was found underneath one of the sidewalks in Butte in the 1970s. How does it work?

Priscilla: I'll show you. You take the items to be weighed, and put them in the pan. And you have several different little cords here to suspend it. And we'll choose this one as a starter and see if we get it pretty close to begin with. It's not quite straight but pretty close. Yeah, there it is.

Elyse: Our Chinese case really did hold a scale!

Priscilla: These scales first came to...

Elyse: Priscilla tells me something I hadn't expected. It's time to get back to Judy. I tell her that her case really did hold a Chinese scale. So that part was right. So we were right about that. But there's something else you should know.

Priscilla: Well, it's a scale, but it's not an opium scale. That's a misnomer. These scales first came to the United States with the many thousands of miners that came from China to this country to mine for gold. In later years, they were used in herbal medicine shops and sometimes by merchants as well.

Elyse: So then why would someone call this an opium scale?

Priscilla: This is a way to demonize the Chinese, and, if you can put opium and Chinese together, then that makes them look bad. And it's just another reason for why people in the olden days would say the Chinese must go.

Elyse: Judy's scale had tested positive for nicotine. Judy is a smoker, and that may account for the results. But it's also possible the scale had once been used to weigh out tobacco in a dry-goods store. So, Judy, this case probably never even had opium in it.

Judy: Never touched it.

Elyse: Probably never touched it.

Judy: I've almost always had it out on display, and now I can answer questions with a little more authority and with a clear conscience.

Elyse: Does it have more meaning now that you know more about it?

Judy: My feelings about it are very similar to some of the kitchen items I've saved from my grandmother, things of humble beginnings, but they take on a special warmth and charm once you know the story behind them.

Elyse: The boycott of Butte's Chinatown in 1897 became a historic showdown. Chinese physician Hoy Pac and other local businessmen hired renowned Montana lawyer Wilber F. Sanders. But although Sanders won his suit and the boycott was ended, the legal victory couldn't save Butte's Chinatown. Ongoing discrimination and new national policies against immigrants to drive Chinese residents out of the smaller western towns towards larger Chinatowns in San Francisco and New York. By 1920, there were just 120 Chinese citizens left in Butte. Today, there are fewer than 100.

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