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Reclaiming History: Vision for the Future in Cumberland

Pioneer

The word pioneer can aptly be applied to individuals of my grandparents' generation who came to Canada and faced the realities of discriminatory policies. Coming to Canada was fraught with hardships—socially and financially. My grandparents on both maternal and paternal side were pioneers; they lived and worked in Chinatowns because they did not have the luxury of choice. They were in a new land, trying to establish a better life for themselves and, ultimately, their offspring.

I, in contrast, have had a relatively easy life. I was able to complete my high school education and continue in graduate studies. My choice of study was Anthropology, with a specialization in Archaeology. This has led to employment that generally garners respect and is viewed as desirable, perhaps even enviable: I am an educator within the university-college system. Any hard knocks I have faced are not comparable to those faced by my grandparents' or even my parents' generation; they were labourers, service industry workers, and/or small-scale businesspeople. Those pioneers broke ground, opening the way for future generations.

Where did these pioneers establish themselves? We know they came primarily from the Guangdong region of southern China, but in British Columbia, they settled in numerous

towns where the need for their labour in sufficiently large numbers created the many Chinatowns. Chinatown was, and continues in some locations to be, the centre of the social and business life of Chinese Canadians.

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Today we think of only Victoria and Vancouver as having Chinatowns. Lost in history are the Chinatowns of Quesnelle Forks, Yale, and Cumberland, among the many scattered throughout British Columbia at different points in time. This is where I enter the scene, perhaps, as a pioneer of recovering and memorializing those who first settled in the late 1800s—only the test of time will tell.

Cumberland Chinatown

Many are unlikely familiar with Chinese Canadian history and/or its relationship to the village of Cumberland. History buffs might recall that Cumberland was one of Dunsmuir's coal mining operations in the Comox Valley of Vancouver Island. It was successful, due in part to its many industrious labourers, including a sizable Chinese population. There was a large influx of Chinese

miners right at the turn of the 20th century. Even in 1921, the Chinese numbered close to 1,000, and this was during Chinatown's decline. You can imagine the size of the settlement during its heyday. Cumberland Chinatown was notable for being one of the largest in BC, and by default, in Canada; until the 1941 census, BC had the largest Chinese population: 54 percent, compared to Ontario with 18 percent.

Cumberland's Chinatown was like many others that grew up around an extractive industry: men dominated the settlement; families were few. Government legislation had a direct impact on who was able to come to Canada. The head tax of 1885, 1901, and 1904 placed a financial burden on families sending their men to try their luck in a new country.

The Chinese were not the only immigrant group to seek opportunity and a new life, but unlike others, policies targeting the Chinese, like the head tax, were an additional encumbrance. In 1904 the head tax was \$500. Compare this to the \$25 amount required of European immigrants on arrival, or \$200 for Indian, in 1908. For this reason, very few Chinese women arrived. This imbalance of sexes was still to be found in Cumberland in 1921 when the male to female ratio was 16 to 1. Cumberland's Chinatown was similar to other Chinese settlements elsewhere in

the province—primarily a “bachelor” society, but not by choice.

The families present were those of the businesspeople. They could afford the head tax and the passage for a wife. For the labourers, Dunsmuir provided the initial funds for their arrival; the “loan” was repaid by deducting 75¢ per day, leaving the individual with 50¢ daily as the remainder of his salary.

Even under these conditions, Cumberland’s Chinatown prospered. It had a full range of businesses and services that catered to its own community and even to those in the other “towns” of Cumberland (Japanese-, and European-Canadians). (At the time, Chinatown was not officially part of the Village of Cumberland proper. Even today, for the most part, it remains outside the Village’s boundaries.)

Within Chinatown, circa 1920, were general stores, restaurants, laundries, tailors, herbalists, butchers, barbers, cobbler, tobacconist, tofu factories, theatres (two, including an opera house), hotel, bakery, and dairy. A church and school also graced its landscape, in addition to the residences, vegetable gardens, and farms. Chinatown was a self-sufficient settlement.

This was not to last because its existence was related to the number of workers employed in the mines. Businesses and services were associated with those who patronized them. As the coal industry declined, so did Cumberland’s Chinatown. The population of mostly families migrated to where work could be found, primarily to Vancouver. A few stayed on, mainly elderly single men. By the 1960s, Chinatown was basically a shadow of its self—only a few old-timers, the “bachelor” men, continued to live in the remaining structures. The one remaining Chinese family in the area was living in Cumberland proper. When the last of the “bachelors” in Chinatown died, the town no longer served the purpose it once had. Ultimately, the old Chinatown site was razed; the location became a shooting range.

A Phoenix Rising

In the late 1960s, eco-tourism was not yet a common word in our lexicon. In 2002, eco-tourism has breathed life into a number of small communities that had feared for their continued existence. Similar new opportunities are sought by other large and small settlements, whether threatened or not, including the Village of Cumberland. The memories of Chinatown, as well as the other two associated “towns” of Cumberland (Japanese and African), are being resurrected.

In a day, where might a child, teenager, or labourer go, or what might he or she do?

How can memories and recollections be transformed in a manner to interest others, as well as be respectful to the original stakeholders of that history? This is not an easy task; it requires a vision that balances the realities of history, a community’s needs, and the interest of others who will be drawn to the place. When history comes alive, it becomes a magnet for not only the history buff, but for families who want to provide a lesson from the past in an interesting and informal manner.

Today from the surrounding overgrown brush, pathways mark the former bustling “main” streets of Cumberland’s Chinatown. Little is visible to the unknowing eye. Look in the right spot and landmarks are to be found, such as the fire hydrant. Beside the dips and hollows that identify building locations, one is struck by the bucolic, idyllic setting. Not surprisingly, this is also a *strong* positive memory of Chinatown’s surviving residents.

For this reason, maintaining green space is desired; it is also congruent with the proposed adjacent land use plan for an industrial heritage park. My vision of Cumberland’s Chinatown site is to work within a park-like environment with the following goals.

- Re-open and mark the trails that were the byways of the residents.
- On each building site, place a marker that is keyed to walking maps painted on information plaques.
- Include a brief written history of Chinatown on the main information plaque.
- Wire the strategically situated information plaques with sound clips recorded by the remaining original residents who have agreed to share some of their memories of the old days. The residents range in age from late-60s to over 90 years.
- Establish covered picnic areas on the sites of former residences, showing exact dimensions and orientation; identify them as such by naming the shelters after the families.
- Incorporate multidisciplinary research by affiliating with an academic institution that can also involve the public.
- Establish regular events that draw visitors from outside the Comox Valley area, to learn about the history and traditions of some of the residents of one of Vancouver Island’s earliest multicultural communities.

Part of marking the landscape is to let an individual get a sense of the dynamic interaction of the populace; ultimately, history is about the people in a place and time. Chinatown was a site with no single building representing the community—a building alone has no significance, it is out of context. In a day, where might a child, teenager, or labourer go, or what might he or she do? A row of picnic shelters with family names gives an impression of the lay of the land in terms of the people. Add to this the stories and images of those who lived in Chinatown, and the site resonates with life for the visitor.

The number of people still alive who had lived in Chinatown is relatively smaller—about 40, with most living in the Vancouver area, but several families, including fourth-generation members,

annually celebrate their Cumberland connection; they meet on the last Sunday of June in Vancouver's Stanley Park. They are the ones who also recognize a need and desire to integrate these memories into the larger community, not just the Chinatown community alone.

In addition to living voices, multidisciplinary research provides another layer of veracity. Archaeology is an obvious avenue of research. It attracts the interest of young and old from far and wide. Students in the school district and beyond can include a component of local history in their studies by spending time either assisting in the excavation work, or just visiting the dig site as part of a planned educational tour. In this way, they learn how past lifeways are reconstructed, based on artifacts (material culture) and ecofacts (floral and faunal remains).

The excavation of one particular structure would allow the creation of an annual event—a pig roast. Chinatown had at least two roasting ovens. In recreating an oven based on the archaeology, the event could be tied to Asian Heritage Month (AHM) in May.

Let the Island celebrate at one of the largest rural Chinese communities that existed. Prior to the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, half of British Columbia's population lived on the Island, so commemorating AHM in Cumberland is appropriate. Chinese and Japanese were significant populations in Cumberland; in fact, there were two "towns" of Japanese.

Evidence of the vegetable gardens and farms still exists. With environmental, horticultural, and/or palaeobotanical studies, either the gardens or the plants/vegetables can be re-established, possibly even for market, as produce or as heritage seeds. As this suggestion implies, heritage can include a number of different features for those who visit—not just structures or artifacts and documents.

To ensure that Cumberland's heritage is recognized nationally and internationally, why not establish a research institute of early Vancouver Island settlements? As noted, Vancouver Island for the early part of modern BC history

was *the* place. A research institute would help acknowledge and reclaim the histories of those pioneers whose labours made this province. Too often, history remembers those who commanded the workers and the armies, etc. We need to know the common man and woman, as well.

To this end, the designation of Cumberland's "towns" (Chinese, Japanese, and African) and adjacent mine shafts as a National Historic Site is an important goal. Cumberland's greatest resource is its heritage. With careful stewardship, Chinatown will be the Phoenix rising from the ashes. ▲

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Cumberland Museum & Archive Photo