The Islander

Chinese coolies built CPR and defences for Canadians

By Archie Wills

Much has been recorded of the great contribution made by 30,000 Chinese coolies who constructed the major link in joining Canada from sea-to-sea. They used their muscle power to drive the roadbed of the Canadian Pacific Railway through the tortuous Rockies and other mountain barriers, a tremendous accomplishment when we realize there were no bulldozers and other mechanical equipment, no radio and today's well-equipped labor force.

But few people know of the magnificent contribution made by 80,000 other Chinese coolies, who in the First World War came here, trained and learned how to build trenches, dugouts and gunpits for the Canadians and other forces who were defending us against the German hordes.

The beautiful site at William Head, at that time a quarantine station, and today a prison, was their headquarters.

It was a lovely place for training purposes but it was quite isolated then.

Victorians were used to seeing Chinese on their streets, but these newcomers were confined to barracks and there was some concern among the settlers in Metchosin and neighboring areas at so many men being confined there. The friendless men were frustrated and rules had to be introduced to quiet them.

The first boatload of coolies, or to be more correct, allied fighters, had to go to William Head, which was the clearing port for all incoming ships. They had to pass medical and at times cases of smallpox were uncovered. Passenger liners were inspected and the passengers had to be placed in quarantine for a prescribed period. The crowded steerage quarters on ships, sometimes with 1,000 men quartered in the 'tween decks, was not too healthy a place.

It was customary for Chinese coolies, on boarding ship, to take along three or four live pigs, which would be slaughtered on the way across the ocean, then tossed into the huge iron pots, along with assorted vegetables. When the killing was done the captain had to alter the course of his vessel and head it straight into the wind, which was supposed to guarantee good luck for the men, if not for the pigs.

In the case of the Chinese who were now on the payroll of the Allies, they came ashore at William Head, where they were to pass their medical and take up residence in tents, as it was summer time.

But, one of their number showed signs of smallpox, which raised a big question for the doctor there and the responsible authorities. The matter was turned over to the military and it was determined to build large wooden living quarters, to handle at least 10,000 men at one time. No one knew how many Chinese were to be brought here or how long the war would last. This, with the regular permanent buildings for the staff, provided quite a settlement amid the most delightful surroundings anyone could wish for.

At one time there were upwards of 10,000 men

built trenches, dugouts and gunpits in First World War

stationed there. When more non-combatants were needed the pool was ready to supply them but usually it was after battles and new lines had to be developed that the call went forth.

During the days of trench warfare when there was little forward movement on either side there was no great demand for the men's services. When open warfare became the role in the latter days of the war there was greater activity in the back area and it is estimated that there were nearly half a million Chinese, and their like, being used and many of them had passed through William Head.

Although William Head was in superb country, with plenty of open land and big trees and copious flowers boredom became a disastrous factor in their daily lives and there were signs of revolt. Investigation showed that the Chinese would like to take over their kitchen duties and do the cooking, which only required the large iron cauldrons, into which they put their rations of meat, rice, herbs and vegatbles.

Victoria boys who manned the forts surrounding Victoria and Esquimalt were continuously grousing about camp life while waiting for a draft to take them overseas where the fighting proved a great drawing card, until they encountered it.

The Chinese had no alternative. They had to stay on the job and were not able to get leave and go up-town for an evening's fun. It was a case of fatigues and training, which can get tedious. So, they labored on in their unique, if indifferent way, even when they weren't aware of the contribution being made to the war effort. There was no glamor for them, but, even at that it was better than being in North China.

They had had an ocean voyage and had experienced the pains of seasickness. But, like the boys in the Canadian forces, they had no alternative, but to just hang on and hope for a move somewhere. There was no way they could get home as there was thousands of miles of rough water, which they had to transverse.

In time they got to play-acting and organized home-made theatricals. They had no women, so men were pressed into acting female parts, even being dressed like girls. There was some music produced on a few instruments that were located in Victoria.

Stage settings were sparse, which however did not detract from Chinese theatricals where motions and signs provide the required change. In fact, when Chinese theatre parties had visited Victoria we got quite used to them, even when a company from San Francisco produced *The Merchant of Venice* in the old Chinese theatre by Fan Tan Alley. A boy with a high-pitched voice played Portia and stood on an empty fruit crate pleading his case. They could even climb stairs by moving their hands up the wall.

The troops also had forms of sports and stuck to long hours on the parade ground.

They seldom had moments of hilarity, but when their boredom was acute they exhibited signs of recklessness, whereupon their instructors suggested they visit the beaches and wade into the piles of wood which had been blown ashore. The Chinese bucked many cords of wood and enjoyed the exercise. In the end they were permitted to tackle other activities such as gardening and soon had changed the appearance of their camp.

I had seen William Head before I had joined the army and gone to France. Imagine my surprise when one night on the Arras Road in the spring of 1918 when the Germans were planning their final drive for the Channel ports I was reunited with some of the William Head Chinese.

I had a crew digging reserve gunpits in case the German drive became dangerous. One of my gang had found what he said was a proper dugout, piled high with rubble.

When we found it was devoid of booby traps we