



Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

More than gold seen behind massacre

Author R. Gregory Nokes peels back the veil of time in his historical work on the murders of 34 Chinese gold miners in Wallowa County.

By ALFRED DIAZ
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WALLA WALLA -- "It is probably the worst crime ever committed by whites against Chinese in America."

It was also the worst crime on record in Oregon, noted author R. Gregory Nokes, who was at Book & Game on Sunday to promote his first historical book: "Massacred for Gold."

Nokes' book tells -- as much as possible after 122 years and many lost facts -- what happened roughly 100 miles away in Hells Canyon, when a group of local thieves shot and killed 34 Chinese gold miners in the Deep Creek cove area of Hells Canyon.

In his research, Nokes found that most people were quick to point to gold as the motive. Even Nokes held that notion when he began his research more than 15 years ago.

"I always assumed gold was a major motive. But the horse thieves could have taken the gold and gone away. Nobody would have thought much about it in those days," Nokes said.

"Those days" refers to May 25, 1887. It is a day that does not appear in most history books.

Having been educated in Oregon, Nokes questions why one of the most heinous crimes in his state has been overlooked in grade schools, colleges and even historical museums.

And those who do know about the massacre often include inaccuracies, and rarely do they note that this was most likely a racially motivated crime.

Nokes' work is based on the previous works of noted historians, court documents and interviews with government officials, family members and other people who over the years acquired and retained knowledge of the crime.

A retired Portland Oregonian reporter and manager, Nokes could be called a journalist's journalist. He spent much of his early career in Latin America in the 1960s and '70s, covering coups and other stories of interest to Americans, while he worked as a political correspondent for The Associated Press.

Back in the U.S., in Portland, he covered urban planning, politics and other beats. And when he had time off, he loved to travel to Wallowa County to fish, ride horses, boat through Hells Canyon and research the massacre.

"Hells Canyon was always fun to go into and to explore the site of the massacre," he said. But along with those recreational outings, Nokes also spent time sifting through ancient court documents and interviewing old-timers who were connected through family, work or other small-town links.

"Every time I would go to Wallowa County I would always find something new," he said.

In 1995, the Oregonian published Nokes first historical account of the massacre, which caught the interest of many Portland readers. East of the Cascades, in an area known for its majestic mountains and scenic valleys, his truth seeking was not always welcomed.

"At the time it was pretty controversial in Wallowa County. A lot of people there didn't want the story told," he said.

Though doors were shut to him, Nokes still found residents who were willing to talk about the crime and what they knew.

Some would be curt, like Marjorie Martin, who served as county clerk for more than four decades, Nokes said. But eventually Martin would come to discuss more openly what she knew of the massacre and missing historical documents that related to the trial -- a trial that would end with no convictions.

Over the years Nokes hit roadblocks and achieved milestones. In 2003 he retired as a reporter and had more time to research his book. And he had to learn patience for this type of journalism, as he worked to piece together what most likely happened to the Chinese miners on that day.

One key account that Nokes mentions in his book includes a second-hand confession that was published on Sept. 30, 1891, in the Walla Walla Statesman.

Nokes believes it is probably the most accurate of all the accounts of what happened. According to an excerpt from his book, the letter was written by Hugh McMillan, whose son, Robert, was a member of the gang that was believed to have killed the miners.

In the second-hand confession, McMillan explained that only days before his son's death, most likely of diphtheria, Robert confessed to having taken part in 13 of 34 murders of the miners.

"My son...," the father wrote in his letter, "...went to the Chinese camp on the Snake River. Canfield and Larue went above the camp and Evans and Vaughan remained below. There were thirteen Chinese in the camp and they were fired on. Twelve Chinese were instantly killed and one other caught afterwards and his brains were beaten out. The party got that evening five thousand five hundred dollars in gold dust. Next day, eight more Chinese came to the camp in a boat. They were all killed and their bodies with the others were thrown into the river.

The party then took a boat and went to another Chinese camp four miles distance where thirteen Chinese were working on a river bar. These were all killed and their bodies thrown into the river..."

"Massacred for Gold" is not Nokes' first book. In the past, he co-authored and published a text book on diplomatic relations. He also wrote a novel, which never published. "Massacred for Gold" is his first mainstream work, and is already getting attention from Chinese-American groups from San Francisco to New York, he said.

Closer to home and 100 miles from where it happened, his book is hard to keep on the shelves, said Becky Hatley of Book & Game.

"We have a large number of customers who come in looking for local history books. And this is a local history book," Hatley said, adding it's now one of their top seller. The last copy sold Monday morning. She also noted that a few years ago they had similar demand for another local history book of sorts, which was based on the glacial Missoula Floods.

This fall, Nokes' book has competition from yet another seasoned journalist who has written about another historical tragedy.

"Calamity, The Heppner Flood of 1903," by Joann Green Byrd, details the June 14 flash flood that killed a fifth of the town's residents. And just like Nokes, Byrd will also do a book signing, on Sunday at 2 p.m.

Those interested in learning more about Nokes book can go to Book & Game on Wednesday, when they will get more copies, or go to www.rgregorynokes.com.

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