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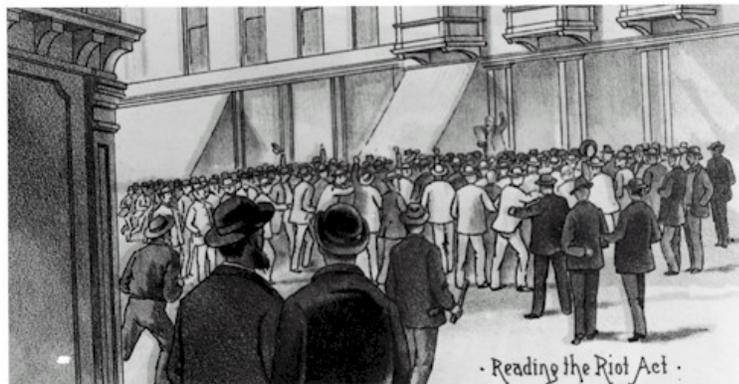
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Run Out on the Rails They Built

By David Jepsen

In 1885, nine-year-old Ruby Chapin was horrified by events around her. Chapin, whose family had moved from New York to Tacoma two years earlier, did not understand why her Chinese neighbors were being forced at gunpoint to leave town, their homes burned and businesses destroyed. Later Ruby wrote that it was the "most unpleasant experience" of her childhood.¹ The young girl witnessed one of the more notorious ethnic-related incidences in the history of the Washington territory -- the expulsion of hundreds of Chinese residents from the city of Tacoma, which eventually became known as the "Tacoma Method."

Anti-Chinese activity was not unique to Tacoma. It occurred throughout the West in the last three decades of the nineteenth century.² Nor was it confined to citizens. The Federal Government had a role too. In May 1882, Congress, responding to pressure from unions, passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. This treaty with the Chinese Government banned Chinese emigrants from entering America and called for the deportation of any who arrived after 1880. Authors of the bill claimed the presence of Chinese people endangered "the good order" of U.S. territories.³

The question for history students today is why. Why were Chinese singled out for expulsion?

In the 1870s, Chinese made headway in California fishing. But white-led fishery groups were threatened by Chinese success. They pressed the government for new laws banning the exportation of the Chinese catch. "Harassed and threatened, the Chinese largely surrendered the fishing business to whites," historian Richard White wrote.⁴

Sometimes the differences were cultural. The fact that some Chinese were reluctant to abandon their own traditions and accept western culture increased the tension. With their hair bound tight in long pigtails and clad in traditional Chinese dress, they became targets of suspicion and ridicule. Even a sympathetic Ruby Chapin wrote that the Chinese "looked very queer, with a pigtail that hung down their backs."⁵

By the mid 1870s, "anti-coolie clubs" began to organize throughout much of the West. Their chief aim was to ban the use of Chinese labor and boycott Chinese-made goods. A slow burn of resentment ignited in 1885 when attacks against Chinese occurred in California, Wyoming, Idaho and the Washington Territory. The terrorizing of Chinese in Tacoma in November was followed by a similar outburst in Seattle in February 1886.



The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was one of the first pieces of legislation passed by the United States government to legally discriminate against the Chinese people. While it banned emigration for 10 years, its powers would be extended by the Geary Act of 1892.

[click to zoom >](#)



The Apex cannery in Anacortes, Washington employed Asian-American workers to assist in canning salmon. The image above was taken in 1913 by photographer Asahel Curtis.

[click to zoom >](#)



In March, 1886, West Shore magazine dramatized the events in Seattle, publishing a series of images depicting the riots.

[click to zoom >](#)

Using that string of violence for context, we return to the "why" question. Why were the Chinese the target of a level of hate considered extreme even by nineteenth-century standards? It likely wasn't the fact they were immigrants, because most whites themselves had recently come from Europe. Nor can we blame it on skin color. While all non-white people were victimized to some degree, the legalized expulsion of Chinese people was distinctive.

“Why were the Chinese the target of a hate considered extreme even by 19th century standards?”

Richard White argues that economic competition, racism and class issues fueled white anger. As long as Chinese were content with jobs few white men wanted, then the whites ignored them. But as soon as Chinese landed better jobs or ventured into more attractive industries then trouble brewed, especially during hard economic times. Whites feared employers would use the Chinese to drive down wages and reduce whites to a status no higher than that of the Chinese workers themselves.⁶

White people's paranoia is clear in the writing of a Tacoma city official who participated in the expulsion. James Wickersham, who later became a delegate for the Alaskan Territory, echoed white fears. In a 1916 letter, he expressed his worries about "being confronted by millions of industrious hard-working" Chinese, who would outdo their white neighbors and "gain possession of the Pacific coast of America."⁷

There were those who argued against expulsion, however. For example, the *New York Times* reported that Massachusetts Senator George F. Hoar argued the bill was advocated "by men inspired by old race prejudice." Hoar also based his argument in the belief that the immigration ban would violate the Burlingame Treaty between the U.S. and China of 1869 that promoted free migration and trade.⁸

1. Ruby Chapin Blackwell. *A Girl in Washington Territory*. Tacoma: Washington State Historical Society, 1972, 21.

2. The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, Chinese Exclusion Act; May 6, 1882. .

3. Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. 283.

4. *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 307.

5. *A Girl in Washington Territory*, 20.

6. *Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 242-3.

7. James Wickersham to Herbert Hunt, April 21, 1916, 2.