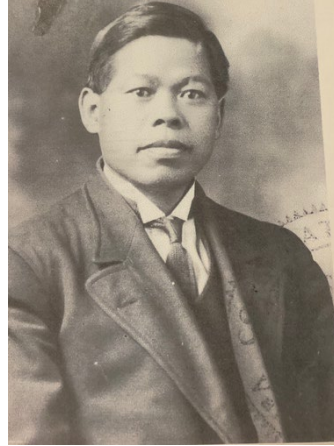


## Hong Wo General Store: Living in harmony with the fishing industry



*Hong Wo Store (c.1970)*



*Ling Lam*

Image Source (left): *Hong Wo & Co. General Merchants*. 1970. Photograph. 1991 2 16. Bell-Irving family fonds. City of Richmond Archives, Richmond, BC.  
<http://archives.richmond.ca/archives/permalink/24469/>

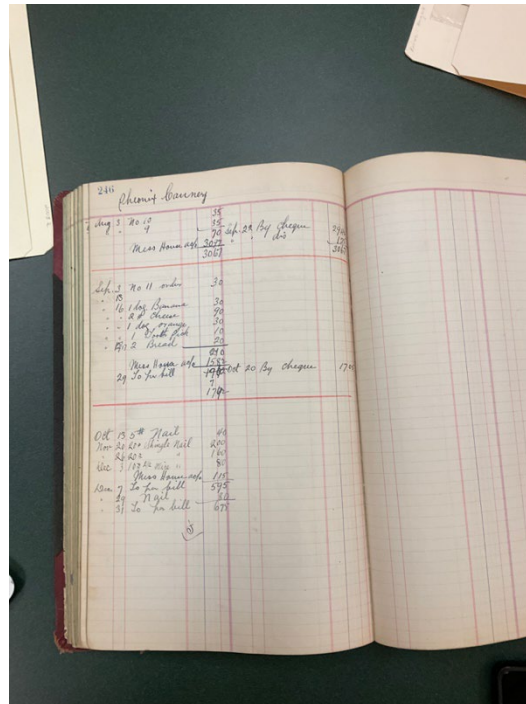
Image Source (right): Photo of Ling Lam. Photograph. Ling Lam - Biography File. City of Richmond Archives, Richmond, BC.

Through the 1880s, the predominantly male Chinese community worked on constructing the Canadian Pacific Railway. After the completion of the railways, the Chinese played an integral role in the Richmond fishing canneries, where they formed the largest ethnic group in the 1890s. It was during this rising influence of the Chinese in the fish cannery industry that Ling Lam set up the Hong Wo (roughly translates to “Living in Harmony”) General Store in 1895 at Steveston, Richmond. Before starting the store, Lam worked in a relative’s store in Victoria before moving to the mainland, where he learned English at a church and went door-to-door selling buns.

One might think that the Hong Wo Store acted as a medium to serve the primarily Chinese clientele and to serve them mostly Chinese products. In reality, the store mainly facilitated the establishment of the Chinese community in Richmond as opposed to retaining ties to China by selling products, including groceries sourced locally from the Lam farm, to both fish canneries and to other residents of Richmond.

The store supported the fishing industry through the provision of equipment and groceries. It sold various products that remained unchanged throughout the store’s operation, including rubber boots, fishermen jackets, toys, potato chips, vegetables and fruits. Ledger books of the

store indicate a large number of transactions with the fishing cannery, including shirts, bananas, grapes and other items to ensure the smooth running of the cannery, and the “mess house” that housed Japanese, First Nations and White cannery workers (Chinese workers were not housed here). The store operated on a form of credit system between the customers and the store where the customer was only expected to pay by the end of the month. Such a system indicates how a degree of trust and understanding was built within the multi-racial Steveston community and was one way the store established itself within the fishing-based community, which was highly affected by boom-and-bust cycles.



*Ledger Book*

Image Source: “Hong Wo Store Ledger.” 1917. 2008 3. City of Richmond Archives, Richmond, BC.

Lam also provided extensive employment opportunities to Chinese individuals in the community, allowing them to establish themselves in Canada. Lam owned over 100 acres of farmland where he grew vegetables such as cucumbers and employed out-of-work Chinese workers during the off-season for the fishing industry. Additionally, Lam acted as an intermediary between Chinese workers and cannery owners. Being an intermediary contractor, Lam took a share of the wages while providing bed-and-board to the Chinese cannery workers. This allowed for a symbiotic relationship; when it was off-season, the Chinese worked in farms for Lam which stocked the General Store, while during the fishing season, Lam provided housing to those Chinese working in the fishing industry, which relied on the equipment provided by the store. Such a circular relationship helped establish the store and its owning family as key figures in Steveston that subsisted even when the cannery industry died down.

Into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the Hong Wo General Store saw its sales plummet as the cannery industry gradually became automated due to technological advances like the Smith

Butchering machine. As a result, the fishing industry no longer required the supplies and food provided by the store leading to the loss of a major customer segment. Chinese workers turned to work as domestic household labourers or as farm workers with some employed at the Lam farm. Ling Lam's daughter, Jessie Lam, managed the store after his death in 1939 and discussed how individuals of all backgrounds, including Black, Chinese, Japanese, and Indigenous people, visited the store to procure groceries and rare items such as copper boilers.

The prolonged existence of the store, arguably the first supermarket in Richmond, was due to the trust and relationships built with its community members throughout the previous years. By the late 20th century, Chinese-Canadians experienced a range of employment possibilities that were previously denied to them in fields such as law and administration from which they were previously excluded either through legislation or custom. While this broke down the symbiotic relationship between Chinese cannery workers and the store, the value of the Hong Wo General Store should not be understated. It served as a conduit between the Chinese community and the wider Richmond society when economic opportunities for the Chinese community in the Canadian Pacific Railway disappeared. The Hong Wo General Store played a small part in demonstrating that the Chinese people of British Columbia were not merely temporary sojourners but a permanent part of Canadian society and remains a pioneering symbol of multicultural Canada.

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