

Opium manufacturing firms put in claims for damages after 1907 race riots

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Now 88, he remembers raiding the dimly lit cellars furnished with two or three wooden bunks, each with a paillasse or straw mattress where addicts would recline to smoke their drugs. Beside each bunk was a small table that held a spirit lamp used to heat the bowl of the opium pipe. “Bunk smoking”—in which one addict exhaled smoke into the nose and mouth of the person lying next to him—was the poor man’s way to get high.

“They get quite dreamy,” said Carter. “They doze off. If you crash in about that time it’s dark and they’re all running around... they don’t know what’s happening. It was a riot. They didn’t know where they were and they’d run into each other.”

Chinese addicts smoked the drug, while whites injected it, said Carter, who joined the RCMP in 1937 and was a Mountie for 30 years, including eight years on the drug squad after the war. The five-man squad was responsible for all of B.C., although most of the work was done in Victoria and Vancouver.

“It made a mess, too; you could tell a guy who was shooting opium. His arm seemed to be more scarred than a guy who was using morphine.”

Opium eventually went out of favour—it came in a brown cake, which made it cumbersome to transport, and had a distinctive, sweet odor when smoked that was easy to detect.

But it dominated the first and one of the most colourful chapters in the history of the young city’s drug problem.

THE BROWNISH-YELLOW resin from the *Papaver somniferum* poppy, opium arrived in British Columbia with the Chinese who joined the Fraser River gold rush of 1858. Al-



Police officers, customs and court officials pose with a canoe and vests used to smuggle opium in the early 1920s. The drug would be dropped into the water from freighters and recovered by traffickers using small boats.

photo courtesy Vancouver Police Centennial Museum

though opium was an ingredient in several patent medicines by the 1870s, smoking it was a predominantly Chinese habit. European immigrants had several other drugs to choose from—cocaine, ether, hashish, chloroform and absinthe, not to mention alcohol. Europeans did ingest opium, however, in the form of laudanum, an opium-alcohol mix sold as a painkiller, and a handful of whites also smoked the drug. By 1887, Vancouver’s chief of police reported approximately 50 white opium users in the city who were “beyond redemption.” The number of Chinese users was not recorded.

Importing, processing and smoking opium was legal in Canada for several decades. In 1884, Victoria’s Chinatown had 14 licensed opium factories that processed raw opium from India, while Vancouver’s Chi-

natown in the late 1880s had up to eight opium factories.

It wasn’t until after the Vancouver race riots of 1907, when mobs smashed shop windows of Chinese and Japanese merchants, that the Canadian government took an interest in opium. W.L. Mackenzie King, then deputy minister of labour, came west to investigate the riot. He was surprised to find two opium manufacturing firms among the businesses submitting claims for damages—he refused to compensate them—and was shocked to hear that whites were smoking the drug in Chinatown opium dens.

“This evil,” he commented in his 1908 report *The Need for the Suppression of the Opium Traffic in Canada*, “does so much to destroy not only the lives of individuals but the manhood of a nation.”

King was spurred on by the Anti-Opium League, made up of Chinese-Canadians opposed to the drug. Its members told him that, “Almost as much opium was sold to white people as to Chinese and that the habit of opium smoking was making headway, not only among white men and boys, but also among women and girls.”

The Opium Act, passed by Parliament in 1908, made it illegal to import, sell or possess opium without a license from the Ministry of Public Health. Licenses were granted only for those with legitimate “medical purposes”—pharmaceutical companies, druggists, doctors, dentists and veterinary surgeons. Smoking opium, possessing an opium pipe or being “found in an opium joint” were cause for arrest.

The Vancouver Police Depart-

ment’s annual report for 1908 records two arrests for breaches of the Opium Act. That same year, police made 1,202 arrests for drunkenness and for being drunk and disorderly.

In 1911, the Vancouver Police Department purchased its first patrol boat, in part to help search for opium. The drug was smuggled into Vancouver by ship and tossed overboard into the harbour, where it would be picked up later by smugglers in small boats. One ingenious scheme involved attaching the drug to a buoy and a block of rock salt. When the salt dissolved, the buoy would rise to the surface, marking the spot where the drug had been dropped.

Despite the new laws and police efforts, opium use continued to climb. The Vancouver Police annual report for 1915 notes 36 arrests for “keeping an opium joint,” 303 for being found in an opium den, 70 for opium smoking, 48 for possession and nine for selling opium.

In 1921, the novel *The Writing on the Wall* painted a graphic picture of Vancouver’s Chinatown opium dens, describing “corpse-like [addicts], stark naked” in dens whose floors were littered with “filth indescribable.” It was followed a year later by *Black Candle*, another anti-drug book, written by Emily Murphy under the pen name Janey Canuck.

Shocked Vancouverites joined the anti-opium crusade. In February of 1922, a host of Vancouver organizations—women’s leagues, churches, men’s organizations, hospital auxiliaries and the Vancouver Board of Trade—fired off letters to the federal government demanding longer prison sentences instead of fines, increased use of the lash, and deportation of aliens convicted of drug offenses.

The narcotics trade, wrote the

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