In the 1850s, Southern Oregon was a racially diverse place, because people came from all over the world to mine for gold. One of the biggest groups of hopeful miners was Chinese immigrants. When Oregon joined the Union in 1859, the state constitution outlawed Chinese immigrants from owning land or property. Despite this, records show that white mine-holders sold their claims to Chinese in the 1860s and 70s, when the claims had been largely picked over. As mining waned, Chinese immigrants, mostly men, worked in railroad construction and in domestic services, such as cooking and laundering. During the 1870s and 1880s, when their labor was not as direly needed, resentment and violence against the Chinese grew, ultimately resulting in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

Even before the 1882 act brought Chinese immigration to a near halt, legislatures and citizens of Southern Oregon made settling here very difficult for the Chinese. From the beginning, Chinese were paid only 1/2 to 1/4 of the wages a white worker would make. Further, they were subject to heavy taxation aimed at driving them out. Several mining camps banned Chinese from owning claims. In the 1870s, heavy taxes on laundries targeted Chinese businesses: launderers in Jacksonville and Ashland had to pay $20 and $40 per year, respectively (that’s about $365 and $769 in today’s money.)

Many of the Chinese miners and laborers intended to earn money here and take it back to their families in China. However, discriminatory economic practices made it difficult to amass wealth. Further, immigration laws discouraged them from bringing their families to Oregon. As a result of these factors, most Chinese laborers lived together in lower quality housing in a small section of town. Census records show the Chinese population of Jackson County decreasing over time. In 1880, there were 323, and by 1900 only 43. In 1940 and 1950, there were only 5 Chinese people in the whole county.