

The 1871 Chinese Massacre

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One of the darkest episodes in Los Angeles history was the 1871 "Chinese Massacre." The event was preceded by simmering anti-Chinese bigotry and, within Chinatown itself (presently where Union Station is located), conflict between two competing tongs (gangs). On the evening of October 24, several white constables entered Chinatown to break up an argument between members of the tongs. Whether by anger or accident, a white man ended up dead by gunshot wound. Shortly thereafter, a mob of 500 non-Asian Angelenos began hunting down and assaulting every Chinese they could find. After five hours, the mobs had killed 19 Chinese men and boys (only one of the victims might have been implicated in the death of the white man). Chinese homes and businesses had also been looted. Eleven white men including Sheriff James Burns and prominent Angeleno Robert Widney had attempted to stop the mobs but were themselves overwhelmed. The mob even shot and killed one of the white men who was trying to protect the Chinese. The incident drew national attention and provoked a grand jury investigation. Seven men were held responsible and convicted for the riots, but only one actually served any jail time.

Excerpt from

CHINESE MASSACRE AT LOS ANGELES IN 1871

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The Chinese in the meantime had taken refuge in a long adobe, with massive walls, heavily covered with brea. They barricaded the doors and windows and prepared for battle. The news of the fight soon spread through the city, and the people collected and surrounded the building. Don Refugio Botello, armed with a six-shooter first ascended the roof, others following, when holes were cut through the brea, and they fired into the interior through the holes thus made.

One Chinaman attempted to leave the besieged building and escape across the street, but he was shot down before half way over. Another one attempting to escape into Los Angeles Street was captured by the crowd, dragged through the street to the western gate of Tomlinson's corral, on New High Street, where he was hanged, after a second attempt, the rope breaking the first time.

Several propositions were made to burn the building, and a fire broke out in two or three places, but it was quickly extinguished. The crowd by this time had collected on the corner of Commercial and Main

Streets, and some advised one thing and some another, but there was no leader to direct, nor officer to control. It was then recommended that a guard be stationed around the building until daylight to await further developments, but the crowd had become furious and uncontrollable and disregarded all expostulations and entreaties to refrain from further violence.

About 9 o' clock a party battered in the eastern end of the building, and with hooting and yelling and firing of pistols, the rioters rushed in and found huddled in corners or hidden behind boxes, eight terror stricken Chinamen, who, in vain, pleaded piteously for their lives. They were violently dragged out and turned over to the infuriated mob. One was killed by dragging him over the stones by a rope around his neck. Three were hanged to a wagon on Los Angeles Street, although they were more dead than alive from being beaten and kicked and mangled, when they reached the place of execution. Four were likewise hanged to the western gateway of Tomlinson's corral, on New High Street. Two of the victims were mere boys.

One of the victims was a Chinese doctor, an inoffensive man, respected by all the white people who knew him. He pleaded in English and in Spanish, for his life, offering his captors all his wealth, some \$2000 or \$3000, but in spite of his entreaties he was hanged; then his money was stolen, and one of his fingers cut off, to obtain the rings he wore. The doctor's name was Gene Tung. It is stated that several other Chinamen were shot, a number fled to the city jail for safety, and many went into the country

While the shooting and hanging were going on, thieves and robbers were looting the Chinese buildings. Every room in the block was thoroughly rifled and ransacked, trunks, boxes and locked receptacles of all kinds were broken open in the search for valuables. One merchant states he lost \$4000 in gold, and others reported losses, in sums varying from a few hundred dollars, to several thousands. It is variously estimated that the loss to the Chinese in money was from \$30,000 to \$70,000.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some riots that have happened in the U.S. in the last decade? How were they similar and how were they different from the Chinese Massacre of 1871?
2. Why do you think the mob was intent on killing the Chinese? Provide evidence from the reading.
3. Why do you think that there was no justice for the murdered and injured Chinese?