

ADVERTISEMENT

Bazaar Boutique

Local Handcrafts • Gourmet Foods
Holiday Decor • Wreaths

[Click Here](#)

LOCALLY OWNED BY PAMPLIN MEDIA GROUP

PortlandLife



News | Opinion | Features | Sports | Sustainable Life | US & World News | Classifieds | Contact Us

Find a story

[Advanced search](#)

Keywords

Any
Writer

Any
Month

Any
Year

Search

Browse archive

[Browse features archive](#)

PortlandTribune

Find a paper

Enter a street name or a 5 digit zip code

Search

Subscribe today!

Breaking News Email Alerts

Features columns

Anne Marie DiStefano

RSS

Tour-takers get tunnel vision

Underground guide shows visitors a bit of sinister local history

BY ERIC BARTELS ✉

The Portland Tribune, Feb 24, 2004

When Michael Jones leads visitors into the rock-walled maze beneath polite, 21st century Portland, he doesn't just tell them about underground culture. He has them squint into the dim light of history.

And it's very dark.

They're called the Shanghai tunnels, a labyrinth of basements and passageways built to foster commerce along the once-bustling waterfront.

But the trade that flourished was a vicious and often deadly traffic in human cargo that made the city one of the most notorious ports on the West Coast.

"This is not a pretty history, but it's a history that took place," Jones tells a group of local architects awaiting a tour. "The stories Ñ some are humorous; most are tragic."

Shanghaiing, originally called "crimping," earned its name in the middle of the 19th century. Jones says the Chinese port of Shanghai was often the last stop for ships setting sail from Portland.

The game was simple: Unsuspecting victims were kidnapped and forced into service on outgoing ships, where conditions were generally deplorable and the pay scant. Richard Engeman of the Oregon Historical Society says the practice was widespread on both coasts.

But those behind the Portland operation didn't just snatch men from

Improve Your Browsing!

Upgrade now to Internet Explorer 7 for MSN

Download FREE!

Weather Forecasts
Weather Maps
Weather Radar

[Video forecast](#)

SPECIAL SECTIONS



Becoming a world-class ARTS CITY

Neighborhood SOURCE

WHERE PORTLAND EATS • 2007 GUIDE •

ADVERTISEMENTS

RSS

Barbara Ashmun

RSS

Liz Colie Gadberry

RSS

The Portland Tribune Features feed

RSS



LocalNewsDaily

VALLEYTIMES

Boom! Boomers & Beyond

ClackamasReview

EAST COUNTY NEWS

EstacadaNews

NEWS TIMES

OUTLOOK

Lake Oswego Review

OregonCityNews

REGAL COURIER

SANDY POST

THE BEE since 1906

Sherwood Gazette

THE SPOTLIGHT

THE SOUTHWEST COMMUNITY CONNECTION

TheTimes

WestLinn Tidings

saloons and bordellos as needed, Jones says. They provided a steady supply of able bodies, holding them in virtually escape-proof underground cells.

“They made them available 24 hours, seven days a week,” he says. “Here in Portland there was a saying: ‘A ship never leaves port without its entire crew.’ No other city was like this.”

Jones says the racket dwindled when the old waterfront was torn down in the 1920s and ended finally with the outbreak of World War II.

Watch your head

The tour starts mundanely enough, through heavy iron doors and down wooden stairs under a Third Avenue sidewalk. Many of the images surrounding the Old Town location evoke another era. Across the street stands a brick facade emblazoned with the date it was erected: 1892.

Jones, whose mustache and helmet of curls give him the look of a thicker-set Sonny Bono, throws himself into his salty yarns, some of which are not easy to substantiate. But he is certainly happy to entertain.

“We don’t call it hitting your head,” he advises visitors as they duck under low-hanging pipes. “We call it being blessed. You don’t want to be blessed too often.”

For atmosphere, illumination is provided only by dim red bulbs in old-style wall-mounted lamps. Jones also distributes flashlights. A rough-hewn wooden door opens into a small room outfitted with a triple bunk bed. If Jones is right, uncounted hallucinatory visions took flight there. It was an opium den.

An archway leads directly into a room with an interior window blocked by heavy, tightly spaced iron bars. Jones says it was a holding cell where detainees would be relieved of their boots before entering. This made escape especially difficult: Kidnappers covered the floors with a bed of broken glass.

A dust-covered pile of very old boots rests nearby.

Jones says it was necessary to incapacitate victims until ships were at sea, lest they attempt to go overboard on the trip down the Columbia River. But blows to the head and knockout drops were imprecise as an anesthetic, and many died in the process.

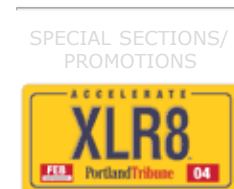
Victims included loggers and farm boys and soldiers posted at Fort Vancouver, Wash., as well as blacks, Chinese immigrants and Native Americans. Jones says an 1881 Chamber of Commerce report estimated 1,500 local disappearances a year. He thinks the number could have been twice that, but the figure is impossible to confirm. A white slavery ring, which sold women into prostitution, also thrived, he says.

At one point in the tour, Jones demonstrates a working Ñ albeit refurbished Ñ trapdoor. Every saloon had them, he says. The legendary Erickson’s Saloon, with its block-long bar, had as many as a dozen. At an opportune time, a bartender would alert henchmen below and, at the push of a button, send two or three men sprawling into the basement.

A blind eye

Jones says the trade could not have prospered without the collusion of local officialdom. “There was a lot of corruption from City Hall on down,” says the historical society’s Engeman.

“Certain things went on, I’m sure,” says Bob Svilar, a retired Portland cop who joined the force in 1950. “Like politics today, you don’t hear about all of it.”



The tour encompasses the basements of four adjoining buildings, but Jones says the tunnels once reached Northwest 23rd Avenue and as far south as the Ross Island Bridge. Other networks existed on the east side of the Willamette River.

Three themed tours are offered, one in conjunction with an organization called Northwest Paranormal Investigations, which calls the tunnels one of the most haunted places on the West Coast. Jones says visitors often report being touched or pulled at by someone or something other than fellow tour-takers.

As an adjunct instructor in Portland State University's School of Continuing Education, Jones has been taking students underground since the early '90s.

He began organized tours for the public in 2000, a move that was not universally popular. Jones claims that one night, as he was taking a preliminary walk around Old Town, he was surrounded by a group of shadowy figures who encouraged him to desist. Undaunted, he went forward with the encouragement of Chinese-American business owners, some of them descendants of the city's early immigrant population.

"The opportunity to go into these places is very rare," Jones says. "This is sacred ground. Most people leave understanding Portland better. This is its history."

Contact Eric Bartels at ebartels@portlandtribune.com.

Copyright 2007 Pamplin Media Group, 6605 S.E. Lake Road, Portland, OR 97222 • 503-226-6397
Pamplin Media Group Privacy Policy

KosmosCentral **Portland Web Design, eCommerce and Marketing** providing quality web development services and custom web solutions for small businesses and large across North America and World Wide.

Looking for graphic design jobs, web design, marketing work or creative **portland jobs**? 52ltd is your source for creative resources in Portland, Oregon.

Search engine marketing, website templates, **portland web design** and website promotion by Webfu // 503.381.5553

New down and fleece north face jackets. The largest selection of **North Face Jackets** available online. Free shipping on orders over \$40.00

USOUTDOOR.com - Shop for **Backpacks** online with free shipping and no sales tax.

See the latest styles of ski jackets and backpacks from **The North Face**.