

THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN KAMLOOPS

Prepared by: The Chinese Cultural
Association of Kamloops,
British Columbia (1988)

[Faint handwritten notes or signatures]

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINATOWN IN KAMLOOPS

Although there was no definable "Chinatown" like it exists in Vancouver, there was a sizeable Chinese population in Kamloops which tended to congregate in certain areas. These areas were primarily places of business as well as residential. It is important to keep in mind that during the 1850's there were primarily a male population of Chinese, hence early Chinatown had extremely few if any females or Chinese families. Several individuals would inhabit a given dwelling which was usually situated next to or in fact was their place of business. Around these places of business small concentrations of Chinese could be found which for our purposes, developed into the Kamloops "Chinesetown".

There seems to be no definable date concerning its origin and data on its early existence is scarce. A few Chinese arrived in this area in the late 1850's in search of the Tranquille gold, but about two or three hundred came in March of 1861. Many Chinese left this area during winter. However, those who remained at Tranquille Creek made up to four dollars per day. There followed a gradual decline after 1861 as the gold content depleted and many Chinese left the area or chose to remain as houseboys or laundrymen.

During this early period the Chinese chose to remain camped near or at their claim at Tranquille Creek and it wasn't until 1884, with the construction of the C.P.R., that Chinese "camps" became distinct from the white labour force as a result of increased numbers. During this time, several merchants came to settle, and trade with their fellow countrymen, and according to the Sentinel, men such as Kwong On Wo did extensive business.

The completion of the C.P.R. in 1885, brought about an economic slump for the Chinese who were either forced to leave the area or remained and took up jobs such as laundrymen, houseboys, cooks and gardeners. With the establishment of Chinese places of business such as laundries, restaurants, general stores, etc., concentrated "Chinese" areas arose in Kamloops. This population tended to congregate near the westend of Victoria street close to the old Overlander's Bridge location. Other smaller concentrations could be found scattered along Lorne Street as well as Victoria street. Chinese who worked as houseboys or ranch cooks would live in the house or ranch and would come to Chinatown for supplies, ceremonies, festivals, gambling, or perhaps to smoke some opium.

Another occupation of the Chinese in this community was market gardening. Many Chinese in Kamloops chose to rent land. Wealthier Chinese chose to set up general stores and provide much needed oriental goods for the Chinese community. These could afford to own land in the future and bring their families to B.C.. As the Chinese community grew, other occupations were available. Chinese businessmen were respected and were to an extent, set apart from the other working Chinese partly because of their prestige as well as the fact that these men lived with their families much like the white society. During these years of segregation the Chinese community kept functioning largely as a result of voluntary associations. These associations were not, by any means, a newly established phenomenon within Chinese culture as it existed in Canadian Society. Their origins may be traced back to early traditional society in China. Ad hoc groups formed to undertake special tasks not catered for in the lineage system. Membership was attained by joining the groups, it was not heredity. Mutual aid clubs collected funds which they invested in lands, then applied rents to a particular purpose - perhaps the burial of one of its members. Other associations were founded on common economic interests.

The conditions of the lineage system in the province of Kwangtung, developed especially strong family ties. Associations were not likely to assume an important position in China. When these southeastern Chinese settled in B.C. towns and cities, they set up urban occupations and social alignments, not able to depend upon traditional lineage support. As dependence upon associations increased, they assumed greater importance. They were set up to co-ordinate economic activity, guide the Chinese in their dealings with the Occidental World, and to provide the individual with some sort of familiar social interaction.

The associations in B.C. consisted of four types of organizations : fraternal associations, community associations, locality associations and clan associations. Out of these four, Kamloops experienced primarily the fraternal associations of which two of the most prominent ones, the Chinese Free Masons and the Kwomintang (Nationalist League), originally had anti-Manchu intent. In Canada these associations were less devoted to politics and more to the economic benevolence and guidance of the local Chinese community in its relation to the Occidental World.

These associations maintained solidarity of Chinese culture within

the community in Kamloops. They perpetuated Chinese customs; for example, the elaborate burial rites associated with Feng Shui. The Chinese dialect common to the group continued to be spoken at each meeting.

Although not a fraternal organization, the first attempt to organize the Chinese as part of the white community was formed in 1890 by the Methodist Church. Its purpose was to educate the Chinese in the English language and the Christian way of life. Rev. Dowsley, a missionary in China for seven years, gave assistance to the volunteer mission workers. However after his departure, interpreters were required. The Church attempted to make the Chinese a more socially accepted group by making them English speaking Christians. The school ran well into the 1920's and the Chinese appreciated the chance to become Canadianized as indicated by high attendance by the men.

The Chinese Methodist Mission Hall was opened on Lorne Street in 1908 (coinciding with the Chinese New Year's celebrations) and Rev. Dickenson, a Methodist pastor, gave the opening sermon. The Chinese sang hymns in their native language while the visitors sang in English. For those who could not speak English, the hymns and prayers were translated into Chinese through interpreters.

In 1921 a Chinese pastor, Rev. Chian Fei Tong, came out from Calgary to replace Dickenson. Even though the Chinese attended church, they were not totally Christians or possessed a really strong belief; most followed a combination of Christianity, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. A Chinese Y.M.C.A. rooming house adjoining the Mission Hall was opened in 1915 for the benefit of new arrivals to this community.

As was mentioned earlier, fraternal associations were experienced in the Kamloops area; namely the Chinese Free Masons and Kuomintang. The activities of the Masonic Lodge were varied and ranged from showers to funerals and kept a very close contact with China because of the interest in Chinese politics. In 1912, the new Chinese Republic under Dr. Sun Yat Sen decreed many changes, including the adoption of the western calendar. On January 21, the Masons held a banquet in Dr. Sun's honour with 150 present and passed a resolution requiring every Chinese in the city to have his queue cut within a week to signify their liberation; an order apparently very gladly obeyed. The organization was a well respected group and held a fair amount of authority.

A little later, another fraternal association called the Kuomintang

or the Chinese Nationalist League started. The aim of this association was to further the development of China under the Republican form of government of Dr. Sun Yat Sen, to complete the social and political reform of China. The first obligation of membership was to observe the laws of the land wherein the member dwelt. They were also to follow the Confucian doctrine of patience. The league actually furthered the integration of the Chinese and white culture to a degree in their belief that when in Canada do as the Canadians do, but keep the Chinese traditions as well. This group was very active, probably because most of the Chinese population were young men very enthusiastic towards the recent trend in the politics of China.

As a final phase in the discussion of the development of Chinatown, the Chinese cemetery proves to be quite interesting. The first reference which may be found regarding the existence of a Chinese burial site is a small article which appears in the Kamloops Sentinel of June 18, 1887 and which reads :

"On rambling over the heights overlooking Kamloops on Tuesday last, one of the reporters of the Sentinel staff came upon a solitary grave. On nearer inspection our reporter discovered a head board bearing a Chinese inscription which indicated that a body of a Celestial was buried underneath. We have often wondered where the Chinamen of Kamloops buried their dead; but this solitary grave upon the heights over which cattle tread, seems to unravel much of the mystery."

This article would seem to indicate that the Chinese were burying their dead at random upon the hillsides of Kamloops. This most likely was not the case however. It has been said that the Chinese were extended a land grant in 1885 for a cemetery and that the site which was chosen complied with specific traditional Chinese burial customs. It was probably this chosen site that the reporter stumbled upon and almost certainly the site marked the origins of the present cemetery. Hundreds of Chinese were buried in the graveyard before the turn of the century but by far the majority of these were exhumed before 1905 and the bones returned to ancestral plots in China.

By 1920, however, a significant change was apparent in the attitude

of the Chinese with regard to their graveyard in terms of finances and funeral ceremonies. They erected two cement cornerposts, three large ceremonial pillars, and the area was fenced off. These measures on the part of the Chinese were probably the consequence of several important issues. Firstly, Chinese immigration to B.C. had virtually been cut off and there was no vehicle by which the bones of the dead could be transported to China. No longer was it a short term resting place but instead a permanent sanction for the deceased Chinese. Secondly, financial support from the Free Masons promoted the well-being of the cemetery. Thirdly, white prejudice against the Chinese was easing somewhat and making the graveyard's presence known to the white community did not threaten its safety. Funeral services were no longer private nor strictly attended by only the Chinese. In fact these ceremonies had become very public in nature as can be seen by the front page headline of the Kamloops Sentinel of August 22, 1932 which read:

"Funeral of the Sam Hung impressive"

"Customs were all observed."

The article continued to say that hundreds of Chinese and many whites gathered in front of the Chinese Masonic Temple on Victoria Street, proceeded up 3rd Avenue and west along St. Paul to the cemetery. At the graveyard rice, roast, chicken and cigarettes were put into the grave. Silver paper which represented money and food was burned; the ashes were intended to float into the atmosphere where the spirit could reach them.

The funeral of Sam Hung was obviously a very significant event for the Chinese of Kamloops. The white community was actually intrigued by the unique event and photographers even took pictures of the funeral rituals in order that postcards could be made; Kamloops was proud of its Chinese community.

The Chinese continued to take good care of their cemetery during the 1930's and 1940's and in 1950 pictures show that the site was in a neat and orderly condition. Many burials took place during this time and eventually the Chinese were forced to stack the bodies two or three high and when this method was exhausted, the graveyard was enlarged in the fifties. Upon expansion, burials continued right up until the late sixties, the extension however, was destined never to be filled as a result of a change in attitude

of the new generation Chinese who did not wish to be buried in a graveyard which is based upon Confucian ideals which they have rejected for Christianity. Today the graveyard is for the most part forgotten. There have been no burials in the last eight to ten years.

Now that a general description of the Kamloops Chinese community has been presented, the way in which they lived within Chinatown and the reaction of the white community to their presence is important from a cultural viewpoint.

LIFE AMONG THE CHINESE IN KAMLOOPS

The Chinese people experienced many difficulties when they first came to Canada. This country was foreign to them and customs, language and way of life appeared very strange and alien. The Chinese had to adjust from a sociologically advanced urban society of southern China to the pioneering frontier life in Kamloops. They were underpaid and most lived in ghetto-like conditions, in tents or western-style huts along the railway. What little money they made they saved to send back to their families in China. During the latter 1800's the Chinese workers stayed in rooming houses generally run by a Chinese boss, storekeeper or laundry man, who also found them jobs for which he took a cut, as well as his gains from room and board. Chinatown was a scene of feverish activity where customers could only buy silks and Chinese goods, have their laundry work done with a private mark for each customer and with no risk of mix up or loss. Nighttime was another matter; here after work, they gathered, talked, read Chinese papers, or played games and gambled. Here life was much like back home, on small wooden bunks without springs or mattresses, which gave rest to these hardworkers, who pound for pound, proved they had few equals in back breaking labour. Chinatown was the origin of festivals, funerals, showers and marriages.

In 1879 a petition was signed by 15,000 residents of B.C. and put forth to the House of Commons requesting the prohibition of Chinese labour in railway work. This and other proposals like it were a direct result of a sudden change towards Chinese employment. The people feared the eventual merchantile, agricultural and procreative dominance of the Chinese. By the late 1890's there was such a large number of Chinese that they started to monopolize the labour force in many fields. Lord Worsely had stated that the Chinese would

eventually over-run the world because they could exist on so little. The government wanted to impose a tax of \$40 per capita for each Chinese entering the Dominion. It was believed that a large influx of Chinese was a serious menace to the prosperity and material welfare of the country. People complained that their moral, social and sanitary status was usually below the most inferior standards of western life. Also, these Chinese were non-assimilative and have no intentions of settled citizenship. The head tax of \$50 in 1885 was later raised to \$500 in 1904.

Many people felt that the Chinese were slowing down the development of business in areas where they worked and that if whites were employed, they would settle and start a family and thereby contribute to the community by purchasing from local stores; unlike the Chinese who chose to send their money back to their homeland.

Whatever discrimination existed in Kamloops against the Chinese, it basically stemmed from economic fears. The labour unions disapproved of the low wages accepted by the Chinese and the merchants disliked the competition. The intensity of discrimination also varied with respect to the relative proportion of Chinese workers to the white labour force. Generally speaking, in Kamloops, the two groups lived quite peacefully together. The whiteman helped the Chinese to integrate into the western society by teaching them the English language and customs. In return the Chinese would include them in their various festivities.

CONCLUSION

Considering the background of the immigrant Chinese, his lineage ties, his need for prestige within the family unit, as well as other conditions present in China, the promise of a better land, and the lure of better wages drew them like a magnet to North America. The Cariboo Gold rush brought thousands to British Columbia in search of the precious metal. The construction of the C.P.R. brought even more workers who proved that they could work for fewer wages, which to them seemed quite a lot at that time.

The completion of the C.P.R. brought about an economic slump for the Chinese who were forced to either return home or remain and work as houseboys or laundrymen. As houseboys they became very attached with their masters and contributed to the overall solidarity of the household.

As businessmen, Chinese were respected for their honesty and concern for each customer. As more and more Chinese took up menial occupations for lower wages, they began to be looked down upon by the white merchants, who disliked the competition. The discontent that did rise was primarily stemming from economic fears as well as the proportion of Chinese to whites in this community. However, as was mentioned earlier, Kamloops, in general, did not experience discontent to any great degree as compared to Vancouver. The process of the Chinese was from segregation at first, to integration with the white community. This process was highlighted by the development of associations such as the Free Masons and the Kuomintang which not only perpetuated Chinese customs but also helped Chinese society to integrate with the white community. The mere fact that everyone was allowed to attend funerals, ceremonies, plays etc., and the proceeds of which were often donated to the hospital for example, points out Chinese attitudes as leaning towards integration with the white society.

There were instances of discontent which arose in Kamloops such as certain questionable lifestyles of the Chinese, but these were to be expected in a predominantly male population.

During their early years in Kamloops they were welcomed, perhaps as a source of revenue from mining licences and trade, and were allowed to vote at the first elections. By 1875 however, they had lost their franchise. Their franchise was lost for several decades until perhaps the Second World War, which began a modern era of adaptation for the Chinese. Canada and China were allies. Chinese community leaders raised funds and organized the community for war causes. The actions of the Nazis' during the war made racism very unfashionable and Canadians took a new look at the races that had previously been excluded from citizenship. In 1947 Chinese immigration was resumed. Full citizenship rights were extended after five years. New job opportunities opened up outside of Chinatown.

As the job range changed, so did the residence of the Chinese. They moved out of the Chinatowns and into various residential areas. Chinatowns now ceased to be residential, they became, and continue to be centres for service industry, the tourist trade, offices of the Chinese associations, restaurants, and specialty shops. Individual ties with business and family are now more important than the old ties of traditional clans and associations. As a result the younger generation has become increasingly integrated into B.C. society. Indeed, the

process of integration is complete in Kamloops and a Chinatown no longer exists. However remnants of the past such as restaurants or the Chinese graveyard are still where they used to be.

Attitudes among the Occidentals have changed too. The Chinese people are no longer alien. Canadians mingle with the Chinese socially and to some extent inter-marriage occurs. Children of both groups attend the same schools; and when they die, they are buried in the same graveyard. The segregated condition, experienced by the early Chinese, no longer exists. The process of integration has been completed and the Chinese appear to be functioning and working well as a part of Kamloops society. This process of integration has been accomplished as a result of several important reasons. One obvious reason was the freeing of immigration laws which allowed Chinese to enter Canada once again. Another important factor which has helped to determine the present status of the Chinese in Kamloops has been the giving up of old traditional Chinese ways. Their acceptance of Christianity also did much towards rapid integration. Discrimination in B.C. usually has an economic base. Since the 1930's we have not suffered a severe depression and as a result, discrimination has been low. The intensity of discrimination relates to the ratio of whites to Orientals. There is no fear today that B.C. might be overrun by Orientals as there was in the period 1860 to 1930. After the Chinese Revolution in 1949, any hope of returning to China disappeared and those Chinese who had since immigrated from Hong Kong have brought their families with them. These families do not live in ghettos and are integrated more closely with the white society.