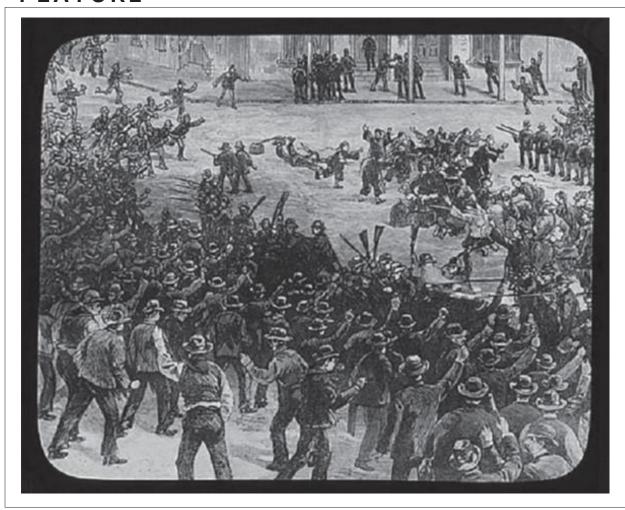# 1886 Riots in Seattle

Resentment toward Chinese peaks with riots in Seattle in 1886

By DANIEL DEMAY

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During the mid-1880s, a nationwide economic depression led to widespread unemployment. Many white workers accused immigrants of taking their jobs.

On the west coast, Chinese laborers were the targets of anger and mob violence. In the fall of 1885, anti-Chinese feelings in Seattle led to four months of riots aimed at driving the Chinese out of the city. Some Seattle citizens organized to uphold the law and protect the Chinese. Even so, many Chinese la borers were driven from their homes and forced onto ships in the bay. Early in 1886, President Grover Cleveland declared martial law and sent in federal troops to restore order.

This 1886 illustration from Harper's Weekly, a national magazine, shows the anti-Chinese riots in Seattle. It shows a group of Chinese men (center) being chased and beaten by the mob." -MOHAI. Photo courtesy MOHAI, Lantern Slide Collection, Asahel Curtis photo, image number 2002.3.410.

The history of Chinese immigrants in Seattle is, in many ways the story of other immigrants (and Native Americans) in the region and across the U.S.

Discrimination of Chinese people was as prevalent in Seattle as anywhere, and it all came to a head on Feb. 7, 1886, when riots broke out as anti-Chinese groups tried to expel the immigrants.

But before we get to that, some background must be recounted.

Chinese immigrants began coming to the U.S. in great numbers in the 1850s, initially because of the California Gold Rush, but then to work for the Central Pacific and other railroads that failed to find enough labor to build their growing rail networks.

When the biggest rail projects were completed, however, these immigrants were laid off and left to fend for themselves. They were experienced rail workers and miners by trade, so they found jobs mining coal, gold or whatever needed mining, and building railways, often for logging operations in the Northwest, says Al Young, a Chinese American historian in Seattle who is also involved with the Chinese Historical Society of America.

This was all fine until the Long Depression started to peak in the late 1870s.

Companies had already made a habit of hiring Chinese workers for less than white workers, thanks in part to an 1854 California Supreme Court decision that put Chinese in the same boat as African Americans and Native Americans.

But once white workers started seeing that companies more readily hired Chinese workers than white workers (because they could pay them less), a resentment began to grow.

The resentment grew enough that the federal government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, essentially banning Chinese laborers from immigrating — only merchants would be allowed into the U.S. until 1943.

But that wasn't enough to quell a growing hatred and it boiled over in September 1885, in Rock Springs. Wyoming, when coal miners' resentment over companies hiring Chinese instead of whites led them to go into a Chinese labor camp and kill at least 28 workers.

"The gist of it was, nothing happened," he says. "It was open season on Chinese."

Days later, in the hop fields of Issaquah, three more Chinese were killed by a group of whites and Native Americans, Young says.

A month or so later, the Tacoma city council votes to expel all the Chinese from the city. So, on a dark and rainy November night, Tacoma's Chinese were marched to the railroad and shipped off to Portland.

By the time this sentiment reached Seattle two or so months later, perhaps spurred by the Knights of Labor and perhaps not, this practice of expulsion was called the "Tacoma Method," Young says.

It was happening up and down the West Coast, cities shipping off their entire Chinese populations out of fear that Chinese workers were keeping whites from working.

On Feb. 7, 1886 a group of men posing as health inspectors (likely a group from the Knights of Labor) entered Chinatown in Seattle and began rounding up Chinese residents.

They were taken down to the waterfront and put on a ship headed for San Francisco, Young says.

But the ship's captain wouldn't take them for free, so the anti-Chinese groups gathered what funds they could and put some Chinese aboard.

The city sent a group of cadets down to protect the immigrants, and they proceeded to march the remaining Chinese people back to Chinatown.

A riot unfolded as guards tried to take them back and several shots were fired, wounding some in the crowd.

President Grover Cleveland declared martial law and dispatched federal troops to put the riots down.

Anti-Chinese activism did not end immediately, but eventually subsided, largely because most of the Chinese in Seattle had left.

Those who remained helped keep Chinatown alive and kept a foothold that would make them a vital part of the city as it grew.

Information for this article came from the Young interview, the Museum of History and Industry and historylink.org.

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