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MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



A history of exclusion and resistance

For the last year, I've been creating an archive website for the *Crossing East* radio series that aired more than ten years ago. The project gathered 100+ hours of scholar interviews and oral histories of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). Before the series began, I had a preconception that AAPIs had little history of resistance and protest, but scholars on the project insisted there has been opposition and struggle throughout AAPI history. During the three years of working on *Crossing East*, I learned how much AAPIs circumvented and resisted a mountain of unfair laws and practices specifically designed to keep them out of this country.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prevented Chinese laborers from immigrating to the U.S.; it was the first time a federal law in the U.S. denied entry to a specific nationality. The merchant classes, diplomats, and their servants were allowed entry, but Chinese people who had already settled here found themselves in permanent limbo. They were denied the right to become citizens or bring their wives and families to the U.S. The law created a bachelor society of men, including frontier herbalist Ing "Doc" Hay and his business partner Lung On in the small mining town of John Day in eastern Oregon. The two gained prominence and became relatively wealthy running a medical practice at the Kam Wah Chung & Co. store which is now an Oregon heritage site and national historic landmark.

Chinese in America found ways to resist the Exclusion Act, including the use of "paper sons." The term "paper sons" referred to the practice of circumventing unfair exclusion laws by selling fake documents claiming to be a child of an American citizen, thus making a person eligible to enter the country. After the 1906 earthquake and subsequent fire in San Francisco, which damaged the building where immigration records were stored, Chinese men already in the U.S. could claim they were born here. They could then travel to China and bring back "sons" or other family members.

Despite this effort, it still wasn't easy. In 1910, the Angel Island Immigration Station off the coast of San Francisco was opened to question and detain people trying to enter the U.S. While white European immigrants who landed at Ellis Island were pretty much allowed to immigrate without much difficulty, people from 84 countries (including those from Asian countries, with Chinese being the most prevalent nationality), found themselves in prison barracks surrounded by barbed wire, sometimes for months at a time. They faced daily

interrogations that could last hours. Often people were sent back if they didn't have their facts straight or struggled with language differences and could not communicate well. Years later, etched onto the walls of the buildings, scholars found protest poetry written in Chinese documenting the unfair living conditions and unwelcome treatment.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 wasn't repealed until 1943, when America was at war with Japan. During the war, Japanese Americans lost their property and businesses and were imprisoned in internment camps in extreme conditions surrounded by barbed wire. Portland attorney Minoru Yasui, along with Gordon Hirabayashi in Seattle and Fred Korematsu in Oakland, were three revered activists who protested and were jailed for challenging the constitutionality of Executive Order 9066 signed by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 19, 1942, which led to the mass removal and incarceration of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans without trial.

Crossing East also covered plantation history in Hawai'i. Many plantation laborers had organized strikes and protests against unfair labor practices since the early 1900s. But in 1946, workers staged the largest protest — 76,000 people (including workers, families, and other supporters) — at a 79-day strike that shut down most of the sugar plantations on the islands.

U.S. history during the 20th century includes numerous unjust laws preventing Asians from freely immigrating here and owning land or becoming citizens, in contrast to white European immigrants. Much of this changed when U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished the national origins quota system and replaced it with a preference system for skills and family relationships, allowing Asian and African citizens of the U.S. to finally bring their families into the country to join them.

During the 1970s and '80s, Oregon embraced a sudden influx of refugees — Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, Mien, and Hmong people — fleeing Southeast Asia. *Crossing East* told the stories of many Portland refugees who came to America in their youth. Oregon was one of the top five states that welcomed people affected by wars in Southeast Asia. Many of the former refugees are now community leaders and proud citizens.

The radio series and the archive of the audio recordings also focus on Korean Americans who

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