

Lee Sing Biography

By Unknown

c. 1850-c.1900 Lee Sing was the Chinese chef in the lavish mansion of Portland socialite Charlotte Green, the grandmother to the Communist radical John Reed. Chinese servants were common in the affluent homes of Portland at the end of the nineteenth century though most lived separate from the Anglo community in the Chinatown district near Second Street between Pine and Taylor. The only record we have of Sing comes from an essay John Reed wrote in his freshman English class at Harvard.

In this essay Reed uses popular stereotypes to describe Sing as “honest, reserved, thrifty” and “a real artist” in the kitchen with “a scarcely veiled contempt for the white man.” Sing attended a Christian Missionary school in the area where he was exposed to Anglo culture and the English language. Before being hired by Charlotte Green, Sing owned a store in Chinatown. Reed suggested he was wealthy in comparison to other Chinese. Though Sing's specific motives to move to Oregon are unknown, most Chinese immigrants came to the region beginning in 1851 with the discovery of gold around the southern coast. By the 1870s these settlers had established a sizable community in Portland.

Despite his conversion to Christianity, Sing practiced several rituals that Reed believed had Chinese origins; he burned joss sticks and ate shark fin seasoned with chicken gizzard. He was adamantly opposed to the presence of others in his kitchen, and was a rumored alcoholic. Though he lived on the Green estate, each night Sing walked the mile and a half to Chinatown to return later that night in a hired coach for fear of being targeted by highwaymen.

It is unknown how or when Lee Sing died.

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