

## YOST, UTAH: DIVERSITY IN A REMOTE UTAH SETTLEMENT

By Audrey M. Godfrey

In 1896, Robert Montgomery, Jr. decided he=d had enough of the crowded settlement of North Ogden and headed for a less populated area. He chose an isolated town in northwestern Utah reached only by dirt roads called Yost.<sup>1</sup>

Surrounded by several mountain ranges, the town lay on the south end of the Raft River Valley with the Clear Creek Mountains on the east and Junction Mountain to the west. Over the mountains on the south were Park Valley, Rosette, Grouse Creek, and Kelton, the latter being the closest railhead for those who lived in the area. To the north was Almo, Idaho, five miles away, close to the main junction of the northern branch of the California Trail and the Salt Lake Cutoff.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> AYost Stories and Information,@ Verda M. Johnston, typed copy in my possession. Frederick M. Huchel in his *History of Box Elder County* (Salt Lake City: Utah Historical Society, 1999), says AYost is so remote that one has to go through Idaho to get there,@ 414.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 415.

Two of the earliest Anglo settlers in the area were Charles Yost and a range rider named George (Davis) who came in the latter part of the 1870s. Homesteaders followed and called their settlement "George Creek" under the Timber and Stone Act of 1878.<sup>3</sup> Large families such as Fannie Marilla Garner Tracy and her seven sons and one daughter were early arrivals. Campbells, Richardson, Smiths, Yates, Spencers, Wards and others added to the population. By 1887 the town merited a post office and Charles Yost became postmaster. Thereafter the settlement was called Yost.

Most of the population belonged to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who moved into the area after church president, John Taylor, encouraged members to move to the "north country" in the winter of 1882.<sup>4</sup> But individuals of other faiths and cultures found their way around the mountains, across valleys and from the railroad to settle and work alongside them. A native of China brought presents of handkerchiefs and ginger root candy upon his return from his travels. Shoshones traded or sold beaded gloves and other leatherwork and gathered pine nuts in the nearby mountains. A Scotch rancher employed all ethnic groups.

These early settlers saw great things ahead of them--plenty of land for grazing and crops, a promised water-dam on the upper Raft River, and heavily traveled trails and wagon roads to transport their mail, freight and lumber throughout Utah, Idaho and other locations. In this hopeful environment individuals established lime kilns, saw and grist mills, and several mercantile

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<sup>3</sup>Under this act "any citizen, and some categories of aliens" could purchase 160 acres of land for \$2.50 per acre. However, this only applied to land "unfit for cultivation" and its value lay in the stone and timber on it. See, *The Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West*, Howard R. Lamar, ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 1182.

<sup>4</sup>Merlin Tracy, "Yost Valley History," quoted in Huchel, 420.

stores opened their doors for business. By 1892, 91 people had homesteaded, and 37 babies were added to the population during the next fifteen years as well as many adults. Two hundred fifty-one residents lived in the town in 1910.

Homes resembled that of the Montgomery=s first residence built of logs with a dirt roof and straw covered dirt floor. Later the Montgomerys constructed a Agood four room log house@ surrounded by native trees and wild flowers. Robert raised hay, wheat, oats and barley in the virgin soil and planted fruit trees.<sup>5</sup> Others also improved their early dwellings, using the plentiful lumber available in the mountains. They farmed and used their talents to make a living.

This paper, however, highlights the individuals who brought a touch of diversity to the town.

### **Gee Ling**

One of the more exotic residents of Yost for a time was an elderly Chinese man named Gee Ling. His first found Utah appearance is on the U.S. Census in 1900. The census taker noted that Gee Ling lived in the third district of Ogden, Weber County where he resided on 16<sup>th</sup> Street with several other single Chinese men which was not unusual. Laws only allowed males to emigrate from China at the time he came in 1850 so those who chose to stay often lived as bachelors until more females were allowed from their home country. Thus, although seventy years of age, having been born in China in April 1830, Ling remained a single man. He listed garden laborer as his occupation. Ling was still unable to read or write English, although he could speak it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>AYost Stories,@ Johnston.

<sup>6</sup>United States Census, taken June 5, 1900.

His life prior to this earliest record suggests he may have emigrated to America with other of his countrymen who came in 1850 to work in the gold fields in California. Upon hearing of the discovery of this valuable ore, thousands of Chinese sailed for the Golden Mountain, as they called California. But the work was hard and discrimination rampant. No laws protected them and they could not vote nor own property. Still, by 1865, about 50,000 made the difficult transition.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>AThe Chinese and the Transcontinental Railroad,@ *The Brown Quarterly* 1 (Spring 1997)3:1, found at <http://brownvboard.org/brwnqurt/01-3/01-3f.htm>.

The drive to connect the continent by rail may have provided Gee Ling with work that brought him to Utah Territory as a laborer on the Central Pacific Railroad when Chinese men were recruited to help blast the way through the Sierra Mountains. Though not considered as on a par with Anglos or paid as well, the Chinese received better treatment than they had in the gold fields. The railroad paid them \$25.00 a month from which they bought their own food and supplies while Anglos received \$35.00 plus their food and supplies<sup>8</sup>

It is possible that after the completion of the railroad in 1869 Gee Ling worked at Terrace near Park Valley which became a maintenance and repair headquarters for the Salt Lake division of the railroad. Here a small roundhouse and switch yard employed many former construction workers, and a community of mostly Chinese grew up around it living in dugouts and shanties east of town. They ran hotels and laundries, or worked in them. Each year on New Year=s Day they made long strips of white coconut candy for a special treat. By 1890, however, Box Elder County listed only 147 Chinese, none in 1900, and two in 1910.<sup>9</sup> This was due to the lack of work available to them when the railway shops were moved to Montello and Carlin, Nevada. Most likely Ling then moved to Ogden.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Helen Z. Papanikolas, *The Peoples of Utah* (Salt Lake City: Utah Historical Society, 1976), 261. Also see, Pamela S. Perlich, *Utah Minorities: The Story Told by 150 years of Census Data* (Salt Lake City: Bureau of Economic and Business Research, David Eccles School of Business, University of Utah, 2002), 13.

In 1892 Congress passed the Geary Exclusion Law which called for Chinese workers who had not registered with authorities to be subject to arrest and deportation. Further acts to strengthen and enforce the law were passed in 1902, and perhaps Gee Ling retired to the less populated area in Yost to escape arrest or deportation. He and his fellow gardeners might also have been driven out when his Ogden neighborhood became more settled and neighbors complained of the stench of the manure they used to fertilize their crops.<sup>10</sup> At any rate, at least two children who lived or frequented Yost between 1900 and 1915, recalled Gee Ling as an intriguing and unusual resident of the town.

There was a Chinese sheepherder in Yost named Gee Ling. When he would go on vacation he brought back Chinese hankies for the ladies and also candy. The candy was a white bar with ginger and coconut in it. He had a neck bar which he used when he would jog to the store to carry his groceries. He used to take pig intestines and wash them in the creek to

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<sup>10</sup>AThe Chinese Exclusion Act (United States),@ found at [www.absoluteastronomy.com/encyclopedia/c/chinese\\_exclusion\\_act](http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/encyclopedia/c/chinese_exclusion_act). F. Ross Peterson and Robert E. Parson, *Ogden City, Its Governmental Legacy: A Sesquicentennial History*. (Ogden: Chapelle Limited, 2001), 189.

eat. The kids all liked him.<sup>11</sup>

Though the children found him an interesting oddity, I have found nothing recorded by adults of the period. Gee Ling stayed for a time, working as a sheepherder for John Blyth. Then he disappeared from Yost and census records. Efforts to find where and when Gee Ling died have been fruitless. Some say there was a Chinese burial ground west of Yost but no records or evidence exists today. Terrace and Corinne also had Chinese graveyards but nothing remains at Terrace nor is Ling=s grave in Corinne. He neither appears in Chinese conclaves such as Plum Alley in Salt Lake City nor in Ogden=s 25<sup>th</sup> Street group of Asians. Nevertheless, his time in Yost showed him continuing to adhere to his Chinese culture, friendly with other residents of the town, and still working in his seventies.

### **Grouse Creek Jack**

Grouse Creek Jack=s presence in Yost was seasonal. He hunted in the area, occasionally worked for John Blyth, and came with others of his tribe to harvest, roast and shell pine nuts.

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<sup>11</sup>Conversation with Floyd and Heber Montgomery at West Point, Utah on October 30, 1968. Rita Oman Holtman, who grew up in Yost, also recalled Gee Ling and believed he worked for John Blythe, a sheep rancher. Telephone interview, January 13, 1999. Isabella E.K. Wilson=s uncle rented a building in Ogden to Chinese for a laundry. She also recalled gifts of the Chinese coconut and ginger candy and handkerchiefs. AThe Early Chinese of the Western United States, @ *Our Pioneer Heritage* (Salt Lake City: Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, 1967), 10:476.

Jack was born nearby in Grouse Creek in 1833 and named Pugahjump Jack. Most likely he is the same individual as Indian Jack referred to by Kristen Smart Rogers in her 2003 article on Grouse<sup>12</sup>Creek in the *Utah Historical Quarterly*. She wrote that Jack accepted the Mormon religion and received the sacred ordinances of the faith=s temple in Logan. He expressed a desire to become a farmer in Grouse Creek and received the help of Philip and William Paskett who plowed the soil for him then Asowed wheat and turnip seed and furnished 2 sacks of potatoes to plant and promised to help him all [they] could to develop his farm.@<sup>11</sup>

Seemingly comfortable interacting with his Anglo neighbors like the Pasketts, Jack also worked as a sheepherder and did odd jobs in the communities in the area. For instance, in 1907 he and his wife worked in the sugar beets in Garland, camping near the sugar beet factory until the job was finished.

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<sup>11</sup>Kristen Smart Rogers, ACommunity and Memory in Grouse Creek,@ *Utah Historical Quarterly* 71 (Spring 2003), 2:153, fn 36.

He converted to Mormonism, no doubt influenced by meeting Brigham Young at about age fifteen when Young explored the northern Utah region. He later worked in the quarry and hauled stone for use in the construction of the LDS temple in Logan, Utah. Friendly to his Yost neighbors, Ann Chadwick Montgomery remembered giving one of her coats to Jack=s wife in Yost. The next time she saw it, Jack was wearing it.<sup>12</sup>

Jack=s first wife died young, after which he married her sister. They had five children, two of which survived. His third wife, Ankapompy, shared the rest of her life with him. They had eight children, four of which survived. Though Jack practiced the hunter-gatherer way of life he also saw merit in the Anglo farm-laborer existence. Thus, he and Ankapompy probably felt comfortable in Grouse Creek, Yost, in their home at Washakie, and finally at Bannock Creek on the Fort Hall Reservation in Idaho.

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<sup>12</sup>Matthew E. Kreitzer, ed., *The Washakie Letters of Willie Ottogary: Northwestern Shoshone Journalist and Leader, 1906-1929*. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2000), 296. AA Brief Sketch of the Life of Ann Chadwick Montgomery and Robert Montgomery, Jr., @ copy in my possession. Kate B. Carter, comp., *Our Pioneer Heritage*, (Salt Lake City: Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, 1964), 7:404.

Yost , the Promontory area and several hundred miles of land in northern Utah and Idaho was the homeland of the Northwestern Shoshone of whom Grouse Creek Jack was a member. It was not unusual for various families to engage in communal hunting, berry and nut gathering and to winter near the various small Anglo communities. Verl Smith, a former Yost resident, recalls many bonfires on surrounding mountains stoked by Shoshones roasting pine nuts they had harvested which they traded or sold and also kept for their own use. Smith=s grandfather, Sam, and his father, Morris, owned a store in Yost and traded groceries with the Indians for pine nuts to sell in their store. Morris also traded hides for leather gloves.<sup>13</sup>

When Grouse Creek Jack died in 1942 an obituary in the *Salt Lake Tribune* announced the passing of the AIndian patriarch@ at age 112. It claimed he was Aone of the first Indian converts to the L.D.S. church in this area.@ His residences since his birth in Grouse Creek included Logan, Washakie, and Fort Hall, according to the report, but many in the town of Yost also recalled the time he spent living amongst them with many other members of his tribe. They left some of their culture in the communityBbeautiful beaded leatherwork and the method of harvesting and preserving the fruit of the pine tree.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>See, Kerry Brinkerhoff, ANorthwest Shoshone Utilization of the Promontory Area,@ found at [www.nps.gov/gosp/research/AIndian\\_prom.htm](http://www.nps.gov/gosp/research/AIndian_prom.htm), 2005. Telephone interview with Verl T. Smith, August 5, 2005.

<sup>14</sup>Obituary quoted in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 403.

**John Blyth (Blythe)<sup>15</sup>**

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<sup>15</sup>Some references to John Blyth end his name with an Ae@ but his signature does not.

Much more is known about John Blyth than the two previous individuals because more documents exist to mark his life after he came to Oakley, Idaho in 1880 at age 27 to herd sheep for AMessrs. Scott and Welsh@ for a year. Later employment included four years as a sheep herder for Charles Parks on Cassia Creek and for Rees Howell of Kelton, Utah. He and Howell formed a partnership that lasted two years. About 1890 Blyth created the first large sheep herd in Yost Valley and employed several men and women, including Gee Ling and Grouse Creek Jack. Some of his employees were known as Adown and outers@ and given a chance to earn a living through their labor for him. At some point, a nephew, James Blyth, came from New Zealand and also worked for him and engaged in the sheep industry of the area.<sup>16</sup>

Born April 21, 1853 in Redden, Roxburgh, Scotland to John and Mary Ann Smith Blyth, John started out Aempty-handed@ and became a Aself-made man.@ Handsome and well-dressed, in later years he sported a well trimmed beard and chin length mutton chop sideburns. He treated people well and was industrious and enterprising. Recognized as a prominent sheepman he owned 18,000 head of sheep and vast land holdings from Yost to Murtaugh, Idaho for grazing. In 1911 *The Deseret Farmer* noted the success of sheep ranching in Utah, counting 990,620 animals.<sup>17</sup> The wool they produced also contributed to economy of the state. Ranchers and other individuals formed crews to shear the sheep, often working all day for several days.

He purchased his initial ranch and homestead from a squatter, gaining two hundred and forty acres in the purchase. He added modern equipment and improved his ranch in Yost, and

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<sup>16</sup>AJohn Blyth,@ in *History of Idaho, the Gem of the Mountains*, 3 vols. (S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1920), 2:556. Interviews with Stanley and DeeAnn Spencer of Yost, Utah, June 29, 2005.

<sup>17</sup>*The Deseret Farmer*, Saturday, December 16, 1911, 416.

also maintained ranches in Standrod and another tract southwest of his home, totaling one hundred and sixty acres.<sup>18</sup>

But Blyth entertained more interests than ranching. He purchased the National Hotel in Burley which stood on the northwest corner of Main Street and Overland Avenue and enlarged it to eighty-two rooms. The building also housed a bank and was a prominent landmark in the city.

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<sup>18</sup>AJohn Blyth@ 556. With Blyth=s extensive holdings and his prominence in the sheep industry, we would expect to find something about him in Arrington=s history of Idaho, but his name is absent, and only a small section even refers to the sheep industry in the state. See, Leonard J. Arrington, *History of Idaho*. 2 vols. (Boise: Idaho State Historical Society, 1994)

He owned the first car in Yost and built an attractive home there.<sup>19</sup> In the 1930s Blyth started a restaurant in Brigham City at the site of the present golf course club-house north of town but died shortly after.<sup>20</sup>

He enjoyed the comforts of life, ordering beer as early as 1914 from the Becker Brewing and Malting Company in Ogden. The bottled beer was shipped in barrels to Kelton where Blyth picked it up and brought it to Yost. When his cache of beer was gone he shipped the empty bottles back to Becker=s and ordered another supply. For instance, on May 30, 1914, he sent back three barrels of empty bottles and ordered two barrels of quart bottles of beer and one of pints.<sup>21</sup>

Blyth registered as a Republican and was known as Presbyterian in his religious beliefs. Associates described him as having Ahigh and honorable principles...at every point in his career, making him a man whom to know is to esteem and honor. He has ever been straightforward in his dealings and his methods have at all times been such as would bear the closest investigation

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<sup>19</sup>AJohn Blyth,@ 556. Phone interview, Irvin Smith, August 5, 2005.

<sup>20</sup>Irvin Smith interview.

<sup>21</sup>Blyth=s correspondence with Becker Brewing and Malting Company dated May 30, 1914, June 13, 1914, and Becker=s response June 10 and June 16, 1914, found in Special Collections, Weber State University, Ogden, Utah.

and scrutiny.<sup>22</sup> Yet, he chose not to live in the cities but in his comfortable and attractive home which still stands with its rock well house in Yost and is owned by Stanley and Dee Ann Spencer.

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<sup>22</sup>*History of Idaho, 556.*

Blyth died March 16, 1931 at Lava Hot Springs in Idaho of Achronic cardiovalvular heart disease,<sup>23</sup> according to his death certificate.<sup>23</sup> His holdings were divided between his nephew, James, and a man named Eddie Stevens. James sold the hotel but kept the land. An attractive headstone marks Blyth=s grave in the Yost Cemetery with James=s nearby.<sup>24</sup> The young Scotsman grew to maturity and left his mark on Yost and other communities, contributing to their economy and becoming a respected citizen.

Today Yost=s isolation discourages further growth. However, visits from outsiders who may not be as interesting as Gee Ling, Grouse Creek Jack and John Blyth are still welcomed. Making good on her promise to visit every town in Utah, last December former Governor Olene Walker and her husband came to Yost and impressed their hosts, Jim and Dee Ann Spencer, by their graciousness and their willingness to be there and see how the people of the little far-flung community lived. She found that only the Spencers, Nolan and Keith Oman and Boyd Taylor continue ranching while most other residents are retired. The diversity today lies in the personalities of the people who live there, such as Lloyd Morey who loves telling stories to anyone who will listen, and Inez and Nelson Stillwell, the town=s celebrities for not only their unusual rock farm built of stones carried from their fields, but for the award Box Elder County gave them for the drip irrigation system they use to conserve water.<sup>25</sup>

Every town has its interesting story, and Yost, though remote and reached by dirt roads,

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<sup>23</sup>Death Certificate, No. 74413, State of Idaho.

<sup>24</sup>Verl Smith interview.

<sup>25</sup>E-mail dated August 26, 2005 from Dee Ann Spencer to author; conversations with Lloyd Morey, and Nelson and Inez Stillwell in Yost, June 29, 2005.

attracted its share of hardy pioneers and intriguing individuals.