

## FEATURE

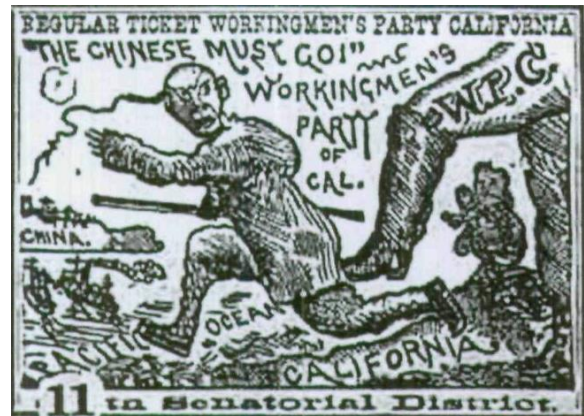
# California Coming to Grips with Its Past Persecution of Chinese Immigrants

The Chinese Exclusion Act, which was passed in 1882, was the first-ever such law to bar a group solely on the basis of race or nationality from immigrating to this country

By Ivy Lee

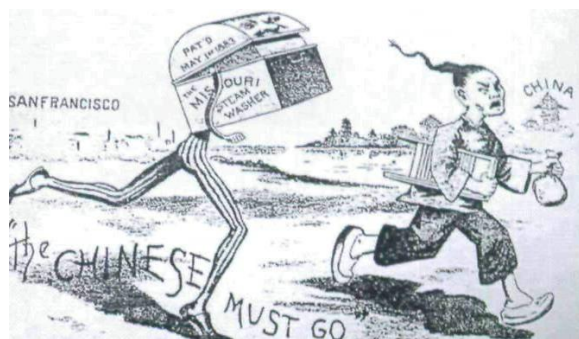
California as we know it today would not exist without the tremendous contributions of the early Chinese immigrants who, like many others, were drawn to these shores by the promise of work and fair wages. While taking the fruits of their labor as given, Californians quickly relegated these Chinese laborers to a sub-human status and subsequently attempted to drive them out of the state in what nowadays would be called an act of ethnic cleansing. Local ordinances and state laws were passed designed to harass and to persecute the Chinese. Then, as a coup de grace, California lobbied for the federal Chinese Exclusion Act which was passed in 1882, the first-ever such law to bar a group solely on the basis of race or nationality from immigrating to this country.

Some question the need to dwell on the past when crises abound such as the inequity in health care and the economic meltdown that plague our state and nation. But forgetting is simply not an option. The economy will rebound and at some point our nation will begin to tackle health care reform. The issue of the California's historical injustices toward the Chinese immigrants, however, will remain and, if



unchallenged, will rankle. Besides, the past, the present and the future are inextricably bound so that there is no going forward without first casting a backward glance. As an example, past discriminatory local and state laws impact on how the Chinese Americans are perceived and treated today. Present day stereotypes such as "perpetual foreigners", "potential spies" and "yellow peril" all originate from the time of the Gold Rush when Chinese could not buy land, own homes, intermarry, testify in court or vote.

To show the necessity of squarely facing the past, governments have sought to remedy historical injustices through the symbolic measure of apologizing. In 2006, Stephen Harper, the Canadian Prime Minister, apologized for the Head Tax the government imposed on the Chinese laborers who arrived at around the same time as the Chinese laborers in the US; and just last year Kevin Rudd, the Australian Prime Minister, apologized to the aborigines for decades of racist policies. Both the Canadian and



Australian governments considered apologizing the only decent thing to do. And as recently as June of 2009, a resolution to apologize to the African Americans for slavery and the Jim Crow laws was passed by the U. S. Senate and is awaiting approval in the House.

Earlier this year Californians were offered a chance to move beyond our past failures through ACR 42, a resolution co-authored by two Assembly members, Paul Fong and Kevin de Leon. ACR 42 touts the many contributions of the early Chinese immigrants; at the same time it repudiates the shameful policies of California's past, offering "deep regrets". Thus the resolution provides Californians with the opportunity of demonstrating that we are a just and good people who, having committed wrongs, recognize it and stand ready to build a more inclusive future together.

After its introduction, ACR 42 moved swiftly through the Legislature and on July 17, 2009, it was chaptered by the Secretary of State to become part of state records. Assembly member de Leon states on his website that "I hope that this resolution will help our children learn about the mistakes in our past and help us avoid the trap of scapegoating others for our problems in the future." As for Assembly member Fong, he plans to continue his quest in the form of an apology from the U.S. Congress. After all Congress has never apologized for the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, nor has it acknowledged the Act's lingering impact on the Chinese American community today.

###

*Ivy Lee, a Chinese American, is a retired sociology professor at California State university, Sacramento.*



A cartoon shows Uncle Sam trying to keep Chinese immigrants out again, using Scott's Exclusion Act of 1888. Some Oregon convention delegates tried to add "Chinamen" to the vote on excluding negroes and mulattoes back in 1857.

*Image courtesy Library of Congress*