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A Few Minutes With Jean Pfaelzer

SAN JOSE (2/3) -Author and professor Jean Pfaelzer spoke at the Martin Luther King Jr. Library in downtown San Jose, California to revisit an ugly portion of American history that many people have either forgotten or never learned about. In her book, Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans, Pfaelzer, a former University of Delaware professor recounts the trials that many Chinese-Americans faced during the nineteenth century. I had a few minutes with the professor to find out more about the book and the history that runs through it.

JRB: First off, what was your initial reason for writing about this period in history that most people have forgotten about?

JP: I was finishing my dissertation and teaching at Humboldt State University in 1975 when a poet told me about the Chinese being driven out of nearby Eureka 100 years earlier. Chinese-Americans know this history as part of their cultural lore and family stories. They haven't necessarily told these stories or even been asked these stories by people outside the community... Asian-American history has been under-read by the general American reading public...I was born in Los Angeles and grew up surrounded by Chinese-Americans ... and I was never taught this. Twenty-five years later, after becoming an English professor, and moving to the East Coast and writing four books, I returned to the story. I combed through microfilm at UC Berkeley and soon realized the story extended far beyond Eureka.

JRB: I know that you go into greater detail in your book, but how widespread was this anti-Chinese sentiment?

JP: Stockton threatened to secede from the union if the Chinese weren't removed... The Stockton Mail supported secession if the "Chinese problem" was not solved... In the 1880s, they started by trying to flood out the Chinese by using the fire trucks. When that didn't work, there were a series of fires where Chinatown was burned to the ground. In Eureka, the Chinese were driven out in 24 hours and marched down to the sea at gunpoint. In Tacoma, Washington, the Chinese were rounded up and driven out of town in four hours. In Rock Springs, Wyoming, 52 Chinese were massacred. The troubling thing ...it was that it was easy to find this material. The research for Driven Out, required no great digging, just perusing the newspapers of the day..."

JRB: You have also said that current instances of "racial profiling have their roots in the type of discrimination that took place...

JP: Here's a forgotten history of the United States' first national identity cards. It is a prescient history of racial profiling, of courageous defiance, of U.S. employers tempted

by immigrant labor and of the betrayal of civil liberties (by China) in exchange for foreign trade.

On September 19, 1892, the Presidents of the Chinese Six Companies ordered all 110,000 Chinese immigrants in the United States to defy the new Geary Act by committing mass civil disobedience and refusing to carry photo identification cards that proved they were in the country legally. Thousands faced immediate deportation.

The refusal by early Chinese Americans to carry the United States' first internal passport created perhaps the largest organized mass civil disobedience in the United States... Determined to protect trade with the United States, China eventually signed onto an amendment to the Geary Act that denied rights to bail and habeas corpus.

JRB: In some recent interviews you have stated that many of the indignities that Chinese-Americans faced during this period of history could be compared to the recent incidents of the Patriot Act and Guantanamo Bay, would you care to elaborate?

JP: In September 19, 1892, the presidents of the Chinese Six Companies, initially organizations of Chinese merchants established in major cities across the United States, ordered all 110,000 Chinese immigrants in the United States to commit mass civil disobedience. Red leaflets appeared on the walls and windows of Chinatowns throughout the country commanding Chinese to defy the new Geary Act that required Chinese residents to carry a photo identification card to prove that they were legal immigrants.

Democratic Congressman Thomas Geary had seized on anti-Chinese sentiment — and wrote an identification bill that easily passed the House of Representatives and the Senate. Their refusal to carry an identity card, America's first internal passport, created perhaps the largest organized act of civil disobedience in the United States.

The identification cards had their roots in slavery. Before the Civil War, enslaved blacks had often been forced to carry identifying passes when they left their plantations and free blacks were required to bear papers proving that they were not slaves.

Now, following four decades of forced expulsions in the Pacific Northwest, Chinese immigrants were similarly compelled to carry an “orderly scheme of individual identification and certification” to “protect their right to remain in the country.”

The Geary Act did more than require the Chinese to wear identification cards. It extended the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first law to ban immigration based on race, for ten more years and restated the ban against Chinese immigrants becoming U.S. citizens.

Another humiliating provision called for two white witnesses to testify to a Chinese person's immigration status. This was the first time a federal statute included a racial

condition on the right to testify... And it was the first time that illegal immigration became a federal crime punishable by a year's imprisonment with hard labor.

Even more un-American, was its provision that a person arrested under the law "shall be adjudged guilty until he shall affirmatively prove his innocence."

JRB: Did Chinese-Americans resist this type of treatment? If so, what steps did they take to insure their rights?

JP: The Chinese offensive against the Geary Act drew together strategies of resistance that had been evolving since the Gold Rush. "As residents of the United States," the league declared, "we claim a common manhood with all other nationalities" that should be recognized according to the principles of American freedom.

By claiming a "common manhood" with other American immigrants, the Chinese Equal Rights League sought to dissolve images of difference in body, religion, dress, food, et al. that saturated American editorials, broadsheets, advertisements, and cartoons

On September 22, 1892, more than 1,000 U.S. citizens joined with 200 Chinese merchants and laborers at Cooper Union in Manhattan to protest the Geary Act. The league also attacked the idea that the Chinese were sojourners in the United States. It appealed for an "equal chance in the race of life in this, our adopted home... Our interest is here, because our homes, our families, and our all are here. America is our home through long residence. Why, then, should we not consider your welfare ours?"

The purpose of the Geary Act was to pressure "more than 100,000 honest and respectable Chinese residents" to leave the country by forcing them "to wear the badge of disgrace like men in your penitentiaries" or to "tag and brand them as a whole lot of cattle for the slaughter."

Nonetheless, the league members wanted to distinguish themselves from refugees from the West Coast or enslaved laborers fleeing Cuba, Mexico, and Peru. "We do not want any more Chinese here any more than you do," they asserted. "The scarcer the Chinese here, the better would be our conditions among you." Up and down the Pacific coast, Chinese laborers and merchants demanded help from China and pressured the Chinese (diplomatic) legation to lobby Congress and the president.

JRB: Another major comparison that you have drawn between the situation back then, and the current immigration debate, is the reliance of the California for the labor of the immigrants. Would you care to elaborate?

JP: Having spent four decades demanding Chinese expulsion, many in California were suddenly threatened by its possibility. In the 1890s, California agriculture was enjoying spectacular growth. Farmers leased small plots of land to hundreds of Chinese tenants for vineyards, orange and lemon groves, and orchards.

The cultivation, harvesting and packing of California's crops depended on Chinese labor. Without the Chinese, the new fruit industry would wither. Farmers also knew that the Chinese were building the long routes and short-haul tracks of the new railroads.

Under the land grants, the railroads still controlled hundreds of thousands of acres of arable land, as well as the power of transportation itself, the refrigerated railroad cars, the location of terminals, the grain towers. Indeed, the entire nexus on which the sales of the fruit of the land depended. Who else would build and fire this iron web? Some farmers thought that only an "influx" of blacks could replace Chinese labor.

-Jose Ricardo G. Bondoc