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## *Birth of the Cruel: How Truckee Pioneered Modern Anti-China Hate*



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The Achilles' heel of American capitalism in the 19th century was the shortage of sufficient manpower at hand to transform eager capital and vast raw materials into profitable infrastructure, products, and commodities, let alone rescue snowbound emigrants.

In the 1860s, the labor shortage was a matter of desperation to the capitalists known as the Big Four, who were striving to drive the Central Pacific line through the unforgiving terrain of the Sierras, so it could reach the basin land of Nevada and Utah and slap down

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track (and claim land grants) in competition with the Union Pacific railroad racing over the Midwest flatlands.

As usual, California was short of labor, at least white labor.

So the Central Pacific made the decision to Go Chinese!, recruiting local Chinese and also immigrants from Guangdong province via labor contractors. At peak construction season somewhere around 16,000 Chinese, the vast majority of the workforce, toiled for the Central Pacific in the Sierras.

The brief, relatively happy episode of the history of the Chinese in Truckee and the Sierras is told in the book “Ghosts of Gold Mountain”, written by what must be reflexively stated is the “good” Gordon Chang, Gordon H. Chang of Stanford University.

Chang’s book is a supremely inspiring account of the stupendous achievements of the “Railroad Chinese” in constructing the Central Pacific railroad tracks, tunnels, and snow sheds through the Sierra Nevadas to reach Truckee. The Chinese railroad men displayed a mastery of excavation, the explosives technology needed to tackle the iron-hard Sierra granite, and sophisticated masonry skills, all of which they subsequently applied to railroad projects throughout North America.

If you want to keep score of fatalities by race, the Donner Party lost 39 people; an estimated 1600 Chinese railroad workers died in the Central Pacific project in avalanches (including at least 19 in once incident), industrial accidents, and occasionally by murder during the work above Truckee. Estimates of California Native Americans murdered by whites in the 19th century—in addition to Luis and Salvador, who were shot and eaten by the Forlorn Hope party— range from 4,500 up to 100,000.

The railroad Chinese and their supporting community—virtually all men since immigration by Chinese women wasn’t allowed—created a vibrant community of over a thousand in Truckee during the construction of the railroad and for a time afterward.

Chang writes that by 1870 30% of Truckee’s population and 45% of its workforce, including 4 of its 5 doctors, were Chinese. Whole streets had only Chinese signage, and Chinese were found throughout the commercial and industrial trades.

But by the 1870s, the railroad was completed and Chinese laborers lost the protection they had enjoyed thanks to employment by the Central Pacific Railroad. And a crippling national recession had swung the pendulum away from labor shortage to labor oversupply. In the US West, anti-Chinese hostility became the default.

In 1879, California amended its state constitution with the notorious Article XIX, which forbade any California state corporation to “employ directly or indirectly, in any capacity, any Chinese or Mongolian.”

The full text is in the transcript.

SECTION 1. The Legislature shall prescribe all necessary regulations for the protection of the State, and the counties, cities, and towns thereof, from the burdens and evils arising from the presence of aliens who are or may become vagrants, paupers, mendicants, criminals, or invalids afflicted with contagious or infectious diseases, and from aliens otherwise dangerous or detrimental to the well-being or peace of the State, and to impose conditions upon which persons may reside in the State, and to provide the means and mode of their removals from the State, upon failure or refusal to comply with such conditions; provided, that nothing contained in this section shall be construed to impair or limit the power of the legislature to pass such police laws or other regulations as it may deem necessary.

SEC. 2. No corporation now existing or hereafter formed under the laws of this State, shall, after the adoption of this Constitution, employ directly or indirectly, in any capacity, any Chinese or Mongolian. The Legislature shall pass such laws as may be necessary to enforce this provision.

SEC. 3. No Chinese shall be employed on any State, county, municipal, or other public work, except in punishment for crime.

SEC. 4. The presence of foreigners ineligible to become citizens of the United States is declared to be dangerous to the well-being of the State, and the Legislature shall discourage their immigration by all the means within its power. Asiatic coolieism is a form of human slavery, and is forever prohibited in this State, and all contracts for coolie labor shall be void. All companies or corporations, whether formed in this country or any foreign country, for the importation of such labor, shall be subject to such penalties as the Legislature may prescribe. The Legislature shall delegate all necessary power to the incorporated cities and towns of this State for the removal of Chinese without the limits of such cities and towns, or for their location within prescribed portions of those limits, and it shall also provide the necessary legislation to prohibit the introduction into this State of Chinese after the adoption of this Constitution. This section shall be enforced by appropriate legislation.

And in 1882 the California congressional delegation was key to getting the US Congress to pass the notorious Chinese Exclusion Act—which prevented Chinese immigrants from coming to live and work in the United States until the Second World War.

The TED talk takeaway is that the state and federal governments did some nasty stuff that prevented Chinese from coming to the US to pursue their New Gold Mountain bliss, so sorry for denying the Celestials full access to the American dream, congressional apology [here](#), please pay attention to the disclaimer of any financial responsibility.\*

\*Nothing in this resolution may be construed or relied on to authorize or support any claim, including but not limited to constitutionally based claims, claims for monetary compensation or claims for equitable relief against the United States or any other party, or serve as a settlement of any claim against the United States.

What is conveniently forgotten is that Chinese *already in* the Western United States were forced to live through the American *nightmare*, a systematic regional pogrom that bookended the exclusion movement, tore them out of their communities and American society, and reduced many Chinatowns to ashes.

Truckee was in the middle of it.

Oh yeah.

Not just in the middle, actually.

In the lead.

In fact, you might say that modern U.S. Chinahawking—the unholy alliance of state, capital, media, and populism known as the “all of society” anti-China strategy—was pioneered in Truckee over 140 years ago.

The unhappy story is told in Dr. Jean Pfaelzer’s essential 2007 book *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans*.

The visionary impresario of the Truckee campaign—you might call him the combined Goebbels, Trump, and Josh Hawley of the anti-China effort—was local big shot, lawyer, and media baron Charles F. McGlashan.

In the 1870s, Truckee had already dipped its beak into anti-Chinese bigotry with the formation of the Caucasian League, a violent, heavy-drinking secret society dedicated to driving Chinese out of the woodcutting business via a campaign of persuasion that looked a lot like intimidation and terror.

In 1878 “somebody” set fire to a woodcutter’s cabin on Trout Creek in Truckee and shot at the Chinese rushing out to escape and get water to fight the flames, killing one. Anti-

Chinese violence was new and novel enough that the case created a statewide scandal and the case went to trial.

Charles McGlashan represented the seven defendants, orchestrated fifty alibis and, to white Truckee's delight, obtained acquittal or dismissal of charges for all the defendants. As each defendant was cleared, the town joyously fired a cannon in celebration.

And in May 1878, Truckee's Chinatown burned...maybe because of arson?

Then, just in case that message was excessively ambiguous, several Chinatown structures were blown up.

And to make sure that Chinese sheltering in the ruins and hoping to rebuild got the message to move, a 601 Club was formed—"601" as in Six feet under, Zero trial, One bullet—to emphasize white hostility to the continued presence of Chinese in the heart of Truckee.

The local newspaper, owned by none other than Charles F. McGlashan, opined that "The site heretofore occupied by Chinatown is the most desirable in town. If owned by white persons it would soon be covered by desirable residences, and possibly business houses..."

By a funny coincidence, Chinatown stood just below the Truckee Heights, where Charles McGlashan built his imposing residence and was perhaps revolted by the spectacle of the Chinese slum beneath his doorstep.

The endgame of old Truckee Chinatown occurred on November 9, 1878, when 500 members and sympathizers of the Caucasian League rampaged through what was left of Chinatown and tore it all down.

In the words of Jean Pfaelzer, "the mob destroyed all houses owned by Chinese and warned white landlords to expect to see their own houses "even as the houses of the heathens."

The Chinese were driven to a new location literally on the other side of the Central Pacific tracks and on the other bank of the Truckee River.

McGlashan's prediction of post-Chinese urban renewal in downtown Truckee was borne out. The heart of old Chinatown—Front Street, now renamed Donner Pass Road—is today the bistro and retail studded main thoroughfare of the quaint town of Truckee.

John Moody—the operator of the Truckee Hotel, who had testified for the defense in the Trout Creek outrage and whose name now graces Truckee's finest and most fashionable eatery (where Paul McCartney dined and sat in with the local musical talent)—

homesteaded the road passing the Old Truckee Chinatown “for the good of the town” so no Chinese could return.

McGlashan, I think, was impressed and inspired by the energy of the anti-Chinese movement, while realizing that its populist, well, violent, white lumpen character alienated moderate opinion and also spooked anxious capitalists.

McGlashan’s solution was to create and lead a cross-class movement that would intimidate and co-opt the business interests that valued and protected Chinese labor—and protect and privilege the business interests that spurned it, while dodging the moral and legal onus of mob violence for the town fathers.

As Pfaelzer relates it, in 1885 McGlashan attended an anti-Chinese meeting and observed: “the wealthy classes were...hardly represented...[and so he] Devised a plan to drive the Chinese from our midst...lawfully”.... McGlashan’s plan was to “turn attention from the Chinese to their employers” and impose leadership from “the better class of citizens.”

McGlashan’s vision of an “all of Truckee” anti-China campaign bore fruit in a town resolution that declared:

Resolved: that not only the laboring man, but the entire community, demand that all individuals, companies, and corporations should discharge any and all Chinamen in their employ by January 1, 1886.

With the growing success of the discharge campaign, there was still the matter of driving out the unemployed and lingering Chinese residents, and intimidating the employers who were still holding out.

On New Year’s Eve, a triumphal procession was held in Truckee, passing in front of the Truckee Hotel. It included a drawing of a rooster declaring “When the Cock Crows, the Chinaman Goes”.

The boycott movement reached its climax in the early weeks of 1886. In Pfaelzer’s words: Truckee’s anti-Chinese movement began to target every industry in town. On January 2 a Committee of Five visited every cigar dealer in town and urged them to buy only “white” cigars...the Committee on Wood Contracts announced that an “uncontrollable current of feeling” in the town “has given rise to apprehension that the masses might join in an uprising that would provide disastrous in its consequences to life and property.” Could the “safety and security of the community...be maintained...while the pitiful cry for bread by the children of white workingmen is continually being mocked by the resounding axes of 500 well-fed well paid Chinamen?”



To make sure that the anti-China campaign would be pushed to its conclusion, McGlashan declared that after the deadline the citizens of Truckee would “refuse to be responsible” for the safety of the Chinese.

The braid of a local Chinese doctor was cut off and hung from a sign along Front Street (today’s Donner Pass Road).

For fans of fists in the air transracial labor solidarity, the takeaway was not inspiring. The Knights of Labor heartily endorsed McGlashan’s strategy (though the Wobblies did not!) and, to great local white celebration, shipped in white laborers to take the place of the Chinese.

On the capitalist side, financial warfare was deployed: banks established liens on Chinese businesses and called in loans, forcing merchants to go bankrupt. Lawfare continued with a McGlashan-driven campaign to prosecute Chinese woodcutters for “stealing wood from government land.”

Per Pfaelzer:

By the end of February, ten weeks after McGlashan had launched the Truckee method, between six hundred and one thousand Chinese people had left the Truckee River basin...Because the [few Chinese who remained] were no longer permitted to enter stores in the town, they arranged for butchers to drop packets of meat for them at fixed stops along the track. Sensing that their community would soon disappear, the Chinese went to their cemetery, digging in the snow to offer food to the departing spirits and exhume their bones to prepare them for their return to China.

McGlashan served as delegate to the San Jose State Convention of the Anti-Chinese League, where he was acclaimed as the “Hero of Truckee.” The convention endorsed his strategy—known as the “Truckee Method”—and issued a boycott petition targeting businesses and individuals that might be inclined to protect the Chinese:.

We, the undersigned, hereby declare that we are in favor of the adoption of all lawful means for the exclusion of Chinese from the Pacific Coast; and we hereby pledge that we will not employ Chinamen, directly or indirectly, or purchase the produces of Chinese labor.

Six hundred people from the Truckee area signed their names to the petition and returned it in person to the offices of the *Truckee Republican*. [187]

McGlashan escalated the culture wars and crossed the gender and age divide in the pages of the *Truckee Republican*:

Let our mothers, wives, and sisters draw their skirts as they pass them on the street. Let them teach their little ones to abhor the Chinaman or his upholder. Let the little fingers be pointed at them, and the first words that fall from their baby lips be “Shame on you, China lover.”

Pfaelzer describes the denouement.

Soon vigilantes began to extort any remaining cash and merchandise from the desperate and hungry Chinese who tried to guard their stores and houses. The boycott leaders urged the townfolk to “starve them out,” counting on poverty and destitution rather than violence to “cleanse” Truckee.

Over the weekend of February 16, men from...nearby towns...joined Truckee’s night marches. Five bonfires burned in the small town square, and more than four hundred men joined a march several blocks long, appearing, one observer noted like a “huge serpent of flame.” The banner of the Truckee Hose and Engine Company, ORGANIZED TO PROTECT WHITE MEN’S PROPERTY, flew alongside canvas banners proclaiming the slogan OUR NEXT GOVERNOR C.F. MCGLASHAN, WHITE LABOR’S CHAMPION. Day by day, carloads of Chinese left Truckee...

On June 17, 1886 Truckee’s Chinatown burned to the ground for the last time. McGlashan’s paper exulted that “dirty, filthy Chinatown has been cleansed and purged of its disease breeding nastiness”.

It was all over for Truckee’s Chinatown.

By 1900, the official Chinese population of Truckee was...two.

Today, a brick building on the south side of the Truckee River, which served as a Chinese pharmacy and is now a home furnishings business, is the only physical remnant of Truckee’s flourishing Chinatown.

McGlashan’s effort resonated far beyond Truckee. His innovative approach united populists and elites, white labor and capital, and downplayed vigilante violence in favor of economic warfare (albeit with a deniable side order of coercion, intimidation, and arson).

It was recognized as “the Truckee method” and adopted by the San Jose Non-Partisan Anti-Chinese Convention as a state-wide template.

As related by Pfaelzer,

Truckee could “rejoice” in “leading the efforts of the entire coast” in “getting rid of the accursed blot upon California.” The Truckee Republican cheered that the Chinese “day is ended in the Sierra. Every burning torch will be a warning that they will not fail to heed, that they must go.”



Inspired by Truckee's example and McGlashan's media promotion, the California towns of Shingle Springs, Georgetown, Germantown, Ukiah, Sonoma, St. Helena, Orland, San Buenaventura (now Ventura), Marysville, Merced, Aptos, Visalia, Gridley, Pence, Yreka, Arbuckle, Napa, Petaluma, and Vina formed anti-Chinese organizations, drafting bylaws and announcing deadlines for the cutoff of employment and economic relations with Chinese.

So that's Truckee: built on a solid foundation of exploitation, murder, greed, robbery, cannibalism, stolen Native American land, and anti-Chinese bigotry and ethnic cleansing. Ethnic cleansing of the Chinese is not just a matter of a historical wrong; it was integral to the formation of present day white California's urban and rural demographics, property ownership, and business and personal wealth.

With the current push for Critical Race Theory examinations of America's past injustices and their current manifestations, I will be interested to see if and how the story of the statewide anti-Chinese pogrom makes it into California's public school curriculum.

And for that matter, perhaps today's China hawks will experience a sense of recognition and shame that their "all of society" anti-PRC policies rely on 19th century anti-Chinese bigotry repackaged for a modern, uninformed, and susceptible American audience.

Until then...

I propose that Donner Lake be renamed Luis and Salvador Lake, to commemorate the Miwok Indians who struggled there in the rescue party, only to be shot and eaten; that McGlashan Point be renamed Ah Ling Point to commemorate the Chinese woodcutter whose murderers McGlashan got off; and Moody's Restaurant at the very least should put a bottomless cocktail on its menu constructed of cream and vodka over ice, spiced with Mr. Lee's Chinese bitters—yes, readers, Mr. Lee's Chinese bitters is a real thing— and ignited to evoke the aura of Truckee's burning Chinatown.

Call the drink "White Oblivion".

Enjoy your vacation!

*Peter Lee is creator of the Patreon [Peter Lee's China Threat Report](#).*

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