



## **Historical Information**

To this day, Steveston remains the largest freshwater commercial fishing port in Canada. The Gulf of Georgia Cannery, known as the “monster cannery” for its size, was built in 1894. Three years later, in 1897, there were over a dozen canneries in Steveston.

Sockeye, chum, coho, pink, and Chinook are the five species of salmon that spawn in the Fraser River and each played a role in the canning industry. The sockeye was most prized for its high oil content and rich red colour. Each year, the canning season usually spanned from March to mid-September, mirroring spawning patterns. The seasonal nature of cannery work meant that during the summer months, Steveston’s population of 400 would swell to over 6000 people. During the busiest times, when large quantities of salmon were being caught, cannery workers could be on the job for 20 hours each day. Fishermen were encouraged to catch as much salmon as they could, so when runs were strong, there were often excess fish that could not be processed before they spoiled and were thrown away as waste.

Canneries were mostly owned by British or American businessmen who made their fortunes by taking advantage of the limited options available to cannery workers. Canneries employed many newcomers to Canada. Among the fishermen were First Nations and Japanese men. Inside the canneries, Chinese men and Native women comprised most of the workforce, managed by a few European foremen. In later years, Japanese and European workers joined the crews. Although cannery work brought together an ethnic mix, the corporate structure modeled the racial hierarchy of the 1800s and early 1900s. People did not usually socialize outside of their ethnic group and Caucasian workers were paid more than other employees.

## **First Nations**

The lower Fraser Valley and southeast Vancouver Island are the traditional lands of the Coast Salish peoples who have been fishing for thousands of years. The Coast Salish, like many other Aboriginal groups, engaged in hunting and gathering in a seasonal round.

As the canning industry developed, many First Nations along the coast adjusted their seasonal round to include cannery work. Native families arrived by canoe each summer. Most of the fishermen before 1893 were First Nations men. Women worked in canneries as slimers and fillers, made nets, and sometimes helped with fishing. Children worked in the can lofts or on the canning line.

Cannery managers were keen to recruit Native families, as their canneries needed a large workforce. Managers who spoke Chinook, the Native trade jargon, were most successful in recruiting First Nations women who were skilled at making and mending nets.



## Chinese

Most early Chinese migrants were men from Say-yup, a region in Guangdong province. Crews from the newly completed CPR railway found work in the emerging canning industry. In 1900, 75% of a cannery crew was Chinese. They engaged in seasonal work for low pay and were employed under a contract labour system. A Chinese boss, who spoke English, was contracted by the canneries to recruit and manage Chinese workers. These workers were paid by the Chinese boss and were obligated to patronize the cannery store and to pay for their room and board out of their wages.

Crews of Chinese men worked as butchers, a job that required skill in beheading and gutting fish with speed and accuracy; each man could butcher about 3 to 5 fish per minute. In the early canneries, Chinese men also filled, cooked, and labelled the cans of salmon. During the off-season, some of the men made cans and assembled boxes.

Chinese crews lived in bunkhouses provided by the canneries. When the cannery was busy, the Chinese contract provided workers with three meals a day: rice, meat, and vegetables. On slack days, only breakfast at 9 am and supper at 4 pm were provided. At night, gambling games were played in the bunkhouses. When the canning season ended, most of the men looked for work in the Chinatowns of larger cities.

## Japanese

When Japanese migrants began arriving in the late 1800s, they were greeted with few employment opportunities other than fishing. Many newcomers from Wakayama prefecture settled in the village of Steveston, known as "Sutebusuton" in Japanese. By the early 1900s, the population of predominantly young men were joined by their wives. Some men sent for "picture brides" and others travelled to Japan to marry. Many Japanese women worked in the canneries alongside Native women.

In order to earn a living beyond the short salmon season, Japanese men also participated in boat building, charcoal production (to power the canning industry), farming, and the salt fish industry.

A number of Japanese boat works were established in Steveston. At age 14, Mamoru Sakamoto started apprenticing with his stepfather who was an established shipwright. By the 1920s, Mamoru was an expert on the locally built Easthope engine. In 1950, he returned to the coast after being interned in Vernon and built 16 high quality boats. *Crystal S.*, named for his daughter, worked as the family fishing boat and was maintained by Mamoru until his death in 2003. The *Crystal S.* can still be seen on the Fraser River today.



## Europeans

Euro-Canadians formed the cannery management and earned the highest salaries.

With the exception of John Deas, an African-American, the owners of the Fraser River's canneries were of European descent.

In 1912, the "Whites" fishing the Fraser River included Canadians, Scandinavians, British, Austrians, Greeks, Fins, Italians, Spaniards, Germans, French, and Russians. Geiri Sigurgeirson, an Icelandic boat builder, moved from Prince Rupert to set up shop on Fourth Avenue in Steveston.

Europeans also worked in the canneries. Women worked on the canning line. Men were employed as machinists, foremen, overseers, and clerks.