

Early Asian Pioneers in Western Canada

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Introduction

British Columbia, like the west coast of the United States, was a main destination for Asian immigrants in the mid to late 19th and early 20th centuries. This was a period of economic boom in the West — a time when those willing to work hard physically could find ample opportunities. During this time gold was discovered in California and British Columbia; both countries were in dire need of laborers to complete their transcontinental railways; and the lumbering, coal mining and fishing industries were all experiencing unprecedented growth. Peasants from around the world (including Italy, the Slavic countries, and Asian) whose homelands were overcrowded and resource bases depleted, saw the West Coast of North America as a place of opportunity and possible settlement.

Unfortunately, these early pioneer and settlement years were extremely difficult ones for Asian immigrants as they had to endure much racism and suffer many barriers to full participation in North American life. This module will focus on the experiences of the most prominent Asian pioneer groups to British Columbia during this period — the Chinese, Japanese, and South Asians — and the eventual barring of Asian immigration in Canada all together. Several parallels will be drawn between Asian history in western Canada and the United States.

The aim of this module is to teach students about the tremendous hurdles these early pioneers had to face in British Columbia and for students to realize that the cultural strength of these communities today is thanks, in part, to the groundwork laid by these early men and women. Through the use of maps, the students should also learn something of western geography.

Gold brings the Chinese to the West

The Chinese pioneers preceded the Japanese and South Asian immigrants to North America's west coast — the Chinese came in the mid-1800s to take advantage of the opportunities brought on by the discovery of gold whereas the Japanese didn't come in significant numbers until the late 1870s and the South Asians not until the early in the 20th century. California was the first destination point.

The California gold rush began in 1849 and continued into the 1850s. The opportunity to make money from the gold rush, whether by prospecting or providing services for the new boom towns, brought thousands of Chinese to California. Have the students draw a line directly from China to California and mark this line, "Chinese immigration — 1840s-50s". In the early 1850s, gold was discovered north of the border. Most of the Chinese who came to British Columbia in the 1850s and 1860s came directly from California — as the gold rush in California was coming to a close, the rush was just beginning in the north.

There were two major gold rushes in British Columbia in the mid-1800s. The first was the Fraser Gold Rush that kicked off in the 1850s and following that was the Cariboo Gold Rush of the 1860s. While the Fraser Gold Rush drew Chinese north, it was during the Cariboo Gold Rush that the first Chinese community was established in Canada in the gold mining town of Barkerville.

On a map of British Columbia have the students locate Yale, British Columbia. Yale is just north of Hope, on the Fraser River. (Hope is directly east of Vancouver and directly north of Ross Lake in Washington.) Now have the students locate Barkerville. Have them follow Highway 1 north to Cache Creek and then continue north on Highway 97 to Quesnel. At Quesnel have them go east to Bowron Lake Provincial Park. Just before coming to the Bowron Lakes they will find Barkerville.

Barkerville is now a heritage site but in the 1860s it was a boom town — thousands of prospectors came to Barkerville, many of them from the U.S. At the height of the gold rush there were as many as 5,000 Chinese living in Barkerville. Due to discrimination towards Asians, the Chinese were not allowed to prospect in the area other than on abandoned sites and so did not make the same fortunes as did the whites. However, the Chinese nonetheless found a way to survive and thrive as a community. As many as 20,000 prospectors came into the Barkerville region in the 1860s and the Chinese provided many of the services they required including operating grocery stores and restaurants. Next to Barkerville have the students write that this was the site of the first Chinese settlement in Canada. Now have the students locate Victoria (at the southern tip of Vancouver Island) and draw a line connecting California to Victoria to Barkerville. Have them label this line, "Chinese migration in the 1850s and 1860s".

During the Fraser and Cariboo Gold Rushes, Fort Victoria (as Victoria was then known) also prospered thanks to the business provided by the gold miners who either wintered over in the city or passed through on their way north. The Chinese from California had heard of Governor James Douglas and his fairness to racial minorities which was, in part, what drew them to British Columbia (Douglas' mother was a "free coloured woman"). Once the gold rush was over, many Chinese stayed on in Victoria. For a time, life in Victoria was good. The Chinese started import businesses and worked as small merchants and built a strong community in the city. Have the students write, next to Victoria, that this was the first permanent Chinese settlement in Canada founded in the 1850s and 60s. By the end of the 1860s there were approximately 7,000 Chinese living in British Columbia.

While the gold rush was going on in British Columbia, thousands of Chinese were also working on the transcontinental railway in the U.S. which was completed in 1869. In 1882 the U.S. implemented the Chinese Exclusion Act prohibiting Chinese immigration to the country. In 1923 Canada also imposed a suspension on Chinese immigration but not before employing approximately 15,000 Chinese to complete the Canadian Pacific Railway. In the early 1880s, just as the U.S. was closing its doors to the Chinese, Canada encouraged thousands of Chinese to make their way north to work on the Canadian Pacific Railway.

It was also during the 1880s that the first Japanese began to immigrate to the U.S. to fill the need for cheap laborers left vacant by the Chinese. Around this same period Japanese immigrants began to make their way to Canada mostly to work in the fishing industry or to start farms in the Fraser Valley near Vancouver.

The Canadian Pacific Railway and the Chinese in Canada

In the mid-1800s British Columbia was still a colony of Great Britain and not yet part of Canada. The federal government, concerned about American expansion in the West, wanted to bring British Columbia into Confederation. In 1871 British Columbia agreed to join Canada contingent on the Canadian Pacific Railway being completed and which would connect the province to the rest of Canada. Have the students look on their maps and identify the Rocky Mountain range along the southern border of Alberta and British Columbia. This was the site of the most difficult and dangerous work to be done on the railway. Tunnels had to be blasted and rail laid along dangerous mountain passes.

Thousands of laborers were needed to complete the railway but the company soon realized that millions of dollars could be saved by employing Chinese immigrants at less than half the wages paid whites. In the end well over half the railway workers were Chinese lured by promises of a decent wage and return passages to China. Unfortunately, when the C.P.R. was completed, these promises were not kept and as many as 5,000 of the men who had hoped to return to China were unable to do so.

This was a sad time for the Chinese in Canada as hundreds died working on the C.P.R. It is estimated that at least four Chinese died for every mile of track laid due to explosions, exposure, or from scurvy or malnutrition. There was no way to bury the dead so the bodies were simply left beside the tracks and covered with rocks and dirt. There is a famous photo of the driving of the Last Spike of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Ironically there is not one Chinese face in that photo though the contribution of the Chinese men was invaluable and the railway could not have been completed without their hard work and dedication.

Once the C.P.R. was completed in 1885 the Chinese were no longer welcome in the province. From the late 1800s on the Canadian government made it increasingly difficult for the Chinese to immigrate. Those who stayed in Canada faced growing racism. Asian children were discouraged from attending school, professional jobs were closed to all Asians, the vote was denied them, and economic problems were blamed on their willingness to work hard and for less than their white counterparts. Due to increased discrimination and being barred from the opportunities available to whites, both the Chinese and Japanese formed their own ethnic enclaves where they could support one another financially and emotionally and where their language and cultures could safely be expressed.

Japanese and South Asian immigrants in British Columbia

The first Japanese began to immigrate to Canada in 1877 — between that year and 1914 over 10,000 Japanese immigrants had come to the British Columbia. Most came from the poorer farming and fishing villages on the southern islands of Kyushu and Honshu and most were young, single men hoping to make enough money to send home to help their families and to establish themselves in the new country. Like the Chinese they couldn't hold professional jobs but were limited to wage-laborer positions, fishing and farming. Have the students draw a line between Japan and the south-west corner of British Columbia and label that line, "Japanese immigration begins in 1877".

In 1903 the first Sikh's settled in the Lower Mainland (the south-west corner of British Columbia) and between 1903-1908 over 5,000 immigrants, mostly men, came to British Columbia to take advantage of the stronger economy. Many of these early immigrants worked in the lumber industry and a few of them opened their own mills. South Asian immigrants initially fared much better in British Columbia than did the Chinese or Japanese pioneers because as British subjects they enjoyed certain rights and privileges. The South Asians usually had some English language skills and understood European culture making their transition into Canadian society somewhat easier. In addition, Chinese and Japanese immigration had been sharply curtailed prior to 1903 leaving many laboring jobs open for the South Asians. However, it only took a slight downturn in the economy to turn the tides against these British subjects. As jobs became increasingly scarce, it was the South Asians who were blamed (along with the Chinese and Japanese) for taking jobs from the whites. Have the students draw a line from India to the Lower Mainland and label that line, "South Asian immigration from 1903-1908".

Anti-Asian discrimination increases in the early 20th century

In the late 1880s there were several racist incidents in Vancouver involving unemployed and frustrated whites who at one point refused to allow a group of Chinese immigrants entry

into the country and at another point burned two settlements in the city. This was a frightening time for all Asians in British Columbia. No longer needed to provide cheap labor and services, they were strongly discouraged from settling in the country.

Almost all politicians felt forced to support the anti-Asian sentiments in British Columbia. In 1902 the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration declared all Asians, "unfit for full citizenship . . . obnoxious to a free community and dangerous to the state," preparing the way for restrictive immigration policies. The following year, in 1903, the Chinese head tax was raised to \$500.00 per person. This had an extreme effect on Chinese immigration: just prior to the new tax almost 5,000 Chinese immigrants entered Canada; in the year following eight Chinese entered the country! Most of the men, and women, coming to Canada were from impoverished regions of China. Almost no one could afford to pay such a high head tax just to enter the country.

Though immigration was severely limited early in the century, a poor economy in Vancouver continued to produce strong discriminatory feelings by the unemployed whites towards Asians. This frustration led to the creation of The Asiatic Exclusion League in British Columbia in 1907. Within months of its founding, the League staged a protest in downtown Vancouver. The creation of the League and the race riot that ensued was partially in response to the British Columbia government refusing to suspend Asian immigration. Vancouver was experiencing an economic slump at the time and in that year alone 11,000 Asians had immigrated to British Columbia. The economic situation combined with the influx of Asian immigrants made for a volatile situation.

On September 8th, 1907 several thousands league-organized marchers met in downtown Vancouver and made speeches about the "yellow peril" drawing more and more supporters until about 15,000 had gathered. They carried banners reading "Keep Canada White" and "Stop the Yellow Peril". They also burned an effigy of Dunsmuir, the coal-mining baron on Vancouver Island, who "dared" to hire Chinese. After getting the mob fully worked up, the leaders encouraged the group to make its way to the nearby Chinatown and Little Tokyo where they looted and burned and destroyed hundreds and thousands of dollars in property. The Chinese did not fight back but the Japanese did and many on both sides were hurt in the race riot. Because the South Asians lived in a different part of the city, their community was spared the violence of the riot.

In response to the race riots the government did not attempt to deal with racism, but instead limited Asian immigration. As the Premier of British Columbia is quoted as saying, "To admit Orientals in large numbers would mean in the end the extinction of the white people, and we always have in mind the necessity of keeping this a white man's country." By 1910 the federal government had set up new immigration policies to solve the Asian "problem". From that point on all Asians had to have at least \$200 in their pockets which pretty much put an end to Asian immigration. For the Chinese this meant \$200 in addition to the \$500 head tax. And, to slow down immigration of the Japanese, the Canadian and Japanese governments made a "gentleman's agreement" to limit Japanese immigration to 400 persons per year. In 1928 this number was reduced to 150 Japanese persons per year. The South Asians presented a more complex problem.

The South Asian settlers in Canada were feeling confused about the new disenfranchisement policies against them as they have been convinced, for the last half century, that they held the same rights and responsibilities as did any other British subject. The South Asians began to question the colonialists too whom they had previously shown much loyalty. With pressure from Britain, the Canadian government had to come up with another excuse to

curb South Asian immigration — the British government was opposed to head tax or to any policy that would set East Indians against the colonialist government in India.

The federal government came up with a very clever piece of legislation that didn't address the South Asians directly, but served to deny them access to Canada nevertheless. On 8 January 1908 an immigration policy was passed that only allowed entry to those travelling by "continuous passage" from their country of origin to Canada. For both the South Asians and Japanese this was not possible — there was no such thing as a direct ticket to Canada. Overnight British subject status came to mean very little and families that were separated had to make some hard decisions. Stephen Leacock, a renowned Canadian humorist, wrote of this legislation, "Hindu immigration to British Columbia was ingeniously side-tracked by the 'continuous journey' rule, as smart a piece of legislation as any that ever disenfranchised negroes in the South. The Hindus were free to come but only on a 'through' ship, and there were no 'through' ships."

The Komagata Maru incident

Perhaps one of the poignant moments in South Asian immigration history in Canada is the Komagata Maru incident. In 1914 a clever Sikh leader named, Gurdit Singh, attempted to challenge the "continuous passage" legislation. He hired a ship, the Komagata Maru, and planned a non-stop voyage to Vancouver with 376 East Indian immigrants. When the freighter anchored in Burrard Inlet in Vancouver, Canadian immigration officials did not allow the men to disembark. Negotiations carried on for two months after which the federal government expelled the ship and men and escorted them back out to sea. (Twenty of the men were allowed to disembark. This was to be the first official act of the recently formed, Royal Canadian Navy.) The Komagata Maru incident cost the East Indian men much time and expense and was perceived as a blatant racist act.

Because of the "continuous journey" law, there was very little South Asian immigration to Canada between 1908 and 1947, when the restriction was lifted. In fact, many of the men who had settled there left for either the United States or India in an effort to reunite with their families. In 1919 a law was passed to allow wives and children to join the men who had immigrated earlier. Nonetheless, the South Asian population fell to just above 1,000 persons. By the early 1950s there were only about 2,000 South Asians in Canada.

All Asians are barred from entry into Canada

South Asians were the first to be barred from entering Canada in 1908 though Chinese and Japanese immigration had been severely limited. On 1 July 1923 (ironically also the anniversary of Confederation) federal legislation was passed suspending Chinese immigration indefinitely. It wasn't until after World War II, in 1947, that the Chinese were once again allowed to immigrate to Canada. While South Asian families were allowed to reunite after 1919, wives and children of the Chinese men were not allowed to join their husbands and many of the early pioneer men were left bachelors in Canada for the next 20-plus years. "Poverty-stricken bachelor-men were left alone in Gold Mountain, with only a few dollars left to send back to China every month, and never enough dollars to buy passage home", writes Wayson Choy in his novel, *The Jade Peony*, "Dozens went mad; many killed themselves. The Chinatown Chinese call July 1st, the day of celebrating the birth of Canada, the Day of Shame." It was almost 20 years later before the Japanese were excluded from entry into Canada, but the nature of that exclusion is also one of the most tragic events in Canadian history.

Internment of the Japanese-Canadians

On 7 December 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and Hong Kong kicking off the worst period of history for the Japanese in North America who from that point on were seen

as enemy aliens. Within days of the bombing over 1,000 Japanese Canadian fishing vessels were seized in Canada putting almost 2,000 Japanese fishermen out of work. By early 1942 both the Canadian and U.S. governments ordered the relocation of all Japanese living along the West Coast to isolated town and camps further inland.

By February of 1942 the Canadian Parliament passed a bill declaring that all Japanese living within 100 miles of the West Coast be relocated. From March to October about 22,000 Japanese were relocated under the "War Measures Act". Approximately 75% of these people were naturalized Canadians. In the U.S. approximately 110,000 Japanese were relocated under the "War Relocation Authority". In both countries the belongings and property of the Japanese were sold and most of the proceeds were not awarded to the owners. Personal property, businesses and over 1,000 Japanese farms in Canada were seized. In Canada the families were told that since they wouldn't be gone long, they didn't need to bring much with them. A Minister of Parliament in the British Columbian government announced, "Let our slogan be for British Columbia; no Japs from the Rockies to the seas." Other politicians weren't so blatant and insisted that the relocation was for security reasons and some even suggested that it was to protect the Japanese from mob violence on the Coast. Today some historians say that this wasn't actually an internment in Canada as the communities were not fenced in or guarded. However, though technically the Japanese may not have been interned, their activities and freedoms were severely restricted as they lost almost all of their belongings, ability to earn an income, and were placed in areas where their movement was severely restricted. In other words, the outcome was the same as had they been put in guarded camps.

In Canada the Japanese were first herded like cattle into livestock pens at the Pacific Exhibition Grounds in Vancouver. Later they were put on trains and sent to remote areas in the interior of British Columbia. Thousands of the men were taken north to work on road crews to pay for the cost of interning their families and entire families were sent to sugar beet farms to work as laborers in Alberta and Manitoba. "The beet farmers met us at the railway station," remembers one Japanese man who was relocated, "For them it was just like picking up slaves".

Several years later, in 1945, the Japanese in Canada were given a choice to be deported back to Japan or relocate east of the Rockies. Most chose to stay in Canada. Again, in 1946, the government attempted to deport 10,000 Japanese Canadians but public outcry made this impossible. By the end of the Second World War the Japanese community in Canada was shattered and the spirits of the people all but broken. Few returned to the West Coast and those that went East did so as family units and small groups, but not as entire communities.

Acceptance of Asians in North America

It wasn't until after the War that the Canadian and American governments finally began to accept Asians as part of their citizenry and removed all anti-Asian immigration restrictions. By the late 1940s all Asians were again enfranchised and in the 1950s racist immigration policies were lifted though quotas remained in place. By the 1960s all immigration restrictions were removed and significant numbers of Asians immigrants once again started to come to North America.

The new immigrants are vastly different from the earlier young peasants who worked so hard to secure a place for themselves in the New World — they are highly educated, most are professionals, and many speak English as well as their own language. These new immigrants have made a place for themselves in North American society. In comparison, though racism and discrimination still exists, these recent immigrants have had a much

easier life. Though the new immigrants have little in common with the hard-working peasants who endured so much in order to gain a foothold in Canada, there are many Asian artists today — writers, fine artists, and film makers — who have devoted their lives to documenting the early struggles of their people. These artists are responsible for giving a voice to the earlier immigrants and to bringing alive a history that for the most part has been buried by shame.

Some of the wrongs committed against Asians in North America have been addressed. In August of 1988 President Ronald Reagan gave the survivors of the Japanese internment, over 60,000 individuals, \$20,000.00 U.S. in compensation. One month later Prime Minister Brian Mulroney gave each individual wronged in Canada a symbolic \$1,000.00 more per person or \$21,000.00 awarded to approximately 16,000 individuals. In addition, the Canadian government established the Canadian Race Relations Foundation with 24 million dollars and gave moneys to the Japanese Canadian Redress Foundation to assist in rebuilding the community. Trudeau in the earlier Liberal government flatly refused to apologize for past injustices or provide any redress for survivors. In his mind the past was not the responsibility of the present government and would only kick off a landslide of other redress cases.

Said one survivor after the redress was announced, "I could not be overjoyed at winning money; it goes much deeper than that. Now I am a real Canadian. And from today on, I can hold my head up." The President of the National Association of Japanese Canadians and the leader of the redress movement, Arthur Miki, was later awarded the Order of Canada — the highest honor awarded Canadian citizens — for his work on behalf of the Japanese Canadian community.

Conclusion

The early Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian immigrants to the West Coast of North America gave a great deal of their life's energy to the building of the infrastructure of the two countries. All of the early pioneers came to North America prepared to work hard in order to send money back home to support their families and to build new lives in North America. In a great many cases this was a long and lonely sacrifice and few experienced much support from the white settlers who had come before them or protection from the government. In almost every case Asians were paid less than were whites and had no rights or privileges in the new country. Bit by bit they were disenfranchised until, eventually, immigration was denied altogether separating families and leaving individuals alienated from their loved ones sometimes for a lifetime. Thousands of men and women sacrificed and endured a great deal in order to be accepted as citizens of Canada and the U.S. and their stories are a vital part of the history of the West.