

Choie Sew Hoy: Otago Pioneer

by Trevor Agnew and Jenny Sew Hoy Agnew



These people are celebrating 150 years since their ancestor, Choie Sew Hoy, arrived in New Zealand.

*Choie Sew Hoy arrived in New Zealand in 1869. He came from a poor part of rural China, but he became a very successful **merchant** and community leader in Dunedin. How did he do it?*

Who was Choie Sew Hoy?

Choie Sew Hoy was born in Guangdong province in China in 1838. Life was hard there. Most people were farmers and poor. When Sew Hoy was thirteen, he went to the United States with some of his extended family to take part in the California **gold rush**. The group did so well that when Sew Hoy returned to China, he was able to marry. He and his wife had four children.



A few years later, when gold was discovered in Australia, Sew Hoy sailed to Melbourne – but he had learnt something from his time in California. He had seen that the people who sold things made more money than most of the miners, so he became a merchant.

Why did Choie Sew Hoy come to New Zealand?

In 1861, gold was found in Otago. People came from all over the world, hoping to get rich. But as time went by, many of these miners moved away to other goldfields. Shops in the province lost customers. A group of business owners decided Otago needed more people to replace those who had left, so they invited Chinese miners in Australia to come to Otago.

The Chinese – all men – began arriving in December 1865. They were experienced goldminers, and they worked in well-organised groups on the old mining **claims**. Many of them had left families behind in China and planned to return home after they had made enough money.



By 1869, there were more than two thousand Chinese miners in Central Otago. Sew Hoy realised that these men would need food and supplies, so he left Melbourne and opened a store near the wharves in Dunedin. He sold rice, peanut oil, and other goods that Chinese miners wanted.

When new miners arrived on ships, they went to Sew Hoy's store. He sold them tools and other things they'd need on the goldfields.



Racism towards Chinese people in New Zealand

Many of the first Chinese who came to New Zealand experienced racism. Some people set up anti-Chinese groups, and newspapers published anti-Chinese cartoons and stories. Some local councils even voted not to use Chinese workers, and the government passed a law to limit the number of Chinese coming into the country.

Choie Sew Hoy often talked to reporters and wrote letters to newspapers asking for Chinese to be treated fairly. In 1881, when the government made every Chinese person entering New Zealand pay a tax of £10 (about \$1,770 today), Sew Hoy spoke out. He said this tax broke agreements Britain had signed with China to give people free entry to New Zealand. (At that time, New Zealand was part of the British Empire.) He always spoke reasonably, using facts to back up what he said. (In 2002, the New Zealand Government apologised to the Chinese community for the tax.)

What made Choie Sew Hoy a success?

People said that Sew Hoy was “sharp as a razor” because he was quick to see opportunities to make his business successful.

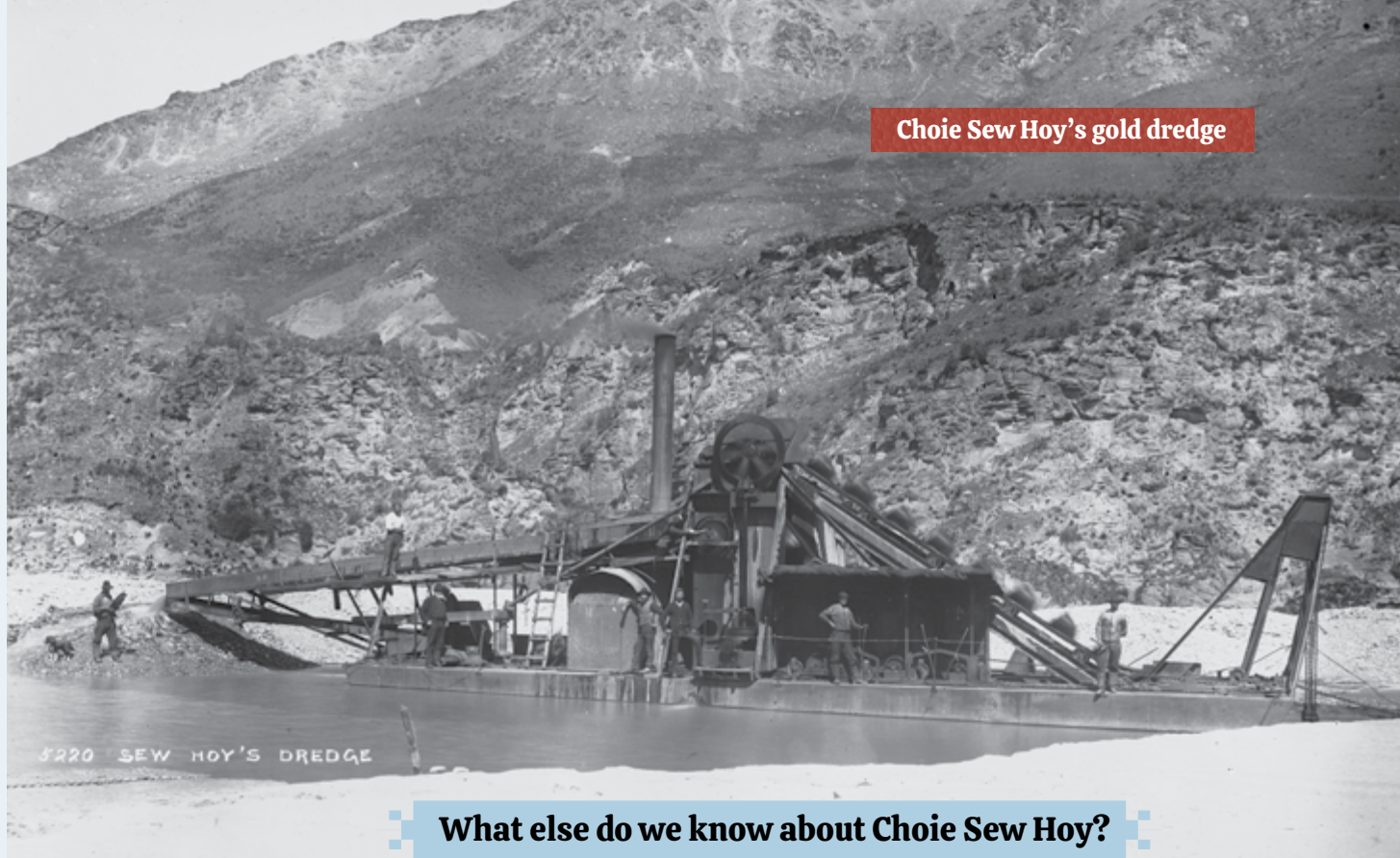
For example:

- He bought scrap metal and old horseshoes, which he **exported** to China for recycling.
- In China, bone was used for carving ornaments and pieces for games, so Sew Hoy bought beef bones to sell in China.
- Hakeke (wood ear fungus) grows in the New Zealand bush. The same kind of fungus was a popular food in China. Sew Hoy paid people to collect and dry hakeke and then he sold it to Chinese in Australia, the United States, and China.

Sew Hoy and some other Chinese merchants hired ships to send their goods to China. When the ships returned, they brought back Chinese goods for the merchants to sell in New Zealand.

Sew Hoy soon became wealthy. He decided to put some of his money into goldmining companies. In many places, miners had taken most of the gold that was easy to find. However, there was still a lot of gold to be found in the gravel underground. Sew Hoy set up companies that used machinery, such as dredges, to **extract** that gold. These companies were very successful.

Choie Sew Hoy's gold dredge



What else do we know about Choie Sew Hoy?

Sew Hoy was not just a successful businessman. He mixed well with Chinese and Europeans and made lots of friends. He was involved in many organisations and community groups in Dunedin. Sew Hoy's second wife was Eliza Prescott. They had two children and lived in a wooden villa in Cumberland Street. Sew Hoy called his home Canton Villa. He kept two large Chinese vases on his front verandah.

Sew Hoy gave money to hospitals, libraries, and charities that helped people in need. He also gave advice and help to new arrivals from China. He spoke excellent English, so he often talked to Europeans on behalf of the Chinese community.

A sign in two languages

This was the sign on Choie Sew Hoy's store. In traditional Chinese, it says Choie Sew Hoy. Choie was his family name or surname, Sew was his generational name (his brothers were named Sew Ding, Sew Hong, and Sew Kung), and Hoy was his personal name.

In English, the sign just says Sew Hoy. He was known among Europeans as Charles Sew Hoy or Mr Sew Hoy. Many of his descendants use Sew Hoy as their family name.



Choie Sew Hoy
in traditional
Chinese clothes

Glossary

claim: an area of land that a miner can work on to find gold

exported: sent to other countries

extract: to take something out of something else

gold rush: when many people move suddenly to a place where gold has just been discovered

immigrant: somebody who moves to another country to live there permanently

merchant: a person who buys and sells things

Why should we remember Choie Sew Hoy?

Sew Hoy arrived in New Zealand as a young **immigrant**. He was full of ideas, and he worked hard to become successful in business. He also became a leader in the community, and he gave a lot back to that community. Sew Hoy always helped other people and cared for his family. Hundreds of his descendants now live in New Zealand and around the world.

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