

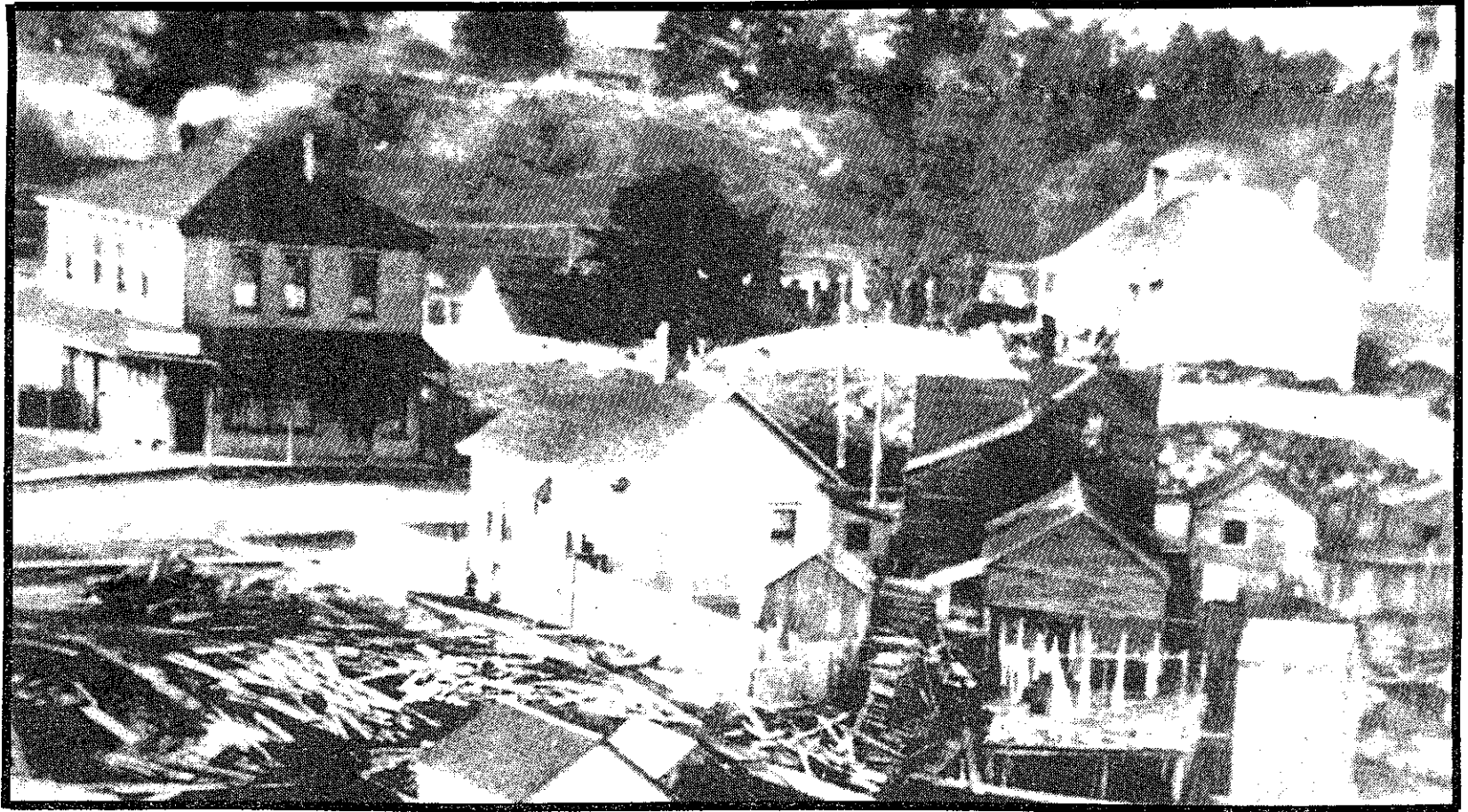
## SOUE KEE: ESQUIMALT CITIZEN

By Louise Ditmars  
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Soue Kee was a well-loved institution of early Esquimalt: both laundryman and unofficial banker. For close to fifty years his laundry in three successive locations was a mainstay of the local economy.

Soue Kee, the familiar name, is not that of the man Tang Kam Chew, but that of his family. He was, however, always known as Soue Kee. Born in Canton, China, Soue Kee arrived in Canada at the age of twenty-five and set up his business in Esquimalt village sometime thereafter.

Mr. Ed Irving, former resident of Naden before its second World War takeover, remembers Soue Kee's first premises on Nelson Street. Dressed in Chinese clothing and a pigtail, Soue Kee spoke broken English then as he worked alongside his helpers. Soue Kee operated there from around 1915 and possibly until 1939 when all buildings at Naden were bought by the Canadian government and torn down to make way for wartime naval expansion.



*Can you identify Soue Kee Laundry?  
(Photo courtesy of Esquimalt Municipal Archives, Van Dalen Collection).*

Hazel Brunson, whose family once owned the Esquimalt Hotel at the present dockyard site, remembers Soue Kee's next laundry at 62 Pioneer Street. She says that he never used laundry tickets, but somehow remembered to whom each article belonged. He was "a dear, kindly old gentleman" who spoke good English and earned

the respect of all. He managed to turn out beautifully laundered and starched garments from quite primitive premises where all work was done by hand and the irons were heated on the stovetop. Naval expansion here in 1942 caused his move to new quarters near St. Paul's Church on Esquimalt Road.

Jim Ryan, R.N., recalls Soue Kee as a popular and fun-loving character who made daily visits to navy ships docking in Esquimalt harbour for 33 years. His old truck was sometimes winched aboard, and he was "piped aboard like an admiral," replying with a smart salute. He announced his presence by yelling "laundlee!"

over the loudspeaker and often whacked sailors sleeping in their hammocks with a "mick stick" shouting "wakey wakey" as he passed. Every messdeck gave him open invitation for a meal and a tot of rum.

He was also the unofficial banker for poorly-paid sailors who ran short of funds between payday, and was never

known to charge a cent of interest.

In later years, Soue Kee retired to the Chinese Community Hospital in Victoria and probably died there. Over a long residence in Esquimalt he showed himself to be a hard worker, an able businessman and a friend to many.

## Out Of The Past