

The Treks from Robe

By Cash Brown

In 1854, around 3000 Chinese landed in Port Philip at the Melbourne wharves. With their sights set on the Victorian goldfields, they were greeted by angry mobs of Europeans. The white settlers didn't much care for the Chinese: their numbers, their different looks, their languages and habits.

The new Victorian Government was soon lobbied by the existing miners and merchants to limit the number of Chinese coming into the colony. The Royal Commission established after the Eureka Stockade also examined the Chinese situation as another of the miner's grievances, in addition to the exorbitant mining licence fees. After riots, mistreatment and the deaths of many Chinese miners, The Victorian Act was passed in 1855. This, An Act to Make Provisions for Certain Immigrants, limited the number of Chinese carried on a ship berthing in Victoria to one passenger for each ton of the ship's weight, plus a £10 poll tax per Chinese passenger to be paid by the ship's captain. The Act also included a heavy import duty on opium.

The Victorian Parliament also installed Chinese 'Protectors' and introduced a one pound per annum residency tax for Chinese to pay for the service. When disputes arose, the Protectors were to help the Chinese. However, translation services were limited, meaning there were often misunderstandings.

Ship captains didn't want to pay the poll tax (although they often made the passengers pay it) and were afraid of being fined for carrying too many Chinese passengers into Victorian ports. So many steered their human cargo to South Australia, which had no landing tax and a competitive 5 per cent tax on opium.

Landing at Port Adelaide meant a daunting 700 km overland walk to the Mt Alexander (Castlemaine) and Bendigo goldfields. The tracks were confusing and there was little water, so a more southern route via Robe and along the Coorong was followed. It was a bullock team route which took longer, but the travellers could stay at inns and shanties making a less arduous journey.

The newly-developed port of Guichen Bay at Robe was closer to the Victorian border than Port Adelaide, making a shorter trip by both sea and land to the goldfields. Shipping agents in Hong Kong initially kept their decision to land there a secret to avoid government interference. The Land of Cakes is often said to have been the first ship to arrive there on January 17, 1857.

It was flying a British flag, so locals were surprised to see 265 passengers sporting pigtailed on board. They were, however, very happy to charge them up to a pound each to row them ashore. Those without the funds to be punted to dry land were sometimes tossed overboard with their belongings and forced to swim. One account of such poor treatment aboard the William Miles resulted in several sailors each being fined £5 by the local magistrate for their 'brutal acts of violence against these poor, unoffending creatures'.

The 200 or so Robe locals called the Chinese influx an 'invasion', and referred to the visitors as 'celestials'. The Chinese too called themselves celestials, as they believed China was the centre of the universe and therefore a celestial empire.

At times there were as many as 3000 'celestials' camping around the town. Robe's doctor was given the duty of selecting new campsites for each boatload of Chinese hopefuls. It was thought necessary to segregate the arrivals because not all spoke the same language or came from the same backgrounds. There were peasants from small villages, artisans and traders from larger towns, and apparently some antagonism between different ethnic groups.

The South Australian government had no intention of paying the doctor to examine the men. Those unwell or diseased would soon be Victoria's 'problem'. Local volunteer nurses, including the mayor's wife, cared for those Chinese who succumbed to the unhygienic conditions and maladies of ship life. Chinese sojourners who died in Robe were buried in unmarked graves.

Small groups of Chinese gathered and dried seaweed from the bay in preparation for their trek. They could be seen flying kites and playing games in their temporary village. The coins they carried were useless for trade, but locals accepted silver and other goods as payment for mining equipment, blankets and food.

This brought great prosperity to Robe, although some locals were afraid of the Chinese and their unfamiliar habits. They carried knives, smoked opium and gambled. Twenty-five redcoat soldiers were brought from Adelaide as a safeguard, but there are no reports of them ever needing to act.

The first Chinese arrivals in Robe relied on locals to guide them to the goldfields. They paid guides, who were often bullockies or traders and were used to travelling the routes. They took the Chinese to the goldfields and on the way back filled their bullock carts with wool for export. The Chinese liked the bullockies best because they could fill the carts with their belongings rather than carry them, and transport those unable to walk.

Guides charged between 10 shillings and £4 per person or £50 for a group of 100 - 300. Different routes were taken depending upon the season and destination, and the travellers marked the routes by carving symbols on trees or attaching coins to them as they passed. This was to ensure the safe passage of those following, as some of the guides abandoned their charges. They feared being attacked by angry miners once at the goldfields, especially as the easier-to-mine alluvial gold had run out and tensions were high. The miners already there did not welcome competition from the efficient Chinese groups.

Along the way they built sophisticated wells ensuring fresh water not only for those who followed, but also for market gardeners, who began to coax a living from the earth to feed future travellers and settlers in the area.

The Chinese generally avoided towns once over the border to avoid detection by the Victorian authorities. They stopped at inns and homesteads along the way, sometimes purchasing sheep for food. Penola was a rare town stop where the

fortune seekers would rest with their guides for a couple of days. Some Chinese stayed and established market gardens there.

Travelling in single file in groups of up to 700, with around 60kg of their belongings in baskets hanging from bamboo poles, some Chinese groups later followed the paths without guides.

Large parties were able to share resources and provided protection from bushrangers. These journeymen had Ballarat in their sights, as the fields in Bendigo and Castlemaine were further away and Ararat's gold was nearly exhausted.

In fine weather these remarkable travelers could cover 35 km in a single day. Treks from Robe to Ballarat took between three to five-and-a-half weeks.

A total of 35 ships carrying around 16,500 Chinese landed in Robe between 1857 and 1862. This was a significant proportion of the Chinese population in Australia at the time, which at its peak was around 40,000.