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Portland was the "shanghai" capital of the world in 1890s

In the days when Portland was a rough, tough, hard-drinking, hard-punching dockside town, press-gang activity was common in waterfront bars and flophouses; the city's "crimping" activity actually generated international incidents with foreign governments.

By Finn J.D. John — June 19, 2010

You'd never know it from looking around the Pearl District of Portland today, but a little over 100 years ago this was the most dangerous place on the West Coast to go out drinking.

The risk you ran wasn't so much death or injury, though. It was the risk of waking up the next morning on board a barque headed for China, with an angry first mate screaming at you to get up and get to work.

Press-gangster's paradise

Not many people know it, but at the end of the 1800s Portland was the most notorious city in the western hemisphere for the practice known today as "shanghaiing" – in the day, it was called "crimping," after a Dutch word for a holding pen for fish.



This image of Sixth Street in downtown Portland



This colorized postcard image is of Portland's harbor very early in the 20th century. [Click here to see a larger version of the image.](#) The picture is from www.portlandwaterfront.org; to see the site's full gallery of photos and other images from Portland's golden age of crimping, [click here](#).

"I will state that there is one port on the Pacific coast that has always been known as the greatest *crimping* den in America," Andrew Furuseth, president of the International Seamen's Union of America, testified to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1911. "I refer to the port of Portland."

Internationally notorious

It got so bad that the French embassy actually filed a formal complaint in 1901, saying French sailors were regularly being crimped there.

In Astoria, the scene was similar, but because Astoria wasn't the second-largest city on the West Coast, it wasn't as widely noticed.

Dangerous boardinghouses

Crimpers operated in several ways in 1890s Portland and Astoria. Most ran boardinghouses at which rent was on "credit," and when a captain needed 10 or 20

more...

THE OLD PORTLAND WATERFRONT



For more details on what Portland was like in the last three decades of the 1800s, check out [Barney Blalock's excellent historical site, www.PortlandWaterfront.com.](#)

SEAMEN'S FRIENDS



[This excellent article from The Oregon Encyclopedia](#) -- a peer-reviewed resource on state history presented by Portland State University, the Oregon Historical Society and others, tells about the Seamen's Friend Society, formed in 1877 partly in response to the prevalence of crimping.

THE PORTLAND UNDERGROUND

is from a postcard mailed in 1909. At that time, the practice of "crimping" in Portland was starting to fade, but was still a big enough problem to come up in Congressional hearings a few years later. [For a larger image, click here.](#)

able-bodied sailors ("A.B.s," they called them) the crimper would simply clear the house out, collecting a fee of \$30 to \$100 a head from the captain and usually delivering the men unconscious, wrapped in a canvas tarp. If there weren't enough out-of-work cowboys,

loggers and farm hands living in the boardinghouse, the crimper might try prowling the downtown watering holes, chatting customers up and slipping knockout drops into their drinks.

And if all else failed, some of them would take a tarp and a blackjack and go find someone to clobber.

Crimpers drummed up extra business by coaxing sailors to desert while they were in port. Sometimes, when the cargo was unloaded and it was time to set sail, captains found themselves "buying" their old crew back.

Sold: Two dozen dead and dying "sailors"

Portland's notoriety reached a peak in 1893, when a crimper named Joseph "Bunko" Kelly delivered two dozen dead men to the captain of a British merchant ship. The story is that Kelly, on the prowl for A.B.s, came across an open cellar door and found, inside, several dozen dead and dying men. They had broken into the cellar of what they thought was a saloon, but it was actually the mortuary next door to it, and the booze they'd been guzzling was embalming fluid – deadly poison. Kelly wrapped them up, hauled them down to the waterfront and cashed them in. When the ship's captain found out what had happened, an international incident ensued.



This postcard image, dating from around 1920, shows a cargo ship being loaded with wheat at the Port of Portland. This was well after the "golden age of crimping," as evidenced by the fact that the vessel is steam powered. [For a larger image, click here.](#)

Authorities: U.S. Constitution doesn't cover seamen

You might think hauling 24 bodies out of a cellar and down to the waterfront would be an activity that would attract some official attention. Not in 1890s Portland. In fact, the Portland chief of police in 1890 was fired for engaging in crimping himself. And the top Portland crimper, a hard-punching scoundrel named Larry Sullivan, once boasted, "I am the law in Portland."

Moreover, in 1897 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the 13th Amendment didn't apply to sailors when it declared involuntary servitude unconstitutional, ruling in essence that merchant sailors were not fit to be entrusted with the full rights of citizens.

Steamships to the rescue

In fact, the end of the crimping era would come not from the law, but from commerce. Labor-intensive barques, barkentines and schooners were giving way to the more lightly staffed steamships, and it was no longer necessary to shark up a big list of A.B.s. By the early 1900s, crimping, while still practiced, was a dying "art," and by 1915 when the federal government finally did something about it – passing the relatively toothless Seaman's Act – the practice was mostly history anyway.

(Sources: Pintarch, Dick. "Shanghai City," [Great Moments in Oregon History](#). Portland: New Oregon Publishing, 1987; www.portlandwaterfront.org; U.S. Bureau of Navigation, [Annual Report of the Commissioner of Navigation](#), 1902; U.S. House of Representatives, [The Seamen's Bill: Hearings ...](#), 1911; Starin, Nicholas. "Portland Seaman's Friend Society," [The Oregon Encyclopedia](#), www.oregonencyclopedia.org.)

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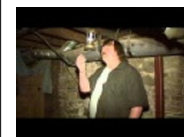
A network of tunnels and passages under the city of Portland was an important part of the crimping industry -- not so much to hide abductions from authorities as to keep future suckers from getting wise. [Portland Walking Tours offers some popular exploratory tours](#) into these dungeons.

"DUDE, WHAT WAS THAT SOUND?"



[This 3-minute video](#) was made by two young men named Brian and Zach, who decided to do some exploring of the underground tunnels beneath a church on Burnside. It ends with them running for their lives after being spooked by mysterious noises.

SO, ARE THEY REALLY HAUNTED?



Not surprisingly, there are plenty of ghost stories around the tunnels. [This 5-minute video](#) made by the employees of EnzymePDX and their friends includes part of a tour, followed by their impressions afterward. Everyone seems to be enjoying the possibility of the tunnels being haunted.