

Untold Hop History

Shedding light on the legacy of Chinese hop farmers *By Carl Segerstrom*

The bitter fruit of the hop plant is at the heart of Oregon's burgeoning microbrew industry. Oregon is second in the country only to our northern neighbor in terms of hop production. While hops are ubiquitous in the crafting and marketing of Oregon brews, the history of hop cultivation by Chinese immigrants in the Northwest is largely an untold story.

In the historical memory of the American West, Chinese laborers are often recalled as the builders of the railroads and as miners, but not as hop farmers. The stereotypical industriousness and work ethic that Chinese laborers are remembered for also extended to the hop fields, where growers hired the Chinese despite racist laws and attitudes.

For journalist and author Putsata Reang, the story of Chinese laborers in the hop fields started to form when she heard an audio recording of Ming Kee, who grew up tending fields that his father, Dong Kee, rented but was unable to own near Aurora.

"There was something in Ming Kee's voice that struck me as sad," Reang says. "There was a sense of almost a helpless resignation. He understood how unfair it was, but his family continued to work hard and lead the best life they could."

The story stayed with Reang, herself a Cambodian-American refugee, because growing up in Corvallis she and her family had firsthand knowledge of the sweat and toil that goes into agricultural work. "My siblings and I spent summers picking strawberries, blueberries and raspberries all up and down the Willamette — all the way up until and even after we graduated high school," Reang says.

"It taught me an absolute respect and love for agriculture, and it also taught me the bittersweet lesson of being an immigrant and coming to a country with nothing," she says. "The story of the hop farmers really struck a chord because I understand and my family understands how hard that labor is. I don't wish that life on anybody."

Reang's essay "Bitter Harvest" for the This Land story series of the Oregon Humanities Project takes readers on a journey into the history of Chinese hop farmers during the beginning of the 20th century. Reang recounts the many toils as well as the rare successes of Chinese hop farmers along with the racism the laborers faced.

According to historian Peter Kopp, Chinese laborers were paid 80 cents for every dollar a grower would pay a white man, a further ten cents less than indigenous workers, who made 90 cents on the white man's dollar.

"It's heartbreaking to know the obstacles that they had to overcome," Reang says. She also connects the experience of Chinese immigrants to the bigotry experienced by Muslims and other immigrants today. "The reality of the situation is there are always policies that are going to stop people from getting ahead."

The targeting of immigrant communities continues to be a problem, she says. "It's an ugly cycle, but it is a cycle of our history."

Kopp, the author of *Hoptopia: A World of Agriculture and Beer in Oregon's Willamette Valley*, provides many insights into the plight of Chinese hop farmers. Reang also credits Tiah Edmunson-Morton, the archivist for the Oregon Hops and Brewing Archives at Oregon State University, for her "tremendous help" in researching the history of Chinese immigrants in the hop industry.

Local brewers *EW* contacted were not aware of this history.

While the story describes the racism that disenfranchised and limited opportunities for Chinese laborers, the story, much like Reang's own experience, is also about overcoming odds and immigrant's tirelessly pursuing their own versions of the American Dream.

Hop Lee, whose name seemed to presage his destiny, came to own 600 acres of land overlooking the Willamette River in Keizer, on some of which he cultivated hops. He was able to purchase the property only because his wife was a Chinese-American born in California, which allowed them to work around laws that prohibited Chinese from owning land.

Nearly 100 years later, Reang says she continues to see both the opportunities and challenges that immigrants face. "My family was intimately familiar with chasing the American dream as refugees fleeing Cambodia," Reang says. "We realized if you work hard you can get ahead, and that's true for many immigrants, but it's not true for everyone."

She points to her own experience of going from picking fruit as a youth to becoming a successful journalist and writer, and says she is thankful for the opportunities she's been able to earn. "I hope that this story doesn't leave people with the idea that immigrants are somehow victims," Reang says.

When Reang left her home in Corvallis to go to the University of Oregon, her parents moved to Keizer to be closer to the Cambodian community there. Their home would later provide the setting for their daughter's story of immigrant struggle and achievement.

"The irony is where they moved is literally in the heart of where all these hop fields still are," Reang says. "All these years I would drive by and it never once occurred to me that perhaps these exact same fields were where Hop Lee had his farm." ■

