

Unburying History: Portland's shameful anti-Chinese violence

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December 10 2020

My view: In an era when the country was yanking out the welcome mat of those who risked their lives to build a transcontinental railroad here, the Chinese population of Portland actually grew.



PMG FILE PHOTO - Mount Tabor is known today for the city reservoir and for the bucolic neighborhoods, but the neighborhood also has a troubled history of racist incidents.

The news garnered only two paragraphs in the Morning Oregonian of March 5, 1886, but the headline was stark: "Another Chinese Outrage: Fifty Masked Men Drive 125 Chinamen into Portland from Mt. Tabor."

With the 1869 completion of the transcontinental railroad and the United States suffering a five-year depression after the Panic of 1873, many workers and politicians began blaming the Chinese for depressing wages and taking jobs from whites.

The backlash culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred future Chinese immigration.

Here in the Northwest, mob violence in 1885 and 1886 forced the removal of Chinese from Seattle, Tacoma, Olympia and Chehalis, wrote historian Marie Rose Wong. Washington's territorial governor declared martial law to curb the violence.

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Hundreds of Chinese immigrants fled from Washington to Portland, but the leader of the Washington anti-Chinese campaign, Daniel Cronin, followed them here in January 1886. Cronin, a Knights of Labor union organizer, soon vowed "there will not be a working Chinaman in Portland" within three months.

On Feb. 22, the anti-Chinese campaign mobilized 1,000 people for a torchlight parade in downtown Portland, wrote historian E. Kimbark MacColl. That night, armed men attacked 160 Chinese employees of the Oregon City Woolen Mills, robbing them of their money and forcing them on a steamer bound for Portland, according to the Morning Oregonian. Later that night, some 30 armed whites broke up a camp of Chinese who were cutting wood in Albina, then a separate city.

Evidently, many of the Chinese driven from Albina later found work chopping wood in Mount Tabor, then a rural farming community not yet part of Portland.

On March 4, a mob followed them to Mount Tabor. In the wee hours of the morning, some 50 masked vigilantes forced the Chinese to leave, shepherding them to the Albina ferry. At 3:30 a.m., an estimated 100 to 200 Chinese made a forced crossing of the Willamette River into Portland, then home to a sizable Chinatown.

A leader of the local anti-Chinese campaign, Sylvester Pennoyer, would go on to win his race for Oregon governor later that year. But the Portland establishment, including The Oregonian and business leaders, urged tolerance. Oregonian editor Harvey Scott, whose statue once sat atop Mount Tabor, penned an editorial criticizing the anti-Chinese campaign as "the base instinct of race hatred," according to MacColl.

In an open letter published in the newspaper March 15, Portland Mayor John Gates called for a mass public meeting the next day.

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"We all know of the disgraceful proceedings which have been enacted lately in Washington territory, at Oregon City, Albina, Mount Tabor and at our very doors here in Portland," Gates wrote. "It seems to be high time for all good people to come out and show the disreputable outlaws that the local authorities will be sustained by the people, and that law and order must and will be maintained in Portland."

The violence eventually abated in Portland. Some Chinese left for San Francisco. But many found a welcome home in Portland's Chinatown, Wong says.

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Portland actually grew, she says.

Steve Law is a retired reporter and editor for the Portland Tribune. He lives in Portland and contributes columns to the Tribune.