BAS 0052 Chinese Boycott

Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Intense discrimination and prejudice against the Chinese was common in 19th Century Butte and throughout the west. How did the Butte Chinese community survive?

The *Butte Bystander*, an unabashedly pro-union newspaper, supported efforts at boycotting the Chinese.

The climate in Butte by the middle 1890s was profoundly anti-Chinese. William Owsley, a prominent businessman who owned one of the largest livery and transfer companies in Montana, was elected Butte Mayor in 1884 in part through his campaign slogan, “Down with cheap Chinese labor.” The strongest of multiple attempts to remove the Chinese developed in 1896-97. Tensions had escalated so that union elements in Butte organized a boycott of businesses employing Chinese – not just Chinese businesses, but also non-Chinese. A boardinghouse owner who used Chinese laundries might be targeted, or a restaurant with Chinese dishwashers. In Anaconda, a building owner refused to renew a lease to a Chinese restaurant, losing $150 a month in income.

It is possible that one reason the Butte boycott more or less failed is that the non-Chinese who used Chinese labor refused to give in to union pressures, even when they were named in newspaper advertisements admonishing the public to boycott them. Eva Althoff, proprietor of a boardinghouse at the corner of Arizona and East Broadway, threatened to sue the union and published her intent to do so in the newspapers of February 25, 1897.

The white community in Butte used Chinese establishments, from laundries and noodle parlors to herbal doctors and opium dens. Also, the size of the Chinese community could have been a stumbling block. While the official census population of Chinese in Butte peaked at around 400, Rose Hum Lee, Butte native and expert on western U.S. Chinatowns, estimated a peak population closer to 2,500, which would have made it probably the largest Chinatown in the intermountain west.

And the business savvy of Butte’s Chinese cannot be discounted. Hum Fay, Dear Yick, Hum Tong and Dr. Huie Pock led 215 additional Chinese complainants, including only one business, the Wah Chong Tai Co., in a law suit against Frank Baldwin and 21 others in unions promoting the boycott. They ultimately won, but were only awarded $1,750.05 in court costs while losing an estimated $500,000 in business, and about 350 Chinese did leave Butte. 1896 is a low point in the counts of Butte’s Chinese businesses, with 14 laundries, compared to a peak in the 1890s of 31 but the numbers slowly rose over the years following the boycott.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.