

Seeing Ethnicity in the Columbia River Canneries

By Unknown

Although the Finns of Astoria provide an example of the expression of ethnic identity among European immigrants, the related documents accompanying this essay suggest that European ethnicity was often invisible in Columbia River salmon-canning towns. While members of these diverse groups likely embraced ethnicity as part of their personal or community identity, the documents provide more evidence of how ethnic tags were used by outsiders to label these communities. As negative markers of difference, ethnic labels were consistently attached to Asians and Native Americans, who faced segregation within (or exclusion from) the industry. While the potential also existed for European ethnics to be tagged as outsiders in times of conflict, they were generally accepted as part of the “white” community and disappeared into that population when they lived outside areas of concentrated ethnic settlement like Astoria’s Uniontown.

These patterns of visible and invisible ethnicity in the Columbia River canneries reflect the broader patterns identified by New Western historians for the region as a whole. In contrast to cities in the East and Midwest who received immigrants, where newcomers from Europe were often regarded as foreign competitors who threatened the established order, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European immigrants and ethnics arriving in the West—particularly those who settled in developing towns and cities—were generally welcomed as fellow pioneers and community builders. Diverse westerners likely identified to varying degrees with ethnic cultures. But in a region where the primary ethnic fears focused on Asians, who were defined as non-whites and noncitizens, Europeans adults and their children generally were not subjected to the ethnic labeling as “other.”

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