

## Chinese Canadian History

### Excerpts from *Last Steps to Freedom* by John Boyko

By the 1800s the Hudson's Bay Company was competing with Russia, the United States and Britain to win control of the resource-rich coast that would become British Columbia. To counter the threat of encroachment and legitimize British and company claims to the area, the HBC undertook an organized settlement of Vancouver Island. Immigration was restricted to white, British subjects.

By 1857 there were one thousand white inhabitants on Vancouver Island. Gold was then discovered in the Thompson River and by summer 1858 nearly thirty thousand people had swept into or through Victoria. The mainland was declared a Crown Colony under the British Colonial office.

With this influx of people came the first Chinese immigrants. In 1858 two thousand Chinese prospectors came from Portland and more from San Francisco. Soon immigrants also came from China, which was in the throes of the long and bloody Taiping Rebellion. The majority of Chinese immigrants to Canada came from the southern Canton delta provinces, Guangdong and Fujian, which were hardest hit during the rebellion. These people had also been exposed to British language and customs in the early 1850s when British soldiers and traders infiltrated the cities in the First Opium War.

Certain immigrants traveled at their own expense, intending to secure work, save money and return home. Other immigrants were laborers, sent to Canada by agencies in Hong Kong or Canton with agreement of fees to be owed.

By 1860 four thousand Chinese immigrants had arrived, by 1861 there were between six and seven thousand. Nearly all were men.

In 1863 in response to demands from growing mining companies, Governor Douglas commissioned the first roads to the interior. It was ordered that only white laborers be hired, however there were not enough white laborers to be found and so by default Chinese workers were hired. Soon there were approximately one thousand Chinese men working to build BC's first major roads. Chinese laborers earned an average of 75 cents to 1.25 a day while white laborers received an average of 1.50 to 2.50 a day.

Coal mines were the basis of Nanaimo's economy. Because of a world wide coal industry depression in 1866, mine owners began hiring Chinese miners at a pay rate of one dollar a day.

The 1885 the Royal Commission investigating Oriental problems in BC stated that not only the coal-mining industry, but also the canning and gold industries would not have succeeded without Chinese labour.

Not all Chinese worked for others. By the 1870s there were thirty Chinese-owned mining companies. By 1862 there were eleven tax paying Chinese owned businesses in Victoria. An imported goods business, established in 1858 by Kuong Lee, became second only the Hudson's Bay Company in terms of sales and employees by 1885.



Anti-Chinese attitudes were present with the first arrivals of Chinese immigrants to BC. In August 1858, for example, a boat of Chinese prospectors arriving in Hope, BC, were met by angry white prospectors (many of whom had recently immigrated themselves). Rocks and insults were hurled and the boat was unable to dock. Violence perpetuated against Chinese prospectors became routine.

A Victoria Gazette newspaper article of 1858 reported "A Chinaman was found shot dead with five bullets in his body. He was on his way to a spring to fetch water and had to pass a camp of miners. Further comment unnecessary."

Many white businessmen realized that Chinese labour was necessary and cheaper, however they felt that the elimination of Chinese business people would benefit themselves. Municipal government leaders and the white business people of Victoria formed the Working Man's Protective Association in 1878. Its aim was "the mutual protection of the working class in BC against the great influx of Chinese..." and to "neither aid nor abet or patronize Chinamen in any way whatever or patronize those employing them and use legitimate means for their expulsion from the country." New chapters were founded in many different communities.

The Protestant and Catholic churches' tacit support of anti-Oriental racism was heard from pulpits. Proceedings of the Presbyterian Church said that all Orientals must be saved from "the centuries of darling superstitions, demonolatry, ancestral worship and faith in false gods."

In 1859 Vancouver's Franchise Act stated that only British subjects could vote. Since regulations made it very difficult for Chinese people to become naturalized citizens, the law effectively barred Chinese people from an essential democratic right.

British Columbia joined Canada in 1871, and passed the Qualification of Voters Act. This law explicitly and completely barred Chinese people of the right to vote.

In 1875 it was proposed that no Chinese person be employed in Victoria's public works. The bills passed unanimously. In 1879 a motion supporting a head tax on all Chinese people in Victoria was passed unanimously by city council. The new tax was levied on every Chinese person over 12 years of age. It forced them to purchase a ten dollar license every three months. Chinese people organized in reaction, petitions were signed and sent to Ottawa and London. Chinese merchants refused to pay the fees. The Victoria police broke down the doors of protesting Chinese businesses, seized their goods and auctioned them at a fraction of their value. The Chinese undertook a general strike. For five days the city teetered on the brink of racial violence. Finally a court injunction forced an end to the auctions and disallowed the law.

By the early 1870s one had to publicly subscribe to anti-Chinese beliefs to enjoy any electoral success. Newspapers continued to reflect and inflame the racism of the community. For example, The Victoria Gazette editorial of March 31, 1869 stated that Chinese people were "a species of slavery and they are with very few exceptions not desirable as permanent settlers in a country peopled by the Caucasian race and governed by civilized enactment."

In 1867 Sir John A Macdonald promised British Columbia's colonial government that he would have a rail line to them if they would forget ideas of American annexation and join the young dominion. Andrew Onderdonk was awarded the contract to build the line through the mountains. He needed workers and there were only 3,500 able-bodied workers in BC when he arrived in Victoria in 1880. He estimated a need for 10,000.



The Working Man Protective Association (WPA) had already sent petitions to Ottawa demanding that no Chinese workers be hired. By 1881 the WPA boasted over 1,000 members and had chapters in several towns. It had organized harassment campaigns in which Chinese homes and businesses in Victoria, Vancouver and New Westminster were ransacked, houses burned, windows, and residents beaten. A number of Chinese men who dared to walk alone, even in broad daylight, with their ceremonial queue (ponytail), had their hair cut off or their head roughly shaved. Victoria's Mayor Shakespeare had a queue thus obtained mounted as a trophy in his home.

Within a month of starting, Onderdonk hired Chinese workers. Many were railroad workers hired from the US. Ignoring criticism Onderdonk also arranged with the six companies of Kwang Tung, the most important of which was the Lian Chang Company, to bring workers from China. In May 1882 two ships brought the first lot of 2,000 directly from Hong Kong to Victoria. By the end of June 6,500 had arrived. By the time construction ended in 1885 approximately 170,000 Chinese workers had been brought to Canada to build its railway. The first ships were met on the Victoria Docks by angry stone throwing mobs. An average of ten percent of those arriving had contracted scurvy on the ships. Most were swinging a pick one day after their arrival in Canada. Chinese navvies were paid less than the whites. They worked most often for one dollar a day fewer expenses. While the situation was hard for all, the Chinese were subjected to especially poor treatment. This tendency resulted in deaths among Chinese workers being much higher in proportion to their numbers than deaths among whites.

Under Onderdonk's direction white workers laid 26 miles of track from Yale to North Bend, white and Chinese had completed 26 miles from North Bend to Lytton. Exclusively Chinese work gangs had laid 17 miles from Lytton to Savannahs Ferry, and another 19 miles from Port Moody. Over 200 Chinese workers died from smallpox and many more from normally preventable diseases. Approximately 4,000 Chinese workers lost their lives laying the majority of the track of the most difficult portion of the Canadian railway. It has been convincingly argued that the railway could simply not have been built without the Chinese workers.

The Royal Commission on Chinese immigration was comprised of the Federal Secretary of State and a BC Supreme Court judge. It recommended that a ten dollar head tax be imposed on all Chinese immigrants to reduce the numbers and weed out the undesirables. The head tax easily passed through the legislative process in Ottawa and became law. The BC legislature was outraged. It had wanted complete exclusion and deportations. It reacted by passing the Chinese Immigration Act that completely barred Chinese entry into the province. Sir John A Macdonald introduced and passed the Franchise Act. The amendment rendered it illegal for any Chinese to vote in a federal election. The restriction even applied to naturalized Canadian citizens of Chinese descent. If a person could not vote in a federal election then he could not vote in provincial or municipal elections. Chinese-Canadians were not able to vote in a federal election until after the Second World War.



There were concerted moves made to implement stricter economic segregation. BC laws and the laws of nearly every BC union barred Chinese members from the economic membership. Blocking union hall doors to Chinese workers enabled them to portray Chinese as enemies competing for the union's jobs. The competition was more imagined than real. In most cases the Chinese workers took jobs that most white workers would not accept. Their labor enabled expansion, creating more jobs. In 1886 a contractor hired Chinese laborers to clear 350 acres of a five hundred acre parcel of land near Vancouver. The large anti-Chinese element of the city was outraged. The next day 250 workers arrived at a meeting held at city hall. The meeting inaugurated a group called the Vancouver Vigilance Committee. The people of Vancouver woke up one morning to find the following bill posted on fences, buildings and poles: "Due notice is hereby given to all China men to move with all their chattels from within the corporation of Vancouver on or before the 15th day of January 1887. Failing which all China men found in the city after the above date shall be forcibly expelled, and their goods and household effects shall be consigned."

A new group called the Anti-Chinese League was formed and led a mob of 3,400 descending upon Vancouver's China Town. They looted Chinese businesses, smashed windows and burned homes. As men, women and children fled to save themselves from a mob they were beaten, kicked and stoned. About 86 Chinese men were torn from their families and placed in small boats and shipped to New Westminster. The Vancouver city council met the next morning and declared that all Chinese residents living in the False Creek area should immediately leave the city. All local newspapers supported the expulsion of Chinese people. It was explained that the Vancouver police and officials could no longer be trusted since "the parties charged with the police protection of the city were not only afraid to enforce the law but were in sympathy with the agitation."

The break in the violence lasted from the late 1880s until the late 1890s and is perhaps due more to demographics than to anything else. In those years Chinese immigration slowed while white immigration from the east increased significantly. Chinese immigration began rising again in the late 1890s. But the ratio of whites to Chinese was such that Chinese were growing less conspicuous. Anti-Chinese newspapers printing articles reinforcing negative stereotypes remained common. Nearly all theatres, restaurants, hotels, and other public places remained segregated or barred Chinese entry completely. Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier won votes in BC by promising to support the province's desire to restrict Chinese immigration. He raised the head tax on Chinese immigrants to one hundred dollars, effective from 1901. The head tax was raised to 500 dollars effective from 1904. The number of Chinese immigrants went from 4,019 in 1903 to 8 in 1904.

In the 1880s and 1890s, a few Chinese children had attended missionary schools. Others had attended Chinese separate schools formed by community organizations. Most parents wanted their children to learn English and British ways and tried enrolling them in public schools. In 1901 a movement began in Victoria to have Chinese children excluded from public schools. Victoria maintained this racial segregation until 1908. In that year the BC department racially segregated all of the province's schools. In 1906 there was a surge in racist violence related to a surge in non-white immigration. In 1907 the BC legislature passed the Natal Act. It was patterned and named after laws enacted to separate the races in South Africa. The new act stated that prospective immigrants had to be able to



write a European language to be admitted and it barred businesses from employing anyone who could not write a European language. On September 7th, Lieutenant Governor announced his refusal to sign the Natal Act. That night 8,000 people showed the hatred of Chinese people and anger with Dunsmuir by marching in downtown Vancouver beneath banners stating "Stand for a white Canada". As it had 20 years before, the mob pillaged and burned homes and businesses. Innocent people were beaten.

The Conservative Party campaigned in BC under the slogan "White Canada". It stated in newspapers "the Conservative Party stands for a white Canada, protection of white labor and the absolute exclusion of Asiatics". The party won 5 out of 7 seats under its blatantly racist platform. The business people of the 1920s still felt threatened by Chinese competition. An Issue of BC Fruit and Farm magazine stated "the proportion of Oriental to white in BC is too great, but only in one sense and that is owing that they are in business for themselves and they are not as they should be, working for white men." Liberal advertisements for the 1921 provincial elections stated that liberal candidates are pledged to a white British Columbia. The Liberals won. Prime Minister Mackenzie King wrote "that Canada should remain a white man's country is believed to be not only desirable for economic and social reasons, but also highly necessary on political and national grounds."

The British Columbia legislature passed the BC Immigration Act in 1922. The federal government devised one of its own and passed the Chinese Immigration Act. It became popularly known as the Chinese Exclusion Act for it banned Chinese entry into Canada. Exceptions were made only for students who had to leave once their studies were completed, merchants who came with sufficient money and contracts, Chinese children born in Canada or members of the Chinese government. It came into effect in 1923. At the same time thousands of European immigrants were being welcomed into Canada. The act remained in effect until 1947.

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