



Outsiders in "the Land of the Free": Aspects of the Asian-American Experience in the Northwest

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By Roger Daniels

Asian Americans have not fared well in the hands of Pacific Northwest historians. Hubert Howe Bancroft (1832-1918), a noted historian of the Pacific Coast, can be surrogate for several generations of writers. Of Chinese he wrote in 1890 that, "The color of their skins, the repulsiveness of their features, their undersize of figure, their incomprehensible language, strange customs and heathen religion conspired to set them apart..." For several generations Pacific Coast historians largely provided variations of Bancroft's racial and ethnic biases, but we need not be concerned with them here. While few were as hank about their biases as Bancroft had been many of them were advocates of "scientific" history they tended to justify what was done to Asians while at the same time saying very little about them.

This began to change in the 1960s. Here are parallel passages from two scholarly books, the first published in 1948 and the second in 1976, which illustrate the nature of that change. In his *Farthest Frontier: The Pacific Northwest* (1948), Sidney Warren writes in his discussion of territorial Idaho about "the Chinese who had infiltrated into the area to serve as cooks and laundry-men and as gleaners of what the white miners considered exhausted gold veins...." In his 1976 history of Idaho, F. Ross Peterson writes, "An interesting aspect of Idaho gold mining is that by 1870 over one-half of Idaho's miners and one-third of the territory's population were Chinese. The Orientals purchased claims from the less-patient whites and worked them long after the original owners had left." Warren not only used pejorative language whites migrated to Idaho while Chinese "infiltrated" but he had the ecology of Chinese employment all wrong. Most Chinese turned to providing services only after they had been driven from the mines by whites.

Contemporary historians of the Pacific Northwest no longer denigrate Chinese and other Asians and usually give accurate accounts of the persistent discrimination and violence that Asian Americans were subjected to until legal discrimination ended during the civil rights era of the 1960s. But what these historians write about Asian Americans tends to be what I have called "negative history" that is, history that largely recounts what was done to these immigrant peoples and their descendants rather than what they themselves have done. This kind of writing makes Asian Americans objects rather than subjects of history. Of the modern state histories of the Northwest, Gordon Dodds's bicentennial history of Oregon has the most detail about individual Asian Americans and their accomplishments, while the most disappointing is a history of Washington that mentions no Asians by name and does not even refer to the process by which most of the state's Japanese Americans were packed off to internment camps in Idaho, California and Wyoming.

The intent here is not to trudge through those works, volume by volume, to point with pleasure or disdain at what each does or does not say about Asian Americans. The fact of the matter is that what Rose Marie Wong says in her 1994 history of Portland's Chinatown "very little has been written on the history of Oregon's

emigrant Chinese settlement or Portland's first Chinatown" could be applied to most of the Asian American experience in the Pacific Northwest. One is struck, for example, after looking through index after index, by how often one sees the entry , first white woman in" and how rarely one sees "first Chinese woman in" or "first Vietnamese woman in". The one is a part of the canon of western history while the others, presumably, are not.

It would be easy to fill many pages complaining about what hasn't been done, but it would be neither interesting nor profitable to do so. Instead, these pages relate some-thing about a few Pacific Northwest Asian Americans who don't usually get into history books, focusing on members of the two oldest groups: Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans.

Although there were a few Chinese in the New World in the early 17th century, numerically significant Chinese migration did not occur until the 1849 gold rush. Not long after that Chinese began moving north and east from California. According to the 1870 census, there were over 7,800 Chinese in the Northwest, with nearly 2,000 in Montana, and nearly 4,300 in Idaho Territory where they comprised over a quarter of the population. This is the highest incidence of Asians ever recorded in any mainland state or territory. Most of them, and those in neighboring states, were searching for gold, and ways were soon found - legal and otherwise - to drive them out of most mines.

Because most other Americans, red or white, treated the Chinese with contempt when they did not brutalize them, we know very little about the vast majority of these people, except that more than 90 percent of them were men. Few left records in English, and what records existed in Chinese were often discarded as being worthless.

They were, after all, in Bret Harte's phrase, only "heathen Chinese." Harte's experience was in California and Nevada, but it was the same, or worse, in the Northwest. Here is a piece of folk-lore doggerel collected in Seattle, Washington; Jacksonville, Oregon; and Florence, Idaho - all places that had significant Chinese populations. Some find it humorous, but it accurately reflects where the Chinese stood in the frontier pecking order. It was probably sung thus:

Old John Martin Duffy was judge of the court

In a small mining town in the West;

Although he knew nothin' 'bout rules of the law,

At judging he was one of the best.

One night in the winter a murder occurred,

And the blacksmith was accused of the crime ;

We caught him red-handed and gave him three trials

But the verdict was "guilty" each time.

Now he was the only good blacksmith we had

And we wanted to spare him his life ,

So Duffy stood up in court like a lord

And with these words he settled the strife.

"I move we dismiss him he's needed in town."

Then he spoke out these words, which have gained him renown:

"We have two Chinese laundrymen, everyone knows

Let's save this poor blacksmith and hang one of those. "

Although the incident described is clearly apocryphal, John R. Wunder has demonstrated in a series of articles that justice for Chinese in the Northwest was very difficult to obtain, especially in cases involving trial by juries from which Chinese were excluded. Chinese defendants fared somewhat better in federal courts, however.

No atrocity better illustrates the kind of "justice" Chinese immigrants received in the Northwest than the little known "Snake River Massacre" of 1887. In terms of "body count," it was worse than the much better known massacres in Los Angeles (1871) and Rock Springs, Wyoming (1885). Thirty-one Chinese miners were robbed, murdered and mutilated by a white gang in the isolated Hell's Canyon gorge in Oregon. Although the identity of the killers became known, one turned state's evidence and three were actually brought to trial none was convicted. Clearly, folklore's Judge Duffy had real life counterparts. The leading authority on this massacre, Professor David Stratton, illustrates the nonchalance with which some Northwesterners treated the deaths of Chinese by pointing out that a relic of the massacre, a Chinese skull fashioned into a sugar bowl-graced the kitchen table of one ranch home for many years.

Dozens of other Chinese were murdered in the Northwest. In the Puget Sound communities of Seattle and Tacoma anti-Chinese rioting brought federal troops in twice. And it was not just labor radicals and riffraff who were involved. In Tacoma, for example, the mayor, two councilmen, a probate judge and 23 other whites were indicted for conspiracy and insurrection, but no jury could be found to convict them for trying to expel Chinese. Is it any wonder, then, that in the West the phrase "a Chinaman's chance" meant no chance at all? Partly because of the violence and partly due to the lack of economic opportunity, most Chinese abandoned the mining regions where they had been most numerous.

Despite the violence and depopulation, some Chinese endured and left records. More than 30 years ago information came to light about the life of one Chinese immigrant who became a Montana farmer, married a Caucasian woman and won the respect of his neighbors. He was born Sing On somewhere in southern China around 1860. He arrived in Montana Territory in 1873 as a teenager, living first in Helena where he supported himself and attended public school. He moved around Montana before settling in Teton County, where he farmed 480 acres.

In 1879 the Montana Territorial Legislature passed an act changing his name to George Taylor, which he later embellished to George Washington Taylor. In 1890 he married Lena Bloom, a Swedish immigrant; they had seven children - four boys and three girls. In 1917, while his eldest son, Sergeant Albert Henry Taylor of Company D, 2d Montana Regiment, was serving under Pershing on the Mexican border, the Montana legislature sent a petition to Congress asking for a private bill to grant citizenship to the soldier's father. George Taylor was described as an "honorable. ..and upright man opposed to anarchy and polygamy."

Congress took no action on the petition, and there is no further information about the elder Taylor or his family. Everything we know about him like most of what we know about 19th-century Chinese Americans comes from documents generated by others about him. Personal letters and diaries, usually one of the richest sources for the social history of American immigrants, are quite rare. There are some letters from Chinese-American merchants and companies in the archives of the non-Chinese firms with which they dealt. In 1878, for example, WaChong, a Seattle labor contractor, complained to the owner of a large lumber mill about the treatment of Chinese workmen furnished by WaChong:

The Chinamen in your employ complain bitterly of the usage they receive from the hands of some of your men, more particularly at the hands of the mate of [your] steamer Blakely. We have had during the past year over 50 men at Port Gamble and have had no complaints whatever. We write to you in person about this trouble, feeling that you are not aware of the abuse our men are receiving at the hands of these other workmen. Chinamen have feelings and know when they are properly used. The men sent to wood up the Blakely last evening took their coats off on the steamer and could not find them afterwards. No doubt they were hidden or thrown overboard by the white men please see about the matter.

The surviving records do not tell us whether or how the matter was handled, but WaChong continued to do business with the mill.

Until recently no one was interested in recording the history or collecting the papers of Asian immigrants the technology that has made massive oral history projects possible was not developed until after World War II. But in 1943-44, Rose Hum Lee, a Chinese-American sociologist, interviewed old-timers in her home town of Butte, Montana, as part the research for her University of Chicago doctoral dissertation. The Butte Chinatown was once the biggest east of the Rockies: in 1880, 21 percent of the town's 3,363 residents were Chinese. A steep pattern of decline followed in Butte; by 1940 the 88 Chinese left in Butte were 0.2 percent of the city's population.

Like almost everyone else drawn to Butte, it was mining that attracted the Chinese. But in 1883 the Montana Territorial Supreme Court ruled that all mining claims held by "aliens ineligible to citizenship" that is, Chinese or other Asians" were void. Many Chinese then left, but others stayed, often entering service trades, particularly laundries and restaurants that catered to the general population. When the anti-Chinese movement leaders in Butte set up a boycott and established picket lines around Chinese businesses, the owners pooled their money and hired a prominent Caucasian attorney. They won their case and, as one of the businessmen remembered exultantly,

We won the lawsuit after many hearings. When the Six Companies in San Francisco heard of the decision, they said, "The Butte Chinese are the smartest anywhere in the United States." We had no idea we would win...but if we had not, none of us would be here today.

There is much of interest in Lee's work, but her interviews with "the oldest woman in Butte's Chinatown" are the most fascinating. They comprise one of the few firsthand accounts we have of the life of an upper class Chinese-American woman of the period:

When I came to America as a bride, I never knew I would be coming to a prison. Until the [1910-11] Revolution I was allowed out of the house but once a year. That was during New Years when families exchanged...calls and feasts. We would dress in our long plaited, hand-embroidered skirts. These were a part of our wedding dowry brought from China. Over these we wore long, sleeved short satin or damask jackets. We wore all of our jewelry and put jeweled ornaments in our hair. The father of my children hired a closed carriage to take me and the children calling. Of course, he did not go with us, as this was against the custom practiced in China. The carriage waited until we were ready to leave, which would be hours later, for

the women saw each other so seldom that we talked and reviewed all that went on since we saw each other. Before we went out of the house, we sent the children to see if the streets were clear of men. If we did have to walk out when men were on the streets we hid our faces behind our silk fans and hurried by....

The women were always glad to see each other; we exchanged news of our families and friends in China. We admired each other's clothes and jewels. As we ate separately from the men, we talked about things that concerned women. When the New Year festivals were over, we would put away our clothes and take them out when another feast was held. Sometimes we went to a feast when a baby born into a family association was one month old. Otherwise we seldom visited each other; it was considered immodest to be seen too many times during the year. After the Revolution in China, I heard that women there were free to go out. When the father of my children cut his queue [pigtail] he adopted new habits: I discarded my Chinese clothes and began to wear American clothes. By that time my children were going to American schools and could speak English, and they helped me buy what I needed. Gradually the other women followed my example. We began to go out more frequently and since then I go out all the time.

Despite what is usually said about the uniqueness of the Asian-American experience, her story is in many ways typically American: an immigrant woman is helped in acculturating to American life by her children who have been molded in the public schools.

During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943, while the Chinese presence in the Northwest and in the nation as a whole shrank in both absolute and relative numbers, the Japanese-American presence grew. After most Chinese immigration had been cut off in 1882, thousands of Japanese immigrants came to the Northwest. The Japanese-American population grew steadily in the region until 1940. By that time there were nearly 20,000 Japanese Americans in the Northwest, some two-thirds of them native-born American citizens. Nearly 15,000 lived in Washington, another 4,000 in Oregon, while just over 1,000 lived in Idaho. Two years later there were some 10,000 Japanese Americans in Idaho, most of them former Washingtonians confined in the Minidoka internment camp. Since Japanese came in this century and a few pioneers are still alive, it is easier to hear their voices. And although many Japanese-American historical documents and artifacts were destroyed in fear and anger after Pearl Harbor, the lives of the Japanese pioneers can be much more easily documented than those of their Chinese predecessors.

Highlighted here are two Northwestern Japanese-American communities - Seattle, Washington, and Hood River, Oregon - which represent the urban and rural aspects of the Japanese immigrants' ecology. Seattle was the second city of mainland Japanese America, trailing only Los Angeles during most of the pre-World War II era. In 1940 it was home for nearly 7,000 Japanese Americans, making them by far the largest prewar racial minority in Seattle. Most lived in a thriving Nihonmachi (Japan-town), centered on Jackson, Main and Washington streets, just east of Union Station. Many of Seattle's Japanese engaged in small businesses, marketing the produce of Japanese farmers and fishermen; Japanese entrepreneurs operated 64 stalls in Pike Place Market. Japanese in Seattle operated 183 hotels and had all of the "red cap" jobs at Union Station. The city's early Japanese population had been heavily male - nearly 30 to 1 in 1900 - but by 1940 it was largely composed of family units, although there were still 123 males for every 100 females.

In many ways Japanese did well in Seattle. By the end of the 1930s most Japanese-American families there were at least in the lower reaches of the middle class and were excelling in education. In 1937, for example, when Seattle had nine high schools, Nisei, second-generation Japanese Americans, were valedictorians in three and salutatorians in two of them. But, as Quintard Taylor has shown us in a stunning essay, it was always clear that whites held the upper hand. Nisei high school and college graduates had to take jobs within the ethnic economy or leave the region to get appropriate employment.

Many of the Seattle Nisei were a feisty bunch. In 1921 a congressional committee investigating "Japanese immigration" visited the city and heard from, among others, 17-year-old Nisei schoolboy James Sakamoto. In his testimony he seems typically American, cocky and bright; in fact, many of the community elders thought his performance disgraceful. Here is part of a colloquy between the teenager and a Colorado congressman:

Congressman: Well, you know that you are claimed as a citizen by Japan and also by the United States?

Sakamoto: I don't care. I was born here.

Congressman: Is it your intention to remain an American citizen [or] be a Japanese citizen? Sakamoto: Why should I not remain an American citizen? I was born here, and why should I go back there? This is my home.

Congressman: You intend to remain an American citizen?

Sakamoto: Well, nobody is going to stop me.

And no one did stop him. Sakamoto remained an American citizen until he died in 1955. But neither his citizenship nor the aggressive brand of Americanism he espoused in his newspaper, the Japanese American Courier, prevented his wartime removal and detention along with most other Seattle Japanese-Americans.

The Japanese Americans of Hood River led a very different kind of life. Hood River is the center of a secluded valley with 1,400 fertile acres of pear and apple orchards. One of the Northwest's most prosperous Japanese-American communities evolved there. By 1940 it had 462 residents recorded as "Japanese" during the census 162 of them immigrants, what Japanese Americans call "Issei," and the other 300 their American-born children. One of the latter, Minoru Yasui, a son of the leading Japanese-American family, bragged to a friendly Portland newspaperman in 1940: "Today the Japanese of Hood River County produce an annual crop of \$500,000. This includes 90 percent of the country's asparagus, 80 percent of the strawberries, 35 percent of the pears and 20 percent of the apples."

The following year Yasui was the first Nisei graduate of the University of Oregon law school, but less than a year later, on March 28, 1942, he was behind bars in Portland's Second Avenue police station. He was there because he had deliberately challenged the 8:00 PM to 6:00 AM curfew that the army had promulgated for all persons of Japanese origin the army liked to phrase that "aliens and non-aliens alike" on the West Coast. Yasui just could not believe, as one who had studied and practiced law, that American courts would uphold such an order against American citizens; he soon learned otherwise. He was convicted of curfew violation in Oregon's federal district court; his conviction was sustained by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and, what was particularly galling to Yasui, the Supreme Court never formally ruled on his case, even though he was the first Japanese American to test the constitutionality of the government's wartime restrictions on Japanese-American citizens. Instead, he was relegated to a footnote in Seattleite Gordon Hirabayashi's more celebrated case.

Hood River became infamous after November 29, 1944, because the local American Legion post had removed the names of 16 Nisei soldiers from the "honor roll" on the east wall of the county courthouse. A little over a month later one of those men, Frank Hachiya, was killed in action and awarded the Silver Star. When Life and other magazines publicized what the Legion post had done, a critical furor erupted and the names were restored a few weeks later.

But a partially successful campaign to keep Japanese Americans from returning to their former homes in Hood River went on for months; only 40 percent of the prewar population returned there, as opposed to nearly 70 percent for Oregon as a whole. Min Yasui, for example, resettled in Denver. A tanka'a traditional form of Japanese poetry written by Mrs. Shizue Iwatsuki may be translated:

He was kind to us before

But now the shopkeeper

Nervously refuses to serve us.

Most of those who returned to Hood River were able to put the pieces of their interrupted lives together. A few years ago, in the mid 1980s, a Hood River Sansei (third generation Japanese American), Professor Linda Tamura of Willamette University, began tape-recording interviews with the surviving Hood River Issei, including her own grandparents. Her maternal grandmother, born in 1897 in Hiroshima, came to the United States as a picture bride in 1916. Of the traumatic 1945 return from Minidoka, she recalled:

In spite of rumors of intense discrimination, Papa was determined to return no matter what, because our son Sat was there. Almost everyone we knew discouraged Papa, warning that strong anti-Japanese feelings made our return much too dangerous. But Papa was determined to return, so my daughter and I had no choice but to accompany him. We were one of the first to leave, so our friends warned us to be careful. We were so frightened! I jumped at every sound! Even at night, I did not sleep well. We were not afraid of anyone in particular it was just a general feeling of insecurity. Whenever we saw a stranger, we were unduly alarmed for we did not know what to expect....As it turned out, nothing really happened, and we were grateful.

When Linda asked her grandmother to characterize her life experience, Asayo Noji spoke for her generation:

Issei have gone through extremely difficult times. Everything in this country was different from language to food to manners....Surviving...and having raised our children, those difficult times are now in the backs of our minds. There are those who were able to withstand the rigors of difficult times, and, of course, there were those who were not. I would say that when we immigrated here, Issei were determined to work hard and succeed. They were probably driven by a desire not to tarnish the Japanese image. We had come from so far away that we wanted to give our best efforts.

Their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren are now accepted in American society to a degree that was unimaginable half a century ago. And, to be sure, the first generations of later-arriving immigrant groups from Asia have much less overt hostility to face, and, at the moment, no discriminatory legislation to endure. But they, like all immigrants, are outsiders in a country where everything or almost everything is different, and, like all persons of color, they live in a society in which the inarticulate major cultural premise is that "normal" people are white. Asian-American Northwesterners in the foreseeable future will surely not meet the intensity of prejudice that their predecessors endured, but they will doubtless encounter both overt and covert discrimination, even if existing policies continue.

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