

Shantytown and “The Special Sanitation:” A Pioneer Square Vignette

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Image 1: Downtown's shantytowns and tidelands circa 1910's



Image 2: Downtown's Alaskan Way over filled in tidelands

The place feels drained. When you emerge from Pioneer Square, Exit C of the Light Rail, there's this instant unease at the juxtaposition of swanky art galleries and urban coffee shops with people ignored— the living urban spirits. People layered in threadbare clothing, wield the weight of life, like you and me, only they wear it differently. But they are simply passed. They become these memorialized statues of gentrification, houselessness, mental illness, addiction, racial inequity and criminalization— a long standing *outside* narrative foisted by the fortunate. The occasional 'good samaritan' or at least performative one will approach with money. But people don't say hello or smile at them as they pass by on the way to waterfront streets—they don't initiate or prolong any interaction. As you look out across the water, unconsciously omitting the gaze of these people, once again, you are reminded of how cyclical, how manipulated history can be.

As early as 1850, houselessness filled the tideflats of downtown Seattle, while City officials filled the waterfront and ports in the name of expansion.¹ Whatever the city left unutilized for the time-being, became inhabited by largely Indigenous families, immigrant or poverty stricken males looking for work, and other people displaced from the landscape. At its height from 1904-1913, the living spaces formed the encampment, "Shantytown."² Beginning in 1907, a series of laws and political maneuvers were executed to diminish and ultimately remove this refuge in the name of civil cultivation and "the immediate need of public peace, health, and safety."³ However, the removal eventually proved to be part of a larger land deal to obtain waterfront property and public works laborers. These maneuvers would become known as "The Special Sanitation."

In March of 1908, Health Commissioner, Dr. James E. Crichton was appointed. He viewed "Shantytown" as a threat to the well-being of both its residents and the surrounding community, and began his campaign for "The Special Sanitation." Starting with systematic burnings of Shantytown, he decimated 105 living spaces, two of which acted as grocery stores

¹ Ott, J. (2013, December 11). *Shaping Seattle*. Shaping Seattle's Central Waterfront, Part 1: Moving People and Freight. Retrieved May 17, 2022, from <https://www.historylink.org/File/10665>

² Watson, A. (2019, November 3). *Supportive Housing: Prefabricating Supportive Communities for the Homeless*. Retrieved 2022.

³ STATE OFFICERS, SUPREME AND SUPERIOR COURT JUDGES, MEMBERS OF HOUSE AND SENATE., & Crichton, J. E., Statutes of Washington 1913, Passed by the Thirteenth Session of the Legislature (1913). Seattle, Washington. Page 319-458

for the community.⁴ Crichton continued with the fire orders under the guise of fending off tuberculosis; however, the repeatedly targeted sections were largely consisting of permanent structures—predominantly the homes of Indigenous families attempting assimilation through established housing. Then, Crichton pushed a Public Relations campaign, largely via newspapers, churches, and other social works programs, to paint the inhabitants of Shantytown both as dangerous and derelict. Initially, newspapers describe the encampment as starting “merry riots,” where “half naked bucks and klootchmen [derogatory term referring to male and female Indigenous members, respectively],” fled from an ablazed cabin. The papers describe the encampment as causing “all sorts of consternation.”⁵ But what it doesn’t detail is how papers were initially told that it was the community’s own riots—how it later emerged that police were instructed to start those fires. His campaign oscillates between painting the people as violent and “wild” to “helpless” and just “unfortunates.”

Roughly 8 months after Crichton’s first removal fire, the Seattle Times quotes Crichton as complementing the “new tide-flat citizens,” (a switch from “shacktown dwellers”) as “compli[ant with] all the sanitation rules.” Realizing he could not keep people away simply by razing the community, he adapted his strategy to victimize the residents. So the new message? “Something Should Be Done for Shacktown.”⁶ The wording is calculated to portray people as casualties of urbanization in order to justify their removal—to paint it as an opportunity for *rescue*.

In 1913, in the course of just 3 hours, Crichton and other city representatives sat down and passed over 200 laws and adaptations to finalize the removal of Shantytown residents. Laws included extensions of crimes to increase arrests. They targeted factors like being out past sunset, begging, truancy, or having insufficient living spaces—actions Shantytown held no choice to do otherwise. Simultaneously, a law was passed so that imprisoned workers could be used for free labor on public highways, city construction projects, etc. Following the orders, arrest rates nearly

⁴ Watson, A. (2019, November 3). *Supportive Housing: Prefabricating Supportive Communities for the Homeless*. Retrieved 2022.

⁵ Pike Brings Excitement; Helpless Offspring. (1904). *The Seattle Daily Times*.

⁶ Pike Brings Excitement; Helpless Offspring. (1908). *The Seattle Daily Times*.

doubled. Additionally, the laws were directed at the removal of the Indigenous community within Shantytown. Gambling was a key piece of Native tradition and, especially, childrens' games, so naturally Crichton directed the city, "to punish the keepers and inmates and lessors of Public morals: houses of ill-fame, gamblers and keepers of gambling tables [through] imprisonment." It was one of countless laws intended to cut off Indigenous peoples from the tidelands territory. Furthermore, because the Indigenous members of Shantytown were predominantly families (contrary to the majority male populations of "Hooverville" Shacktowns that would emerge in the Great Depression), Crichton's laws were specialized to target women and children, as well. Children were included in the potential for imprisonment and the potential to become wards of the state. It remains unclear where the children were relocated to for juvenile detention centers, orphanages, and adoptions.⁷ The council decided it would behoove the children to have impermanent records of the city's criminalization of them. That, and it meant their whereabouts could be erased from history, permanently disconnecting the children from their families and cultures.⁸

In the end of 1913, Shantytown was burned to the ground by an ordinance from Crichton, displacing an estimated 3,500 people and over 1,200 living spaces.⁹ So as you look out across the previously mutilated tidelands suppressed by urbanization, don't omit that gaze— the gaze of the people living in the streets, corners, and shadows of Pioneer Square. There's this unconscious interaction where all of the sudden you become too busy to notice, too busy to recognize that you aren't even registering the people around you— especially the "urban spirits." Reflect on that, and remember to *choose* to meet the eyes of people dislodged by circumstances both inherited or acquired, choose to acknowledge their presence, their humanity, and the existence of the people and cultures displaced, disconnected, and erased before them.

⁷ Seattle Municipal Archives Digital Collections

⁸ STATE OFFICERS, SUPREME AND SUPERIOR COURT JUDGES, MEMBERS OF HOUSE AND SENATE., & Crichton, J. E., Statutes of Washington 1913, Passed by the Thirteenth Session of the Legislature (1913). Seattle, Washington Page 514-722

⁹ Watson, A. (2019, November 3). *Supportive Housing: Prefabricating Supportive Communities for the Homeless*. Retrieved 2022.