

# CHINA DOCTOR of John Day

*China Doctor* is the true tale of two immigrant Chinese who broke the social and racial barriers of the Frontier West to become full members of the community to which they came as greenhorn miners. Ing Hay, better known as "Doc Hay," and his business partner, Lung On, established a successful business enterprise and medical practice, eventually becoming leading citizens of John Day in Eastern Oregon. Because of their unique abilities to merge the East with the West, both men are legendary folk heroes of the community even today.

One has only to visit small towns along the old Dalles Military Road and mention Doc Hay for an old-timer to recall a relative saved from death by the "China Doctor" and his herbal brews. During present-day searches for alternative medical techniques, it is interesting to remember that our frontier forebears not only looked to other than western medical practitioners, but were even saved from blood poison, meningitis, and flu epidemics by a traditional Chinese herbal doctor who lived in the local Chinatown.

This Chinese gentleman, in his traditional clothing, and his westernized partner were a familiar sight in their wagon heading far out of town to care for patients and deliver supplies to isolated settlers. Their good humor and friendship brought them success in their drygoods store as well as their medical practice. Many is the tale of a visit to the doctor and a chat in the dark and mysterious Kam Wah Chung Building, with burning punk candles near the shrine in the main room of the store. A drink and cigar for adults, oranges and Owyhee Peanut Kisses candy for the children were usually offered. Then the China Doctor would proceed to tell the patients what ailed them, feeling only the pulse at their wrist, but earning the accolade of "The Best Doctor Who Ever Lived."

From over five hundred different herbs and medications found in Doc Hay's collection in the Kam Wah Chung and Company Building, sixty-two were selected for a special section in this book. All have several properties and are used in many ways for various ailments, to restore the patient to proper "physical balance." Here they have been grouped according to uses to make the treatments more accessible to the general reader.

*Cover photo: The Kam Wah Chung Building*

ISBN 0-8323-0346-1



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## Introduction

Ing Hay was an immigrant from China who came to this country as a young man to work as a gold miner, like tens of thousands of his countrymen. Though the Chinese immigrants who went to California to mine are best known to historians and writers of popular fiction, television, and movie scripts, the Chinese miners of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho were relatively more important to the development of the Pacific Northwest than were the Chinese of California.

The Chinese brought not only their traditional medicine with them, but many other skills as well. After the passing of the frontier and the mines, many stayed in the same region and made a lasting contribution to its growth. Ing Hay's partner, Lung On, for example, came to this country in the 1880s as an immigrant, mined gold, gambled, and eventually became a very successful modern businessman and the first automobile dealer in Eastern Oregon.

The lives of Ing Hay and Lung On began in China, but it was in the mining frontier of Eastern Oregon and Washington that they became significant to the historian and to the community of John Day in which they lived. The mining frontier of the area around Eastern Oregon, including parts of Washington and Idaho, was among the last of the American frontiers and was in many ways a typical part of the "Wild West."

The history of Ing Hay and the Chinese community of John Day gives a rewarding and accurate picture of the Chinese immigrant on the American Frontier. Ing Hay, Lung On, and other Chinese immigrants like Markee Tom and Buckaroo Sam were not faceless stereotypical Chinamen. They were remarkable individuals and true pioneers—and most of their contemporaries and heirs to the developing region of Eastern Oregon knew it. Their contribution to the process of building civilized society in the region is remembered and honored there today.

## 1.

### Ing Hay and His Terrible Brew

The Eastern Oregon winter of 1919-1920 was a hard one. In late December, the temperature had hit twenty-two degrees below in John Day, and a thermometer in Bear Valley had given up and frozen solid at fifty degrees below. In those weather conditions and on the unpacked dirt roads of the area, work and travel in the outdoors was an extreme hardship. So remarkable was it to make a drive of more than twenty or thirty miles that to do so was often reported in the paper, as when the *Blue Mountain Eagle* announced on January 23, 1920: "Ira Mahan drove his Ford over from Burns Friday."

It was inevitable that again this year the flu would strike among the road crew, and it did. These laborers—who were forging the final transportation link between Grant County and Portland—were a hardy and determined breed, many of them former miners. They all knew that modern medicine was helpless before the flu. Medical doctors did not agree on the cause of the disease and had no real treatment except to send the patient to bed and hope for the best. Many of them did not trust doctors, in any event, remembering the quacks who had followed the miners into the gold fields in the nineteenth century, and seeing the failure of doctors to prevent the thousands of deaths in Portland alone in the epidemics of 1918-19.

These laborers did, however, trust the medical wisdom of a member of their own community, Ing Hay, the "China Doctor." Ing Hay, the men knew, was the most famous and capable frontier physician of the area. He served patients from the late nineteenth century to 1948, when he retired. He was a traditional Chinese herbal physician whose practice of medicine was based on an entirely different approach from that of the increasingly laboratory-oriented doctors who were so helpless in the face of the earlier influenza.