



Sunday, April 29, 2001, 12:00 AM

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Portland's tunnels led unlucky sailors to Shanghai

By Joseph B. Frazier
The Associated Press

PORTLAND - It would start with a thirsty working stiff out on the town with his back pay, swaggering into the half-bars/half-bordellos called boardinghouses and hard on the heels of whisky, women and song.

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But soon the ceiling would start to spin, his legs wouldn't obey, and oblivion moved in like a fog. He would awaken on a ship at sea.

He had been Shanghaied - addled with a drugged drink, hustled into an alley or dropped through a trap door to an underground tunnel leading to the river, bundled in a blanket and sold for a few dollars to a ship's captain in need of a crew.

The practice flourished on Portland's rough-and-tumble Skid Road riverfront from the 1860s until it began to wane around World War I. The laws, such as they were, weren't enforced. Sailors of the day weren't considered worth the effort.

Some of the tunnels are still there, and they have provided a lifetime of fascination for Michael Jones, a Portland historian. He is trying to restore them to their original condition and offer guided tours of the "Portland Underground," something he already has begun on a limited basis.

If you go

The contact for the underground tour in Portland is Michael Jones of the [Cascade Geographic Society](#), 503-622-4798.

Tour reservations need to be made in advance, and cost \$10 per person.

Portland was known as the worst port on the West Coast for Shanghaing, putting even wicked San Francisco in the shade. Most of the sailors found themselves bound for foreign ports, often Shanghai in China - hence the name. Portland was the jumping-off point for the Orient because of lumber and grain shipments, and the crop of "Shanghaiable" men was bountiful.

Many of the boardinghouses that sailors frequented were owned by the Shanghaiers, or "crimps" as they were called.

"Portland was vice-ridden and corrupt," Jones says. "It catered to people who played as hard as they worked, and those are the people who were Shanghaied."

Jones does not romanticize the Shanghai days. "It was human abuse at its worst. It's a piece of our history that's not very nice."

Jones, 49, who has relied heavily on decades of oral histories and the little that has been written, says he hopes enough time has gone by so that Portland can confront this aspect of its past.

Even now, he says, when he meets people whose forebears had firsthand knowledge, they say something like, "The family talked about it in whispers."

Some of the men who were Shanghaied would be gone for years before they could work their way back. Some were fatally drugged, Jones says.

"The knockout drops were powerful," Jones says. "They had to last from 13 to 16 hours, until the ship was at sea, because if they didn't, the man might jump overboard and try to swim to land."

"The first thing they did was take away their boots. They sprinkled broken glass on the floor, so that if someone got free he wouldn't get very far very fast."

Jones plans a museum in one of the subterranean rooms, where tunnels connect the low brick rooms.

Jones says he thinks the tunnels were built for Shanghaing, but others are skeptical.

Chet Orloff, the former head of the Oregon Historical Society, says the tunnels had a number of purposes in a city full of mud-and-cobblestone streets, where it was easier to use an iron-wheeled hand cart underground than above.

"The tunnels did serve secondary purposes," Orloff says. "Chinese lived in some of them. Were they Shanghai tunnels? I suppose one could say, yes, they would have occasionally been used for that because they were there, they were under the bars in that part of town and they could get them a few blocks down to the waterfront."

"I have heard older Portlanders talk about how when they were kids growing up they were warned by their parents not to go to Old Town, to the tough Skid Road areas, because they would be dragged through tunnels to a ship," he says.

Nobody knows how many men were Shanghaied out of Portland, but the numbers probably ran to the thousands.

The "crimps" weren't fussy. Cowboys, farmhands, inexperienced sailors (old salts knew better), loggers, anyone would do. Crimps usually got \$30 to \$50 per man, a tidy sum at the time.

Shanghaing flourished until the passage of the LaFollette Seaman's Act of 1915 and the gradual change to steam power, which required more skilled seamen than the sailing era of "iron men and wooden ships." Unions helped, too.