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# A Massacre at China Point

A Senior Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation Undergraduate  
History Program of the University of Washington Tacoma

by

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The University of Washington Tacoma

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### **Abstract**

While the frontier was coming to a close in Washington State in the late nineteenth century, Chinese immigration was in full swing. For more than 130 years, rumors of a massacre of Chinese at China Point in the 1870s or 1880s have lingered in the collective memory of residents of the Cle Elum and Roslyn region of the Central Cascades. This work examines available primary sources to determine the validity of the claim. Furthermore, it scrutinizes previous historical works, as well as testimonies left by men claiming to know the truth.

## **Acknowledgements**

This project would not have been possible if not for the aid and efforts of Dr. Julie Nicoletta who provided much needed guidance in the drafting and production of this thesis. Without her assistance my writing would have suffered greatly. I wish to express my genuine and grateful thanks to you for your help and guidance. Secondly, Dr. Michael Allen in entertaining my questions about your childhood and familiarity of the story that I chased down. Finally I would like to express gratefulness to my wife for allowing me to do something I love, I sincerely appreciate you and love you.

## Introduction

The longer a story stays the same, the more believable an improbable story will be perceived as absolute truth.<sup>1</sup> The definition for the term “myth” given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “A traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon.”<sup>2</sup> The story of the massacre of an estimated twenty-five Chinese at China Point in the late nineteenth century, near the towns of Cle Elum and Roslyn, Washington, has been passed down for roughly 130 years through the process of oral tradition. Authors of modern accounts about the massacre have continued to repeat the legend using the same inadequate sources to formulate their opinions. Without significant evidence in regards to the massacre, the story should be viewed either as an amalgamation of other anti-Chinese hostilities or a myth designed to deter the Chinese from settling the region. Until facts prove otherwise, the story should be viewed as a myth.

With the myth’s long line of oral tradition, outright dismissal of the story is difficult. Families that have lived in Roslyn since the town’s inception in the 1880’s struggle with the possibility of this story being an actual occurrence.<sup>3</sup> Variations of the story number the victims from one to twenty-five Chinese. Furthermore, the date of the massacre is in dispute with Robert Bell, the individual who first went on record in 1954 claiming to have knowledge of the crime, providing a version different than the one told by Adolf Elsner in 1972. Bell provided two versions with dates being off by as much as ten years. He first said the massacre occurred in the 1880s; later he claimed it happened

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 20 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> David Browitt, Esq., interview with author, Roslyn, Washington, January 20, 2015.

in the 1870s. Despite these variances, the general premise of the story has remained the same; this level of consistency encouraged many individuals like Frederick Krueger, a local historian, to pursue the truth.

### **Research Methods**

To achieve an objective outcome, hours of archival research were dedicated to uncover the evidence at the University of Washington and local state archives in Olympia and Ellensburg. After archival research, a compilation of known literature that discussed the incident was uncovered and scrutinized. Little has been published that points to the incident in the Cle Elum and Roslyn region, nor do local and national newspapers shed light on the myth. Sadly, the story has persisted due to historians failing to provide further research on the incident while continuing to reuse unreliable sources, in addition to local residents propagating the myth by oral tradition.

### **Literature Review**

While Cle Elum and Roslyn have a rich history, there is little quality research that has been done on the rumored massacre. Only a few authors have approached the topic; those that have done research offer little more than a paragraph or two. Sources available have touched mostly on regional history or the Northern Pacific Railroad (NPRR). Anyone conducting historical research on this area must also rely on more general scholarly works for context.

The following literature review discusses works by theme. Authors such as John Shideler, Mary Gaylord, Josee Jordan, Art Chin and Doug Chin, and those of the Roslyn Community, *Study Spawn of Coal Dust*, provide specific details of the legend. Takaki, Friday and Morgan offer accounts on specific events of anti-Chinese hostility that

occurred in Washington and the West Coast. R. G. Nokes specifically deals with the Hells Canyon Massacre in Oregon, a similar event to the China Point Massacre. Finally William Lyman's *History of the Yakima Valley* is significant as an early publication on the region; it does not include the massacre.

Historian John Shideler wrote *Coal Towns in the Cascades*, a resourceful photographic history of the Cle Elum and Roslyn region that attempts to explain the 150 year progression of the Kittitas, Yakima, and Spokane counties from native contact with whites to current industrial times.<sup>4</sup> While Shideler's work is interesting and it includes a several paragraph section on the rumored China Point massacre, he puts too much importance on the testimony of Robert Bell, the first individual tied to the myth as detailed in *Spawn of Coal Dust*, a study on Roslyn's history. Shideler's book boasts an abundance of research and information relevant to each community. His work details the discovery of coal in the early 1880s in Kittitas County to the death of the mines of the Northwest Improvement Company (NIC) in the 1960s.

*You're at Liberty Here* is a fairly thorough case study of mining in the Swauk region, which lies only a short drive from Roslyn. Josee Jordan's work details the methods, location, and lives of miners. Jordan includes mining claim meeting minutes, testimony, and continues to build off of *Spawn of Coal Dust*. Jordan's work proves to be relevant due to specifically detailing the incident that was first described in *Spawn of Coal Dust* despite adding no new evidence.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John C. Shideler, *Coal Towns in the Cascades: A Centennial History of Roslyn and Cle Elum, Washington* (Spokane, Wash: Melior Publications, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Josee Jordan, *You're at Liberty Here: Mines and Miners of the Swauk* (Yakima, Wash: Franklin Press, 1967), 30.

Mary Gaylord, author of *Eastern Washington's Past*, details cultural diversity in Eastern Washington communities. This diversity was a primary factor in labor, religious, and cultural tensions that dominated the Eastern Washington regions, specifically relating to minority groups.<sup>6</sup> Gaylord provides an extensive bibliography that contains primary and secondary sources, including government data, personal testimony, and newspaper articles relevant to the time, in addition to using *Spawn of Coal Dust* as well as Jordan's *You're at Liberty Here*. She addresses specific rail and coal-related controversies that profoundly shaped Roslyn. Some of Gaylord's interpretations of events provide vague explanations of disputed ethnic hostilities, such as the China Point massacre. This vagueness requires additional research to substantiate her claims. Gaylord makes similar claims as Shideler while using similar sources.

The coal industry has seen its fair share of labor crises. The work is hard, dirty, and dangerous. When it is the only work available, however, men can hotly contest each other in pursuit of this line of work. The complex nature of labor strife can have far-reaching effects that leave people severely scarred; for example, the draft riots in New York during the Civil War pitted the Irish against the blacks that left many African Americans dead. In the late nineteenth century in the Pacific Northwest, whites often singled out the Chinese. The United States passed laws to curb the Chinese immigration and immense anti-Chinese sentiment made the Chinese victims of theft, murder, and assaults due to law enforcement often not providing equal protection.

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Gaylord. *Eastern Washington's Past: Chinese & other Pioneers, 1860-1910: A Self-Guided Auto Tour to the State's Diverse Heritage* (Pacific Northwest Region: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service, 1994), 79.



Art Chin and Doug Chin provide an insightful and moderately thorough local history on the Chinese, detailing the racial hostilities and the invaluable contributions of the Chinese to the West Coast in their book *The Chinese in Washington State*.<sup>7</sup> The Chins use governmental and academic resources providing an exhaustive bibliography. Their work only touches on the China Point story in passing while not providing any hard evidence to support the actual occurrence. Ultimately, they use the same sources as Shideler and Gaylord, adding no new evidence.

*Spawn of Coal Dust* was published in 1954 as a regional study on Roslyn's history. The study detailed the course and direction of the town in addition to the impact of the NIC and NPRR. *Spawn of Coal Dust* is the first publication to detail the China Point massacre and perhaps is responsible for the spread of the myth. Clearly, the publication is extremely important to the paper due to its inclusion of the China Point story told by Robert Bell. The regional study is supported by an abundance of personal testimony in addition to NIC and NPRR records.<sup>8</sup>

Cle Elum retained its Native American name, which meant "swift water." The region would quickly become a breadbasket that would fulfill the needs of the new community in the Pacific Northwest. In the early 1880's, it drew prospectors, settlers, loggers, and the industrial powers of the Northwest Improvement Company, a subsidiary of the Northern Pacific Railroad. The region's ample resources were like a hook to the mouth of men looking to reap its bountiful riches. An abundance of wildlife and salmon proved to be an invaluable resource that would provide for its industrious inhabitants. As

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<sup>7</sup> Art Chin and Doug Chin, *The Chinese in Washington State* (Seattle: OCA Greater Seattle, 2013), 56.

<sup>8</sup> Roslyn Community Study, *Spawn of Coal Dust*, History Report [of the] Proceedings "Operation Uplift," 1954, 183.

settlement occurred, coal was such an abundant resource that it was rumored to almost boil from the ground as soup in a cauldron.

Chinese exploitation was rampant and abusive. The Chinese were every bit as much pioneers to the region as any natural citizen born in the union who made their way west. Chris Friday details the ethnic and racial hostilities toward Asians in his article, "Asian American Labor and Historical Interpretation." He argues that Americans should be accepting and proud of the accomplished heritage left behind by Asian Americans due to their role in the expansion of the West.<sup>9</sup> Friday uses an abundance of scholarly literature, in addition to primary sources such as company data and the state inspectors' findings to establish his conclusion. His article details the experiences and conditions the Chinese, among other Asian immigrants, endured.

Ronald Takaki's *Strangers From a Different Shore* details the experiences, both good and bad, that all Asian Americans encountered in their pioneering works that shaped America. Takaki provides an immense amount of detail on the accomplishments of the Chinese who came to America in search of their own American dream, "Gold Mountain." Takaki details the other fields that many Chinese found themselves in, such as their experiences as builders of the railroad or being forced into positions such as laundry men, providing a rather wide view of their accomplishments and unfortunate experiences.<sup>10</sup> Takaki is widely respected for his work on Asian American history.

Murray Morgan's *Puget's Sound* recounts events of Tacoma and the lower Puget Sound in the late nineteenth century. In one chapter he specifically deals with the anti-

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<sup>9</sup> Chris Friday, "Asian American Labor and Historical Interpretation," *Labor History* 35: 4 (October 01, 1994): 524-546.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald T. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989).

Chinese sentiment that pushed the Chinese out of Tacoma in 1885. Morgan provides an abundance of specific incidents of anti-Chinese hostility that ultimately was just a part to the whole. His work shows how the legal system failed the Chinese, because officials were willing to let the eviction occur if done in an orderly manner. Morgan supports his work with first and secondhand testimonies and newspaper articles that reported on the incident.<sup>11</sup> In addition Morgan's work is a classic on Puget Sound history, emphasizing its importance to the topic.

R. G. Nokes', "A Most Daring Outrage," in the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, details the Hells Canyon, or Deep Creek, Massacre in 1887 on the Snake River that lies between the Oregon and Idaho borders. His work is relevant due to the proximity in terms of both time and place, to the alleged China Point Massacre in Roslyn. Nokes provides testimony from contemporaries of the individuals indicted for the massacre. He also draws on national and local newspapers and other strong primary sources that detail the crime, two-day trial, and apparent motive that induced the men to attack the Chinese.<sup>12</sup>

No published work provides the answer to the question of whether the China Point Massacre is accurate or why the locals created the massacre as folklore to be passed down from generation to generation. To truly understand the Cle Elum-Roslyn region, one must accept the painful truth that the history of the area is shrouded in conflicts that ultimately gave rise to the China Point story. Detailing the truth requires a painstaking commitment to research.

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<sup>11</sup> Murray Morgan, *Puget's Sound: A Narrative of Early Tacoma and the Southern Sound* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979).

<sup>12</sup> R. G. Nokes, "A Most Daring Outrage: Murders at Chinese Cove, 1887," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 107, no. 3 (2006): 326.

## Historical Background

Roslyn is a small town in Kittitas County on the eastern slope of the central Cascades. Kittitas County, prior to 1884, was part of the greater Yakima County. Kittitas Valley had various prospectors, pioneers, and land speculators traveling through the region searching for their own piece of wealth. The earliest known settlers appear to have made their way into the upper valley around 1868.<sup>13</sup> Over the next twenty years, the valley would be settled primarily by western Europeans starting in Taneum Creek and eventually ending in Cle Elum and Roslyn.

While the Northern Pacific Rail Road (NPRR) was advancing west, coal was discovered in Roslyn. By 1886, the Northern Pacific Rail Road had reached Ellensburg and was swiftly making its way to Cle Elum and Roslyn.<sup>14</sup> At the end of 1886, Roslyn's rail line had been finished and coal mining soon became king in Upper Kittitas County. With the arrival of the railroad and the expansion of the coal industry, the population in the Upper Kittitas Valley soon burgeoned with new pioneers who would transition from various livelihoods to wage laborers. In 1886, Roslyn's estimated population was no more than a few hundred; forty years later that number had reached upwards of four thousand due primarily to the mining industry.

The Northwest Improvement Company (NIC), a subsidiary of the NPRR, ran the mining operation. The Roslyn mines brought in people from all backgrounds of life. In 1888, the Roslyn miners' poor working conditions, as well as dissatisfaction with wages came to a head when the Knights of Labor, a union organization that had great influence, pressed the miners to strike. This action by the union completely shut down the mines,

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<sup>13</sup> William Denison Lyman, *History of the Yakima Valley, Washington: Comprising Yakima, Kittitas, and Benton Counties* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke, 1919), 271.

<sup>14</sup> Lyman, 632.

causing the NIC to react. The NIC decided to carry on its business by bringing African American laborers in from the East Coast to replace the striking miners.<sup>15</sup>

Initially, the NIC brought an estimated fifty African American laborers to work the Number Three Mine located in Ronald just outside of Roslyn.<sup>16</sup> This action sparked hostility among the locals. The NIC initially placed these black miners under protection while they worked due to the extremely tense situation with the Knights of Labor.<sup>17</sup> The local miners acted aggressively and threatened the black workers and company men. John Kongley, the general manager of the mines in the late nineteenth century, telegraphed the NIC/NPRR headquarters in Illinois to inform them of the explosive tempers among the miners during the strike.<sup>18</sup> He stated the Knights acted out violently, most notably on company men, saying his men were, “surrounded and knocked senseless.”<sup>19</sup> By the turn of the century, tensions had cooled, allowing twenty-four different nationalities to work side by side, including African Americans.

Ultimately, the strike of 1888 set a local precedent for the potential for violence in the region against perceived outsiders. Kongley described how the striking miners had assaulted and disarmed the new drivers, then proceeded to run them out of town.<sup>20</sup> This violence toward black strikebreakers suggests the possibility of violence toward other

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<sup>15</sup> Letter from S. T. Packwood to Hon. Eugene Semple, August 23, 1888, University of Washington Libraries Special Collections (digital), Seattle, Washington.

<sup>16</sup> Packwood.

<sup>17</sup> Packwood.

<sup>18</sup> Telegram from John Kongley to NIC Illinois, Dec. 1888 - 1st part, *Brooks Library Digital Collections*, Central Washington University, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://digital.lib.cwu.edu/items/show/7037>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Telegram from John Kongley to NIC Illinois, Dec. 1888 - 2nd part, *Brooks Library Digital Collections*, Central Washington University, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://digital.lib.cwu.edu/items/show/6988>.

groups; however, there is a difference between threatening behavior and killing an estimated twenty-five Chinese.

Was Roslyn's well-documented coal mining unrest in 1888 to blame for the origin of the myth that supposedly took the lives of twenty-five Chinese? It is certainly possible, yet a lack of significant evidence makes it hard to track down the truth or the origins. There are very few primary sources that describe or even mention the incident. These multiple versions have significant and subtle variances that should cause researchers to act with trepidation.

### **Accounts of the China Point Massacre**

The first written testimony of the event was documented in 1954 for *Spawn of Coal Dust*, a study on Roslyn.<sup>21</sup> The individual who gave the account of the massacre was Robert Bell of Roslyn who was born in Hudson Bay, New York, in 1887. In certain versions of the massacre, Robert Bell, himself, would have been, at most, one year old, so he recounted the story with secondhand information. Bell, in his original version of the story, said, "As close as I can come to the date of the massacre is 1880."<sup>22</sup> He stated that the massacre of Chinese at China Camp (China Point) was by an unnamed tribe of Indians who did not want the Chinese in the area.

In both of Bell's accounts of the incident there was only one Chinese survivor who escaped the massacre. Bell believed this lone survivor was the same individual who started the New York Café, a Chinese restaurant in Ellensburg. The lone survivor, whom Bell called "Challie Sam," journeyed through the night in an attempt to flee. As morning came Bell stated that this man looked up the path that he had recently come down and

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<sup>21</sup> Roslyn Community Study, 183.

<sup>22</sup> Roslyn Community Study, 183.

saw a black bear smelling his tracks. When “Challie Sam” saw this he said, “All [sic] light, Mr. Bear, you [sic] likie tracks, me going to [sic] makee more.”<sup>23</sup> With Mr. Bell describing Challie in this manner, it is easy to see a racially insensitive individual who apparently did not know Challie’s real name. While today he would be highly criticized for this sort of descriptive language, Bell came from a generation that did have racial biases against the Chinese. This sort of behavior was commonplace.

Adolf Elsner, a contemporary of Bell, was a hard rock miner. Elsner gave his account of the incident in 1972 in an interview with Fred Krueger who was conducting a regional history on local residents. Elsner’s account has some serious inconsistencies in comparison to Bell’s version, yet the primary elements of the myth remain the same. Elsner discussed his father’s store that served the miners in the mountains. This store gave his father an avenue to build relationships, and to become familiar with any incident, such as the China Point Massacre. He only briefly discussed the attack due to his limited knowledge of the facts. He stated that he did not know if the story was a rumor. Elsner believed that the Chinese were, in fact, mining the area and were chased off and attacked by cowboys, although he did not give an exact timeframe of these events. He noted that the Chinese had to leave in a hurry, even leaving shoes and supplies behind. He also noted that there was a rumor of several Chinese being murdered, their bodies left out in the elements.<sup>24</sup>

Bell’s second hand account of the massacre was his 1972 interview with Fred Krueger. This account is generally the same as the first although there are variations that raise questions. Bell noted that he believed his original account of the incident was off in

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<sup>23</sup> Roslyn Community Study, 183.

<sup>24</sup> Adolph Elsner, "Adolph Elsner Interview," 1972, *Roslyn, Cle Elum, and Ronald Oral History Interviews*, Book 27, [http://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/roslyn\\_history/27](http://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/roslyn_history/27).

regards to the time it could have happened. In this later account, Bell stated that he believed the incident occurred sometime in the 1870's, although he provided no reason for this change.<sup>25</sup> Bell and Elsner provide the best examples of semi-reliable sources, but as neither man was around to witness the event firsthand, nor do their stories entirely match up, the story becomes increasingly difficult to authenticate.

In addition to Bell's 1954 account in *Spawn of Coal Dust* and the 1972 interviews of Elsner and Bell with Fred Krueger, a book details the incident. Josee Jordan's 1967 book, *You're at Liberty Here*, includes a short note on the incident, "There had been an Indian massacre of twenty-five Chinese in Salmon-la-sac (then called China Camp) in 1880."<sup>26</sup> Immediately after mentioning the massacre, the book discusses a vote by the Swauk Miners Association to exclude the Chinese from mining the region in 1884.<sup>27</sup> The trouble with the account provided in the book is that it does not cite any source for the China Camp massacre portion. This lack of sources makes it difficult to authenticate Jordan's claims.

In addition to the issues that *You're at Liberty Here* raises, *Eastern Washington's Past* written by Mary Gaylord in 1994, makes similar accusations of the Chinese Massacre, yet she only provides the same sources found in the earlier books of Shideler and Jordan.<sup>28</sup> The continuation of the myth through literature without hard evidence only perpetuates the idea that the massacre did take place, while those who continue to report on the incident provide no new evidence to strengthen their argument.

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Bell Sr., "Robert (Bob) Bell, Sr., Interview," 1972, *Roslyn, Cle Elum and Ronald Oral History Interviews*, Book 5.

<sup>26</sup> Jordan, 30.

<sup>27</sup> Jordan, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Gaylord, 79.



Schideler's *Coal Towns in the Cascades* makes the same claims as Gaylord. Shideler's account of the murder of Chinese is related to the myth presented in *Spawn of Coal Dust*.<sup>29</sup> Shideler references William Rees also interviewed in *Spawn of Coal Dust*, quoting him as saying, "he can tell some real stories about how they drove the Chinese out of the mines."<sup>30</sup> While the testimony of Rees is concerning, the claim of Chinese in the mines is in dispute. Furthermore, is Rees talking about the Chinese as placer miners or coal miners? David Browitt, a local historian who has conducted seminars on local history, states the Chinese were never involved in the actual removal of coal in Roslyn.<sup>31</sup> Without any real clarification, it is difficult to view Rees as a credible source, regardless of the disturbing nature of his claim that the Chinese were driven out. Interestingly Rees' claim of whites pushing the Chinese out bears resemblance to Elsner's claim of cowboys conducting the murders. There is little to shed light on who Rees was or his credibility as a source. Furthermore, Rees does not mention the massacre, but acknowledges a general anti-Chinese sentiment that pushed the Chinese out of Roslyn. Unfortunately, there is just not enough evidence in the short portion of *Spawn of Coal Dust* to make any discernible claim.

Other than the ambiguous and distasteful claim of William Rees, the myth does not explicitly accuse the residents of Roslyn for murdering or driving away the Chinese. The only consistent themes of the myth are the location (China Point), the expulsion, and the murder of Chinese. No element of the myth consistently details a perpetrator or gives a reliable timeframe. The fascinating component is the continuation and replication of the story after roughly one hundred and thirty years.

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<sup>29</sup> Shideler, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Shideler, 37.

<sup>31</sup> Browitt.

While it may be difficult to track down every variation of the myth, the primary pieces of the story remain. One Kittitas County resident, Dr. Michael Allen of the University of Washington Tacoma, heard the story passed down by his parents. His parents owned a cabin that stands within several hundred yards of the location that is rumored to have been the site of the incident.<sup>32</sup> While Allen grew up hearing of this incident even from the mouths of his parents, he struggles to give much merit to the massacre because of a lack of reliable sources or credible evidence.

Yet many documented historical accounts of victimizing Chinese settlers in the west survive and have received national attention. For example, the Deep Creek Massacre in Hells Canyon, Oregon, in 1887, and the expulsion of the Chinese from Tacoma, Washington, in 1885 show up in newspaper articles and were thoroughly documented.<sup>33</sup> The China Point story never received any news coverage.

In 1904, *An Illustrated History of Klickitat, Yakima and Kittitas Counties* was written to document local history.<sup>34</sup> While the work states that several Chinese lived in the region in the 1880s, the book does not discuss the China Point massacre in any form. Since this book was published only twenty or thirty years after the alleged dates of the massacre, the authors certainly would have had an opportunity to contact people who would have had firsthand knowledge of the event. The absence of the China Point tale suggests the story was created after the publication of the book or individuals involved did a good job keeping it quiet.

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Allen, Ph.D., interview with author, Tacoma, Washington, September, 2, 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Nokes, 326.

<sup>34</sup> Chicago Interstate Publishing Co., *An Illustrated History of Klickitat, Yakima and Kittitas Counties; With an Outline of the Early History of the State of Washington* (Chicago: Interstate Pub. Co, 1904).

Both Elsner's and Bell's accounts of the massacre suggest cowboys or Indians did the deed. This discrepancy and the vagueness of the accusations make it difficult to seek out who may have done it. Cowboys often were either hired hands by ranchers or transients moving from place to place for work. Identifying Indians who may have had any connection to the murders would be even more difficult. In the era of Manifest Destiny, Indians were pushed from their native lands, even at the end of western expansion in the late nineteenth century. Some native peoples passed away in transit, while others were forced by laws and regulations onto reservations. There is no evidence to ascribe this atrocity to the Indians of Eastern Washington.

### **Weighing the Evidence**

The only official government documentation that may have any bearing on this matter is a letter, dated September 1888, from Territorial Governor Eugene Semple to the Yakima County Prosecutor, H.J. Snively. In this letter, Semple writes, "It would be of service to me if I could get at the circumstances of the massacre of some Chinese laborers, at the summit, last year, by detectives."<sup>35</sup> As of now there is no known record that provides a reply from Snively on this matter. Regardless, Semple is, in fact, inquiring about a "massacre" of Chinese that appears to have been carried out by detectives. The detectives that Semple is referring to may be a railroad police force, such as the Pinkertons, or another entity that operated in the same capacity. The Pinkertons were a notoriously aggressive private police force that companies hired as strikebreakers and enforcers to sway people's opinions and decisions.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Letter from Eugene Semple to H.J. Snively in Washington territory, September 1888, UW Digital Collections, Seattle, Wa.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Kahan, *The Homestead Strike Labor, Violence, and American Industry* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 73.

If the massacre that Semple is referring to is related to a railroad police force, the likelihood of the massacre being the same one as the alleged China Point massacre is unlikely. The railroad was not within a reasonable distance for the police force to carry out the murders of Chinese, who would have been approximately eighteen miles further up the valley, without any rail line in the upper valley past the town of Ronald. Yet, if the Chinese had abandoned the railroad to work for a placer miner at China Point, the detectives may have traveled up to the region to try and recapture the men to finish their work on the railroad. Certainly, this would be pure speculation, since there is no evidence to support such a claim. Furthermore, the summit that Semple is referring to could have been any number of places in the Kittitas and Yakima counties. Today, the summit is often referred to as the summit of Snoqualmie Pass that is within a short distance of Cle Elum and Roslyn by today's automobile standards of travel.

Organizations, such as the Pinkertons, that major railroad companies or big industries hired tended to bully their way around. The aggressive tactics that these private police forces used caused tension and even heated exchanges of fire with union members as witnessed in the Homestead Strike of 1892 in Homestead, Pennsylvania, a labor conflict that led to violent interaction between the Pinkerton Detective Agency and displaced laborers. The Homestead Strike was widely publicized and full of horrific acts by the hands of the hired police force and the angry laborers. Ultimately, by hiring an independent police organization like the Pinkertons the company enflamed the tempers of those on strike that were looking for an opportunity to share their grievances in hopes of better working conditions.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Kahan, 73.

As indicated in Semple's letter and the telegram John Kongley had sent to NIC headquarters in Illinois, detectives or private police were, in fact, present. As was customary in the late nineteenth century, labor strife tended to be accompanied by violence and aggression. This period of American history is littered with violent acts related to strikes and labor shortages. The presence of labor strife at the time of the alleged massacre lends some credence to the China Point myth, with its themes of labor unrest and ethnic conflict. The story was born out of real turmoil in an era of tension and upheaval.

The strike of 1888 in Roslyn had potentially all the ingredients to be a powder keg, yet the tension never reached the same flash point as the Homestead Strike. Sheriff Packwood, who had dialogue with both the NIC and Semple, was keeping tabs on the situation as well as keeping Semple informed of the actions of the strikers and company. The NIC brought in African American strikebreakers and detectives to protect the new laborers.<sup>38</sup> These actions caught the interest of government officials and newspapers. With the attention of the Territorial Governor, newspapers and the NIC on Roslyn, the likelihood of the storied massacre going unnoticed remains highly unlikely, due to outside sources of influence having their attention on the region.

In the late nineteenth century, the reality of anti-Chinese activism on the West Coast of the United States was very real with heart-breaking events that left many Chinese dead. Specifically two acts of violence against the Chinese occurred not far from Cle Elum and Roslyn in the 1880s. Oregon, for example, witnessed an infamous anti-Chinese action that left between thirty-one and thirty-four dead in the closing frontier in

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<sup>38</sup> S.T. Packwood. Letter to Eugene Semple in Washington Territory, UW digital collections, Seattle WA. 1888.

1887. The Deep Creek Massacre occurred in Hells Canyon on the Snake River, specifically near Deep Creek, also known as Chinese Massacre Cove.<sup>39</sup> Initially, approximately ten Chinese were believed to be dead, but the number soon rose to an estimated thirty-four individuals.<sup>40</sup> The Deep Creek Massacre occurred when white settlers murdered and stole gold from the Chinese. The massacre was discovered when people sailing the river saw the victims in the water.

This massacre made national headlines, making this story impossible to cover up. The largely uncontested anti-Chinese sentiment made prosecuting any individual involved difficult, because of biased juries. Such was the case with the Deep Creek Massacre. George Craig, a well known Wallowa County rancher, said, “I guess if they had killed 31 white men, something would have been done about it, but none of the jury knew the Chinamen or cared much about it, so they turned the men loose.”<sup>41</sup> Despite the lack of justice for those massacred, the media never let this story go untold, contrary to the massacre that was said to have happened at China Point. The three men presumed to be the leaders of the Deep Creek attack escaped with gold and were never caught. The remaining individuals involved were declared innocent and were released after a two-day trial.<sup>42</sup>

Two years earlier, in 1885, Tacoma, Washington, witnessed an anti-Chinese movement that pushed the Chinese from their homes. The Chinese were not murdered in Tacoma, as was the case with the Deep Creek Massacre, yet they experienced terrifying circumstances that certainly cannot be denied. As noted in Morgan’s *Puget’s Sound*, “the

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<sup>39</sup> Nokes, 326.

<sup>40</sup> Nokes, 327.

<sup>41</sup> Nokes, 328.

<sup>42</sup> Nokes, 346.

Knights of Labor and the International Workingman's Association used opposition to the Chinese as an organizing principal."<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, the Chinese were viewed in a manner that caused people to raise "the question of the Chinese," eerily familiar to anti-Semitic language in Germany prior to World War II.<sup>44</sup> The most common fear was that the Chinese would overtake any place they settled as declared by the *Ledger*, a local newspaper, "Allow twenty feet on any prominent street ...rapidly...they will occupy the whole street."<sup>45</sup>

A number of similarities between these incidents stand out. First the Deep Creek massacre and China Point myth have locations renamed or popularly known today as China Point, or in the case of the Deep Creek Massacre, Chinese Massacre Cove.<sup>46</sup> Second, all three incidents occurred around the 1880s, Tacoma in 1885, the Deep Creek Massacre in 1887, and the China Point myth ranging from the 1870s to the 1880s. Third, the Tacoma and China Point events share close proximity as well as the involvement of the Knights of Labor. Fourth, the Deep Creek Massacre is also characterized by the involvement of lazy or negligent law enforcement agencies that failed to fully charge the individuals involved.<sup>47</sup> Tacoma's event saw law enforcement standing by watching a systematic removal of Chinese.<sup>48</sup> In the rumored China Point incident, there was apparently no law enforcement dispatched at all. The closest bit of evidence suggesting

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<sup>43</sup> Morgan, 216.

<sup>44</sup> Morgan, 213.

<sup>45</sup> Morgan, 221.

<sup>46</sup> Nokes, 326.

<sup>47</sup> Nokes, 328.

<sup>48</sup> Morgan, 238.

law enforcement knowledge is the letter from Semple to Snivley in 1888 that received no follow up.<sup>49</sup>

To further point out differences between the China Point and Deep Creek massacres, the China Point incident has only been carried on by oral history. Is it possible for a mass murder to go undetected? Absolutely, yet that would require the individuals involved to be sworn to secrecy or the violent acts to be so commonplace that people would no longer notice the violence. Ultimately, the China Point Massacre is not supported by enough written evidence to state definitively that the incident happened without a shadow of doubt. Even the oral testimony given by Bell and Elsner are not firsthand accounts. While racism and violence did befall the Chinese, there was often nothing for the perpetrators to fear. Often, officials brought no legal action against those who committed violent acts against the Chinese. If this was the case in regards to the China Point Massacre, there would have been no reason for the individuals involved to hide their actions, which would lead to a high probability of a newspaper reporting the incident. Yet, no news accounts documenting the massacre exist.

While the murder of twenty-five Chinese is notable, the reality is that violent actions carried out against ethnic minorities in the late nineteenth century were so common that people no longer paid attention nor felt the need to prosecute the perpetrators. After the Civil War, during the Reconstruction Era and after, African Americans experienced lynchings and other acts of violence, predominately in the South, that were very public. In *Dark Journey*, Neil McMillen addresses the problem of reporting such events. “But because these keepers of the lynching record depended upon

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<sup>49</sup> Semple.



local press reports or letters from local blacks, even such records as they kept must be viewed as crude and probably very conservative estimates.”<sup>50</sup>

McMillen’s discussion certainly causes one to take a closer look at rumored, yet unreported attacks on ethnic minorities. But the sheer magnitude of the China Point attack would make the event extremely difficult to keep from the public as witnessed by the Deep Creek incident. While comparing the experiences of Chinese and African Americans may be offensive to some, the comparison has merit due to each group’s shared experience of being forcibly removed from homes and land, and each group’s unprovoked attacks by hostile whites that left many dead.<sup>51</sup> These actions, sadly, are part of American history.

In addition to the open violence, federal and state governments passed bills that restricted immigration of various ethnic groups, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, or the black codes that continued to restrict African Americans’ rights as citizens, such as voting rights and gaining an education.<sup>52</sup> With federal and state governments passing laws against the Chinese and African Americans, history has proven that citizens who support these repressive laws can lose their moral compass and commit horrific acts of violence. In spite of the negligent legal atmosphere and cultural insensitivity that existed in the late nineteenth century, there continues to be a lack of evidence that can be viewed as reliable and credible in regards to the China Point Massacre. Until an anthropological dig uncovers evidence or an individual with knowledge of the crime

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<sup>50</sup> Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 229.

<sup>51</sup> Morgan, 236.

<sup>52</sup> Takaki, 14.

comes forward with documents confirming the event, the story of the massacre has to be regarded with skepticism.

Both the Chinese and blacks contributed to the expansion of the west where the legal system tended to be behind the well-established East Coast. Historian Ronald Takaki discusses certain Chinese achievements, such as building the transcontinental railroad, yet he points to the Asian pioneers as often being excluded from history.<sup>53</sup> Since the Chinese were key to building the railroad, the China Point myth continues to be supported by the presence of hardworking and productive Chinamen. The Chinese were often excluded from good jobs, because the whites saw them as a threat due to their reputation as being hardworking and diligent. With the eagerness to point to their demise, there should be a greater push to find those who may have carried out the despicable act or to find any physical evidence left in the region.

Art Chin and Doug Chin, authors of *The Chinese in Washington State*, detail many of the challenges that the Chinese faced in Washington such as discrimination in the workplace, exclusion from good jobs, and work place violence. Furthermore they detail the Squak Massacre of 1885, which occurred in present-day Issaquah, that took the lives of three Chinese hop-pickers. While their work is well written and informative, they provide no more than a sentence or two that briefly mentions the China Point Massacre, yet they are unable to provide any new evidence to substantiate the event.<sup>54</sup> In addition, they provide no evidence of Chinese being present in the area at the time of the supposed massacre.

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<sup>53</sup> Takaki, 6.

<sup>54</sup> Chin and Chin, 56.

Census records would be another potential source to provide evidence of a Chinese presence in Kittitas County. What we do know is there was a limited number of Chinese in Washington at the time of the incident. While census records for the area were spotty at best during the mid to late 1880s, some records are accessible through the Washington Secretary of State's website. According to the 1885 Kittitas County Census, it appears only two Chinese lived in the Upper Kittitas Valley.<sup>55</sup> Is it possible that the records are incomplete? Just two years later, the 1887 census reported eight Chinese.<sup>56</sup> The population numbers seem quite low to have elicited a massacre in the 1880s.

While the Chinese had been in the Washington Territory since the 1860s, there was no record of their being in Roslyn prior to their grueling work of installing the transcontinental railroad in 1886. In the 1860s, some Chinese were placer mining on the banks of the Columbia and Snake rivers, yet there is no evidence of the Chinese being in the upper valley of Kittitas County prior to the railroad's construction. With the 1887 census limiting the number of Chinese to eight, the rumored twenty-five Chinese massacred is put in serious doubt.<sup>57</sup>

In one of the many variations of the myth discussed by David Browitt, a white miner was rumored to have recruited the Chinese to work alongside him at China Point, although no specific date is known in this version.<sup>58</sup> If true, this piece of information should be traceable to the original claim owner; however, as pre-1900 mining records are unavailable, it is nearly impossible to track the original claim owners. While having a

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<sup>55</sup> 1885 Kittitas County Census, ONLINE 2004, Updated 2008, Washington Secretary of State. <http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov>.

<sup>56</sup> 1887 Kittitas County Census, ONLINE 2003, Updated 2008, Washington Secretary of State. <http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov>.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Browitt.

white claim owner as a boss is plausible, it is unlikely since the placer and hard rock miners tended to lament the Chinese presence as witnessed in the California gold fields.<sup>59</sup>

With more recent historians of Kittitas County apparently regurgitating the available sources, the process of proving whether or not the incident actually took place is difficult. An exhaustive search of local archives and newspapers has produced no evidence documenting the incident all those years ago. While other massacres received local headlines and the attention of national media, the China Point incident remained nothing more than a story passed down by friends around tables and campfires and from students and teachers. Books such as *Spawn of Coal Dust*, *Coal Towns in the Cascades*, *You're at Liberty Here*, and *Eastern Washington's Past* all use the testimony of Robert Bell as their primary source, even though his account is secondhand. While it would be poor practice to assault a man's character and call into question the validity of his account, it is surprising that so many authors have accepted his account without reservation.

Certainly, the myth is intriguing and worthy of further research because, whether true or not, it reflects the strong anti-Chinese sentiment that plagued the West Coast. The United States government passed laws meant to stem the tide of immigration and hinder the ability of the Chinese to compete for jobs with whites in an attempt to protect and care for their own selfish interests. While it is of no personal reward to point out the flaws of society or national interest, it is important to make sure that accuracy and honesty are paramount.

In *Strangers From A Different Shore*, Ronald Takaki illustrates the repressive nature of laws placed on the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian workers who traveled

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<sup>59</sup> Takaki, 81.

to America to in search “Gold Mountain,” a term used by the Chinese to refer to gold rich hills along the West Coast, particularly in California.<sup>60</sup> These laws prohibited the Chinese from bringing women with them, effectively limiting the immigrants’ ability to plant roots and establish families. The truth of the matter is that the Chinese left their homes in search of a better life, possibly even believing in their idea of the American dream. None of these laws would have been passed if there were not already a deeply engrained anti-Chinese sentiment among the white population in late nineteenth century America.<sup>61</sup>

Murray Morgan’s book, *Puget’s Sound*, details some of the early uneasiness among the Chinese and the predominantly white population in Tacoma, Washington, in the 1880s.<sup>62</sup> Morgan discusses how authors, such as Horace Greeley who used his platform with the New York *Tribune*, created common misconceptions of the Chinese, calling them, “uncivilized, unclean and filthy beyond all conception, without any of the higher domestic or social relations; lustful and sensual in the dispositions; every female is a prostitute of the basest order.”<sup>63</sup> While these views are blatantly wrong and misguided, Greeley was hardly the only individual with a public platform to smear the image of the Chinese.<sup>64</sup>

Ultimately, the pioneers moving out west in the late nineteenth century competed with the Chinese for land and resources. As the California gold rush was reaching its climax, the Chinese were being viewed as a threat due to their strong work ethic. The indirect challenge of what the Chinese could accomplish in comparison to white laborers

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<sup>60</sup> Takaki, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Morgan, 216.

<sup>62</sup> Morgan, 216.

<sup>63</sup> Morgan, 216.

<sup>64</sup> Morgan, 214.

led to unionization and the exclusion of Chinese in respectable fields of work.<sup>65</sup> Cle Elum and Roslyn thrived off of the labor industry. Mining coal in Roslyn was not something the Chinese participated in. Their efforts focused on the railroad expansion. The possibility of Chinese placer miners at the time of the massacre being present is just too small until new evidence proves otherwise.

Cle Elum and Roslyn were just bricks in the road to the Pacific. Today the I-90 corridor is one of the heavier travelled mountain passes in Washington. Unfortunately, the history of the region has conflicts that some may view as warts. Yet, the land is fertile, beautiful, and just as rich as it was more than one hundred years ago. The experience of the Chinese in the region would best be described as typical of the time. Their work on the transcontinental railroad was invaluable then and remains so by today's standards.

After reviewing all the possible facts and leads, one has to conclude that the story of the China Point Massacre is nothing more than a tale told by old timers who enjoyed a good story. The variations of the myth are the result of its innumerable tellings. The Chinese did in fact work in the region. They may or may not have participated in placer mining at China Point, but it is impossible to tell for sure until further information is revealed. The testimonies of Robert Bell and Adolf Elsner appear to be only secondhand stories with no real evidence to say otherwise.

More interesting is that the story has persisted for so long, perhaps saying more about twentieth-century perspectives of the past. While the story is, in fact, enticing, it can no longer be spoken as truth until further evidence is revealed. Reviewing the history of the China Point Massacre also provides a cautionary tale to any historians who rely too

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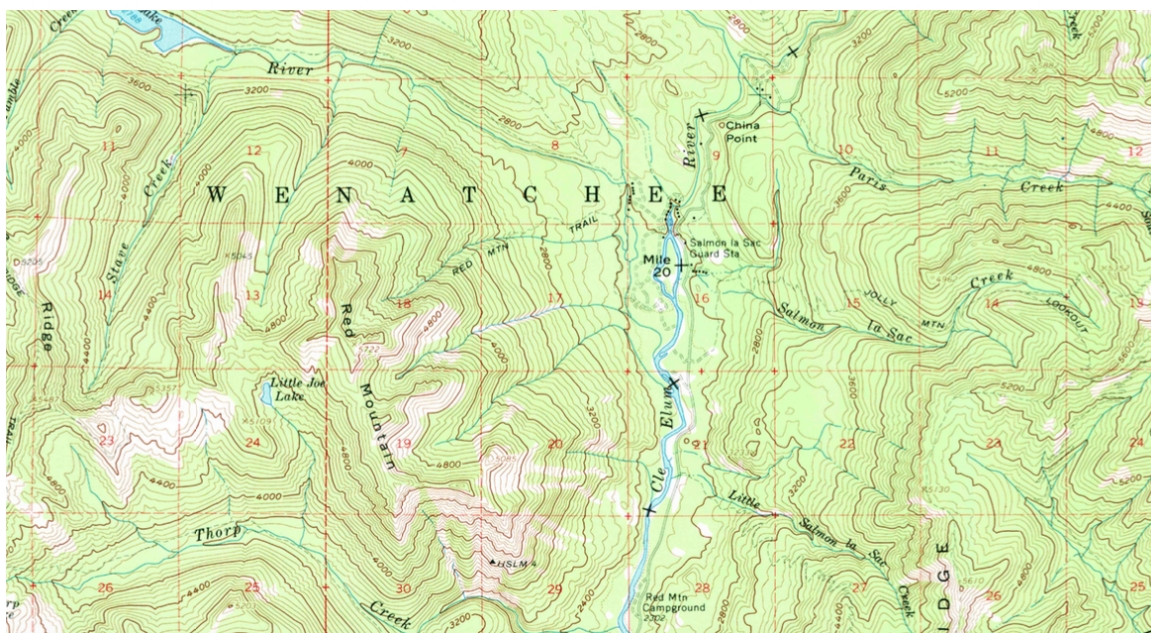
<sup>65</sup> Morgan, 216.

heavily on unsupported evidence rather than digging through primary sources themselves to uncover the truth.

## Images and Maps



U.S. Geological Survey Historic Topographic Map Collection (Snoqualmie, Wa 1903)



U.S. Geological Survey Historic Topographic Map Collection (Kachess Lake, WA-1961)





Robert Bell Hunting 1920s (CWU Frederick Krueger Collection)  
Hunting Bob Bell, 1920. *Frederick Krueger Photographs*. Paper 73. Central Washington University Digital Collections. Ellensburg, WA.  
[http://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/frederick\\_krueger/73](http://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/frederick_krueger/73)



Elsner brothers logging 1920s (CWU Frederick Krueger Collection)  
Elsner Brothers Logging, 1930. *Frederick Krueger Photographs*. Paper 251. Central Washington University Digital Collections, Ellensburg WA.  
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Summit, Snoqualmie Pass, C.P. Harper 1908 (CWU Frederick Krueger Collection)  
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Chinese clearing snow from Northern Pacific Railroad tracks 1886 (UW digital  
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 Chinese workers clearing snow from tracks NPRR, 1886. University of Washington  
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