

“Meticulously researched and engagingly written, *Massacred for Gold* should be required reading in the American West.”

—JIM LYNCH, author of *The Highest Tide* and *Border Songs*

R. GREGORY NOKES



**MASSACRED
FOR GOLD**



THE CHINESE IN HELLS CANYON

“There is so little to know and I think what was known was forgotten.”

Marjorie Martin
Former Wallowa County clerk, Enterprise, Oregon



Map courtesy of Oregon Historical Quarterly and Dean Shapiro

Massacred for Gold

THE CHINESE IN HELLS CANYON

R. Gregory Nokes

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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.

R. Gregory Nokes
January 15, 2009

PART ONE

The Dead

CHAPTER ONE

Tales of Murder

I LISTENED ON a hot July morning in 2003 as a Snake River jetboat captain, idling his boat in front of a cove known as Deep Creek, told two dozen tourists the story, or at least a story, of what happened there in 1887. He said a gang of horse thieves led by an outlaw named Blue Evans had lined up thirty-four Chinese gold miners and shot them one by one after they refused to disclose where they had hidden their gold. Before revving the boat's engines to continue upstream, the captain said it was ironic that the first Chinese killed was the only one who knew English, and the only one who could have revealed the hiding place. For this reason, he told us, the gold was never found.

The captain made no attempt to explain how—since all the miners were killed—anyone could know who did, or did not, speak English, and in what sequence they were murdered. Moreover, the assumption that the gold was never found assumed a great deal, since anyone who found it would surely have done their utmost to keep it a secret.

I saw no point in questioning the captain about the discrepancies in his story. In fact, it was the second version of the massacre I had heard from a river guide. The first time, I dismissed the account as the kind of myth invented by people in the tourism business to entertain their clients. But by now I knew better. While the captain didn't have the details right, he was correct in saying something terrible had happened at Deep Creek to a large group of Chinese miners.

IN THE FALL of 1886, Chea Po would have had no reason to anticipate the terror that lay ahead when his crew of gold miners pushed their boat into the Snake River at Lewiston in the Idaho Territory. They were headed south toward Hells Canyon, a remote chasm of twisting basalt cliffs, known at the time as the Snake River Canyon.¹ Possibly they felt excited at the prospect of finding gold, maybe enough to return to China to their families, from whom they probably had been separated for years. Another crew led by Lee She traveled with them in a second boat—both boats loaded with

tools and provisions. The crews pushed them with poles, or pulled them with ropes from shore, through the strong current.

As crew leaders, Chea and Lee were no doubt experienced miners with some knowledge of the canyon, where Chinese had mined since the 1860s. Chea may even have known his destination, a bowl-shaped cove, sixty-five miles south of Lewiston. Here, a stream called Dead Line Creek, now named Deep Creek, flowed out of the Oregon cliffs and across a wide gravel bar into the Snake. The cove was spacious enough for a large camp from which the miners could work the river banks in both directions. On a hillside back from the river was a rock shelter, used previously by Native Americans, which the miners might use for a dwelling or for storage.

The Snake River flows north through Hells Canyon, so the journey against the fast-flowing current must have taken several weeks at least, depending on how frequently the crews stopped to mine. And they probably stopped often, probing the river banks and gravel bars for signs of gold, using pans, rockers, or sluices, all techniques of placer mining—the use of water to wash the ore from dirt and gravel in gold-bearing deposits along streambeds. According to an early settler's account, the Chinese stopped to mine at least once, at a place known as Summer's Bar, but were chased away by a white miner. Recalled one early settler: "Frank Summers was already panning for gold dust on this bar and he resented the Chinamen working on his claim and late in the fall he got after them and made them move."²

The Snake River would have been relatively placid for the first thirty miles or so until the Chinese reached the canyon mouth near the Oregon border. But once they were inside the canyon, the deepest in North America, their journey became back breaking and dangerous. Frequently unable to see more than a quarter-mile ahead amid twisting cliffs looming above them like prison walls, the crews faced new obstacles around each bend. Where cliffs rose vertically on both sides of the river, footing was precarious. There were few ways out—they could go forward, or back.

Weather in the canyon is fickle in the early fall. In the mornings, the miners probably wore quilted tunics against the cold wind blowing in their faces, then may have stripped to their waists in the afternoons when temperatures might soar into the eighties. Most would have shielded their heads against the intense sun with wide-brimmed hats of woven bamboo, known to Americans as coolie hats, although the miners weren't coolies—



A view near the mouth of Hells Canyon, the deepest canyon in North America, with forty miles of cliffs more than a mile high. The Chinese miners used poles and ropes from shore to maneuver their boats upstream on the Snake River for sixty-five miles from Lewiston in the Idaho Territory to Deep Creek. (Photo by the author)

they were independent laborers, working for a Chinese employer. Like most Chinese, they probably wore their hair in queues, hung loosely down their backs or wound around their heads, out of their way while they worked.

The miners used flat-bottomed boats, called *bateaus*, capable of maneuvering over river shallows. They would have had to unload their boats to portage around major rapids, such as those now called Wild Goose and Mountain Sheep. The challenge in maneuvering through the rapids was underscored in 1903 when a 125-foot steamer, the *Imnaha*, loaded with equipment for a copper mine, sank after becoming disabled in the Mountain Sheep Rapid.³ Always, the Chinese faced the threat that the current might tear the boats from their grasp and carry them careening downriver with the loss of their provisions and equipment.

Although the trip must have been physically exhausting, I find it comforting to think the miners might sometimes have paused to admire the beauty of the basalt cliffs, glowing in gold, ochre, and orange in the sunlight, and brooding in blue and ink-dark purple in the shadows. In the evenings, after

the sun crossed over the canyon's western rim, they might have been amazed to still see brilliant blue sky overhead, while scarcely able to recognize one another in the dark of the canyon floor. They surely felt the chill breeze that blows after sunset even in midsummer. And they might, after a hard day on the river, have appreciated the quiet of the night, soothed to sleep on the occasional sandy beach by the symphony of the river current. Perhaps, too, they saw a bald eagle circling high above the canyon, with outspread wings rising and falling on the wind currents, or several bighorn sheep looking down from a foothold on a cliff so steep they couldn't imagine how they got there or why they didn't fall. The miners may even have stopped to catch and make a meal of the once-abundant yard-long sockeye salmon, or a ten-foot sturgeon.

Of course, the Chinese might have been too exhausted to experience any of the canyon's majesty, wanting only to collapse at the end of the day on their straw sleeping mats, desperate to rest aching backs and raw and blistered hands. They may have dreamt of the riches they hoped to extract from *Gum San*, their word for Gold Mountain, the name the first immigrants had optimistically given the foreign land.

The crews of Chea Po and Lee She would have traveled the canyon mostly alone and unseen, except by an occasional homesteader or rancher—or the rustlers who preyed on the ranchers. Their journey took them past three large rivers which drain into the Snake: first, the Grande Ronde from the



Deep Creek at the site of the Chinese camp flows out of cliffs on the Oregon side of Hells Canyon and across a gravel bar into the Snake River. The Chinese victims of the massacre mined on the gravel bar and may have been working when they were ambushed. (Photo by the author)

A five-acre site at Deep Creek has been officially named Chinese Massacre Cove to honor those killed there in 1887. The site extends from a boulder-strewn beach upstream to this sandy beach downstream. Deep Creek bisects the site. (Photo by the author)



west, marking the approximate border between Washington and Oregon; then the Salmon from Idaho; and finally the Imnaha, flowing out of the rugged granite peaks of northeastern Oregon's Willowa Mountains.

Four miles south of the Imnaha, the miners passed Dug Bar, no doubt unaware of its place in history as the crossing point where ten years earlier the legendary Chief Joseph led his band of several hundred Nez Perce in a perilous river crossing after being forced to surrender their northeastern Oregon homeland to white settlers.

WHILE CHEA PO made his camp at Deep Creek about three miles south of Dug Bar, the crew led by Lee She continued another twenty miles upstream to a site known as Salt Creek, where they mined separately from Chea's men at what would prove to be a safe distance from the attack.

According to a 1961 magazine article written by a former Forest Service employee, the late Gerald J. Tucker, Chea's crew uncovered a rich deposit of nuggets and heavy gold flakes along the river bank.⁴ Tucker speculated that, centuries earlier, the river had cut through a vein of gold-bearing quartz somewhere upstream and that the gold had lodged in the crevices of the bedrock where the miners found it. He didn't say how he knew all this. But, if he was right, the Chinese scored a major strike, yielding more than the typical find of tiny particles, called flour gold. It would explain why the Chinese mined in the cove for the next eight months. However much they did find, it cost them their lives.

In 1887, more than thirty Chinese gold miners were massacred on the Oregon side of Hells Canyon, the deepest canyon in North America. *Massacred for Gold*, the first authoritative account of the unsolved crime, unearths the evidence that points to an improbable gang of seven rustlers and schoolboys, one only fifteen, as the killers.

Massacred for Gold traces the author's long personal journey to expose details of the massacre and its aftermath, and to understand how one of the worst of the many crimes committed by whites against Chinese laborers in the American West was for so long lost to history.

Sadly, it took more than one hundred years for someone to give this massacre the relentless attention and indignation it has always deserved, but Greg Nokes has finally done it. There was no justice for the Hells Canyon killers, and there is no lasting monument to the innocent victims, but this honorable book offers the solace that comes with the pursuit of the truth."

—**JIM LYNCH**, author of *The Highest Tide* and *Border Songs*

"Greg Nokes' diligent and persistent historical research creates in *Massacred for Gold* both a local and a national context for the murder of thirty-some Chinese men near Deep Creek, Oregon in the spring of 1887. It also makes clear why all the young murderers went free. Nokes describes two tragedies then, one of rapacity, the other of a community's willful denial of its past. Nokes' book, therefore, is an act of citizenship as much as it is a commendable work of history."

—**BARRY LOPEZ**, author of *Arctic Dreams* and editor of *Home Ground*

R. GREGORY NOKES travelled the world as a reporter and editor for The Associated Press and *The Oregonian*. His reporting has resulted in a formal designation of the massacre site as Chinese Massacre Cove. He earned a BA from Willamette University and attended Harvard University as a Nieman Fellow. Greg and his wife, Candise, live in West Linn, Oregon.

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