
THE CHINESE IN ARMSTRONG

By Peter Critchley

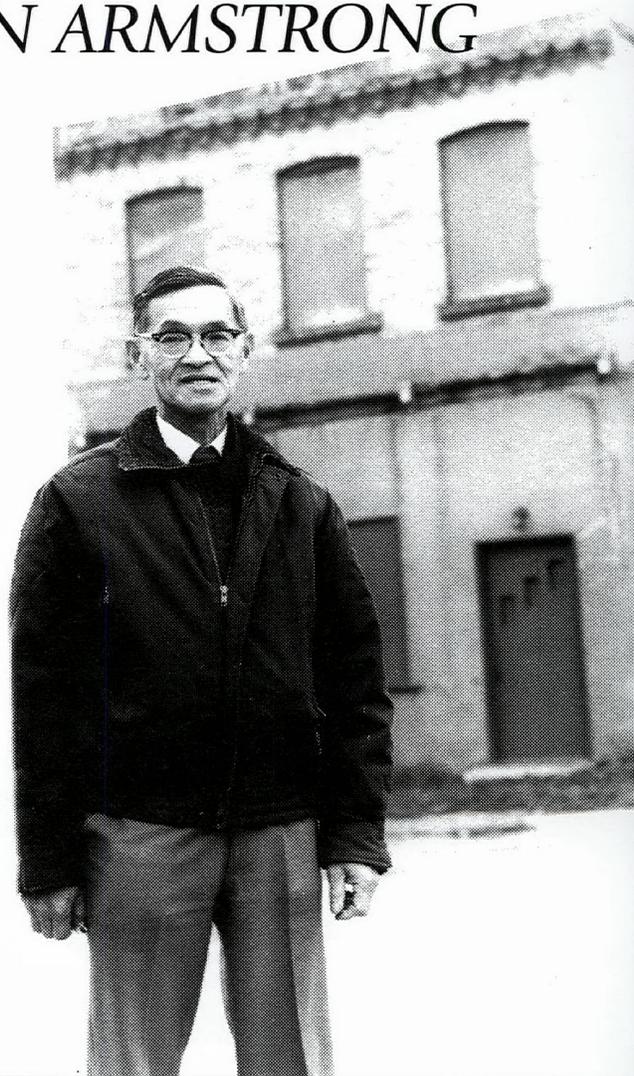
Editor's note: This article springs from a series in the *Armstrong Advertiser*, also written by the author, on the Chinese in Armstrong. Mr. Critchley based his material on presentations made at a meeting of the Armstrong-Enderby Branch, Okanagan Historical Society, and an interview with Ben Lee, son of one of the Chinese pioneers.

Sedge grass, rushes and reeds now flourish in the rich soil of the abandoned fields nudging the City of Armstrong.

Ducks, geese and seagulls feed there in the spring when the creeks overflow and flood the land. Blackbirds warble in the rushes and the odd hawk wheels skyward.

But at one time long, straight rows of celery, lettuce and cabbage lined this fertile bottom land, cleared and drained by hundreds of Chinese men early in this century. And the produce from those once immaculate fields ended up on tables across the country and as far away as Hawaii.

The express trains that once rumbled through town to pick up boxcars laden with crates of celery and lettuce stopped rolling long ago. The former packing houses and a few faded photographs



Ben Lee in front of family home. (Armstrong Advertiser)

Peter Critchley, a product of the co-op writing program at the University of Victoria, covers the news for the *Armstrong Advertiser*, an independent weekly that began publishing in 1902. He lives in Spallumcheen with his wife and two children.

are all that remain of the Chinese market gardeners who transformed Armstrong into the celery capital of Canada—with the singular exception of one family.

“We are the last of the Chinese gardeners and we still garden,” said Enyit Guaw Jong, better known in the community as Mary Jong, the daughter of Jong Hughie, one of the first Chinese to settle here.

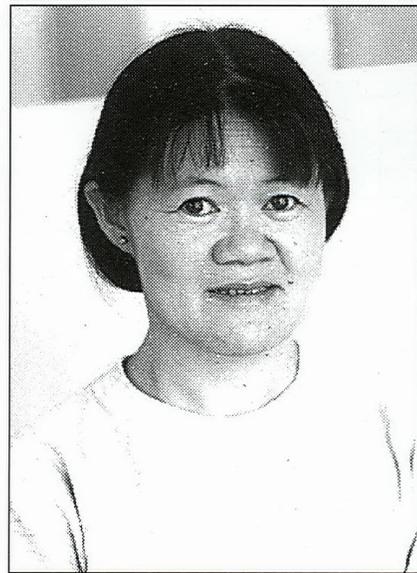
“All of the old-timers are gone. Mainly, the California vegetable industry was the end, and they were all elderly people. They made a bit of fortune and sent the money back and as they themselves grew older they wanted to go home, too. They soon passed away or left the area.”

But the Jongs stayed and struggled for many years to make ends meet. Today, they still garden the same piece of land they bought just a few years after the Canadian government repealed the Exclusion Act, which prohibited Chinese from becoming citizens or purchasing land. Mr. Jong obtained an eight-acre parcel fronting Pleasant Valley Road in 1956, two years after bringing his wife from China, and bought an adjacent 10-acre parcel nine years later.

“Last year we had the best crop of celery ever,” Ms. Jong said. “We shipped at least 3,000 pounds to Askew’s store here and at Salmon Arm, and to farmer markets.”

The Jongs grow celery virtually the same way that the local Chinese market gardeners did at the turn of the century. They even use a celery stamper, constructed with two pieces of light board separated by coil springs, to punch holes in the soil for the young plants. And all the weeding, harvesting, washing, grading, bagging and shipping is still done by hand. “You’re out there from early morning until late at night.”

For many years, primarily before the Second World War, the gardeners also needed to hill the celery to stop it from turning green. Some of them rented horses, but most hilled the long rows of celery and lettuce by hand. They worked incredibly long hours during the growing season to tend crops on land most of them did not own.



Mary Jong



Family of Mr. and Mrs. Lee Bak Bong gather for parents' 50th wedding anniversary in 1961. (Donovan Clemson photograph, courtesy Jan Clemson)

Some years they earned a pittance, compared to the profits the packing houses were making. For example, even as late as 1952, the packers paid the Chinese gardeners nine cents a dozen for lettuce and sold it by the three-dozen pack for \$4.80.

But the little money they did earn enabled many to support wives and families back in China. This is what drove most of them to labour in the fields that once surrounded Armstrong. And this opportunity, limited as it might appear today, is what drew many of them here.

"I remember people who didn't understand the problem and would complain. They complained to me that the market gardener would make money here but didn't keep it in this country. They sent it away to China. They were criticized for that." These are the words of Ben Lee of Kelowna, son of pioneer Lee Bak Bong.

"The Chinese have a saying, which translated to English means gold mountain," Mary Jong explained. "They believed this land was filled with gold, holding out opportunities denied in their distressed homeland."

Mary Jong's father, a highly-educated scholar and teacher, came in search of the golden mountain at the turn of the century. He travelled with his own father, who chose to emigrate to the United States; they parted company and never saw each other again.

Despite his education, Hughie Jong could not find work as a teacher when he arrived in Victoria. He first supported himself as a bricklayer and later cleared land for roads, some of them located in the small Chinatown that is still a vital part of Victoria.

"He was one of the first Chinese to settle here. A lot of people think that Lee Bak Bong and Harry Lee were but my dad was here before them," Ms. Jong said. "He helped build the roads around here. But he didn't know that many people or speak English then and he didn't make himself that well known."

Armstrong soon became a haven for people like Mr. Jong and the permanent Chinese population grew to about 500. At one time during the First World War up to 900 Chinese men lived there, many working for a potato dehydration plant that operated during the war.

Mr. Jong later worked for market gardeners such as Lee Bak Bong and Harry Lee. He also wrote countless letters for members of the Chinese community, as it was the only way they could communicate with families stranded in China, since they were forbidden to join their loved ones in Canada.

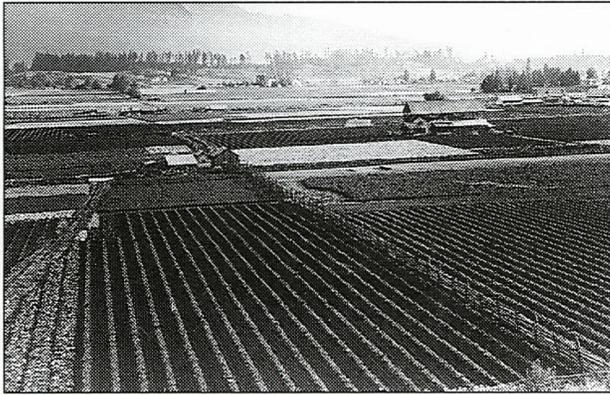


Armstrong celery fields photographed September 4, 1929.
(W. A. Smith Collection)



Celery field ready for harvesting.

Like the rest of the Asian population in the community, Mr. Jong lived a world apart from the Occidental citizenry. A Chinatown existed in Armstrong, built on land purchased by countrymen before the Exclusion Act of 1923. Many of the field hands who worked together also lived communally. These small enclaves helped to shield the Chinese from the widespread racism that existed here and across the province; it even resulted in disembarking Chinese immigrants being killed at the Vancouver waterfront during a race riot in the early 1900s. "In the past the Chinatown communities offered protection from the discriminatory society and provided the Chinese with security and company," Ms. Jong said.



Row upon carefully tended row, Chinese market gardens were a study in symmetry. (Bill Jamieson photograph)

Ben Lee: "Many of those men working out on the land would come to town in the winter and many lived here [Chinatown]. They had bunk beds and a common kitchen . . . The other thing was that in winter the days were long and this gave them an opportunity to socialize."

Some also used the opportunity to gamble for a few dollars, usually above the laundry in Chinatown. It is believed debts from these games of chance resulted in a couple of unexplained murders in the early 1930s, according to Mary Jong's father.

Mah jong and dominoes drew the attention of the local police, despite the relatively small stakes. This reflected the deep and widespread prejudice against the Chinese that then existed throughout the province. Armstrong and other B. C. municipalities even



Celery field showing board hilling method.

passed their own by-laws to collect head taxes. Of course, the police never raided a poker game played by members of the Caucasian community.

The little Chinatown burned to the ground in 1922, with strong suspicions it was arson. Ben Lee: "The old Chinatown used to be on the corner. But the funny thing was a building stuck out partly on the road. It was a big wooden building. Lo and behold, not much longer after the city said 'cut it back,' they had a big fire. It might just be a coincidence."

Chinese market gardeners even ran into problems working on Sunday, after a local Christian group agitated against the practice. The Chinese, liking the idea of a day off, agreed to stop working on the Sabbath, but on Monday morning the packing houses lay idle. None of the shops had any vegetables for sale, either, to the consternation of the same people responsible for the decision not to work on Sunday. Whereupon, it was generally agreed that, yes, the market gardeners could toil on Sunday.

Virulent racism abated in the decades that followed, but it didn't disappear. And Ms. Jong learned that the hard way as a young child in school. "It was then that I first learned of my cultural difference. When I went to school I remembered the difficulty they had in pronouncing my name, so they gave me Mary. For the longest time I didn't answer to this because this wasn't my name.

"I felt dumb and shamed that I was different from everyone else. Deep down I never felt I was different, but everyone reminded me of how different I was. I would be in the back of the class in silence and terrified the teacher would call my name. When she asked a question, I would freeze and a deafening silence would fill the air and I could hear my heart pounding louder and louder. I just didn't understand, but how could I explain? The kids at first would just stare at me. Later they would tease, point and laugh at me and call me a dumb chink."

Consequently, Ms. Jong did not speak to anybody except her brother in the first few years of school. She did not even ask to go to the bathroom and ate her lunch in silence, alone in the playground. She also failed Grade 1. "I felt isolated, miserable and alone. I hated school and everyone in it.

"Every morning the teacher would check our hands, hair and clothes and divide the class into rows and give stars to the row with the cleanest students. My row always came in last because of me. Everyone blamed me and didn't want me in their group. How could they know that I had to work in the vegetable garden every morning before going to school and didn't have time to clean up?"

The teacher also awarded stars for eating a proper breakfast, as defined by the Canada Food Guide. Of course, Mary Jong did not eat cereal, bacon, eggs, or drink juice and milk for the first meal of the day; she ate a Chinese rice pudding dish. "I never got a star for that either."

But Ms. Jong, who dropped out of school at one point, returned to the classroom and eventually earned a star of another kind—a university degree. She is also an accomplished artist specializing in lithographic printing.



While a punitive head tax virtually barred Chinese women from entering Canada, one did arrive in Armstrong three years before the way was completely blocked by federal decree.

She was Lee Bak Bong's wife and the mother of Ben Lee, who was born and raised in the red brick building that still stands on the site of Armstrong's small Chinatown. Ben Lee's father and grandfather both worked with the sole purpose of bringing Mrs. Lee to Canada at a time when the head tax was \$500, a veritable fortune when two acres produced \$28 for a year's work. Soon after, only Chinese men were admitted—with a still more exorbitant price on their heads.

As the only Chinese woman in the community, Mrs. Lee Bak Bong found herself without a female friend. Her family said that as children growing up they never realized how lonely it must have been for their mother.

Some of the Chinese lived in a little neighbourhood that developed at the corner of Okanagan Street and Patterson Avenue. Others lived in shacks out in the fields, or in boarding houses like the Taylor house beside St. Joseph's Catholic Church. The influx of Chinese men, primarily from Canton province, started after the pioneers had drained the land of present-day Armstrong and the Shuswap & Okanagan Railway (S&O) made its appearance in 1892. Field crops were soon generating lucrative express revenue for the rail line.

At that time people called the area The Island and three creeks drained into it, with the only settlement of any size residing at Lansdowne in north Spallumcheen. There was a swamp where Davis Creek becomes Fortune Creek. Deep Creek came down through the McNair property (Lansdowne area) and spilled out here, while Meighen Creek flowed where the Highway 97 shopping centre makes its home.

Men worked for a dollar a day during the winter to earn a grubstake to finance farming activities. They dug Davis (Fortune) Creek down to the Shuswap River at Enderby to drain that district and deepened Deep Creek down to Otter Lake. "When that was drained out, first of all it was hay and a bit of oats and the odd fellow grew a few potatoes," recounted Mat Hassen, native son and good friend and associate of the Chinese market gardeners. "Then the vegetable business started up with people like the late W. A. Cuthbert. He brought in some Chinese men, including the notable Louie Chin, who came here in 1911."

Some of Chin's contemporaries were Wong Chog, Harry Lee, Leon Sing, Jong Hughie, Wong Soo and Lee Bak Bong. They raised early and late varieties of celery and lettuce, alternating one crop with the other—harvesting early lettuce and planting late celery and vice versa. This “double-barrelled use of land” entailed a great deal of labour. “They did everything by hand except for using horses to plow the fields or sometimes renting animals to hill up the rows of celery to blanch it; at that time they only grew white celery for market,” said Mr. Hassen. This was all Chinese labour; white men owned the land. The Chinese couldn't own the land until they were granted citizenship in the late 1940s. So they were renters.

“They would ship things, particularly berries, strawberries and lettuce that perished very rapidly en route. So the guy on the other end would claim 50 percent damage or worse. The man in the packing house here would have to get on the train to go out to that place to see vegetables or fruit that arrived in that state. He couldn't always do it and it ended up he might get paid for a quarter or half a shipment. And you know how much they paid the grower for it.”

During the growing season the weeding never stopped until harvest. The crops were gleaned by hand, using a heavy knife to cut off the celery just above the root system, and peel the outer layer before packing the remainder in 400-pound boxes to deliver to one of eight packing houses once operating in Armstrong. During peak season as many as 10 boxcars a day were sent off to market on the S&O.

By coaxing bumper yields from the fertile bottomlands, the Chinese gardeners bestowed economic benefits on other sections of the community. Armstrong and Enderby sawmills were kept busy manufacturing shipping boxes and there was a brisk demand for ice, distributed from a storage shed where Buckerfields later operated. Packing houses, of course, were part of the picture, while other men found employment cutting, hauling and putting up ice in the winter.

“They would cut the ice in blocks and store it in sawdust in a shed made out of logs,” explained Ben Lee. “In the spring they would take [the blocks] out, wash off the sawdust and put them through a chipper to crack it up and use it for packing lettuce in the wooden boxes. And when the boxcar was filled they also blew it into the car so the whole space was filled with chipped ice. It was early refrigeration.”

The Chinese market gardeners once farmed as far out as Otter Lake, and north to Enderby and Salmon Arm. But they grew much of the celery and lettuce on the rich alluvial muck surrounding Armstrong—land that otherwise probably would never have been cultivated.

As the 1940s dawned men with families in the homeland were finding it increasingly frustrating to live with the Exclusion Act. They didn't earn much working from dawn to dusk, but many had somehow managed to save enough to bring their loved ones over. The question grew more pressing after the Second World War when Chinese-Canadian veterans added their voice to efforts to convince the federal government to throw out the discriminatory legislation.

"After the war many of the returned soldiers—the Chinese-Canadians—who fought for this country questioned why they were still classified as aliens. They said they had rights and, after all, they were born here." The veterans and Chinese associations made many trips to Ottawa on behalf of their cause. Finally, in 1947, their campaign bore fruit.

"Unless you were a Canadian citizen you couldn't vote. If you can't vote you can't buy property. In fact, I think even Armstrong city council once excluded Chinese from owning land," Mr. Lee said.

Repealing the Act did not significantly alter the lives of the people it affected in Armstrong, Mr. Lee claimed. "Some of them were now at the age they wanted to retire and go back to see their families; some had never been back since they came out. And some went back and returned with their families. "The few dollars they earned, unless they were in a bigger business or worked larger farms, weren't enough to buy land. Land cost at least \$3,000 an acre and they were only making something like \$1,000 a year. They had to live on that and send money back to China. Some enterprising market gardeners, led by Wong



The Jong Hughie market garden has long been a family enterprise, noted for growing some of the finest fresh vegetables in the North Okanagan. Helping with the 1969 crop were Mary, Joan, Margaret, Danny and Jeannie.



Armstrong farming scene circa 1909

Chog, did band together to purchase property and farm it collectively. But they still faced obstacles few Occidental farmers did.

The Vegetable Marketing Board controlled the marketing of all vegetables, including perishable crops like lettuce and celery, grown primarily by Chinese gardeners. But it failed to recognize a fundamental difference between root crops that stored well and perishable commodities.

“Many of the market gardeners had no qualms about the control and regulation of root vegetables. But they sure didn’t have a good feeling about controlling vegetables that are perishable, such as lettuce and celery. When these are ready you have to get them to market. They didn’t give any consideration to that; they just wanted to control it,” was how Ben Lee felt about central selling. “The board failed to meet its mandate to protect the grower. Instead, it protected the packing houses and wholesalers.

“For instance, if you grew vegetables you could take them to sell within a 15-mile radius. Where do you go if you have 10 to 20 acres of celery to sell? To Enderby? But there is a market in Kelowna, Penticton, Revelstoke and Kamloops.”

The marketing board refused to even issue the Lee Bak Bong family a licence, despite the fact it was given a business licence by the City of Armstrong. Eventually, the family challenged the board

in court twice and won both cases. "They said we could not take vegetables outside of our growing area. But they couldn't find a market for us."

Sometimes the market gardeners simply plowed their crops under when prices dropped to the point where harvesting the crop was pointless. At other times the marketing board could not find willing buyers for the celery and lettuce.

Today, there is far greater understanding about cultural differences than when Ms. Jong first attended school, or when Ben Lee gave up any designs he might have had on farming to pursue a successful career in education. People are also more aware of the instrumental role that the Chinese market gardeners played in the development of Armstrong. The produce they laboriously grew in such abundance helped to transform and fuel the local economy. In the process they laid a foundation that still benefits the people living here.

The new and ultra-modern restaurant, located in the heart of the downtown business area, has attracted large crowds of patrons, with many from neighboring centres enjoying the specialized Chinese foods featured as well as the unique and attractive atmosphere. The business is a tribute to the foresight and long-planning on the part of its owners, Mr. and Mrs. Jong Hughie.

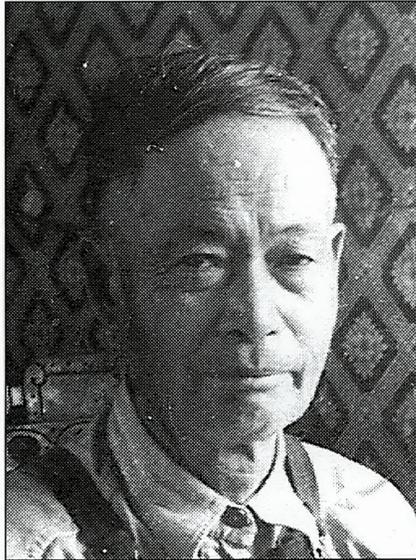
(Armstrong Advertiser, May 11, 1967)

Grow vegetables or start a restaurant: those were generally the only options open to ambitious Chinese of humble origin once the great railway-building era ended. In many ways the choices were astonishingly similar—long hours for painfully little gain.

"Chinese and Western Cuisine" establishments became an institution of Small Town Canada, often the only place for a stranger to get a meal and now one of the few survivors in many dying Prairie hamlets.

At first, most Chinese restaurants catered to the Western palate, saving authentic fare for countrymen who enjoyed a meal out, or for ad-

venturous Canadian diners willing to try something besides meat-and-potatoes. For many of us, it was our first taste of exotic foreign food.



Jong Hughie

Jong Hughie was both gardener and restaurateur. He came to Armstrong not long after the turn of the century and outlasted most of his contemporaries, obtaining his own land and starting a successful sales outlet for his produce.

In the 1960s he and his wife demolished the old Overwaitea building and began constructing the Shanghai Chop Suey House, finished in “striking amber elm and indirect fluorescent lighting” behind matching elmwood panels. On the auspicious fifth day of the fifth month, 1967, the Hughies opened for business after host-

ing a banquet the previous night for 80 business associates and guests.

By now a Chinese restaurant was usually a family enterprise; and just as often a means to procure a good education for the next generation. It also provided job opportunities to recent immigrants, literally their first taste of the new land.

The Shanghai Chop Suey House survives as the Great Wall Restaurant, but under new owners, Hughies having sold out in 1995.