

FEATURE

Newcastle, Washington Chinese labor in the Pacific Northwest Coal Mines

By Mahlon Meyer



Editor's Note:
Newcastle has been an important settlement and town since the late 19th century and was the first in King County.

Newcastle played a major role in the development of Seattle and the Seattle region. It was one of the region's earliest coal mining areas and its railroad link to Seattle.

Coal delivered by rail from Newcastle's mines to Seattle fueled the growth of the Port of Seattle and attracted railroads, most notably the Great Northern Railway.

The Newcastle coal mine began producing coal by the 1870s. More than 13 million tons of coal had been extracted by the time the mine closed in 1963. Newcastle's coal mining legacy, and the mines with many Chinese laborers, remains in place names such as Coal Creek, Coal Creek Parkway, and China Creek Golf Course.

Chinese labor in the Pacific Northwest Coal Mines

According to the Newcastle Historical Society, the mines in Newcastle were operated from 1863 to 1963 and produced a total of nearly 1 million tons of coal. They were "Seattle and King County's earliest largest industry," that transformed Seattle from a small village in the 1860's to the "dominant port city of Puget Sound by the 1880's."

The proximity of the mines to Lake Washington accounted for one reason for their success. Coal was carried by cart to the shores of the lake, then transported by barge across the lake, and finally disembarked for further transport. The mines were owned by San Francisco interests, and it is possible that practices adopted elsewhere were also affected in Newcastle, such as referring to Chinese laborers by numbers rather than names.

As with Twain's depiction of Chinese laborers, in depictions of life at Newcastle, the onus for unrest and trouble is placed squarely on



*Newcastle and Renton coal fields, 1880
Courtesy UW Special Collection*

the shoulders of poor, working-class whites. One source argues that until the 1880's, when a recession set in, Chinese laborers "worked alongside" white miners. A reporter for Harper's Magazine visiting Newcastle in 1884 described poor, rootless white laborers as mostly morally deficient.

"The great body of men employed at the Newcastle mines – 250 to 300 in number, is made up of Welsh, Scotch, English and Irish – just the same crowd of heedless colliers, physically and morally, that you will see everywhere else under similar circumstances . . . only a small number have laid any money by, and all ceaselessly complain of their poverty.

The town itself straggles in and out of the great dumps of clay and waste that extend like black spurs from the foot of the mountain, the cottages being grouped upon the rocky, stump-infested, forest-bound hillside, without an attempt at order or comeliness."

Along with regular explosions in the mines, caused by continued use of cheaper "black powder," despite the invention of dynamite in 1866, fights were depicted as regularly breaking out among the white miners. The Post Intelligencer, in April 1884, reported an incident

that seemed to capture the outside world's vision of life in a coal mining community.

"At 10 O'clock Friday night, a shooting scrape took place in Kennedy's Saloon at Newcastle, in which Robert Buffington, age about 30 years, was shot twice, once in the neck and once in the body. Reports as to the cause of the affair are very conflicting." The shooting was the result of a card game. A local teamster, Thomas McManimee, accused Buffington of cheating him of two dollars. McManimee was reported to have simply walked away, a statement that would have confounded and titillated urbanite readers.

Depictions of Chinese laborers in the popular media also seemed to follow Twain's somewhat romantic envisioning of them as efficient, serene and noble. Except, in the case of the Harper's reporter, one sees both Twain's version of the Chinese – the patient and uncomplaining worker – and Conrad's version – the almost inhuman, insect-like creature driven by passion that, when allowed to escape, is as uncontrollable as a blast of steam.

"For this duty Chinese are employed to stand all day bending over a sliding stream of coal and rapidly picking out the waste – being far superior to any white man, who grows lame and impatient at such confining and pernickety work. They are paid \$27 a month and 'find' themselves – which is more than I could do until I chanced upon the colony honeycombed away in an old engine-shed that had been patched up for the occupancy. Thither rushes a riot of screaming Celestials when the noon whistle blows, for the winner has the first big dip into the common kettle of luncheon rice, after which the scrapings left for the latecomers are extremely meager."

As in other parts of the west coast, attacks on Chinese eventually drove away all Chinese from the coal mines. As early as 1876, forty Chinese laborers were driven away from the Newcastle area. In 1882, in a parallel incident, 32 Chinese hop pickers on the way to the Wold Brothers' ranch were attacked by armed

vigilantes. On September 11, 1884, masked white men set fire to the building where the Chinese workers lived near Coal Creek mine. The structure was completely destroyed.

Miners force Chinese from Newcastle mine on June 3, 1876.

On June 3, 1876, miners drive 40 Chinese mineworkers from the from the Newcastle mines. Newcastle is located in the Puget Sound region in east King County

A coalminer, John McKnight, wrote to his wife Ellen on June 8, 1876:

"The miners at the Seattle mine [at Newcastle] drove all the Chinamen away from there Saturday last. I will send for you as soon as I poss. can, but I must say that I don't like the looks of this place so far, and I'm afraid you won't neither ...". Earlier that year, on January 15, 1876, it was reported that the Seattle Coal Mines employed 300 men at Newcastle.

Sources:

Marilyn Tharp, "Story of Coal Newcastle," Pacific Northwest Quarterly, Vol. 48, No. 4 (1957), 124-125

As a result of the attacks, many Chinese moved to settlements away from the main encampments. One description of the late 1880's described a scene of their life along a river.

Though larded with exotic and ornate descriptions, the Newcastle Historical Society avers that it was probably not dissimilar to the community Chinese built among China Creek, before they were eventually driven out.

"The Chinese have built among the trees a group of small huts, steep roofed, weather-reddened, and long-shingled; have planted narrow gardens on the river bank, and have set up tiny coops for the beloved ducks and chickens,

until they have made as picturesque and foreign a scene as though it were a home village on the Yangtse River."

Today

Standing with his back against a fence post, a thin, wiry Chinese man surveys the property that has just been purchased by a major development company that plans to erect a retirement community. This is the land that the Chinese coal miners lived on over a century ago. From where he leans, he can see the lake that the future residents will overlook. It is solid green and the wind whips off its surface so that it ruffles the red cravat he has tied loosely around his neck.

The field behind him is where China Creek pours, trickles past hillocks of grass and sand, and meanders among large fields of oaks and chestnut trees, finally spilling out into the lake. Beyond the field are more trees, hundreds of years old, as if watching, silently, perhaps bemusedly, the anticipated return of Chinese to this spot where they labored, built a home and now plan to find a home again, a community.

This Chinese man in particular has seen or contemplated many of the horrors of the twentieth century. He escaped from the Japanese invasion of China. He has seen the violence of the twentieth century and he reflects on the progress of the world since World War II. How has the world changed? Has it gotten better or worse?

The quiet of the field behind him, vast, stony, cold and filled with the hush of air and wind from the lake surrounds him, fills his words and reflections with depth and quietness. It is as if he is talking to the lake itself.

The retirement center will house over one hundred residents and will be attached to a community center where Chinese culture will be taught, sustained and grown. It will be open to all people, based on the philosophy of Da Tong, or "The Great Community," but will have an Asian, particularly, a Chinese theme. The care staff will speak Mandarin and the residents will eat Chinese food.

But this man, who has pursued diplomacy for half his life, does not want to talk about the Chinese “reclaiming” their past. He does not want to talk about victory or even triumph. For him, it is more about the willow tree on the far edge of the property that bends seductively over the lake, seeking out its own reflection, an image of peace and harmony that this spot seems to afford. As he talks, leans back against the fence post, time passes and the hills surrounding the property, the trees, even the blanket of silence confirm his vision of an opportunity to make an even greater contribution for peace.

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Mablon Meyer is a historian of modern China with a unique background.

He was a journalist in Asia for more than a decade, mostly for Newsweek magazine where he was an award-winning staff correspondent based in Hong Kong.

He also rose to national prominence in the Chinese media as a daily participant in China’s popular program in which he pitted his wits (in Mandarin Chinese) with leading public intellectuals and business figures.

The program, carried by Phoenix Television, reached the upper echelons of Chinese society, resulting, in 2003, an invitation for him to follow Tony Blair in a lecture series at China’s Qinghua University. Mablon was then invited to publish his memoirs in Chinese by a foreign ministry press in Beijing, which was published in the following year.

When he returned to the United States, he got his Ph.D. and started a teaching career.