



The Poker Bride: The First Chinese in the Wild West

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When gold rush fever gripped the globe in 1849, thousands of Chinese immigrants came through San Francisco seeking fortune. In *The Poker Bride*, Christopher Corbett uses a little-known Idaho legend as a lens into this Chinese experience.

Before 1849, the Chinese in the United States were little more than curiosities. But as word spread of the discovery of gold, they soon became a regular sight in the American West. In San Francisco, a labyrinthine Chinatown arose where Chinese smuggled into the country were deposited. Polly, a young Chinese concubine, accompanied her owner to a mining camp in the highlands of Idaho.

After he lost her in a poker game, Polly found her way with her new owner to an isolated ranch on the banks of the Salmon River. As the gold rush receded, it took with it the Chinese miners, but left behind Polly, who would make headlines when she emerged from the Idaho hills nearly half a century later to visit a modern city and tell her story.

The Poker Bride vividly reconstructs a lost period of history when the first Chinese sojourners flooded into the country and left only glimmering traces of their presence scattered across the American West.

The Poker Bride: The First Chinese in the Wild West Details

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From Reader Review The Poker Bride: The First Chinese in the Wild West for online ebook

Cheryl says

Misleading title and description since very little of this story is actually about Polly Bemis and occasional references to her often were supposition and conjecture rather than proven fact. Instead of being about the individual on the cover, this book is basically a boring and verbose account of the treatment of Chinese, especially women, during the gold rush.

When I slogged my way page by tedious page, I reached the point where the author labels other versions of Polly's life as 'bowdlerization' because of 'Victorian sensibilities carried over from the nineteenth-century into the twentieth". At that point, I felt the book had become openly insulting to me as the reader and had lost all credibility for me.

I'm very disappointed. This book had everything that indicated this would be a great book: a period of time/people I find very interesting; about a strong and interesting woman; written by an individual with substantial experience as a journalist who is a faculty member teaching English at University of Maryland Baltimore County; and the book had a recommendation by the NY Times. My expectations of high quality, interesting, fact-based biography were definitely not met.

A recently published, far more readable and interesting book about this time in history and the terrible plight and occasional success of the Chinese in America is *Fortunate Sons: The 120 Chinese Boys Who Came to America, Went to School, and Revolutionized an Ancient Civilization*.

Jim says

Enjoyed all the historical information.

Paula says

The history of the Chinese was interesting, but title of the book leads you to believe that it is about The Poker Bride. She only shows up as tiny glimpses and we learn next to nothing about her life. Very disappointing.

Deidre says

As noted by others, this is really a book about early Chinese immigration, rather than about Polly Bemis, and for that reason, it was really disappointing. For that reason, it gets only 2 stars. It does, however, appear to be well researched and for that I give the second star.

Angela says

Corbett couldn't decide whether he wanted to write about Polly Bemis, the fabled Chinese bride won in a poker game, or tell the story of the brief wave of Chinese immigration to the West before political sentiment and discriminatory laws made the Chinese settlers disappear as quickly as they had come to the US territories. He can't even seem to make up his mind in the title, and the book winds on trying to intertwine these two stories, despite Polly's life not having much to do with the experience of male Chinese miners or even having much in common with the horrifying lives of female Chinese prostitutes.

To be sure, both are interesting stories, and the slavery conditions, discrimination, and racially motivated violence that the indentured Chinese laborers endured go largely untaught in American history classes. This book would have made a couple of very interesting long articles, but the scant documented information on either Bemis or her gold-mining Chinese compatriots results in information stretched thin and repeated in an attempt to fill 200 pages.

Susan Krich says

Interesting book about the hard life and slavery of Chinese women in the Western US starting with gold rush days.

Other than the preface it takes almost 2/3's of the book to get to Polly's story. Much of her earlier life can only be surmised. Some parts have differing possibilities the same experience because of the time period starting before the civil war.

Gail Cooke says

History is vivified when seen through the eyes of an individual, thus it is with Christopher Corbett's story of Polly Bemis, a Chinese concubine sold by her starving parents IN 1872 then smuggled to San Francisco. Next, she was brought by her owner to an Idaho mining camp where he lost her to Charlie Bemis in a poker game.

She lived with Charlie for almost half a century on an isolated ranch in the canyon of the Salmon River, "known as the `River Of No Return." She nursed him back to health after he was almost fatally wounded, and he later did an amazing thing - Charlie married her. There is a picture of Polly in the book wearing her 1894 wedding dress. She's a small woman with her hair pulled back in a neat bun; the hand touching her skirt appears strong.

In 1923 she will come down from the mountain on horseback and be taken by car to Orangeville, the Idaho County seat. This was an amazing journey for Polly as she had never ridden in a car. "She had never heard a radio or seen a train, an airplane, a motion picture, or electric lights. Her arrival was also amazing for the populace, receiving banner newspaper headlines and being likened to Rip Van Winkle.

Polly was one of the more fortunate of the hordes of Chinese who came to California, to what they called "Golden Mountain" to search for gold. As Corbett points out the California Gold Rush was a time of madness, violence, and rabid discrimination against the Chinese. Although they worked for very low wages

it was claimed that they took jobs from Americans - there were "Chinese Must Go" campaigns, and frequent brutalities inflicted upon them.

Of course, crossing the Pacific to reach our shores was travail within itself. "Steerage on the China run was damp, dark, poorly ventilated, and filthy." One ship, the Libertad, carried 560 passengers although its limit was 297, and lost 100 men on that voyage. Writers described the passage from China as a "floating hell."

A former editor and reporter with the Associated Press Corbett has researched extensively and enriched THE POKER BRIDE with details describing this little known portion of our history. It is, of course, Polly's story but it is also the immigrants' story - fascinating, often tragic, and true.

Highly recommended.

- Gail Cooke

Dawn Trlak-Donahue says

The concept was interesting, but the story only mentioned the poker bride in passing. The story of the Chinese immigrants could have been good, but the author apparently did not have enough material to fill a book, as it was repetitive...and boring.

Randall Decker says

Although this book had a lot of great historical facts about the Chinese in America during the 1800's and beginning of the 1900's, I wanted to read more about Poly Bemus, the poker bride. It talks of the sad plight of the Chinese in America who were often treated worse than slaves, but had the fortitude to persevere and make something of their lives in the hostile environment of the wild west. I would have given this more stars had it been portrayed as a historical piece rather than the story of Poly. Poly took up about 15% of the pages. Poly was and is a heroine in her own right, a romantic figure that found a good life despite the unimaginable odds against her.

Alexis says

Started off interesting, but then became repetitious and rather dull. There are better Chinese history books out there.

Anna says

Much as in his previous book, Orphans Preferred, Christopher Corbett's true material isn't the particular parts of history that the books are ostensibly about, but the very act of story-telling. The Poker Bride is a fascinating account of a Chinese girl who may or may not have been won in a poker game in Gold Rush-era Idaho back country, and the larger nearly-lost history of the transient Chinese immigrants who helped build

the American west. But above that, it's a story of how history gets lost and twisted -- if history is written by the winners, what happens to the history of those who were less fortunate? As he finds and debates the myriad unreliable ways that the "poker bride" might have ended up living on the banks of the Salmon River at the turn of the 20th century, what Corbett is really preserving is the fine line between history and myth, and the ease with which that line is crossed.

See also: The Baltimore Sun review of "The Poker Bride"

(Disclaimer: The author is my former college adviser, so this review may not be the most objective.)

Vickie Rinn says

good history in general. but not enough details about polly bemis

Lex says

My current obsession-- books about historical events that I never learned about in school. Corbett uses the story of Polly Bemis, who was sold into sexual slavery as a young girl, as a thread uniting his narrative of Chinese people in the west during the time of the Gold Rush.

Anna Wassenaar says

Found this a fascinating read, but wanted more pics/details about Polly Bemis herself. There was a lot of general information and anecdotal stories about Chinese people in the west around the gold rush up until the turn of the century.

Nicole says

To be perfectly honest, I didn't finish this book. It wasn't at all what I expected. I wanted to read the story of Polly Bemis's life in detail, which is not the direction this book took. Rather it's a historical overview of the Chinese experience in America, which I was already familiar with from the Asian-American studies courses I took for my undergrad. I never would have started reading if I had known the true focus of the book was decidedly NOT Polly. I guess they had to market it somehow. That said, the historical info is well written, but to me was just a regurgitation of stuff I'd already studied. Oh well, there's always another book waiting in the wings!
