

Prologue

WE KNOW ONLY these eleven names:

Chea Po

Chea Sun

Chea Yow

Chea Shun

Chea Cheong

Chea Ling

Chea Chow

Chea Lin-chung

Kong Mun-kow

Kong Nhan¹

Ah Yow²

ALL MEN, these eleven were among as many as thirty-four Chinese gold miners robbed and killed on the Oregon side of Hells Canyon in a massacre that began on May 25, 1887. We know little else about them. Of the other two dozen victims, we don't even have their names.

The miners, immigrants from China, were never part of the American Dream. They lived largely anonymous to the Caucasians around them, and died anonymous. Even the burial places for most are unknown—if they were buried at all.

The killers were a gang of rustlers and schoolboys from northeastern Oregon in what is now Wallowa County. Protected by family and friends, some were tried for murder and declared innocent, while the alleged ringleaders fled and were never caught. One would later live a prosperous life in nearby Idaho, quite possibly bankrolled by gold stolen from the Chinese and others.

In lives lost, the Hells Canyon massacre was the worst crime committed by whites against the approximately three hundred thousand Chinese who immigrated to the United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century.³ But the crime was by no means unique. Violence and discrimination against the Chinese was widespread throughout the American West in the

1870s and 1880s, stemming partly from complaints they took jobs from white workers, and partly from blatant racism, fueled by demagogues.

The irony is that many were welcomed when they first arrived, relieving a serious shortage of labor. They came chiefly to mine gold and build the new railroads then spanning the West. Many also found jobs as farm workers, common laborers, and domestics. But when there was no longer a labor shortage, pressure mounted on the government to send them home.

Congress pandered to the growing anti-Chinese sentiment by enacting the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred additional laborers from immigrating—although allowing those already in the country to remain. It was an earlier version of the debate that rages today over the status of undocumented Latino immigrants. The initial period of exclusion was for ten years, but it later continued well into the twentieth century. However, the Act settled nothing. Many of the worst outrages against the Chinese occurred after 1882.

Never fully investigated, the Hells Canyon massacre was all but forgotten until a county clerk in Wallowa County, Oregon, discovered a handful of documents relating to the crime in an unused safe where they had laid hidden for decades. These documents and other discoveries, including recollections of the crime in histories written by two early northeastern Oregon settlers, make it possible for the first time to unravel much of the mystery of what really occurred in Hells Canyon in 1887.

I FIRST LEARNED of the documents found in the safe while I was a reporter for *The Oregonian* of Portland. At the time, I approached the discovery as a news story. But as someone educated in Oregon schools, I wondered why I had never heard of the massacre, certainly one of the worst crimes in the state's history. I was soon to discover the reasons: one, people in Wallowa County, both then and now, didn't want the story told, and, two, authorities at all levels of government—federal, state, and county—cared so little about the Chinese that they made at best only a half-hearted attempt to investigate. As I delved further into the story, I learned that other documents about the case had disappeared, and that long-time county residents who had some knowledge of the massacre proved reluctant to talk. All the evidence pointed to a cover-up extending for more than a century.

What started out as the pursuit of a compelling news story soon became much more. I resolved to break through the silence, and bring the story out of the shadows to take its rightful place as part—albeit a disturbing part—of the remembered history of Oregon and the American West. My efforts took time, years, in fact. Friends and family said they admired my passion. But I wondered whether they weren't being patronizing and, in truth, thought I had become obsessed. And maybe to some extent, I was.

I retired from the newspaper in 2003, which made it easier to find the time to run down leads and conduct research. I also taught myself the useful skill of patience, something I had not practiced well as a reporter. Over the next few years, I would find documents in surprising places. I succeeded in getting people to talk with me years after they first refused. I would also discover it wasn't just the massacre that was largely forgotten, but also the once-substantial presence of the Chinese in the interior of the Pacific Northwest. Nobody had kept their history. The Chinese experience—why they came; what happened to them—became an important part of the story.

I haven't learned everything, but I have learned a great deal. The story that follows is the product of my search. But I must say at the outset that I am grateful for the help of others, most notably Dr. David H. Stratton, a retired professor of history at Washington State University in Pullman, who graciously shared his research, and Priscilla Wegars, volunteer curator of the Asian American Comparative Collection at the University of Idaho, an invaluable adviser on how the Chinese lived and the significance of the little they left behind.

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www.massacredforgold.com