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...Astoria: A look back in time

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“slime line” — the several thousand Chinese who chopped, canned, and cooked the fish.

When canneries sprung up along Astoria’s waterfront in the 1870s, labor was in short supply: Native American populations had been decimated by disease, and few settlers had yet arrived. So Chinese labor brokers stepped in to supply contract labor, and brought hundreds of male workers from Guangdong Province, in the Pearl River Delta. By 1880, there were 2,317 Chinese in Clatsop County, a third of the population. Nearly all worked in Astoria’s canneries, which were built on wooden pilings over the water. During salmon season, which lasted from April 1 to Aug. 1, cannery workers toiled 11 hours a day, and slept in crowded wooden bunk houses provided by their employers. Sanborn Company fire insurance maps from that era show a densely-packed Chinatown, right alongside row after row of “Female Boarding,” the maps’ euphemism for brothels. The Chinese worked extremely hard: Some could clean a 40-



Though stocks were already in decline by the 1880s, there were still plenty of salmon to be had for gill-netters like those above, pictured at the mouth of the Columbia River.

pound salmon in 45 seconds, and 1,700 fish in a day.

But in the 1880s, a wave of anti-Asian feeling spread through the western United States. It led in 1882 to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred further immigration. In 1885, the anti-Chinese movement culminated in massacres, riots, and forcible expulsions in towns and mining camps all over the West.

Astoria was tolerant compared to other West Coast towns at the time, says conference panelist Regan Watjus, who wrote her University of Oregon mas-

ters thesis on the Astoria Chinese. True, newspapers like the Daily Astorian were full of racist rhetoric about “yellow men,” and “heathenish celestial brutes.” But the need to keep canneries running prevented Astoria from following the example of towns like Tacoma and Oregon City, where white mobs attacked Chinese in the dead of night and forced them to leave town.

At the height of the anti-Chinese movement, the biggest worker organization was not the AFL, but the Knights of Labor. Its primary demand was for the

eight-hour work day, and in the East it sometimes stood for racial equality. But in the West, it was an active part of the anti-Chinese movement.

In Astoria, members of the Knights of Labor organized anti-Chinese meetings. In February 1886, they got 18 cannery owners to sign an agreement not to employ Chinese workers once that year’s salmon season ended. The agreement didn’t hold, and the Knights of Labor went into rapid decline soon after.

Exclusion and hostility took a toll on the Astoria Chinese. Workers returned to China, or stayed in other cities instead of returning to Astoria for salmon season. By 1890, Astoria’s Chinese population was 925, and by 1900, 601.

Columbia River salmon runs also began to decline as early as the 1880s, due to pollution and overfishing. At the industry’s peak, Astoria had 17 canneries packing 12 million pounds of salmon a year. But towns and lumber mills up and down the tributary Willamette River were using the river as an open sewer. Fish pulled in by gill-netters

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