A sketch of Derby, British Columbia in 1859

Sketch drawn by William Crickmer in 1859 of Derby, British Columbia, the original site of Fort Langley and the first permanent settlement in the Lower Fraser Valley.

Amor De Cosmos on the Chinese in British Columbia

Excerpt from a newspaper article written by politician and journalist Amor De Cosmos, published in the British Colonist on March 8, 1860.

The British Colonist
March 8, 1860

Regarding Chinese race:

They may be inferior to Europeans and Americans in energy and ability; hostile to us in race, language and habits and may remain among us a Pariah [outcast] race; still they are patient, easily governed [controlled] and invariably industrious [hard-working] and their presence at this juncture would benefit trade everywhere in the two colonies [Vancouver Island and British Columbia]...Hereafter, when the time arrives that we can dispose of them, we will heartily second a check [limit] to their immigration.

-Amor De Cosmos

Labourers on the Cariboo Wagon Road

Excerpt from a speech given in 1908 by Walter Moberly, a construction supervisor for the section of the Cariboo road between Lytton and Spence’s Bridge.

Walter Moberly
1908

"This contemptible (disgraceful) proceeding (action) on the part of these men, which was brought about by the reports of fabulously rich deposits of gold having been discovered on Antler and other creeks in Cariboo, reduced the force of men needed to insure the prosecution (completion) of the work in accordance (agreement) with our contract (deal) with the government, and compelled (forced) me to employ, much against my wishes, a large force of Chinese labourers. It will thus be seen that the bad faith and unscrupulous (immoral) conduct (actions) of the white labourers was the cause of (reason for) the employment of Chinese labour in constructing the Cariboo wagon road. All the other contractors on this road experienced the same treatment from their white labourers that befell (happened to) me.

I found all the Chinese employed worked most industriously (with great effort) and faithfully and gave me no trouble."

The Cariboo Sentinel attacks Chinese labour

Excerpts from a newspaper article published in 1866 in the Cariboo Sentinel, a Barkerville newspaper.

The Cariboo Sentinel
Barkerville, BC
1866

...Second, because they never become good citizens, they never serve on juries [body of people sworn to give verdict in legal case] or on fire companies, or in any way in which the citizens of any other country would lend a hand in cases of emergency. They never marry or settle in any country but their own, and are more apt [likely] to create immorality than otherwise and hence they are a bad example, and their presence injurious [harmful]. Third, they deal entirely with their own countrymen and consume few articles of the production of the country in which they reside [live]; their consumption in all cases is confined [limited] to articles of the first necessity [need], and they do little to assist in the accumulation [build up] of wealth in any country where they may be located. Fourth, they hoard [save] their money with the intention [plan] of sending it away to the country whence [from which] they came, so that its accumulation and exploitation [use] is an absolute [total] loss to the people amongst whom it is amassed [built up]. Large sums are in this way yearly sent away from British Columbia that would otherwise, if circulated in the colony, add vastly to its prosperity [wealth]. Fifth, they evade [avoid] payment of the taxes to which the citizens of the colony are subjected [must pay], and thus are the most privileged class, while they are at the same time the most unprofitable.

Downtown Barkerville

Photograph taken in 1868 of Barkerville, a mining town located in the Cariboo region of British Columbia.

Frederick Dally, “Wa Lee laundry in Barkerville, an early Chinese community in British Columbia, September 1868” © Public Domain
Library and Archives Canada (nlc- 8646) http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/settlement/kids/021013-2031.2-e.html
This 1867 Pacific Coast Business Directory contains the name and address of each merchant, manufacturer and professional residing in the western U.S. states and the colony of British Columbia.
A letter to the editor of the Victoria Times Colonist

Letter to the editor of the Victoria Times Colonist in 1864. In 1864 a collection of money was held in support of a reception to be given in honour of the new governor of Vancouver Island, Arthur E. Kennedy.

Comments in brackets are not part of the original document. They have been added to assist the reader with difficult words.

Victoria Times Colonist

1864

If the collectors appointed to receive donations for the governor's reception fund will call at Messrs. [Misters] Kwong Lee and Co's Store on Cormorant Street they may receive upwards of one hundred dollars contributed without solicitation by the Chinese residents of Victoria as a mark of loyalty to our Gracious Queen.

- Richard Hall, Sin Shang

Washing gold in the Fraser River

Photograph of a Chinese man washing gold in the Fraser River in 1875. The man is using a gold separating machine introduced by the Chinese to British Columbia that was later used and copied by other miners.

Excerpt from a letter to the editor published in the Victoria Times Colonist in March 1872. In February 1872, British Columbia Legislative Assembly member John Robson proposed a bill (an idea for a law) that created a $50 head tax per year on Chinese people living in British Columbia. Although the proposal was defeated by 14 votes to 6, many newspaper editors agreed with the plan.

Comments in brackets are not part of the original document. They have been added to assist the reader with difficult words.

Victoria Times Colonist
1872

[The per capita tax] is based on the assumption [belief] that the Chinese do not now contribute their fair quota [share] toward public revenue [income] ... it will hardly be contented [argued] that they are anything like as large consumers of dutiable [taxable] goods as are the Caucasian [white] race .... The Caucasian labourer keeps [maintains] a house, raises a family and does his part toward maintaining all institutions of a civilized Christian community. The Mongolian [reference to Chinese] labourer emerges from his sardine box [small fish tightly packed in a box] in the morning, consumes his pound of rice and puts his days work, baiting [spending] naught [nothing] from his earnings, save [except] the veriest [smallest] pittance [amount] he subsists [lives] on. No wife and children to feed and clothe and educate, no church to maintain, no Sunday clothes too, he saves nearly with him [keeps] all his hoardings [saved money] [to send] home to China ....

A complaint against Chinese labourers

Excerpts from an 1877 issue of the Victoria Times Colonist regarding Chinese labourers who worked on the construction of the Yale Wagon Road.

Comments in brackets are not part of the original document. They have been added to assist the reader with difficult words.

Victoria Times Colonist
1877

How many of the 1000 and off Celestial laborers who worked on the Yale–New Westminster road in 1874 and 1875 and were paid $300 000 for their labor, became permanent settlers? ... Not one .... They came like locusts [insects often migrating in immense swarms that devour vegetation and crops] and so departed.

Excerpt from a series of interviews with Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of British Columbia, Sir Matthew Begbie, published as part of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration in 1885.

Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration, 1885

I do not see how people would get on (exist) here at all without Chinamen. They do, and do well, what white women cannot do, and do what white men will not do ... as to the past, the undoubted facts are: 1st. That Chinamen are very largely, and till within a year (of 1884), mainly, employed in all the laborious parts of our coal mines; 2nd. They constitute three-fourths of the working hands about every salmon canner-y; 3rd. They are a very large majority of the labourers employed in gold mines; 4th. They are the model (exemplary) market gardeners of the province, and produce the greater part of the vegetables grown here; 5th. They have been found to be absolutely indispensable (crucial) in the construction of the railway; 6th. They are largely, sometimes, exclusively (the only ones), employed in nearly every manufactory or undertaking of any description, not being under the authority of a board or council elected exclusively by white voters.

(Signed)

Sir Matthew Begbie
Chief Justice of the Supreme Court
British Columbia

But it was the gold mines, and to some extent the Chinese, that brought dollars and pounds into Victoria. The city was a great funnel into which was poured men and supplies, most of which flowed down the every-narrowing neck to the gulf, the river, the canyons, the gorges and the untrammelled valleys of the interior. 

[...] 

It is not known how many Orientals [Asians] lived in [Victoria] at this time but those required to pay taxes for the half year beginning July 1, 1862 included Al Foo (Fruiterer), Ah Sing (Trader), Du Quong …. The heaviest assessment was levelled at the Hudson’s Bay Company, to the amount of 25,000 pounds sterling, but next was none other than the Kwong Lee Company at 6,560 pounds, on which was paid a tax of 15 pounds. Janion and Green and J. J. Southgate were assessed at 6,000 pounds each, followed by four companies at between 2,000 and 6,000 pounds. At the 2,000-pound level were several establishments including De Cosmos (Printer) Government Street, Tai-Soon (Merchant) and the Yong-Wo-Sang Company (Merchants) each of whom paid a tax of six pounds. If this was any sign of the wealth of the city, the three Chinese merchant companies provided a remarkable proportion of it. 

The Chinese not only improved the commerce of the city but also contributed to the health and well-being of the good housewives of the town—or, more accurately of those households who could afford a Chinese servant. As Henry Pelling Perew Crease later pointed out, life in the colony had been rugged before the arrival of the Chinese …. The Chinese proved to be ideal servants and the Oriental washman, trotting the muddy streets with his bags of dirty linen strung across his shoulders on a bamboo pole, was a great boon to them.
The Chinese also met many of the frontier economy’s needs. They grew vegetables for sale, cut firewood and ran laundries and restaurants. A thousand Chinese helped build the 607-kilometre Cariboo Wagon Road from Yale to Barkerville. Once it was finished, Chinese teamsters drove horse-teams through perilous Fraser Canyon. In 1866, five hundred Chinese strung telegraph wires through the new colony.

Not all Chinese who came to British Columbia went to or stayed in the gold rush areas. In the 1870s, fish canneries were established along the coast. Their owners were constantly troubled by labour shortages because the work was seasonal and because White workers tended to leave for the mines at the first opportunity. Chinese crews soon dominated the industry. In Victoria, Chinese worked as servants and cooks in wealthy households. Chinese coal miners worked in Cumberland, near Nanaimo [on Vancouver Island].

The first census of Canada, in 1871, gave the number of Chinese in British Columbia as 1548. There is reason to doubt this figure, for the same source estimates the Chinese population in 1874 as 3000. Even this figure is well below the estimate of 6000 for 1861, however, and it is therefore to be supposed that many Chinese departed Canada after the gold rush had petered out and the provisioning and servicing of mining communities no longer provided the lucrative employment it had in the early 1860s.

Harry Con et al., From China to Canada: A history of the Chinese communities in Canada (Toronto, ON: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), p. 19 © Public Domain
At the peak of the gold rush immigration in the mid-1860s, there were about 4000 [Chinese people] in the colony, but that number declined to about 1500 in 1870. 

[...] 

The most distinctive feature of the Chinese community in Canada until after World War II was its overwhelming maleness …. This fact contributed to white suspicions about Chinese morality and to complaints that the Chinese were not contributing to the development of British Columbia but were sending their earnings “home” to wives, families, and villages. Indeed, the income from so-journers overseas was crucial to the economies of many families and communities in China. 

Although a handful of Chinese immigrants did settle permanently and establish families, the majority, in ambition, if not achievement, sought to make their fortunes and then return to China where they could live in ease.

Patricia Roy, A white man’s province: British Columbia politicians and Chinese and Japanese immigrants, 1858–1914 (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 1989), p. xi. These excerpts are reprinted with permission of the Publisher. All rights reserved by the Publisher | www.ubcpress.ca