

BC'S METALLIFEROUS MINERALS ACT – 1897

In the 1800's many Chinese workers were hired by BC's mines which became dependent on their cheap labour.

Working at half the wages of whites, they were used as strikebreakers as well. Often assigned the more dangerous tasks like transporting explosives, the Chinese were an easy scapegoat for two catastrophic accidents (1887/1888) at Robert Dunsmuir's Vancouver Island coal mines.

In response to pressure the BC government enacted the discriminatory Metalliferous Minerals Act in 1897 which prohibited employment of Chinese underground. However, the lure of cheap labour remained.

In Van Anda, Gold Commissioner Marshal Bray investigated the Copper Queen mine that year and reported that most of the work had been done by Chinese. Local miner Charlie Rabson attempted to lodge an official complaint that Chinese were employed "in defiance of the law."

However, Justice of the Peace A.A. Forbes refused to register the information and ordered Rabson out of his office. Forbes was residing in mine manager Blewett's house at the time and was said to be "under the thumb" of the manager.

"Such is the state of affairs in Van Anda," wrote Rabson to BC's Attorney-General.

Although Blewett later produced a cheque to cover the licence fees, the banks refused to honour it.

Member of Provincial Parliament, W. Wymond Walkem, joined the conversation. He cited dissatisfaction among Texada's white miners who were compelled to buy licences while the "miserable Chinese" escaped "scot free." The province was losing a "considerable sum" of revenue. Walkem labelled the company a "snide outfit ... of little good to the country." These Americans "ought to be taught a lesson."



As the years passed on Texada Chinese worked breaking limerock by hand and sorting ore (photo). They were gradually accepted and their exploitation became an issue of social and workplace justice.

At Blubber Bay in 1938, for example, striking white miners demanded "job security for Orientals." Chinese workers, many 20-year employees, had been forcibly evicted from their company housing. The union provided tents for them at Limekiln Bay and canvassed for donations.

It took 70 years for the government of Canada, in 1967, to repeal all laws based on race, ethnicity or national origin.