

# An Interview with Special Agent C.S. Crain

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By Steven W. Hooper

The year is 1895. The President of the United States is Grover H. Cleveland and the Secretary of the Treasury is John G. Carlisle. The first motion picture projector is patented and the first commercial movie performance is given in New York. The first professional football game is played in Latrobe, Pennsylvania and the winning quarterback, John Brallier, is paid \$10. America's first auto race is held in Chicago on Thanksgiving Day with the winner taking 7 hours and 53 minutes to cover the 54-mile course. The winning vehicle averaged 7 MPH and used 3.5 gallons of gas.

During 1895, Treasury Agents were hard at work protecting our borders. But have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a Treasury Agent during this exciting time in history? Well, you are in luck because an NCMF reporter was able to travel back in time and interview Special Agent Charles S. Crain of Chicago, Illinois.

**NCMF Reporter:** Good morning agent Crain. Could you explain to us the duties of a Treasury agent?

**Agent Crain:** The work of special agents is very diversified. As the late Secretary of the Treasury Daniel Manning said, our special agents are the "eyes and ears of the Treasury Department." This is a high complement to the men that make up the eighteen special agency districts in the United States. One of our primary duties is to ensure foreign merchandise is imported legally and that full duty is paid on imported goods. Last year our district recovered \$80,000 from firms who undervalued their imported merchandise.

We are also called upon to examine and pass on the accounts of all ports of entry. Any request by the Collector of Customs for an increase in salaries or additional staff is examined and a recommendation as to approval is made to the Treasury Department. Another important duty is the supervision of the papers of all "Chinaman" seeking admission to the district. We also inspect bonded warehouses and have general supervision over the drawback system.

Another part of the special agent's duties is the inspection of steamships to determine if the captains and engineers have licenses and the vessels have the legal complement of lifeboats and life preservers.

One of the most exciting features of the job until recently was opium smuggling. When the duty rate on opium was lowered by the new tariff schedule from \$12 to \$6 per pound, the smuggling of the drug decreased. (Opium did not become a prohibited import until 1909.)

**NCMF Reporter:** With so many important duties, how big is your staff?

**Agent Crain:** Here in this district, the Chicago office is comprised of myself, two Chinese Inspectors and a Special Inspector of Customs. I also have Special Inspectors of Customs stationed at St. Paul, Duluth, and Pembina.

**NCMF Reporter:** You mentioned that some of your most interesting cases involve the smuggling of opium. Could you give us an example?

**Agent Crain:** The last opium seizure in Chicago took place a few weeks before the new tariff law went into effect. Two pickpockets were caught in a Chinese laundry with 230 cans of smuggled opium and were arrested. The opium was packed in a new and expensive grip (suitcase). The next day one of the pickpockets met with me and asked if he could get the grip back. He explained he "had borrowed" that nice-looking grip from a friend. He said that he wished I would let him have it back "so that he could return it to him."

When I explained that I could not comply with his request, he became almost tearful in his pleas to return the satchel. Then as if a brilliant thought had struck him, he said "Say Mr. Crain, you give me the grip, and I will "pinch" you a better one when I get out." Of course, I rejected his unselfish offer.

The court found the pickpockets guilty and ordered them to each pay a \$150 fine but gave them no prison time. The U.S. Marshal sold the opium at auction for \$1,100.

**NCMF Reporter:** You said that a lot of your time and resources go into enforcing the Chinese Exclusion Act. Can you tell us a little about your efforts?

**Agent Crain:** Under the current law, only Chinese merchants and bona-fide tourists can enter the country. When a doubt about the admissibility of the person at our borders occurs, a certificate is created that contains the business of the person and a portrait of the individual. This certificate is then forwarded to the special agent at the office nearest the point of the person's destination. A Chinese Inspector is then sent out to confirm the information contained on the certificate.

The usual claim is that the man is a member of some firm doing business in the United States. As a result, many Chinese firms claim to have as many as fifty Chinese partners. The Attorney General has ruled that a man claiming admission as a member of a firm must be listed on either the partnership papers or listed on a sign outside the firm's offices. These claims often turn out to be false with the "businessmen" hoping that U.S. Customs will not verify their claims.

For instance, word was received the other day from Pembina that a businessman allegedly associated with a Chicago firm wished to return to the city. When Chinese Inspector M.H. Hereley visited the business premises, he found a laundry without any evidence of merchandise or other trade. The boss was out but his brother said he did not know the man seeking admission and that he had never seen him before.

Two days later the laundry owner appeared at the U.S. Customs office and said his brother was "foolish" and that he did not understand the business. The laundry man insisted the businessman was a partner in the firm. When he realized that his pleas would not change the outcome of the investigation, he changed his tune. He claimed that if anyone found out that his brother was the innocent cause of the businessman being refused entry into the country, he feared bodily harm from the group that arranged the scheme. I agreed to never tell anyone and the laundry man was greatly relieved.

**NCMF Reporter:** Prior to your appointment as Special Agent, what jobs did you hold?

**Agent Crain:** I was a cashier at U.S. Customs in Chicago under Collector Seeberger and an oil inspector under Chicago Mayor Cregier. I was appointed as a Special Agent on July 1, 1893.

**NCMF Reporter:** Thank you for your time Special Agent Crain. I wish we had more time to explore the many duties of Treasury Agents here in Chicago.

**Agent Crain:** Thank you.

As you can see things have changed considerably for special agents over the last 127 years. Today's Treasury Agents are now Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) special agents. These agents are responsible for investigating transnational crime and threats, specifically those criminal organizations that exploit the global infrastructure through which international trade, travel, and finance move. HSI's mission is to investigate, disrupt and dismantle terrorist, transnational and other criminal organizations that threaten or seek to exploit the customs and immigration laws of the United States.

I wonder what kind of changes the next 127 years will bring to these special agents.

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**Primary Source:**

This interview of Special Agent Charles. S. Crain is based on an article that appeared in the *Chicago Chronicle* on August 25, 1895. The article was edited and condensed into this interview format.

*"Chinese as Smugglers," The Chicago Chronicle* (Chicago, Illinois), August 25, 1895, p. 26. (The original article may contain some outdated cultural depictions.)

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*Figure 1:* Charles S. Crain was appointed as a Treasury Special Agent in Chicago in July of 1893. He was charged with enforcing laws against smuggling, fraud on the revenue and investigating violations of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

Source: *The Chicago Chronicle*, August 25, 1895, p 26.



*Figure 2:* The U.S. Customhouse and Post Office in Chicago was completed in 1880 and was demolished in 1896. Special Agent Crain's office was in this building when he was interviewed for the article in the *Chicago Chronicle* in 1895.

Source: Wikipedia website,

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United States Custom House, Court House, and Post Office \(Chicago, Illinois, 1880\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Custom_House,_Court_House,_and_Post_Office_(Chicago,_Illinois,_1880)).