

Gratitude and Reflection

From her speech for the Chinese Expulsion Remembrance

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By Amy Johnson

“On behalf of the Descendant’s Committee of Seattle, thank you for having us here today as we remember—and also learn more about—this important time in Seattle’s history.

The Chinese expulsion movement was a dark and ugly time in the history of Seattle, and one that we would probably just like to forget. But it is important to look at difficult and painful times in history so that we can learn from them.

Today I don’t want to focus on the darkness of this history. We just heard from Doug Chin, who helped shed some light on the injustices that were inflicted on the Chinese workers. What I would like to do is to look at the few bright spots. I do this not to lessen the suffering and pain that was inflicted on the Chinese during this time. But, I believe, looking at the bright spots can help free us from the pain of the past and enable to us move forward.

One of the bright spots was that there were a number of strong supporters of the Chinese during this time. These supporters were willing to stand up, speak out, and help protect the Chinese—at great personal risk, loss, and persecution for years afterwards.

I would like to introduce to you the descendants of some of the supporters of the Chinese: Julie Stein, of the Burke Museum, representing the Judge Thomas Burke family; Scott Pattison, great-great-grandson of Sheriff John McGraw; Dee Dickinson, great-granddaughter of Governor Watson Squire; Louise Jones-Brown, great-great granddaughter of Jacob Maple; and Admiral Horton Smith, great-grandson of Dexter Horton.

These descendants have told me that their forefathers’ support of the Chinese has been one of the things that has made them so proud of their ancestors. I wish that we had more time to share some of our families’ stories from that era. I would like to share a brief story about my great-great-grandfather David Denny in order for you to see why we are so proud of our forefathers.

David Denny was known for his strong support of the Chinese and his employment of many Chinese workers. Prior to the anti-Chinese riots, a mob of the “haters,” that was determined to burn down his house and his barn, gathered in Seattle. David caught wind of this threat, and it was said that he went upstairs, brought down his Winchester rifle, sat down, and continued his reading.

Apparently, David Denny was known to be a crack shot, so when the mob found out that he was waiting for them, they had second thoughts. It was also said that his Chinese cook, a formidable adversary with a long-barreled frontier colt strapped to his arm underneath his voluminous sleeves, also helped to change their mind!

I would like to address the young people right now. There were “haters” during the anti-Chinese riots, there are “haters” now, and there will be “haters” in every generation. My charge to you today is to learn from history, to be willing to step out in your generation when you see injustice or oppression of those who have no voice, to be willing to take personal risks to stand up for what is right, even though it may be difficult.



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The next bright spot that I want to talk about is the courage and determination of the Chinese during that time. From what I read, only half of the Chinese left Seattle. How brave and determined must have been those who stayed and did not let the hate, anger, and prejudice of the anti-Chinese mobs carry them away. And later, many Chinese returned to Seattle after the Great Seattle Fire in 1889 in order to rebuild the city, which could not have been done without them.

We are so thankful that the Chinese were—and are—determined to make Seattle their home. They have been a strong foundation in Seattle’s history, and this city would be greatly diminished without our Chinese community. In response to this, we would now like to present the Chinese community with a gift. It is an unusual one, but one that represents the foundation of this city and the large role that the Chinese played in it. *[pulling out brick]* This brick is an actual brick from the Denny brick factory, and may well have been one that was used in the rebuilding of Seattle.

So with this gift, we say Thank You to the Chinese community in Seattle. You are a strong, vital, and vibrant part of Seattle’s community, and we look forward to building together on this strong foundation that you helped lay.”

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Amy Johnson is the great-great-granddaughter of David Thomas Denny (1832-1903). Ms. Johnson is chair of the

Descendants Committee of Seattle. She has carried on her great-great-grandfather’s legacy of friendship with the Native people with the formation of the Descendants Committee. Her desire is to facilitate reconciliation between the Native and non-Native community of the Northwest, with special attention to historic injustices.