



MICHELLE LEE

## *CPR built on corpses of Chinese laborers*

**T**he CANADIAN PACIFIC Railway. Is it really the Canadian Pacific Railway? Was it not the Chinese who toiled endlessly so that John A. Macdonald's dream of a united Canada could be fulfilled? Was it not the Chinese who were maimed by dynamite explosions, smothered to death in earth cave-ins and drowned by falling from unfinished bridges in order that we, as Canadians, could be joined from sea to sea?

I remember seeing one of those Canadian history segments about the Chinese railhands who labored on the CPR. One of the Chinese workers had been bribed by the white foreman to set a stick of dynamite in one of the caves. There was a loud explosion as the other Chinese looked on anxiously for their friend to come out. Meanwhile, the foreman sauntered off to get another Chinese "rat." The man staggered out, coughing vigorously from inhaling the poisonous fumes.

I soon learned this laborer was one of the few lucky ones to have survived a dynamite explosion.

As I researched the topic further, I became disgusted by the hundreds of deaths due to the hazardous conditions to which the Chinese were exposed.

Between 1881-1885, the Chinese poured into Victoria at an astonishing rate. More than 17,000 immigrated to Canada in search of meeting their dream of financial independence. Regrettably, this dream rarely became reality. The Chinese were paid one-third to a half less than the white laborers. They were forced to pay numerous expenses, including clothing, room rent, tools, fares, revenue and road taxes, religious fees, doctors' bills and the cost of drugs. This left the average laborer with \$43 after one full year of back-breaking labor. This scarcely covered the cost for the trip back to China.

Conditions on the CPR, however, were no better. The Chinese were prone to disease due to the crowded conditions, cold weather, inadequate nutrition, and lack of medical attention. Many died from the sheer exhaustion of hard work and the strenuous walk from camp to the work site.

Lee Yee Sum was one of the many Chinese laborers on the CPR. He was born in Chung San, China in 1869. He, too, had hoped to make a better future for himself in Canada and first arrived here at age 16 in 1885. He endured dynamite explosions and became sick from inhaling the poisonous fumes. In 1913, he returned to his homeland subsequent to the completion of the CPR, married and had two children. He returned again to Canada in 1913, but never saw his family again, as he died in Victoria as a result of pneumonia in 1938. Lee Yee Sum is survived by his two children, Wah Chan, who still lives in China, and Sou Kiu, who now resides in Australia. Lee Yee Sum was my great uncle.

Those industrious laborers endured racism, bitter cold, inadequate nutrition, unjust treatment, and the most back-breaking and dangerous work on the railway.

I am proud to be a Chinese-Canadian because it was the people of my race who labored to unite this country; yet, I am also sombre because what joins Canada is mile upon mile of Chinese corpses stretching as far as the Rocky Mountains.

The CPR serves as a tombstone for the thousands of Chinese who gave their lives. CPR will always mean to me the Chinese Pacific Railway.

Michelle Lee, 16, is a Grade 10 student at Argyle secondary school in North Vancouver.

VOICES

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GEORGE E. CLARK

# No ethnic group was spared hard times

**I** WAS DEEPLY disturbed by the Voices column of Saturday, May 21, written by Michelle Lee.

The article is well-written and augers a great writing future for this 16-year-old.

My problem is with the content, and my problem is with the incessant desire of ethnic groups to grope about in the long past of their histories and to moan and groan about things over and done with. Will there be no end to this senseless waste of time and energy? Is there not enough wrong happening in the world today, even as we write, that we need harken back 100 years or more to the follies of our ancestors?

I am of Irish descent. My mother was born in Victoria in 1895 and her family came around Cape Horn in a sailing vessel in the late 1800s, directly from Ireland.

Do you want to write about broken promises? Write Irish.

Do you want to write about death-dealing toil? Write Irish.

Do you want to write about being the scum of society? Write Irish. Do you want to write about being the brunt of bad jokes? Write Irish. Do you want to write about hazardous work conditions? Write Irish. Do you want to write about the immigrants' dreams of a new world being shattered? Write

Do you want to write about having no money to return to the homeland? Write about the Irish who had no money and no homeland to return to.

The Great Potato Famine in Ireland caused thousands of deaths, dispossession of farms and caused the Irish to leave their homeland in droves.

The historic fact is that there were many more Irish laborers involved in building the CPR than Chinese. The Chinese built from the coast to the Summit, but the Irish had already built the link from the east.

The early Chinese laborers in Canada endured the most vicious of conditions and survived, and so did the Irish.

There is a bright side that never seems to get written about: My father operated a logging camp near Errington on Vancouver Island, during the "Dirty Thirties." I lived in the camp during school vacations. The loggers were Scandinavian, the road builders were Chinese. The two groups lived in separate camps. Why? The Chinese preferred it that way and so would I.

The Chinese head man, Yung Yen, could speak only very faulty English. I recall my father and Yen discussing and drawing plans for a new bunkhouse for the Chinese. Yen was a frequent guest in our home for dinner on his way to Vancouver's Chinatown for delicacies and to send money home to relatives every month. We exchanged gifts frequently. He was, and still is, a very important part of my growing up. When my father was short of cash to pay his help, Yen financed the whole operation.

Please, in the future, write about the whole picture and, please, Michelle, there is no ethnic group, no, not one, that has not suffered severely over the centuries. Let's build upon our mutual strengths and let's not repeat, or allow to be repeated, the mistakes of the past.

So, Michelle, please accept an Irish hug and a kiss and the prospect of fresh beginnings for all of us.

George E. Clark, 67, is retired and lives in Vancouver.

We'd like to hear your voice — in about 550 words. Mail to Voices, Linda Bates, Vancouver Sun, 2250 Granville St., Vancouver V6H 3G2, or fax 732-2323.

# Chinese Labourers.

Andrew Onderdonk estimated that he needed at least 10,000 men to build his section of the railway from Port Moody to Eagle Pass. His solution of bringing workers from China horrified the racist population of British Columbia. The BC government tried to ban the Chinese, but Prime Minister John A. Macdonald knew, "either you must have this



labour or you can't have the railway." Onderdonk paid the Chinese less, only a dollar a day, forced them to buy all their supplies from the company store, and made them build their own camps. All this they agreed to do, for the money they saved would serve them for life in China.

There were concerns for the slight build of the Chinese, but Onderdonk reasoned that if they could build the Great Wall, they could surely build a railway. In 1881-82 Onderdonk shipped at least 6000 workers from Hong Kong. The railway would not have been built without them.

Death was far more frequent among the Chinese than the other groups. The litany of death reads "crushed by a log," "killed by falling rock," "drowned," "smothered by cave-in" and of course death by explosion. Scores also died of scurvy, 200 in the first year alone. They received little notice or medical care.

1) Why were Chinese labourers brought over?

2) What was the reaction of BC residents?

3) What concerns were there about the Chinese as workers?

4) What occurred more frequently among Chinese labourers, than other wor.?

5) What response was there to this?