

"Day of Inclusion" shines light on dark history

By LARRY MITCHELL - Staff Writer | Posted: 12/17/2009 12:00:00 AM PST

CHICO -- Although it's not widely known yet, today has been given the job of teaching about a time when Chinese people suffered violence in many parts of California, including Chico.

The campaign to designate Dec. 17 as the "Day of Inclusion" in California began when an artist named Steve Yee set out to learn more about his father. Yee's dad was among thousands of men who came to America illegally from China. For that reason, he didn't use his real name, and he never spoke about his origins. Yee, who lives in Sacramento, couldn't find out much about his father, but he did learn a lot about what he calls "the Driving Out."

This occurred in the late 1800s, when Chinese workers faced violence from angry whites. Chico's history in the 1870s typifies what happened, according to Michele Shover, a retired Chico State University political-science professor. Thousands of Chinese immigrated to America legally in the 1850s and 1860s. They were needed as cheap labor, Shover said. Many worked to build the first railroad lines across the country.

When the railroads were finished, the Chinese spread out, settling in communities and looking for work. As they competed with white people for jobs, the Chinese encountered hostility. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. It said no more Chinese could come to America. One exception was sons of U.S. citizens. That's why Yee's father entered the United States under false pretenses, claiming to be the son of a citizen. The Exclusion Act stood until Dec. 17, 1943. It was repealed, because America wanted to earn favor with China, which was helping in the war against Japan.

In her book "Exploring Chico's Past ... and Other Essays," Shover details the anti-Chinese movement in Chico during the 1870s. It was fueled by an economic depression that swept across the nation and reached Chico by 1875. Many businesses closed, and a lot of men were out of work.

Chico, at that time, had a population of 3,700, several hundred of whom were Chinese, Shover said. The Chinese were industrious and worked for very low pay, as domestic help, in laundries and on ranches. As resentment built, the town was divided between pro-Chinese and anti-Chinese whites. A local chapter of an organization called the Order of Caucasians formed, which tried to persuade white people to only patronize businesses owned by whites and to only hire whites. Town hall meetings were held, attended by hundreds of irate white men. A group of 60 or so men formed a vigilante unit and planned to rid the town of the Chinese by force.

Before long, members of this group burned down a Chinese-owned butcher shop. And then, on the night of March 14, 1877, six of Chico's white citizens went to a shack where some Chinese were staying. The Chinese were working on a ranch near Deadhorse Slough, not far from where Marsh Junior High School stands today. The armed men entered the shack, robbed the Chinese and shot six of them. Four of the victims died.

Of the attackers, five were caught and tried. They were sentenced to long terms at San Quentin. However, most people in Chico sympathized with the killers and viewed them as "victims," Shover wrote. They petitioned the governor, who agreed to set four of the five prisoners free after four years.

These events in Chico were very typical of the "Driving Out," Yee said, explaining he'd read that "31 urban centers from Los Angeles to Red Bluff ... underwent burning of Chinatowns and anti-Chinese expulsions."

One of those burned Chinatowns was in Sacramento, near where the Amtrak station is today. It was called Yee Fow. Yee hopes to start a museum there dedicated to promoting tolerance and spreading knowledge of the "Driving Out." Yee's organization, the Yee Fow Museum, sponsored legislation (Assembly Concurrent Resolution 76) that passed this year, establishing Dec. 17 as the Day of Inclusion.

Assemblyman Mike Eng, D-Monterey Park, who is of Chinese ancestry himself, authored the legislation. He hopes the Day of Inclusion will become widely observed as time goes on, he said. "It is incumbent on us to know about this dark day in history."