The Cowboy and the Mountain: Charley Lee Blasingame and Chinese American Interactions in the Sierra Nevada

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Chinese Peak sits in the Sierra Nevada Mountains near Fresno and is home to a ski resort. While many similarly named peaks derived their nomenclature from Chinese settlements nearby, Chinese Peak is named after an individual, Charley Lee Blasingame, who defied the racial discrimination of his time. A prominent rancher named J.A. Blasingame recruited Lee to the area, and Lee became a manager in the family's livestock empire. The Blasingames referred to Lee as part of their "family"—a word they used to signify their esteem for the skills that he brought to their organization. Lee befriended Sierra Club members, meeting John Muir and Joseph LeConte. While most Chinese Americans in this period faced increasing prejudice, Lee enjoyed wide respect in the local area for his expertise as a rancher and manager. On his deathbed, Lee asked the Blasingames to return his bones to China, but they refused. His successes are commemorated in the mountain peak named in his honor, though his wishes were denied by those who no longer saw him as Chinese.

Key words: Charley Lee Blasingame, ranching, Chinese Americans, Chinese Peak, China Peak, Sierra Nevada, Joseph LeConte, Sierra Club

In 2010, a ski area in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains underwent an unusual name change. Following its purchase by new owners, the Fresno County resort's name was changed from the generic moniker of Sierra Summit to China Peak—a modification

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that attracted a substantial amount of media attention and questions about the origins of the designation.¹ In fact, as the resort's new owner pointed out, the change was actually a homage to the area's historic name of "Chinese Peak" and was not a change but rather a restoration.²

Unlike many peaks bearing similar names, sometimes including racially offensive terminology, Chinese Peak was not named after a local community or historical settlement in the area, but after an individual.³ The man who lent his identity to the peak's name, Charley Lee Blasingame, was once one of the area's most famous figures.⁴ Lee, whose original name was Jung Lee (or possibly Fong Ah Lee), had been recruited in San Francisco in 1873 by J.A. Blasingame to move to the Fresno area as a house servant for the prominent Blasingame family. For more than six decades, Lee worked as an employee of the Blasingames in the Sierra high country as their head cowboy. Over the course of his career, Lee became close friends with significant figures working to explore and document the Sierra mountains. It was one of these friends, Berkeley geologist Joseph LeConte, who named the lava knob that resides on top of the mountain "Chinese Peak" in honor of his friendship with Lee, creating what continues to serve as a permanent monument to Lee's significance in the Sierra. Over the course of his life, Lee became a prominent fixture in the lore of the Sierra, earning himself a place in numerous local accounts of the era. Further, the naming of the mountain "Chinese Peak" flew in the face of a policy advocated by members of the Sierra Club, including LeConte, who argued that mountains should not be named after local individuals. The fact that the Sierra Club evidently made an exception in naming Chinese Peak suggests the unique recognition that Charley Lee Blasingame enjoyed.

This article argues that Lee's hitherto-unexamined story constitutes an important narrative that sheds new light on the diverse

1. See, for instance, "Sierra Summit Sold, Name Changing to China Peak," ABC30 Television, last modified March 5, 2010, <http://abc30.com/archive/7313158/>.

2. The official name of the peak itself had always remained Chinese Peak despite the ski resort's name change.

3. In one prominent example, in 2001 "Chinks Peak" in Idaho had its name officially changed to "Chinese Peak." Betsy Peoples, "Geography for the Politically Correct," *The New Crisis*, 2001, 13–15.

4. Lee's nickname was spelled as both "Charley" and "Charlie" in contemporary sources. We refer to him as Lee.

and significant roles Chinese immigrants played in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century California, in a period when racial prejudice played a major role in the daily lives of virtually all non-white residents. The fact that Lee's story takes place outside the two traditionally examined areas of Chinese immigrant history in California—the construction of the railroads, often under perilous conditions, and the San Francisco Bay Area, where a large Asian American community established itself in the post-Gold Rush era—lends it added significance. Further, Lee's being known locally as the "Chinese Cowboy" establishes him as a figure who defied not only traditional geographic boundaries but also professional and personal ones. His adoption by the Blasingame family and his assumption of a new identity linked to theirs suggests that he was able, or indeed required, to subsume his ethnic identity into a new professional persona designed to more closely integrate him with both the landscape of Central California and the community that surrounded him.

Lee's professional success was exceptional on two levels; first, because he was elevated to a position of de facto managerial responsibility and second, because it was extraordinarily rare for Chinese laborers to be involved in the cattle industry at all. Sucheng Chan writes of the need for more research into this phenomenon:

Chinese agricultural laborers not only were skilled and enterprising but were surprisingly adaptable. In the semiarid San Joaquin Valley, a small number became shepherds, cowboys, and irrigators . . . Chinese cowboys? Yes, indeed! Their ages ranged from twenty to about sixty, with the majority in their forties and fifties [in the 1880 census]. If only more could be known about them!⁵

As a Chinese cowboy who was around thirty years old in 1880, Lee is one of the few figures fitting Chan's description about whom it is possible to learn a reasonable amount and who is also commemorated in a particularly public manner in the present day.

This study is divided into four sections. In the first two sections, Lee's early life in San Francisco and the Central Valley is considered in an effort to demonstrate the ways through which he was able to defy both the racial and economic expectations of the time. The fact that the Blasingames interpreted Lee's narrative to begin with

5. Sucheng Chan, *This Bitter-Sweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860–1910* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 338–39.

a rescue-and-redemption event suggests that his later identity remained inextricably linked to the beneficence of the white employers who were directly responsible for not only his continued prosperity but his very existence in a world that he would not normally be expected, or even permitted, to inhabit.⁶

The third section examines the way Lee himself used this unique convergence of factors and his personal situation to establish his own identity. Through his professional exploits in the High Sierra, Lee was able to cultivate relationships with a number of significant figures who were often fascinated by his life story and his defiance of racial stereotypes and restrictions. The fact that herders and visitors alike referred regularly to Lee in their accounts suggests that he took on an almost mythological status during the period, as a figure who lived far from so-called civilization but simultaneously provided a much-needed and much-appreciated respite from the toils of Sierra exploration. For example, in 1904, a Sierra Reserve Ranger described Lee in his logbook as a “remarkable character” as they exchanged words in Vermilion Cliff Meadow—a powerful testament from a man who would have been familiar with virtually everyone in the communities in and near the Sierra at the time.⁷

The fourth section examines the end of Lee’s life and community reactions to his death. These responses suggest that many white residents of the area considered Lee to inhabit a sort of middle space between his ethnic identity and the predominantly white world he inhabited for most of his life. The fact that virtually all accounts and obituaries of Lee refer to him as either “Indian Charley” (derived from the identity of his wife) or “Chinaman Charley” highlight the fact that his racial identity remained at the forefront of his public identity. However, the content of these memorializations suggest a high degree of integration with the white community that was not often seen at the time. In addition, the fact that Lee’s remains were ultimately not treated in accordance with his wishes suggests that his self-identity clashed with the

6. Peggy Pascoe analyzes such rescue narratives in *Relations of Rescue*, although in a different context. Notably, she argues that the notion of rescue was a creation of the rescuers themselves. Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), esp. 96–98.

7. Martin L. Kientz, *Tales of the Sierra* (Auberry, Calif.: Three Forests Interpretive Association, 2004), 5.

perceptions his adoptive family, the Blasingames, held of him: while for Lee his new identity was transient and ended with his death, for the Blasingames his new identity as part of their society, and even family, was dominant.

Lee's story is significant to the wider historiography of Chinese American history. As a case study, he illustrates the ways some Chinese immigrants were able to defy expectations and prejudice in order to inhabit a sort of middle ground between their heritage and the world dominated by whites.

Chinese immigration in California and Jung Lee's arrival in San Francisco

Significant historiography exists surrounding Chinese immigration to the United States and the development of Chinese American communities and cultural identity. Many existing historical perspectives propose a general consensus about the development of early Chinese American identity that suggest it emerged as a response to both ethnic discrimination and the specific labor industries in which Chinese laborers were employed. The majority of these writings suggest that the advent of Chinese American identity was fundamentally relational to the factors of race and labor demands.⁸ As the labor historian Alexander Saxton writes in his classic study of Chinese immigration to the West Coast, "the prime purpose of the entire apparatus [of bringing Chinese immigrants to the United

8. There is a vast historiography surrounding Chinese immigration to the United States and the emergence of Chinese American cultural identity and communities. Along with the work of Madeline Hsu, Mark Lai Him, Judy Yung, Nyan Shah, Henry Yu, and Yong Chen, and others, see specifically the following: Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 2, 3, 6, 34, 51, 137, 141, 189, 195; Mary R. Coolidge, *Chinese Immigration* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 46, 58, 63, 78, 89, 156; Michael S. Opper and Lillie L. Lew, "A History of the Chinese in Fresno, California," in *The Life, Influence and the Role of the Chinese in the United States, 1776–1960: Proceedings/Papers of the National Conference Held at the University of San Francisco, July 10, 11, 12, 1975* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society, 1976), 47–55; Calvin Lee, *Chinatown, USA* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1965), 123; Elmer Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 48, 62, 110, 14; Franklin Ng, ed., *Asian American Women and Gender*, (London: Routledge, 1998); Paul Ong et al., *The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* (Charlotte: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

States but giving them few rights] was the exploitation of cheap labor in a high-priced labor market.”⁹

The young Jung Lee’s identity initially shared many features with the ethnic community in which he had been raised. Chinese immigration increased significantly in California in the years following 1860, fueled by the state’s enormous demand for labor. Between 1857 and 1876 more than 214,000 Chinese immigrants would arrive in the United States, the vast majority of whom were young men.¹⁰ After 1865, railroad construction became a primary employer of Chinese labor when it became apparent that white unskilled labor was insufficient to complete the mammoth projects underway (and, as Saxton argues, because white workers were subsequently given a higher status in relation to the Chinese laborers).¹¹ By the mid-1870s, violence between white and Chinese laborers had become fairly commonplace on the West Coast, particularly when mine owners began to employ Chinese workers and often laid off white laborers as a result.¹²

This California was the one to which Jung Lee would migrate as a child. Born in China, likely the Northern Provinces, in the mid-1850s, though records disagree, Lee’s early life was spent in the Chinese American community in San Francisco.¹³ There are no records of his entrance into the United States, which is hardly surprising given the general scarcity of specific Chinese immigration records from the mid-nineteenth century. The vast majority of these post-Gold Rush immigrants came from Guangdong Province, spending only a few days in Dai Fow (San Francisco) before leaving the city’s Chinatown to seek their fortunes elsewhere.¹⁴ There is no evidence as to whether his parents immigrated to the country as

9. Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 9.

10. Coolidge, *Chinese Immigration*, 89.

11. Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 62–63.

12. *Ibid.*, 201–3.

13. There is significant discrepancy in the sources as to Lee’s year of birth and age of death. His death certificate in 1924 lists his age as “about 74” with no date of birth recorded. His age at the time of his encounter with the Blasingame family varies between around eleven and fourteen years old depending on the source, suggesting that he was in fact born closer to 1860. It is possible that his true age and birth date were unknown even to him, and at the time of his encounter with the Blasingame family he was seen simply as a boy of those approximate ages.

14. Sylvia Sun Minnick, *Samfow: The San Joaquin Chinese Legacy* (Fresno, Calif.: Panorama West, 1988), 9–11.

well, and the Blasingame family would regard him as an orphan.¹⁵ Regardless of the circumstances of his arrival, by 1873 Lee was employed in a Chinatown restaurant near Montgomery Street in San Francisco.

Apparently suffering the effects of a recent beating by his employer, Jung Lee stood weeping in the street when he was approached by Jesse August (J.A.) Blasingame, Sr., a Central Valley cattleman who was visiting the city on a combination of business and carousing. Making inquiries about the boy's employment, Blasingame announced that Lee was welcome to leave San Francisco and work for him as a house servant in his ranch house near the foothill community of Academy in Central California. How Lee's freedom from his previous employment was legally secured remains unclear, but family lore held that it may have involved either the outright purchase of Lee from the restaurant proprietor or the winning of his freedom in a card game, which Blasingame, as a notorious gambler, would have been well-positioned to secure.¹⁶

The Blasingame family and the politics of California's Central Valley

By his own account, J.A. Blasingame in many ways epitomized the trope of the self-made man and roguish landowner of the Central Valley in the late nineteenth century. He was born in Madison County, Alabama in 1826, and upon arrival in Central California around 1859 he quickly established himself as one of the area's largest landowners by purchasing land in Fresno County. He entered the stock-raising business, which he found more profitable, and more stable, than the widespread gold mining that characterized the age.¹⁷ By the end of the 1860s Blasingame was one of the largest landowners in the Fresno area, boasting about twelve

15. Ernestine Winchell, "Fresno Memories," *Fresno Morning Republican*, October 24, 1926, Box E.1, June English Forestry Papers (hereafter JEFP), Special Collections, Henry Madden Library, California State University, Fresno.

16. The local Fresno historian June English suggests that the Lee was "purchased" but offers no evidence for the claim. Account of Lee's first encounter with Blasingame can be found in Lee's obituary. "Leaves from the Past" MSS, p. 35, Folder "Chinese, 1871–1874, 1927–1930 and 1966–1986," Box 13, June English Papers (hereafter JE), Special Collections, Madden Library; Photocopy of obituary reprint, Box 10, JE.

17. *History of Fresno County*, excerpts, p. 1406, Box E.1, JEFP.

thousand acres of land with abundant natural springs and thousands of sheep.

In 1873, burdened by her growing household and the pressures of family life, J.A. Blasingame's wife, Mary Jane, asked him to obtain a domestic servant. She suggested that he "try a China boy, as they were said to be excellent domestic workers with no marrying tendencies."¹⁸ Mary Jane's request reflected a widely held view in the Pacific Coast in this period. Although domestic servants in the East tended to be female, the population of the West was heavily male, and therefore there were few young women available for domestic service. Male Chinese servants were therefore the style of the day for fashionable white families in California. An 1893 article in the religiously oriented publication *The Congregationalist*, for instance, praised the virtues of Chinese servants "on the Pacific Coast where Chinamen hold sway in the kitchen." The Chinese male domestic, the writer extolled, was "ingenious about the kitchens and its mends," "usually teachable," "generally amiable and pleasant," and "the friend of the children and seems oftentimes himself but a child of larger growth." The author concluded by musing that "we who are interested in foreign missions and their noble workers might attempt a little missionary work in our own kitchens among this alien race, who serve at our bidding yet remain as distinctly heathen as if living in the Flowery Kingdom [China]."¹⁹

Despite the expectation that Lee would work as a house servant, and despite Mary Jane Blasingame's views about the merits of hiring a "China boy," the young Lee proved better suited to the outdoor life and soon joined the shepherds employed by Blasingame to manage his livestock.²⁰ This new profession placed Lee at the end of a long tradition of Chinese shepherds in the region; while before the 1870s there had been Chinese herders in the Sierra Nevada and the Fresno County area, following the regional drought of 1877 they were largely replaced by newcomer French, Basque, and Portuguese shepherds. Lee would become known as the "last" of the Chinese shepherds in the area—a status that would later lead to significant conflict on ethnic and political lines (as one local

18. Winchell, "Fresno Memories," Box E.1, JE.

19. "Chinese House Servants," *Congregationalist*, October 12, 1893, 495.

20. Gene Rose, *Sierra Centennial: 100 Years of Pioneering on the Sierra National Forest* (Clovis: Sierra National Forest, 1993), 13.

recalled later, “the oldtimers say they [the Chinese] were the best ones. Reliable and didn’t fight with each other”).²¹ The rareness of a Chinese shepherd after 1877 was not confined to the Fresno area: San Joaquin County, to the north, reported only one Chinese shepherd in the entire county in the 1900 census.²²

Lee’s arrival in Fresno County corresponded with a dramatic upswing in the size of the local Chinese American community. Chinese immigrants first arrived in Fresno County in the 1850s as small groups traveled to the town of Millerton to mine gold—a typical pursuit for Chinese immigrants of the time. In 1872, their numbers increased because of the completion of a Central Pacific Railroad station in Fresno. Racial discrimination soon followed: In 1874 white residents accused their Chinese neighbors of stealing prime real estate east of the railroad tracks in Fresno. Thereafter, Chinese purchasers were allowed to acquire property only in the less-desirable western area. This area became Fresno’s Chinatown district.

In terms of overall population, Fresno County’s Chinese community remained comparatively small. In the 1860 census there were just 309 Chinese immigrants in Fresno County. Ten years later that number had grown to 427, or 0.9 percent of the overall population of the county. In the 1890 census, however, there were 2,736 Chinese immigrants in the country, or 3.8 percent of the total population, placing Lee’s move to the area around the exact time the Chinese population began to increase rapidly.²³ By the 1880s, Fresno’s Chinatown became a major stop for travelers between San Francisco and Los Angeles. Economic reliance on Chinese laborers increased in this period, with an estimated 75 percent of farm labor in the Central Valley being done by Chinese American workers. The rapid increase in growth for Fresno’s Chinatown centered on the influx of first-generation immigrants coming to the Valley to work in the fields. As was the case with many Chinatowns, this area offered immigrants a degree of protection from the discrimination prevalent in the wider white community, along with a place where cultural and linguistic traditions could be maintained.

21. “Leaves from the Past,” Box 13, JE. Comments regarding Chinese sheep herders were made by English in Dulcy Tully Rose, oral history interview, Subject File: Recollections I, Box C, JEPF.

22. Minnick, *Samfow*, 89.

23. Coolidge, *Chinese Immigration*, 503.

As Fresno's Chinese community expanded, Lee's outwardly perceived identity underwent significant change in the Blasingame household, from Chinese servant to adoptive family member. Years later, J.A. Blasingame's grandson, Alfred, recalled that "my father and Charley were raised together."²⁴ The transformation was completed when Jung Lee changed his name to Charley Lee Blasingame, sometime after his arrival in Fresno County. He would never again be identified by his Chinese name, with even his death certificate carrying the name of his adopted family. Yet, as will be shown, Lee's Chinese identity never entirely disappeared despite this "new" identity. The fact that his identity would become blended between American and Chinese in the perceptions of the community was atypical for Chinese immigrants in the period. As the historian Yong Chen has observed, even if a Chinese person wanted to change their identity and role in the wider community it was virtually impossible to do so:

The freedom of individual Chinese to "choose" their cultural identity was significantly constrained by how others saw them. A young Chinese man could decide to abandon everything Chinese in his consciousness and outward appearance, but in either his own communities or in the anti-Chinese white society he would not become "American" as it was defined by the dominant blocs at the time.²⁵

It was thus impossible to ever become truly "American" in the eyes of the community. The constant use of nicknames such as Chinaman Charley to distinguish Lee from the other members of the Blasingame family is evidence of this point.

In 1880, the Blasingame family moved from its ranch house east of Fresno to the city's burgeoning downtown. The physical departure of J.A. Blasingame from the oversight of his business interests presented a unique opportunity for Lee: with the aging J.A. and his sons now based elsewhere, day-to-day management of the Blasingame herds and range were left in Lee's hands, in large part because he was evidently the best at the job. Rising to the opportunity, he "ably provided for all their [the Blasingame family's] needs," and when the elder Blasingame died in 1887, Lee "knew as much of the

24. Oral history interview with Alfred Blasingame, Jr., March 23, 1987, in authors' possession.

25. Yong Chen, *Chinese San Francisco, 1850–1943* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000), 125.

business as any of the sons, and unquestionably assumed his full share of the responsibilities.” In the course of a few years, Lee had advanced from house servant to trusted family adviser concerned with the Blasingames’ most critical financial matters.²⁶ “He practically ran that Blasingame outfit,” one area resident recalled later.²⁷

This statement itself reveals the intrinsic ambiguity in Lee’s identity and status. Was he literally considered to be a member of the Blasingame family, or was he simply a trusted senior employee who had become unusually close to his superiors? It is difficult to fully know. The Blasingames, for their part, seem to have genuinely regarded him in a unique manner that was not extended to their other employees; and, as will be seen, he himself possessed at least an abstract sense of ownership toward the Blasingames’ livestock and property. On the other hand, Lee’s son Sam would not be granted an inheritance by the family, suggesting that his father’s status was unique and not heritable in the way it would be for biological relatives. It is perhaps impossible to fully resolve this ambiguity between two roles: first, the role of highly trusted manager who dedicated his life to the service of the Blasingame family and was given unique status as a result, and second, the role of an actual family member who might have been given a greater material share of the wealth but entrusted with fewer responsibilities. Regardless of which side of this dichotomy Lee inhabited, if either, it remains the case that the Blasingames extended such status only to him.

Natural resource management in the Sierra and the role of race

By the 1890s, Lee had become a sort of local curiosity in the mountain communities he visited, with residents noting with amusement that he had developed a habit of referring to the Blasingame family’s possessions as his own: “It was my ranch, my cattle” in his formulation.²⁸ The amusement, of course, belies claims by white Fresnoans that they considered Lee to be any literal part of the Blasingame family. Lee’s constant swearing in broken English also attracted amused comment, as did his whiskey drinking. As Sierra resident Ida Akers recalled, “One fellow who used to work with

26. Winchell, “Fresno Memories,” Box E.1, JEPF.

27. Ida Akers, oral history interview, Akers Surname File, Box 10, JEP.

28. “Charley Lee Blasingame Is Dead: Served Fresno Family since Rescue 63 Years Ago: Chinese Leaves Host of Friends,” *Fresno Bee*, June 19, 1924, 6.

them said if there was an extra wild steer he would say, 'we'll sell that sonacabitchi [sic], he cost me so much expense.' That was his main swear word."²⁹ Lee was widely known for injecting the term into virtually all conversations, giving him an air of transgression among the more conservative and religious members of the Blasingame family (who also presumably disapproved of famed drinking and gambling habits of their patriarch, J.A.).³⁰ Lee had also acquired a new sobriquet by this time as well: around 1900 he had married a half-Native American woman, Elizabeth "Lizzie" Lorensen. Already known among whites as "Chinaman Charley," Lee now gained the nickname "Indian Charley" among some whites as well. Lee and Lorensen soon had a son, Sam Lee, who followed his father into the cattle industry but evidently possessed few of his skills and was once fired by his father for incompetence.³¹

It was at this moment, however, that the wider politics of race and debates over the natural resource management of the West rose to the forefront of Lee's career and identity. The Blasingames were sheep ranchers, but by the early 1890s this industry was increasingly under fire both locally and at the national level. During the Civil War, grazing in the Sierra had been increased due to the loss of the Southern cotton supply and a series of droughts in the Central Valley. By the 1870s the large herds living off the natural resources of the mountain range were seen as a significant environmental threat because sheep consume natural flora at a much higher rate than cattle. In 1893, President Benjamin Harrison signed an executive order setting aside four million acres of the Sierra Nevada Mountains as the Sierra Forest Reserve, giving the federal government the legal authority to regulate access and use of its resources. Initially there was little done to physically protect the reserve from illegal use by loggers or shepherds, and it was estimated that nearly five hundred thousand sheep were grazing illegally in the reserve in the mid-1890s. In 1897 the federal government appointed a special forest agent responsible for the reserve's protection. Rangers were soon patrolling the forest, though these men were initially part-time, seasonal employees who were hardly effective at their jobs.³²

29. Akers interview.

30. Morgan Blasingame, oral history interview by Jeffery Torosian, March 24, 2008, Clovis, Calif., tape recording in authors' possession.

31. Winchell, "Fresno Memories," Box E.1, JEPF.

32. Gene Rose, *Sierra Centennial*, 1-2, 4, 8-10, 11-12, 31.

The hiring of rangers to patrol the reserve appalled the shepherds, who now faced actual physical threats to “their” grazing land. In 1899, Lee A. Blasingame, one of J.A. Blasingame’s heirs, was caught smuggling 3,500 sheep into the reserve under the cover of darkness without their bells. In the ensuing furor, other herders threatened to enter the reserve en masse in a challenge to federal authority. Eventually the case was settled with a nominal fine, but the situation between the herders and the government was clearly far from comfortable.³³ The herders themselves had been building a public case against any restriction on their business for decades. As one put it in a local 1870 newspaper article objecting to grazing restrictions in Fresno County, “If this law was enforced, or rather if it could be enforced, what would become of the immense flocks of sheep in this country?”³⁴

Further, in the absence of actual government authority in the reserve, the shepherds themselves were far from peaceful. Before the establishment of the reserve and in the period of lax regulation, the Sierra were effectively the Wild West, complete with “six shooter leases” on grazing territory and periodic violence between rival groups. The first federal superintendent of the reserve was reluctant to allow his rangers to carry weapons, despite the fact that the shepherds were known to be heavily armed and willing to resort to violence to protect their herds and what they perceived as their grazing rights. The level of violence that took place in the Sierra before 1900 is still poorly understood. Official accounts suggest that shootouts between herders and government agents took place on occasion but were rare and resulted in few, if any, fatalities.³⁵ Contemporary reports suggest a different story. There were numerous folkloric accounts of murders, shootouts, and threats both against government officials and between groups of herders; these appeared in newspapers of the time and in later oral histories.³⁶ Many of these reports may well have been a combination of rumor and exaggeration, but

33. Ibid., 13.

34. “The Sheep Law,” *The Fresno Expositor*, August 17, 1870, photocopy, Sheep Herding Topic File, Box A, JEFPP.

35. Gene Rose, *Sierra Centennial*, 14. Gene Tully, one of the early rangers claims that herders were only “wounded,” and then generally only when they fought with rival herders.

36. See, for instance, Sheep Herding Subject File, Box A, JEFPP. For an account of sheep herder threats against forest rangers, see also Gene Rose, *Sierra Centennial*, 29.

they still suggest that violence was reasonably widespread in the Sierra at the turn of the twentieth century.

The fact that many of these new herders were Basque, a group that had begun taking up the profession and soon dominated it in some areas, further exacerbated the tension on racial grounds. As the diarist William Perkins put it in 1852, the Basque were viewed by many Californians as “generally . . . peaceful, hard working men, but when their passions are roused they are very dangerous . . . These fellows would make the finest soldiers in the world but are too proud to enlist in any service.”³⁷ Local lore was filled with tales of violence committed by Basque herders in the mountains, with one area being reputedly named Graveyard Meadows after one Basque herder killed and decapitated another in an argument over grazing rights there.³⁸

This violent and racialized situation soon presented a problem for the Blasingames. With Lee as their herd manager, there was significant room for ethnic resentment from the Basque and Portuguese herders he managed. Lee soon became a target for verbal abuse and possible mutiny. The Fresno writer Ernestine Winchell described a moment of particular peril when the Basque and Portuguese herders under Lee’s authority threatened to no longer follow the instructions of their Chinese American boss. Only the intervention of an actual Blasingame relative (rather than adoptive son Lee) could prevent serious trouble:

For the elemental reason of race hatred the Chinaman was resented by the Latins and it so chanced that Alfred Blasingame, his employer and friend, arrived in the camp simultaneously with vicious mutiny. The young white man took a firm hold of the situation and sharply ordered: “Charley, here, is boss of the Blasingame sheep. You Frenchies and Portigees that don’t like it, you take your blankets and get off the mountain!” That ended the trouble, and . . . there was no better sheep-herder in the Fresno Sierras than this Chinaman.³⁹

Averting mutiny against a trusted subordinate was obviously good business on the one hand, but the fact that he was willing to risk an outbreak of violence by his employees also reflected Alfred Blasingame’s personal esteem for his manager. In 1892, Lee was quoted in

37. Quotation from William Perkins, diary, Sheep Herding Subject File, Box A, JEFP.

38. Dulce Tully Rose interview, p. 14.

39. Winchell, “Fresno Memories,” Box E.1, JEFP.

a traveler's account in *The Fresno Weekly Republican* as an authority on sheep-grazing conditions in the Sierra foothills. The quotation, with its prominent and deprecating use of pidgin English, highlighted Lee's status as a Chinese laborer, despite treating his remarks with authority: "Sheep grazing is said to be short this year. Blasingame's foreman, wild and wooly Charlie, says: 'Me hap hustle likee – to find feed for sheep.'"⁴⁰

In 1900, the Sierra herders faced a crisis when the federal government banned sheep from the entire reserve area. Cattle would still be permitted on a regulated basis, with herders being granted federal grazing permits for set numbers of cattle, but sheep were forbidden because of the environmental damage being done to the forest. This damage was mostly constituted by the rapid destruction of flora at pace that was not sustainable for regrowth. In 1902, Charles Shinn was appointed Chief Ranger and established a headquarters for policing and managing the wilderness. This was a significant departure from his predecessor, who had balked at the idea of actually being based in the Sierra. In addition, Yosemite National Park itself was patrolled by soldiers who were tasked with stopping shepherds from entering the park.⁴¹ However, the Reserve consisted of thousands of acres with difficult terrain and could be dangerous for those who lacked knowledge of its intricacies. Ranger patrols often took weeks to cross their designated areas, meaning that trespassers could slip by undetected as long as their herds did not linger.

The Forest Service was faced with the task of hiring rangers who had sufficient knowledge of the terrain to patrol the area without becoming lost themselves and also had the skills to survive for weeks at a time in the wilderness. These requirements meant hiring locals, which came with its own obvious pitfalls. Among the first rangers were Gene Tully, who joined as a Reserve Patrolman in 1903, and Charles O'Neal, himself a cattle herder from Madera County whose brother would become one of the most significant herders in the Sierra.⁴² Tully quickly became the dominant figure, building a national profile by traveling to Washington, D.C. to consult with

40. *Fresno Weekly Republican*, June 3, 1892.

41. John O'Neal, "Two Blades of Grass Where Thousands Grew Before," *The Western Livestock Journal*, 1953, photocopy, Subject File: U.S. Forest Service, JEPF.

42. Gene Tully's daughter described John O'Neal as "a big man" who "seldom ran his cattle with us." Dulce Tully Rose interview, p. 2.

federal officials on forest service policy.⁴³ Like O'Neal, he also grazed cattle in the same forest he patrolled.⁴⁴

The rangers, and Shinn himself, often had a symbiotic relationship with herders, including Lee, whom they were tasked with regulating in the harsh environment of the mountains. Tully and his associates would often share camps with the cattle herders and travel with them on drives. The shepherds were seen as the enemy, and, controversially, they often faced a draconian fate when federal authorities found them. Rather than being arrested and their sheep impounded pending legal proceedings, the rangers simply scattered their illegal flocks, allowing the sheep to die of exposure and become meals for predators.⁴⁵ Thousands of sheep from scattered herds were thus wandering the forest at any given time, awaiting their mortality.

Having respectfully made the conversion to cattle when federal law demanded and to protect their financial interests, the Blasingames were at the heart of the unfolding battle over the Sierra Reserve. As their head cowboy, Lee was both the face and the power behind the scenes of their operation in the Sierra: their main camp, near the base of what would become Chinese Peak, was nicknamed China Camp in recognition of his prominent role in the business and became their permanent headquarters during the warm months of spring and summer.⁴⁶ The camp was also used by the Blasingame family to slaughter cows for the Edison Company, which at the time was the largest supplier of beef in the Pacific Northwest, shoring up the family's economic position.⁴⁷ These two locations—the former China Camp and the mountain itself—now comprise the area of what is called the China Peak ski resort. During the frigid winter months, Lee returned to his home on the main Blasingame ranch near the town of Academy in the foothills.

After 1900, the economic survival of Sierra cattlemen like the Blasingames now lay firmly in the hands of federal officials, who had the power to grant and deny grazing permits, and the rangers like Tully, who had the power to enforce the law or overlook its violations. Tully himself often disagreed with the edicts being sent down

43. Gene Tully ranger logs, January 1908, Surnames: Tully, Box 12, JEP.

44. O'Neal, "Two Blades of Grass," 28.

45. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

46. *Ibid.*, 21.

47. "Charlie Lee Blasingame," *Backwood's Badger*, October 1975, parts 1 and 2.

Figure 1. Charley Lee Blasingame smoking outside his house at China Camp, circa 1919. Lee was known for rolling his own cigarettes. Courtesy Blasingame Family.

from Washington and coming from Shinn's North Fork office, arguing that herders should be fined and their sheep impounded rather than scattered in the mountains to die. Even within the confines of

Figure 2. Charley Lee Blasingame, right, and his son, Sam Lee, often worked together for the Blasingame family but their own relationship was cantankerous at times. Courtesy Blasingame Family.

legal cattle grazing, politics were paramount for continued profitability: in 1904, the powerful Miller & Lux company had its permit cut to allow only 400 head of cattle into the Reserve rather than the previous number of 2,000. Determining that the number was too small to be profitable, the company simply decided to no longer graze cattle at all. The beneficiaries of the decision were two cattlemen, including John O'Neal, who received supplementary permits for 250 head each.⁴⁸

Within the Reserve itself, the situation was equally tenuous. John O'Neal complained that the enforcement of grazing permits was often arbitrary, with false accusations being leveled by some rangers about the number of cattle being driven by herders with whom they had disagreements.⁴⁹ Tully's logbooks recount a grueling

48. O'Neal, "Two Blades of Grass," 24.

49. *Ibid.*, 19.

schedule of extended and lonely patrols for days at a time, followed by dull administrative tasks and securing supplies at various stores. As part of his duties, however, Tully and his fellow rangers visited the camps of the various cattle herders, including the Blasingames. China Camp would have been one of his frequent stops, as it was for the many herders making their way through the Sierra.⁵⁰ These were important visits not only because they brought the latest news from other parts of the Sierra and the world to the isolated herders, but also because they gave the herders a chance to interact with Tully directly and argue their points of view to him in person. The fact that Tully made personal visits to Blasingame holdings regularly suggests a level of intimacy. Undoubtedly, much of the business that he conducted would have been arranged with Lee as the representative of his employers.

Preserving the forest and naming the peaks

By 1900, cattlemen and rangers were no longer the only human visitors to the Sierra Reserve. The naturalist John Muir had begun exploring Yosemite in the late 1860s and soon committed himself to conserving the natural beauty of the Sierra. In 1870, Muir and the University of California professor Joseph LeConte, Sr. joined a student expedition to Yosemite, where they were struck by the astonishing beauty of their surroundings. Returning to Berkeley, LeConte became one of the founding figures in the Sierra Club, which was founded in 1892 as a society dedicated to preserving the natural beauty of California's mountains while making them accessible to recreationalists and nature lovers.⁵¹ One of the Club's first causes was successfully arguing for the outright ban on sheep grazing. With a large number of scientists in its early membership, another key task was making accurate maps of the mountains that would facilitate safe recreational use. LeConte's son, Joseph Nisbet LeConte, Jr., became one of the key cartographers undertaking this ambitious task, producing a number of maps for the Sierra Club in the first years of the twentieth century.

Just as the Sierra could be treacherous for the herders, the Sierra Club explorers faced their own dangers and relied on local

50. See for instance, Tully Ranger Logs, January 1908, Surnames: Tully, Box 12, JEP.

51. Michael C. Cohen, *The History of the Sierra Club 1892–1970* (San Francisco: Random House, 1988), esp. chapter 2.

friends for both companionship and survival. During an expedition in 1890, Joseph N. LeConte reported to his mother that his party had encountered a camp of cattlemen near Mount Whitney who had “insisted on our staying a whole day with them. They were just as kind and hospitable as could be. We caught 200 golden trout. I think it was about the only time I had as many mountain trout as I could eat.”⁵² An 1894 trip in the Mono Creek area was delayed when one of LeConte’s mules died, forcing his party to stay in a shepherd camp where they “sponged” on the generosity of their hosts for three days until a replacement animal could be found.⁵³ The Sierra Club explorers were clearly reliant on the friendship of the same shepherds their organization was lobbying to exclude from the Sierra Reserve.

In the course of these expeditions, both Muir and the LeContes encountered Lee. Lee first met Muir in the Vermilion Valley while tending sheep and was intrigued to see the naturalist chasing butterflies with a net. He later referred to Muir as a crazy “sonakabichi” man with a butterfly net.⁵⁴ Lee’s interactions with the LeContes were more substantive. Presumably having met at China Camp or another herding camp, the elder LeConte struck up a friendship with Lee and made his camp a regular stopping point on his expeditions. The two men spent long hours talking around a campfire, swapping stories about their adventures in the mountains, and LeConte made a point of bringing him a quart of whiskey during each of his visits. According to Lee’s obituary in *The Fresno Bee*, LeConte “never passed through Fresno County without stopping in to see Lee.”⁵⁵

With the LeConte expeditions and other Sierra Club explorations penetrating deeper into the previously uncharted depths of the mountains, a competition quickly erupted over the right to legally name the geologic features being explored. Climbers from Berkeley and Stanford competed to name peaks after their universities, fellow academics, and friends: University Peak, named after the University of California (Berkeley) by a student expedition that

52. Joseph N. LeConte to his mother Caroline LeConte, July 21, 1890, Outgoing Mail, Box 2, LeConte family papers (Joseph N. LeConte collection, hereafter LEC), MSS C-B 452 Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

53. Joseph N. LeConte to Helen, June 30, 1898, Outgoing Mail, Box 3, LEC.

54. Morgan Blasingame, oral history interview by Jeffery Torosian, March 24, 2008, Clovis, Calif., tape recording in authors’ possession.

55. “Charley Lee Blasingame Is Dead,” 6.

included the junior LeConte, was a prominent example. Other peaks were named after Stanford University professors as part of the rivalry.⁵⁶ By tradition, the first person to have properly documented exploration of an area, or the scaling of a peak, had the right to suggest a name for it, though the final authority to accept or reject the name lay with the U.S. Geological Survey in Washington. In 1897, the *Sierra Club Bulletin* sympathetically reprinted a letter arguing that Sierra place names should be melodious and not “jar and be out of harmony with the rest.”⁵⁷ Instead:

The desirable thing, then, in naming is not “authority,” nor is it to drag some man by the hair to “honor” him; but a consideration of the significance and suggestiveness of words to the mind, and of their musical suggestiveness to the ear. This, in the long run, will satisfy us best; and it will, in the much longer run, satisfy best our friends of the future.⁵⁸

The naming frenzy soon turned sour and political. In 1903, the junior LeConte sent a scathing letter to the Fresno resident and inveterate Sierra explorer L.A. Winchell, who had formally proposed naming (or renaming) several peaks after prominent local residents. There was a classic urban/rural rivalry involved: LeConte seemingly had no problem naming peaks after Berkeley academics and the university but was militantly opposed to the name of a prominent local resident being used on the grounds that it was “unsuitable . . . for so majestic and imposing an object of Nature.” Place names, he wrote, should be given that could “be handed down through all time, a name that is fitting.” He went on:

There is another reason the U.S. Geological Survey . . . are strongly opposed to the naming of just peaks after men . . . Therefore I doubt whether any but a suitable name would stick. Now you may think, as I have often thought, what business have the men in Washington to interfere with our own names of our own Sierras. But I leave it to your own sense of justice that the name you have proposed is not fitted in this instance.⁵⁹

In the midst of this ongoing controversy, Chinese Peak received and kept its name. The elder LeConte had begun referring to the lava

56. Ann Lage, “The Peaks and the Professors: University Names in the High Sierra,” *Chronicle of the University of California*, Spring 2000.

57. “Notes and Correspondence,” *Sierra Club Bulletin*, 1897, 53–55.

58. *Ibid.*

59. LeConte to L.A. Winchell, February 23, 1903, photocopy, Surnames, Early Residents, Winchell Letters, Box E, JEPF. Original noted as held in the Bancroft Library.

knob and peak near China Camp using the name in honor of his friend Lee; the feature had no previous name on official maps or Sierra Club documents. While the younger LeConte's maps of the area still showed no name for the peak after 1900, the U.S. Geological Survey map of 1904 included the name.⁶⁰ A prior map surveyed by LeConte in 1899 indicated a small area named Blasingame Horse Meadow, which is near the current location of Chinese Peak.⁶¹ The fact that the peak was named for Lee was commented upon locally: the Fresno resident Ida Akers noted that "one of the big shots of the Sierra Club used to stop and see him and gave China Peak its name."⁶²

Conclusions

Following the end of World War I, the situation in the Sierra stabilized, although it was not until the 1940s that the federal government made significant improvements to grazing management and began investing more heavily in sustainability infrastructure. The era of the six-shooter lease was over, and the world that Lee had known was coming to an end. Gene Tully continued his patrols of the mountains for decades to come, but now with more men and authority. At the time of his death in the early 1970s, Tully was the last surviving member of the initial group of rangers.

As L.A. Winchell noted in a letter to the scientist and Sierra explorer Gustav Eisen, by 1930 the world of the nineteenth-century shepherds and rangers was largely gone:

Of the many mountain men you knew—sheep men and others—nearly all are gone . . . Great changes have taken place since you were familiar with the pioneer aspects of the sierras: Numerous roads, great dams, electrical power, railroads, homes, reservoirs, mountain towns, villages, mark the forests and canyons! Where then were thousands of sheep and a few men tending them, and communication was by individual contact, now the aeroplanes fly daily (in summer) over the mountains, electric power lines, telephone lines thread their way to distant stock ranges, radio instruments in the humble homes of mountain dwellers.⁶³

60. U.S. Geological Survey, map of Kaiser, California, 30x30 grid, Edition of 1904, reprinted 1950, USGS ID: 5505883.

61. Joseph N. LeConte, map of Sierras, 1899, Map G4362.S57, Special Collections, Madden Library.

62. Oral history with Akers, Akers Surname File, Box 10, JEP.

63. L.A. Winchell to Gustav Eisen, [1930], Outgoing Correspondence, Box 1, L.A. Winchell Papers, Fresno City and County Historical Society.

In 1945 and 1946, the U.S. Congress considered bills that would have defined grazing rights as belonging to individual herders while opening some federally owned lands to private ownership. The legislation was unsuccessful, and the public confrontation that resulted on Capitol Hill between cattle ranchers and conservationists was widely viewed as discrediting the former and leading to the abandonment of the notion that the Forest Service would ever walk away from its regulatory efforts. By the 1950s, the Eisenhower Administration made it clear that there would be no major change in forest policy.⁶⁴

By the early 1920s, Lee's health was failing and he could no longer take the grueling pace of life in the Sierra. He moved to Clovis, living on a form of retirement provided by his former employers: on his deathbed, J.A. Blasingame had made his children promise to "take care of Charley."⁶⁵ Suffering from diabetes, Lee was admitted to one of the finest hospitals in Fresno, where he died in June 1924.⁶⁶ Tragedy struck when Lee's diaries, which he had kept since he was a boy, and his papers were lost in a house fire following his death. He had expressed the hope that one of the Blasingames would write his memoirs from a translation of the documents. On his death certificate, Lee's occupation was listed as "steward" for the Blasingame family.⁶⁷ Obituaries ran in all the major local papers, reflecting the reputation he enjoyed, with one noting that "the memory of Lee is perpetuated by a mighty monument, China Peak, in the hills back of Clovis. It was named for Lee by LeConte."⁶⁸

Denied much of his own cultural identity in life and facing discrimination even from his subordinates, in death Lee would again face a mixed identity. On his deathbed, he insisted that his remains be returned to China though the Blasingame family had offered to bury him in their family plot. "Alive I'm Blasingame. Dead, I'm Chinaman. Put me in the China graveyard—already paid for when I come to Ame[r]ica," he was reported as saying. Yet, as Ernestine Winchell described it, "they could not do it," and Lee was buried in the Blasingame family plot instead—a remarkable gesture

64. Paul W. Hirt, *A Conspiracy of Optimism: Management of the National Forests Since World War Two* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 73–75.

65. Winchell, "Fresno Memories," Box E.1, JEPF.

66. Ibid.

67. Death certificate, Charlie Lee, Sample Sanitarium, Fresno, June 18, 1924, Fresno County Recorder's Office.

68. "Charley Lee Blasingame Is Dead," 6.

in a period when cemeteries were still generally segregated by race and nationality.⁶⁹

The Blasingames' decision to bury Lee in the family plot rather than returning his remains to China was paradoxical on several levels: On the one hand, the Blasingames perceived the gesture as a magnanimous proclamation that Lee was a permanent part of the family. On the other hand, the decision reveals their disregard for—perhaps their utter misunderstanding of—Lee's wishes, identity, and cultural traditions. Even in death, Lee both transcended ethnic and racial identities and remained trapped between them. As in life, his own identity was superseded by that of the white society in which he lived. Whatever dual identity Lee may have felt personally, he chose his homeland as his identity after death. The Blasingames rejected this choice.

Today, the Blasingame ranch is still in operation. The remains of Lee's house sit on the southwest corner of the ranch near the town of Academy, with a few Chinaberry trees that were in his garden and the remains of the root cellar. A few personal items of Lee's remain in the family, including traditional Chinese wooden shoes, cooking pots, and rice wine jugs.⁷⁰ These personal artifacts suggest that Lee maintained a connection with his Chinese past throughout his life. In 1957, a ski resort began construction on Chinese Peak and opened the following year under the name China Peak.⁷¹ In 1981, the resort was bought by Snow Summit Ski Corporation, which officially changed the name of the ski resort, though not the mountain, from China Peak to Sierra Summit Ski Resort. In 2010, the original name of the resort was restored.

The story of China Peak and Charley Lee Blasingame remains resonant for a number of reasons. Lee was not only an employee of the Blasingames and their extensive business interests, but was seen, often paternalistically, as a family member. J.A. Blasingame and his heirs relied on Lee for many of the daily operations of their grazing empire (though he himself was not an heir to the estate), and the fact that Alfred Blasingame was willing to risk mutiny in the remote Sierra to maintain Lee's authority was telling. But how was Lee actually viewed by the Blasingame family, and how did he view

69. Ibid.

70. These items are in the private collection of the Blasingame family.

71. Thomas W. Catchpole, "Summit Reaches 50," *Mountain Press*, 2008, 1.

himself? Here the evidence is more difficult to discern. The fact that the Blasingame family buried him in their plot rather than allow his remains to be shipped back to China suggests that they viewed him as more of a relative than an employee. At the same time, his own wish to return to the country that he must have had only hazy memories of at best is instructive and an indication of the fact that he still viewed himself as fundamentally Chinese. As the historian Adam McKeown has observed, the practice of shipping bones back to the mother country was an important ritual that bound Chinese migrants together and was a right theoretically guaranteed in the contracts issued by the Six Companies that had initially carried the immigrants to the United States.⁷² Therefore Lee's wish to have his bones transported suggests that he retained a strong identity with the Chinese community, even as he lived in geographical isolation from it. As Chan has observed of the Chinese immigrant community of the period, there was no real sense of being "Chinese American" until after World War II; one was either one or the other.⁷³ In addition:

Instead of a monolithic group consciousness, Chinese Americans had a multitude of identities that existed at different levels in different contexts. Within the immigrant community individuals displayed their strong parochialism by organizing themselves into various associations, resurrecting Old World social relations on the basis of geographical, dialectical, and kinship affiliations. . . . That affiliation was so important that it was carried to the grave . . . The New World's new environment, especially the existence of racial antagonism there, undoubtedly enhanced Chinese immigrants' national awareness.⁷⁴

Despite how the Blasingame family viewed him, Lee's self-identification remained firmly Chinese.

That being said, it is undeniable that Lee was a significant outlier for his community at the time. The fact that he was effectively running a complicated cattle operation in the Sierra, and was permitted by his white bosses to do so, reflects the amount of autonomy that he was able to secure for himself. Further, Sierra grazing was imbued with strife and politics by the 1880s, and the conversion to

72. Adam McKeown, "Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842 to 1949," *Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1999): 306–37, 320; Yucheng Qin, "A Century-old 'Puzzle': The Six Companies' Role in Chinese Labor Importation in the Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 12, no. 3/4 (2003): 225–54, 237.

73. Chan, *This Bitter-Sweet Soil*, 126.

74. *Ibid.*, 128–30.

cattle from sheep around 1900 made matters even more politicized and complicated. Lee's existence was not only dependent on the flocks of sheep he tended but also on navigating the delicate politics that ensured continued access to the reserve. This task would have entailed constant contact with not only other herders but also the Sierra authorities—Shinn, Tully, and the other rangers patrolling the forest—and the maintenance of relationships that would allow the Blasingames to continue receiving grazing permits and keep their herds from facing harassment by the rangers. This was a world inhabited entirely by whites, and yet Lee was able to be successful in its confines.

Lee's reputation as the Blasingame family's most important manager was bolstered by the fact that he was known to also be friendly with the newcomers to the forest: the Sierra Club members and scientific explorers who had a very different agenda than the herders and were therefore outsiders in their own way. The fact that LeConte named Chinese Peak in Lee's honor, and that the name was allowed to remain despite the contemporary controversy over Sierra naming conventions, reflected the reputation Lee enjoyed within this community as well. It probably helped that the peak's name was generic enough to arguably not refer to a specific local individual (as LeConte, Jr. officially opposed), rather it could be seen as referring to a larger group. Whatever the reason, the name Chinese Peak was clearly deemed suitable enough for the geological formation.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of this story is the fact that Lee himself referred to the Blasingame family's possessions and ventures as his own, indicating his level of personal investment in their grazing empire. On the other hand, at the end of his life he rejected the notion that he should be buried in the United States. Further, despite his efforts for the Blasingame family, Lee had accrued almost no material benefits for his efforts, though his immediate needs had been met and he ran a small herd of his own cattle next to those of his employers. On his death Lee's estate was valued at a mere \$500 (around \$7,000 in 2015 currency) and was left to his son. Denied the chance to return to his native country in death not out of malice but out of affection, Lee remains buried in California's Central Valley, not far from the peak that bears his name. Of the "Chinese Cowboys" identified by Chan, we have the ability to know the story of at least one, and it is a story that thousands of skiers inadvertently encounter in the Sierra Nevada Mountains every winter.