FEATURE

How Chinese pioneers helped build the Pacific Northwest

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The memorial stands in a patch of brush near the Snake River as it winds through Hells Canyon in rugged northeast Oregon. When the light is just right, the rocky cliffs above the isolated nook resemble ancient faces silently watching.

The site is called Chinese Massacre Cove in memory of the day in May 1887 when a gang of seven horse thieves, including schoolboys, shot and killed more than 30 unarmed Chinese men who had been placer mining on the river. The miners' bodies were thrown in the water and their gold, estimated to be worth about $4,000 to $5,000, was stolen.

Though the murderers were identified and accused of the crime, no one was ever punished. Over the years, the incident was slowly forgotten.

Today, a slab of white granite, installed in 2012, recognizes the event as one of the worst

atrocities leveled against the nearly 300,000 Chinese immigrants who entered the United States during the nineteenth century, many looking for work in the railroad and mining industries.

Though often surprising to people today, Chinese immigrants once had a thriving population in the Inland Pacific Northwest, which embraces parts of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. The 1870 census, for example, shows that Chinese comprised nearly 30 percent of the Idaho population. From their earliest days searching for gold to their later work constructing the Northern Pacific Railway, the Chinese endured discrimination and, in many cases, extreme brutality.

Yet, with hard work and a frugal lifestyle, many Chinese Americans also successfully established dry goods stores, restaurants, laundries, and vegetable gardens. Over time, they built homes, brought their families to the United States, and enriched their communities with a heritage that remains vital today.

Despite their role in the development of the Inland Northwest, however, the history and contributions of the Chinese have largely faded, relegated mostly to small museum exhibits and library special collections. There, in neatly framed black and white photos, their smiles and stoicism whisper from the past.

THE STORY BEGINS IN THE EARLY 1800S IN THE SOUTH CHINA AREA OF TOISHAN, OR CANTON, IN THE GUANGDONG PROVINCE. AFTER YEARS OF GREAT PROSPERITY AND POPULATION GROWTH, THE IMPERIAL NATION WAS NOW FACING A DEVASTATING SEASON OF DROUGHTS, FLOODS, FAMINE, AND POLITICAL UNREST.

During this time, China would accept only silver from the British in trade for their valuable silks and spices. Preferring to keep their silver, the British offered to trade opium instead, and threatened the Chinese with gun boats if they refused. The conflict led to the Opium War in the 1840s, which opened China to a turbulent narcotics trade that ultimately devastated household industries and farming. The crisis was amplified by the Taiping Rebellion from 1850 to 1864, leaving many peasants in poverty and struggling to survive.

When word came that gold had been discovered in central California in 1849, many Chinese, mostly men from the Guangdong area, jumped on boats headed to San Francisco or "Land of the Gold Mountain" hoping to strike it rich. What began as a trickle of immigrants soon became thousands of Chinese traveling to the United States, many with plans to make money and then return to their families in China.

"Chinese merchants in San Francisco organized into a group called the Six Companies, or Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Associations," says Phil Gruen, architectural historian and associate professor in the Washington State University School of Design and Construction.

"Six Companies was based in Chinatown and became the most powerful umbrella organization in the country for looking after the Chinese who immigrated to the US. They helped with fares, food, lodging, finding employment, as well as return passage to China."

Guided by Six Companies agents, the newcomers quickly established mining claims in California. Most of these sites had been previously scoured and abandoned by White miners. The Chinese, however, were diligent and managed to work the tailings for a profit. As the gold supply ran out, they moved up the coast in the 1860s to Portland and Seattle and the early Washington Territory.

From there, many traveled further inland along the Columbia, Snake, and Clearwater Rivers in pursuit of gold fields in the mountains. Vibrant Chinatowns sprung up along the way in cities like Lewiston, which at that time was the region's mining supply center.

SET SERENELY ON A WINDSWEPT HILL IN RURAL COTTONWOOD, IDAHO, ST. GERTRUDE'S MONASTERY IS THE KEEPER OF A COMPREHENSIVE LITTLE MUSEUM THAT INCLUDES DETAILS OF THE MINING HEYDAY AND THE STORY OF POLLY BEMIS.

Under glass and soft amber lights, a sepia photo is captioned, "At the time of the 1870 census, Chinese made up a remarkable 28 percent of Idaho's population, including most of its miners."

In 1872, Lalu Nathoy was among those immigrants traveling by ship and then pack train into the rugged and remote Idaho wilderness. She was a nineteen-year-old Chinese girl who had been sold into slavery by her destitute parents and smuggled into the United States. By most accounts, she was probably intended to be a sex worker or concubine and was one of the few Chinese women who came to the Inland Northwest at that time.

"It had to be a long and arduous trek," says Gruen. "From the rivers, most miners headed up by horseback to Pierce, Florence, and Elk City. The trek to the Clearwater Mountains or Salmon River to reach the gold fields was a major effort."

For Lalu, her destination was a boomtown called Warren where placer gold had been discovered in 1862. As the White miners moved to hard-rock underground mining, they sold their claims to the Chinese who carefully washed the tailings in pans or wooden rockers that allowed the heavier particles of gold to settle out at the bottom. For most of the nineteenth century, Chinese outnumbered Whites in the town.

When Lalu arrived in Warren, the story goes, someone called her "Polly," and the name stuck. She was indebted to work for a wealthy old Chinese saloon owner but by 1880, she had won her freedom and was living with a kind-hearted White man named Charlie Bemis. They later married and built a log cabin on a remote Salmon River ranch where they grew and sold fruits and vegetables.

Polly Bemis was hard-working, fun-loving, and had a great sense of humor. She knew the names of everyone in town and often carried candy in her apron pocket for the children. She readily shared her story and the townspeople respected her.

Polly remained by the Salmon River until her death in 1933 and her cabin has since been restored as a pioneer museum. Polly's life is chronicled in a book and a 1991 motion picture entitled *Thousand Pieces of Gold*.

Gruen says many other stories, often less celebrated and far more brutal, played out in small towns throughout the Northwest, including the Hoodoo Mountains on the eastern edge of the Palouse.

"There were several small gold strikes on the North Fork of the Palouse River out beyond Potlatch," he says. "Like Lewiston to the south, the town of Palouse was a mining center for the region supplying prospectors with clothes, food, and equipment.

"It was on the North Fork of the Palouse in the Hoodoo Mountains that the area's most heinous case of violence toward the Chinese occurred on what is now called Strychnine Creek," Gruen says.

According to a book by Eddy Ng ('76 Asian Stu., '79 MA History), *From Sojourner to Citizen: Chinese of the Inland Empire*, the incident occurred around 1889 near what is now Laird Park. White miners had abandoned a small gulch after extracting gold there proved difficult and unprofitable. The Chinese miners, as they often did, came in behind them to work the tailings. They dug ditches to carry enough water for the sluicing—or sand washing—operation and were rewarded with a rich take. They also used this water for washing and cooking.

Watching in dismay, the White miners grew angry and devised a plot to take back the

site. To avoid bloodshed, they decided to poison the Chinese by putting strychnine in the ditch. Their plan was successful, and an unrecorded number of Chinese suffered an excruciating death. The White miners then destroyed their camp and stole the gold.

"This kind of discrimination and violence against the Chinese began in San Francisco but it has been repeated time after time all across the region and nation," says Gruen.

According to a 1982 article in *Bunchgrass Historian*, author William Wilbert says the first Chinese to arrive in Washington Territory were generally admired and well tolerated by Whites. But the peaceful sojourners were soon taken advantage of.

If the Chinese managed to find gold, they were often short-changed when cashing it in. Special poll taxes were imposed on Chinese workers and their gold fields—but not on White miners. Landlords, too, leased land and shanties to Chinese at exorbitant rates.

Early on, the Chinese were also denied certain voting rights and forbidden from testifying against White people in court. Acts of violence committed against them were rarely punished. A few years later, the territory reversed its stand and allowed Chinese to provide evidence in legal cases.

In many ways, Wilbert writes, the Chinese were punished by the dominating White class simply because of their diligent work ethic. Whites often grumbled that the Chinese worked for day-laborer wages that no person of European descent could survive on. By the 1880s, as competition for unskilled labor grew fierce, White workers began forcing the Chinese out with cries of, "The Chinese must go!"

RORY ONG, THIRD-GENERATION CHINESE AMERICAN AND WSU ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF COMPARATIVE ETHNIC STUDIES, SAYS THIS KIND OF DISCRIMINATION CAN BE TRACED BACK TO THE 1790 NATURALIZATION ACT, WHICH LIMITED CITIZENSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES TO WHITE IMMIGRANTS ONLY.

"Basically, we decided it was only going to be free White men who were going to be citizens of the US," says Ong. "That meant they were landowners or had some other wealth, came from western or northern Europe, and were male. This set up centuries-long conditions to bring in the 'right' people for the democracy.

"So, when Chinese immigrants started coming in for work, they didn't fit the bill. Neither did the Irish or those from southern Europe nor women," he says. "At first, they tried to assimilate Native Americans but when that didn't work out well, they pushed them to the reservations.

"Mexicans, at the time, were categorized as White due to the 1848 Treaty of Hidalgo but it didn't take long for the US to start taking land away from Mexico and we started seeing the stereotypical image of Mexicans emerge that is still seen today."

Ong says those stereotypes were also applied to Chinese who were often dismissively referred to as "The Heathen Chinee" or "Sons of Confucius."

"When the Chinese came to work in the mines and railroads, and even though they were hard working, the issue became about them not being White and therefore, not fit to participate in the democracy," Ong says. "That they didn't have the moral or intellectual capacity to participate in the democratic system."

In addition, Chinese immigrants who planned to save money and return to their homes in China tended to keep to themselves, retaining their simple blue tunics, queue pigtails, and traditional religions. This apparent lack of interest in the majority culture aroused suspicion and fear in more than a few White Americans.

Businessmen in the United States, however, saw the Chinese as an opportunity to cut

labor costs and make more money. The railroad barons, in particular, hired workers directly from China with offers of lower wages than Whites received. Such actions angered Whites who also needed jobs and led to widespread protests of unfair competition from "cheap" Chinese labor.

As a result, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which prohibited unskilled Chinese laborers from entering the United States and denied citizenship to all Chinese already in the country, even those born here.

"It's the only law we had on the books that was directed toward one particular group," says Ong. "Later, it was extended to other Asian groups such as the Japanese and Filipinos."

The Exclusion Act followed the 1875 Page Act which had effectively barred Chinese women from entering the country, an unveiled attempt to stop Chinese from establishing US homes and families.

In 1892, the Exclusion Act was amended, adding the requirement that Chinese must carry a Certificate of Residence, a precursor of the green card system, to prove they had entered the country legally. Those caught without the documents could be detained and deported.

Congress finally repealed all the exclusion acts in 1943.

"It wasn't until China became a US ally during World War II that immigration began loosening up a bit," Ong says. "With the passage of the War Brides Act in 1945, soldiers were allowed to bring their spouses and children home from other countries. Then came the Immigration Act in 1965, which scholars see as a watershed moment for Asian immigrants. Finally, whole families, siblings, and parents, could come to the US.

"So, when you see people raging about Mexicans or Asians in particular ways, to me it's just part of the rhetoric that's long been embedded in everyday US life, how we define ourselves against one another," says Ong. "It's a constant.

"It will be quiet for years but when it raises its head again, it's not too surprising. It comes out in those moments when tensions rise. When certain groups feel left out."

It's a trend still evident today. A recent investigation by University of Chicago political scientist Robert Pape into the January 6, 2021, Capitol riots showed that those same fears of losing out permeated the towns Capitol rioters came from.

Pape told the *New York Times* that most of the people who took part in the assault came from towns awash with fear that minorities and immigrants were crowding out the rights of White people in American politics and culture.

"The Capitol insurrectionists were mainly middle-class to upper-middle-class Whites who are worried that, as social changes occur around them, they will see a decline in their status in the future," he said.

WHILE THE FIRST CHINESE IMMIGRANTS CAME TO THE UNITED STATES IN HOPES OF FINDING GOLD, MANY MORE FOUND GAINFUL EMPLOYMENT IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD. THEY ALSO PLAYED A CRITICAL ROLE IN BUILDING THE NORTHERN PACIFIC AND GREAT NORTHERN LINES.

"In the 1880s, the Northern Pacific Railroad came through this area and crossed the Snake River," says WSU Tri-Cities history professor Robert Bauman. "Pasco became the largest railroad hub in central Washington.

"It was a community largely of railroad workers including 300 Chinese laborers. They also had a Chinatown that lasted until it was raided for opium during Prohibition."

It was in the lively town of Pasco that pioneering Hollywood cinematographer, and

"poet of the camera" James Wong Howe got his start.

"James's father, Wong Howe, was a railroad labor contractor who had come to the US alone," Bauman says. "But he was allowed to bring his family over from China during the Exclusion Act because he had a high-paying job and was seen as a permanent resident. He also ran a successful business called Wong Howe Notions. His was one of very few Chinese American families at the time."

Bauman says that James was born in China but grew up in Pasco. "The story is that someone gave him a camera when he was just a little guy," he says. "James loved to photograph everything and took that camera everywhere.

"At some point, James moved away and ended up in southern California. It was the 1920s and the film industry was just developing, and James wanted to be a part of it. He began his career as an assistant to legendary film director Cecil B. DeMille.

"James became a really influential cinematographer and was recognized for the innovative techniques he used," says Bauman. "He worked on dozens of movies over his forty-year career including *Hud* and *Funny Lady*. He won two Academy Awards and was nominated for several others."

Howe continually faced discrimination, however, and wasn't allowed to become a US citizen until the 1950s after the repeal of the Exclusion Act. He was also prohibited from marrying a White woman thanks to the prevailing laws that banned interracial marriage.

Howe and his wife married in Paris instead, but their union was not legally recognized in the United States for over a decade.

I WOULDN'T HAVE MADE A GOOD PIONEER," SAYS EDDY NG OVER A CUP OF GREEN TEA AT HIS COLFAX RESTAURANT. "I'D SAY, 'THE HELL WITH IT' AND LEAVE! CAN YOU IMAGINE WHEN IT'S COLD AND YOU HAVE TO BUILD THE RAILROAD DOING REALLY DIFFICULT TASKS LIKE SETTING OFF DYNAMITE? MANY CHINESE DIED WHILE BUILDING BRANCHES OF THE PALOUSE RAILROADS. IT WAS A TOUGH LIFE."

Ng, owner of Eddy's Chinese and American Restaurant is fourth-generation Chinese American, although he didn't come to the United States until his teens.

"We are from the Toishan area of South China," he says. "I grew up in Hong Kong due to complex political reasons; my family was scattered all over the world."

Over the years, many of his family members reunited in the Inland Northwest.

"My great-grandfather, Gin Sing Ng, was born in San Francisco and traveled to Seattle by train," says Ng. "From there he moved to the Lewiston Chinatown where he worked at a 24-hour operation called the Majestic Café. At the time, men had to return to China to wed and couldn't bring their wives to the US until after World War II."

Ng's grandfather, Owen Ng, eventually joined great-grandfather Gin Sing in Lewiston.

"My grandfather was Americanized and loved Cadillacs and beautiful women," Ng says. "But we were not allowed to marry other races. Well, you can't stop human interactions— I just found out a couple years ago that he had an affair with a Caucasian lady, and they had offspring. Now, I have more relatives."

It was Ng's great-grandmother who managed to take young Ng out of the People's Republic of China after the government imposed a lockdown and shut the Bamboo Curtain in 1949. Her husband, Gin Sing, had passed away in America, so she was eligible to move to Hong Kong, which had a US consulate.

"She asked if she could take a companion and they said, 'OK, you can take your little grandson,'" says Ng.

"Later, as a teen, she asked me to take her to America so she could be buried next to her husband. I wrote to my folks who were legal immigrants and asked them to apply for us to come to the US. And that's how I came to Colfax where my dad and mom worked for the Colfax Coffee Shop.

"In the beginning, I wasn't used to the small-town life and I was surprised to learn there had been Chinese in Colfax in the early years," he says. "They mainly did laundry and there was a Chinese vegetable garden. Then, they disappeared. The old men went back to die in China."

Ng says that, overall, Chinese in the Inland Northwest were generally welcome, although they certainly faced discrimination and injustice.

"Personally, I feel we were not treated too bad except for the horrible Snake River massacre and some other incidents," he says. "It was an ugly chapter driven by greed."

Today, the Ng family feels at home in the little town of Colfax, where people are supportive and have made them feel part of the community.

"I'm so proud—we are here and diversified and able to help kids understand other ethnic groups," Ng says.

"I believe we're a positive influence and when the kids grow up, they realize there's nothing to be afraid of. Their minds are open to learning about different cultures and ideas and it's good for them. I think education is key."

China's First Hundred: WSC history professor Thomas La Fargue researched the Chinese Educational Mission (1878–1881).

Editor's Note: Many thanks to the author for this comprehensive and well-written article.