

Archive Package: 1857–1884 (Early Immigration)

Story Sheet: Shirley Chan's Family

Shirley Chan's great grandfather came to Canada in 1879, for the gold rush. "We thought of North America as gold mountain. Chinese call it *Gum San*. The streets were paved with gold, there was gold everywhere, and the gold in the mountains would make you rich. People like my great grandfather were lured by the stories of unimaginable wealth. When they got here, it wasn't quite like that." Her great-grandfather panned up and down the Fraser River, but he never struck it rich. Instead, he ended up working on the railroad, trying to pay back his debt for his passage to BC. When the railroad was finished, he was able to stake out a claim for a piece of land. "It wasn't very nice land, it was a bit wet, boggy... he tried to raise chickens." But weasels or or otters got the chickens, so he switched to pigs.

While he was farming, Shirley's great-grandfather also worked other jobs. He worked in the homes of white families, chopping wood for the fire, cleaning floors, and cooking. One day, he'd gotten permission from the owners of the home he worked in to take home an old stove. He managed to arrange transportation to take it. But when the neighbours saw him remove something from the shed, they had him arrested for stealing. Eventually the family came back, and he was let go. But when Shirley's great-grandfather returned to his farm, he found his pigs had died while the authorities were trying to verify his story.

This story of being accused of stealing was impressed upon Shirley's grandfather, "because he too joined his father as a houseboy working for families who owned property, and he was taught that if there's a coin on the floor, don't ever touch it—don't pick it up. Wash around it, so you will never be accused of stealing. And that was part of the story my mother passed on to me. That, too, shows you how careful you had to be, if you were Chinese."

When it was time to pay property taxes, her great-grandfather didn't have the money, so he lost his land, which was expropriated for the Vancouver Harbour Development. "So, it's a story of some tragedy, some racism, hardship, but he didn't give up," says Shirley. His wife had committed suicide while he was in BC. "She had been left for so long... she didn't make it to see him again," says Shirley. With the

money her great-grandfather received for the expropriation, he was able to bring his son to join him in BC, paying his head tax. The two worked together, and eventually Shirley's uncle came over too, learned English, and with her grandfather, started a business.

“He got on that CPR train that my grandfather worked on, and he rode that train to where it stopped. He got out and looked around, he saw a Chinese family or business or restaurant there, and he talked to them and asked them what they needed, what they wanted from China, but couldn't have. And so he took their orders, and went from train stop to train stop, and then he set up an export company in Hong Kong, and imported what these people wanted, and used the CPR to deliver. Isn't that good entrepreneurial spirit? Brilliant. That's my uncle Seto.”

Looking back on the pioneers in her family, Shirley says, “I'm grateful, I'm grateful for their courage, for having travelled across an ocean, to an unknown part of the world... They faced a lot of hardship and racism, and had to incur a lot of debt in order to be able to find, to forge a new life. The Chinese were very strong, very adventurous people. Certainly that's what my great-grandfather was to me, and to the people in his village. We became an overseas Chinese family, which later became harsh for families left behind during the Cultural Revolution, during the Communist Revolution. But until then, the family lived quite well on the remittances that were sent home.

Shirley says the legacy, for her, is “a chance to grow up in a city like Vancouver with all its wonderful natural elements, but the political and community structure that allowed us, as citizens, to have equal rights. We had to work through a season, to work our way through hardship, but we have built something really special for the people who live here today. My children are very fortunate.”