

THE FORGOTTEN HISTORIES OF THE CHINESE IN BATHURST

Events in the past year commemorating the establishment of Bathurst as Australia's oldest inland town have provided a reminder of the many layers that comprise its past, from colonial settlement to the much longer occupation of the Wiradyuri people. The little-known histories of the Chinese in Bathurst are equally deserving of commemoration. The bicentenary is an opportune time to recover these histories and to celebrate the Chinese contribution to the community and economy of the Bathurst region.

Although Bathurst's heritage is intertwined with the Chinese sojourners and migrants, there are few markers of their presence. Those who could, mostly returned to China after the gold rushes, and others moved away, but there were also many who lived and died in Bathurst. While the ideal was for their bones to be exhumed and repatriated to China, this happened rarely in Bathurst and many of their gravesites have simply been lost over time. The few headstones in Bathurst Cemetery and in derelict cemeteries in the region belie the fact that in the nineteenth century Chinese

comprised the largest population of non-Europeans in the Central West.

The first Chinese to the region did not come as gold seekers but as indentured labourers. On 10 November 1849, the Bathurst Free Press remarked on six "Celestials" passing through Bathurst to work as shepherds on a property on the Macquarie River. They were amongst the estimated 3,000 Chinese men imported from Amoy to New South Wales between 1848 and 1852 to serve five year, legally binding contracts as pastoral labourers. Most of these indentured labourers were taken to work in northern New South Wales and the northern districts (Queensland), where frontier conflict and isolation had made it almost impossible to attract labour. The presence of the Chinese shepherds aided the pastoral expansion into the "unsettled districts". Fewer of these indentured labourers were employed in Bathurst, where the labour shortage was less acute, but Chinese labourers were indentured to the south of Bathurst at William Lawson's Errowanbang and Thomas Icely's Coombing Park near Carcoar, to the

west on the Lee family's Wellington property Baragon and to the east on Andrew Brown's Hartley runs and at Robert Fitzgerald's Rylstone establishment, Dabee at which it was reported that eighty Chinese labourers were in service.

The little information available about these Amoy labourers mostly emerges from the reports of court cases in which they were involved. In 1854, one fifth of the population of Bathurst Gaol were Chinese men awaiting trial for offences which ranged from absconding from service to murder. Some fled to escape cruelty or unfair working conditions, while others made for the goldfields. Those who completed their contracts and remained in Bathurst found employment as cooks in the town and harvesters on pastoral properties.

In 1853, 24 Chinese labourers who had been imported from Amoy by Robert Towns on his ship the *Royal Saxon* were conveyed to Bathurst where they were contracted to work for the Colonial Gold Company. Among them was a young

Amoy man who adopted the name of William Beacham. However, the numbers of Amoy Chinese on the goldfields were few in comparison with the large numbers of Chinese men from the Pearl River Delta area who, from mid-1856, swelled the ranks of those flocking to the goldfields around Bathurst. Very few Chinese women came to Bathurst.

The Chinese population on the Bathurst goldfields reached its peak in the 1860s when the 1861 census for the Sofala Registry recorded 1,877 males born in China, 54 percent of the male population. In Tambaroora, there were 1,649 males born in China, 66.5 percent of the male population. The Bathurst Times of 8 August 1861 wrote "Only imagine that in the small township of Sofala there are thirteen Chinese to fifteen European stores! ... From the Lime Kilns to the Turon you see no working parties, but these pilgrims from the land of tea." Photos in the Holtermann Collection at the State Library of New South Wales provide a glimpse of Chinese settlements in Hill End, Tambaroora and Gulgong in the 1870s.

As Chinese gold seekers continued to arrive and their co-operative methods and industry gained them gold, resentment at their success fermented. Though the Lambing Flat riots are the most well-known, there were also clashes between Chinese and European diggers on goldfields at Tambaroora in 1854 and 1858, Native Dog Creek in June 1861, and Napoleon Reef in 1866.

After the Lambing Flat riots, legislation was introduced to restrict Chinese immigration and the freedoms of resident Chinese. William Beacham was amongst 971 Chinese who successfully applied for naturalisation before legislation was enacted which prohibited the naturalisation of Chinese. Beacham established himself as a storekeeper and interpreter in Sofala, married Agnes Fanning in 1864 and began a family. In the 1870s after Agnes died in Sofala, Beacham moved to Bathurst, where he ran a store at 105 George Street whilst maintaining a forty-year career as a court interpreter. He remarried and had a large family. There were many other children of relationships and marriages between

Chinese men and European women, some of whose descendants continue to live in Bathurst.

By the 1870s as alluvial gold ran out and goldfields populations dissipated, Chinese began to consolidate in Bathurst and its villages. There were sufficient Chinese residents and businesses in Bathurst in the 1870s for an area known as Chinatown to emerge. Although the Chinese were skilled in a range of occupations, they were discouraged by legislative measures and social pressures from competing in businesses such as cabinet-making. However, by 1870 they were established as growers and hawkers of vegetables. The *Bathurst Times* of 11 June 1870 described Celestials

... crowding together in the Chinese quarter of this city ... In a number of small tenements in Howick and Rankin streets, large numbers of these people... scatter themselves as hawkers of vegetables throughout the length and breadth of the city...

The Chinese gardeners' knowledge of floodplain farming and water management skills made them the dominant vegetable growers in the Bathurst region in the era before irrigation, refrigeration and rail. William Beacham, Yet Sing, Lee War and William Owens are amongst the Chinese gardeners who took prizes for their vegetables at the Bathurst Show. Though the success of the gardeners was often the cause of envy, the *Bathurst Post* of 15 December 1892 praised their efforts:

Few admit that they are a desirable race to people our country with. In fact, so much was public opinion against them that the Government now charge £100 as a poll-tax on every one coming here. Yet, this undesirable man has been most useful. In the dry times he found us vegetables, when no white man attempted the task. Just now all that the white man has to do is to turn up the ground and put in the seed and almost every kind of vegetable grows in spite of him. No watering and very little or no manuring is required, hence anyone can, and does, grow vegetables.

Although older Bathurst residents

remember the last of the Chinese gardens at Kelso, Learmonth Park and Morrisset Street, Chinese gardens once existed along the Macquarie River and the Vale Creek, and in localities such as Rockley, Lagoon and White Rock. In some cases the Chinese worked in partnership with those who owned the land. Many of Bathurst's well-known families, including the Lees at Woodlands and the Webbs at Hathrop and Littlebourne, leased part of their land to Chinese gardeners. Cabbages, onions, potatoes and tobacco were grown by Chinese at Alloway Bank, Esrom, Bradwardine and Hereford in the decades before these properties became synonymous with the Edgells name.

The Chinese market gardens in Bathurst continued into the twentieth century as they sent tons of produce by rail to the Sydney markets. However, the discriminatory measures of the White Australia policy contributed to their decline. Their disappearance in Bathurst was marked by the demolition in 1953 of the last symbol of Chinese community, the Chinese Masonic Lodge on the corner of Rankin and Durham streets.

What was the experience of these men who had left behind not only famine and war but also their families in China to work in a distant and foreign country? No diaries or journals written by these Chinese labourers have come to light to tell the stories of their lives in Bathurst; we know more about how they were perceived from the often hostile local press than what they experienced or how they felt.

In 1891, William Beacham wrote to the editor of the *National Advocate* denouncing the story of a white woman held captive in a Chinese opium den as gross libel. Such utterances in the historical record are few and far between. An important strategy of *From Old Ground* is opening space to recover and acknowledge the historical memory of Chinese communities in Bathurst and inscribe new impressions on the landscape which they helped to shape.

Juanita Kwok
PhD candidate, Charles Sturt University,
Bathurst
November 2015