

Community Spaces (cafés, grocery stores) and how they shaped Alberta Towns



*Figure 1: Quon's Grocery and New Look Café, Railway Station at High River.
Courtesy of Museum of the Highwood*

Research Methods

The research conducted here are from primary sources including interviews with elders such as Margaret Rose Wong, who was the daughter of Paul Wong, proprietor of New Look Café, and a Scottish mother, Maggie (also Margaret); and archival material including recorded interviews from Alberta museums, and secondary resources.

Community Spaces

High River was home to many Chinese settlers who traveled east after the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in B.C. Seeking employment was difficult however, as white employers seldom hired Chinese workers for expertise opportunities. Instead, they worked as ranch cooks or “house boys” and helped with domestic labour. Entrepreneurship among the Chinese was also limited to mostly restaurants and laundries, which were considered undesirable work and non-competitive businesses that did not threaten industries led by white men’s labour. There is a misconception that Chinese settlers “choose” to open these businesses, but the reality

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was that there was little choice. These oppressive conditions were what led to the historical proliferation of Chinese-led restaurants and laundries across Canada. These businesses, however, were where the Chinese settlers would build community.

Chinese-run businesses in High River *were* the community spaces for those who shared an ancestral homeland of 開平縣 or Hoy Ping/Kaiping county, which was the commonality of all the key figures of the early period. The grocery store and café were side by side. They not only shared a wall but a doorway from the dirt basement that allowed access between the two buildings. These joint passages exemplify the many hidden rooms and tunnels that were typical in Chinese-operated businesses across Canada. These passages served as escape routes or places to hide during hostile times.



Figure 2: 關 Quon Chong buried in Highwood Cemetery, High River

Quon's Grocery (and Palm Café)

Before New Look Café was established by Paul Wong, the former management was run by Quon Chong and was called Palm Café. According to immigration records, data suggest that Quon arrived in Victoria in May of 1900. His ancestral homeland is recorded as 開平縣 or Hoy Ping/Kaiping, which is the same as other Chinese contemporaries of Quon in High River.

Quon arrived in Alberta in 1904 and opened a general store the following year. He later left High River for Winnifred in 1919 to establish another general store, and returned in 1936 to take over the Long Tom's Store and reopened it as Quon's Grocery.

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Both the grocery store and adjacent café were operated by the 關 family patriarch, Quon Chong, until his death in 1948. Subsequently, Palm Café was sold to Paul Wong and Seto Gan who aptly renamed it New Look Café. Quon's family continued to operate the grocery store.



Figure 3: 林啟文 *Lim Seto* (paper son), 司徒錫 *Seto Gan*, Paul Wong

Courtesy of M. Wong

The People of New Look Café

Paul Wong operated the New Look Café, formerly Palm Café, with his business partner 司徒錫 Seto Gan. The café was located on Railway Street, on the west side of the train station and tracks. On the east side was the Wing Chong Laundry. The two shops can almost see each other when they look across the train tracks and park that divided the east and west sides of town.

A pool hall was situated above the café. Seto Gan, his “paper son” Lim, and daughter-in-law Charlotte and grandchildren worked in the café and lived upstairs behind the pool hall. Paper son refers to a young Chinese male who posed as a son to a Chinese man to gain access to migrate to the country. As immigration laws became more racist and unjust, eventually barring the Chinese, it propagated the use of these “papers”. 林啟文 *Lim Kai Man* appears to have retained his true surname "Lim" as a given name. This practice was rather common and telling, which was

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accomplished by putting two surnames together as in "Lim Seto". Lim's "paper son" status was expressed by Margaret Wong, which indicates it was common knowledge within the community.

Seto Gan was the grandfather figure in the community and was loved by many of the Chinese children in High River. He lived as a bachelor while in Canada although he did have family in China whom he could not bring over due to the *Chinese Exclusion Act*.

司徒錫 *Seto Gan*

Before partnering with Paul to establish the New Look Café, Seto had been aggressively chasing prosperity, picking up and moving to where the work was and where his entrepreneurial spirit could thrive. He sought opportunities where he could set up a new café business for a few hundred dollars and with only a few tables, in a bygone time and place where farmers and townfolks would help one another. He was familiar with Saskatchewan towns such as Weyburn, Bateman, Moss Bank, Assiniboia, Shaunavon—all close to Moose Jaw. During the pioneer years, new towns were being incorporated as community populations peaked. With the ebb and flow of human history, some are now ghost towns.

Deaths in Seto's family precipitated his two major moves on the prairies. When his second brother died in Toronto during the influenza pandemic of 1918-1919, Seto moved from Weyburn, Saskatchewan to the newly-formed town Bateman, where he set up the American Café and stayed there for thirty years. When his wife died in China during the Second World War, he relocated to High River in 1948 where he became a joint owner of the New Look Café. In the wake of these two deaths in the family, "new" was an important theme when dealing with loss where big moves were part of the journey to healing.

In an interview conducted with Seto during the mid-1970s and at the age of 84, he had lived in High River for about three decades and was retired. During the period from 1930 to 1939, Seto Gan was the only Chinese person in Bateman, Saskatchewan. Hope and optimism for the future sustained him; his clan prospered over the next decades. Today, the contributions of the Seto clan are evident throughout the prairies.

The 黃 Wong Family

Paul Wong married Margaret Kergan, who was of Scottish ancestry and went by the moniker "Maggie". Together they had a child, Margaret Rose who would have been the only mixed-race child of an inter-racial relationship at that time in High River. This coupling would be considered unconventional and taboo in an openly racist era.

Maggie Kergan's mother was Sarah Campbell, whose father, the Campbell family patriarch, was a cousin to Sir John A. Macdonald. He was attracted to settling in Canada by Sir John's offer of free land; ironically, the same government that passed the *Chinese Immigration Act, 1885*, commonly referred to as the Head Tax, to restrict Chinese immigration to Canada.

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During the 50's the café was as a community space and neighbourhood hangout for High River residents. It was the afterschool hangout place for the High River youth, complete with soda fountain and juke box. The stories evoke images of 1950s youth culture, much like the "Back to the Future" movies. Lunch and dinner would serve different crowds, not the afterschool youth.

Aside from the youth, farmers and townspeople visited and dined at various times throughout the day. Maggie Wong served breakfast at the café from 7am. The dining room would be packed for lunch with yet another crowd by the dinner hour. People from Hutterite and First Nations communities stopped by to buy candy, gum, tobacco, and ice-cream, which was a treasured treat during a time when box ice cream was less common and would have melted during the trip home to farms or the reserve. These transactions however, only occurred at the front counter as they never set foot inside the dining room. There was an unspoken boundary, an impassable line on the floor that the Indigenous and racialized customer did not cross.

In a series of interviews with Margaret Rose she offers accounts of what the menu was like at the café from memory:

"Chips [fries] and gravy were the top seller. The food was western, Canadian, European– not Chinese. Steak and eggs, pancakes were big on the menu as were roast beef, liver, and onions. It wasn't Chinese food. Farmers and townsfolk were not interested in Chinese food and eventually the dish "chop suey" came about later. Fried rice came next, fortune cookies, almond cookies, [but] nothing else that was even a tad Chinese was served until the late 1960s and 1970s.

Fortune cookies did not come about until 1960s-70s. No dim sum, no laisee [traditional red envelopes gifted on Lunar New Year] neither. No dragon or lion dances in High River."

While the Toisan Chinese diaspora operated the café, their clientele was almost exclusively white people. The small handful of Chinese families in High River did not dine out and besides, the café served unfamiliar, western foods.

After the *Chinese Exclusion Act* era in the late 1940s and 1950s, New Look Café workers boarded above the Wing Chong laundry. For staff meals, the cooks made a version of Toisan Chinese food using prairie ingredients on hand. The communal meals were always taken at the café even when the workers boarded at the laundry. They would cross the train tracks to eat together.

The pressure to assimilate New Look Café's menu was not only a business strategy, but also affected how the Chinese community could participate in rural society. In two separate interviews with Seto Gan and Tse, the owner of Wing Chong Laundry, conducted between 1974 – 75 and accessed through the Glenbow Archives, both give similar testimonies to the isolation and laborious conditions. Unlike in the city centres, in High River, there were no Chinese festivals or traditional celebrations– no time or resources could be spared.

Based on photos of the storefronts from the early 1950s, Chinese shops had only English names on the signage. Not only is this a reflection of the anti-Chinese times and the prioritization of white clientele over their own community, but it seems the racialized proprietors tried to blend in to keep a low profile and not draw even more attention to themselves.

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During this period, it was typical for the Chinese community to establish their own borrowing services as traditional banking was not available to them. In High River, both New Look Café and Wing Chong Laundry offered cheque cashing services that extended to whites. In a 1986 speech by Calgary Alderman Sue Higgins mentioned this as “the only place Mrs. Leitch [school teacher, mother of Sue Higgins] could cash a cheque on a Sunday”.



Figure 4: Quon's Grocery and New Look Café on Railway Street

Courtesy of Museum of the Highwood



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