

Actress helps West High students learn history

By **TOM HOWARD**
Of The Gazette Staff

The 1900 federal census counted 3,500 males of Chinese ancestry in the state of Washington, but only 79 females of Chinese descent.

The explanation of that odd population disparity speaks volumes about nation's immigration policies during the 19th century. Seattle actress Stephaine Roberts told West High students Wednesday that Chinese laborers played an integral role in settling the American West. They helped build the railroads, worked in logging camps and toiled in mines.

But in 1882, Congress passed legislation that prevented further Chinese immigration and later expanded the ban to other Asian people. Chinese laborers who came to the United States in search of a better life were separated from their families for many years, a fact that's reflected in the cen-

sus information of 1900, Roberts said.

Likewise, the 11,000 Native Americans living in Washington at the turn of the century routinely saw their children shipped off to boarding schools to unlearn Indian ways and to become assimilated into white society. During the years in which boarding schools operated, Native American children were subjected to harsh military-style discipline. Some even had to build the schools they attended, Roberts said.

Roberts urged West High students to ponder these and other uncomfortable aspects of American history following her portrayal of a young Swedish immigrant in a program called "Northwest Passages."

Roberts works for a Seattle-based group called Living Voices, which presents history-based multi-media presentations to schools and other groups.

Roberts was one of several speakers to

address West High students this week during the school's annual multicultural awareness days. Presenters from a variety of cultural backgrounds visit the school to discuss the cultural norms, differences and barriers that they face in life.

Julia Berg, the fictional character that Roberts portrayed in "Northwest Passages," was similar to millions of other Americans who came to the United States in the late 19th century. Her family hoped to build a better life in a country where opportunities abounded.

The young Berg learned to speak and write English at school and, contrary to the wishes of her mother, she graduated from nursing school and went on to practice nursing during the height of a worldwide flu epidemic that killed millions of people from 1918-20.

Roberts said Berg was a composite of several actual people who lived in the Pacific Northwest at the turn of the century.

Northwest Passages in Billings