

## Ep 11 – Chinese Farmers of Celery City

Transcript by Patricia Wejr

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:00:19] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a podcast that aims to shed light on British Columbia's rich labour heritage. Today, we shift away from unions to take a look at agriculture, focusing on Chinese Canadian farmers, and particularly, those whose efforts gave the small North Okanagan community of Armstrong the title Celery City. They were workers too. The long history of BC's Chinese immigrants is rife with racism, mistreatment and discrimination. Much of it took root with the arrival of 17,000 Chinese workers hired to help build the Canadian Pacific Railway. They were poorly paid, given the most dangerous jobs, and once the railway was completed in 1885, when they were no longer needed, the federal government imposed a hefty head tax on future Chinese immigrants to discourage any more from coming to Canada. When many managed to pay the tax and continued to emigrate, the government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923, an even more notorious law which banned all Chinese immigration. Until the act was repealed in 1947, fewer than 50 Chinese managed to make it in. That left thousands of families separated for the next 24 years. Chinese immigrants who were here had no right to vote, could not become citizens, were barred from the professions and restricted from buying or leasing crown land. However, there were still ways to access privately owned land, and many had come to British Columbia with a knowledge of farming. Not only could they feed themselves, but their fellow immigrants as well. That was the case in the small town of Armstrong, a few miles north of Vernon. Over time, it became known as Celery City, as a few Chinese farmers turned the area's rich land into a haven for vegetables favoured by Chinese consumers. Although celery was king, it was not easy to grow. Celery had to be planted individually, evenly placed in long, straight rows. This was achieved by long string lines and an ingenious device invented by Chinese farmers called a celery stamper that allowed 12 seedlings to be planted simultaneously. All produce had to be harvested by hand. So hundreds of Chinese immigrants flocked to Armstrong to work in the fields. As they became proficient, some rented land and went into the celery business themselves. Yield was six to eight tons an acre. Louie Chin and Jong Hughie were two of Armstrong's earliest Chinese farmers. They came to town shortly after 1910 and remained in the vegetable business for decades. But it was never easy. Hong Hughie struggled for years before he was finally able to actually purchase an eight-acre piece of land. Lee Bak Bong was another pioneer Chinese farmer. He and his father worked relentlessly to pay the \$500 head tax to bring Lee's wife to Canada. They managed it just before the doors slammed shut for Chinese women immigrants in 1923. As the only Chinese woman in the community for many years, she had a lonely existence. One of her sons. Howe Yet Lee was interviewed by Denise Fong in 2019 about the family's many years in Armstrong.

**Howe Yet Lee** [00:04:04] Our family came after the peak, First War [unclear] growing potatoes for the Canadian troops in France. This was before the city was built, and that was during the First War, 1914 to 1918. So when the war ended, the First War, then there was no work for these labourers, so most of them moved back to Vancouver. But my dad... my grandfather, he stayed on. And then, as the record shows, my dad was brought over and we continued living here and then our family then was born and brought up in Armstrong. There were seven boys and four girls in the family. Because of the Chinese history and the family, as you said, we were the only family in Armstrong for many years, after the second family moved out. So what my mother used to do was put on a big Chinese dinner, Chinese New Year. We would invite the whole community. Well, we had a big place. It was sort of taking over a commercial building and my grandfather was

involved. I think it was my grandfather who originally built that. It was a brick building. Sometime we would have two sittings. That many, you know. Well, again, most of these were bachelors. They didn't have family. So it was a great sort of a focal point for the men who would or we would have like a weekend coffee session. We would put, mother would put coffee on. They would come and have coffee and socialize with us on Saturday evenings in particular.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:06:01] Jong Hughie, meanwhile, had to wait until 1954 because of the Chinese Exclusion Act before he could bring a wife to Armstrong. They soon had a large family. Daughter Mary Jong remembered the importance of Armstrong's distinct Chinatown, which had gradually taken root over the years as their own tightly knit community.

**Yee Chung Dai voicing Mary Jong's statement** [00:06:23] In the past, the Chinatown communities offered protection from the discriminatory society and provided the Chinese with security, and the company.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:06:36] Added Ben Lee, another of Lee Bak Bong's sons:

**Wing Chow voicing Ben Lee's statement** [00:06:40] Many of those men working out on the land would come to town in the winter, and many lived in 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.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:06:57] There was small scale gambling to, mah-jong and dominoes. Despite the few dollars that exchanged hands, however, they were regularly raided by local police. High stakes poker games by the white community were ignored. This sort of racism was widespread. Chinese market gardeners even ran into trouble working on Sunday. When a local Christian group objected, the Chinese readily agreed to stop working on the Sabbath. Who wouldn't want a day off? Of course, on the following Monday, there were no vegetables for sale in local stores. The white Christian community quickly withdrew its objection and Sunday fieldwork resumed. Mary Jong recalled the bullying and name calling she experienced at school.

**Yee Chung Dai voicing Mary Jong's statement** [00:07:44] Every morning the teacher would check our hands, hair and clothes and divide the class into rows and gave stars to the row with the cleanest students. My row always came in last because of me. Everybody 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.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:08:16] Although they were shunned by many in the community, Chinese gardeners brought prosperity to the region. Local sawmills were kept busy making shipping crates. Locals also found wintertime work cutting, hauling and putting up ice. A number of packing houses were built alongside the railway that ran right through the centre of town. In fact, Armstrong's enterprising Chinese farmers and their hired labourers worked so hard during those years that no less than Doris Day, backed by the Les Brown Orchestra, did a song about them called 'Celery Stalks at Midnight'. Okay. Just kidding. But it's still a fun song.

**Music: 'Celery Stalks at Midnight' performed by Doris Day with the Les Brown Orchestra** [00:09:50] Lurking in the moonlight, what's this funny nightmare all about.

Celery stalks at midnight, mounted on their broomsticks, gliding through the treetops, in and out. It's like a bad dream, a crazy kind of mad dream. Must have been something that I ate no doubt. Celery stalks at midnight, lurking in the moonlight. What's this very funny nightmare all about.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:10:37] The Lee Bak Bong building provided bunkhouses on the upper floor for Chinese labourers after the growing season ended. The main floor was a grocery store and vegetable distribution centre. The solid brick structure had been built by Mah Yick after a suspicious fire destroyed much of Armstrong's original Chinatown. The building was then bought by the thriving Lee family. Howe Lee recalled:

**Howe Yet Lee** [00:11:02] And this area on this side at that time, you know, it specialized in celery. At one time, it was called the Celery City of Armstrong. In this area there was two packing houses here and one down towards the end here. So three packing houses specializing in taking the farmer's lettuce and celery, and box them. They used to box them in wooden crates. Lettuce used to be in a wooden crate about this long, about this wide and about this tall. You could pack five dozen, three layers, 20 head lettuce, about five and four. My dad made contact with some of these corner stores. You know, they like to have Chinese vegetables for the Chinese in the community, you know, growing like that. You know lo bok, the radish and then sui choy and oh, that became the big one. That Chinese cabbage. Even during my dad's time, through his personal contact, he was shipping by rail in these crates, wooden crates as far as Winnipeg. And then Safeway, through McDonald's Consolidated found that Chinese were looking for Chinese vegetables in the Safeways. They couldn't get it, but because my dad had contact with a bid out for Chinese cabbage he was selling to McDonald's Consolidated. And this is where then McDonald's Consolidated started to asked for more and more and Dad became more specializing in growing the Chinese vegetable, in particular Chinese cabbage, because Chinese cabbage has an excellent shelf life.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:12:59] By the end of World War II, non-Asian farmers had become envious of the thriving Chinese growers. So they set up a marketing board that imposed quotas for the amount of celery and cabbage that could be grown. Despite their deep anger, the Lee family adapted to the new rules. Howe Lee:

**Howe Yet Lee** [00:13:20] ... after the first war, he came back to Armstrong and then he lived there for a while. And then the second war. And after the Second World War, he came back and became quite involved and I guess he had interests in the community. This guy, Ted Poole, decided to convince the government to set up a marketing group. It was called the Interior Vegetable Marketing Board. With that legislation, it gave this marketing board control of the farm land and what could be grown. So this dictator then started to tell the Chinese farmer, you can only grow this number of acres of lettuce, this number of acres of celery. It was so bad that this is why Dad decided to go less and less in lettuce and celery and more and more of Chinese veggies. And that's how he overcame.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:14:21] In 2016, the B.C. Labour Heritage Centre commemorated the Chinese market gardeners with a special plaque. It reads: Armstrong's early agricultural success owes much to the hardworking Chinese immigrants who cultivated the city's fertile bottom lands. As many as 500 Chinese labourers lived in huts in the fields and bunkhouses in Chinatown in the winter. They grew crops that included celery, cabbage, lettuce and potatoes which were shipped across Canada. Life for the Chinese farmers was challenging. They could not own land and faced much racial animosity. Despite these obstacles, Chinese workers were an integral part of Armstrong's history and helped it

become what was once the celery capital of Canada. BC's Lower Mainland was another success story for Chinese market gardeners. Despite facing the same racism as those in Armstrong, there was a place for them on the Musqueam Indian Reserve. Known as Hong Kong Gardens, they consisted of a collection of one-story wood frame huts on land rented from the Musqueam. Structures built by farmer Lee Chin Leong in the 1950s are still standing, the last traces of the 18 Chinese Canadian farms that once occupied the Musqueam lands. The reserve was a haven for Chinese who had trouble acquiring land and water rights in the wider community. Their farms supplied much of the Lower Mainland's produce for decades. Today, the garden remains are recognised by Canada's historical places as, quote, socially and culturally important for the descendants unquote, of Musqueam and Chinese Canadians across the Lower Mainland. They stand as proof of the long standing historic relationship of mutual respect and reciprocity between Chinese Canadians and the Musqueam. In North Vancouver, Lim Gong established a fruits and vegetable store in the early 1900s. He had to brave the hostility of the local Asiatic Exclusion League, backed by the mayor, which urged people to help them 'keep this a white man's country'. Lim Gong kept his store going long enough for him to finally be able to vote in the late 1940s. When he died in 1952, the North Shore News quoted his friend C.W. Cates of the Cates tugboat company, who remarked:

**John Mabbott voicing CW Cates' statement** [00:16:47] It is remarkable how these people, although sometimes tormented almost beyond endurance, invariably turned the other cheek and returned good for evil.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:16:58] It should be noted that Chinese immigrants didn't always turn the other cheek. They were known to stop work on the C.P.R. whenever they felt they were shortchanged on their pay. In Victoria, when local authorities imposed special taxes on their produce and seized their goods, Chinese residents staged a strike. When the supply of vegetables disappeared, the tax did, too. Chinese lumber workers organized unions at a few sawmills, and Chinese workers played a key role in the historic strike at Blubber Bay on Tuxedo Island in 1938. But that's a story for another day. We hope you've enjoyed this look at another of those little known chapters of BC labour history. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. Thanks as always to the other members of the podcast collective, the appropriately named Bailey Garden and Patricia Wejr, who did much of the research. Thanks also to Lucie McNeil for her help in putting this podcast together. Wing Chow provided the voice for Ben Lee. Yee Chung Dai was Mary Jo Long and John Mabbott was Captain C.W. Cates. We'll see you next time On the Line.

**Theme music** [00:18:09]