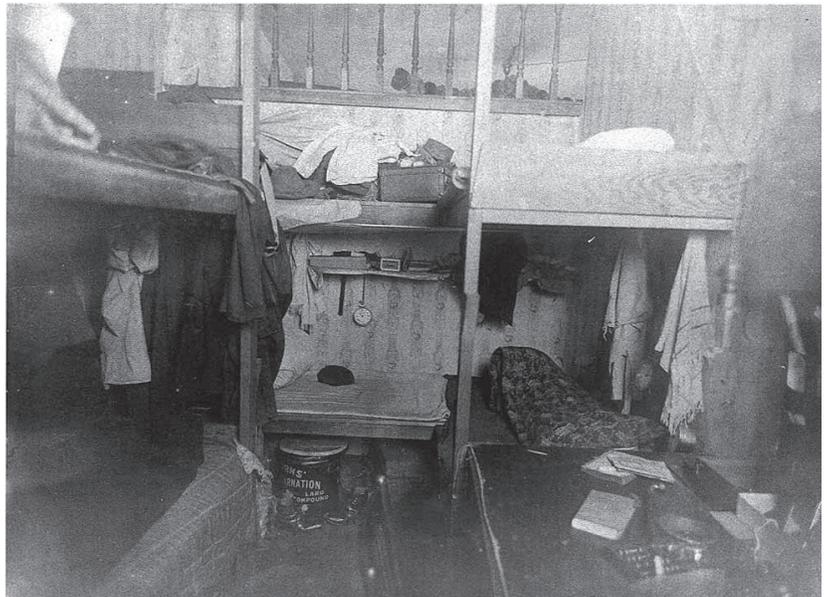


1907: Anti-Asian Riots in Vancouver

Background on Asians in Canada

Chinese workers had made their way to Canada for some decades before the 1870s, but it was the promise of work on the transcontinental railway that brought Chinese to Canada in large numbers. Railway owners argued that they should hire Asian railway workers because they could not find anyone else to do the dangerous and difficult work of railroad building. Many British Canadians, however, felt that it was the low wages that Chinese people charged that made them attractive alternatives to higher paid non-Asians. As employment on the railways decreased after 1886, Chinese workers filled a variety of jobs in rural and urban British Columbia. In 1885, the Canadian government, giving way to years of pressure from British Columbia, passed laws preventing Canadian citizens of Chinese origin from voting, and requiring each Chinese person to pay a tax of \$50 upon entry into Canada. By 1901, this “head tax” as it was known, was raised to \$100, and in 1903 it was raised to \$500—a sum equal to one year’s salary for a working man.

Hostility was increasingly directed toward these immigrants with the economic recession of 1903-1907. Social reformers began to associate the Chinese with crime, immorality and disease in Vancouver’s poorest neighbourhood. Vancouver’s ‘Chinatown’ became a focus for reformers wanting to highlight the dreadful living conditions—the inadequate and overcrowded housing, the poor sewage and water facilities of this area of town. Although Chinatown merchants themselves lobbied during the early 20th century for improved conditions, city councillors and journalists persisted in seeing the terrible living and working conditions in Chinatown as a result of moral and cultural flaws among the Chinese population. Outside observers were disturbed by the tendency of the Chinese to smoke opium, and a law prohibiting the sale of the drug (which has been introduced to the Chinese by the British a century earlier) was passed in 1908.



Sleeping quarters for 16 in a rooming house,
Vancouver Chinatown, December 1902
(British Columbia Archives, Accession # 193501-
001; Call # D-00335; Catalogue # HP059639)

http://www.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca/cgi-bin/text2html/.visual/img_txt/dir_75/d_00335.txt?D-00335

The riot

In 1907, the Asiatic Exclusion League was formed in British Columbia by members of a working men’s association concerned about the impact of the continued presence of poorly paid Chinese workers. On September 8th, 1907, upset that 11,000 Asians had immigrated to Canada that year, and hearing rumours that another boatload of immigrants was about to arrive, some thousands of marchers met in downtown Vancouver. The protesters marched their way through the streets carrying banners (“Keep Canada White” and “Stop the Yellow Peril”) and singing “Rule Britannia.” More than ten thousand people assembled outside the downtown city hall. They also burned an effigy of Dunsmuir, the coal-mining baron on Vancouver Island, who “dared” to hire Chinese. After giving wild speeches against the Chinese, leaders encouraged the crowd to move towards nearby Chinatown and Little Tokyo. Four hours of rioting began with the breaking of windows and looting of Asian businesses. Although the Chinese did not fight back, the Japanese did. In addition to considerable property damage, many on both sides were hurt in the race riot.

Effects of the riot

The immediate effect of the riot was, unfortunately, to heighten racial feelings between Asians and those identifying themselves as “White” or “British” Canadians. Although these riots had no direct effect on Aboriginal peoples, the increased racism that the riots demonstrated was also directed towards all non-white groups throughout Canada as an agenda of white supremacy took hold. In the following months, neither the people of Vancouver, nor the government tried to stop racism or punish those who promoted hatred against people. Instead, it responded by limiting immigration from Asia. The “head tax” remained at the high level of \$500 per person. In 1907, Japan and Canada agreed in a “Gentleman’s Agreement” to limit Japanese immigration to Canada to 400 people a year, a number that was reduced to 150 in 1928. In 1908, legislation limited Asian immigration further. With a head tax of \$500 on Chinese heads, very few people were able to immigrate. South Asians were barred entirely from entering Canada in 1908. On Dominion Day (July 1) 1923, the federal government passed legislation suspending Chinese immigration indefinitely. Only after World War II, in 1947, were Chinese once again allowed to immigrate to Canada. While South Asian families were allowed to reunite with their Canadian families after 1919, Chinese wives and could not join their husbands and many of the early pioneer men were left single.

Historians do not agree about the causes of the Vancouver race riot of 1907 or the violent anti-Asian feeling that was at its root. Some maintain that economic problems explain the hatred that was expressed toward people of Asian descent. Fears of ‘unfair competition’ during a difficult economic time meant that wages might be lowered or that jobs would be taken away. Other historians argue that other social factors were involved, including a deep fear of being ‘taken over’ by a foreign culture and a belief (popular at the time) that the white race was naturally better and should, therefore dominate the world. These riots had little effect on French Canadians throughout Canada. Although French and English were known as the two ‘founding races’ of Canada, the racism evidenced by the Vancouver riot was based on a different set of ethnic prejudices than those influencing French-English relations.

As a result of both formal and informal restrictions, Asian immigrants were forced into work that was often dangerous, unpleasant and underpaid. The poverty and demoralization that often resulted from these factors was also held against them. Canada’s refusal to extend a welcome to these immigrants reflected Canada’s racist attitudes of the era, and certainly contributed to the creation of a country that aimed for a certain ‘sameness’ in the population. These racist attitudes behind the policies adopted during the early 20th century surfaced again in the 1940s, when thousands of Japanese Canadians were dispossessed of their property, moved away from the west coast and interned in work camps as a result of the Canadian government’s fears of a Japanese invasion. In the long term, however, the legacy of these racist events in Canadian history has been to expose the limitations that racist policies have on the growth of Canada. The backlash against such racist policies to fight discrimination in Canada is reflected in the protections now offered to all Canadians, regardless of colour or place of origin, in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.