

Author shines light on Chinese presence in Oregon

Story of 100-year-old massacre reveals efforts to right a wrong



Gregory Nokes speaks at the Columbia Forum Thursday about his book "Massacred for Gold" inside the Loft at the Red Building. The book describes the killing of more than 30 Chinese gold miners in Hells Canyon in 1887.

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By NANCY McCARTHY The Daily Astorian |

When reporter Gregory Nokes first learned of the massacre of 34 Chinese gold miners in Wallowa County, he couldn't shake the questions.

Why were the Chinese there? Who killed them? Why didn't anyone – except for a few who wanted to keep it secret – know about the killings for more than 100 years?

What Nokes learned during the 12 years he researched and eventually published his book, "Massacred for Gold, the Chinese in Hells Canyon," is that the Chinese had a major presence in Oregon during the 19th century, but little is left to recall that they were here.

Even in Astoria, where 1,639 Chinese cannery workers and entrepreneurs composed 47 percent of Astoria's population in 1880, they remained largely anonymous.

"They lived below the surface," said Nokes, who spoke at Thursday night's Columbia Forum in Astoria. "Partly it was because of a language barrier, and newspapers were focused on a Caucasian readership, so it was easy to ignore them."

When they were mentioned in newspapers, he said, it usually was in relation to a crime, and even then, their names often weren't used.

Nokes told how he unraveled the mystery of the massacre of the Chinese gold miners by horse thieves in Hells Canyon, the deepest canyon in North America. He called it “one of the worst crimes ever committed against the Chinese.”

He first learned of the massacre in 1995 when he read a story in *The Wallowa Chieftan*. A reporter for *The Oregonian* at the time, Nokes, who already had an affection for Wallowa County, grew curious about the incident. His questions led him to talk to sometimes reluctant “secret keepers” in Wallowa County, to county records that were hidden in unused safes and misfiled in county departments, 100-year-old newspaper clippings thought to be lost and, eventually down to the bottom of Hells Canyon, where the massacre occurred.

It was there, on Deep Creek, on May 25, 1887, that a gang of horse thieves, some only school boys, began killing 34 Chinese gold miners; the massacre lasted two days. They threw some of the bodies into the creek, and those bodies floated down the Snake River 65 miles to Lewiston, Idaho, where they eventually were recovered.

Three of the horse thieves, whose ages ranged from 15 to 37, were tried but not convicted. Three others escaped. One man, Frank Vaughan, turned over state’s evidence and was not tried. He remained in the community and became a school board member and a road commissioner.

Another horse thief, Bruce Evans, who escaped after being apprehended, disappeared, leaving behind a wife and two children. But his memory remained when, in the 1930s, his name was listed on a bronze plaque among those who had contributed to the community.

Why the men weren’t convicted may be contained in a comment read by Nokes in a pioneer journal kept by George Craig, who lived in Wallowa County at the time.

“I guess if they had killed 31 white men, something would have been done about it,” Craig wrote. “But the jury didn’t know the Chinamen or cared much about it, so they turned them loose.”

Although all of the murderers’ names are known, only the names of 11 of the Chinese men killed are known, Nokes said.

Most of the Chinese who came to the Western United States in the mid-1880s were seeking gold. They had learned of the California gold rush in 1849. But most became laborers, working in the canneries on the coast or on the railroads. They did jobs that Caucasians didn’t want to do, Nokes said.

In a letter, railroad tycoon Leland Stanford described the Chinese workers as “quiet, peaceable, patient, industrious and economical.” They were “ready and apt to learn all of the different kinds of work required.”

Of the 13,000 workers who built the railroad tracks eventually linking the east coast to the West Coast, 11,000 were Chinese, Nokes said.

Despite their hard work, however, they continued to suffer discrimination. During the economic panic of 1873, when both Caucasians and Chinese were laid off of the railroads, campaigns were waged to remove the Chinese from local towns.

As those campaigns continued through the years, even Astoria was affected, when the Chinese from Puget Sound fled to Astoria for safety in 1885. According to some

estimates, 5,300 Chinese were in Clatsop County, living mainly in Astoria, while only about 2,500 Caucasians occupied the town.

Following the reduction of railroad work in Wallowa County, the Chinese turned to gold mining, Nokes said. They took up claims already worked by white gold miners. The gold washed from the mountains and out of the rock. Nokes figured the massacred miners had between \$3,000 and \$5,000 among them.

It may have taken more than 100 years to honor the Chinese presence in Wallowa County and elsewhere, but some efforts are being made, said Nokes.

A five-acre site on Deep Creek where the massacre occurred has been officially renamed as Chinese Massacre Cove.



Since 2008, an annual “Chinese Remembering” conference is held there in June. Lectures and presentations are conducted during the first day of the conference, and a trip to the massacre site is made on the second day.

Since he published the book in 2009, Nokes has learned more about the history of the Chinese as well as the horse thieves who murdered the gold miners. Some of the murderers’ relatives have contacted Nokes and have sent photos.

“I think there’s definitely some remorse and a little shame,” Nokes said. “This gives them closure and answers their questions.”

Bettie Sing Luke of Seattle, conducts a healing ceremony in 2010 next to Chinese-built walls at Deep Creek/Chinese Massacre Cove.