



Sam Wong

A Chinese Canadian Story

PROVENANCE

My name is Sam Wong. I came to Canada in 1920 when I was very young, only 16 years old. I came from a small village in the Chinese province of Guangdong. Our family farmed the land but my father spent most of his life in Canada. When I became an adult, I left my village in Guangdong to work in Canada with my father. He arranged for my trip and paid the five hundred-dollar head tax for me to come into the country. All Chinese coming to Canada had to pay this head tax. I took a boat across the Pacific Ocean from the port of Guangzhou (Canton). It took a whole month to travel to Canada. When I arrived in Vancouver, my father was waiting for me at the docks. He did not recognize me. The last time he saw me I was just a baby.

LANGUAGE

The day I arrived, my father showed me around Vancouver. Many people from my country lived in one area called Chinatown. Most of them came from Guangdong like me but they spoke a different kind of Chinese than I did. That is because they used expressions and words that were only used in the villages where they came from. My father knew almost everyone. He had been living in Canada for many years already.

WHY WE CAME

My father came to Canada to become rich. In China, cultivating the land was hard. Our family needed more money to live well. A man from our village went to Canada and returned rich. He had found gold over there. My father thought he could find gold too. So he left our family in China and went to Canada. He never found gold but lots of jobs were available. So he worked hard and sent us money. Because of that money our family could buy more land and we did not starve when the harvest was bad. When I turned 16 years old, I came to help my father. With both of us working, we hoped that soon we would have enough money to become rich and return to China for good. Until then, we worked as hard as we could to earn lots of money and help our family.

AT WORK

Before I came to join him, my father worked at many different jobs. First, he helped build the Canadian Pacific Railway. He was also a coal miner in Nanaimo. When I arrived, my father worked at two different jobs. During the winter he worked in a mill near Vancouver making shingles for rooftops. I started to work with him right away. In the summer, we worked at the Gulf of Georgia Cannery in Steveston. My father started working there in 1904. Every summer, the canneries along the Fraser River employed hundreds of Chinese, Japanese, and Aboriginal workers to butcher and can the salmon caught by fishermen. My father was a butcher. His job was to clean the fish. Cleaning salmon meant he had to cut off the head, tail, and fins of the fish, then cut its belly open and take all its guts out. He told me he was not very good at first. Some friends helped him to learn. They showed him how to hold his knife properly. They also showed him how to keep his knife sharpened to cut the salmon better and faster. Soon he could clean



Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site of Canada

12138 Fourth Ave. Richmond B.C. V7E 3J1

almost five fish per minute. The more fish a butcher could clean, the more money he got. When the fishing season was good there were a lot of fish to butcher. Dad made about 30 dollars a month. The man who employed my father was a Chinese Contractor. He could speak English. That is why he was the Boss. He took orders from the Canadian bosses and told my father and the other Chinese workers what to do. He is the one who paid the men after the Canadian bosses paid him for the work of his crew.

When I started working in 1920, the canning lines did not need butchers anymore. A butchering machine had replaced them. The white men called this machine an "Iron Chink". So after that, my father worked at the sliming tables. He inspected the fish as it came out of the butchering machine. He made sure it was well cleaned. I worked at the end of the canning lines, at the retorts. Retorts were large ovens that cooked the salmon inside the cans. Only strong young men like me worked at the retorts because it was very hard work. You needed to be strong to fill these ovens with the heavy trays full of cans and then empty them again after the salmon was cooked.

LEISURE

Most of the money we made at work went directly to our family in China. My father and I did not keep much for ourselves. The man who hired us, Mr Yip Sang, provided two or three meals a day and a place to stay in a boarding house close to the Cannery in Steveston. So we saved most of our money. Some of my friends liked to drink whiskey, gamble and smoke opium. They spent much money that way. But Father and I did not. Father was always so tired after work that he never had enough energy left to go out. He stayed at the bunkhouse to write letters to our family in China and to sleep. Sometimes I went to the gambling house to talk with others and maybe have a glass of whiskey or two, but I never gambled. I didn't have many friends. I spent most of my time with my Dad or at the Cannery. Some days we worked from sunrise to sundown. We were always too busy at work to talk and get to know each other and a lot of people did not even speak Chinese. They were from Japan or from Native villages. The white workers did not speak to us either.

During the winter, when we lived in Chinatown, father and I went to the Chinese Opera once a month. We also liked going to the Chinese Benevolent Association meetings to talk about China and find new ways of helping our family over there. We liked Canada because it allowed us to make money for our family but our hearts were always with China.

My father became very sick in 1925. He was getting old and he had been working too hard for too many years. He died during the winter. I wanted to go back to China to bury my father's bones on our ancestral land but I could not. Starting in 1923, the Canadian Government stopped the Chinese from coming into Canada. They were afraid there would be too many of us. This law continued until 1947. If I had left, I would not have been able to come back. So I continued to work to help my family. They needed me more than ever.



Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site of Canada
12138 Fourth Ave. Richmond B.C. V7E 3J1

Canada slowly became my home. After a while I forgot what it was like to live in China. I made new friends and learned to speak English. I got married to a young woman who was born here from Chinese parents. I worked for many more years at the Cannery and continued to send money to my mother. My wife and I had a son. He went to a good school. During his summer vacations, he worked at the Cannery. With the money he made, he paid for his education. He was the first in our family to go to university. When I was young, Chinese people were not allowed to study in university. But my son was a Canadian. He could study where he wanted and hold a good job and even vote. He became a very successful businessman.



Aki Yoshida

A Japanese Canadian Story

My name is Aki Yoshida. I am a student at Lord Byng School in Steveston. My school was built in 1929 for the children of Japanese fishers. My grandmother and my grandfather also went to Lord Byng School when they were kids. That was long before my grandfather started fishing with his dad and before my grandmother started working at the Japanese hospital. Today in school, we learned all about the history of Japanese Canadians. It was really interesting. Especially since my great-grandfather, Hidezo Yoshida, came to Steveston from Japan in 1900. That year, a lot of Japanese fishers like Hidezo came to the West Coast of Canada to fish salmon. But they were not the first Japanese people to come to the area.

COMING TO CANADA

The first Japanese fishers in Steveston arrived around 1885. They were young single men who came to Canada to earn money. They planned to return home to pay family debts, buy land, or start a business. These young men came from many different areas of Japan. They were hired as “day workers”; that is, they were hired by the canneries when needed and were provided with boats and gear. They only worked at the cannery during the fishing season, in the summer. In the off-season, they worked in lumbering camps, sawmills and farms... wherever they could find a job. These men all dreamed of returning to Japan but many of them never did. Instead, they used the money that they earned to buy farms or to start businesses here in Canada. After 1900, many fishers like my great-grandfather arrived from Mio-mura, a small coastal village in Wakayama Prefecture. Like my great-grandfather, they were fishers in Japan and fishers they remained in British Columbia. At first, they returned to Japan in the off-season but later they formed families in Canada and stayed in the Steveston area. That is what my great-grandfather did. With my great-grandmother he lived in a company house provided by the Gulf of Georgia Cannery where they both worked. They shopped on credit at the cannery store. They lived like they did in Japan and continued to speak their language.

AT WORK

My great-grandfather was a contract worker for the Gulf of Georgia Cannery. That means that the cannery gave him a boat to do his fishing. Soon after, he became a citizen of Canada and was able to buy his own license to fish. Then he bought his own boat and gear from the Cannery. He made more money that way.

My great-grandmother worked at the Gulf of Georgia Cannery too. While my great-grandfather was out fishing, she canned fish with other Japanese and Aboriginal women. She had no one to take care of her children while she was at work so she brought them with her. Strapped on her back, her younger son spent the day with her while she worked. She could always make sure he was O.K. This baby would grow up to be my grandfather. Her oldest daughter helped out by bringing boxes of empty cans



Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site of Canada

12138 Fourth Ave. Richmond B.C. V7E 3J1

next to my great-grandmother's work station. That way my great-grandmother could work really fast without worrying about running out of cans.

When there was no fishing or canning my great-grandfather still kept busy. He would repair his net or weave a new one from twine. It took one and a half months of work to make a set of nets. He also worked with a shipwright to make some money while he was not fishing.

Many of my great-grandparents' friends returned to Japan but they decided to stay. Canada had become their home. Some Japanese people returned because they did not feel welcomed by white Canadians. There were also fewer and fewer fishing licenses available to Japanese fishers, especially between 1923 and 1930. During that time, the number of licenses to fish salmon went from 3000 to 1065.

LEISURE

My great-grandparents lived, worked and socialized with other Japanese families in Steveston. They continued to speak their native language, the Mio dialect. They had little contact with other people so they never really had the chance or the need to learn English. To negotiate with the Cannery managers and owners, the fishers relied on Japanese "bosses" who had some knowledge of English. Sometimes Japanese, white and Aboriginal fishers had disputes over the fish prices. Japanese fishers often accepted lower prices for their catch. They thought it was better to sell fish at low price rather than not sell it at all and starve. The other fishers who wanted to sell at a higher price did not like the Japanese way of business. This caused much resentment and racial tension.

The Japanese fishers who did not have wives and children gambled and drank when they were not working. My great-grandfather had too many responsibilities. He had a wife and two small children to take care of. He did not drink or gamble. To relax and to have some fun my great-grandparents attended travelling Japanese movies and Japanese community concerts. But following their custom, they went with friends of their own gender, not together.

WORLD WAR II

The year 1942 was very tragic. By then, my grandfather was old enough to fish with his father. He was getting to be a very good fisher. But all this changed right after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and Japan and Canada became enemies. This was the third year of the Second World War. Many Canadians were scared that the Japanese fishermen in Steveston would use their boats to help Japan win the War. So the government of Canada rounded up all their boats and sold them at bargain prices. By the end of May, all Japanese from the Steveston area were confined in Hastings Park in Vancouver. Then they were sent to the interior of British Columbia. My great-grandfather and his family lost everything. They spent the next seven years working on a farm. My grandfather hated it. He wanted to go back to Steveston and fish again with his dad. In



Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site of Canada
12138 Fourth Ave. Richmond B.C. V7E 3J1

1949 he got his wish. In that year, the government allowed the Japanese back in Steveston. But things were different. They had no house, no money, and no boat. They had to borrow money from the Cannery and start all over again. It was hard work and my great-grandfather was getting too old. He died that year. His son, my grandfather, took over.

He was young and was not afraid of hard work. Slowly he saved enough money to be able to buy a new boat and build a little house in Steveston. My grandfather became a very good fisher and was involved in the United Fisherman and Allied Workers Union to help defend fishers' rights. His son, my father, also became a fisher. Now he is teaching me how to become one.



Louise Alex

A Stó:lō Story

PROVENANCE

My name is Louise Alex. I am from the Cheam Reserve near Agassiz in the Fraser Valley. I started working at the canneries when I was about 16 years old, after my father drowned in the Fraser River. My father had been a Fraser Valley logger before he died. After he passed away, my mother, grandmother, grandfather, and I all went to work at the Steveston canneries. We took a steamboat down the Fraser to Steveston each summer to work in the cannery.

LANGUAGE

My grandparents spoke mostly Halq'eméylem and Chinook. Halq'eméylem is the traditional language of the Stó:lō (pronounced Stahloh) people who live along the lower Fraser River. Chinook is a trade dialect that traders and aboriginal people used to allow them to communicate with people from diverse language groups. Both of my parents went to St Mary's residential school in Mission where they were forced to speak English. Because of their education experience, they spoke a bit of Halq'eméylem at home but mostly English. Just like my parents, I went to a residential school in Mission. Although I understand Halq'eméylem, I usually speak English.

AT WORK

My family worked at the canneries because it was important seasonal employment. After my father passed away, my mother, grandmother, and I needed to support my young brothers and sisters. Working at the canneries in Steveston fit our seasonal economic and social cycles. Also, the work that we did in the canneries - preparing and preserving the fish - was familiar, as this kind of work was traditionally done by women in Stó:lō society. Working at the canneries also served an important social function as many aboriginal people from all over BC gathered in summer to work in the canneries.

When I first started at the canneries, I felt very uneasy and overwhelmed by the machinery, noise, cold, and smells. Although I had cleaned and preserved salmon with my family, I had never been in an environment like the cannery. They were so many machines and so much noise. We had to stand in a line and do the work put in front of us as quickly as possible.

My mother, grandmother, and I washed fish, mostly salmon, and filled cans. We stood at a table with other aboriginal women from all over BC scraping the fish with a knife and then brushing them. Once they were clean we threw them to the fish cutters. The fish cutters, usually operated by Chinese men, cut the salmon so it would fit into the cans. It was hard to learn how to fill the cans properly and quickly. We had to stand in a line and fill tray of cans. If our cans weren't filled properly, a girl would grab the can and send it back to us.



Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site of Canada
12138 Fourth Ave. Richmond B.C. V7E 3J1

I wasn't a fast can filler but a lot of my co-workers were. They filled the cans quickly because they were paid by the number of cans they filled. I preferred to work by the hour because I was slower. I made about 50 cents an hour, which was less than the women who were paid by the number of cans they filled. Because my grandmother and mother both filled their cans quickly, they always decided to be paid by the can.

We would go down to the cannery in the summer and stay almost until Christmas. My mother, grandmother, grandfather, and I all lived in a small shack near the canneries when we were working at the canneries. All of the aboriginal people lived in the same area.

My grandfather didn't work at the canneries but he would always come to Steveston while we worked there. I went to the cannery for about three years in a row and then I stopped going because I got married.

LEISURE

The money I made at the cannery helped support my family. I didn't spend much on myself and when I wasn't working at the canneries, I usually went berry-picking to make extra money. I didn't really have much leisure time.

My grandmother and mother and I sometimes visited with other aboriginal people after work. There were a lot of aboriginal people in our encampment that were from different areas of BC. Sometimes, I would watch slahal games between aboriginal people from the Fraser Valley and Vancouver Island. Other times there would be running races. Often I just went to bed tired from our long day of work. My grandfather did a lot of visiting and socializing when we were at the canneries.



Mary McAlister

A Scottish Story

It is summer 1917 and 19-year-old Mary McAlister is boarding a train in Quebec City. She and her parents have crossed the Atlantic by ship and cleared Canadian immigration and customs. They left their native Scotland in search of better opportunities in British Columbia, Canada. Soon their journey west will begin and when it ends the family will be in Vancouver.

WHY BC?

During the previous year, Mary's uncle Graham had convinced her father that well-paying jobs were available in BC for the whole family. Mary's father was a herring fisherman and a builder. Her mother, like herself, was a fishing industry shoreworker and domestic servant. After years of hard work and sacrifice to scrimp and save the family's earnings, Mary's father was ready for something better.

Uncle Graham was adamant that BC's fishing industry was thriving and that there would be no shortage of work. He himself had immigrated to Canada in 1887. He had always been skilled with numbers and worked for many years in Inverness, Scotland as a shop assistant, selling fishing supplies. His motto was 'be early, be lucky, be daring and above all, be industrious.' He had been hearing for some time through various contacts and suppliers that salmon fishing and canning was booming in British Columbia, Canada. He knew that it was mostly Scots building and running the canneries and he hoped he could get into the action out there.

Like countless Scots, Graham was attracted to BC by the promise of abundant work for high wages. Times were tough in Scotland and the opportunities available in the frontier economy of BC were too tempting to resist. In addition to wages that were up to three times higher than those in Scotland and twice as high as those in eastern Canada, BC was a land of Scottish culture and enterprise. Scots had explored it, settled it and were now the ones extracting the resources. They were a force in mining, lumbering, fishing, and finance. The language of work and education was English. The predominant religion was Presbyterian. Scots were prospering in BC as opportunities abounded. For Graham there was no better time to live by his motto. After arriving in Vancouver on the newly completed trans-continental railway, Graham was soon employed at a grocery wholesale warehouse. By the time Mary and her family were arriving in Canada in 1917, Graham was a store manager for J.H Todd & Sons Ltd., a Victoria wholesaler and salmon canner.

As the train rumbled and rattled along, Mary felt excited about what lay ahead. She was young and it was an adventure, but she knew that hard work was in her future. In Aberdeen, Mary had followed in the footsteps of her mother and her mother's mother. She was a herring girl, her mother and grandmother 'fishwives.' What would it be like in British Columbia? Would the herring be the same? Would she still be good at the job? Would there be singing and dancing after a day's gutting? Would she make any friends?



Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site of Canada

12138 Fourth Ave. Richmond B.C. V7E 3J1

When they finally arrived in Vancouver, Uncle Graham met them at the station. Mary marveled at the beauty of her surroundings and was excited to see her well-to-do uncle. The family was quickly settled into a small house in Vancouver. Through the local Presbyterian Church, they made friends with many of the Scottish people in the area. They joined a Scottish society and Mary took up Scottish dancing and her father the bagpipes.

AT WORK

Mary and her mother were employed by the Canadian Fishing Company to fill salmon cans. There were many Scottish women working in the salmon canneries. They made friends in the fish plant and enjoyed the work. Her father got a job fishing for herring for the same company and was very successful.

The family worked for Canfisco for three years, but decided to move and join Uncle Graham at J.H. Todd & Sons Ltd. in Victoria in 1922. They moved into a larger house and were quickly accepted into the local church and society. Mary's father became a crew member on a salmon seiner and quickly developed a skill for this type of fishing. When he wasn't seining he was working as a carpenter in the company's canneries. Mary and her mother both worked on the salmon lines in Victoria, but Mary soon became a secretary in the Company office.

LEISURE

Their after-work lives were dedicated to self-improvement. Mary read voraciously, wrote a great deal of poetry and attended classes to become a school teacher. She was still very active in Scottish dancing and it helped considerably that her father had become equally interested in learning to play the bagpipes. Each Robbie Burns Night was a much beloved affair as the entire family gathered with a host of other society members and friends to listen to the toasts proposed by the local orators to the haggis and the 'Immortal Memory.' And then there was church – the services, the funerals, the weddings, the teas and the socials – which was the focal point of the community.

In Victoria, Mary's family would never lose sight of 'auld Scotia,' of their Scottish heritage, but would always feel thankful for the opportunities that had brought them to British Columbia, Canada. Ironically for Mary, like so many other Scots, employment in the BC fishing industry allowed her to leave behind a Scotland in which she would have toiled her entire life as a 'fishwife' and become a proud member of a 'new' Scotland in which the sky was the limit -- a new Scotland in which Mary would become a successful public school teacher.