

## ROCK SPRINGS RIOT SEPTEMBER 2, 1885

During the 1870s and 1880s, violence against Chinese immigrants became commonplace. Many towns and cities in the western states had anti-Chinese clubs whose principle objective was to agitate for anti-Chinese legislation, harass Chinese residents, encourage boycott of Chinese-produced goods and Chinese businesses, and to force Chinese residents out of town.

Initially in Rock Springs, Wyoming Territory, white and Chinese miners worked together and were on good terms. However when the Chinese refused to join in a strike for higher wages, a mob of 150 white miners attacked the Chinese, killing twenty-eight and wounding fifteen. Many of the Chinese fled to the safety of the hills surrounding town. Not long after this incident, a similar attack took place in Washington. Several Chinese were killed in Seattle and several hundred Chinese immigrants were driven out of Tacoma by force.

The following newspaper articles about the Wyoming attack appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

### The Anti-Chinese Riots

#### The Effort to Drive the Mongolians From Wyoming.

CHEYENNE, September 3.—The worst has evidently not been told regarding the anti-Chinese riots in the west part of Wyoming... The Rock Springs miners took the initiative and the result there has been announced. The mob at that place looted the houses of the Chinese before setting fire to them. The outrage commenced in Mine No. 6, where three Chinese miners were attacked and killed. Then the riot spread all over town, even women joining with loaded shotguns in their hands. Superintendent Evans of the coal mines was warned to leave town, and he did so with alacrity, passing through here today, en route for Omaha. Nothing can be heard from Carbon. The operator there is evidently afraid to send the news.

CHICAGO, September 3.—News from Rock Springs, Wy. T., indicates a worse state of affairs than that reported last night. Over 500 Chinamen have been driven out of town. Fifteen dead Chinamen have thus far been discovered, and as many more dead bodies are probably in the ruins. Fifty houses belonging to the railroad company and fifty more owned by the Chinamen were burned. The Chinamen are yet in the hills west of town without food, and afraid to go to the Green River City, distant about ten miles. No more disturbance is anticipated. Food will be sent to the starving Chinamen in the hills by the authorities.

## The Wyoming Riot

### What Will China Do?

WASHINGTON, September 5.—The Secretary of the Chinese Legation informed the Chronicle's correspondent to-night that so far the Chinese Legation was without any facts in regard to the Chinese who are reported to have been killed in Wyoming. He said he was certain that there would be some correspondence with the State Department in regard to the matter, but he was not able to state whether the Chinese Legation would claim any monetary damages. On the other hand, persons who are well posted on international law say that this country can offer the numerous violations of the Immigration Act by subjects of China as a set-off to any damages that China may claim. An attache of the Japanese Legation, who has resided for twenty-five years in China, says he does not think the Chinese Legation will take any action in this matter, but will allow it to pass unnoticed...

### The Diplomatic Aspect

Dr. McCartee of this city, who resided in China for forty years speaking concerning the diplomatic aspect of the massacre of Chinese in Wyoming, says he thinks it may be the subject of correspondence between the Chinese Foreign Office and the State Department here, but he does not think China is likely to use vigorous action in the matter. In the first place, he says the Chinese Government is opposed to the emigration of her subjects. There is a Chinese law which has been in force until within a few years which absolutely prohibited Chinamen leaving the country to make their homes elsewhere. Through the intervention of the English the Chinese officials were induced to relax the rigor of this law, and it has of late years become almost a dead letter; but still the policy of the government is against Chinamen leaving the country. Chinese immigrants in this country, while not exactly outlawed in their own country, are looked upon with disfavor. Under these circumstances Dr. McCartee thinks the Chinese officials will not care much about the Wyoming affair and it will not become generally known in China.

*Contrary to the experts' opinions, the Chinese did view the attack seriously. On learning of the riot, the head of the Chinese legation in the United States sent three Chinese officials, one of whom was the consul at New York, to Wyoming to investigate. What follows are excerpts from a letter given to the Chinese consul of New York by Chinese miners who had survived the massacre.*

**Memorial of Chinese Laborers Resident at Rock Springs,  
Wyoming Territory, to the Chinese Consul at New York  
(1885)**

We, the undersigned, have been in Rock Springs, Wyoming Territory, for periods ranging from one to fifteen years, for the purpose of working on the railroads and in the coal mines.

Up to the time of the recent troubles we had worked along with the white men, and had not had the least ill feeling against them. The officers of the companies employing us treated us and the white man kindly, placing both races on the same footing and paying the same wages.

Several times we had been approached by the white men and requested to join them in asking the companies for an increase in the wages of all, both Chinese and white men. We inquired of them what we should do if the companies refused to grant an increase. They answered that if the companies would not increase our wages we should all strike, then the companies would be obliged to increase our wages. To this we dissented, wherefore we excited their animosity against us.

During the past two years there has been in existence in "Whitemen's Town," Rock Springs, an organization composed of white miners, whose object was to bring about the expulsion of all Chinese from the Territory. To them or to their object we paid no attention...

Soon after, the mob on the hill behind Coal Pit No.3 came down from the hill, and joining the different squads of the mob, fired their weapons and pressed on to Chinatown.

The Gang that was at the plank bridge also divided into several squads, pressing near and surrounding "Chinatown." One squad of them guarded the plank bridge in order to cut off the retreat of the Chinese....

Some of the Chinese were killed at the bank of Bitter Creek, some near the railroad bridge, and some in "Chinatown." After having been killed, the dead bodies of some were carried to the burning buildings and thrown into the flames. Some of the Chinese who had hid themselves in the houses were killed and their bodies burned; some, who on account of sickness could not run, were burned alive in the houses. One Chinese was killed in "Whitemen's

## I The Chinese Experience in 19th Century America

Town” in a laundry house, and his house demolished. The whole number of Chinese killed was twenty-eight and those wounded fifteen...

When the Chinese fled to the different hills they intended to come back to “Chinatown” when the riot was over, to dispose of the dead bodies and to take care of the wounded. But to their disappointment, all the houses were burned to ashes and there was then no place of shelter for them; they were obliged to run blindly from hill to hill...

We never thought that the subjects of a nation entitled by treaty to the rights and privileges of the most favored nation could, in a country so highly civilized like this, so unexpectedly suffer the cruelty and wrong of being unjustly put to death, or of being wounded and left without the means of cure, or being abandoned to poverty, hunger, and cold, and without the means to betake themselves elsewhere.

To the great President of the United States, who, hearing of the riot, sent troops to protect our lives, we are most sincerely thankful.

In behalf of those killed or wounded, or of those deprived of their property, we pray that the examining commission will ask our minister to sympathize, and to endeavor to secure the punishment of the murderers, the relief of the wounded, and compensation for those despoiled of their property, so that the living and the relatives of the dead will be grateful, and never forget his kindness for generations.

Hereinabove we have made a brief recital of the facts of this riot, and pray your honor will take them into your kind consideration.

[the letter is then signed by 559 Chinese laborers who were residents of Rock Springs at the time of the attack].

When it became obvious to the Chinese officials that none of the guilty parties would be punished, the Chinese minister in Washington pressed the United States government to make reparations. The U.S. government did not accept legal liability for the Chinese losses, but President Cleveland, in a gesture of generosity, requested Congress to pay compensation to the surviving Chinese. Finally, in February 1887, Congress passed a bill authorizing payment to the Chinese.

● ASSIGNMENT

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PART I In a group, discuss the following questions and summarize your group's responses to the questions in the space provided.

1. What is the main purpose of this letter?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Would you characterize this attack as spontaneous or premeditated?

Why?

Does it matter?

3. Did the United States government have an obligation to respond to this incident? To pay damages to the Chinese for the loss of property and loss of life? To take action to prevent future incidents similar to this?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Did the Chinese government have an obligation to respond to this incident? To take action to prevent future incidents similar to this? How could China have intervened on behalf of its citizens living in the United States?

PART II Independent inquiry:

The treatment of the Chinese in the United States happened within the context of world affairs and international relations. Had China been a stronger nation at the time, anti-Chinese sentiment and violence would have been treated much more seriously and tactfully by the United States government. What factors determine whether or not a nation can protect its citizens, even when they are living under the rules and regulations of another country? Should China have done more to demand fair treatment for its citizens who had immigrated to the United States?

Research an incident in which an instance of violence, injustice, or imprisonment of an individual (or group) has turned into an international incident. Write a report summarizing the incident and explain how the government intervened on behalf of its citizens. Include the different arguments made for and against the action that was taken.

*Some incidents you could investigate:*

In 1992, a Japanese student, Yoshi Hattori, was shot dead in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Terry Anderson, an American journalist, was held hostage in Lebanon and now has a lawsuit against the Iranian government.

In 1979, the American Embassy in Iran was seized and the embassy staff held hostage.

The involvement of the governments of Cuba and the United States in the custody of six-year old Cuban refugee, Elian Gonzales.

An American teenager was flogged with a cane in Singapore as punishment for vandalism.

Americans in prison in Peru, Turkey, and other countries on drug charges. For example, American Lori Benensen was sentenced to life in prison in Peru, but was subsequently released.

Foreign nationals (British, Saudi) captured by the U.S. in Afganistan and imprisoned in Guantanamo.