

# Death of the Chinese Field Hands

## CHAPTER ONE

When I first began the Herculean labor that writing my memoirs has turned out to be, I had fully intended to avoid relating the terrible events of the autumn of 1871. I had (and have) little taste for recounting the horrors we experienced the awful night of the riot and the weeks that followed.

However, my sweet grandniece often says that there may be lessons learned in the relating of the darkest times of our lives. Given that she spent the Great War in France, serving as a nurse on the front lines, I don't doubt her wisdom in that regard. Furthermore, not to relate these events would be a grave injustice to the memories of those who lost their lives during those weeks. And so, I begin.

It had been a long day that Tuesday, October 24, in the year of Our Lord 1871, and it was a blessing for my three Chinese field hands that it was. The day started with bringing in the last of the grapes for the angelica. My vineyards and winery were my principal support in those days. We had already harvested the cabernet and merlot two weeks before and the wine would soon be ready to move from the vats in which the grapes had fermented into the casks where it would age. The grapes for the angelica were always harvested last, as they did not ripen readily. Indeed, even when some of the grapes had already turned to raisins, there were still several green grapes among the clusters.

As the sun slowly sank toward the horizon, Wei Li and Wei Chin were still walking in the vats with several of the Ortiz children, crushing the grapes in

preparation for fermentation. Both were unusually tall for members of their race, with long, thin mustaches. Both had shaved the front of their scalps and wore the rest of their hair in long, braided queues down their backs, as did the vast majority of the Chinese did even while here.

Wang Fu, who was more traditionally statured and always wore a bright blue cap, worked alongside my partners in the venture, Sebastiano and Enrique Ortiz. I was wearing my red poplin work dress and moving the cleaned baskets to the back part of the winery barn.

We heard the first of the gunfire around five-thirty.

“Sounds like the big fight has started,” Hernan said, playfully nudging Wei Li.

Hernan Mendoza was one of the other field hands on Rancho de las Flores. He’d just brought in the last baskets of grapes. Wei Li grunted and kept walking the vat.

Wang Fu had told us earlier that there were rumors that there would be a fight that day between two rival companies on the Calle de los Negros, where the Chinese principally lived. The companies were home organizations that, by themselves, helped the Chinese who came to our fair shores navigate a society that was to them utterly strange and even barbaric. But as so often happens, there was a criminal element known as Tongks that became attached to some of the companies. It was rumored that one of the companies had hired Tong assassins from San Francisco to fight against the leader of a rival company.

Even so, we were not terribly concerned at first. After all, Los Angeles was a very rough place in those days and the sound of gunfire was almost pervasive. However, that evening, not only did the reports continue, they grew as if more and more guns were being fired.

“You would think there was a war on,” Sebastiano said, shaking his head.

"It may be," said Wang Fu quietly. He looked up at the Wei brothers, who looked frightened but did not say anything.

I wiped my hands on my apron. "That most certainly means there are injuries. I'd best get my bag and head over there."

Enrique and Sebastiano groaned quietly but did not bother to deter me. It would have done no good and they knew it.

"I go with you," said Wang Fu. His accent was getting much better, but it was still very heavy.

He had been trained as a physician in his native China and was becoming quite a help to me.

Armando, Enrique's son who was seventeen at the time, burst into the yard. Dark had settled by that point, and Armando was returning from his job at the Pico House hotel, around the corner from the Calle de los Negros.

"Wang Fu! Wei Li! Wei Chin!" Armando looked around, frantically. "Are they here?"

"We are in the grapes," Wei Chin said, nervously laughing.

Armando gasped. "You can't go home. There's a mob. I saw them take Ah Wing, one of the kitchen boys. They're calling for a lynching!"

"But what did this Mr. Ah do?" I asked.

"He didn't do anything!" Armando gulped, his face ashen in the light of the lamps scattered about the yard. "Leastways, I don't think so. But he was trying to run away, and some men caught him and Marshal Baker found a gun on him. They were screaming to lynch him and all of the Chinese, too. I was hoping our fellows would still be here, so I ran as fast as I could."

"Maddie," said Sebastiano. "Maybe we'd better wait to take care of people until things settle down."

I frowned, then shook my head. "That might be too late for the worst injured. But let us not throw all caution to the wind. Wang Fu, why don't you stay here? We can have the casualties brought here and you can

tend to them. Enrique, you can keep guard. Sebastiano, shall we?"

"Let me get my guns," Sebastiano said. "Armando, get yours and the rifle."

Both the Wei brothers and Mr. Wang looked at me and Mr. Wang spoke first.

"There is the Lee wash house and laundry," he said. "That is where we live. Please find Lee Won and Lee Ma. They are good people. If as bad as Mr. Armando say, they will be safe with you."

Both Sebastiano and I readily agreed. However, by the time we made it to the Calle de los Negros, it was worse than what Armando had said.

I have tried again and again to forget that most terrible of nights. Even now, two score and ten years later, I cannot escape the horror, the acrid stench of human blood and fear, the screams, the harsh laughter of the mob.

Sebastiano insisted that we skirt the group crowded around the Coronel adobe, which we later learned was at the center of the riot. Torch light flickered against the shadows of the men, as they cheered and yelled all manner of curses at the Chinese within the adobe. The other buildings on the Calle de los Negros were dark, although one would catch the occasional glimpse of a flickering torch inside a window. Raucous shouts confirmed that there was looting going on.

Near the end of the calle closest to the Plaza, we found the Lee wash house. It, too, was dark. Sebastiano called out and slowly slid into the door. He came out a few minutes later, shaking his head.

"They're gone?" I asked, my mouth going dry.

Sebastiano shrugged. "There is no one inside."

Even as I fervently hoped that meant the family had escaped, I knew that was by no means certain.

"Where could they be?" I asked.

I hurried into the house, pulling up wash tubs and checking behind corners, but Sebastiano was right. There was no one home.

Shaking, I went back to the street and toward the crowd near the Coronel Adobe, almost stumbling against an overturned wagon. There was another cheer and more gunfire. I ran behind the wash house, but there was no one there, either. The cheering grew louder again, and my heart sank.

I went back to the street, determined to search every building until I found the Lee family. Sebastiano emerged from an adobe across from the wash house. As I ran over to him, Armando trotted up from the plaza behind us and leaned against the wagon bed I had almost fallen over.

Suddenly, the boy put his forefinger to his lips and pointed down at the wagon. Muffled sounds of hushing came from within the wooden box that had formed the bed, then silence. We could hear more loud laughter and cheers from the other end of the street. I nodded at Sebastiano and Armando, and we circled the wagon slowly, certain that whoever was underneath the overturned box was terrified beyond all reckoning. I knelt next to the wagon box.

"We're here to help you escape," I said slowly and softly. "We will not harm you. We will bring you to safety."

There was dead silence within. I nodded at Armando and Sebastiano and they slowly raised the box. Huddled inside were two women and three men. They drew back in terror as they saw me.

"Lee Won? Lee Ma?" I asked. "Wang Fu, Wei Li and Wei Chin sent us to find you."

The oldest of the three men looked at me warily. "Wang Fu?"

There was more shouting and the bouncing light of torches slowly made their way toward us.

"Yes, Wang Fu," I said. "Hurry. We must get you to safety."

One of the women chattered at the old man, and he nodded.

"I Lee Won," he said. "We go."

We hurried along the adobe on the eastern side of the plaza, hoping to find Alameda Street and get back to the rancho. But a crowd suddenly burst into the plaza and came straight toward us, so we slunk up in front of the Pico House and went cautiously along the Calle Principal toward the jail. It was a very long way around to the ranch, but we hoped we'd be able to go around the worst of the riot.

Just beyond the new Merced Theater, we realized that there was a mob coming from behind us. We ducked into the nearest street to hide, little realizing what a terrible mistake we'd made. We pressed ourselves into the doorway of a darkened adobe, but we could still see the corral at Aliso and Los Angeles streets. Three bodies dangled from the gate's crosspiece, black against the flicking orange light of the torches. Men were binding a fourth struggling man, slipping the noose over his neck, while what looked like a boy danced on the top of the gate.

I couldn't help it. I burst from our hiding place, screaming at the men, but they did not hear me. Two other men tried to make themselves heard as they confronted the crowd, but they were pushed back or ignored.

I started to rush forward, but Sebastiano held me back.

"We cannot help them," he growled softly. "Not now. We must save Wang Fu's friends."

I looked back. The two men continued their fight to be heard over the mob and I had to give Sebastiano the truth of his reasoning. Loathe as I was to admit it, there was nothing I could do there, although it still grieves me to this day that I didn't try harder to stop the mob. We slipped our small group back up to the Calle Principal and were debating which way to go when a group of about eight men suddenly bore down on us, guns drawn.

"You'll give us those heathens," the leader called out in between all manner of foul words. I could

barely make out his face in the dark and the flickering torchlight, but his exceptionally full beard was dark, with the ends waving in the evening's breeze.

"I most certainly will not!" I said, positioning myself in front of our little band of refugees.

"Either hand them over or we'll shoot you like dogs," the leader crowed.

The men behind him laughed. Terrified, not only for myself, but for the people I guarded and my dearest of friends, I pressed my lips together.

"Shoot her, McKinley," growled one of the men behind the leader, I couldn't see who. "It's that lady doctor. She'll finally get what she's got coming to her."

It was not a sentiment with which I was unfamiliar, but it had never been used as an excuse to kill me before. The leader raised his gun. Armando and Sebastiano both cocked theirs.

"Hey, look over there!" a third man cried. "Let's go get after some of that!"

I have no idea if the men had, in fact, seen something more enticing or whether they merely didn't want to shoot us. Nonetheless, the men dashed off, although one lingered a moment, his face lost in the shadow of his hat. The torchlight glinted off the gold anchor watch fob that dangled from his vest pocket. Then he was gone, running after his fellows.

I swallowed and looked at Sebastiano. He nodded.

From there, we kept to the dark corners and eventually made it back to the rancho, thoroughly shaken but unharmed in body. I couldn't help looking back at the Calle de los Negros, and the glow of torchlight that hovered over it. I do not think I have ever felt as helpless as I did that night.

There was a great deal of chatter among our Chinese field hands and our guests in that so very odd language of theirs. In addition to Mr. and Mrs. Lee, an older couple with graying hair, there was Lu Ang, a spindly fellow who could not stop shaking, and An Wu and An Mei, a young couple. An Mei was Mr. and Mrs.

Lee's daughter and had only recently married Mr. An.

Wang Fu was very relieved to see the Lee family, but the Wei brothers seemed more concerned about something else. I asked Mr. Wang what that might be, but he shrugged as if he didn't want to tell me.

Among my household, Enrique's wife, Magdalena, seemed very perturbed to find that the "Chinos" were going to be spending the night in the large barracks house where most of my hands and their families lived. Sebastiano and Enrique each had an adobe to house their respective families. The barracks housed both Rodolfo and Anita Sanchez, and Hernan and Maria Mendoza and their growing family, along with Hernan's cousins Emilio and Pascual Mendoza. I was not happy with Magdalena's attitude, but was saved from remonstrating with her by Armando. We had often teased Magdalena that her darling son could tease her into doing anything he wanted. But that night I was profoundly glad of it. It must have been the resilience of youth, for Armando was able to translate to his mother the horrors we had witnessed in such a way that her prejudices were abandoned in favor of the Christian charity that I normally associated with her.

It was a sleepless night, nonetheless. That much I had anticipated, and, as I expected, I tossed and turned as the clock on my wardrobe chimed out hour after hour. I did not expect the nightmare that came upon me in the last hour before dawn.

I must interject that the past two volumes of my memoirs contain a serious error. At the time I wrote them, I was dependent on my memory and the letters I had written to my sisters to reconstruct the events I related, as my journals from that period in time had been burned up in a fire. So, I hope I may be forgiven for not remembering that I had, in fact, heard about Mr. Pasteur's germ theory and Mr. Lister's work in antiseptic surgery by that time. That I had not yet done my first true antiseptic surgery may account for the lapse.



In addition, while both Mr. Pasteur's and Mr. Lister's theories seem obvious now, they were not at all obvious at the time of which I write. I do recall being very intrigued by the idea of disease and infection being caused by invisible organic particles called germs, rather than by miasmas or malaria, or bad air. Mr. Lister's article that had been published in the California Medical Gazette had so intrigued me that I rushed over to the home of my friend and colleague, Dr. Skillen, to discuss it with him.

However, now that I think about it, there had also been an article about the advantages of using alcohol on wounds, and another on using plaster of Paris to make splints for broken bones. As Dr. Skillen employed wine as part of his poultice for gunshot wounds, we became quite involved discussing whether it was the alcohol or the herbs or the gunpowder that were the most effective parts of the poultice. I also expressed an interest in using plaster of Paris for splints, but Dr. Skillen seemed unimpressed.

The dream I had began happily, with my rush to get to Dr. Skillen's home as quickly as I could to discuss the articles that I'd read. I couldn't wait to hear what Dr. Skillen would say about Mr. Lister. I pushed my roan mare, Daisy, into a canter, under the brilliant cerulean blue sky that Los Angeles is so famous for. As I approached Dr. Skillen's house, the sky darkened and I saw rows and rows of tombstones erupting out of the ground, with even more people rising up behind them. No matter which way I looked, there was someone looking at me in accusation, and I knew that I could have saved that person's life. The young mother I had performed a caesarian section on to release the infant that was too big to pass from her womb, only to helplessly watch the mother die the next day as the contagion raged. The man whose leg I amputated that had festered and festered and he died in agony. The boy who had been shot in the gut and whose last night on earth was spent in fevered pain.

I woke up gasping and perspiring in spite of the chilled pre-dawn air. I swallowed my fear back. It had, after all, been naught but a dream. I had no idea then that the dream would continue to haunt me, and even now still does. I wanted to go back to sleep, but it was so close to the hour when I normally rose that it seemed pointless.

The sun that morning rose over the pueblo upon quite the grisly spectacle. Eighteen men in all had been lynched in three different locations. Many of the men had been mutilated as well. The bodies were cut down and the inquests began.

I went with the Wei brothers and our guests to the jail, where they had laid out the bodies. There were only 200 Chinese in the pueblo, and, not surprisingly, they mostly knew each other. Mr. An was horrified to find that one of his cousins was among the dead. Against our advice, Wei Li and Lee Won insisted on going back to the Calle de Los Negros. When we met them back at the rancho, Wei Li said something to Wei Chin and both brothers seemed relieved. Mr. Lee, however, was deeply saddened, telling us through Wang Fu that the wash house had been completely destroyed and the small amount of money that he had saved had been stolen.

The funeral for the victims was held that same day. I attended with Mr. Wang and his fellows. It was a curious event, with much atonal wailing, yet it was deeply affecting, and somehow reminded me of the nightmare I'd had that morning.

Among the good citizens of Los Angeles, most denied any involvement, some legitimately, others less so. As the days went on, those of the more settled class blamed the ruffians and transients in the pueblo. The newspapers published hypocritical essays on the rule of law, particularly given the stories they'd published in the weeks prior to the riot denouncing the Chinese as rogues.

One of my rescued guests, the spindly Lu Ang,

was gone to Wilmington by the end of the day after the funeral, presumably to catch the next steamship to San Francisco. Whether he stayed in California or returned to China, we never found out. The Lee family, however, had little choice but to stay, as did their son-in-law and daughter. With a sudden dearth of laundries (which at the time were mostly run by the Chinese), they actually did rather well, although it was not easy for them.

Wang Fu chose to stay, for which I was heartily glad. The Wei brothers, however, informed me that while they would wait until spring, they would be leaving to go back to China. Wei Chin, whose English was significantly better than his brother's hastened to reassure me that this had been planned before the riot.

"We come here to make money to take back to China," he explained. "So our family live easy. We have money now. We go. We wait 'til spring because no storm on ocean." He smiled impishly. "And we like you, Miz Wilcox. We help you prune vines, then we go."

There was naught I could do but give him my blessing.

A week passed and there was significant talk of witnesses and indictments. Still numbed by the shock of it all, we clung to the rhythms and tasks of everyday life. The wine for the angelica fermented. We racked the cabernet and merlot wines together and made a lovely claret, as I recall. I went on another crusade to teach housewives the importance of sanitation in the home, which was ill-received. We tried to pretend that everything was normal. So, I didn't think anything of asking Wei Li to take our goats and pasture them in the far end of the vineyard that day, the first week of November. None of us did.

Until Wei Li didn't come back.

