

Chinese Joss House

A vacant lot at the south end of Main Street in Lytton was once the location of a Chinese Joss Temple.

A story about the temple appeared in the *Vancouver Daily Province* May 07, 1933.

George M. Murray, a journalist with the *Province* and later a newspaperman and publisher in his own right, wrote the article. Murray lived in China for several years and perhaps the following article reflected his concern with and interest in the plight of the Chinese in B.C.

Murray also served as a B.C. Liberal MLA for many years (beginning in 1933) and as a Federal Member of Parliament. He and his famous outspoken wife “Ma Murray” co-founded the Lillooet Bridge River News in 1934. Ma Murray is a Lillooet legend.

Here is the intriguing story:

GODS IN A LYTTON WOODSHED

George M. Murray

The Chinese Republic had made protests to Great Britain and to Ottawa about it; but the Chinese joss house at Lytton has passed legally into the hands of Signor Guiseppe (his mark) Taverna, native son of Italy and as reliable a track patrolman as the Canadian Pacific Railway employs.

It took twenty-one long years to win the joss house. And now the Chinese gods and goddesses, tenants there since 1881, rest in Taverna's woodshed. Every son of Han in interior British Columbia is angry about it. The Chinese consul at Vancouver has written strong words about it to home government at Nanking, and Nanking has written the British and Canadian authorities about it. But Taverna, a man with an iron will, has won out. He now owns the joss house. And to prove that a devout Christian respects even the idols of old China, the Lytton deities are now snugly housed by Taverna free of cost.

The story of the Chinese joss house at Lytton is officially recorded in the land office at Kamloops. There is a file of letters there, some inches thick, which give in detail the various steps in the struggle of Guiseppe Taverna to obtain the land and building so sacred to the Chinese of the district. Taverna was next door to the joss house. He had a small lot. His family was growing. He looked across the fence and dreamed of the day when he would be able to extend his boundaries and annex the joss house properties.

What was a joss house more or less? Taverna thought to himself. The Chinese pay little attention to it. Some days they come, bring a fat pig or chicken or imitation money and place it before one of the idols there. They light a taper, burn some incense and go away. Then the tramps come from the main line freight trains, smell the cooked pork or chicken, enter stealthily, and then help the spirits hovering about the gods and goddesses to consume the sacrificial offerings.

This went on year after year. The fruit trees in Taverna's yard spread their branches over the fence above the ground of the Chinese joss house. The Taverna grape vine was as anxious as its owner to get possession of the adjoining land.

In 1901 Guiseppe (his mark) Taverna addressed a letter to the Dominion land agent at Kamloops "Re: Lot 2, Block 13, Town of Lytton." Upon which was a certain house owned by Chinese, the house being a frame building, 18 by 27, on a lot of 50 feet by 33. In this letter he stated the lot and building was Dominion property, since the Chinese had no deed to the land.

At once the Dominion land agent looked into the matter. He consulted with the late Tom Earl, the rancher, one of Lytton's oldest residents, who had planted the first orchard in that part of the country. The late Mr. Earl informed the government agent that the Chinese had taken over the property there previous to 1881. There had been an epidemic among Chinese on C.P.R. construction and among Chinese miners along the Fraser and in the Cariboo. The late Mr. Earl said that the leader had decided that the ancient gods were merely expressing anger because British Columbia Chinese has forsaken the gods of their ancestors.

In the records it was found that the first entry covering the land and joss house was made in 1901, when the following Chinese had made application to purchase Lot 2, Block 13, Lytton: Hong Wo, Wo Pin, Foo Sang, Lee Seen and Lou (his mark) Alaak.

Taverna continued to apply to the land office for purchase of the lot. He, or his agents, wrote letter after letter. Taverna alleged that the lot was an eyesore. The building, he said (in 1911) would soon fall down of its own weight. The furnishings—which included Kwan Yen, goddess of mercy; Shen Nung, god of cereal and the god of medicine—were said of Taverna to be of no value whatsoever.

Kwan Yen, goddess of mercy, gives courage to her worshippers. She is the taking-away-fear goddess. Her powers must have passed to Taverna, because he went ahead fearlessly to gain control of the joss house property. The god of medicine must have had a beneficent influence on Taverna's household. At any rate his family continued to increase and his need for more land continued more imperative. The god of medicine controls the six virtues-wisdom, benevolence, magnanimity, righteousness, loyalty and harmony. All these virtues Guiseppe (his mark) Taverna possessed and enjoyed as he went daily to his task on the C.P.R.: but he did want that joss house.

In 1917 the Dominion Government instructed the Kamloops land office to ascertain at once the value of the joss house. This was the result of a fiery letter written by the minister of the interior of that time by the late Mr. James Murphy, Ashcroft lawyer, brother of Mr. Justice Murphy of Vancouver. The late James Murphy had known Taverna for many years. Mr. Murphy was of Irish extraction, Taverna was a true son of Italy. Mr. Murphy had a keen sense of humour, and from the records at Kamloops entered heartily into the fight to gain the sacred edifice for his friend and client.

Adding to the correspondence from Mr. Murphy are further letters from Taverna. In 1918 there is a letter with Taverna's mark alleging "it is a fire trap. Tramps go there to sleep and eat. They throw matches and cigarettes about. If it burns, my own house will burn as well and maybe all of Lytton. There will be loss of life."

Mr. Murphy pointed out in 1918 that "Forty years ago hundreds of Chinese washed gold in that locality. The building was of value to them then, but had recently been more or less forsaken."

Despite all this, the Dominion Government refused to move. In 1919 the Kamloops office was asked for a further report. The report went to Ottawa that the Chinese residents then in Lytton believed that while the joss house was not much use, that if it was destroyed the Chinese believe that they might all get sick again as they or their people did in 1881. The government of Sir Robert Borden apparently felt that it was no time, with the war being on, to arouse the anger of the Chinese gods in British Columbia. They left the Lytton joss house alone.

Time passed, and in 1927, Taverna, having learned to read and write since he first began to apply for the lot, wrote in a bold script to Ottawa a letter, in which he said: "Children play in the joss house. Tramps sleep there. I offer \$35 for the property."

Then J.W. Benzie, homestead inspector, was ordered to report on the matter. He did so, declaring that the joss house itself was but 18 by 27 feet of frame. It would make a good chicken house. He suggested a valuation of \$50.

The joss house was put for sale in 1928 at 2pm, at the Globe Hotel, Lytton. The sum of \$42 was bid by Taverna. H.J. Parker, Dominion land agent at Kamloops, duly reported the holding of the sale to Ottawa.

Taverna also wrote to Ottawa asking what he should do with the building in that year.

No sooner had the sale been held than Chinese began to appear from all parts of the West to visit the joss house, to offer sacrifices before the idols which continued as tenants.

Mr. Chenhow H. Pao, then consul-general for the Republic of China at Vancouver, addressed a letter to the Government of Canada, alleging that the contents of the joss house were valued at \$3000 and that the building and contents belonged to the Chinese Benevolent Association.

Then Mr. Parker reported again to Ottawa that “the building was very old and dilapidated, and it would not pay to have the building demolished.” A patent was duly issued to Taverna in 1928.

The Chinese consul-general then replied, “It is true the building was very old and dilapidated, but has been repaired by the Chinese occasionally from time to time. It is unreasonably unfair to state the building has not been in use for twenty years. It is well decorated and the furniture is worth \$1000.”

The records further show that Chenhow H. Pao then reported the whole matter to Nanking to the government of President Sun Yat Sen.

Meanwhile, Chinese warned Taverna personally not to move the gods or goddesses.

Taverna did remove the gods and goddesses to his own woodshed. He then took over the Chinese joss house and converted it into a fine chicken house. Where the God of cereals, Shen Nung, once sat and received offerings, Taverna now throws scratch feed to his numerous fowls. A rooster crows where the god of anger once leered and winked. On land where Chinese of other days brought offerings of imitation money for the gods, Taverna now, by his

energy and thrift, derives an income of real money. Tramps can no longer plunder the premises because the doors are well locked.

But over the entire property still hovers the spirit of evicted gods and goddesses. They rest under that cover of the Italian's roof. But Taverna fears to destroy them and also dislikes the idea of continuing to board them. He might sell them, but he is not sure that he owns them. He came by them lawfully enough, he feels. But then, a god or goddess is not anyone's property. Such deities are of the other world, the Chinese believe. They are not real estate and they surely are not holdings and they cannot be classed as furniture.

The latest development in this strange case is that the Chinese continue to claim ownership of all that pertains to this certain joss house at Lytton. They are not unduly loud in their protests about it. They are not going to court about it. But officially the matter is not yet disposed of as between the consul-general's office at Vancouver and the land office at Kamloops.

Since Chinese point to the unemployment menace which affects the Chinese community of British Columbia so severely and declare that neglect of their gods is not unconnected with the present plight of Chinese labourers. There is not a wholesale dying off as in the eighties, when the building of the Lytton joss house helped to stay the hand of the Grim Reaper. But who can say what the future has in store. Taverna has not come under any blight as a result of disturbing the peace of the gods and goddesses. He and his family have flourished to the full. True, the death of Mr. James Murphy, the talented Ashcroft lawyer, who helped Taverna win the house, was under tragic circumstances. Many of the employees of the Dominion land office lost their positions at Kamloops when the railway belt, in which the joss house stood, came under provincial jurisdiction. But that may or may not be connected with the affair.

The provincial god of the lot, Shen Nung, became a deity 2825 years before Christ. The god of the six virtues has ruled over happy families in China for more than 5000 years.

(The Sunday Province, Vancouver, B.C. – date unknown)