

Immigration Stories: 1853–1923

“ We come by plane, we come with expensive camera or expensive tape recorder...and then when we arrive we have a nice car, our friends, our family waiting for us. In the old days he just came alone. All (my father) had was a bag and he walked off the ship.

– Harry Con

Lee Mong Kow

Lee Mong Kow was born in Guangdong province of China in December, 1861. The Taiping Rebellion was happening in China at the time Lee was born. Twenty million people would die in this civil war.

When he was only nine-years-old his father died, leaving Lee Mong Kow and his mother. Around 1880, in order to help support his mother in China, Lee Mong Kow came to Canada, where he worked as a labourer in Esquimalt, BC. Then he studied to become a tailor. In 1882, he moved to Victoria, where in 1893, he married Seto Chang Ann. They had seventeen children, twelve of whom survived to adulthood.

In 1895, he became a partner in a tailor shop named Gum Jern (old address 7 Cormorant Street). In 1902, he went into partnership operating a Chinese Medicine Herbal Store called Shon Yeun, at 541 Fisgard Street. He was also involved in real estate, and owned the Sheam and Lee Building. Lee also became an interpreter for the Chinese immigration services in 1889. In this role, he was able to assist new immigrants from China.

Lee Mong Kow was very active in the Chinese community. He served as Vice President of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in 1898. And with others, he started the Lock Quun Chinese School and was its principal for twelve years. Later this became known as the Chinese Public School.

He retired in 1920 and moved the family to Hong Kong, travelling on the Empress of Russia.

CD Hoy

CD Hoy (Chow Dong Hoy) was born in Guangdong province in 1883. His family valued education, and sent CD—their firstborn—to school until he was eleven, when he had to go to work to help support his family.

In 1902, when CD Hoy was a teenager, his father borrowed \$300 to send him to BC. CD Hoy wanted to work so he could send money back home to China to help his family, who were suffering from extreme poverty. But, he had no job prospects, and no relatives in BC. Fortunately, a shopkeeper in Vancouver from CD's home village let him stay with him, and helped him find his first job.

Starting out as a houseboy, CD used his wages to hire an English tutor. He then borrowed money to head to the Cariboo Gold Rush. Although the Gold Rush had slowed down, it still afforded some opportunities—CD worked as a hotel dishwasher and was able to start saving money to send home to China. Then he moved from Quesnel to Fort St. James, where he worked as a cook. He learned some Central Carrier dialect (a First Nations language), and began his own trading company.

In 1909, CD moved to Barkerville, where he began his work as a photographer. He also repaired watches and worked as a barber! His first photographs were of Chinese workers, taken as mementoes for them to send back to their families in China. As his fame grew, he began taking photographs of the local First Nations, Chinese and white people. CD took more than 1,500 photographs between 1909 and 1920, leaving an invaluable record of Cariboo life at the time.

In 1910, CD had saved enough money to return to China to marry a bride chosen for him by his mother. His wife would not be able to join him in Canada until 1917, when he was finally able to save enough money for her travel and Head Tax. CD and his wife had twelve children (nine girls). He made a good life for himself and his family, expanding his businesses and becoming a primary gold dealer. He never forgot his poor, early beginnings, and offered credit at his store to anyone in need.

The Hoy family home in Quesnel still stands today, and can be identified by the Hoy name in the sidewalk, outlined in white marble stones.

Fred Soon

Fred Soon was born in Canton, China in 1908. There was political conflict in China at the time with students and workers protesting the government.

When he first arrived in Vancouver in 1921, his father had to pay a \$500 Head Tax to allow him to stay. Fred spent three weeks in the Immigration Building. It was called the *pig house* because people were locked up like pigs in a shed. He describes it in this way:

In the Immigration Building we each had a bed. No furniture...not even a night table. There are probably a dozen people in a big open room. No privacy, everything was public, you couldn't even write a letter. Those are the days I don't like to remember.

Fred lived in a rented community house along Keefer and Pender Street in Vancouver. Fred lived with about ten other single men who left their wives in China. Each man had his own room, but the kitchen was shared.

Fred found a job at a shipyard, bolting steel together. He was then promoted to sheet-metal mechanic, and made \$1.25 an hour. This was a good wage at the time.

Later, Fred worked at a shingle mill and lived in a camp for Chinese workers. He was paid less than white workers who did the same job. Often Chinese workers were asked to do the tough, backbreaking jobs that no one else wanted to do.