

THE ORIENTALS IN THE ALASKA SALMON INDUSTRY

First Hand Observations of Max Stern, of the Daily News

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Grant-Av, San Francisco, is one of the most fascinating streets in the world, for in its short compass of a half-mile you can shop in the atmosphere of three civilizations.

Its four blocks running north from Market-st are like New York's Fifth-av. It is here that Milady does her afternoon shopping.

The city's most exclusive stores spread gorgeous Parisian gowns in their ample show windows; flower vendors, line the broad sidewalks; dainty tea-rooms tempt the smart shoppers into cool and fragrant rest.

A short walk up a steep hill brings you to Sacramento-st and the gateway to the old world. Here Grant-av narrows into the main thoroughfare of Chinatown. For a half-dozen blocks you walk, as in a dream, through a lazy maze of strange sights, sounds and odors.

Jade, ivory, silk, sandalwood, dragons and the images of strange gods pass before your eyes. Sidewalk displays of mangoes, mint, water-cress, snails and abalones, crates of fowls, crowd you into the narrow, populous street. You pass meat shops filled with eels, cuttle fish, dried shrimp and other impossible creatures of the deep.

You gaze into stores stocked with queer oriental herbs, restaurants with ornate balconies under pagoda-crested eaves and dark basement steps, leading heaven knows where.

And under it and over it and through it swarms, like bees in a hive, the slant-eyed race of the Rising Sun, quiet and inscrutable, but decidedly busy with its own affairs.

At Columbus-av the street changes again. Here is the gateway to Little Italy. Of a sudden Grant-av has become the marketing street for

for the Neapolitan fisherfolk of North Beach and Telegraph Hill.

Bakeries of anise-seed, baccalatoes and pastries of a hundred shapes alternate with neat stores filled with green olives and olive oil, strong scented cheeses, dried fish, garlic sausages and green groceries, and through the street floats a pervasive, pungent smell, suggestive of cellars of good red wine.

The stores of the three nations that line the sides of Grant-av are many and strange, but the strangest of them all is a certain gents' furnishing shop, run by J. S. Meyer and Solomon Young.

This store stands at a point on Grant-av where the exotic charm of the orient is fading into the picturesqueness of the Latin quarter. It is just north of Columbus-av, where for the moment the street becomes ugly and ordinary through the presence of a group of cheap lodging houses and shoddy shops.

It is a sort of Alice-in-Wonderland store.

It does a tremendous business and yet it needs only one clerk. This clerk can barely speak the English language.

Unlike any other store on the avenue its shelves are barren of goods, and its show windows hold no tempting display or design to attract the buyers.

It is in this store that is held the key to the labor situation in the Alaska salmon fields, and it was hither that I was walking one fine day last April in search of a job in the salmon canneries.

In 1919 a crowd of college boys from the University of California, thinking that the voyage would be a lark, shipped on one of the Alaska Packers' Assn barks. They planned to spend their vacations working in the canneries of Alaska. But one night in the hold of the ship had been enough. Two of them jumped over the side of the vessel as she lay

one night in China Basin on the eve of sailing, and, swimming ashore, notified the police of conditions they had found.

A police launch was immediately dispatched and rescued the rest. Safe on shore again they described what they had seen, and what they had told made good newspaper copy. Their stores confirmed much that had been told by returning workers, and it earned for the Alaska salmon boats the name they still bear - "Hell Ships."

The tales of neglect, distress, danger, privation and exploitation had not been confined to doings aboard the "Hell Ships." Life in the canneries on the shores of bleak Alaskan rivers and bays held its secrets, and some whispers of these secrets had come to be heard by social workers and even by the law-makers. My job was to uncover these secrets, if possible.

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In the old gold rush days of California, the cheap labor of the foot-hill placer camps was all done by Chinese coolies. When in the '70's the first salmon canneries were opened in the Sacramento river, it was a natural thing that the labor should be done by Chinese. The white owners had no other workers to do their work. The "Chinks" were good fishermen and they were good workers. In spite of Bret Harte's songs from Truthful James "Chinese cheap labor" didn't ruin the white man in those days.

More salmon canneries were put on the Sacramento river and the fish soon gave out. The industry moved to the Columbia river and Puget Sound. Then it pushed on to Alaska.

The first happying hunting ground was southeastern Alaska, then Central Alaska, and now it is Bristol bay and the rivers that feed it with its untold millions of fish. In each hegira of the pioneer canners, The Chinese worker went along to do the mucking and grilling work in the

canneries. They became specialized, and the same coolies went in the holds of the salmon fleet year after year. I met one Chinaman who had been to Alaska each season for 30 years.

A Chinaman is a good business man, but he is also a good man to do business with. The white owners found it easier to have a Chinese boss attend to the hiring of coolies than to do it themselves. They worked out the Chinese contract system, which functioned something like this:

Mr. Smith, superintendent of one of the Alaska packers' canneries would, in the early spring, send out word that he wanted bids on his cheap labor. Wong Wo, and Hai Sing and Tsu Loui, whose business was contracting for Chinese labor, would leave their luxurious homes in Chinatown and make for the offices of the superintendent. He wanted the labor, on, say, 45,000 cases of salmon. The orientals would submit bids. Tsu Loui would do the work for 35¢ a case. His bid was lowest and he got the contract. Henceforth all the worry of hiring workers fell on his shoulders. He not only hired ^{his} men, but he fed them, and paid them off. The only responsibility the superintendent had was to furnish them quarters in the forward hold of the ship and at the cannery.

There was no signed agreement. The Chinese boss' word was sufficient. As long as the "China boss" hired only Chinese help the system proved fairly satisfactory. The coolies ate very little. Plenty of tea and rice and a little fish and seaweed sufficed to keep them in working order. At best there were no strikes. But, as the years went on, the coolie labor situation became a social problem for California, and congress passed the Chinese exclusion act. The coolies began to thin out, and other labor had to be sought for the canneries. Negroes, whites, Filipinos, and finally Mexicans were taken to fill in the ranks of the aging and dying Chinese veterans. With new canneries springing up each year, the supply of yellow labor began to dwindle rapidly. But the contract system persisted.

Japanese were tried, but they failed utterly to get along with the Chinese boss and the Chinese workers. In San Francisco no Japanese laborers have been hired for several years. In the Puget Sound region and in southeastern Alaska a number of crews are all Japanese. But these work for a Japanese boss.

The dwindling of the Chinese labor is shown by figures for 1920. There were 27,482 workers employed in Alaskan fisheries, out of which 16,052 were whites; 3733 natives; 2369 Chinese; 1445 Japanese; 1587 Filipinos; 1679 Mexicans; 307 negroes and 310 miscellaneous workers.

In western Alaska or the Bristol bay region, where the newest developments have taken place, there were 1227 Mexicans to 691 Chinese. This year the proportion was nearer three to one. But the new workers didn't work for the Chinese boss as well as the old ones. The Occidentals don't relish rice, tea and seaweed. Each year "belly strikes" and mutinies enlivened the trips to Alaska. At one cannery, it became necessary one year for the U.S.marshall to step in and order the Chinese boss to feed his new workers suitable food, under threat of calling in the revenue cutter and having them all taken to their homes in San Francisco.

It was not only the food that led to dissatisfaction. The idea of being hired to work by and for a Chinese boss didn't appeal to the Americans.

Instead of giving up the system, a ruse was resorted to. Tsu Louis let out the business of hiring his labor to a white sub-contractor, and himself retired into the dim background. Hence the firm of Meyer & Young.

The Chinese contractors of the salmon industry have made and are still making hundreds of thousands of dollars. Many of them have become millionaires and ride about Chinatown in their limousines. In Seattle, Goon Dip, the Chinese consul general, is an Alaskan labor contractor. They have prospered and waxed fat in the land of their adoption. Their work has been

purely parasitical, and their road to prosperity has been paved with suffering, privation and even death.

But no step in the salmon industry has, I am now convinced, proven more destructive to American labor ideals than this latest one.

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My shipmates of the Chinese Gang were indeed a motley crew. In color they ranged from a purple-black worn by a young Colombian to the sickly yellow of a consumptive Chinaman. In nationality they must represented at least a score of lands.

The thing that impressed me above everything was the general lack of vitality among them. They were going in for a rigorous climate, a trying voyage and the hardest sort of work. Yet, ^{had} they been a bunch of convalescents they could not have appeared less able for the trip than they did now. They were the usual "bindle stiff" types, only a degree more abject, the sort ~~that~~ society keeps for its casual jobs in harvest time and then forgets about during the long winter months. Culls, they were, from America's "kingly commons."

A Portuguese laborer, named Souza, was typical. He had been to Alaska 15 times in the Chinese gang. Always a little in debt, he made the summer trip in the hope of clearing himself, and depended on winter work to get ahead. But this year he had had only four days of work all winter. He hung around the wharves in Stockton, vainly looking for odd jobs, living in a cheap rooming house and eating "coffee-and" instead of good food. Souza was only 50 and should have been in his prime. Yet he was an old man, and climbed feebly in and out of his bunk with great difficulty. "Alaska never did me no good," said Souza. "I keep coming and I'm just exactly where I was 15 years ago. That's nowhere."

Another Portuguese was a youth reared in the Oakland slums. He came from a huge family of underfed children and had never known, he said, anything but beatings and cursings from his drunken father. To him the trip was an adventure.

A third Portuguese was a lad, bumming his way around the world. He was a New Yorker and proud of his metropolitan origin. One night on the old bark had sickened him and he was ready to "swim it" if the opportunity came.

The younger negroes on the whole were the fittest. Among these was a quartet of young fellows who had just been mustered out of the army. They had been to France and spoke in a wide-worldly, blase manner. Their vocabulary was full of "bokoos" "we-wees," "snarry-anns" and other signs of French culture. One of them, who had just come from Manila, was love-lornly reminiscent of a little, brown Filipino miss, whom he hoped to marry from the proceeds of this trip. "Ah, mean, she's a chocolate vamp," he enthused.

The Latins presented a wide range. Some were Yaqui Indians and some were Castilian Spanish. Most were just Mexicans, patient hewers of wood and drawers of water. In spite of what Meyer had told me of their "clannishness" they were more than anxious to be friendly.

They seemed too spiritless to be ugly. The older Mexicans were halter-broke, and swallowed the coarse feed without a murmur. The younger ones were sometimes peevish and, if rebellion could break out anywhere, it would be among these. But three of them to my knowledge were sick with venereal disease, and others were addicted to the marahuana weed. On the whole, the Chinese boss had done well. There would be no mutiny on this trip.

Most ineffectual of all the crew was the Chinese contingent. There was only one young man in all the 15. He was about 30. The rest were either past middle age or very old and feeble. They lived in their dark corner, rarely ever coming on deck, even in good weather.

One fat Chinaman wore bed slippers and pajamas with his socks and garters on the outside of the pajama legs. I never saw him change from this negligee. None wore anything but the cloth footwear.

They spent their days and nights in the hold gambling, chattering together, drinking tea and smoking their strong water-pipes. Several smoked opium, drawing the curtain in front of their bunks and sinking into forgetfulness for hours and days. At least two of the Chinese had consumption and coughed incessantly.

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The tides that washed this motley crew from the earth's four corners had dumped into our ship many who had seen better days. One tall Negro of the Chinese gang named Bob had been wealthy in a way until misfortune overtook him. He had made thousands of dollars smuggling Chinese coolies across the Mexican border and up to San Francisco and Oakland. How he packed the contraband Asiatics into the bottom of his Cadillac at Tia Juana, drove furiously over the highways by night and rested in the Chinatowns of Los Angeles and Fresno by day, would make a story in itself. He had done well at \$1,000 per head delivered in Oakland, but he tried opium and booze as side-lines and was arrested and fined the value of his bank account and car. Now he was trying to recoup at the gambling tables.

Another of our crew named Martini, a little fat man of inky-black complexion, had been at one time chief of police of Panama City. Now he was pitifully feeble and lay in his bunk day and night.

There was also an ex-pearl diver from Baja, Calif. He was a beautiful young animal whose black eyes flashed angrily as he softly cursed in strange Spanish the house of Meyer and Young, and called down maledictions on everything Alaskan.

In the fishermen's fo'castle were even more ex-celebrities.

Lying in his bunk, with a broken nose, acquired in a drunken fight, was a Russian Lett, called the "Baron." He had been one of the Lettish landed nobility, but the revolution laid him low. He was now living with and working beside a group of socialist Letts, and apparently forgetting all by-gones. The Bossun, also a Lett, was called the "Consul." He had been at one time Lettish consul to an European city, but now was a wanderer seeking to make enough money to return to his native land.

In the beach-gang was a splendidly built young Irishman, named Pat. The way he walked gave assurance that he had been a policeman. He had been a San Francisco "cop", and was trying to make a little stake on the trip to Alaska to permit him to go to college to study electrical engineering.

"Yoe" the night watchman, had been an innkeeper in Holland and his pal "Blackie" blacksmith of the Monkey-Wrench Gang, had been on the road to prosperity when the automobile had pushed him and his trade to the wall.

And so on. A stranger assortment of humans it would be hard to gather together in one ship, yet they had all been reduced to a sort of working equality by that most effective democratizer, misfortune. Holding them together was the great common denominator of hard luck,

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Leaning up against the pig-pen and gazing into the waves was a boy whose nationality would be hard to guess. He was probably Portuguese, but he was certainly a derelict. "Well, what do you think of the trip," I

asked, "Are you glad you came?" Well, I guess I am," he replied uncertainly, "Meyer got me out of jail on probation on the promise I'd take this trip. I reckon this is some better than jail, but I don't know."

What does Alaska think of the oriental labor contract system in its salmon fisheries? I had an unusually good chance to find out, and I can say that from Nushagak to Kodiak and from Seward to Seattle the people of Alaska are everlastingly opposed to its operation in their midst.....

... S.O. Casler of Valdez, for nine years chief U.S. deputy marshall for the Bristol Bay region, speaks with knowledge and authority.

"Seventy per cent of all the insane that Alaska is supporting come out of the salmon canneries," he told me, "and practically all of that 70 percent comes from the Chinese gangs.

"The gangs have meant nothing but trouble for Alaska. It's been a case of one "belly strike" after another. Two years ago we took 16 affidavits at one of these strike hearings. Low wages, poor food, dope peddling, booze, disease - these were a few of the effects of the Chinese gang system. The physical examination in the cannery ships is a joke.

One year we took out 13 insane from this district alone. Alaska gets an average of a dozen insane left up here a year. They are mostly Mexicans and other Latins, who go crazy from marahuana weed, or booze, venereal disease or overwork. It is costing the territory \$10,000 a year to care for these insane alone. What it costs in its effect on the natives no one knows. We want Alaska made safe for white cannery hands, not a dumping ground for all the cheap labor from the states.".....

.....W. S. Craig, former commissioner for Dillingham, Bristol Bay: "I've heard cases in Bristol Bay settlement for two years. The big majority of cases that came before me were those of the Chinese gangs. Its a shame the way they are treated and it is up to the companies to look into the situation. These gangs sell booze to our natives and take their last dollar. It would be better for our natives, if the canneries had never come.".....

H.E. Ellsworth, fish commissioner for the third district: "If I had my way I'd close up all the canneries for four years until we could work out some protective legislation. Go to our orphanages and you'll see the effect of the kind of labor the canneries are bringing up here. The workers they are sending up here are deteriorating our population, and adding to our crime and insanity problems."

Delegate Dan Sutherland, Seward: "We want white men sent up here to help us colonize Alaska. There ought to be a village every few miles of our 2000 miles of coast, like in Norway. As it is, the fisheries are being exploited for all the traffic will bear by a handful of capitalists. They want their capital back the first year. They treat the fisheries like a placer mine."

H. B. Selby, editor of the Seward "Gateway": "The oriental contract system should be abolished. The insane, criminal and diseased are left on our hands. They are the result of dope, booze and overwork, and they are the problem for the canneries. There are very few sour-doughs in our insane asylum. The big majority come from the cannery gangs. While the canneries are busy looting Alaska, they ought to at least be made to care for their insane."

Commissioner Tom Padden, Dillingham: "The Chinese gang system is a thoroughly bad institution. It brings the riff-raff of the states to Alaska and does us no good. I think the cannery owners themselves would find it to their advantage to do away with the system and hire for themselves a better type of workers."

Senator Chamberlain, member of the Alaska legislature from Seward: "Two-thirds of all our crime and insanity is traceable to the Chinese labor camps of our salmon canneries. They kill our game, sell booze to our natives, and then what little money they make they cannot spend outside the company stores. If Alaska had the power to make her own laws, she'd soon put a stop to it.".....

"The Chinese contract system is a relic of the feudal days, and has to go sooner or later. It's little better than slavery."

A. E. Rucker, former chief deputy clerk of the third division:

"Alaska wants white labor. The Chinese contract system is repulsive to our ideal of Americanism. Moreover, we don't want their grappa and their dope brought up here to contaminate our natives. You only have to live in Seward and see every year the insane brought out of the cannery region to realize what the effects of the system are."

Thus speaks Alaska. One could quote to the limit of all its 20,000 people, for they do not love the canneries and their ways. The people of Alaska don't mind hard work and certainly they aren't squeamish, but they insist on fair play. And the Alaskans figure that the canneries, with their Chinese gang system, have gone a bit too far."

"Why do you turn the hiring and caring for your workmen over to absentee Chinamen, whose only interest can be to exploit them?" I asked C. H. Bentley, head of the California Packing Corp., which five years ago absorbed the Alaska Packers Ass'n, the biggest salmon combination in the world.

Bentley is a thoughtful and kindly-appearing type of capitalist. He is one of the "new school" and since taking over the salmon fisheries has been doing a lot to improve the housing facilities in the company's many canneries.

"Well," he smiled, "it's always been done that way, and it's always worked satisfactorily."

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The usual excuse for the system is that it saves the cannery superintendents a lot of trouble. The Alaska Packers' Ass'n has given orders to hire no white men and the company figures, a Chinaman knows best how to scout the other kind.

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Salmon packers will, however, in the future have to begin to apply to their industry the same yardstick that other industries in the states are measuring up to.

They will not only have to adopt the Chicago packers economy slogan and save all the salmon but the scales. They will not only have to quit washing fish. They will have to quit wasting human beings.

The salmon packers will have to live up to the fact that California, Oregon, Washington and Alaska are not a part of China, Japan or "barbarous Mexico" but belong to the U.S.A. and that they are living not in the days of feudalism, but in 1933. And the U.S.A. in 1922 means quite the opposite of the conditions such as I found them in the Chinese gangs.

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