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## THE ANTI-CHINESE MOVEMENT IN LOS ANGELES

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An exact date of the arrival of the Chinese in California can not be pinpointed, but data indicates their presence as early as the 1840s. City of Los Angeles records show that in 1850 there were two natives of China present in Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup> The presence of non-Europeans was not new for Californians, but the unwanted arrival of the Chinese created a sentiment of hatred and racial prejudice. The rapid increase in the numbers of immigrants from China to California cities over the next three decades caused added animosity, increased the repugnance felt towards them, and spurred a move against them. From its origins to exclusion, the anti-Chinese movement in Los Angeles was greatly affected by local and federal regulations and had a profound effect on economic and social aspects of the city.

The anti-Chinese movement in Los Angeles was the consequence of a complex amalgamation, of economic, social, and political catalysts that resulted in decades of harassment and prejudice towards the Chinese. The effects of these derogatory actions were often received by the afflicted race in a violent or destructive manner. The resentment harbored against them created the driving force behind laws that restricted, eventually excluded, and significantly altered the federal government's role. Prior to the signing of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the United States Congress supported by the Supreme Court, consistently halted the enactment of state and local ordinances and laws. This modification of policy by the federal government was influenced considerably by Western states and was a sign of changing times in America.

The increased immigration of Chinese into California coincided with the Civil War and the end of slavery. The cessation of the enslavement of African-Americans not only caused a demand for cheap labor in America, but it also created an atmosphere that was

antagonistic towards forced servitude. The arrival of men from China both filled a much-needed void and spawned another problem. While they provided cheap labor, the manner in which they did closely resembled slavery for many.<sup>2</sup> The concept of Chinese Coolieism, which was similar to indentured servitude and not widely practiced, caused many Californians to protest against their presence.

The Opium War, which occurred much earlier in China, provoked Americans to develop negative feelings due to the stereotype that all Chinese were addicted to opium. The war and subsequent expansion by the West revealed many things about the Middle Kingdom including the widespread corruption and the horrors of the Coolie Trade. Furthermore, the ongoing Taiping Rebellion in their homeland caused factionalism amongst the Chinese in California and promoted derogatory feelings. Additionally, the rise of labor unions in Los Angeles provided a united front for disgruntled Anglo employees being replaced by Chinese laborers.

Historians vary in their opinion as to the origins of the anti-Chinese movement, but the central themes throughout scholarly thought focus on labor and racial issues. Chinese historian Rose Hum Lee places importance on the Burlingame Treaty of 1868 and on the 1876 presidential platforms promising legislature to supersede the treaty.<sup>3</sup> Another viewpoint offered by noted historian Elmer Sandmeyer details his contention that Coolie labor served as the foundation of the movement.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, historian Clayton D. Laurie summarizes the origins of the movement in his belief that racial differences and labor competition caused the spread of "yellow peril," which was the fear of the effects of Chinese immigration.<sup>5</sup> Another prominent historian, Sucheng Chan, concentrated on the impact the movement had on women, and she detailed the decrease in population caused by the Page Law.<sup>6</sup> These historians and others have contributed considerably to the scholastic work focused on the anti-Chinese movement in California and its origins.

The origins of the anti-Chinese movement in Los Angeles can be grouped into three categories; these consist of the economic, social, and political aspects. All three facets greatly affected Anglo-Chinese relations, but financial concerns often took precedence.

The economic origins of the movement focused on low wages for which Chinese laborers were willing to work for and also on their low standard of living. The wages an employer paid natives of China were considerably less than that of other laborers. This situation created animosity between the Chinese and other potential workers. According to historian Raymond Lou, "...the Chinese were said to upset the precarious balance of demand and supply that had been established between workers and employer which, prior to mass immigration from Asia, favored the worker."<sup>7</sup> Closely associated with this problem was the low standard of living by which the Chinese survived on. The low level of subsistence allowed them to tolerate their meager wages.

Although most in California were against the Chinese laborer, there did exist a group

who favored them. Employers consistently sided with the foreign laborers because they were a financial asset. Historian Elmer Clarence Sandmeyer asserts that, "With few exceptions employers considered them beneficial as a flexible supply of labor, cheap, submissive, and efficient..."<sup>8</sup> The support of the employers did little to stem the movement or provide help in other aspects of their life.

In addition to the economic origins, social differences were at the foundation of anti-Chinese sentiment. Social problems consisted of prostitution, gambling, and cultural differences which impacted the area of immigration. Among these issues, residents of Los Angeles viewed cultural differences as an imposing wedge between the two societies.

The Chinese in the city were easily identifiable due to their dress, language, and food. Furthermore, their religious practices were an area of grave concern for many in Los Angeles. In particular, the complex blend of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism caused great confusion amongst those who interacted with the Chinese. Additionally, the persistence of the Chinese in keeping their native language and other social customs intact created an air of unconformity that differentiated them from other immigrants.<sup>9</sup> These differences can especially be seen in the area of gambling.

The residents of Los Angeles and of California were forced to deal with the Chinese inclination to gamble. A *Los Angeles Times* article illustrated the frequency of gambling in Chinatown. The newspaper cited that in one day there were twenty-nine tan games and twenty-six lottery games. The total for a month's worth of these games totaled five thousand dollars.<sup>10</sup> The evils of the dreaded practice had profound effects on both the American and Chinese communities. The residents of Los Angeles viewed gambling strictly as a moral issue, but the effects of these games of chance on natives of China were significantly different. In all contests involving betting there is a loser and a winner, and in Chinatown the disparity that existed between the two groups caused significant social conflict. Noted historian Gunther Barth illustrates the problem, "While merchants and professional gamblers grew steadily richer from the profits which these means of escape in Chinatown produced, the picture of the losing indentured emigrant appeared again and again."<sup>11</sup> Gambling, with all of its problems, was still overshadowed by the larger and more despised vice of prostitution.

No other issue upset the Anglo-Chinese relationship more than prostitution. The residents of Los Angeles despised the age-old practice and viewed the women who were involved as slaves. The expansive nature of the problem is discussed by Sandmeyer who states, "It was charged that there was not a single home, in the American sense, among all on the coast, and that of the four thousand Chinese women in the state all were either prostitutes or concubines."<sup>12</sup> The negative nature of this depiction resembles the sentiment of many in Los Angeles and illustrates the hatred felt towards harlotry. The feelings of detestation harbored by many in Los Angeles and in California caused the social establish-

ment to turn to political channels to address the problem of prostitution and its enslaved women.

Political origins of the movement against the Chinese can be seen as early as the 1850s in California. Consistently from this early date residents of Los Angeles and of the state attempted to use politics to affect Chinese immigration and eventually took aim at their right to be in the United States. In a 1858 document entitled, "An Act to Prevent the Further Immigration of Chinese or Mongolians to This State [California]," citizens sought to end Chinese immigration.<sup>13</sup> The movement against the immigration of men and women from the Middle Kingdom was stymied somewhat by the Burlingame Treaty of 1858. The accord between the United States and China "recognized the right of free migration and emigration of the citizens of both countries, with the exception of naturalization."<sup>14</sup> The treaty's most profound effect was the negating power it imposed upon legislation and ordinances passed to limit or end Chinese immigration. Furthermore, the Page Law of 1875 sought to end the immigration of Chinese contract laborers, and women for the purpose of prostitution.<sup>15</sup> The relationship between federal mandates, such as the Page Law, and local ordinances will be discussed later in this paper.

The physical and social base of the Chinese community was found in Chinatown, but so were motives for hatred. This densely populated area of Los Angeles was initially located in the heart of the city; however, the hatred of municipal residents created a force wishing to drive the Chinese out of the nucleus. In 1871 the Chinese population was forced to move out of the core of the city and relocate on its outskirts.<sup>16</sup> The causes vary, but the belief that the Chinese were dirty and disease-ridden people was prominent. The Chinese were perceived by many as unsanitary and as described by a *Los Angeles Times* article, "... never dreams of observing even the simplest sanitary rules. He knows nothing of them and does not care to learn."<sup>17</sup> It was believed by the Anglo society that the problem with cleanliness caused diseases to fester and brought illness and death to many in and out of Chinatown. Sandmeyer concludes:

*In addition to the stench, filth, crowding, and general dilapidation with which Chinatown was accused of afflicting the community, another serious charge was made that the Chinese were introducing foreign diseases among the whites. For instance, both civil and medical authorities claimed that Chinese men and women were afflicted with venereal diseases to an uncommon degree.*<sup>18</sup>

The fear of disease and the dislike of the Chinese way of life caused state and local governments to become active in the lives of the residents of Chinatown.

Inhabitants of Los Angeles and of California, having been forced to act, reached out to the political arena for help. As chronicled earlier, citizens of the state looked to prevent Chinese immigration as early as the 1850s. In addition to the 1858 act mentioned above, the state acted in other ways that were less governmental and more social in nature. For

example, on the fourth of February 1886, the first state convention of the “Anti-Chinese Leagues” began its deliberation. The gathering established the “California Non-partisan Anti-Chinese Association,” and resolved that, “we regard the Chinese among us as a mental, physical, moral, and financial evil.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, those convening called for the establishment of committees at local levels whose members would work collectively for the expulsion of the Chinese and who would also abstain from doing business with them.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, California pursued legislative endeavors aimed at controlling Chinese immigration. Due to its discriminatory nature, the adoption of the 1879 constitution illustrated the state’s determination to control natives of China. According to historian William L. Tung, the document, “contained many discriminatory provisions against the Chinese, including the prohibition of further immigration of Chinese laborers, their removal outside the limits of certain cities and towns, and their relocation within prescribed portions of those limits.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, section three of the document explicitly excludes Chinese from, “... being employed by any State, County, municipal, or other public work, except in punishment for crime.”<sup>22</sup> The state’s coordination of social and legislative processes allowed for the facilitation of their ideas; however, cooperation with local governments enabled the enactment of its policies.

The municipalities of California actively participated in the anti-Chinese movement and in many instances took the lead in the development of methodology. Los Angeles, as well as many other cities, looked at the issue in specific terms on the basis of how individual citizens were affected. In April of 1882 the city council authored an ordinance advocating the exclusion of Chinese from Los Angeles’s fire limits. This action was a direct response of resident’s concerns focused on the “evils” of Chinatown.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, as focal points shifted, urban centers retailored their areas of interests to cater to the societal shift. As priority in the 1880s shifted from exclusion to boycott, local governments responded. According to the *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, “An Anti-Chinese meeting, under the auspices of the White Cigar Makers Association was held...” This gathering called for, “...all railroads of the Pacific Coast to discharge their Chinese employees.”<sup>24</sup> Los Angeles’s response to this shift can also be seen in the development of a Workingmen’s Club in March of 1885.<sup>25</sup> The development of this organization lends itself to the labor movement in the city, an area that will be discussed later. Coinciding with the cooperation and coordination among the states and municipalities was the realization of the important and often impeding role the federal government performed.

Until the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the presence of the central government, especially the Supreme Court, was an encumbering nuisance to the anti-Chinese movement in California. The federal bureaucracy created significant problems concerning the implementation of ordinances and laws that were aimed at the Chinese or that attempted to exclude them. According to Sandmeyer, the Fourteenth Amendment, the

Burlingame Treaty, and the Civil Rights Act were all integral in thwarting attempts by state and local governments. The United States Circuit Court ruled in 1879 that section two of the California Constitution, and a coinciding act passed to enforce it, were unconstitutional based on the Burlingame Treaty and the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, in 1882, Los Angeles city attorney H. T. Hazard stated his belief that an ordinance passed by the city council was invalid based on the federally mandated Burlingame treaty.<sup>27</sup> These and other rulings of negation permeated the federal government in regards to the anti-Chinese movement in California prior to the federal 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

The function of the federal government in the move against the Chinese drastically changed with the 1882 Exclusion Act. In the period preceding the exclusionary legislation the Chinese were sheltered by federal documents, but the afflicted race soon lost all protection. The issue of excluding natives of China not only affected those being expelled but also divided United States citizens. Those in California, who were most affected by the presence of the Chinese, became bitter towards those in the East, who were reluctant to accept exclusion. According to historian David J. Hellwig, "The dramatic shift in United States immigration policy embodied in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibiting entry of Chinese laborers was preceded by lengthy, emotional, and occasionally violent debates."<sup>28</sup> As the political and social climate on the West Coast became more volatile, Chinese Americans began to trek across the Rocky Mountains and migrate East. Author Andrew Gyory explains the move by stating, "This looming wave of migration aroused the interest of wealthy society women in the East. To them the newcomers represented a solution to a vexing problem: the Chinese would 'supplant... the incompetent order of servants who have long cursed our cities.'"<sup>29</sup> The migration of Chinese to the urban centers on the East Coast caused the first full-fledged anti-Chinese meeting East of the Continental Divide to convene on March 15, 1880.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the movement of the Chinese eastward created an extension of the anti-Chinese movement to uncharted territory. This expansion of anti-Chinese sentiment caused the signing of the Chinese Exclusion Act by President Chester A. Arthur on May 6, 1882. The following report in the *Los Angeles Daily Times* summarized the popular view of most in the city. The newspaper stated:

*As we have all the time persistently asserted would be the case, the President has signed the new bill for checking Chinese immigration. We congratulate our fellow-citizens thereupon, and hereby tender to our Senators and Representatives the thanks of their Pacific Coast constituency for their efforts in support of the bill for our relief.<sup>31</sup>*

The long and tumultuous expedition to forbid the continued arrivals of the Chinese was accomplished, but many questions remained to be answered, including the dispute over Chinese laborers.

The issue of labor has consistently been at the heart of the Chinese question from its

inception. From their arrival in California, the Chinese laborer worked hard and was able to sustain themselves on meager wages. The query of whether the Chinese took jobs away from white laborers, or if they filled a much-needed void, has been consistently asked. Historians suggest that no clear-cut answer can be found but stress that in most cases from the beginning of their presence in California, the Chinese were satisfying a need. According to Sandmeyer:

*Many employers welcomed the Chinese laborer because his low wage scale enabled them to inaugurate undertakings which otherwise might not have been able to compete with older establishments in the East. Others claimed that white labor was not available, while some insisted that the Chinese created additional labor for the whites, of a higher grade than that done by the Chinese.”<sup>32</sup>*

The early role that the Chinese filled was only one aspect of the Chinese labor question.

Another facet related to labor involved the use of Coolies, which consisted of a native of China being transported to California for no charge in return for a certain number of years of servitude. Residents of the state had significant problems with the system because most believed they could not compete with laborers who worked for almost nothing. Sandmeyer summarizes the situation when he quotes a student of the problem, “There is no doubt that the greater part of the Chinese emigration to California was financed and controlled by merchant brokers, acting either independently or through Trading Guilds.”<sup>33</sup> American workers rallied around the issue of Coolieism; however, the practice was not used extensively after the initial decade of Chinese immigration to California. The mobilization of workers against the system created the need for and the existence of labor unions.

Labor unions rose out of the anti-Coolie sentiment and created a linkage unit for the laborers being affected by the quasi-slavery system. The rise of unions in Los Angeles, as a result of the move against the Chinese Coolie, occurred after 1870, and gave rise to the Anti-Coolie Club. The Workingmen’s Club was formed in March of 1885 in Los Angeles and eventually became known as the Anti-Chinese Union.<sup>34</sup> Labor unions were politicized as the Workingmen’s Party came to prominence in the late 1870s and 1880s. Furthermore, the Workingmen’s Party as well as various unions created the framework needed to push for a boycott of Chinese products and labor in 1886.

The move to refrain from purchasing labor or products from natives of China was a collaborated effort to hurt the Chinese financially thus forcing them to leave the state. The *Los Angeles Times* in February of 1886 reported that the Trades Council of Los Angeles met and resolved:

*That we the citizens of Los Angeles, in mass meeting assembled, hereby pledge ourselves that from and after the 1<sup>st</sup> day of May next that we will discontinue the patronage of the Chinese vegetable gardens, the Chinese laundries, restaurants,*

*hotels, and other establishments where Chinese are established.*<sup>35</sup>

However, the newspaper opposed the boycott and stated:

*The idea that these laborers, who permeate, and in some cases dominate our industries, can be got rid of at once, is impractical. The white labor necessary to take the place of the displaced Mongols must be on the spot when the time comes for making the proposed change, or many of our important industries suffer, our prosperity languish.*<sup>36</sup>

The replacement of Chinese laborers with white workers often resulted in futility, and these failures, along with the departure of many Chinese to work elsewhere and the demise of the Workingmen's Party, led to the downfall of the boycott movement in Los Angeles.<sup>37</sup>

The anti-Chinese movement in Los Angeles lasted for over two decades and resulted in riots, demonstrations, and many acts of racial violence. From its inception, the anti-Chinese movement in Los Angeles was marred by irresponsible behavior. Furthermore, the city became the home of the first sizable mob riot on the Pacific Coast. The disturbance occurred on 24 October 1871 and was the result of a fight between two rival Chinese gangs. The situation turned sour when a civilian was fatally wounded and two police officers were injured. Historian S. W. Kung highlights the events by stating, "In the course of a few minutes, Chinatown was stormed by a large mob. Houses were burned, movable property was carried away, and at least eighteen persons were killed—all within four hours."<sup>38</sup> As the years passed, the relationship between the Chinese and residents of Los Angeles improved, but was still susceptible to violence and thuggery. Periodic demonstrations occurred in support of the Workingmen's Party or some other group, but the majority of the actions were peaceful in nature. The ironic coexistence of the two groups came to a head in July 1887 when Chinatown was set on fire, and evidence exposed the possibility of arson. The situation was further exacerbated by the accusation that the fire department purposely responded in a negligent manner. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, "The fire was started at three or four points, and from the attempt that was made a few weeks ago, it is very certain that the plan of the persons who started it were well matured." The article continues:

*It [the fire] was under good headway when the fire department arrived, and from the actions of quite a number who watched the fireman closely, there is strong suspicion that the hose would have been cut had the firemen showed a very decided desire to get the fire under control too soon.*<sup>39</sup>

In the days following the fire allegations were made, and the Fire Commissioner refuted them by stating that no evidence existed to suggest that the fire department was to blame. Concern about the incident would pass with time, but the residents of Chinatown were forced to deal with the loss of about \$50,000 worth of damages.<sup>40</sup> In the usual manner of the day the Chinese had no recourse for actions taken against them, even when evidence

existed to support their claims.

The anti-Chinese movement in Los Angeles spanned over a quarter of a century and had a significant effect on the city and its residents. The origins of the move against natives of China included a combination of economic, social, and political stimuli, and transformed Anglo-Chinese relations considerably. The movement was greatly affected by the federal government, and also had a profound effect on the role of the federal government in state and local affairs. Evidence of this can be found in the Supreme Court and the rulings it issued to shelter the Chinese from the various ordinances and laws passed to harm them, and also in the Exclusion Act of 1882, which stripped them of this protection. The issue of labor was persistently at the forefront of Anglo-Chinese agitation, and led to the boycott of 1886. The brunt of the anti-Chinese movement was felt in Chinatown, where the physical and social structures were profoundly changed due to the racist and often violent nature of the movement. The move against the natives of China influenced economic, social, and political aspects in Los Angeles and profoundly altered Anglo-Chinese relationship as well as the relationship between state, local, and federal governments.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Raymond Lou, *The Chinese American Community of Los Angeles, 1870-1900: A Case of Resistance, Organization, and Participation* (Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Irvine, 1982), 17.

<sup>2</sup>Lou, 97.

<sup>3</sup>Rose Hum Lee, *The Chinese in the United States of America* (Hong Kong: Cathay Press, 1960), 12.

<sup>4</sup>Elmer Clarence Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 47.

<sup>5</sup>Clayton D. Laurie, "The Chinese Must Go," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (1990): 23.

<sup>6</sup>Sucheng Chan, "The Exclusion of Chinese Women, 1870-1943," *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (1994), 75.

<sup>7</sup>Lou, 81.

<sup>8</sup>Sandmeyer, 33.

<sup>9</sup>Lee, 278-9.

<sup>10</sup>"At Last: Camping on the Trail of the Gamblers," *Los Angeles Times* 12 June 1888, p.1.

<sup>11</sup>Gunther Barth, *Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850-1870* (Cambridge: University of Harvard Press, 1964), 127.

<sup>12</sup>Sandmeyer, 34.

<sup>13</sup>William L. Tung, *The Chinese in America, 1820-1973* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana Publications, 1974), 53.

<sup>14</sup>Tung, 11

<sup>15</sup>Chan, 85.

<sup>16</sup>"Chinatown: It will No Longer Be a Central Eyesore," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 March 1887, p.3.

<sup>17</sup>"The Heathen Chinese." *Los Angeles Daily Times*, 8 December 1881, p.3.

<sup>18</sup>Sandmeyer, 37.

<sup>19</sup>"Down on John: The Anti-Coolie Convention at San Jose," *Los Angeles Daily Times*, 5 February 1886, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Tung, 15.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 57.

<sup>23</sup>"Chinatown: The Proposed Ordinance Contradicts the Treaty Only," *Los Angeles Daily Times*, 2 May 1882, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup>"Anti-Chinese Meeting," *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, 7 March, 1886, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup>*An 1886 Chinese Labor Boycott in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Castle Press, [1982]), 1.

<sup>26</sup>Sandmeyer, 13.

<sup>27</sup>"Chinatown: The Proposed Ordinance Contradicts the Treaty Only," 3.

<sup>28</sup>David J.Hellwig, Black Reactions to Chinese Immigration and the Anti-Chinese Movement: 1850-1910," *Amerasia Journal* 9, no. 1 (1982): 25.

<sup>29</sup>Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 177.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 180.

<sup>31</sup>"The Chinese Bill Signed," Los Angeles Daily Times 9May 1882, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup>Sandmeyer, 30.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>34</sup>*An 1886 Chinese Labor Boycott in Los Angeles*, 1

<sup>35</sup>"The Boycott: How the Anti-Chinese Movers Propose to Start Their Campaign," Los Angeles Daily Times, 23 February 1886, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup>*An 1886 Chinese Labor Boycott in Los Angeles*, 2-3.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Kung, 68.

<sup>39</sup>"The Chinatown Fire," Los Angeles Times 25 July 1887, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

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"Anti-Chinese Meeting," Los Angeles Sunday Times 7 March 1886, p. 1.

*Reports an anti-Chinese meeting that took place under the guise of a White Cigar Makers Association gathering. Also discloses information on resolutions that were adopted. One resolution called upon all railroads on the West Coast to replace their Chinese laborers.*

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*Gives details on the gambling crackdown by the Police Board in Chinatown. Also discusses the repercussions of the action taken.*
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*Outlines resolutions passed at the last Trades Council session. Resolutions focus on Chinese labor.*
- "Chinaman," Los Angeles Sunday Times 7 March 1886, p. 1.  
*Police report of two seamen who were arrested for bringing a Chinese laborer into the state.*
- "The Chinatown Fire," Los Angeles Times 25 July 1887, p. 1.  
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*Presents the group's experiences from their arrival to exclusion. Examines closely the role that labor played in bringing the Chinese to California and how this labor led to their exclusion.*

Tung, William L. *The Chinese in America: 1820-1973, A Chronology and Factbook*. Dobbs Ferry, N.Y. : Oceana Publications, 1974.

*The work contains numerous documents relevant to the anti-Chinese movement, including many that focus on California. An enormous bibliography is also included.*

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# Gum Saan Journal

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*The following article is based upon a presentation at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage on August 12, 2000 at a celebration honoring Chinese-American Veterans of World War II.*

## REFLECTIONS OF A WORLD WAR II VETERAN

By Delbert Earl Wong

*Reflections of a World War II Veteran, Delbert E. Wong, who in 1959 became the first Chinese-American to serve as a judge in the continental United States.*

I was born in Hanford, California, and moved to Bakersfield, California, at an early age where I attended the public schools. On the day that Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese on December 7, 1941, I was a student in my senior year at the University of California at Berkeley.



Upon graduation in June of 1942 I enlisted in the Army Air Corps at the same time as my only brother Ervin Wong. I subsequently became an

aviation cadet, then a navigator flying combat missions on B-17's in the European Theater. He became a radio operator on a B-26 attack bomber and was killed in an airplane accident in 1943 enroute to his overseas assignment.

I commenced my basic pre-flight training in 1942 at Santa Ana, California, where aviation cadets were given physical and psychological examinations, written and oral tests, to determine who would remain in the program and who would wash out, and whether they would train to become pilots, navigators, or bombardiers. In 1942 and 1943 there was a great need for aircrews for heavy bombardment aircraft in Europe.

General Dwight Eisenhower, Commander in Chief of the Allied Forces and General Hap Arnold of the Eighth Air Force knew that the invasion of Europe by ground forces could not commence until the German air force was destroyed or made ineffective. They realized that the losses for an invading ground force moving from ships to landing barges, then to the beaches of Normandy, would be heavy enough when opposed by only ground troops and artillery, but, if opposed by low flying enemy fighters with their machine guns and cannons blazing, the invading forces would be helpless. The success of an invasion would be impossible and the high casualty rate would just be unacceptable.

Thus the objectives of the air wars in Europe were not only to destroy Germany's industrial power by bombing their steel mills, ball bearing plants, airfields, railroad marshalling yards, and submarine pens, but also to destroy their air force. By sending over waves of bombers, we forced the Germans to commit their fighters in defense of their Fatherland, even if they were to sustain punishing losses of aircraft and airmen.

Therefore, the recruitment and training of aircrews was accelerated in the United States, and the assembly lines were asked to produce more heavy

bombardment aircraft.

My preflight training was at Santa Ana, from December of 1942 until March of 1943. At the time I was going through the classification examinations there was a shortage of candidates with sufficient mathematical background to qualify as navigators. In those days radio and radar could not be used because of the fear of detection by the enemy. During flying at night, particularly on Trans-Atlantic or Trans-Pacific flights, navigators had to rely on celestial navigation, which in turn required a working knowledge of advanced algebra and trigonometry.

In any event, I was classified as a navigator because of my solid mathematical background.

I was sent to Mather Field in Sacramento for my flight training and received my wings in July of 1943. There was only nine months from the commencement of my flight training until I flew my first combat mission in Europe on December 5, 1943.

In September of 1943, I joined the 401st Bomb Group, a new heavy bombardment unit flying B-17's, also known as Flying Fortresses. The four squadron commanders were West Point graduates who subsequently became pilots.

Each combat crew consisted of 10 airmen, including a pilot, co-pilot, navigator, bombardier, radio operator, and five gunners. With the exception of the two pilots, each crew member was assigned to one or two 50 caliber machine guns. I operated two in the nose of the B-17.

The rest of the crew had the advantage of first and second phase training, which included air to air gunnery training, but, because of the shortage of trained navigators, we were assigned to the crews without this training. Such

lack of gunnery training would later hamper my effectiveness in combat.



It was not until I had successfully completed three combat missions that I had an opportunity to see a training film shown the crew as a refresher course. I realized I had been leading attacking fighter planes the wrong way. In civilian life, I had been a skeet shooter and had always led the clay pigeons by aiming in front of the target. However, I did not realize that when you were firing from a moving platform --- in this case a B-17 flying at 200 m.p.h. ground speed --- you had to lead the oncoming aircraft towards the tail of

your own aircraft --- thus taking into account the forward motion of the B-17. In some instances I had to fire towards the tail of the oncoming fighter plane --- not its nose. Thus, for 3 missions I had been firing at attacking enemy fighters in the wrong direction.

In November of 1943 our crew was assigned to a B-17G, a model with open waist windows, open radio hatch, and no pressurization. Above 25,000 feet, the temperature during the winter could be 50 degrees below zero, requiring us to wear electrically heated suits. Over 10,000 feet we put on oxygen masks, which limited our ability to get around the airplane. We were connected with the central oxygen supply, and if we were to leave our assigned positions on the aircraft, we would have to use a portable oxygen tank. There were no toilets on B-17's, only a relief tube located in the bomb bay. In order to go to the relief tube, we would have to connect our oxygen mask to a portable oxygen tank, disconnect our earphones from the radio

communication lines, take off our bullet-proof flack suit and our parachute, disconnect our electric suit, and crawl back to the bomb bay, which was at the center of the airplane.

When flying on 8 to 10 hour combat missions at 25,000 feet over enemy territory, going to the relief tube in the bomb bay was very difficult, and while under attack by enemy fighter planes or anti-aircraft guns from below, impossible.

After we went overseas, various methods were suggested to avoid this trip to the bomb bay. Our ground crews and the flight engineers tried to suggest using a funnel and a bottle or a funnel and a canteen. But if the airplane should go into a sudden dive or lurch, there was always the possibility of getting oneself wet. At temperatures of 50 degrees below zero, such moisture could result in painful frostbites. Finally the best solution was to urinate in rubber condoms and to drop the filled condoms out of the flare chute. So each morning as we were getting ready to take off for a mission, each crewmember was given a half dozen condoms to stow away in the pocket of our flight suit. Imagine the surprise of the Germans to find that every one of the captured American flyers had in his flight suit a half dozen condoms. They probably wondered "Don't these Americans flyers ever think of anything else?" Little did they know that these were issued by the government for a legitimate and necessary purpose.

Another item which we were issued before taking off on combat missions was a G.I. escape kit. This kit was to be used by the flyers who were shot down to assist them in avoiding capture. Each kit contained a plastic water bottle with pills for purifying water; pain pills; currency of each country we would be flying over on the particular mission; a little saw; a compass; and a passport photo of the flyer dressed as a French or German peasant, to be used by the underground organizations formed to assist the flyers in their escape attempts. An order came down for each of us to take passport photos

for this purpose. You should have seen my photo in which I wore French peasant clothing. I would never have passed.

In 1943 our casualties were high. 11% of the bombers participating in combat missions over central Germany and 5% over occupied territories were shot down. The Germans were more than willing to commit their fighters in defense of their Fatherland.

When I arrived in England and commenced operations, we would be sent home if we survived 25 missions. In order to qualify as a mission, however, we had to drop our bombs on the intended target or an authorized target of opportunity, or we had to engage in combat with enemy aircraft.

Because of heavy losses and the inability to train enough replacement crews, in March of 1944 after I had completed 15 missions, the 25 mission requirement was raised to 30. We protested, but to no avail, so we called the new order the "Fly until you die" policy.

Of the 18 navigators from my class at Mather Field who were assigned to the 401st Bomb Group, only 3 of us completed the required 30 missions. The other 15 were either killed in action, missing in action, or wounded so seriously that they were unable to return to active duty.

I participated in the first Berlin mission on March 6, 1944, during which we lost 60 B-17's in a single day, but in return our bombers and fighter pilots were credited with destroying 210 German fighters on the same day. The German fighters would fly through our formations — 20 at a time.

This mission was planned with great secrecy. On the morning of our briefing, we were astounded when the mission map was first displayed to the crews. We did not think the B-17's had the range to fly to Berlin and back. We were able to do so only because we carried auxiliary fuel tanks in

the bomb bay and only one-half the normal bomb load. Also, instead of carrying the usual 400 rounds of ammunition for each of the 13 machine guns, we carried only 200 rounds with strict instructions to conserve ammunition.

I also participated in the second Berlin mission on March 9th and a third mission on March 22nd. On the 9th we lost 43 heavy bombers and on the 22nd we lost 31.

The most tragic mission for our crew was our eighth mission on February 5, 1944 to Chateauroux, France. It was not a long mission and not expected to be difficult. However, after we dropped our bombs and headed for home, two FW-190's came out of the clouds and wracked our airplane with nine direct hits. Our waist gunner, Fatica, was killed; our ball turret received a direct hit, and the gunner, Nonemaker, received shrapnel in his head and to both hands while the substitute radio operator, Minor, was wounded in the right leg. One of our engines was put out of commission and a second faltered. We left the formation and had to limp our way home. The White Cliffs of Dover were a welcome sight for it meant that we would not have to ditch our B-17 into the English Channel. Our pilot, Christensen, did a superb job in landing our crippled airplane on a British fighter base so we could get our wounded to a nearby hospital. Nonemaker was hospitalized for 3 months, but survived and was discharged from the service. He returned to the States and went to work on the assembly line of an aircraft factory until the end of the war. Minor, the radio operator, was hospitalized for two months but able to rejoin his regular crew. Our bombardier, who was wounded in a prior mission, had to administer first aid to the wounded on this mission, was grounded for 2 months for combat fatigue, but subsequently did return to us in April.

After we returned to our air base, our crew was taken off the active list for four days pending a substitute bombardier, a new radio operator, a new ball

turret gunner, and a replacement waist gunner. After only one practice mission with this new crew, we returned to combat.

Let me comment about the fighter escorts which were provided for the bomber formations. We would leave England with 6 bombers per squadron, 18 per group and 54 B-17's in a combat wing, flying in close formation for mutual protection. On the bombing run a simultaneous hit with bombs from 54 bombers would be more devastating for the enemy.

Our escorts would pick us up crossing the English Channel and would stay with us for an hour or two before they had to go back to refuel. Other fighter planes would then come into position to escort us. However, in the late 1943 and early 1944 period we had only P-47 and P-38 escorts with limited range. On missions deep into Germany, into such cities as Berlin, Leipzig, Oschersleben, or Scheinfurt, the fighters could only escort us until we were one-half hour from the target area and pick us up again one-half hour after. During that intervening period we were completely without fighter escort. The Germans, of course, knew this and did not attack until we were left unprotected. Then the battle really began with B-17's with 13 guns per ship versus German fighters with machine guns, cannons, and rockets. They had the advantage of speed, maneuverability, and the choice of targets. Overall the advantage was theirs. They were attacking; we were defending. We did not get full fighter cover until the arrival of the P-51 Mustangs in March of 1944.

After our Berlin missions the next most important one was to the ball bearing factory at Scheinfurt on February 24, 1944. The area surrounding the factory was protected by 400 batteries of anti-aircraft guns and the highly trained and experienced fighter squadron commanded by General Herman Goering. In an effort to surprise the Germans, our combat wing of fifty-four B-17's, was diverted from the main group of attacking airplanes, and headed for Scheinfurt. The Germans, however, were not fooled, and

kept the main force of fighters in reserve. Our combat wing of bombers and our fighter escort had a two hour running battle with the German fighters. Notwithstanding our heavy losses, we were still able to drop our demolition bombs on the ball bearing plant and put it out of commission for 60 days.

I completed my 30th mission on June 2, 1944, four days before the Normandy invasion on D-day, June 6, 1944. Those of us who completed our 30 missions were not immediately sent home. Instead we were kept in reserve just in the event there was further need for additional flying personnel to support the ground forces. Fortunately, the aircraft losses were not high enough to require us to fly additional missions. By the middle of July, I was on a troop transport ship headed for New York.

When I returned to California, I was given a 6 week leave during which time I was informed by the Air Corps of the death of my brother who was enroute to Europe. The following week my father's grocery store was completely destroyed by fire. I requested and was granted an additional leave of 30 days to be with my family and to assist them with all their problems.

Thereafter, I reported to the reclassification center and again was given a battery of tests. Again, because of my good mathematics background, I was sent to Harvard University, School of Business, to be trained to become a staff officer with specialty in statistical control.

I was at Harvard University for the winter of 1944 and was later assigned to the Material Command with headquarters at Wright/Patterson Air Base in Ohio. After indoctrination, I was sent to San Bernardino Air Base, where I served as a staff officer until V.J. Day in August of 1945.

At the end of hostilities, the service personnel were discharged according to a point system, one point for every month served, an additional point for

every month of overseas service, and 5 points for each meritorious decoration. Like most veterans of the air wars, I received a number of decorations -- Air Medals on four occasions, the Distinguished Flying Cross, and the Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation twice. I had enough points to be among the first to be discharged in August of 1945, just in time to enroll in the first post war class at Stanford Law School, with classes starting in September of 1945.



My parents were not enthusiastic about my going to law school. They said to me that any Chinese person who got into legal difficulties would feel that he already had two strikes against him, so why would he further jeopardize his situation by hiring a Chinese lawyer? Because the G.I. bill paid for my tuition, my books, and \$50 per month for expenses, they dropped their objections.

I commenced my legal studies in September of 1945; graduated in 1948 and became a lawyer. There were few opportunities for Chinese-American lawyers, but, thanks to the civil service system, I was able to become a lawyer for the State Legislature. Later, I became the first Asian Deputy Attorney General of the State of California, a civil service position.

It was my good fortune that the Attorney General was Edmund G. (Pat) Brown, who later became Governor of the State of California. He appointed me as a Judge of the Municipal Court where I became the first American of Chinese descent to be a judge in the Continental United States. Two years

later he appointed me Judge of the Superior Court. In 1982 I retired from the bench after 23 years of judicial service and entered the field of private judging.

I cherish my war time experience and am ever grateful that Congress saw fit to enact the G.I. Bill to assist veterans with their education, the purchase of a new home, and to help them return to civilian life. I am proud to be an American and thankful for the opportunity to serve my country.

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