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An Anti-Chinese Riot in Los Angeles (1871)

California continued to lure immigration from China following the California Gold Rush. By 1870 the predominately male Chinese community of California stood at 50,000. Friction between the Chinese and anglo communities was augmented by job competition and objections over Chinese customs. Assaults on Chinese residents were commonplace in California's coastal towns. Many of the Chinese belonged to competing Tong fraternal societies. In 1871, rival Tongs came to blows on the streets of Los Angeles. In the resulting fray, several police officers were wounded and a civilian killed while attempting to restore order. A mob descended on the Tongs as they attempted to erect a barricade. Before the day was out the white mob had killed eighteen or nineteen of the Chinese. The following contemporary newspaper account describes in graphic detail the lynching and shooting of Chinese residents during this episode.*

The difficulty which occurred yesterday at Negro Alley, between two opposition Chinese companies, in which pistols were then freely used, again broke out afresh about five o'clock last evening. The difficulty of yesterday had been taken into court where it was supposed that it would be properly disposed of. It appears, however, that after coming from Justice Gray's Court where the preliminary examination was commenced yesterday afternoon, they renewed their quarrel and again resorted to the pistol for settlement. Immediately after the first shots were fired, officers and citizens rushed to the scene, and an attempt was made to arrest the parties engaged in the melee. Instead of surrendering, these miscreants at once turned to bay, and discharged the contents of their revolvers at those attempting to arrest them. This dispersed the crowd quicker than it had

* *Los Angeles Daily News*, October 25, 1871.

collected; but two of the Chinese still stood at the door of one of their dens, and discharged their weapons at the retreating crowds. One of the officers Bilderrain in a gallant attempt, with one or two others of the officers and some volunteers, to enter this den, was shot in the right shoulder and badly wounded. His brother, a boy about 15 years of age, received a ball in his right leg below the knee. Another man, a well known and respected citizen named Robert Thompson, who was called upon to assist while endeavoring to enter was confronted by a Chinaman with a loaded pistol in each hand. These he placed against Thompson's breast, and fired, one of the balls entering the right breast, the wound resulting fatally in about an hour and a half. This repeated firing was the signal for the closing of the iron shutters of neighboring stores.

Knots of men congregated at the street corners; and, in less time than it takes to be told, the entire block was surrounded, so as to permit none to escape. A string of men extended across Los Angeles Street along the east side of Negro Alley and on the western side of the block along Sanchez Street; and an unbroken line formed around the Plaza connecting with both the ends of the lines on Sanchez Street and Negro Alley. The wildest excitement prevailed. The mob was demoralized and uncontrollable. No definite organization existed. There seemed to be an understanding on the part of some few to drive the inmates of the blockaded houses up to the upper end of the block and allow them to escape into the Plaza where parties were stationed to receive them.

A Capture-The Captive Lynched

Shortly after the line had been formed, one of the inmates of the den in which these Chinamen had taken refuge was observed endeavoring to escape across Los Angeles Street. The cry was raised; and he was quickly captured by one Romo Sortorel. He had evidently made up his mind to cut his way through the circle, being armed at the time with a hatchet. When arrested, someone made an attempt to stab him with a knife, cutting the hand of Sortorel. Others took him in charge, with the view of placing him in jail. The infuriated mob followed. Cries of "Hang him!" "Take him from Harris!" "Shoot him!" rose in every direction. The officers proceeded safely with their prisoner until they arrived at the junction of Temple and Spring Streets. Here they were surrounded, and the Chinaman forcibly taken from them, and dragged up Temple Street to New High Street. The frame of the sliding doors of a corral at the corner of his street afford a convenient gallows. A rope was soon at hand, and amid his own wailings and the hootings and imprecations of the crowd, he was elevated. The cord broke, however, but another was at hand, and he was again hoisted to the beam, and there left to swing.

The Multitude Maddened

Returning to the scene, efforts were made by the Sheriff to organize a body of men to watch the place until morning, when more efficient means would be used for capturing those remaining in the houses. But all his efforts failed. Parties then proceeded on the roofs of the Chinese dens, breaking them in with axes, and discharging their pistols into the interior, hoping thereby to succeed in driving them out. In the center of the block,

behind the Chinese residences, is a corral. Last evening this contained some seven or eight horses, behind which some of the Chinamen were discovered secreting themselves, and four of them were summarily despatched. The demoniacal desire to set the block on fire and burn them out was broached, but a better spirit prevailed, and the repeated cries of "Burn the S— of B—s out," were answered by more numerous ones, in the negative. The dread of a conflagration was, providentially, predominant in the minds of the majority. Two attempts, nevertheless, were made by throwing fireballs into the open doorways, and through the holes in the roofs, but they were expeditiously extinguished.

For three hours, that portion of the city was a pandemonium. Yells, shouts, curses, and pistol shots rent the air in every direction. A novel idea at last suggested itself to some-one's mind, viz.: that water through the firemen's hose be brought to play upon their retreat, to try and drive them out in that manner. The effort was made, but was unsuccessful, as it was impossible to get any concert of action.

Ferreted Out

About half past nine, some person ventured to enter one of the houses, and presently emerged with a prisoner. The crowd instantly seized him, and hurried him off down to Los Angeles Street to the point south of Commercial Street. At this point were several empty wagons; and in lieu of any more convenient place, a rope was attached to his neck, and he was raised from the ground. Further search resulted in the capture, as far as we could ascertain, of fourteen others, who were similarly dealt with, four of them being taken to the place of execution on New High Street and the other ten to Los Angeles and Commercial Streets. The dwellings on Los Angeles Street, where these scenes were enacted, have an awning projecting over the sidewalk. Six of these Chinamen—one a mere child—swung from it in a row, three hanging together in a bunch. An empty wagon close by had four others hanging to its sides. So furious had the mob become, that they placed the ropes around the necks of their captives as soon as they got them into their hands, and then dragged them along the street to the places of execution, where, more dead than alive, their existence was ended. An effort to stay the proceedings, as possible innocence was being sacrificed for guilt, was squelched, and the humanitarian, threatened with having a place given him among the ghastly row of victims hanging there before him. Such was the terrible vengeance that overtook these men. The bodies of those who were shot were lying on the street and sidewalk last night...

As might be expected, thieves were not idle. Upon breaking open the Chinese establishment, and obtaining complete mastery over the inmates, they commenced to ply their trade, helping themselves to everything they could lay their hands upon. "Help yourself, boys," was the advice boldly given by one, who was actively putting same into practice. When he proceeded to retire, however, the crowd marched him back and forced him to disgorge.

It was currently reported that during the melee about forty of the opposition party of Chinamen, or the Yo Hing Company had decamped, crossing the Los Angeles River, and going in an eastward direction.

Latest

At the time of going to press, seventeen bodies are reported at the jail, and three wounded, besides a large number of women and children in custody.

Everything is now quiet in Negro Alley and the neighborhood, and strong special force will keep guard throughout the rest of the night.