

# High Desert Journal

WITNESS TO THE WEST





*Ranch barn near Fossil, Oregon, August 13, 2011. By Thomas Osborne*

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ISSUE 14, FALL 2011

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## COVER

Fred Birchman  
*Prairie*  
Charcoal, graphite, watercolor and stains on paper.  
28 × 52 inches. 2009

# WHAT

PHOTOGRAPHS OF CHINESE EXPULSION SITES

# YOU SEE

THE LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN WEST ARE littered with the fascinating histories of diverse people and places, but few stories are less well-known than the plight of Chinese immigrants in our country. Throughout the latter half of the 19th century Chinese settlers contributed significantly to the development of our country while enduring repeated acts of horrendous institutionalized racism. Between 1850 and 1910 at least 153 incidents of major mob or group violence against Chinese immigrants were known to have happened in 14 Western states, but the complete toll of the violence will never be known.

For the past four years I've been documenting sites where documented violence against Chinese immigrants in the West took place. It began with a simple place name that appeared on a map: "Chinese Massacre Cove." I was



researching possible locations to photograph in Hells Canyon, a deep river gorge on the Oregon-Idaho border, when I came across a reference to this oddly named place. I'd never heard of it before, and the name certainly intrigued me. It wasn't long before I learned that this was the site of one of the most notorious incidents in U.S. history, part of a little-known series of events that have collectively come to be known as the Chinese Expulsion. What started as an intriguing name became an obsession about a history I didn't know and places that have been forgotten.

Since this unexpected beginning, I've traveled thousands of miles throughout the West in search of more information about what took place. I discovered that, unlike many historical sites, there was almost no recognition of the specific locations where these events took place. For most sites there are no plaques or markers, no guidebook references – nothing at all to indicate what happened. They have simply been transformed by time and neglect, easier to be forgotten than considered for what happened there.

To make these photographs I've spent hundreds of hours reading new and old books, journals, magazines and newspapers; pouring over old records and maps; and meeting with local historians and residents in order to come up with as accurate information as possible about the specific sites where these events took place. Each image has come

as the result of solving a puzzle, usually starting with deciphering old descriptions of locations, then tracking changes in street and place names and finally trying to match the written information with the physical location.

One of the disconcerting things I learned was that the violence against Chinese immigrants was not defined by place or population. Terrible incidents happened equally in major cities, smaller towns and in isolated locations. I couldn't help but think about parallels between what happened then and what is taking place in our country right now.

Both periods are marked by a widespread lack of understanding of other cultures; both featured organized agitators who spewed out bigotry and hatred; and in both greedy business owners tried to profit by hiring immigrant workers at low wages. It is as though we are living out George Santayana's words, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

I took the title *What You See* from the old adage "What you see is what you get." In this case the title is both ironic and symbolic. What you see initially in these photos is often different from what you interpret after reading the accompanying text. You don't "get" what you see until you see what you're getting.

I also believe the title relates to some of the Euro-Americans of the 19th century who at best chose to see Chinese people as uncivilized and more often thought of them as "savages." The oppressors were driven by their own prejudices and ignorance, and it was easier to blame their troubles on what they decided to see in front of them rather than question what they were told by the agitators and officials.

I hope this project will do two things: help bring attention to this unfortunate time in

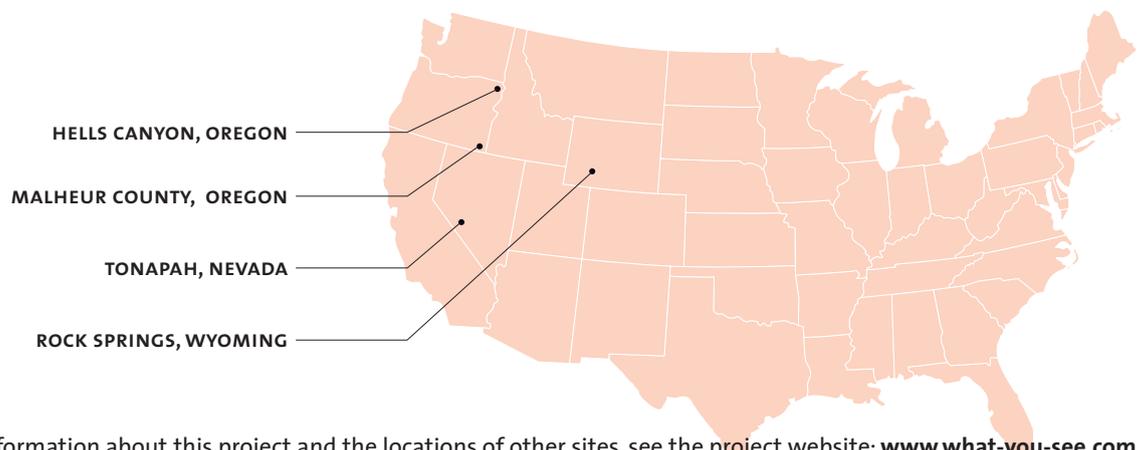
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**FOR MOST SITES THERE ARE NO PLAQUES OR MARKERS, NO GUIDEBOOK**

references – nothing at all to indicate what happened. They have simply been transformed by time and neglect, easier to be forgotten than considered for what happened there.

our past when bigotry and hatred ruled part of our society; and help us learn to think carefully about what we think we are seeing. The power of photography to shape our understanding of the world is limited only by our own understanding of the forces that influence our behaviors.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that my calling attention to these incidents in various cities is in no way a reflection on the people or officials of those cities today. In every city I've visited I've found diverse and robust communities that are both regretful of this part of the past and encouraging of a future that embraces many cultures and viewpoints. <HDJ>



For more information about this project and the locations of other sites, see the project website: [www.what-you-see.com](http://www.what-you-see.com)

## PHOTOGRAPHS OF CHINESE EXPULSION SITES

### Chinese Massacre Cove, Hells Canyon Oregon



*Unlike most other sites, the location of Chinese Massacre Cove has been well documented. Gregory Nokes, a former reporter for The Oregonian newspaper, has thoroughly researched this event and written a book about it, Massacred for Gold: The Chinese in Hells Canyon. The site is on the Snake River and is now within the boundaries of the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area. This photograph looks down into the cove area in the immediate foreground. It's likely that the Chinese miners would have been panning for gold at the river's edge, and they would have been easy targets from any of the higher vantage points around the cove (such as this one).*

GPS: 45° 46' 47.08" N, 116° 39' 17.71" W

ONE OF THE WORST CRIMES in Oregon history took place here in May, 1887. There are conflicting accounts of exactly what happened, but the following is known to be true. A group of at least 31 Chinese miners were camped on the river when a small group of white men surrounded them and opened fire.

All of the miners were killed, including one man who managed to escape the initial onslaught but was chased down and bludgeoned to death with a rock.

The site of the massacre is very isolated, and the killers might have gotten away had they not thrown the bodies of the Chinese into the river. About two weeks later several of the bodies washed up on the shores near Lewiston, Idaho, about 65 miles downstream.

Local officials conducted a minimal investigation, but the Chinese men's San Francisco-based employer, the Sam Yup Company, hired a local justice of the peace, Joseph Vincent, to look further into the crime. Vincent determined that the killers were a band of local horse thieves, and he got one of the group to testify against the others.

Three of the group of killers took off before they could be arrested, but another three finally stood trial. In the courtroom the killers claimed to have been motivated by the lure of gold that the Chinese miners were sure to have. However, no gold was ever found among those who were arrested, and even if that were the real intent they could have easily robbed the Chinese without murdering them.

The jury was not moved by the testimonies, and all three men were acquitted. A local rancher who attended the trial said "I guess if they had killed 31 white men, something would have been done about it, but none of the jury knew the Chinamen or cared much about it, so they turned the men loose."

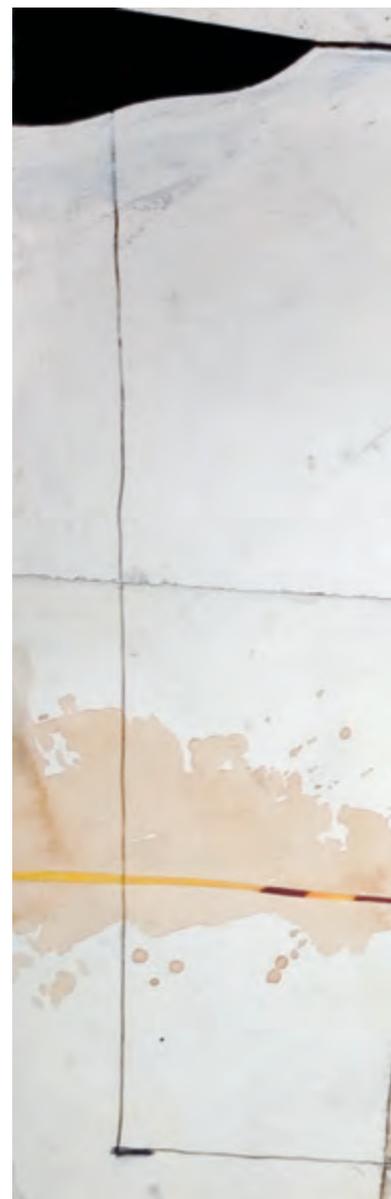


# DOWN TO THE **BONE**

DRAWINGS BY FRED BIRCHMAN

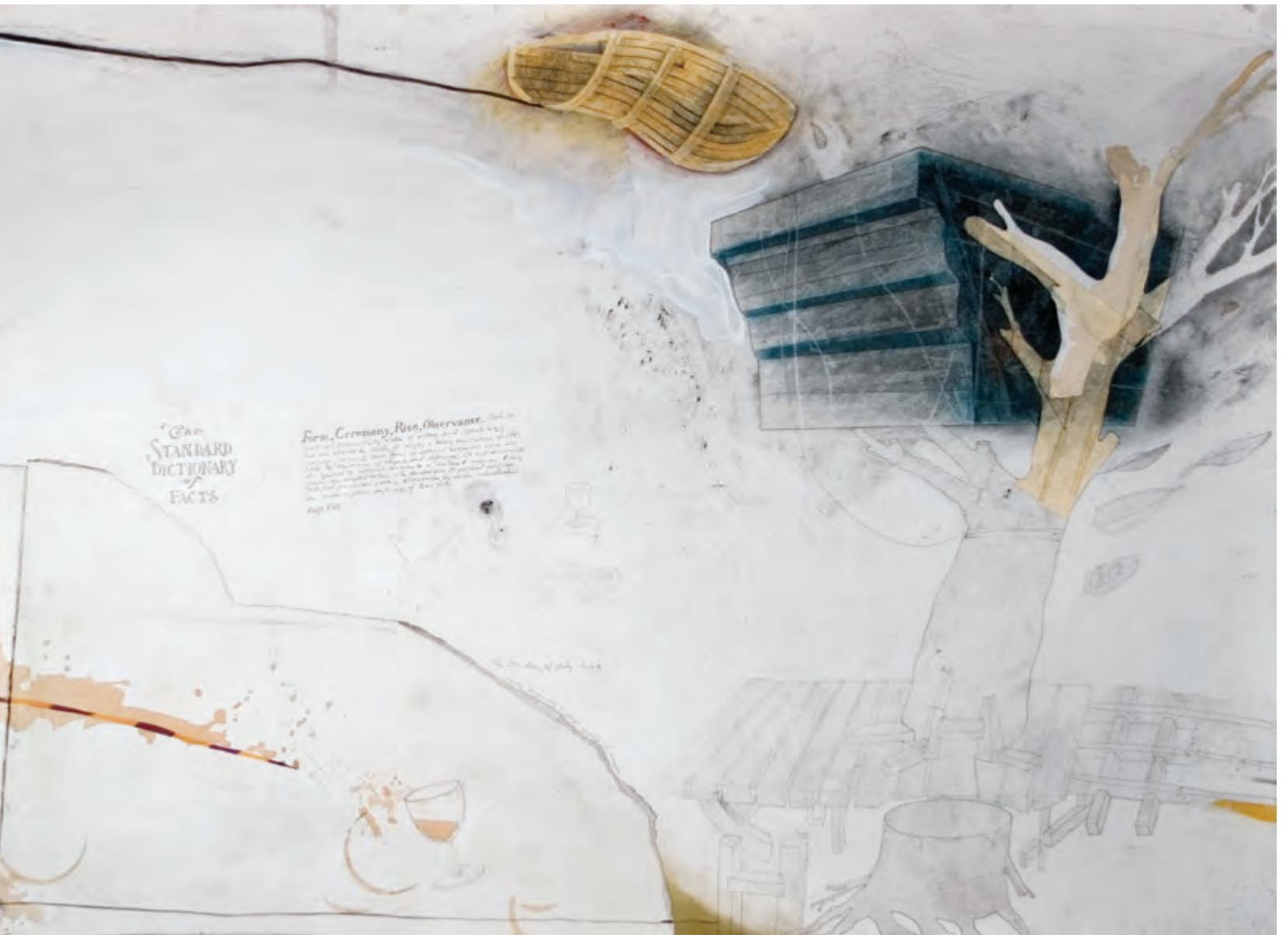


*Twister*  
2009  
Charcoal, graphite,  
acrylic and stains  
on paper  
35 × 65 inches



*Imam*  
2009  
Charcoal, graphite,  
acrylic, watercolor and  
stains on paper  
50 × 35 inches

*Celeste Mechanique*  
2010  
Charcoal, graphite,  
acrylic, watercolor  
and stains on paper  
24 × 45 inches



*Night*  
2008  
Charcoal, graphite  
and stains on paper  
50 x 35 inches

## SANCTUARY

The ducks are calm this morning. Why shouldn't they be –  
the storm is past, the golden sun is rising.

Yesterday's rain, last night's house-shaking wind  
have blown away, far over the distant rim

of the lake. Here birdsong rules, with rosy clouds  
reflecting what's to come. And though you know your country

is at war, know peace is still retreating  
in the deserts of another place, out here

you can almost believe that distant perils  
don't touch you. You can float upon the water like the ducks,

but still beneath, there's paddling:  
an hour south a pipeline's being laid;

it's gas that's burning in your cozy fireplace.  
Your haven is part of the gruesome world;

the gruesome world conceived this sweet retreat –  
where rusted tools mark out fresh garden beds

and birth is on the wing, and in your head.

– CECELIA HAGEN