

EARLY CHINESE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

From the Chung Wah 75th Anniversary Magazine 1910-1985

by Anne ATKINSON

Just a few months after Western Australia was proclaimed a colony in 1829, Moon Chow disembarked from the ship, Emily Taylor, and became the first recorded Chinese to arrive in the colony. Moon Chow was a carpenter and settled in Fremantle where he practised his trade; building houses, shops and warehouses in the new port town. Twenty years after his arrival he married an English woman and raised a family of two sons and a daughter. Moon Chow seems to have been the only Chinese in the colony until 1847 when twenty Chinese arrived from Singapore.

For the first twenty years of European settlement, labour needed for clearing the land and developing agriculture was recruited from England. As English servants left employers to set up farms of their own or migrate to the eastern colonies, Western Australia experienced severe labour shortages. Farmers complained that "flocks would have to be boiled down and farms remain uncultivated" unless shepherds and farming men were introduced to the colony immediately. Convict labour was suggested but turned down because many settlers did not want to see the colony become a penal settlement. Another suggestion to overcome the labour problem involved importing Chinese from Singapore. After some debate, colonial government funds were allocated to finance two voyages, one in October 1847 and one in May 1848, to recruit a total of 51 Chinese men.



The Chung Wah Hall next to Hop Hing & Co in James Street, one of the three areas with concentrated numbers of Chinese in Perth at the turn of the twentieth century. c1930

Working as domestic servants and in Perth, or on farms at York, Albany and Bunbury, and even as basket makers for the salt works on Rottnest Island, the Chinese signed contracts which ensured a monthly wage of one pound, five shillings (\$6 Singapore) for domestic and farm servants and two pounds (\$10 Singapore) for carpenters and;

"... be found in food and to receive at the rate of not less than 2 lbs of Rice and flour and ¼ lb of fish and meat per day also to be found in medical attendance for all ordinary diseases."

Although most of the 51 Chinese seemed satisfied with their work and employers, several insisted on changing their employment and were not shy in complaining to the specially appointed Protector of Chinese about conditions of work or pay. Grievances were given a fair hearing since, to the white settlers in the colony, Chinese were welcome as a valuable source of labour. One newspaper; however, reported that,

"As domestic servants, gardeners and carpenters, those introduced have more than answered the expectations that were formed; but whether they would be equally available for the service of the agriculturalist and sheep-farmer, we have doubts. China is not a pastoral country, and its inhabitants must therefore be deficient in the necessary knowledge required in the care of sheep and cattle. "

The question of whether Chinese were suited to such work ceased to be of concern when Western Australia was declared a penal settlement in 1849. Thereafter, convicts fulfilled many of the labour requirements of the colony. It is not known what happened to the original 51 Chinese but it is thought that most remained in the colony after their contracts expired moving to the eastern colonies when

gold was discovered in the 1850s. For example, "John A. Hong Boney, a Chinese headman, arrived at Swan River, Western Australia from Singapore in 1847, from thence to Adelaide in 1854 and left Adelaide for Melbourne in same year. He was naturalized in 1859." At least three Chinese suffered attacks of blindness, no doubt brought on by the climate, dust and flies, and were sent back to their villages in China. Several Chinese stayed, married and raised families, like John Lak of Greenough and Hong Way and Ho Man.

Five years after the cessation of convict transportation in 1868, labour shortages were again a problem. Requests for a reliable and relatively cheap source of labour came not only from agriculturalists, but also from newly established pastoralists and pearlers. At first pearlers recruited and shipped Chinese from Singapore independently. However, in the mid-1870s, under pressure from pastoralists and farmers, the colonial government once again organised and financed Chinese immigration. The conditions and terms of contracts for Chinese were similar to earlier contracts although the assigned categories of occupation were broader: shepherds, gardeners, carpenters, cooks, general servants and farm servants.

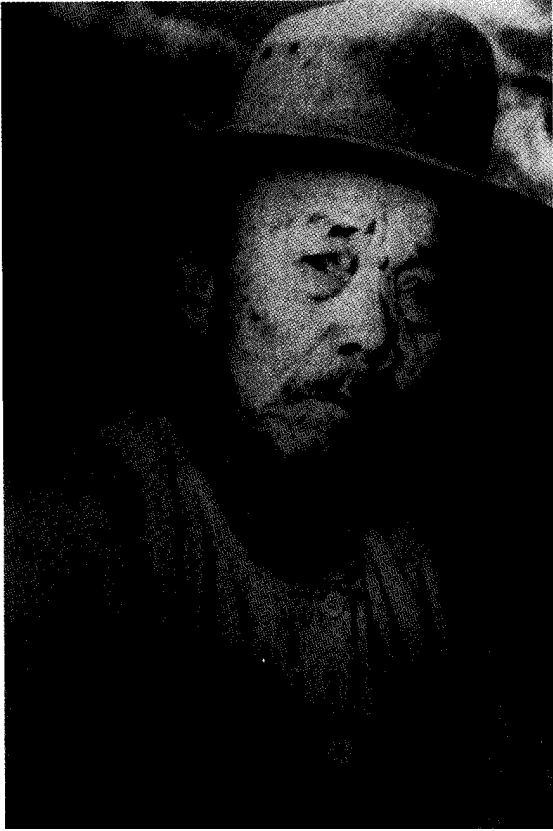
Chinese recruited to work in Western Australia came from a diverse range of regional areas and linguistic groups. Just one page of the register listing Chinese coming to Western Australia in April 1889 records 33 emigrants from 13 different districts and five major linguistic groups: Cantonese, Hokkien, Hainam, Teochiu and Huichiu. On arrival, many immigrants were sent to remote and isolated areas, separated from fellow countrymen. On stations or in small towns, cooks, servants and gardeners were in contact with other folk although language barriers were a problem. Station hands, shepherds and stockmen, on the other hand, experienced long periods of extreme isolation. Whilst most Chinese overcame the loneliness, some responded by breaking contracts, absconding from service and moving into town. In extreme cases, severe mental depression and suicide were the end result.

Chinese continued to be recruited in Singapore for work in Western Australia until 1898 when, with the introduction of various immigration acts in the 1890s, which culminated in the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, all such labour schemes came to an end. At the same time, however, a minor influx occurred when "free" immigrants, or Chinese not bound by contracts, arrived in the colony. Attracted by new economic opportunities accompanying a sudden increase in Western Australia's population after the discovery of gold, Chinese came from south China, South East Asia and from the eastern colonies (including Queensland and Darwin). Although Chinese were barred from mining for gold and actively discouraged from being on or near the goldfield, they found opportunities to establish business operations in market gardening, furniture manufacturing, laundry work and retailing in Perth and the North West. The gold rush also created employment in the catering industry and many Chinese found work as cooks, kitchen hands or domestic servants in hotels and boarding houses.

In 1901 there were 1,521 Chinese males and 18 Chinese females living in Western Australia. The majority, 54%, lived in the rural areas whilst 46% lived in the Perth metropolitan area. Demographically, the Chinese community throughout Western Australia was composed almost entirely of men over the age of 21. Only a small number - 3% - had wives and families living with them. Almost half the men were married but their wives and families remained in China. The rest of the population was single.

In the early 1900s, Chinese were solidly established in market garden and laundry enterprises and dominated these industries. Chinese greengrocery and general stores were located throughout the central and metropolitan area of Perth and the North West whilst Chinese furniture factories managed to retain a considerable share of the furniture trade although they were in direct competition with European factories and bore the brunt of discriminatory legislation.

Market gardens employed approximately half the total Chinese population in Western Australia. Gardens were located throughout the metropolitan area in places where fresh ground or river water was accessible and transport to the markets not too difficult. Major gardening areas were found in North Perth, Bayswater, Jandakot, Osborne Park and South Perth. Chinese also established gardens in rural Western Australia: Northam, Albany and Katanning each had several gardens, whilst smaller towns like Gingin, Bridgetown and Narrogin had one or two gardens to supply local needs. Gardens were usually operated by two or more Chinese in partnership, and employed extra Chinese labour during the busy seasons. Because city and country vegetable growing and harvesting periods differed - the Perth season was during the summer months and the wheatbelt season during the winter months - work for seasonal labour was available the year round. All kinds of vegetables, both Chinese and European, were grown. European vegetables were either taken to the wholesale vegetable markets in James Street, Wellington Street, and Fremantle or sold by the gardeners from the backs of vegetable carts in the streets of Perth.



Ah TIE, the longest serving Chinese indentured labourer He arrived in 1891 and worked at Mundabullangana Station as a blacksmith, wind mill hand and gardener until his death in 1961 aged 91 years. Courtesy of The West Australian Newspaper

Chinese laundries, like the gardens, were operated by at least two partners in control of the enterprise with extra labour employed during peak periods. By 1904 at least 50 Chinese laundries operated in Perth, Fremantle and suburbs - Cottesloe, South Perth and Claremont - employing 150 Chinese. Laundrymen used hand-operated wringers, scrubbing boards, mangles and flat irons. The work was hot and arduous, especially during the summer months, as Chinese were restricted to working between 8am and 5pm and could not take advantage of the cool morning or evening hours. The Act, which restricted hours of work, also forced the Chinese to pay a higher factory registration fee. This fee was twice the amount of the highest fee paid by European laundries and renewed annually.

Chinese furniture factories were also subject to the restricted hours and annual registration fee. In fact, it was the presence of Chinese in the furniture manufacturing industry which inspired the trade union movement to lobby for the introduction of restrictive legislation under the Factories Act 1904. Members of the Trade Union movement saw Chinese as "cheap labour" and a threat to their jobs. The Act, therefore, was designed to prevent Chinese from establishing factories after 1904 and from participating in fair competition in the job and market place. In 1912 another Act decreed that all furniture made in Chinese factories was to be stamped with the words - Asiatic Labour - thus notifying buyers of its origins. Despite these discriminatory measures, Chinese furniture manufacturers survived and enjoyed boom years, especially around 1910 when their furniture was in such demand that orders had to be sent to Chinese factories in Melbourne. Buyers, therefore, recognised the quality of Chinese-made furniture. As one buyer said, ".....it [Chinese furniture] was superior to that made by white labour."

Although Chinese laundries and furniture factories bore the brunt of anti-Chinese legislation, Chinese retail stores and import/export agencies seem to have escaped a lot of this discrimination. Perhaps this was because the Chinese were not in direct competition with European retailers and were willing to operate in remote and isolated areas, like the North West, which Europeans were reluctant to do. Chinese stores began operating in the 1880s. One of the first was that of See Sing and Company which opened a store at Roebourne in 1888 and then established branches at Cossack and Broome. They supplied both the Asian communities and the European population in those areas. By the 1900s, Chinese stores could be found in most coastal towns in the North West as well as in Perth. There were three major areas of Chinese concentration in Perth: in Murray Street; in James and William Streets; and in Market Street and South Terrace in Fremantle. In the suburbs, Chinese shops were located in Subiaco, Claremont, Leederville, Kalamunda and Beaconsfield. One Chinese visitor to Perth in 1900 described a Fremantle store, Warley and Company thus:

"Taking into account all the Western and Chinese stores in Fremantle, the Warley Co. is the third biggest. One can see that our Chinese people are excellent at doing business; they can struggle for profit in the inferior status of guest to host and yet are not beaten by the Westerners."

Several Chinese stores, especially in James Street and Fremantle, catered exclusively to the Chinese population in Perth. They sold Chinese clothing, foodstuffs, bedding, confectionery and cooking and

eating utensils. They provided market gardeners with gardening equipment, including carrying poles, baskets, buckets, gardening tools and seeds. These stores gave other valuable services to the community by acting as postal collecting agencies, by supplying translating and interpreting services (particularly important for banking) and by providing meeting places. This last service was very important as it helped foster the strong sense of community spirit, which was instrumental in establishing the Chung Wah Association.

This special spirit was also important in helping individual Chinese overcome the indignities of discrimination in a racially hostile environment. As a community, Chinese were able to protest against prejudice. For example, the Chinese communally petitioned the British government protesting the harsh regulations of the Factories Act 1904. In 1912 16 Chinese laundries withheld their annual factory registration fee, were taken to court but were successful with their case. No factory fees were paid that year. Western Australian Chinese also protested against the Immigration Restriction Act, appealing to the Prime Minister and cabling the Empress Dowager of China and Peking. They asked for negotiations to make the Act less restrictive.

The strong sense of community, which allowed the Chinese to act together in adversity, is today, enabling them to take the lead in developing a multicultural Australia. It allows Chinese Australians to retain and practise many of their cultural traditions whilst participating and sharing in the development of a wider community.