

War Memories across Canada Conversation Kit:

Chinese Labour Corps William Head Institution Metchosin, BC Correctional Service of Canada



Metchosin School Museum Society

In 1917, William Head Correctional Institution in Victoria, BC, served as a quarantine station for over 80,000 Chinese men as they arrived from China on their way to France to ease the Allies' labour burden. The Chinese Labour Corps (CLC) were secretly assembled and moved by rail across Canada where they boarded ships bound for France.

Approximately 700 CLC died from the cramped and freezing conditions on route to the East coast. Several CLC workers died while at William Head and are buried there. More research is needed to identify the unmarked graves.

Discussion Questions:

Describe the role of the CLC during the First World War. Why did the Allies recruit these men? What work did they do? What do you think volunteers gained by leaving China? What impact do you think the CLC had on the outcome of the war?

Many historians believe the story of the CLC has been largely forgotten. Why do you think this is? How do you think we should commemorate the CLC and their contribution to the Allies' victory?

What was Canada's relationship with China at the time? What was the head tax, and how did that policy affect the way Chinese labourers were treated as they were assembled and transported across Canada on their way to France?

Why did China agree to supply labour to the French and British? How did the CLC ultimately contribute to China's internationalization? What was the legacy of the CLC in their home country?

Activities:

Imagine you are a Chinese peasant labour volunteer and you have just arrived at the William Head quarantine station. This is your first encounter with foreigners. What are your first impressions? How are you treated? What are your living conditions? Write a story or a diary entry. Include drawings.



CLC graves at William Head - Metchosin School Museum Society

Create a contract that outlines what a Chinese labour volunteer typically received as payment for his services. Include wages, clothing, medical care, housing, and financial support for the labourer's family in China.

Resources:

Websites

China's WW1 – The Forgotten Army of the First World War (South China Morning Post)

<http://multimedia.scmp.com/ww1-china/>

The Labour Corps of 1917-1918

<http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/regiments-and-corps/the-labour-corps-of-1917-1918/>

The National Campaign for a Permanent Memorial to the Chinese Labour Corps of the First World War

<http://ensuringweremember.org.uk/>

Quarantine was hell at William Head: Chinese men recruited by Britain for 'non-combat' roles in First World War – Times Colonist (May 28, 2016)

<http://www.timescolonist.com/life/islander/quarantine-was-hell-at-william-head-1.2265396#sthash.oGu19Rok.dpuf>

Quarantine Station - Metchosin School Museum Society

<http://metchosinmuseum.ca/heritage-sites/quarantine-station/>

Videos

Tricks on the Dead: The Story of the Chinese Labour Corps in WWI, by Jordan Paterson, Rare Earth Media, 2014

<http://rareearthmedia.com/project/tricks-on-the-dead/>

Books & articles

Forgotten voices from the Great War: the Chinese Labour Corps, by Alex Calvo, Bao Qiaoni. The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 13, Issue. 49, December 21, 2015

<http://apjif.org/-Alex-Calvo/4411>

Quarantined: life and death at William Head Station, 1872-1959, by Peter Johnson. Heritage House, 2013.

Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War, by Xu Guoqi. Harvard University Press, 2011.

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