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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



A tale of two exhibits

People of my generation didn't learn much about Asian-American history growing up. It simply wasn't taught at school. I knew nothing about exclusion laws until the 1990s. I remember being shocked when I learned about the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and how it discriminated against Chinese laborers. Though the miners and railroad workers were allowed to stay in America after the act was signed into law, some 20,000 could not return after they went back to China to see family members because of another exclusion law, the Scott Act of 1888.

These exclusion laws created a society of bachelor men such as Ing (Doc) Hay at the Kam Wah Chung & Co. general store in John Day, Oregon, who never returned to China even for a visit. Many other Asian exclusion laws followed that barred immigration from Japan, Korea, South Asia, and the Philippines.

Young people in Portland now have an opportunity to experience a part of history that still is not included in many school curriculums. Luckily, the Oregon Historical Society (OHS) currently has two important and educational displays on view. The first is a travelling exhibit that features the complex immigration history of Chinese Americans in relation to exclusionary laws targeting them. The second was created locally and highlights the people and communities who were part of Portland's two Chinatowns.

In January, OHS hosted the west-coast premiere of "Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion," which is on loan from the New-York Historical Society before it is displayed in China. The exhibit, which runs through June 1, 2016, chronicles the early days of China trade to the history of Chinese immigration and the life of Chinese Americans.

Eliza Canty-Jones, director of community engagement at OHS, said the national exhibit tells the story of exclusionary laws against Chinese Americans beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which wasn't repealed until 1943. It covers the history of "paper sons" — when people circumvented unfair laws by buying false documents stating they were blood relatives of U.S. citizens in order to enter the U.S. The exhibit also

documents the intense interrogations and long detentions Chinese immigrants endured, sometimes up to two years, at the Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco.

In conjunction with the national exhibit, the OHS museum opened a second exhibit — "Beyond the Gate: A Tale of Portland's Historic Chinatowns" — that is on view through June 21, 2016. By the 1900s, Portland's Chinatown was the second largest in the nation.

Jackie Peterson-Loomis, Ph.D., a retired history professor at Washington State University Vancouver, brought the national exhibit to the attention of OHS. She then curated "Beyond the Gate" to highlight 100 years of history in Portland's Old Chinatown (1850-1905) and New Chinatown (1905-1950).

What I love about history is learning about personal stories. OHS recently brought Judy Yung to Portland to celebrate the opening of "Beyond the Gate." Yung, the author of several books about Chinese-American women,

is professor emerita of American studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Yung featured Portlander Leah Hing, a resident of New Chinatown whose story appears in "Beyond the Gate," in a slide presentation.

Leah Hing (1907-2001) was born and raised in Portland by immigrant parents who owned a Chinese medicine and tea store in New Chinatown. In the 1920s, she started an all-Chinese women's band in which she was a saxophone player. Yung interviewed Hing in 1982. She said Hing considered the band "a novelty act" with only one song in their repertoire. The band played "Happy Days Are Here Again" to mostly white audiences during the Depression and travelled across the U.S. and Canada for two years.

According to Yung, Hing returned to Portland to work in her father's restaurant. There she met an aviation instructor who wanted to start an all-female stunt team and encouraged her to take flying lessons from him. Hing accepted, but was disappointed when her father would not let her go to China as a pilot to fight the Japanese during World War II. Another Portlander, Hazel Ying Lee, joined

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