

The Chinese on Bendigo (1)

Prior to 1854 the number of Chinese was so slight as to arouse no great comment. Their early Chinamen were in the main market gardeners and as such were welcomed by the diggers. Concern was expressed however by authority & the mining population of Bendigo when some thousands of Chinese were discernible with hundreds arriving daily. With the ~~influx~~^{advent} of a wholesale immigration of Chinese, the Police Magistrate at Sandhurst (as Bendigo was then called) stated "... the principal grievance was the great ~~diminution~~ diminution in the yield of gold, and moreover, that the influx of such a number of Chinamen will lower the price of labour, and they will not be allowed to work at a low price." This ~~seemingly~~^{seemed} seems to be the main objection, although J.P. Faulkner when moving the appointment of a Select Committee to inquire into the subject of Chinese immigration used much stronger but less relevant reasons — "That a Select Committee of seven members be appointed to frame a bill to control the flood of Chinese immigrations, setting in to this Colony, and effectually prevent the Gold fields of Australia Felix from becoming the property of the Emperor of China, and of the Mongolian & Tartar hordes of Asia." The Report by the committee, which was chaired by Faulkner is strongly flavoured with this gentleman's personal opinions & bias. (2) In fact ~~many~~ many of the objections were raised had no foundation in truth and reflect badly against the committee. As a result of the experiences on the Gold Fields the Colonial Parliaments passed a series of Acts to restrict Chinese immigration and to discriminate against those Chinese on the fields. (3)

~~Note~~ (1) The diggers always spoke of being "on Bendigo", not in Bendigo. This meant that they were domiciled on Bendigo Creek & could have meant, anywhere between "the Rocks" (Golden Square today) & White Hills some miles away.

(2) Report of the Select Committee on the subject of Chinese immigration. pp iii, iv, v. & p. of the Leges. Com. of Vic. 1856-7. Vol 2.

(3) Victorian Acts 18 Vic. No 35 of 1855, & 20 Vic No 41 of 1857.

The Victorian Act is Vic. N^o 39 of 1855 placed a ^{capitation} ~~gold~~ tax of £10 on each Chinese immigrant. The evasion of this tax was a formidable reason also for their further restrictions.

Before proceeding further let us trace the movement of these Chinese immigrants. They were in the main, natives of Canton, China (incidentally they affectionately called Bencigo 'Big Canton', & Castellane, 'little Canton'.) At this time the ~~Portuguese~~ ^{English} were commencing to exploit the trade possibilities on the Chinese seaboard & had come into conflict with the Princes of many provinces - Canton was one. The introduction of opium into China at this time ~~for~~ in the interests of English trade was one of the great blots in the copy book of English maritime expansion. It will be noted that the young Chinese selected by their parents to go to Australia were fine strapping young men, ~~not~~ ^{the} of a physique far superior to that with which we are accustomed today. The Chinaman was sent here to retrieve the family fortunes at the best or to ~~provide~~ bring home enough gold to see the family through hard times at the worst. As will be appreciated China is a land of great sorrow economically, even today, under Communistic control, despite propoganda to the contrary, the failure of the last two ~~the~~ crops, could well mean more years of new starvation for a big percentage of the populace. Undoubtedly the Chinese immigrant was sent here to ~~make as much~~ make some money & return quickly to repay those who advanced his passage money (The Chinese Bankers) and to succour his family. The Chinese have a great regard & respect for their elders and the young fellows who came to Bencigo were no exception. Having received a loan from the family banker in Canton they proceeded to ^{HONG KONG,} ~~the docks of that great port~~ & along with their fellows paid some skipper their little all for the voyage from ~~Canton~~ ^{HONG KONG} to Port Phillip. The captain of the vessel contracted to supply them of course. Imagine the numbers jammed aboard these vessels and the conditions they must have come out in. Avaricious shipping interests took good care to see they profited by the venture. When it became known in China that a tax of £10 would be levied against each it was ~~sometimes~~ agreed by the shipping agents that an all up sum of money, probably £20 or thereabouts would cover

the cost of ^{the} voyage, provisioning en route & the tax, which was to be paid in bulk by the skipper at ~~the~~ Port Phillip. To avoid paying this tax, and so make a rich haul, ^{for themselves,} the Captains of these vessels would land the Chinese at ~~some~~ places like ~~South~~ GUICHEN BAY where they would be left to find their own way overland to the goldfields.

The Chinese defended themselves by presenting several quaintly worded Petitions to the Government of the day (4) one, of interest to us, is "The Humble Petition of the Chinese Storekeepers, Miners, & others, now resident out, and in the Neighbourhood of the Bendigo Gold Field in the said Colony, # (E N^o 1 V. & P. of the Legis. Ass. of Vic., 1856-7. Vol 3.) The Chinese answered the charges levelled against them adequately: in the main there were (1) that ~~the~~ ^{the} duration of their stay on Bendigo would only be temporary - when they had made a little gold they would be anxious to return to China to assume their responsibilities. (2) They could not afford to bring their women ^{out}, and that, if that were possible, who would remain to look after the young & the aged. (3) That not all evaded the tax, some paid, but unscrupulous sea captains did not keep the bargain contracted under which they felt they came out under. (4) They begged the indulgence of authority towards the fact that many were illiterate and did not fully understand the immigration laws. (5) That the ground mined by the Chinese was only the leftovers, by washing headings & tailings and found old shaft abandoned by European.

(4) See Petitions on the influx of the Chinese, V. & P. of the Legis. Ass. of Vic., 1856-7. Vol 3.

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Severe trouble looked like developing ~~early~~ in 1854. At this time there could have been about 15,000 Chinese on the Bendigo field with more arriving daily. William Dixon Campbell Denovan the acknowledged leader of the Bendigo diggers headed an agitation to prevent the wholesale influx of Chinese on to the fields. Late in June at a mass meeting of miners he advocated their removal from the field by force if necessary. He named July 4th as the date that the diggers would deal with the Chinese and it is important to pay attention to that date. There were on the Bendigo field at this time a number of American forty miners and it is remarkable that both here and in Ballarat they were very active agitators. One 'Captain' Brown, (nobody knows where he received the title) often referred to as 'a white washed Irish yankee' was involved during the 'Red Ribbon Agitation' with threatening a storekeeper, Mr. Fraser (subsequently represented the diggers as a member of the L.C.) and imprisoned for the offence. It seems certain that a number of these Yankee exponents of republicanism had Democratic ears and suggested that July 4th (the day set aside in America to commemorate Independence) be chosen to clear the fields of the Chinese and wave the revolutionary flag in the face of Commissioner Pantou the official representative of Government on the field. Fortunately for Bendigo both Denovan and Pantou were upright and honest men who always thought twice (wonderfully they were both Scotsmen) although Mr Pantou ^{appeared to} ~~must~~ have ~~some~~ doubts on this occasion.

Joseph Anderson Pantou C.M.E., F.R.C.S., & Metropolitan P.M. was an able young administrator who took charge of the field when only a little over twenty one years of age. When the news was conveyed to him that "On July 4th, all diggers would rise as one man and clear the Elders out of the district" he was somewhat cautious about moving. However considerable alarm existed all day on the eve of the 4th and at 11 o'clock that night Mr Denovan was taken before 'Bendigo Mag' (Mr. Macken McHadden P.M.) and questioned. ~~Subsequently~~ Denovan seemed to enjoy the words imputed to him but stated that he used them in a political sense to forward ~~to~~ the aims of the diggers in restricting the Chinese. Fortunately no revolt took place next day. The capitulation tax was imposed and subsequently a residence tax. It is interesting to note that when this tax passed unfairly ~~of~~ on the poorer Chinese Denovan went to the trouble to have this abolished.

Mr. Panton was eventually appointed to look into the matter of Chinese on the gold fields of Victoria and very successfully brought about an arrangement that suited everyone. A scheme, largely Panton's idea, was drawn up by which the Chinese were assigned a portion of the field solely for their encampment and entirely separate from the Europeans. This was accepted as well as certain regulations and of course the Capitation tax. Two camps were formed in Bendigo, one at Eaglehawk and the other at Back Creek. These were systematically drained and became an attraction to many visiting Europeans.

The Chinese did not forget the deed of good Mr. Panton put in on their behalf. In September 1858 when it was known that Mr. Panton was leaving the district for a trip home to his birthplace the Chinese community presented him with a valuable gold seal on which was the representation of the Imperial lion of China. The seal it was understood was a passport throughout China for the recipient.

As the Aust. character becomes better known it is noticeable that the Australian does not so much dislike the immigrant for his nationality or the colour of his skin as for the fact that he is a 'new chum'. The 'new chum' unfortunately is never acceptable for the first few years after that if he ~~qualifies~~ he can exhibit the desired qualities he is accepted. ~~The~~ The reasons for this go back also to the gold mining era when the wealthy sons of some noble families visited the diggings they were treated with disdain. In fact anyone who did not come on to the diggings in a red or blue shirt and wolseley trousers was looked on as a 'new chum' and treated accordingly. The average Aust. is a little contemptuous towards anyone who is not cut in his pattern.