

Background Notes for Chinese Reconciliation Memorial Project

"The Tacoma Method"*

Synopsis: On November 3, 1885, a large group of Tacoma citizens expelled the Chinese populace.

In 1849, Chinese workers began to emigrate to the United States, in particular California. Lured by tales of Gum San, the Land of the Golden Mountains, they came seeking a better life for themselves and their families in China.

Working the tailings left by white miners, they soon discovered that Gum San was not all they had been told. Oppressive taxes and restrictive legislation were enacted against them by white miners and other workers who feared a tide of foreign labor which would deprive the white Californians of their livelihoods.

During the early 1860's, ten thousand Chinese laborers were imported to California to complete the work on the Central Pacific Railroad. After 1869, and the completion of that project, many of the Chinese were without work and had to look further afield. British Columbia and eastern Washington Territory offered gold mining. In 1870, two thousand Chinese were hired to work on the Northern Pacific Railroad line from Kalama in the southwestern corner of Washington Territory to Tacoma, the western terminus of the line.

Not only did the Chinese come north, but the legislative persecution followed them, first in British Columbia, then eastern Washington and finally to western Washington and the Puget Sound area.

They say history repeats itself and in this instance it did. The work for the Chinese also began to dwindle here as projects were completed and the national economy went into a slump in 1873. As in California, Washingtonians were beginning to feel the economic pinch and they also looked for something or someone to blame for their concerns. What better scapegoat than the Chinese; they wore funny clothes, ate different food, and since they could "live on practically nothing", sent most of their earnings home to China rather than spend it in the local economy.

Several local citizens who had witnessed the California problems first-hand and knew of the Californians' efforts to expel the Chinese, met with the mayor of Tacoma and members of the school board, legal profession, local press, etc. Together plans were generated for ridding Tacoma of its Chinese population. Not a massacre but an expulsion, then there would be plenty of jobs available for the locals.

Mass meetings were held at the Alpha Opera House for debate on the subject. Of course, the mayor presided. As reported in the local paper, the rhetoric was passionately for the expulsion. Some local citizens did present the other side of the debate: Ezra Meeker, Puyallup pioneer, and an alliance of ministers. However, their pleas were in vain. Swayed by civic leaders and others, the crowds elected for expulsion.

Warnings were issued to the Chinese, "You Must Be Gone!". Employers of Chinese workers were forced to replace them with whites or Indians. Posters on the telephone poles said, "The Chinese Must Go!". Seattle soon followed Tacoma's lead and the persecution spread up and down Puget Sound.

Final plans were made on the night of November 2, 1885. On November 3 at 9:30 a.m., the whistles blew at Lister's Foundry and other mills in the area. Several hundred workers met together and began their methodical march through Tacoma's streets where the Chinese had businesses: wash-houses; chop-houses; shops; residences; etc. On down to Chinatown and the waterfront they marched. At each place where the Chinese were they stopped, hammered on the door and told them to gather at 7th and Pacific Avenue by early afternoon for they were to leave Tacoma that day.

Later that day, they were gathered together, the young, the old, men and women, over two hundred people. Then began the trek to Lakeview, a suburban railway station at the south end of Tacoma. The wind was bitter and the rain driving and on they marched through the mud.

Some of the Chinese who were quite old or ill were driven to Lakeview by wagon. The station at Lakeview had only a shed for protection. Some local people brought food and hot water for tea after seeing their distress. Fortunately, no one was injured or killed. However, Lum May's wife was so frightened by the violence that she lost her reason and subsequently attacked people with an ax.

When the 3 a.m. train came through some Chinese bought tickets and headed for Portland, Oregon. Later, when the morning freight came the engineer said, "Put 'em aboard. I'll take 'em to Portland!". For several days, forlorn Chinese stragglers could be seen walking the tracks southward. As Lum May said, "It was a sad spectacle."

The ringleaders of the expulsion were arrested and taken to the Vancouver Barracks. They were never prosecuted nor convicted. Some years later the United States government paid an indemnity to the Chinese government of \$424,367 for all damages to Chinese citizens in the United States including Tacoma, Seattle, Rock Springs, Wyoming, etc.

"The Tacoma Method" was successful, but Tacoma lost in the end. The city lost productive citizens who could have contributed much to their community. There were no Chinese in Tacoma until the 1920's. They were discouraged from coming to town and Tacoma actively campaigned not to allow Chinese to locate here.

Now, the community is in the process of creating a memorial to reconcile this event -- to provide a lesson for future generations -- to welcome future Asian citizens to Tacoma.

- * *Background Notes for Chinese Reconciliation Memorial Project*, written by Lorraine Hildebrand for the Chinese Reconciliation Project Steering Committee. Ms. Hildebrand is author of *Straw Hats, Sandals, and Steel; the Chinese in Washington State*. The term, "The Tacoma Method" was first used by George Dudley Lawson in the magazine, *Overland Monthly*, "The Tacoma Method", Vol. II, 1886, pp 239-240.

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