

Session title: Defining Citizenship: Idaho's Contested History

Session description: In this session, the presenters will examine different interpretations of citizenship in Idaho's history, focusing on the cultural challenges over the term "citizenship" and how these challenges affected Idaho's views on civil rights and race. Idaho's complicated history regarding race and culture often is masked in traditional accounts, but this session contends that struggles over citizenship in Idaho demonstrate the complexity of race in a state not known for racial diversity. The session will also examine changing ideas of citizenship over time and through generations. Dr. Kevin Marsh (Idaho State University) will investigate how a local Idaho chapter of the Japanese-American Citizens League in southeastern Idaho helped shape identity and citizenship rights for Japanese-Americans in the 20th century. Next, Dr. Amy Canfield (Lewis-Clark State College) will examine the massacre of Chinese miners at Hells Canyon in 1887 to illustrate how racism clouded judicial issues in Idaho's territorial history. Finally, Dr. Jill Gill (Boise State University) will examine Idaho's multifaceted relationship with states' rights and civil rights in the 20th century.

Panel organizer: Dr. Amy Canfield, Lewis-Clark State College, aecanfield@lcsc.edu, 208.792.2362

AV requirements: laptop, projector, screen for PowerPoint slides

Individual presentations

- "Memory, Memorialization, and Justice: The Lessons of a Massacre"

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In the summer of 2012, a memorial stone was unveiled at the site of an 1887 massacre of 34 Chinese miners. The stone was simple in its wording, noting at the end of its four lines that "No one was held accountable" for the murders of these men. This commemoration signifies a large shift in historical memory, especially for Idahoans who have been reluctant to acknowledge the racism and violence within their state's history. When miners brutally murdered Chinese miners and sent some of their massacred bodies down the Snake River, Lewiston, Idaho residents were horrified by the crime. The horror quickly faded as the race of the victims became apparent. One of the murderers later confessed to the killings, but legal authorities were reluctant to get involved in investigating the murders and in fully prosecuting those guilty. The end trial, held for only a minority of the men involved, further underscored the apathy, as the three men charged were found innocent and the violent massacre receded rapidly from historical memory. This presentation will focus on what the massacre reveals about race

relationships and citizenship in the West, since the Chinese Act of 1882 denied citizenship to Chinese immigrants. The combined factors of lack of citizenship and racism contributed not only to the murders themselves and the limited legal action, but also to the historical amnesia that followed. The 2012 commemoration represents a change in historical interpretation, interest, and memory, reflecting a modification of how race and history are remembered.

- “Nisei in East Idaho: The Japanese-American Citizens League and Citizenship in Pocatello and Blackfoot”

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The Japanese-American Citizens League is the central institution defining identity and citizenship rights for second-generation Japanese-Americans in the United States in the twentieth century. Founded in 1929, the JACL held its first convention in Seattle in 1930. Although much scholarship focuses on the role of this national organization in Asian American civil rights, there is much less known about how the many chapters helped to shape identity and citizenship in local communities throughout the Northwest and the country. This is a study of the changing role of the Pocatello-Blackfoot Chapter of the JACL. Founded a month before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Pocatello-Blackfoot Chapter provided a social cohesion for the children of the Japanese immigrant population that first settled in Southeast Idaho in the 1890s. During the war, when the U.S. government incarcerated Japanese families from the Seattle and Portland areas in the Minidoka Internment Camp west of Pocatello, the newly established chapter helped to define the roles and rights for Northwest Nisei who were not in the camps. Through the post-war years and into the Civil Rights Movement, the local chapter of the JACL worked to campaign for civil rights while also maintaining a distinct cultural identity. Based on the archival records of the local chapter, oral histories, and family papers, this is a story of the role of a local institution in shaping the citizenship rights of its members across several generations.

- “The Idaho-Dixiecrat Axis vs. Civil Rights: How States Rights put Idahoans on the Wrong Side of History”

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Idahoans resent their state's image as a haven for racists. Deeming it inaccurate and unfair, they argue that the Aryan Nations comprised mostly outsiders and point to the successful twenty-year struggle of local human rights groups against white supremacy as a truer reflection of the state's racial views. However, long prior to the Aryan Nations' formation in Hayden Lake in 1977, Idaho built a reputation throughout the south as a states-rights ally against civil rights legislation. Firmly established by Senator William Borah through his consistent and powerful opposition to anti-lynching legislation between 1922 and 1940, southern lobby groups later reenergized this relationship by urging Idahoans to pen letters against federal Civil Rights bills in the mid-1960s. Letters poured in to congressional offices overwhelmingly opposed to the proposed bills--and from citizens in a rural state with a population only .02 percent black, and which would be lightly affected by the bills' passage. Idahoans' historical antipathy for the federal government and affection for states' rights, combined with their disconnect from minorities in general, misplaced sense of innocence on racial matters, and unchallenged stereotypes, fueled their alliance with the south. Though some of Idaho's senators and congressmen ignored constituents to vote in favor of civil rights, others helped lead the backlash against that movement. Idaho's reputation as a white flight destination, while heightened by the Aryans, may not root to them. In fact, their founder Richard Butler may have selected Idaho after many visits because he sensed some tolerance for his views.