

# What we all assume we know about the Vincent Chin case probably isn't so

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By Neal Rubin, *Detroit News*, April 29, 2014

1) Two unemployed autoworkers beat Vincent Chin to death because they thought he was Japanese and they drunkenly decided he had cost them their jobs.

2) That's an accepted piece of history, like Ty Cobb being the worst racist in baseball or Henry Ford boosting his workers' daily wage to \$5 so they could buy his cars.

3) It popped up again last week in the *New York Times*, in a piece about the mob attack on tree trimmer Steve Utash. "I remember two out-of-work white autoworkers in 1982," the article says, "beating a Chinese-American man to death because they thought he was Japanese."

4) The problem, says Tim Kiska, is that "almost all of that is wrong."

5) Chin was, in fact, murdered. The killers were two white men, and it has never made sense that they didn't go to jail.

6) Neither was unemployed, however, one worked for a furniture chain, and the only testimony connecting the crime to fury over the auto industry was so dubious that a jury in a federal civil rights trial rejected it.

7) The early '80s was an angry time, with Japanese car companies thriving while the Big Three stumbled. A bar Downriver bought a sledgehammer and a junked Toyota, and people lined up to take their whacks.

8) The Chin story has context, drama and outrage.

9) But sometimes, the accepted truth shouldn't be.

10) Ty Cobb was no more bigoted than most ballplayers in the early 1900s, or for that matter, many Americans. Ford might have cared about putting his employees on wheels, but he mostly just wanted them to show up for work.

11) And Vincent Chin?

12) "The story makes all the sense in the world," says Kiska, who covered the case as a reporter and is now a journalism professor at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. "But it didn't happen that way."

## Dispute turns deadly

13) What's undisputed is that on June 19, 1982, Chin was celebrating his impending marriage with four friends at a Highland Park strip club called the Fancy Pants Lounge.

14) Ronald Ebens, a foreman at a Chrysler plant, was there with his stepson, Michael Nitz.

15) Chin, a 27-year-old industrial draftsman, had been drinking, as had Ebens and Nitz. At the hospital later, Chin's blood alcohol content was .14.

16) An argument broke out between the groups over a lap dance. Chin threw the first punch. Also thrown: a chair. All were ejected from the club.

17) Outside, Chin attempted to prolong the fight. Outnumbered, Ebens and Nitz declined, but Ebens fetched a bat from his car — a Jackie Robinson model.

18) The parties scattered. Ebens and Nitz went looking for Chin, but failed to find him. A short time later, as they drove to a hospital, they spotted Chin with a friend outside a McDonald's.

19) Ebens killed him with the bat in the middle of Woodward Avenue.

20) Ebens and Nitz pleaded guilty to manslaughter. Bizarrely, no one from the prosecution showed up at the sentencing, and they each drew only a \$3,780 fine and three years of probation.

21) Judge Charles Kaufman had been a Japanese prisoner during World War II. "He told me that because of his experience, he always gave people the highest plausible sentence," Kiska says.

#### **Dancer distorts truth**

22) The general response was outrage, particularly among Asian-Americans. Federal prosecutors brought civil rights charges, and Ebens was convicted in Detroit and sentenced to 25 years.

23) When that verdict was overturned — prosecution witnesses had been

excessively coached — a retrial was held in Cincinnati. Not guilty.

24) It was in the federal trials that a bottomless dancer named Racine Colwell claimed that Ebens had snarled, "It's because of you (bleeps) we're out of work."

Colwell arrived in court in Detroit without underwear. Prosecutors had to scramble to find her a topcoat. "Forget about the underwear," Kiska says. "She was so wacky, so out to lunch, it was hard to believe her." Her testimony is the source for what's now accepted as the truth.

25) Kiska's father once worked at a Detroit watch repair shop staffed largely by Japanese-Americans who had been sent to internment camps during World War II. After the Chin murder, one of his father's friends had lamented, "I thought we were safe."

26) Understanding the anguish, Kiska was prepared to be outraged in the courtroom. But he came away convinced the Chin case was just a disastrous barroom brawl — no matter what we keep reading now.

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