

View of Old Chinatown on Second Avenue North in Downtown, circa 1911. Photo LH-1948: Courtesy of Saskatoon Public Library.

Chinese settlement in the “Paris of the Prairies” By Raymond Douglas Chong

In the early 20th century, on the vast and windy prairies of Saskatchewan, along the meandering South Saskatchewan River, in the Meewasin Valley, on the west riverbank, a tiny enclave of Chinese dwelled in Saskatoon. They came in search of gold pieces in “Gold Mountain” (Canada). Generally arriving at Vancouver, they worked in the mines, farms, and railroads in British Columbia; they laboured in laundries, restaurants, and stores in the coastal and valley towns and villages.

From 1880 to 1885, under contract, thousands of Chinese immigrants laboured to build the Canadian Pacific Railway, the transcontinental railroad, to connect the land between the east and west coasts. After its completion and faced with rampant racism, the Chinese roamed across the Prairies to find work. They were sojourners of the epic diaspora of men from the Wuyi region of the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province of China.

Saskatoon, recently nicknamed the “Paris of the Prairies,” was incorporated as a town on July 1, 1903. At the turn of the century, the economy was booming for the city and its surrounding farming community. Also dubbed the “Hub City,” Saskatoon was a key stop for the Qu’Appelle, Long Lake and Saskatchewan Railway and Steamboat Company, which attracted Chinese pioneers to gradually settle in Saskatoon as labourers and merchants residing in a cluster of small businesses and living quarters that became known as Saskatoon’s Chinatown.

Struggling against racial discrimination

In 1885, the federal government enacted the *Chinese Immigration Act*, placing many restrictions on Chinese immigration and imposing a “head tax” of \$50 (\$500 by 1903) on every Chinese person who entered Canada. Not welcomed as new Canadians, the Chinese were instead considered to be temporary workers, and called “Celestials” or “Orientals.”

In Saskatchewan, the Chinese had no legal right to vote; moreover, through 1912 legislation, Saskatchewan was the first province to enact “white women’s labour laws” that prohibited Chinese owners of restaurants, laundries and other businesses from hiring white women to work in any capacity.

Chinese women and children were generally prohibited from immigrating with the men; in fact, *The 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act* excluded virtually all Chinese from immigrating to Canada, except for diplomats, merchants, and students. It was a lonely, Spartan existence for this bachelor society of married and single men living miserably without their families, left behind in the old country while the men laboured in Saskatoon.

In such an atmosphere of hostility and prejudice, the Chinese found limited opportunities beyond laundries, restaurants, and retail shops. Very few were able to escape the terrible conundrum of being a legal underclass in the “Land of Opportunity.” To protect their common interests and defend their legal rights, they formed a Chinese Benevolent Association.

Old Chinatown

Most Chinese in Saskatoon lived in the ramshackle buildings of Chinatown along 19th Street East, east of the Canadian National Railway tracks. By 1921, according to the federal census, 228 Chinese lived in Saskatoon.

Laundries lined the streets of Chinatown in simple wood buildings. Cafés featuring chop suey (Cantonese food with a Canadian accent) and grocery stores sprung up amidst the laundries.

The Mark family (also spelled Mah or Mar) from Guangdong Province became the most prominent Chinese family in Saskatoon. In 1904, brothers Bill and Charlie Mark established the BC Café on 2nd Avenue, serving western foods and chop suey to hungry patrons who ate at lunch counters and in its dining rooms.



SAB photo S-B3073: Chinese labourers worked on the Pennant Ferry road contract, October 4, 1918.

Changes in China

Meanwhile, in the early 20th Century, a new China was emerging amidst the decay and collapse of the Ching Dynasty. The last vestiges of the Imperial system were in rapid decline. By 1912, Sun Yet Sen was recognized as the premier of the new China under the Kuomintang (KMT, commonly translated as Chinese Nationalist Party); he constantly struggled with warlords to retain power until his death in 1925, when he was succeeded by General Chiang Kai-shek. The new China inspired many Chinese in Saskatoon with hopes and dreams for a better country. They raised funds for the Chinese nationalist causes and formed the Chinese National League to support Kuomintang.

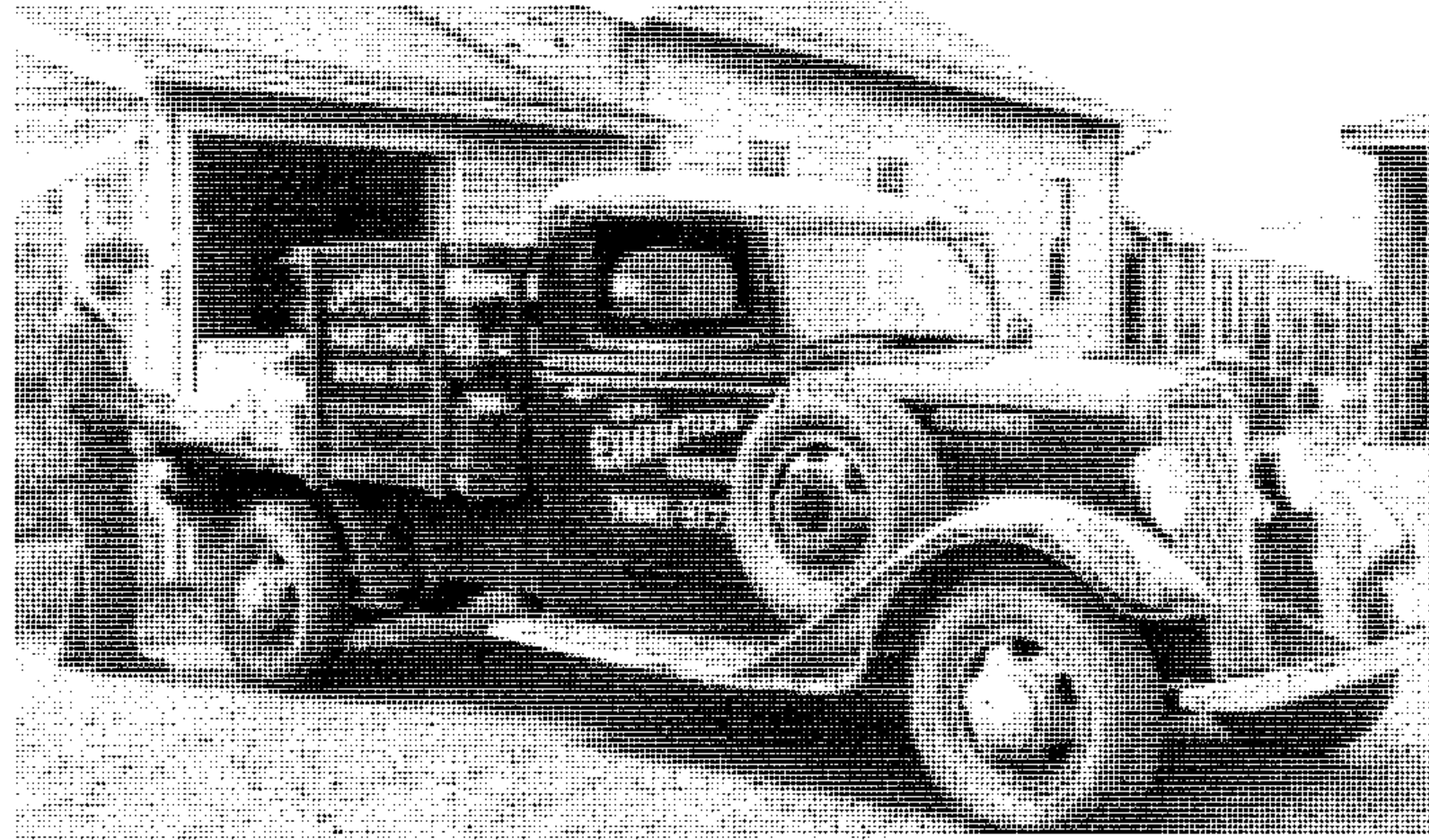
In 1919, on a tract of land at the northwest outskirts of Saskatoon, the Kuomintang established the Keng Wah Aviation School, “the Chinese airfield,” sponsored by the

Chinese Nationalist League. Its main purpose was to train pilots for the new China to fight warlords during a possible civil war: training an embryonic Nationalist air force. Its first graduate was Lim On, and Wah’s flagship plane was called “Queen of the Air.”

Focused on food: New Chinatown

By 1930, urban renewal development forced the demolition of Old Chinatown. Most Chinese businesses relocated from 19th Street East to 20th Street West and Avenue C, scattered along the business district of Riverdale, but the cohesion of Saskatoon’s Chinatown was diminished. Another blow to its residents: the advent of the washing machine forced laundries to gradually disappear from the Chinatown landscape.

However, following the Depression, the New Chinatown thrived – largely because of its traditional food offerings.



Left: Chung Hong, Mah Bing, Roland Groome and Charlie Spooner in front of Keng Wah Aviation School hangar, circa 1921. Photo PH-98-80-9: Courtesy of Saskatoon Public Library. Right: Cousins Shuen and James Lee operated James Lee Market Garden in the Exhibition subdivision of Saskatoon, on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River. Photo circa 1936; courtesy private family collection.

THE COMPANY FRUIT AND VEGETABLE MARKET

CANNED
SOUPS

TEAS &
COFFEES

FRUIT
CANNED
FRUIT

CEREALS

VINEGAR

SOUPS

CONDENSED MILK

VEGETABLES

EGGS

MEAT

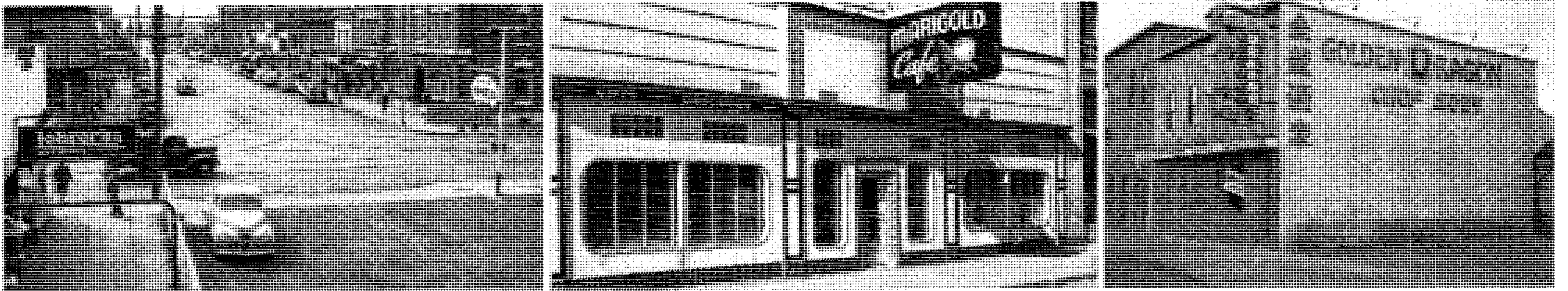
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THE COMPANY
FRUIT AND VEGETABLE MARKET

Kong Lee Grocery Store, at 144 2nd Avenue South, was a market for fruits, vegetables, fresh fish, cooked meats, and other groceries, including Chinese tea and imported cheese. Photo circa 1942. Photo A-1479. Courtesy of Saskatoon Public Library.





Left: New Chinatown on 20th Street West in Riversdale, circa 1955. Photo B-335: Courtesy of Saskatoon Public Library. Middle: Neon signs attracted customers to Marigold Café, offering Saskatoon's only Chinese smorgasbord. Photo circa 1941. Photo A-1854: Courtesy of Saskatoon Public Library. Right: The Golden Dragon Restaurant in New Chinatown. Owned by Bing Der, it was known for its healthy stir fry Chinese cuisine and operated for 50 years until its closure in 2008. Photo circa 1960. Photo QC-912: Courtesy of Saskatoon Public Library.

In 1958, for example, H.Y. Mark and son, W.Y. Mark, established the National Chop Suey Restaurant in Chinatown, known for genuine Chinese cuisines and Canadian specialities. The same year, Mandarin Restaurant was also founded and is still operated by the Lee family on 20th Street West.

Chung Wah Chinese Grocery and Seafood on 20th Street West provided groceries and seafood for the Chinese. The Orient Trading Company on Avenue C South, founded in 1968 by Arthur Mark, stocked imports, groceries, foodstuffs, ornaments, and novelties.

Finally, integration

As the era of official racial discrimination gradually closed, the Chinese integrated into mainstream society of Saskatoon. The *Chinese Immigration Act* had been repealed in 1947, allowing the men to sponsor their wives and families to Canada; by 1967, Chinese were finally free to immigrate without restrictions.

The Chinese Young Men's Association and the Salvation Army evangelized the Chinese to become Christians. Men and women married at churches. They graduated from the University of Saskatchewan.

Chinese clubs actively preserved and promoted their culture, including folk dancing, classical music, martial arts, and languages.

During the annual Traveller's Day Parade, the Chinese Young Men's Association, Chinese Free Masons, and Golden Dragon Restaurant exhibited their grand floats.

Raymond Douglas Chong is a fifth generation, California-born Chinese who now lives in Texas, USA. Raymond is a professional civil engineer, as well as a writer, poet and film producer whose written work includes Orchid Flower Love Poetry: Amorous Moods of Sensuous Passion. Endnotes begin on page 46.

Chinatown Saskatoon today

In 2014, Year of the Horse, after 110 years of Chinese settlement, little of Chinatown remains in Saskatoon. Patrons still flock to the Mandarin Restaurant for Dim Sum and Cantonese dishes; customers still buy groceries at Wah Chung Groceries and Seafood. Mark Wing's Noodle Manufacturing on Avenue D South continues to produce noodles.

But the legacy of Chinese restaurants is gone, with the sole exception of the Mandarin Restaurant. No plaques or memorials honour the memories of Old Chinatown in downtown, or even New Chinatown in Riversdale.

Now, every New Year, the Chinese celebrate the Spring Festival at TCU Place. The Chinese have prospered and are indeed a vital part of the diverse cultural mosaic of Saskatoon. But the bygone era of China in the "Paris of the Prairies" has faded to dim memories.

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Opposite page (all photos from private family collections) - Left: Fan and Tim Sham's Wedding Photo-1965: Arriving in Canada in 1950, Tim Sham opened the Western Noodle Factory in 1970 with his wife, Fan, producing a huge variety of noodles, including those made with peas, corn, and wild rice. During its heyday, they employed 14 people. In 1988, they renamed their business to Sham Noodle Company. Middle: Dr. Ivan Jen was born in Hong Kong in 1932. His grandfather built track for the Canadian Pacific Railway in British Columbia in the early 1880s, and his father, who paid a \$500 head tax when he arrived in 1911, worked in a Chinese restaurant in Old Chinatown. It would be years -- until the 1947 repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1923 -- before Dr. Jen finally reunited his family in Saskatoon in 1951. He obtained his medical degree from the University of Saskatchewan, while working two part-time jobs, and began his medical career in 1961. Dr. Jen married his classmate, Dr. Suzanne Yip; both seen in this photo. Right: Fan Sham and her son, Wing, when they first arrived in Canada. This page - Top: Golden Dragon Restaurant float in Traveller's Day Parade, 1961, features a pagoda and diners seated at a table. Photo B-8314: Courtesy of Saskatoon Public Library. This page - Bottom: Chinese Dragon Dance. Photo from SAB StarPhoenix collection S-SP-A8014-4: June 25 1973.