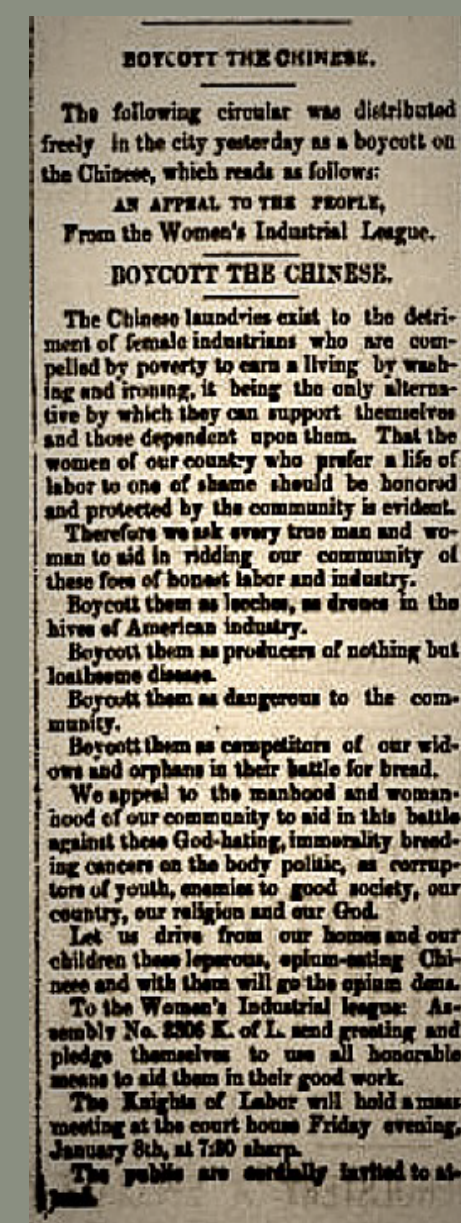


The Chinese Laundries of Wichita, Kansas

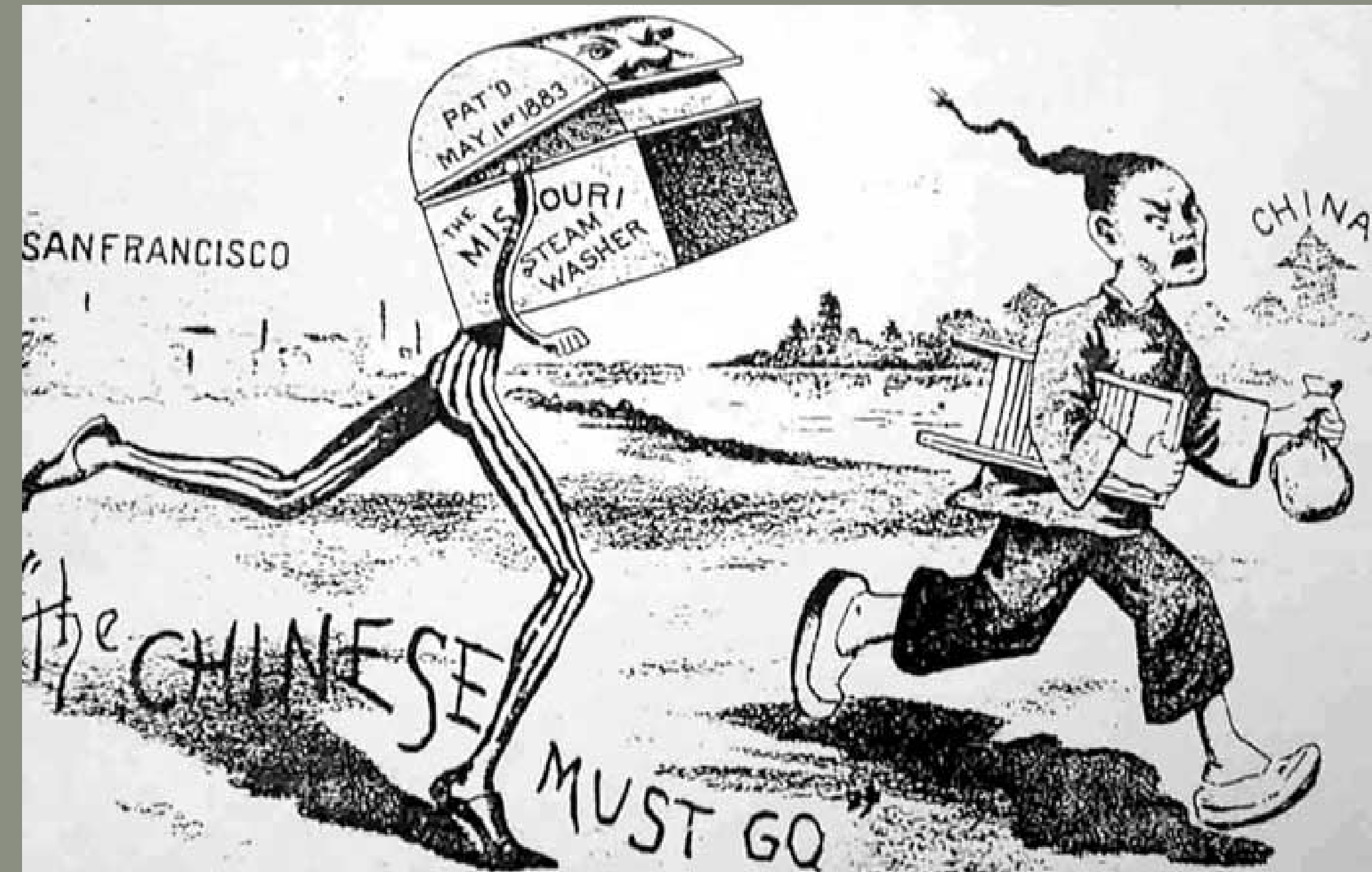
A Portrait of an Immigrant Community on the Western Frontier 1880-1905



Chinese laundry in Scottsdale, Arizona, taken around the turn of the century. No photographs are known to exist of the laundries in Wichita, Kansas. This photograph serves as an example of how Chinese laundries commonly appeared. The laundries in Wichita would have been smaller, often they consisted of a single room that was partitioned with fabric curtains, to separate the living space from the business. A common complaint by white American's was that the Chinese lived and worked out of the same room, which they claimed was unsanitary.

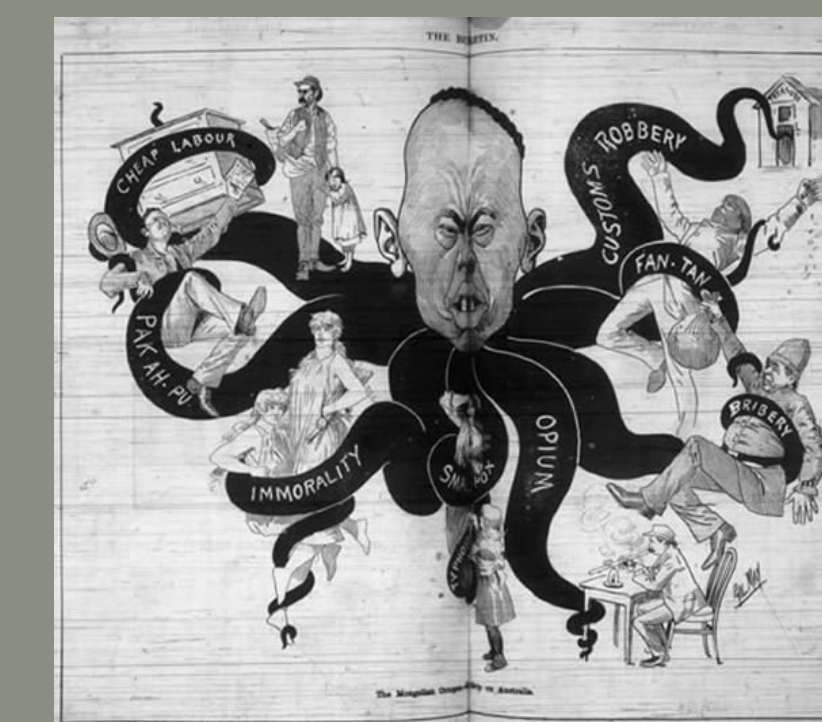


Anti-Chinese circular, from The Womens Industrial League, calling for a boycott on Chinese laundries. Printed in the Wichita Daily Eagle, January 8, 1886.

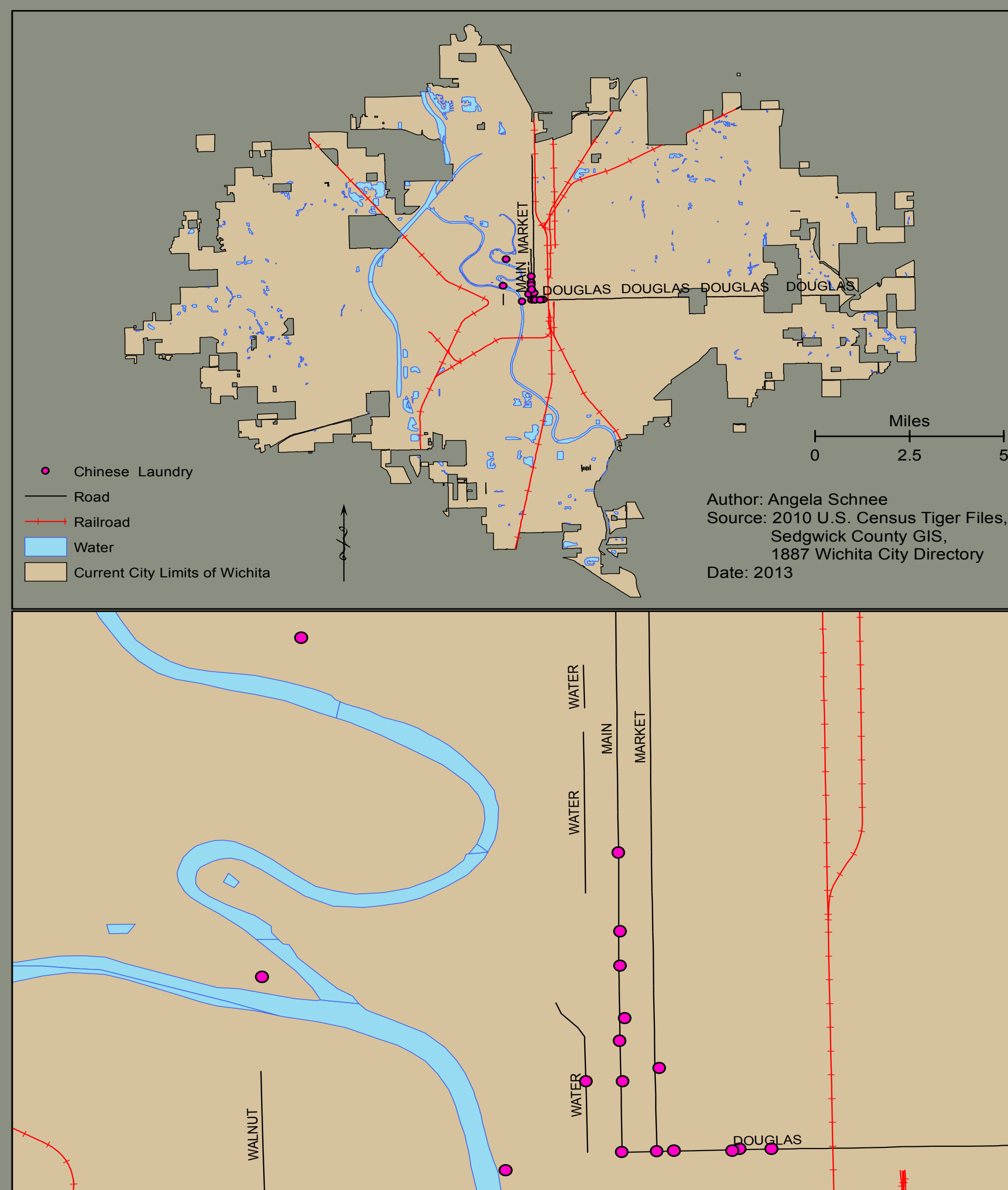


Political cartoons such as these were common in the United States beginning in the 1870s until the passage of the "Chinese Exclusion Acts" in 1882, and were still found, though less frequently, throughout the 20th century. There is a lot of information that can be gleaned from these cartoons, and they highlight some of the biggest fears white American's had at the time. Many of these same fears and arguments are being brought up today with immigration reform. The Chinese were seen as dirty and lawless; this was primarily due to lack of cultural understanding. Chinese language, religion, and customs were very different from those of European decent. The laundries were often associated with the opium trade, giving such establishments a tawdry reputation; however there were many reputable laundries.

In Wichita the first laundryman was Charley Sing, who began running a laundry in 1880 and continued business until 1905 when he closed the laundry and opened a restaurant. By 1887 there were as many as seventeen Chinese laundries operating in the city of Wichita. Evidence shows that these businesses were run by three families, the Sings, the Lees and the Wings. According to census records Wichita had a Chinese population of thirty or more at the turn of the century; all were participating in the laundry business. The Chinese of Wichita demonstrate the geographic concept of chain-migration, in that usually an initial family member settles in an area (Charley Sing), this then triggers subsequent migrations to the same place by family and friends (It appears that the Sing and Lee families were somehow related, however tracing Chinese American genealogy is difficult). Charley Sing's Chinese Laundry was the first and last in the city of Wichita. Mr. Sing is a prime example, that shows how many of the Chinese who immigrated to the United States became contributing members of their communities. The recorded history of the state of Kansas frequently excludes accounts of ethnic populations. There are many reasons for this omission, but it is important that all aspects of our states heritage are preserved. The occurrence of a Chinese population in the early days of Kansas gives telling information about the population distribution of the state as a whole. Newspaper accounts and census records also bring to light the hardships this particular population endured. We learn a lot from our past and it is essential that we remember how we handled the "Chinese Question" when

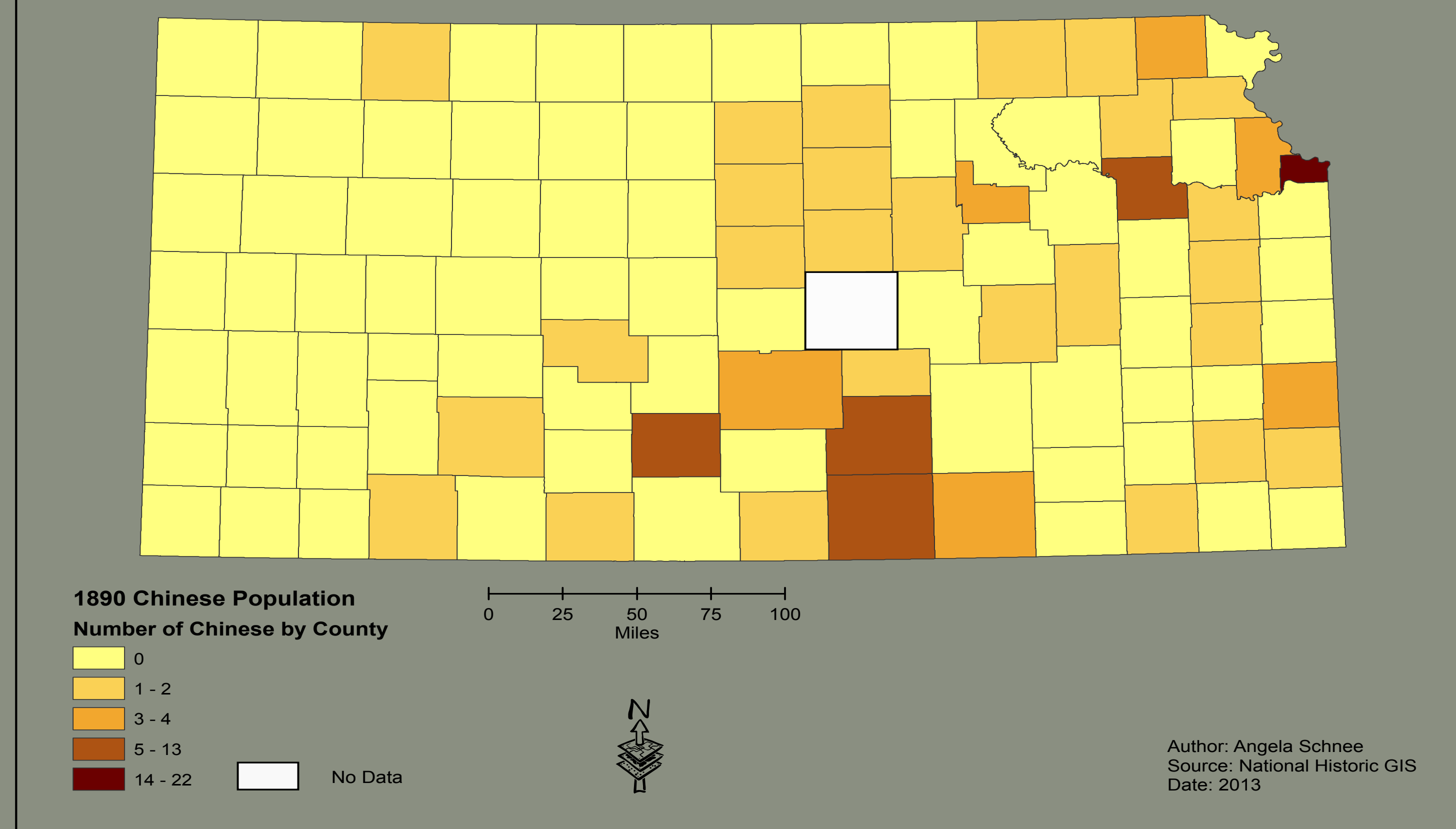


CHINESE LAUNDRIES OF WICHITA, KANSAS 1887

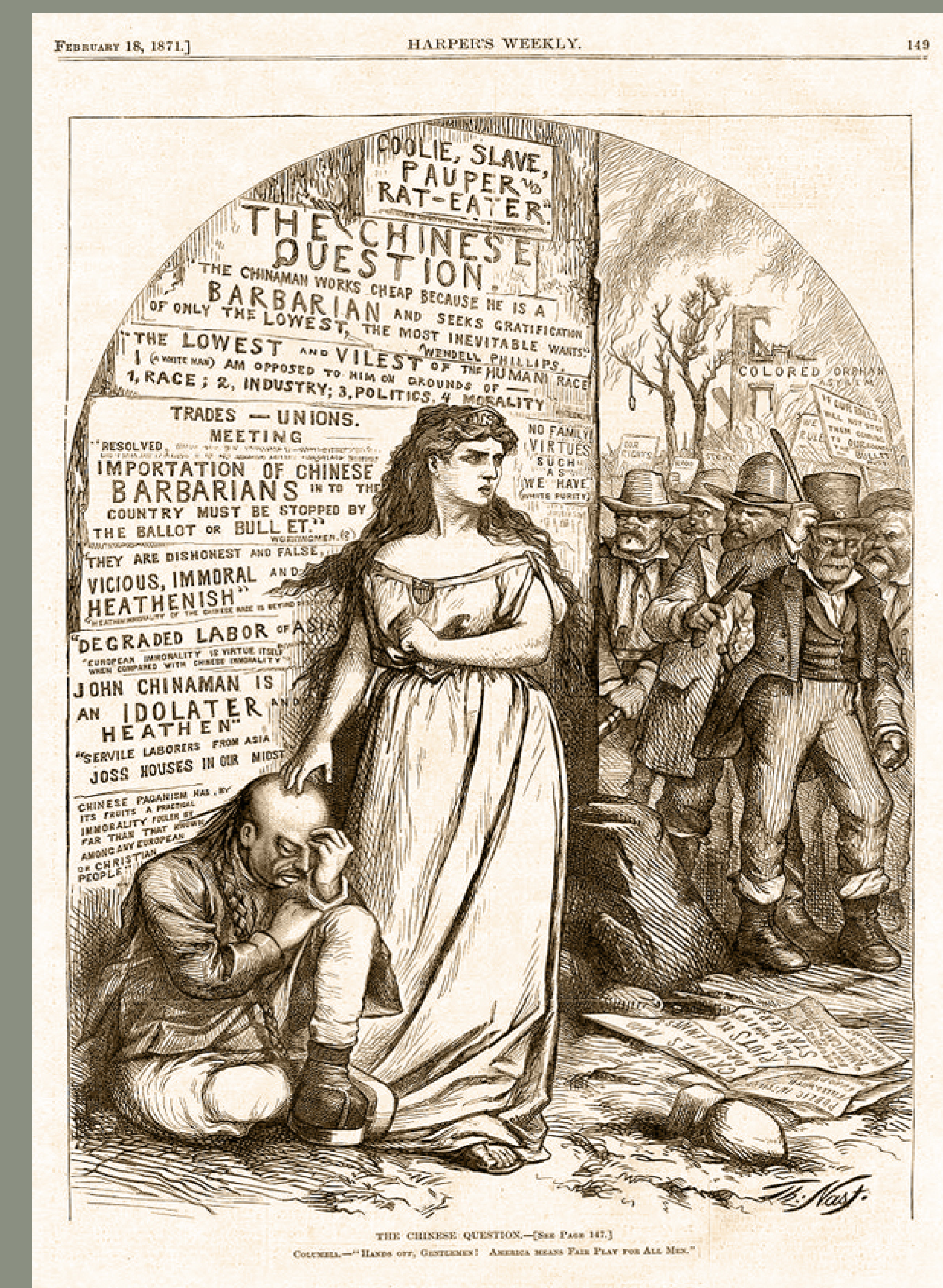


The 1887, Wichita City Directory showed 17 Chinese laundries in operation within the city. Notice that most of the laundries are located at the end of the central business district that developed near the railroads. Three laundries are found near the river possibly for convenient access to the water needed to wash laundry, these were also less desirable properties due to the threat of flood.

CHINESE POPULATION OF KANSAS IN 1890



Sedgwick County had one of the largest Chinese populations in the state, only surpassed by Wyandotte County, which is home to Kansas City, a major city and cattle shipping hub. Notice that the Chinese population appears to follow the cattle trails such as the Chisholm trail (from the south through Wichita then continued north to Abilene) that ended in Abilene. It is probable that towns such as these provided the most lucrative locations for the Chinese to operate a laundry business. Most cow towns had a highly transient male population (cowboys), who would have readily utilized the laundry services.



The author has researched many aspects of Kansas history; primarily focusing on vanishing Kansas communities. To see more of her work and the work of other undergraduate researchers, please visit, The Chapman Center for Rural Studies website at, <http://www.k-state.edu/history/chapman/>