Chinese Cans in the Countryside

What?
Chinese-made canisters or boxes have been identified at archaeological sites throughout the western United States. These are characterized by one or three sheets of metal, bent and soldered together to create their rectangular shape. The hand-soldiered side seams are often asymmetrically placed on the body of the can. Some of the cans have a circular hole with a square seal. Brass opium cans are the most readily recognized, but other Chinese cans are overlooked in the archaeological record as some other container or interpreted as a kind of modification rather than manufacturing technique.

How?
The Chinese have a history of making containers for the shipment of tea; the wooden tea chests were often lined with thin metal. Early accounts describe the making of this living or “sheet-lead canister” by folding and soldering thin metal around a block of wood (Asiatic Journal 1840, Tiffany 1849); the process continued to create their rectangular shape. In 1887 the Cheung Keung Fun factory was established in Guangdong Province and by 1917 became an important exporter of canned foods geared toward Chinese emigrants (Tsai 1993). China did not have large-scale canning factories until the 1950s when the consumption of such goods began to increase (Arnold 1939; Wood 1917). The cans were made mostly by hand, with some factories using outdated machinery from Britain and Germany (Department of Commerce and Labor 1912). The Chinese canned a variety of food, including bamboo shoots, bitter squash, green peas, fly woods, beans, water chestnuts, mushrooms, pineapples, peans, lychees, carabolambo (star fruit), longan fruit (dragon-eye), ginger, Chinese onions, rice birds, partridges, stewed duck, stewed ed, rest groose, pork chops and stewed pork breast, frog cutlets, dried system and soy oil, fresh shadfish, and stewed fish.

Where?
The most common types of cans found at overseas Chinese communities are a small rectangular can thought to contain tea or bean paste, and a larger can with a hole sealed with a square patch of metal thought to contain cooking oil. These have been found at mining sites, railroad construction camps, charcoal and lumber camps, and at communities with “Chinatowns.” Recent studies at Chinese sites in the Cortez Mining District in central Nevada have produced several more types of Chinese cans not previously mentioned in other research (Johnson and McQueen 2016). The mining district had a large population of Chinese who were hired to work in the mill and as hard rock miners.

When?
Conditions in China during the early 1850s caused thousands of men to seek employment in other countries. The United States, with a gold rush in California, attracted many Chinese to the Sierra Nevada foothills and cities along the West Coast. Waves of laborers followed in the late 1860s and 1870s. Mining, and the prospect of quick riches, continued to lure Chinese immigrants to the West. The Chinese population in the Cortez Mining District peaked from the mid 1870s to the late 1890s; many of the Chinese cans were located at sites dating from this period.

Why?
Based on the similar construction styles of these cans, we propose that all of these cans are of Chinese origin and have created this typology. The use of Chinese cans for products is not well documented. Most important Chinese food during the nineteenth century was preserved and packaged in storeware jars. Perhaps these cans were used for dried items and liquids. Further research is definitely needed.

Blas and Pieces
The sparse remains of Chinese cans in the archaeological record can be informative. The tops were often completely removed to get at the contents and for modification and reuse of the body of the can. The discarded tops may indicate the type of can they came from based on their size and shape. Cut ends that are square with a circular hole may represent the tall rectangular Type 5 or Type 6, depending on the size of the hole and how it was sealed. Cut ends that are rectangular with a smaller hole most likely represent the large rectangular Type 2 cans.