

## Anti-Asian riot in Vancouver: 1907



Cartoon showing Amor de Cosmos demanding an end to Chinese immigration, *Canadian Illustrated News*, 1879  
Special Collection and University Archives Division, University of British Columbia Library

In September 1907, thousands of British Columbians marched through the streets of Vancouver to protest the settlement of Chinese people. Threatened by the low wages paid to Asians during the economic recession, hostile to a culture that they saw as criminal and immoral, the majority culture tried to enforce its ideal of a White Canada. In the riot, property of Chinese and Japanese store owners was destroyed. In the aftermath of these events, even more racist laws against Asians were implemented.

### ***Overview of the decade: 1895-1911***

#### **Economic developments**

The year 1896 marked the beginning of the biggest economic boom that Canada had yet seen. A surge in the invention of new machinery and technologies in turn created new industries, like the pulp and paper industry. Older industries were changed by these inventions. Mining activity, for example, increased greatly with the use of powerful pumps that circulated air and removed water, allowing for deeper mines. Power saws transformed the logging industry; refrigeration transformed the fishing and cattle industries. Exports of natural resources like coal, timber, and fish increased. Canada's farm-grown produce was increasingly sold overseas—apples from Nova Scotia and British Columbia, wheat from the Prairies, bacon from Ontario—and crop yields were increased by the chemical revolution that allowed farmers to experiment with new fertilizers and pesticides.



Coal miners, Nanaimo, 1900  
(British Columbia Archives, Call E-02626  
Catalogue HP080645;  
Accession Number:193501-001)

Rural and urban, primary production and manufacturing, west and east fed into each others' success in these years. As huge numbers of people arrived from Eastern Europe as well as Britain to settle on the prairies, they required manufactured goods produced in central Canada, and this new demand stimulated industry, business and trade throughout the country. British Columbia lumber sales, for example, boomed as the result of prairie demand for housing materials, while rail shipments of prairie wheat boosted international trade moving through shipping terminals in Vancouver and Thunder Bay. Vancouver received another boost in 1914, when the opening of Panama Canal greatly reduced ocean transportation time between Vancouver and Britain. First the Canadian Pacific Railroad and later the Canadian Northern and the Grand Trunk Pacific were central to rapidly increasing trade within North America and, when linked to ocean-going steamers, provided vital trade and immigration links between Canada, Great Britain and Europe. While most people still lived in rural areas, the trend was increasingly to move into cities, where jobs with regular salaries replaced the more varied rural economies.

### Social developments

Between 1881 and 1901, high birth rates and increased immigration boosted Canada's population from 3.6 million to just over five million. In 1901, the great majority of Canada's population—88%—was of British or French descent, but increasing numbers of Eastern Europeans, African Americans and Asians were entering the country. Urban society was growing and becoming more ethnically mixed, and more culturally sophisticated. Toronto, Montreal, Halifax and Winnipeg prided themselves on their growing commitment to the cultural arts. Urban problems of poverty, unemployment and poor services like street lighting and sewers still existed, but municipal governments were building the social and structural frameworks of urban society. Most Canadians still lived in the countryside, where frontier conditions were turning to those of commercial agriculture in most parts of the country.

In central, eastern and western Canada, reform movements began in these years as concerned citizens worked to create



Grain elevators at Pilot Mound, Manitoba, 1900, south of Winnipeg  
(National Archives of Canada, PA-141220; ID #20788)

<http://www.canadianheritage.org/reproductions/20788.htm>

a humanized capitalism, one that could balance the interests of the poor with those of the rich. With the influx of more than a million immigrants in the years between 1896 and 1913, a number of different groups worked to establish charitable organizations to deal with poverty and unemployment, while unions tried to obtain better wages and working conditions. Volunteers provided soup kitchens, employment bureaus, shelters for the homeless, the YMCA, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, child rescue, aid to single mothers (many of them widowed), voluntary medical services, and training centres to educate mothers about the health and nurturing of their children. Many of these reformers were influenced by the “social gospel” movement, which combined Christian beliefs about justice and love with political convictions about equality and justice here on earth.

### Political developments

Difference between east and west, farmers and manufacturers, and rural and urban people continued to divide society. A sense of grievance was particularly pronounced in the west. Already stung by high tariffs on their purchases of manufactured goods, western farmers had another complaint against the business interests in central Canada. They argued that the rates they had to pay to ship their products to market were unfairly high, compared to rates charged for shipping manufactured goods within central Canada. As the 20th century progressed, farmers gathered together to create their own organizations, often with the help of the government, to protect them from the worst aspects of a competitive economic system.



Chipewyans preparing a moose hide, Christina Lake, Alberta, 1918  
(National Archives of Canada, PA-17946; ID #10052)

<http://www.canadianheritage.org/reproductions/10052.htm>

Things may have been slowly improving for many Canadians, but legal changes were helping to make conditions worse for the non-British minority. Aboriginal peoples on the Prairies and elsewhere had suffered under the Indian Act in 1876, an act that tried to assimilate Aboriginal people through agricultural education, the establishment of Indian Reserves, and the education of native children away from their parents in residential (or boarding) schools. Although many Aboriginal peoples continued to follow traditional lifeways, their economic and cultural practices, particularly the west coast potlatch and the prairie Sun Dance, were discouraged by the government. In 1885—the same year that the potlatch was legally banned—Canada imposed a “head tax” on all Chinese immigrants, a tax that increased over the years of the early 20th century, and placed an effective ban on Asian immigration by the 1920s. Eastern Europeans, such as Ukrainian peoples, were actively invited to Canada, but for a least a generation they were seen by many as second class citizens. Alberta tried to impose racial legislation limiting the immigration of Blacks and Asians into the province. Doukhobors in Saskatchewan had half of their land taken in 1907 and, when they refused to send their children to public schools in British Columbia, had their children taken from them. In the first thirty years of the century, theories of eugenics—the belief that white races were superior—gained popularity across the western world, and were used to justify laws discriminating against many non-British groups.

## 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.bccarchives.gov.bc.ca/cgi-bin/text2html/.visual/img\\_txt/dir\\_75/d\\_00335.txt?D-00335](http://www.bccarchives.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, Japanese 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.