

FEATURE

A ceremony to heal the spirits

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CHINESE MASSACRE COVE, Ore. - With a ritual whisk, Master E-man whipped away the hatred and unhappiness that has hung in a forgotten pocket of Hells Canyon for 125 years.

The golden robes of the Taoists stood in bold contrast to the canyon's stark palette of tan, grey and muddy green. On a red blanket lay offerings to the spirits of the 34 Chinese miners murdered here in 1887 - legumes, nuts, rice, coins, wine, tea and elaborate paper lotus flowers.

No one was ever convicted of the crime, discovered when the miners' bullet- and axe-wounded bodies began washing up in Lewiston 65 miles down the Snake River. Only in the past five years has the incident come to national and international attention because of those among the more than 100 gathered Friday at the site.

The healing ceremony was part of Chinese Remembering, a Lewiston history conference in its fifth and final year, which has explored Chinese contributions in the Pacific Northwest. The dedication of a granite memorial honoring the murdered miners in English, Chinese and Nez Perce was an end for the conference, which has grown from a small gathering to a two-day event that drew Chinese-Americans from around the country.

"We're here to forgive the unforgivable today and that's a great thing," said Roger Amerman of Stites, who joined representatives of the Nez Perce Tribe at the ceremony.

The dedication began with a reading of the 11 known names of the miners. A bell sounded for the unknown. The names were read by R. Gregory Nokes, whose book "Massacred for Gold, The Chinese in Hells Canyon," was the first authoritative account of the murders and subsequent cover-up.



Chinese Massacre Memorial Project

A memorial to the nearly three-dozen Chinese gold miners massacred in 1887 was dedicated on June 22, 2012 at Chinese Massacre Cove on the Oregon side of Hells Canyon where the massacre occurred. The crime, for which no one was held accountable, was the worst of the many crimes committed by whites against 19th century Chinese immigrants.

"This has been a big step toward providing some justice to the Chinese massacred here," Nokes, 75, said before the ceremony began. "We can recognize the crime and honor the victims. The healing goes on forever."

Chuimei Ho of Seattle is among those seeking healing. Ho went to China with her husband, Bennet Bronson, in search of the miners' origins. The two archaeologists began looking after the second Chinese Remembering conference.

"You just cannot stop and go on with your life as usual," Ho said of what she felt after learning of the miners' plight.

She and Bronson found the men's home village Xialiang, now Baiyun, but could not locate relatives. The village elders were very solemn when she told them the story of the miners, Ho said. They have asked for a record of Friday's dedication.

Ho also researched Lewiston's Beuk Aie Temple, one of the most intact Chinese temples in the Northwest. She believes the temple's wooden artifacts, dated 1888, were purchased by the Chinese community as a way to cope with the murders.

"The temple is more than a just a temple," she said. "That is their voice. They speak up in a different way. It really isn't Taoism. It's humanity. Just like today we rally behind a piece of rock."

Ho researched accounts of anti-Chinese violence in the West and believes the Hells Canyon massacre is no doubt one of the worst.

"Lewiston is a model case on how to resolve the differences even 100 years later," she said of Chinese Remembering. "Here the effort is initiated by non-Chinese. This is so beautiful and amazing. This is what true America is. This is what I believed when I came to this country."

The conference was started by Lewiston historians Lyle Wirtanen and Garry Bush in 2007. Wirtanen said the conference accomplished its goals of spreading Chinese history, retelling the massacre story and healing.

"We are so gratified that after five years it's come to this," Wirtanen said.

Marcus Lee, of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in Portland, Ore., said he believes this is the only memorial dedicated to Chinese pioneers in the U.S.

Lee said some people have questioned the reasoning behind bringing up the dark past.

"We're not here looking for someone to blame," Lee said. "Memorials like this are teaching tools for Chinese-Americans and new immigrants coming from Taiwan and elsewhere. They need to know what those early immigrants endured to have what we have now. ... We want our history in the curriculums and taught in school just like other groups. It's part of history."

Master E-man ended the ceremony by inviting the crowd to offer green leaf bundles of sticky rice to the fish of the river so they would leave the spirits of the deceased alone. He and his attendants learned of the conference from others in the Chinese-American community and offered to come at their own expense from Los Angeles. While other healing ceremonies have been conducted at the cove, this was the first true Taoist ceremony, the religion of the slain miners.

"We'd like to have forgiveness course over and have love and peace for the world," Master E-Man said after the ceremony about why he came to Idaho.

"Even though they still have something they can't release, they feel better now," he said of the spirits at Chinese Massacre Cove.

Chinese Remembering was sponsored by the Monastery of St. Gertrude, Lewis-Clark State College and the Center for Arts & History, and the Idaho Humanities Council.