

FEATURE

Opportunity to Gain Acceptance

The Chinese Community's Participation in the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition

By Trish Hackett Nicola

In the mid-1800s, the United States and China signed several treaties that opened the door to Chinese immigration. The United States needed cheap labor for the mining and railroad industries and the Chinese were willing to provide it [1]. By 1870 the population of Seattle was a little over 1,100. Thirty-two of those inhabitants were Chinese - cooks, cigar makers, laundrymen, sawmill workers and one tea merchant [3]. The Chinese in Washington Territory were mostly employed digging mines, laying rail-road tracks, and canning salmon [4].

There was an economic depression in the 1870s after the completion of the building of the Union Pacific Railroad and anti-Chinese riots occurred around the country. Although many U. S. laborers were recent immigrants themselves, they resented the Chinese being here and taking jobs away from white workers. This bitterness led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. Chinese immigration to the United States was suspended for 10 years, laborers and Chinese employed in mining were excluded, and the Chinese were ineligible for naturalization. When the act was extended in 1892, all Chinese residents were required to register and obtain a certificate of residence. Over time the act became more restrictive and enforcement became tighter. More data was collected through interrogations -



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names, dates, places, physical characteristics, photos, and witnesses were required [5]. Finally, in 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt repealed the Acts [6].

By 1885-1886, the anti-Chinese agitation on the West Coast was in a frenzied state. A law was passed in Washington Territory which resulted in barring Chinese ownership of property. In February 1886, the 350 Chinese in Seattle were rounded up and taken down to the waterfront to be sent out on the next ship. The sheriff and a few other upright citizens confronted the mob. The mob

rioted; several dissenters were shot and one died from his wounds. C. S. President Cleveland declared martial law. Most of the Chinese left for San Francisco. In a matter of days there were only a few Chinese left in Seattle [7].

The Chinese merchants who stayed behind helped to gradually rebuild the community. Chin Gee Hee, a successful Chinese merchant, built one of the first brick structures after the Great Fire of 1889. His business, Quang Tuck Company, traded with the local Chinese residents and supplied workers for railroads and mines [8]. Hee, Eng Ah King, and Chen Cheong revitalized Seattle's Chinatown. They and other merchants emerged from the anti-Chinese disturbances as powerful figures. They controlled the supply of labor for the railroads, canneries and farms, were the exclusive importers and retailers

of Chinese goods, and owners of the residential hotels inhabited by the Chinese workers. Within a few years the Chinese population in Seattle had bounced back to about 350. There was a two-tiered class structure- the merchants often accruing extraordinary wealth while most of their kinsmen remained in grim poverty. Chin Gee Hee returned to China in 1905 and invested and supervised the building of the first railroad in China to be constructed without western assistance [9].

The leaders of the Chinese community were anxious to participate in the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition. It was an opportunity to gain acceptance in the community and there was the possibility that it would help the government see the wisdom in easing immigration laws. Both the whites and the Chinese saw the importance of Asian trade to Seattle - it was beneficial for all [10]."

The white citizens of Seattle respected the successful Chinese merchants but most people still had negative feelings about the Chinese laborers. The Chinese as a group were seen as exotic. They were often referred to as Celestials, coolies, Chinamen, Orientals, highbinders, "almond eyed" and Mongolians. They were thought to be superstitious and gamblers. Whites were intrigued by their holiday celebrations, their religious rites, the tong wars and their elaborate funerals and parades [11]. Marriage between Caucasian and Chinese was still illegal in Oregon and California. During the first decade of 1900, the headlines in the Seattle newspapers were starting to show a more positive tone- " ... party of distinguished Chinese given a Royal Welcome to the United States ... " [12] and "Advent of Chinese Baby Causes Feasting: More than Two Hundred Attend Dinners Given in Honor of Chin Lung Ying, son and Heir of Chin Keay [13]. (Chin Keay was the Secretary of the Chinese Consulate and a supporter of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition.) The Chinese were making social and financial progress in Seattle. It was important for them to make their

participation in the A-Y-P Exposition a successful endeavor.

Ah King and Goon Dip and were instrumental in organizing the Chinese Village and China Day for the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition.

Ah King was born in China and arrived in San Francisco in 1877 as a young man and soon moved to the Pacific Northwest to work in the logging camps. He worked hard and saved his money. In 1897. Ah King came to Seattle and opened a restaurant. By 1906 he founded the Ah King Company, also known as the King Chong Lung Company.

Ah King sponsored the Chinese Village pavilion at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition. He was in charge of erecting buildings to house the Chinese exhibits, supplying many of the curios, and for the operation of Chinese amusements on the Exposition grounds.

In December 1908 he traveled to China to select Chinese curios and goods for the exhibit [14]. In preparation for his trip Ah King was given several letters of introduction by various U. S. government officials. Because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Ah King was required to be interrogated by the United States immigration authorities. An interpreter was supplied for the interrogation but was not needed since King spoke English. This is what they found: in December 1908. Ah King was 47 years old. He was a merchant and manager of the King Chong Lung Company, a wholesale and retail business selling Chinese groceries and dry goods at 217 Washington Street in Seattle. There were forty members in his firm. The annual amount of business transacted was forty or fifty thousand dollars. He had been in Seattle more than ten years. He and his wife, Wong She, had three children: Ah Get, age 22; Ah Ging, a daughter, age 15; and Ah Poon age 12. They were all born in Har Ping village, Sun Ning District. Two witnesses testified in Ah King's favor - C. I. Lynch, Post Office Superintendent of Delivery in Seattle, and Daniel Landon, attorney. They

confirmed that Ah King was a bona fide merchant and Landon also said that Ah King was probably the most prominent Chinese merchant in the city [15].

While in China, Ah King recruited Chinese to work at A-Y-P. He brought concession workers, actor and acrobats back with him. He paid their passage, put up the money guarantees, obtained the necessary bonds and paid each of the workers a monthly salary. They earned about \$50 a month in Chinese currency. There were no written contracts; only oral agreements. The workers were required to return to China within thirty days after the close of the Fair [16]. The theatre performers received considerably more in wages.

Because of the strained relationship between the United States and China, the Chinese government did not sponsor the exhibits for the Chinese Village or officially participate in its financing or planning [17]. The Chinese living in Seattle helped finance the construction and management of the Chinese Village. Each resident was said to have contributed \$4 each (nearly \$80 in 2009 dollars)" [18].

While Ah King was in China, his assistant Chin How, handled the construction preparations for the Village. Ah King also negotiated a financial agreement with exposition officials to pay a flat rate of \$3,000 plus 25 percent of receipts from the main gate to enter the Chinese village. The exposition furnished a ticket-taker to collect the admission to enter the Village. The admission fee to enter the Village is not known but people were charged a dime to enter the Chinese Temple and Theatre [19].

The Chinese Village was located in the Pay Streak between the Ferris wheel to the north and the Arena to the south. There were three buildings, which included a bazaar, a Chinese temple, Ah King's restaurant, and a tea room. The Chinese exhibits and curios were exhibited on the village grounds behind the main building [20]. It cost about \$15,000 to construct the buildings. The cost to bring the theatrical troupe and approximately twenty workers the Exposition and their return trip to China, plus their compensation, was \$5,000. Other costs pushed the grand total to build and operate the village past \$25,000 [21]. Every piece of furniture, every drapery and curtain was imported from China [22]

The restaurant employed the top chefs from China. The Temple of Confucius was brought over from China. It is insured with a \$10,000 bond and was to be returned after the Fair. Tourists were guided through temple but it



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was used as a place of worship by the visiting Chinese. In another building, Chinese carvings, rich draperies, laces and silks were on display. One piece of silk was embroidered with the portraits of President Taft and Vice President Sherman. On the background were woven flowers a spray of fern and Chinese writings. It was done by several Chinese school children under the age of 12 and required several months to complete

[23]. The piece was given to Taft during his visit to the A-Y-P in October [24].

The Pay Streak was the biggest thing at the fair - it had life, action, color, an assortment of music - the unique and bizarre were found there. Publicity articles said that the Chinese village would be a reproduction of the life at

home, faithful in every particular. The theater was to be a section of one of the most famous streets of Peking (Peking). The buildings alone in the Chinese Village cost \$14,000 [25]. Although some thought that many visitors from the East would be afraid to patronize the restaurant in the Chinese Village because of the selection of unknown dishes they were assured that the Chinese had been cooking American dishes for many years on the West Coast. The best chefs in the homes of Seattle citizens were Chinese. They hoped traveling Americans would order quaint and curious Chinese dishes and use chop sticks in true Oriental fashion [26].

The Chinese Theatre was a favorite attraction at the Chinese Village. It featured performances that changed daily by the Tin Yung Qui Troupe, also billed as the "Peking" (Peking, known as Beijing now) Troupe, even though the group actually hailed from Shanghai. The troupe - said to be direct from the court of the Dowager Empress - of jugglers, magicians, and acrobats wowed the crowd with their acts. One of the magicians was a woman, not particularly unusual for a Chinese performance in 1909, but most unusual for an American performance. Many of these performers toured the vaudeville circuit for a few months after the exposition ended; eventually most of them returned to China [27].

When the acrobats arrived in Canada in early June, several of them had trouble getting across the border. It took over three weeks to resolve the issue. Chee Yu San was held over in Vancouver because he had trachoma, a bacterial infection of the eye. His wife, a member of the troupe, stayed with him. J. E. Chilberg, president of the A-Y-P, wired the authorities in Washington, DC. asking for immediate action in releasing Chee Yu San (some publications referred to him as Shin Yu). This negotiating highlighted the problems Chinese sometimes had trying to get into the United States. Chilberg obtained affidavits of physicians in Vancouver, B.C. saying there was nothing wrong with Chee Yu San physically or mentally and suggested that Chee was the victim of over-zealous inspectors

Ah King went to Vancouver to help with the situation. The newspaper reported that Chin How, the local manager of the Chinese Village in Seattle, was "tearing his hair out and using his most expressive English in telling what he thinks of the United States immigration officials" [28]. After ten long days of conciliation, Chee Yu San and his wife finally arrived on the fair ground on June 20 [29].

Chee Yu San was allowed into the county on the condition that he would remain in the Chinese Village, apart from the public or from other Chinese. In addition he was to sleep in apartments to be used exclusively by him and his wife, disinfect all table linen, change all linen weekly, and bath hands and face with sublimate solution. When his tour was over all effects were to be thoroughly disinfected by steam or formaldehyde [30]. Since Chee Yu San and the other acrobats were so popular with their audiences and the press, it is not likely that these procedures were followed.

In July on the invitation of Ah King, the Tin Yung Qui troupe of Imperial Chinese performers entertained twenty-six representatives of local news-papers and their friends with an evening of acrobatic, juggling and sleight-of hand acts. According to a newspaper article, "the performers tossed monster blocks of stone about and toyed with 150-pound spears as if they were feathers. Spinning diminutive plates on the ends of two bamboo canes, a performer at the same time went through an amazing series of contortions." The hit of the evening, however, was furnished by two magicians whose act started with several huge bowls of water containing gold fish and ended with one bowl filled to the brim with water and all of the fish. "The performance was followed by a dinner served by winsome little Chinese maidens clad in silken garments at the Chinese Village." The evening ended with a ride on the Ferris wheel [31].

The Tin Yung Qui troupe was popular with fair goers throughout the exposition. It was one of the few imported attractions to achieve

widespread fame. It was reported that after the exposition the troupe had a short engagement with one of the Eastern vaudeville circuits before sailing for Hong Kong in February 1910 [32].

The other important Chinese AYPE organizer was Goon Dip. He was one of the wealthiest members of Portland's Chinese colony. Dip was held in high esteem by his fellow countrymen. He had accumulated a considerable fortune as a merchant and labor contractor in Portland and many made investments in several Pacific Coast cities [33]. Goon Dip advocated relaxing the Chinese immigrations laws. He argued that because of tight immigration restrictions, the Chinese population in the U. S. was decreasing rapidly on the Pacific Coast. He argued that the Chinese supplied a type of labor which was needed but unsuitable for whites and that because of the trade interest of the U. S. in China, the Chinese should be treated more fairly [34]. Goon Dip spoke fluent English [35]. He was well educated man, created a pleasing impression and was a skilled politician [36].



The success of the Chinese community at Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Expo was an enriching experience, something to be proud of, a legacy to pass on to future generations.

In January 1909 the Chinese Minister in Washington, D. C. appointed Goon Dip to a newly - created consulship in Seattle. The Chinese Foreign Office wanted Seattle to catch up with Portland in the volume of its trade with China. Seattle was centrally located for working with all of the Puget Sound area and Alaska.

Seattle welcomed and celebrated Goon Dip's arrival in January 1909 by hosting an elaborate Chinese banquet with thirty members of the local Chinese leaders and a representative of the Japanese community [37].

Chin Keay, a member of the Quong Tuck Com-pany in Seattle and one of the most prosperous members of the community, was appointed secretary to the Consul [38].

Goon Dip, who was well known on the Pacific Coast, raised money on his own initiative and obtained many of the fair's exhibits from his Chinese contacts living in Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco [39].

September 13, 1909 was declared China Day at A-Y-P. Goon Dip was the parade chair. The China Day program chairman was Lew Kay, son of Lew King, a pioneer Chinese merchant of Seattle. Lew Kay was born in Seattle and educated in public schools. He was the first Chinese to enter the University of Washington. He graduated from there in 1909. Lew Kay organized the parades, floats, luncheon, and speakers and entertainment at the AYP auditorium for China Day. (In 1913 he married Rosaline L. Goon Dip, the daughter of Goon Dip) [40].

The China Day celebration began with a parade through downtown streets. A replica of enormous dragon led the procession to the delight of the huge crowd. J. E. Chilberg, A-Y-P president and Goon Dip led the parade. Goon Dip was dressed in flowing silken robes led the parade of his countrymen from Quong Tuck's tea house to Washington Street. A police platoon was out from, followed by Chin Kim, Lew Ching and L. S. Lee in Chinese attire on horseback. The A-Y-

P marching band was next. Then four Chinese bands riding on floats decorated with Chinese and American colors and playing Chinese music made their appearance.

"Chinese horsemen in full military regalia with their armored suits and helmets, led detachments of footmen representing the Imperial Infantry, whose silken uniforms were a riot of color. "

"Interspersed in the line were squads of small boys and girls bearing banners and emblems." Alongside the young group, adult Chinese carried huge, heavy banners with Chinese inscribed on them.

Fifty children from the Seattle Chinese Imperial School dressed in Chinese attire were on another float. White women held up their children to see them to the delight of all.

"In front of grave mandarins marched small boys, swinging incense lamps."

"Following the dragon were thirty automobiles bearing local Chinese merchants and their visiting brethren from Vancouver, Victoria, Tacoma, Portland, Everett, Bellingham and other cities."

"At their head rode Goon Dip and his assistant Ah Key, Rev. Fong Chack, Judge Thomas Burke, Consul Moy Pack-Hin, of Portland and other dignitaries."

In one automobile a Chinese quartet from Portland sang popular American airs.

The parade moved up Second Avenue to Pike Street, thence to Sixth Avenue and Pine Street, where those not accommodated by automobiles took cars to the exposition fair grounds at U. W.

"Before the main gate of the exposition hung the Chinese flag with a green dragon on a field of yellow."

"The demonstration in the city and at the exposition cost the local Chinese residents \$5000 which was raised by subscription." [41].

The Chinese dragon was the highlight of the parade and China Day. The 150 foot-long dragon sat on the shoulders of fifty men whose legs represent a centipede. Footmen kept the dragon's "spirit subdued by threatening it with war clubs and spears."

After four and a half months the Fair ended on October 16, 1909. When the figures were tallied, the total receipts for 3,740,551 admissions to the Fair were \$1,096,475. The A-Y-P finished with a surplus of \$62,676. The corporate stockholders donated it to the Anti-Tuberculosis League and the Seamen's Institute [42]. No liquor or intoxication beverages were sold on the grounds or within two miles of the exposition" [43]. It made a profit in spite of this.

Ah King said shortly before the exposition began that he did not expect to make a profit from the Chinese Village and in fact anticipated a loss. He was right: The village brought in total revenues of \$21,451, and this was before the A-Y-P got its cut (\$4,863). Still, the Chinese Village didn't do too badly, bringing in nearly as much revenue as the A-Y-P's Japanese Village. This was big for Seattle's Chinese community, not only because the Japanese government sponsored the Japanese Village, but also because there were several thousand more Japanese than Chinese in Seattle in 1909" [44].

"In the years following the Exposition there was no significant increase in trade with Asia, and Alaska did not show the boon in growth for which every-one had hoped" [45].

In Lew G. Kay's 1909 article in *Coast Magazine* he wrote that the Chinese leaders of Seattle could be considered among the pioneer builders of the great Pacific Northwest. Some, like Chin Gee Hee, returned to China and assist in the industrial and commercial development which will greatly increase the trade between China and the Pacific Northwest. Other leaders

like Ah King and Goon Dip stayed in Seattle worked on advancing the interest of trade between the Pacific Northwest in the Oriental. Lew Kay's article appeared in the same year as the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exhibition, a world's fair held at the University of Washington campus [46].

Although the Chinese did not make a profit at A-Y-P, they gained status and respect in the community. A relatively small community of Chinese pulled off an amazing feat during the A-Y-P Exposition - the Chinese Village was popular and the Tin Yung Qui Troupe was an enormous hit. The Chinese parade and dragon were loved by huge crowds of people. Many Chinese dignitaries from far and wide visited the fair. Curious people tried their food and examined their curios. It would be another thirty-five years before the Chinese Exclusion Act would finally be overturned but the white community was more aware of the unfairness of immigration restrictions on the Chinese. The Chinese were respected by white community leaders. The success of the Chinese Community at A-Y-P was an enriching experience, something to be proud of, a legacy to pass on to future generations.

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Her interest in the Chinese evolved from volunteer work indexing the Chinese Exclusion Act files at the National Archives in Seattle.

Trish Hackett Nicola was a Program Chair for the Pacific Northwest Historians Guild Conference on AYPE in March 2009, is a graduate of MOHAI's Nearby History writing class, and has a keen interest in Washington State and Pacific Northwest history. She is a certified genealogist and family history researcher.

Some additional information is known about the Chinese Village workers, the Chinese Village workers, the dignitaries and influential families who visited the fair.

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