

(C 441-m-rs-1885)

CHINESE RIOT.

By
David G. Thomas
as told to his daughter, Mrs. J.H. Goodnough.

On the fifth day of September 1885, in Rock Springs, Wyoming, occurred a riot, so brutal in its actuality, so revolting in its execution and so gruesome in its details, that it made the town, since famous for its coal, equally infamous and left deep scars in the minds and hearts of its citizens: scars which redden and open after forty years, at "Man's Inhumanity to Man."

As I questioned my father about the stirring events, those which led up to the actual riot, I could not but be impressed, as he sat calmly smoking his friendly pipe, white haired, and animatedly relating events as he saw them, of the progress, which civilization has brought in its wake to our city, contrasted with the bloody scenes of the eighties. We who live in Rock Springs and love it, are vitally interested in her history and this was the reason I secured the facts herein quoted.

The opinions expressed may or may not, be correct, but they are formed by the impressions made at the time, and are our own. My father David G. Thomas witnessed the riot from No. 5 tipple and actually saw what follows in the narrative.

To understand conditions as they existed, one must go back to the year 1869, when the Southern Pacific railroad had been completed and Chinese coolies had been imported for the work of building the road. Upon its completion, most of the employees were out of work and anxious to become engaged in some remunerative labor. There was a feeling of resentment augered at the time among labor agitators, which grew steadily each year as it fed on propaganda.

The situation in the coal mines of Rock Springs in the year 1876, was anything but pleasant. A strike was in progress, whereby the coal mines was limited in degree and quantity and very few miners were hired, neither the Superintendent nor the Mine Boss, having any authority; the power being relegated to a committee of three miners, a triumvirate, who were the Mussolini of the mines. Finally the situation became intolerable to mining officials and the agitators were fired boldly and bodily from any further participation in Company affairs. A few men, however, loyal in their devotion were retained.

To a large extent, the mines were now without white labor, so the question was, "Who should mine the coal?" Beckwith and Quinn agreed to furnish a contract to supply Chinese labor for the mines, with Mr. W.H. O'Donnell, the contact man of the deal, in the year 1885. It is well to bear this fact in mind as Mr. O'Donnell (or Grandpa, as he was affectionally known to those of us of a younger generation, who held for him real affection, which we had and still hold for his memory) - was involved in the brutal workings of what we now call "Mob Psychology," but which caused him worry and annoyance for two days, when he was guilty of nothing, but the faithful discharge of his duties.

So the situation was in the year 1878 when my father arrived in the mining town of Rock Springs, and secured employment in the mines as a driver.

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The years passed, with the spirit of unrest and dissatisfaction gaining ground against the Chinese, not only in Rock Springs, but in California, Colorado, and even in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. However the year 1885 arrived with my father, now a Mine Boss at No. 5, and from this point, he will tell his own story as he actually saw it, using the first person.

"One week before the riot, Mr. C.P. Wassung and I had occasion to visit Laramie on Lodge business. We met an acquaintance who had no business connections in Rock Springs at the time, but who remarked that he would visit our town in a few days, and that there would be 'something doing'. The 'something doing' part of the conversation made an indelible impression on our minds, when this same man became one of the leaders in the riot of September 5th. I have reason to believe that he lived and still lives to be very much ashamed of his participation in the disgraceful events."

"I was Mine Boss at No. 5, and on the morning of September 5, I noticed a visible commotion at No. 3. Rumors had reached me that there was violence at No. 6, where Chinese miners had been assigned to places, previously promised by the Superintendent to the white men. It is an unwritten law in the mines, that miners work in certain assigned places. I felt at the time, and have since had no reason to change my views, that the Chinese riot was due to the tactlessness of the Mine Superintendent, Jim Evans. He was efficient in working knowledge, but was lacking in the virtue of 'tact', and it was the only thing needed to fan the flames of revolt and race hatred to red heat, and start the riot, which cost the lives of 27 innocent men, beside leaving a stain on the town, and in the hearts of those who participated, some of whom cooled down quickly, after seeing the horror of the first scenes. I never felt the men wanted to riot at this time,"

"To quote now from a local newspaper, dated September 6, 1885:
 "Today for the first time in a good many years there is not a Chinaman in Rock Springs and nothing but heaps of smoking ruins mark the spot where Chinatown stood. The feeling against the Chinese has been growing stronger all summer. The fact that the white men were seeking in vain for work, and had been turned off the sections, while the Chinese were being shipped in by carloads and given work, strengthened the feeling against them. It needed little to incite this feeling into an active crusade, and that came yesterday morning at No. 6. All the entries were stopped at No. 6, the first of the month and Mr. Evans, Mine Superintendent, marked off a number of rooms in the entries. In No 5 entry, eight Chinamen were working and four rooms marked off for them. In No. 13, Mr. Whitehouse and Mr. Jenkins were working, and Evans told them they could have rooms in that entry, or in No 11 or 5. They chose No 5 and they went to work Tuesday. Dave Brookman, who was acting Pitt Boss in Francis' absence, told them to take the first rooms marked off. He supposed the Chinamen had begun work on their rooms and that Whitehouse and Jenkins would take the next rooms beyond them. But as the first two rooms of the Chinamen had been commenced, Whitehouse took one, not knowing they had been given to the Chinamen. He went up town in the afternoon, and in his absence, and in his absence the two Chinamen came in and began to work in the room. High words followed, then blows. The Chinese from other rooms came rushing in,

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"as did the whites and a fight ensued, with picks, shovels, drills and needles for weapons. The Chinamen were worsted, four of them being badly wounded, one of them has since died."

To resume our story from this place.

"I was standing on No.5 tipple, when I distinctly saw a commotion at No. 3 mine. I hurried over there to transact some business at the blacksmith shop, and upon its completion, made my way through Chinatown, notifying five or six of my Chinese friends to be careful, as it looked like trouble was brewing. I then returned to No.5 tipple, when I saw the mob, now formed with rifles, shotguns, and revolvers, stop for a moment at the railroad crossing, near the present home of M.W. Medill. Here a shot or two was fired at the defenseless Chinese, who came out of their numerous dugouts and shakes, like sheep led to the slaughter- taken by surprise, unarmed and unprotected." *(Shackley)*

"They ^{filed} precipitously to Bitter Creek, eastward to Burning Mountain, and now the riot was on. May I say at this point, that one of our leading professional men, was on horseback, waving his hat and shouting loudly, and while he appeared to be unarmed, he was inciting a maddened crowd to bloodthirsty deeds."

"Bullets followed the fleeing Chinese, when 16 of them were killed brutally, while the other casualties met an even more horrible fate the same evening, when some of the citizens satisfied their murderous instincts and inhumanly slew the few remaining Chinese for their money, which their victims had hidden on their persons, afterwards setting fire to the buildings to hide their crime."

"I left for home and went through town. Here an old Chinese Laundryman, 'Ah Lee' lived in a dirt dugout, with a roof of boards. He was so frightened, that he had bolted, but the fiends were not to be cheated of their prey, so they came through the poor old man's roof, and murdered him ruthlessly. I asked the same man whom I had met previously in Laramie: 'Why did you kill old Ah Lee?' His answer was 'I had to, Dave, he was coming at me with a knife.' The reader can judge for himself the accuracy of the alibi, self-defense, after breaking through a man's roof, and shooting him in the back of the head. But dead men tell no tales."

"In this connection may be told the story of a Rock Springs woman who walked over the body of the dead Chinaman and stole packages of laundry, which he had neatly laid aside for delivery. Years later she died in distressing circumstances of poverty. Deserved? Who knows."

"Understand too, we were nervous for our own safety, as we were in the employ of the Company, and knew not what the mob might decide to do, as the next order of business."

"However, around seven o'clock Frank Hamlin, Lloyd Thomas and I walked over to Chinatown, where we saw laying in the dirt the body of an old Chinaman, whom we had known, shot through the chest and dying slowly. One of the men in the group suggested that we shoot him to get him out of his misery, but this we declined to do, so we left him to die."

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"The flames from forty burning houses lighted our faces. When we came to Bitter Creek, we saw the body of Joe Brown, one of the first Chinaman killed in the one sided battle."

"We returned to Mr. Tisdale, the General Superintendent's house, which is located on the present ~~of the~~ postoffice. ^{site} Mr and Mrs Tisdale were out of town, so Frank Hamblin and I prepared to retire, altho we slept little, as the section house had been set on fire by this time, and shots were rending the air all night long. We wondered too, if the mob would not visit Mr. Tisdale's house in a spirit of revenge, but our fears were groundless and we were left undisturbed."

"These were things I actually saw, and the next day we heard that Mr. Jim Evans, Mine Superintendent, had been requested to leave town at once, which he did, - never appearing here again."

To quote from the local paper, again, of the sixth: "well gentlemen, the next thing is to give Mr. O'Donnell notice to leave and then go to No. 6" said one of the men in the crowd. But the crowd was slow in starting on their errand. A large number seemed to think this was going too far, and of the crowd that gathered in front of O'Donnell's store, the majority did not sympathize with ^{this} move. But at somebody's suggestion a note ordering O'Donnell to leave was written, and given to Gottsche, his teamster."

One of the men who objected loudest to this mode of procedure, was the same person we had occasion to mention before, at Laramie, Ah Lee's murder etc: but he quit the riot at this place, highly indignant at the treatment meted to Mr. O'Donnell. However Mr. O'Donnell was told to come back in two days, which he did, much to the general rejoicing."

"A look around Thursday, the sixth, revealed some grewsome sights, resembling the methods of the modern racketeer. In the smoking cellar of one Chinese house, the blackened bodies of three Chinamen were found. Three others were in the cellar of another and four more bodies were found nearby. From the position of some of the bodies it would seem as if they had begun to dig a hole in the cellar to hide themselves. But the fire overtook them, when about half way in the hole, burning their lower limbs to a crisp and leaving the upper, untouched. At the East end of Chinatown, another body was found, charred by the flames and mutilated by hogs. For a long time, therefore pork was not tempting to us, as an appetite teaser, and we gladly refrained from including it in our diet. The smell that arose from the smoking ruins was horribly suggestive of burning flesh. Farther east were the bodies of four more Chinamen, shot down. In their flight one of them had tumbled over the bank, shot in the hips and still alive. He was taken uptown and cared for by Dr. Woodruff. Besides this two others were seriously wounded,"

"One Chinaman ~~and~~ woman fled with her husband, a gambler, who carried her across Bitter Creek, and both appeared to be unusually calm. Neither of them were among the casualties."

"The wife of Soo Qui, a Boss Chinaman, was badly frightened and with tearful eyes and trembling voice said to the mob, 'Soo, he go, I go, too.' The assurance of the men that she would be unharmed failed to calm her, and gathering a few household goods she fled to the house of a neighbor."

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" A few days after the riot, Mrs.D.M.Thayer was visited by a woman, who carried a fur coat over her arm, making the statement that this coat was made of an 'H'African lion' and was too large for her, so she would like to sell it. She failed to convince Mrs. Thayer, however, as the latter had seen the coat too often on 'Ah Coon,' one of the missing Chinese."

"Mr Joe Young, the sheriff was in Green River the day of the riot, but placed guards to protect the property of citizens, in case of disturbance."

" A Coroner's jury, who with Dr. Woodruff examined the bodies of the Chinamen, returned a verdict that ll had burned to death, and four more shot by parties unknown to the jury. The bodies were put in rough coffins and buried in the Chinese burial ground."

" A good many indictments followed the arrival of the troops, which were sent by the Government, but the trial was a farce, and the cases dismissed. I was told to report for jury service in Green River, and when D.O.Clark asked me why I did not want to serve, I replied that I did not feel that my back was bulletproof. Such was the attitude of the citizens at the time."

"Governor Warren came with railroad officials on a special train, and took a view of the situation, and a quantity of provisions was sent west for the Chinese near Green River. Troops were ordered to be stationed in Rock Springs, and all the Chinese were picked and closely guarded by Uncle Sam's men. Some of the officers located here included Major Freeman and Captain Coolidge, the adopted father of the Rev. Sherman Coolidge, Indian Episcopal rector at Colorado Springs. The troops remained here until the Spanish -American war, and it was with considerable regret that the citizens saw the soldiers depart, as they became an influence for good in the community."

"And now to tell the story of 'Pung Chung,' our loyal and devoted friend. He went to No.3 when he first heard about the riot thru the Chinese whom I had notified, and retraced his steps back again thru the mine to No.5, where he had hoped to find me, but I had left for home at the time. Then he fled to the hills, where he stayed for three or four ^{days} without food or water, and when found was in a half crazed condition, brought on thru fright and starvation, together with exhaustion."

"He was always our loyal friend, and years later, I can picture him, and old man, sitting on the coping of my wife's grave; in his hands ,a few fragrant flowers-pitifully eloquent- his token of respect to her memory. His devotion touched us, and we feel it indeed a privilege to place on his grave, each Decoration Day, a little flower, with a thought similar to the one expressed by Thomas Campbell.

"To live in hearts we leave behind
Is noy to die."

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Myfanwy Goodnough.

Published in two Rock Springs newspapers

April 16,1931.

Mr. Thomas passed away Feb 6, 1935. Age 78 years.