

Re-envisioning history: Chinese made their mark on Seattle at the turn of the century

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Editor's note: In 2008, Trish Hackett Nicola received a grant from 4Culture to research and write a paper on the Chinese community's involvement in the AYPE — this article is an edited version of her paper. Nicola recently presented her findings at the AYPE Symposium at the National Archives on Saturday, Sept. 12.

Seattle celebrated the centennial of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition (AYPE), which was held in Seattle from June 1 to Oct. 16, 1909. Sept. 13 marked the 100th anniversary of China Day at the exposition.

The exposition was promoted as a gateway to the rich resources of Alaska, the Yukon, and Asia. It was also promoted as a way to encourage trade with those areas. The directors of AYPE thought that if they studied the habits and customs of China, they would learn about which products to sell to the Chinese.

Leaders in Seattle's local Chinese community were anxious to participate in the AYPE. Besides supporting Asian trade with Seattle and the West coast, it was an opportunity for the Chinese to gain acceptance within the community, a step that they thought could lead to the easing of restrictive immigration laws at the time.

In the early 1900s, white Seattleites showed respect to successful Chinese merchants, but still viewed the majority of immigrants as foreign and exotic.

Although intrigued by Chinese holiday celebrations, religious rites, and elaborate parades, most whites lacked a broad acceptance of the general Chinese population. Marriage between whites and Chinese was still illegal.

However, progress was being made.

Local newspapers occasionally recognized distinguished Chinese when they visited the Pacific Northwest. They even reported on some important family celebrations for the Chinese, such as births, weddings, and funerals.

The timing of the exposition couldn't be better for the Chinese to show off their trade products and their culture. It was crucial for the Chinese to make their participation in the AYPE a successful endeavor.

Because anti-Chinese sentiments ran high, the Chinese government did not sponsor an exhibit at the AYPE. However, well-known local community leaders Goon Dip and Ah King were instrumental in organizing China Day and the Chinese Village exhibit for the exposition.

Goon Dip, consul for China, was a skilled politician and entrepreneur. He was a well-educated man who spoke fluent English.

With the help from his Chinese friends in Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco, he raised enough money to develop a praiseworthy exhibit of Chinese goods. He also used his ingenuity to supply an enormous Chinese dragon that led the parade through downtown Seattle on China Day.

Ah King sponsored the Chinese Village pavilion at the AYPE. He was in charge of erecting buildings to house the Chinese exhibits and operating the Chinese activities on the exposition grounds. He invested his time and money to ensure that his country was well represented.

The Chinese Village was located on the Pay Streak near the Ferris wheel. The village had a bazaar, a Chinese temple (brought intact from Shanghai), a theatre, a restaurant, and a tea room. Chinese exhibits and curios were exhibited on the village grounds behind the main building.

One of the main attractions of the Chinese Village was the Tin Yung Qui Troupe. They caused a sensation with their juggling, magic, and contortion acts among the thousands who visited them daily.

Interesting to note is that one of the magicians was a woman, not particularly unusual for a Chinese performance in 1909, but most unusual for an American act. ♦

Do you any stories, artifacts, or photos related to the fair that you would like to share? Send information to trish.nicola6@gmail.com. Nicola is a certified genealogist and family history researcher. To read more of her work on the AYPE, visit www.Chinese1909AYPE.wordpress.com.