

The Yee Lun Ark Kee Collection

Connecting the RBCM Collections with the Community

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In 2004, a collection of almost 200 miscellaneous items was donated to the Royal BC Museum by David Walker. He had worked as a cleaner in downtown Victoria, including Chinatown, from the 1950s to the 19090s. At the time of the donation, no direct connection could be made between the collection items and any specific individual or business. Possible sources for the development of the collection may have been pawn shops or the lost-and-found service in a laundry.

In 2012, a series of events shed light on the origins of this collection. In May, I was introduced to Reta and Sandra Der and Corinne and Randy Wong, third and fourth-generation Chinese Canadians. Reta and Corinne are the daughters of Wah Quan, owner of the Yee Lun Ark Kee business in Victoria's Chinatown. They shared their family history and old images from their family collection with me. A few months later, as Collection Manager Charlene Gregg started cataloguing the collection donated by David Walker, I identified Reta Der and her father, Wah Quan, in a roll of old photographs in the collection. From there, staff connected a series of documents and personal items from David's donation to the Quan family.

In August, we invited the Family to come in and see the items connected to them. It was the first time the Quan family knew about the existence of these items. During the visit, Randy Wong, the grandson of Wah Quan, also received a crash course from museum conservator Betty Walsh to ensure proper care of the family's own collection. The combined efforts of the museum and archives staff and family members helped reconstruct the family history. Yen Quon landed in Victoria at the age of 25 in 1895 from Canton (Quon). He worked as a houseboy and brick maker before starting the business named Yee Lun in 1896. Yee Lun became the only large import and retail grocery business in Victoria that started in the 19th century and prospered into the 1970s. It also served as an important community centre, bank, and post office for many immigrants, as evidenced by the various documents found in the collection.

Later on, collections manager Charlene Gregg, now familiar with the family history, happened to walk into an open house one weekend and found an aging sign with the writing "Yee Lun Ark Kee & Co." hanging on the kitchen wall. Because serving the public take precedence over augmenting our collections, we consulted the family about their knowledge of the sign and their preference. The Quan family acquired the sign for their own collection, after consultation and negotiation with the house owner who had no knowledge about the sign. The collaborative efforts of the family and the museum and archives have contributed to a better understanding of the family history and collections.



Yee Lun Ark Kee Store Staff (Wah Quan in the middle, Rita Der second from right)

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Randy Wong and daughter Katrina Wong with the Yee Lun Ark Kee & Co. sign that was reunited with the family.

Photo courtesy of Randy Wong