

# Remembering Washington's Chinese expulsion 125 years later

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By

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On this evening, 125 years ago, the residents of what would one day be Bellingham gathered in celebration.

They marched in a torchlight parade, listened to speakers that included the mayor, heard songs by the glee club and watched a fireworks display.

The reason for their merriment was noted in the Nov. 6, 1885, edition of the Whatcom Reveille, which had invited residents to the Nov. 7 gathering.

“The Chinese are gone. We rejoice. Every person who rejoices in the exit of the Mongolian serfs and coolies is cordially invited,” read that edition of the weekly newspaper.

The Reveille's publishers, with the help of civic leaders, had successfully launched in its pages a campaign to push all Chinese out of Whatcom County through a combination of threats, boycotts, vitriol and insistence that the immigrants were taking jobs away from white residents in the midst of an economic downturn.

The Chinese were given until Nov. 1, 1885, to leave.

“It was so blatant the insolence that the newspapers had at the time. They were so powerful,” said Margaret Willson, a former research associate in the Department of Anthropology at Western Washington University who delved into and wrote about this little-known piece of Whatcom County history.

Exactly how many Chinese were pushed out is unknown, although Willson indicated they had residences and businesses in two blocks in downtown Bellingham, with at least one of the businesses being a laundry.

Residents in this corner of what was then the Washington Territory were not alone in pushing out the Chinese.

Thousands of the immigrants were hounded out of towns in the Puget Sound during the fall of 1885 and winter of 1886. In places like Seattle and Tacoma, white residents burned the homes of Chinese, beat them and killed some of the immigrants as anti-Chinese activities hit a peak.

More than a century later, organizers once again want residents of Puget Sound to gather – this time to remember the racial hostilities against the Chinese, to learn from a dark piece of history, to reflect on the dangers of intolerance.

Called the Chinese Expulsion Remembrance Project, it includes events in Bellingham, Mount Vernon, Seattle, Tacoma and Olympia.

In Bellingham, the first event is a panel discussion in Fairhaven College at Western Washington University on Monday, Nov. 8.

Titled “Chinese Expulsion: the Legacy of Intolerance in Whatcom County,” the talk is among the activities sparked by a Whatcom County group, the Human Rights Commemorative Project.

Other upcoming events here include those featuring Chinese culture and an original ballet about star-crossed lovers set in the racial divide of Bellingham Bay 125 years ago – a few years after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first U.S. law to restrict immigration based on race. It barred Chinese laborers from the U.S. and blocked them from becoming naturalized citizens, but left exemptions for merchants, students and diplomats.

Organizers of the events in Bellingham and elsewhere hope people will learn from that period.

“It helps us to understand what happened in history and what we can do to try to avoid the same thing happening again,” said Xinrong Lynch, a Bellingham resident and president of the Northwest Chinese Cultural Association.

The association is among those participating in remembrance events in Bellingham.

To Bettie Sing Luke, a Seattle resident and chairwoman of the Chinese Expulsion Remembrance Project, what happened to Chinese immigrants 125 years ago echoes modern-day debates over immigration.

“It isn’t that far removed from today. It happened then. It wasn’t fair. What’s happening now, that isn’t fair,” said Luke, who said she had an uncle in Seattle at the time of the expulsion.

Willson recalled that when she started her research in the 1980s into the Chinese here, that “it was very hard to get information on it.”

“Nobody ever talked about it, not at all then,” said Willson, who conducted research with Jeff MacDonald, then an ethnohistorian living in Bellingham.

One piece of their research showed that the white communities of Bellingham Bay – made up of Whatcom, Sehome, Bellingham and Fairhaven – forced the Chinese out in 1885 and didn’t allow them to return to work until they were needed as seasonal workers in the salmon canneries in the late 1890s.

Even then they were segregated into bunkhouses during the months of their cannery work. It was only after World War II that Chinese were allowed to again be permanent residents of Bellingham, Willson and MacDonald found as they studied racial tensions at Bellingham Bay and Port Townsend from 1870 to 1886.

Chinese immigrants started coming to the U.S. from southeast China in the mid-1800s, fleeing war and famine in their country and hoping to support their families financially.

They traveled to the American West to pan for gold, build the railroads, work in coal mines, as general laborers and as servants in the homes of the rich.

Chinese laborers were working in the communities of Bellingham Bay by the late 1860s. They were hired to clear land, work in the coal mines, the lumber mills and in cookhouses.

The Chinese were accepted until the 1880s, when resentment started to mount about Chinese illegally coming to the U.S. through British Columbia and about cheap foreign labor taking work away from white residents during a poor economy.

“It’s like the politics of today. When there’s an economic downturn, they get angry and they look for scapegoats,” said Paul Englesberg, a Ferndale resident and member of the Human Rights Commemorative Project.

Willson and MacDonald found that anti-Chinese attitudes here were whipped up by the publishers of Whatcom Reveille, Thomas Nicklin and Will Jenkins, who did not want the Chinese to establish a foothold in Bellingham Bay.

The publishers were joined in their efforts by civic leaders and the Knights of Labor.

The pages of the Reveille referred to the Chinese as “lepers,” a “filthy horde” and “Chinese evil,” and the publishers introduced the idea of a boycott in October 1885.

They asked for petitions to be circulated in which residents promised they would not go to Chinese laundries, employ Chinese and “use all reasonable means to discourage their presence among us.”

The names of those who signed, at least 100, were listed in the newspaper. Those who refused were asked why, and names of nine people who wouldn’t sign were listed in an edition of the Whatcom Reveille.

The Chinese exodus from Whatcom County occurred by the Nov. 1, 1885, deadline, which also was the deadline given to Chinese living in other towns in Western Washington.

“They were very proud of it, that we completely cleared them out,” Englesberg said of the publishers, adding they were proud that the Chinese were pushed out without the use of violence.

But winning the anti-Chinese campaign launched in the pages of their newspaper wasn’t enough for the publishers.

In the Nov. 6, 1885, edition, they castigated those residents – they called them “white Chinamen” – who refused to take part in pushing the Chinese out of Whatcom County.

“Everybody rejoices except for a baker’s dozen of sycophantic maudlin sympathizers, whose sickening sentimentality has become as disgusting as it is absurd and idiotic,” they wrote.

When it was done, just one Chinese immigrant is believed to have withstood the ouster – Charley or Charlie Ah Fat, who lived in Point Roberts.

It’s not known where Ah Fat was at the time of the ordered expulsion, whether he left and came back or whether he laid low, Englesberg said.

What is known is that in Point Roberts, he was accepted. Ah Fat cut his queue, the long braid typically worn by Chinese men, wore Western clothes, spoke English, made friends in the community, and called himself Charley, according to an article by Michael Chan for the Point Roberts Historical Society.

He worked in the canneries in Point Roberts, where Icelandic descendants lived, and later opened a restaurant. Ah Fat lived in his house at what is now Lighthouse Marine Park from 1893 until his death in 1915, according to the Point Roberts Historical Society.

He was the only Chinese listed in the 1904 Ellet report, which attempted to list early settlers, according to the society.

Those exploring the anti-Chinese movement in Whatcom County and the Puget Sound like to point to those who likely protected Ah Fat as examples that not all stood against the Chinese.

They also refer to James Cass – a court officer who refused to sign the Reville’s petition and seemed to take the rights of the Chinese seriously – and to residents and leaders in Port Townsend and Olympia who didn’t push out the Chinese.

“Individuals can make a difference,” Englesberg said. “People who stand up and want to cross those bridges can make a difference.”