

*Hercules resident Ashley Connelley wrote the following paper for a class called “History of the West” for Professor Mark Brilliant, at UC Berkeley in Spring 2006. The assignment was very broad, and she could research any topic focused on “the west” but had to use mainly primary sources (she used mostly newspaper articles from the UC Berkeley micro-film library). As there appeared to be very little written about the factory, this sparked her interest in pursuing the topic. Ashley has allowed the Hercules Historical Society to post this paper on its web site.*

*On October 14, 2008, a plaque dedicated to the Chinese workers in Hercules was included in a dedication ceremony for the City of Hercules’ newest park called Frog Pad Park (located at Sycamore Avenue and Willet Street). The plaque is imbedded in a stone that together are considered a monument and is in front of a ginkgo tree. Members of the Chinese Association of Hercules and the Hercules Historical Society were joined by the Hercules City Council and provided those present with the background information to explain the inclusion of the plaque and tree at this particular site. Photographs of the tree and monument can be viewed on the HHS web site.*

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### Hercules Powder and Chinese Labor

The city of Hercules, 13 miles north of the Bay Bridge, became the site of California Powder Works in 1881. Hercules was named after the company’s major product, Hercules Black Powder. The plant was ideally located near the Southern Pacific Railroad and along the San Pablo Bay. The isolated location of the company town was necessary because of the explosive nature of the company’s product. The work in the factory was extremely dangerous and between the plant’s opening in 1882 and the turn of the century, there were at least seven deadly explosions. The most destructive explosion occurred in 1908. The town, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, employed both white and Chinese workers. Newspaper coverage of each explosion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often demonstrated the tension between white and Chinese workers. With increasing anti-Chinese sentiment in California and the United States in the 1860s and 1870s, and the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the company town experienced a demographic shift. At the town’s opening, Chinese workers made up the majority of the plant’s labor force and by 1913 the town

no longer employed Chinese workers.<sup>1</sup> Hercules and its explosive dynamite plant employed Chinese workers for the plant's most dangerous positions, resulting in the death of a disproportionate number of Chinese workers to white workers. The small company town of Hercules felt vibrations from the government's Chinese Exclusion policies, resulting in differential treatment between white and Chinese workers at the plant as well as differentiating representation in both local and international newspapers, which covered the many explosions at the plant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

California in 1879, prior to the United States' Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which limited Chinese laborers from migrating into the country, adopted its second Constitution, which declared Chinese people as an "undesirable" race to be excluded from California.<sup>2</sup> Chinese were viewed as an enemy to working class white men. *Puck Magazine* released a political cartoon, picturing conversation between a Chinese man and an American missionary in China which read, "Why is it," asked the thoughtful Chinese, "that I may go to your Heaven, while I may not go to your country?" The American missionary shrugged his shoulders. "There is no labor vote in Heaven."<sup>3</sup> With this anti-Chinese sentiment, why would Chinese workers want to migrate to the United States? The attraction to California from China was enormous as laborers, while earning three to five dollars a month in South China in the 1850s could typically make one dollar a day in California.<sup>4</sup> Working ten hours a day and six days a week in the Hercules plant, Chinese workers commonly made \$1.25 or \$1.50 per day.<sup>5</sup> Between white workers and Chinese workers at the plant, there were large pay discrepancies and job assignment differences.

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<sup>1</sup> Cori Ojala and Kevin McGrath, "Remembering Days Past: Hercules 1879 to 1987" (bound, Hercules, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Philip Choy, Lorraine Dong and Marlon K. Hom, eds., *The Coming Man: 19th Century American Perceptions of the Chinese* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 169.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Jack Chen, *The Chinese in America* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1980), 61.

<sup>5</sup> Ojala and McGrath, *Remembering Days Past: Hercules 1879 to 1987*

Chinese workers earned less and worked in the most dangerous of the plant's buildings. The men in the nitroglycerine and mixing house departments "received large salaries as the work was so dangerous. The white men received on average \$150 to \$200 per month. The Chinese received \$1.50 per day and furnished their own board."<sup>6</sup> The newspaper article reflects the acceptance of wage discrepancy practiced during this time of anti-Chinese movements. In the 1883 explosion at the plant, forty Chinese workers and one white man were killed. The white man was the overseer in the room for the Chinese workers.<sup>7</sup> In nearly every explosion, the number of Chinese workers killed far outnumbered the deaths of white workers. Chinese workers were assigned to work in the two most dangerous buildings, as an article after the 1895 explosion described that, "the more dangerous part of the work is in the nitroglycerine house and the mixing department."<sup>8</sup> The explosions that occurred at the Hercules plant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries each originated in one of these two main buildings. To clarify the differences between white and Chinese employment, after the explosion of 1908, the description of the victims read, "William Stillwell, foreman of dynamite packing house [and] twenty Chinese laborers in packing house."<sup>9</sup> White men, when white employment was low at the factory, seemed to hold administrative positions only while Chinese workers labored in dangerous departments.

Often the blame for the explosions was placed on Chinese workers, possibly because of the greater number of Chinese workers in the dangerous positions but also seemingly as a testament of anti-Chinese feelings. On May 21, 1895 in an explosion that killed nine Chinese workers and five white workers, newspapers pronounced that, "it is believed that a Chinaman dropped a can of nitroglycerine, and that the concussion from this explosion caused the greater

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<sup>6</sup> "Frightful Explosion," *Oakland Times* 2 Sep 1896.

<sup>7</sup> "Destruction of Powder Works," *New York Times* 12 Jan 1882.

<sup>8</sup> "Death's Awful Harvest at Pinole," *San Francisco Call* 22 May 1895.

<sup>9</sup> "Twenty Four Killed and Five Injured by Dynamite Explosions," *San Francisco Call* 21 Feb 1908.

disaster.”<sup>10</sup> Most causes of the explosions could not be proven because those who knew the cause were often killed in the disaster. Newspapers, often reflecting the thoughts of the acting superintendents of the Hercules plant, did not hesitate to print the improvable hypotheses for causes of the disasters. On July 27, 1898, the *Oakland Tribune*'s headline read “Blown up by a Fiend,” in huge capital letters, to introduce the article for the explosion at Hercules the day before. The beginning of the article described, “one week ago a Chinese fiend incarnate fired the powder magazine in the Western Fuse and Explosives Company works...today, by a fiend unknown but not less incarnate, the nitroglycerine house of the Hercules Powder Works [was also] fired.”<sup>11</sup> The disaster was written about as the work of a traitor and the article describes that, as bystanders came to witness the destruction, “angry threats were made...as to what they would do if the miscreant who had caused the wreck was discovered.”<sup>12</sup> The possibility of sabotage always seemed to haunt factory leaders' minds. As the twentieth century approached, the factory was feeling the vibrations of the anti-Chinese labor movement. Chinese workers were often seen as industrious and skilled laborers but consequently this became viewed as a threat to the working class white male. In 1883 there were twenty white employees in the plant and 125 Chinese workers while by 1895 there were 100 white workers and seventy-five Chinese workers. A *Los Angeles Times* article described that, “the prevailing belief is that it was the spite of some discharged employee anxious to injure the company.”<sup>13</sup> The plant, between its opening in 1882 and this explosion in 1895, shifted its workforce dramatically toward a majority of white workers. The view toward Chinese workers was reflected, not only in the workplace, but also in the living and social arrangements of the company town.

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<sup>10</sup> "Fourteen Lives are Lost: Result of an Explosion in a California Powder Mill," *New York Times* 22 May 1895.

<sup>11</sup> "Blown Up by a Fiend," *Oakland Tribune* 27 July 1898.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> "Deadly Gun Cotton," *Los Angeles Times* 28 July 1898.

Housing in the company town was divided between three distinct groups of workers. Administrative personnel were located on a ridge of land, which became known as “the hill”, and worker’s housing was down the western slope of the hill in the “village.” The ridge provided protection from the dangerous explosions of the plant.<sup>14</sup> In these single-family style homes, many men would live with their wives and children. The Chinese workers were housed in dormitories that were located only 200 yards from the plant’s main entrance. The dormitories were long wooden buildings lined with bunks that were four feet by six feet, and housed only men. While Chinese workers were employed at the plant, the dorms were known as “China Camp.”<sup>15</sup> The company began creating a plan for the Hercules Club House in 1897 for its workers. Women and Chinese workers, however, were excluded from the club’s facilities and from participating in its social activities.<sup>16</sup> The seclusion of the Chinese in the company town further reflected growing feelings toward Chinese people in California and the United States at the time.

The day following each explosion in the Hercules factory, local and international papers recalled the accidents in articles that repeatedly excluded the Chinese workers from the recognition given to the white workers. The blast was most often the headline of the day’s paper in local news, appearing in large font and on the front page of the newspaper. The headline would nearly always announce the number of fatalities, such as the *New York Times* in 1895 which read, “Fourteen Lives are Lost: Result of an Explosion in a California Powder Mill,” and the *San Francisco Call* in 1908, which read, “Twenty Four Killed and Five Injured by Dynamite Explosions.” Following the headline, the articles always differentiated between the number of Chinese workers and the number of white men that were killed in the explosion. Internationally

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<sup>14</sup> Ojala and McGrath, *Remembering Days Past: Hercules 1879 to 1987*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

and locally, papers listed the names of each white man and often wrote a short biography while the Chinese workers were not named or recognized except by the number of “Chinamen” fatalities. The *Los Angeles Times*, after the 1895 explosion, read, “The fatalities are as follows: Clare Johnson, foreman of the glycerin house of Pinole, H. Minugh of Oakland...nine Chinamen.”<sup>17</sup> On September 1, 1896, the *Oakland Tribune*’s evening edition read “Extra! Twelve Men Killed” and described, “Fritz, Garcia, McCarthy, and Carter are the names of the white men. The rest were Chinese.”<sup>18</sup> Refusing to name the Chinese men while naming the white men further demonstrated the general societal position on the “Chinese issue” at the time. This dehumanized the laborers. The *San Francisco Call* released an article the following day about the 1896 explosion that described how “[yesterday afternoon] grief was hurled into four happy families at Pinole.”<sup>19</sup> Although eight Chinese men died in this same explosion, they were not mentioned here. The Chinese men that were killed in the accident were referred to only as “eight Chinamen, names unknown.”<sup>20</sup> John Fritz, who died in the explosion, was described in the *Oakland Times* as “a native of Portugal, [about] 45 years of age. He was married and had eight children that were dependent upon him for support.”<sup>21</sup> Newspapers commonly seemed to invoke pity for the white men who sacrificed their lives for their occupation but Chinese workers were never recognized as individuals.

Despite the lack of recognition given to Chinese workers, there were rare exceptions when newspapers acknowledged the men as exceptional workers. After the May 22, 1895 explosion in Hercules, Superintendent Alexander Pollock, despite the blame being placed upon the Chinese workers for the explosion, announced to reporters that, “I have never had a more

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<sup>17</sup> "Worst Yet: Another Explosion at Pinole," *Los Angeles Times* 22 May 1895.

<sup>18</sup> "Twelve Men Killed." *Oakland Tribune* 1 Sep 1896.

<sup>19</sup> "Explosion at Pinole," *San Francisco Call* 2 Sep 1896.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Frightful Explosion*, 1

competent, more steady, conscientious, and reliable crew at work in the nitroglycerine house than were those poor fellows.”<sup>22</sup> The nitroglycerine house, as one of the more dangerous buildings of the factory, typically employed more Chinese workers than white. In this accident, nine Chinese men died and four white men. In the *San Francisco Call* the day following the 1895 explosion, an article described that, “of the Chinamen killed, the best known was Lem Lock...he had been in the works here a good many years and was a general favorite, even among the Caucasians.”<sup>23</sup> Of three newspaper articles that covered the 1895 explosion, this was the only to name and describe a Chinese worker. By 1920 in the book *California and the Oriental*, the author described that, “while it has been generally considered that the presence in California of Oriental laborers has its most detrimental effect upon the laboring classes here, it has more recently been demonstrated that this is not a fact.”<sup>24</sup> By 1920 there were no Chinese men at work in Hercules and earlier in the century, it seemed that the danger of the work kept white men to different positions, encouraging Chinese workers to take jobs. It could have been the exceptional work of Chinese workers that employed the men at the Hercules plant but most likely it was the danger of the positions. Despite the occasional recognition of Chinese men as good laborers, it was extremely rare for newspapers to print the names of the Chinese workers, giving the honor only to white employees of the plant.

Chinese workers were separated from white workers in the more dangerous jobs at the Hercules plant and differentiated within news about the explosions of but furthermore, Chinese workers were set apart from whites after becoming victims of the explosions. The separation of white and Chinese workers in the Hercules factory can be best exemplified in the number of fatalities in each explosion. There were major explosions in 1882, 1883, 1886, 1895, 1896, 1898

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<sup>22</sup> *Death's Awful Harvest at Pinole*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> State Board of Control of California, *California and the Oriental* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 231.

and 1908. Between newspapers there were occasional discrepancies in the number of fatalities, especially for Chinese workers. In this twenty-six year span, there were approximately 106 deaths. Of this total, only eighteen were white workers, while the remaining eighty-eight were Chinese. Following the explosion on September 1, 1896, the *San Francisco Times* issued an article that described, “disfigured bodies lay side by side in the acid house that for many successive years has done duty...as a morgue. In another part of the charnel house, in small boxes, were the remains of eight Chinamen. Around them a small group of their countrymen were chattering, whether their excitement was due to grief or congratulation over their own fate, no white man can judge.”<sup>25</sup> Chinese workers, after the explosions, were kept apart from the white victims. They were continuously viewed as distinct from white workers. Newspaper articles induced the notion that Chinese individuals did not feel emotion or grief as did white families and friends of workers. Chinese workers were often represented as inhuman and many articles of the time included extremely graphic details of the victims of the Hercules disasters. The *New York Times* described forty Chinese workers in the mixing room in an 1883 blast being “blown to atoms,”<sup>26</sup> and in the *Los Angeles Times*, after the 1895 explosion at the Hercules plant, an article describes that, “toes, hands, legs and other parts of the mutilated remains of the dead are scattered along the road for a mile.”<sup>27</sup> Newspapers rarely spared their readers the details of the catastrophic explosions, which disproportionately took the lives of Chinese workers.

The dynamite factory in Hercules, upon its opening in 1881, relied heavily on Chinese labor until 1913, when the last Chinese laborer left the plant. Newspaper accounts of the explosion accidents commonly printed varied numbers of victims and those injured. Between 1881 and 1908, of eight explosions, there were approximately 106 victims, and seventy five

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<sup>25</sup> *Explosion at Pinole*

<sup>26</sup> "Forty Chinamen Killed," *New York Times* 2 Oct 1883.

<sup>27</sup> *Worst Yet: Another Explosion at Pinole*, 1

percent of those killed were Chinese. With the opening of the plant, there were a majority of Chinese workers and by 1895, this shifted to a majority white work force until 1913 when the plant employed only white workers. Newspaper coverage of the various explosions emphasized the differences between Chinese and white workers in the Hercules factory by differentiating between the numbers of whites and Chinese victims. Particularly, by naming the white workers while simply assigning a number to the Chinese victims, newspapers dehumanized Chinese workers, consistently referring to them as “x Chinamen.” Chinese Exclusion played a role in the shifting demographic of the plant throughout the turn of the century and the coverage of the explosions exemplified the positions given to Chinese men and the different outlook within mainstream society between the working class white man and the Chinese worker.

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