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Description

A backlash against Chinese Workers in the 1850's leads to the Chinese Exclusion Act, perhaps the harshest anti-immigration legislation in American history.

Keywords


Citation

MLA
The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

NARRATOR: Chinese immigrants began flooding into the United States in the 1850s, attracted by opportunities in the American West. They were escaping poverty and unrest in China, and filling jobs in the new American mining and railroad industries.

Professor MARIA MONTOYA (New York University): And they were considered to be very pliable labor, very inexpensive labor. Labor that would work no matter what the circumstances were, no matter what, how dangerous it was.

NARRATOR: Within thirty years, about 200,000 Chinese had settled in the U.S. But by the 1870s, a backlash against them had grown large and violent.

Professor EDWARD T. O’DONNELL (Holy Cross College): They faced a lot of discrimination, a lot of racial intolerance, because they were seen as working for lower wages, taking jobs at a time when unemployment was 25, 30 percent in some communities. The Chinese become the scapegoat for American workers on the west coast, especially, for all the economic troubles.

NARRATOR: The railroad companies turned against Chinese workers after they began to organize for better pay and a shorter workday. In 1867, when five thousand Chinese Central Pacific Railroad workers went on strike, the company simply cut off their food supplies until the starving workers agreed to return to work one week later.

O’DONNELL: And so there's the “throw the Chinese out” movement. Labor unions line up with it. The American Working Man's Party is founded principally on this issue. And they pressure Congress, and Congress eventually agrees to pass its first immigration restriction law in 1882, explicitly targeting Chinese immigrants as undesirables.

NARRATOR: The Chinese Exclusion Act banned Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States for ten years. It also prevented the Chinese already in the U.S. from becoming citizens. Congress renewed the law in 1892, and made it permanent in 1902. It was not until 1943 that the Act was repealed, allowing Chinese immigration and granting citizenship to Chinese nationals already residing in the country. But by
then, many once-thriving Chinese communities in the U.S. had nearly disappeared.