

Cumberland Chinatown: 1888-1968

Coal Creek Historic Park



Dart Coon Club, circa 1920
Cumberland Museum and Archives, C040-022

1890 1900 1910 1920 1930 1950 1960 1970 1980 1990 2000 2010

1888
The Union Colliery Company sets aside the swampy area to the southwest of Cumberland for its Chinese labourers who soon drain the swamp to construct homes and businesses.

History Comes to Life
Cumberland's Chinatown was significant as one of the largest rural North American Chinese populations of the early 20th century. Although local myth claims it was "the largest Chinatown north of San Francisco," population data suggests there were about 1500 residents at its peak.

1891-1899
No. 2 Mine, located in Chinatown, is in operation.

Chinatown with No. 2 mine in background, circa 1910
Cumberland Museum and Archives, C040-001

1910
Chinatown has grown into a self contained community. Only half the residents work in the mines and others work as domestic servants in Cumberland or provide a growing number of services in Chinatown.

1918-1923
Golden Era of Chinatown. Over 50 businesses exist providing all that was needed for its residents as well as supporting neighbouring communities.

1923
An inquiry into the 1922 explosion in Cumberland's No. 4 mine lead to the prohibition of "oriental" labourers working underground. Canadian Government introduces the Chinese Immigration Act (also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act) which severely limits immigration. This, combined with a decline in global coal markets and increasing competition for jobs, puts an abrupt halt to the growth of Chinatown.

Chinatown Social Organizations
In 1921 there were approximately 160 men to every 10 women living in Chinatown. This predominately male population translated into the absence of family and kinship networks that would otherwise have been present in traditional Chinese society. In response to this, many Chinese men became active in Chinese fraternities, such as the Chinese Freemasons (aka Chee Kung Tong), the Dart Coon Club, the Chinese Benevolent Association, the Chinese Nationalist League and family associations. Although these fraternities had ties to political organizations in China, locally they were valued for their financial, moral and social support. In the event of illness or injury, these organizations functioned as the only family that residents of Chinatown could rely on.



Chinese Nationalist League, circa 1928
2nd anniversary
Cumberland Museum and Archives, C040-020

A Bustling Community
The two main streets, Shan Gai and Hai Gai, bustled with activity. Grocers sold fruits and vegetables, barbers tended to their clients, and the earthy smell of the swamp mingled with lye from the laundries. With hardware stores, bakeries, apothecaries, theatres, parlours and temples, Chinatown was an integral part of Cumberland, the surrounding communities of Minto, Bevan, Union Bay, Royston, Courtenay and Comox, and the larger business community of British Columbia. And since 1972, former residents and their descendants have continued to meet annually as the Cumberland Chinatown Picnic Reunion Group.

1935
Major fire results in 43 buildings being destroyed. Many residents choose to move away rather than rebuild, marking the beginning of the end for Chinatown.



1921 insurance map of Chinatown
Cumberland Museum and Archives, C040-040

1950's and 60's
Chinatown is practically a ghost town.

1968
With the remaining buildings declared a fire hazard, Chinatown is razed by the Village of Cumberland.



Above:
Chinatown, circa 1958
Cumberland Museum and Archives, C040-039

Above Right:
Jumbo sitting on a deck chair, date unknown
Cumberland Museum and Archives, C040-002

Left:
Burning of Chinatown's buildings, circa 1968
Cumberland Museum and Archives, C040-057

1970 - 2000
With the residents and buildings gone, the private landowner leases the Chinatown site to the Cumberland Rod and Gun Club, who uses the property for a gun range.



Jumbo's Cabin
Significant as the only remaining building left from Chinatown, "Jumbo's Cabin" was built in the 1920's. Its first tenant was mine manager, Sam Davis. The building later became both a company jailhouse and storage shed. Its final tenant was Hor Sue Mah, nicknamed "Jumbo" because of his great strength; he lived in the cabin until Chinatown's razing in 1968. The cabin was moved to this site on Comox Lake Road in the early 1980's.

2002
Property ownership is transferred to the Village and the site is designated "Perseverance Creek Historic Park".

2008
Park is renamed "Coal Creek Historic Park" at the request of former residents to recognize the historic common name of the creek.

Old Chinatown before demolition of buildings, circa 1960
Cumberland Museum and Archives, C040-149

1963
Village of Cumberland is unsuccessful in acquiring a grant to restore Chinatown as a tourist attraction.

For more information

on Cumberland's history, visit the Cumberland Museum and Archives
2680 Dunsmuir Ave.
250-336-2445
cumberlandmuseum.ca

