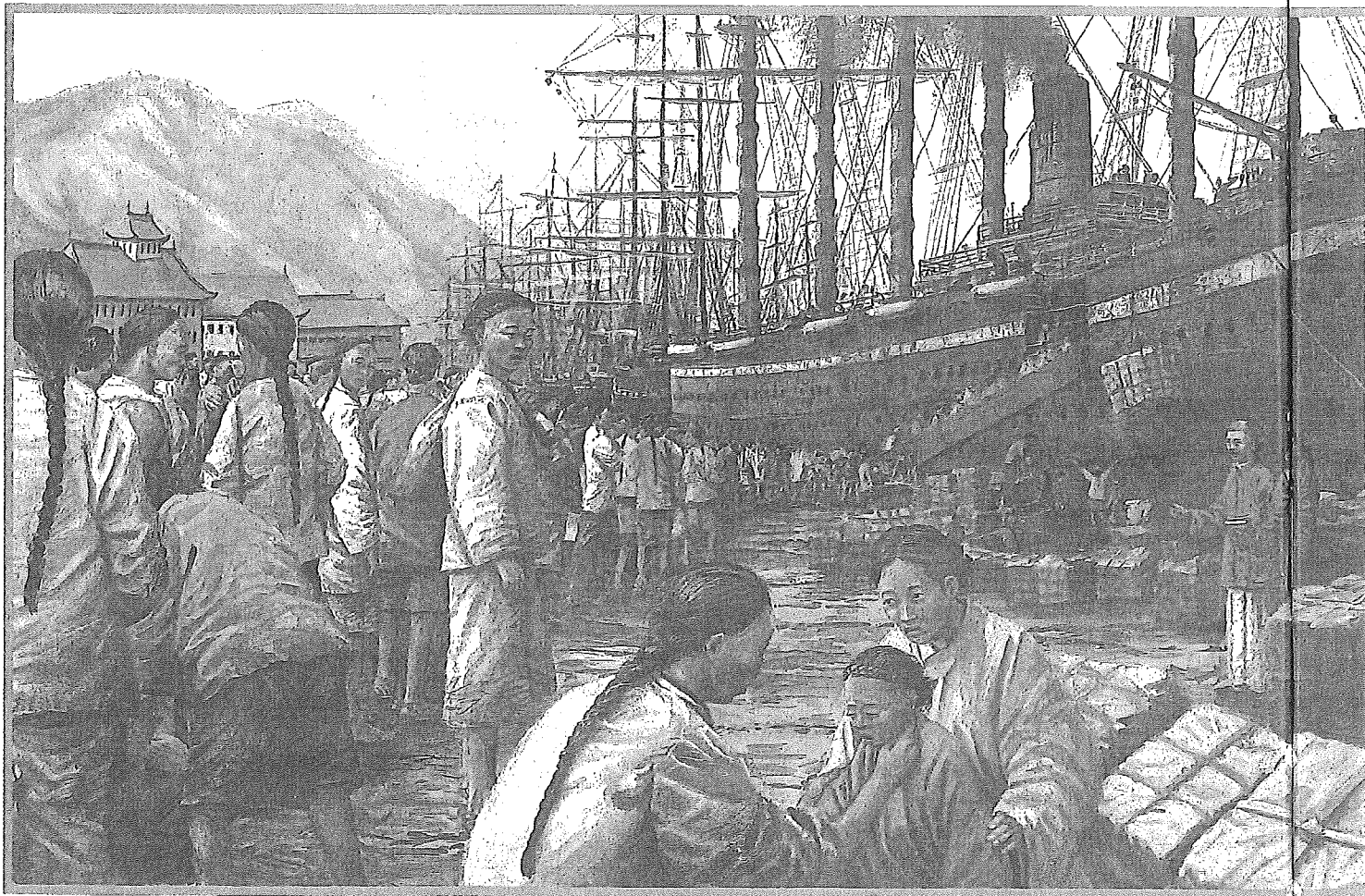


## A Mountain of Grief

*During the second half of the nineteenth century, living conditions in South China were extremely harsh. The land was overcrowded, and farmers were heavily taxed. It was a struggle for most farmers to survive, let alone make a decent living. In the 1850s and 1860s, several uprisings took place against the Qing Dynasty, and many farms were overrun or abandoned. In the midst of this strife, farmers in South China heard wonderful stories about the riches to be made in North America during the days of the California Gold Rush. So, when railway construction in British Columbia began in the 1880s, thousands of Chinese farmers came to Canada to make their fortune. The reality they confronted was very different from the stories they had heard, as this fictionalized account based on historical records shows.*



My name is Woo Xi Feng. I was born in a village near Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong province. Our village is small. Right now, there are very few opportunities here for young men to work and to earn a living. I was married in the winter of 1881, and I am not able to provide at all well for my wife. In that winter, a man from Guangzhou came to our village. He spoke to all the young men who were without work, and he told us of a fabulous place across the ocean. He called it "The Golden Mountain."

There, he said, a man could gain his fortune, if he was prepared to work hard. The work he described sounded very difficult, but he promised us wages of one dollar for every day that we worked. He said that the man he represented would pay for our passage to this place, and that we could expect to work for at least three years. My fellow villagers and I calculated that a man who accepted this offer could easily make \$1000 in those three years. In our village, such a sum would make us wealthy and allow us to buy a good-sized farm. So we accepted his offer and followed him, first to Guangzhou, and then to Hong Kong, where we boarded the ship that would take us to the Golden Mountain.

#### January 15, 1882

We have spent over a month on this ship. The ocean is a frightening place for men who have never travelled on it. The ship is very crowded, and the air below decks, where we stay, is very foul. The food is not good, but many of us cannot eat anyway, as we are sea-sick. My friends and I wonder if we have made the right choice.

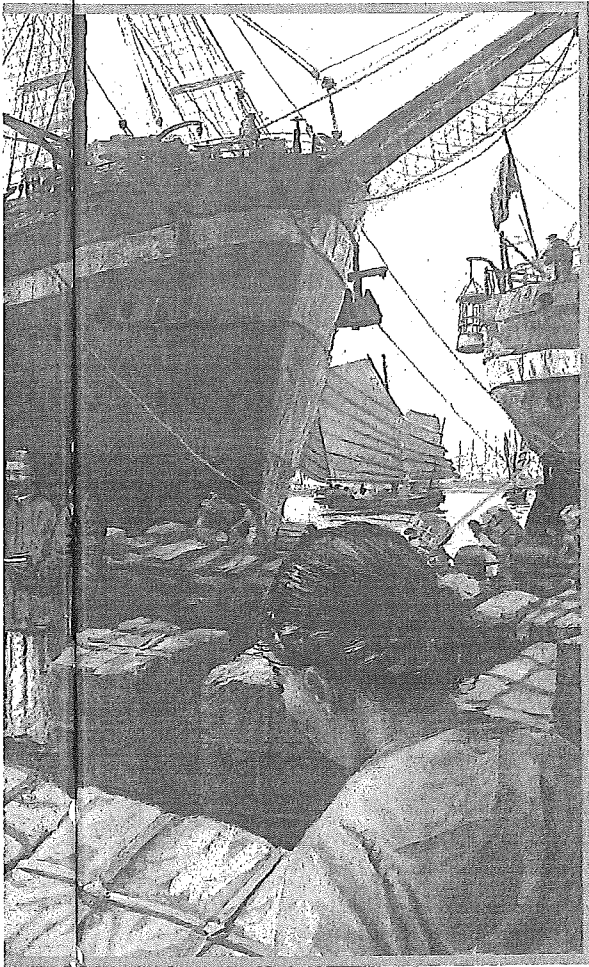
#### February 2, 1882

We have arrived at a place the Europeans call "New Westminster." There are many people here, but few Chinese. These people call out angrily at us as we pass through the town on our way to the riverboat, which will take us to where we

will start work. We do not understand their language, and we are frightened. Why are they so angry at us, as they have never seen us before?

#### February 7, 1882

We have arrived at a place called "Yale," another strange-sounding European name. We have been placed in a building the Europeans call a "bunkhouse." It is a long, wooden structure, with a door, one window, and wooden beds that are stacked vertically along the walls. An iron stove in the centre of the big room gives us some heat, and we also use it to cook the rice and fish we live on. This land is very strange to us. South China is a warm place, but here the air is very cold, and there is a substance called "snow" that covers the ground. Many of us have become ill from the cold. There are thirty of us in this bunkhouse, as well as two cooks. We follow the instructions of a Chinese man, Mr. Chen, who has the title **bookman**. Mr. Chen has explained to us that he is in charge of our wages and supplies. And, since he speaks English, he is also responsible for telling us the orders of the men who have hired us. We will be working to build a railway, which is an iron road on which trains will run. We had never heard of such a thing! Our job will be to carry away rocks from the tunnels which are being built here.



The cargo steamer that took Woo Xi Feng to Canada



The bunkhouse offered few comforts and the land seemed very strange.

The landscape is also very strange. A wild river runs through this place, between enormous walls of rock. The Europeans are using a variety of gunpowder to blast tunnels through the rock so the railway can be built.

### May 3, 1882

We have been working on the railway for two months now. The work is difficult and very dangerous. When the blasting takes place, all men must clear out of the tunnel. If they do not, the falling rock can easily kill them. We have heard of accidents that occur when men do not get away quickly enough. We are under the direction of a European man named "Miller," who is our herder. We

do not like him, for he is often abusive in his language, especially when we do not work hard enough to satisfy him. Mr. Chen is always polite, but Miller does not return this politeness. We still do not understand why the Europeans dislike us. We have heard that European workers are paid twice as much as we are, yet they do not work as hard as we do. Also, while we keep to ourselves, they often leave the workplace and go to Yale, which is quite far away, where they drink and gamble.

### August 8, 1882

Miller has finally caused a great disturbance. Today, when the signal to leave the area before a blast took place, Miller did not

get us far enough away. A big rock flew through the air, striking one of our workers. The rock took his head off completely. We were so angry, we all—our whole crew—ran after Miller. I am sure that we would have killed him, except he leapt into the river and swam away. Mr. Chen told us later that Miller had been fired for his carelessness, and that a new herder would take his place.

### September 11, 1882

One of our men has died. He fell off the side of the rail bed, and lay on a big rock far below. We will not work in the presence of the dead because it is bad fortune. If we did, perhaps another man would die. So we all sat down and refused to

work. The big boss—Mr. Haney—came by and was angered by our refusal to work under these conditions. He asked the European workers to remove the body, but they refused, as the corpse was in a place they could not reach. Later that day, a Native man announced he could remove the body. He did so in a very ingenious way. He collected some sticks of dynamite and lowered them on a rope to where the body lay. The explosion totally destroyed the body, and we resumed our work.

### November 12, 1882

The Europeans have cheated us. When it came time for us to receive our pay, we discovered we had been underpaid by a whole cent per hour. As we do not get much pay in any case, we refused to work. Mr. Chen went to the boss, Mr. Haney. He soon realized the error, and we were paid the missing cent for our work. Mr. Haney does not understand our ways, but he is an honest man, and for that we respect him. Once, he had to get a work crew quickly to **move up the line** fifty miles. He said that no crew could move that distance, but we told him that we could do so. Within a day, we had moved ourselves and our belongings the required distance, and had begun clearing the way for the rails to be laid. Mr. Haney was most pleased, and thanked us for our efforts.

Later that day, a Native man helped us remove the body.

### June 18, 1883

We are now working further up the canyon of the Fraser River than where we were last year. The work is still hard, and men are still injured and die in accidents, but we have become more used to the work, and to the climate. While the last winter was just as cold as the first we encountered, it did not seem so cold. Mr. Chen also obtained some quilted coats for us, and these helped keep out the cold.

### August 20, 1883

One of our men has become sick. He can no longer work, and he lies in the tent. There is nothing we can do for him. So we keep working. Yesterday, Mr. Haney asked Mr. Chen about the man.

"Will he die today?" he asked.

Mr. Chen said, "No, tomorrow, at three o'clock."

This was in fact the time for his death—and it came to pass as Mr. Chen had said. Mr.



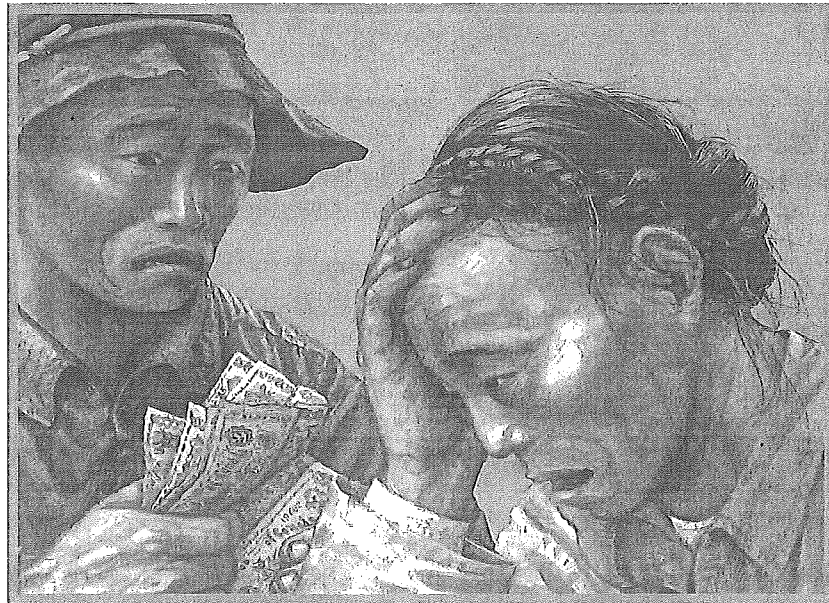
Haney also asked about our food. We eat rice with fish, and we are used to this food. Sometimes, though, men take sick and die. Mr. Haney says it is our food, but we rather think that it is both the hard work and living in this strange land which causes death from sickness.

### October 20, 1884

It seems strange, but we have been working now for over two years on the railway. For most of us, the work has become familiar, and we are now out of the hardest area. Every day we carry rocks, or clear brush, or flatten the ground for the rails to be laid. The work is hard, but we are all looking forward to the day when the railway is finished and we can collect our wages and travel home to our families, whom we have not seen for so long.

### November 5, 1885

The work is finally over. The railway will be finished in a week or less, and Mr. Chen has come to tell us that we are discharged. Unfortunately, the railway company lied to us about our wages. We understood that our passage to this place was paid for. They did not tell us



Woo Xi Feng learns how much money was deducted from his wages.

that the cost of passage was deducted from our wages. Nor did they tell us that all the costs of our work were also charged to us. Our rent (in tents and bunkhouses), our food, our tools, our clothing—in fact, all that we used—was subtracted from our pay. And also, in the winter months, when we could not work for the snow and the cold, we were not paid, but our expenses continued! This year alone, I expected to earn at least \$250. I actually was paid \$43.

Like most of my fellow workers, I am now unable to return

to China. I must travel back to the coast at my own expense, and try to find work in Vancouver or New Westminster. I do not believe I will ever see my village or my wife again. I will disgrace my ancestors if I die here. I am, after nearly four years in this country, a stranger in a strange land.

**Dynasty:** a period of rule in China by the same family

**bookman:** the boss

**herder:** the person in charge of the workers

**to move up the line:** to travel a distance along the designated route

## ACTIVITIES

- How did Woo Xi Feng hear about the opportunities in British Columbia? Why would he and his friends be eager to work on the railway?
- Why do you suppose people in British Columbia were hostile to the Chinese workers?
- Find three examples of Chinese customs which would have perplexed the Europeans. Find aspects of life on the Fraser that would have perplexed the Chinese railway workers.
- What do you suppose the fate of Woo Xi Feng was? Form groups and investigate possibilities.

## THE CHINESE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

**to rework:** to go back and try to extract more gold from an area after it has already been worked

**frugal:** careful with money

The first Chinese immigrants to North America came during the California Gold Rush of the early 1850s. A few years later, thousands arrived in British Columbia during the Cariboo Gold Rush. As in California, they faced prejudice and discrimination because they differed from European miners in their language, dress, religion, and customs. Realizing that their opportunities in British Columbia were limited by racism, many Chinese miners started **reworking** claims abandoned by White miners intent on quick wealth. Such claims were less expensive to acquire and, if worked patiently, usually produced a reasonable amount of gold. In 1883, a provincial mining inspector noted the following:



The larger number of claims in the province are owned and worked by Chinese, their more **frugal** living habits, their greater industry and more moderate expectations of reward making profitable to them claims that the white miners regard as not having sufficient attraction. Thus, but for the Chinese, the production of gold in this country would not reach nearly the sum shown.

In 1883, of the roughly 2000 gold miners left in British Columbia, 1500 were Chinese. The newcomers helped to build the frontier economy of the province in other ways. They opened general stores and restaurants in the mining towns and operated vegetable farms both in the interior and near the coastal cities. Some Chinese immigrants also worked for wealthy White families in British Columbia, but they always kept close ties with their community.

In 1881, the CPR was faced with an acute shortage of labour for the construction of the BC section of the railway (see Chapter 5), so it hired large numbers of Chinese labourers. Between 1881 and 1885, more than 17 000 Chinese immigrants came to BC to work on the railway. As you read in this chapter's Window on the Past, they were paid one dollar a day (less than half the salary paid to White workers). They lived in separate camps, and generally provided



Figure 6-29 A camp for Chinese workers

their own food and lodging. The work was dangerous and difficult. It is estimated that more than 600 Chinese workers died through accidents or illness during the four years of railway construction.

## Life in the Cities

When the railway was completed in 1885, many Chinese labourers could not afford to travel back to China. They had been misled about the cost of food and equipment, which rather than being provided was deducted from their wages. They moved to Vancouver and Victoria in search of work.

This influx of Chinese immigrants into British Columbia's major population centres led to renewed acts of discrimination and prejudice. Racist actions by Whites were both spontaneous and organized. The Knights of Labour, for example, campaigned to have all Chinese removed from Vancouver. The Knights would also often force Chinese residents out of town through intimidation and violence. They also organized a boycott against all businesses that sold goods to Chinese customers.

In the urban areas, Chinese immigrants often did heavy manual labour that other British Columbians avoided. Usually, an English-speaking Chinese **contractor** would bid on a specific job (often land clearing), and would recruit a group of Chinese workers. He would pay and house them out of the monies received for the contract, and would keep anything left over as profit. This system usually ended up cheating Chinese workers. Many Chinese contractors made a fortune from providing work crews. In 1900,

the two largest contractors, Loo Gee Wing and Sam Kee, each had fortunes approaching \$1 million.

The account that follows was provided by Sam Lum to a royal commission on Chinese and Japanese immigration in 1902. Sam Lum worked as a labourer in a Vancouver brickyard.



I get two dollars a day, a dollar fifty in winter. I only have about six months' work in the year; sometimes we get two days in the week, sometimes none at all. My wife and children are in China; I have never been back. I send thirty or forty dollars home every year. I board myself; there is a house in the brickyard. It costs me fifteen or sixteen dollars a month to live, two dollars for rice, eight dollars for meat, nine dollars for beer and whiskey.

Chinese immigrants did displace White workers in some jobs—brick manufacturing was one notable example. The Chinese system of labour contracting also ensured lower wages for Chinese workers because their contractors assisted with living arrangements. Of course, these expenses were deducted from workers' pay, but the situation still angered many White workers, who thought they were being **undercut**.

Discrimination against the Chinese was also purely social. Most non-Native residents of British Columbia in the later nineteenth century were British, and wanted to recreate a homogeneous British culture in the province. The presence of Chinese made this goal impossible. Therefore, the Chinese were depicted as being inferior and dangerous, and incapable of assimilation.

**contractor:** one who supplies workers

**to undercut:** to sell work at a lower price than average

**head tax:** a tax imposed on each person entering a country

**smelter:** a place where metal is separated from ore

**tramway:** a road for transporting mine freight

The government even legalized racial discrimination. Until the railway was completed, there were no government restrictions on Chinese immigration. In 1885, however, after a series of hearings, the government decided to limit Chinese immigration. Each immigrant was required to pay a fifty-dollar **head tax** upon landing in Canada, and ships were allowed to carry no more than one

Chinese person per 50 tonnes. Since most ships weighed about 2000 tonnes, this meant that only about forty Chinese immigrants could enter the country at any one time. While these provisions slowed immigration, they did not entirely stop it. However, they did make it nearly impossible for whole families to come to British Columbia.

## ACTIVITIES

1. How did the Chinese turn their experience of discrimination during the Cariboo Gold Rush to their advantage? How do you suppose some local workers would have reacted to this?
2. How did CPR employment practices discriminate against Chinese workers? Why do you suppose Chinese railway workers decided to remain segregated from the other workers?
3. How did the hiring practices of Chinese labour contractors lead to discrimination? How did they exploit Chinese workers?

## ECONOMIC DIVERSITY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

### DID YOU KNOW?

*A popular ditty of the 1890s predicted that*

*"In 1910,  
Vancouver then  
Will have 100 000 men."*

*The population of men,  
women, and children  
actually reached 115 000  
by 1910.*

**W**ith the completion of the CPR, British Columbia was no longer isolated in the Dominion. Now goods could now flow much more easily through the province, both to the rest of Canada and across the Pacific to Asian markets. Vancouver, in particular, experienced rapid growth in the last decade of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century.

Other areas of the province also grew in the 1890s. While gold production remained relatively constant, the mining of other minerals

grew at an impressive pace. Prospectors discovered silver, copper, and other metals in the Kootenay region in the early 1890s, and mining towns soon dotted the whole region. Giant **smelters** were built in order to extract the metals from the ore of the mines. The new Hall Mines Smelter in Nelson could process 250 tonnes of ore a day. The ore was then transported from the mine, high above the town on Toad Mountain, by a gravity-operated **tramway**. Nelson's population grew from just 400 people in 1890 to 7000