

1984 marks the 200 anniversary of the first major settlement in Ontario. It is the intention of the Bicentennial Committee, not only to commemorate the U.E.L who came to this province, but to honor all those who have journeyed here, from around the world. To celebrate together all our achievements as a community, and a province.

Multi-Cultural week will begin Feb. 11, and numerous events have been planned, displays, demonstrations, music, dancing and dinners. The Chinese Community will be holding their dinner Feb. 13 at St. Michael's Hall, in honor of the New Year: "The Year of the Rat".

The story of the Chinese emigration to Canada dates back to the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1880's. They were brought to this country to work on the road gangs. When the railroad was completed a great number of these emigrants returned from the western plains, to the cities and the towns in Ontario.

Without formal education, language of the people, or experience in the trades, the majority went into business for themselves, first opening laundries, and then restaurants. Canadians had yet to hear of Chao Mein, or Chicken Fried Rice, and the menu consisted of such standbys, as fish and chips and steak and potatoes.

As was customary with Canadians at the time, the Chinese offspring followed in the footsteps of their father, taking over the family business or starting a place of their own. This practise was almost universal; and continued well into the second world war years, when education became the prime objective of father, for son or daughter.

The history of the Chinese Community of Fort Erie dates back to the early 1900's, and space does not allow for a complete account. Their contributions have been going on for many years, and we can only give a brief account, perhaps to recall to your mind, a favourite restaurant, or an old friend.

The first Chinese businessmen to come to what was then called Bridgeburg were the Pong brothers, Charlie and Sam. They opened their laundry on the north side of Jarvis St., in the early 1900's. There were no Chinese women in town at the time, and it was quite an event when Charlie returned from China with his new bride. Fort Erie saw many laundrymen follow through the years: H. Chong, Sam Lee, & Pong Kim, while Ridgway had Hum Lee. When Paul Wong closed his doors on Klauck St. and left for Niagara Falls, we saw the last of this service. It was a particularly hard blow to the nurses in town, that were accustomed to having their caps cleaned and starched there.

How many of the oldtimers will remember the farm of Hum Lee opposite the public school in Ridgeway. Mr. Lee started in the laundry trade on the site of the present Legion Hall. In the early 20's he acquired a tract of land from the Jackson sisters on Farr Rd. for his small vegetable farm. He employed nine Chinese workers who went about their tasks dressed in the traditional Coolie fashion. They sold from a roadside stand, eventually delivering to the stores in Fort Erie, remaining in business till the mid forties.

The Chinese restaurants sprung up on Jarvis St. in the late 20's, and by the same time on Niagara St. in Fort Erie south. It was not the custom at the time for people to eat out, so a place of business had to be located where transits railroad men, or tourists would congregate. This meant close by the ferry landing or the railroad. Big and Little J.P. Lee opened the first establishment on the north side of Jarvis. It was in an old frame building by the corner of Klauck St., later demolished for the new Murph Teal Block. The Lees were among the first to occupy this new building. The townspeople took great pride when they erected a large neon sign on their restaurant, complete with a pecking chicken. It far surpassed anything they had at the time in Buffalo. So popular was this sign that it crossed the road, and was again erected on the site of the Castle Cafe, the corner of Klauck.

In Fort Erie South, Pong How opened a small restaurant on Niagara St. followed by Jung Kwong Kun. In the late 20's the Niagara Hotel opened at the foot of Catherine St. operated by Mr. J. Wong with the help of Wing Fong and other family members. It was taken over in 1927 by Kee Wong, known as Wong Kee, by the villagers. After his death the business was carried on by his wife May Wong till June 1980, when the building was demolished and she retired to Hamilton.

Perhaps the most familiar figure to all is "Skippy" : Gee You Wong. His nickname given as to the way he skipped about his popular restaurant on the corner of Jarvis and Klauck. So well known did this name become, that his place of business was changed from Paradise Grill to "Skippy's". He arrived in Canada in 1923 moving to Welland where he remained till his departure for Fort Erie in 1929. He worked in several clubs in the area before returning to China for a short time. He went into business for himself in 1939 when he opened the Paradise Grill. He remained at this location till 1965, a period of 26 years. Many a schoolgirl romance began here, as pupils met on their way home from High School for coke and ice cream. Skippy was not to content himself with this thriving business. He opened a fine dining room, "The Willows" at Cosy Dell which he operated for over three years.

In the late 30's and 40's there were only a small number of Chinese restaurants in town, however they changed hands many times as their owners sought to improve their lot. The list includes the New York Cafe run by Stanley Joe: George's Good Food run by George Gee and Mr. Chan Sr., followed by grandsons Jack and Dan Chan. By this time the south end crowd were hanging out at the Tic Toc restaurant 172 Niagara Blvd., a building owned by Bob Lam. It was operated by Sam How, later by Fue Wong who turned it into an apartment. From the ground floor Mr. Lam ran his taxi business no. 200.

By the early 50's Fort Erie was to see a large influx of Chinese emigrants, most entering into the restaurant business. The war had greatly changed our eating habits, money had been plentiful and eating out became a common thing. We had acquired a new taste away from meat and potatoes, and the Chinese restaurants had added numerous oriental dishes to their menus, to tempt our appetites. Not only did the menu change, but the decor as well. Gone was the Chinese restaurant that we had grown up with; a centre aisle with leather booths running down either side. No expense was spared creating the Chinese theme, inside and out, adding greatly to our pleasure of eating at these establishments.

It did not take long for our neighbours across the river to note the change, and soon our American friends were flocking across the border, adding new life to the south end. Soon to open were "The Little Steak House on the Garrison Rd., Happy Jacks on the site of the New York Cafe, The Parkview on Niagara St., and the King Wah Gardens which replaced The Little Steak House.

In 1966 Harry and Jeanne Dong took over the Casa Maria on Dominion Rd., and shortly after renamed it the Nan Hai. They lavished the interior with base relief dragons, lanterns, ivory screens, and Chinese artwork of all descriptions. These restaurants flourished, and many went through several large expansions, such as Happy Jacks, the King Wah, and George's Good Food. In 1975 Eddie Chew demolished the old Parkview building, and opened up the Mah Wah restaurant a much larger and more modern establishment.

The Parkview name, was carried across the St. by Louie Louie who had just completed the construction of his new building by John St. A new delight in dining came with the opening of the Ming Teh, by Sui and Julie Cheung. Unlike the other restaurants to date, the owners specialize in Cantonese and Peking dishes. Ornate Chinese carvings decorate this tiny restaurant. All the work of the owner, an artist in his own right.

The late 70's brought the Ho Ho restaurant to the Garrison Rd. owned by George Lipp and three partners. Soon to follow was the Oriental Court opened by Phillip Wong in the old Bank of Commerce building at the foot of Forsyth St. With the opening of the Happy Family restaurant on Ridge Rd. in 78, the people of Ridgeway no longer had to travel to Fort Erie for a taste of Chinese cooking.

In 1983 we were to see a real break with Chinese tradition when Michael Chan, sold the Parkview to his eldest brother Chin and purchased Shirley's restaurant on the Dominion Rd. The name was changed to Mike's, however he chose to serve from the previous Canadian menu.

We must not forget that for a number of years Fort Erie has been home to another group of professionals, doctors, pharmacists, and businessmen of all kinds. We have such familiar names as Dr. Henry Au, Dr. C.M. Lau, Dr. C.C. Fann, Dr. C.Y. Leung, Alfred Lui, pharmacist and drug store manager, pharmacist Mr. Au Young, Jeweller Mr. Chow, and the list could go on and on.

Since the turn of the century, Fort Erie has seen a great change in the Chinese Community, not alone in numbers, but in accomplishments which have been a great benefit not only personally but to the Town of Fort Erie on a whole.

Kung Hei Fat Choy: Happy New Year.