

“CHINAMAN” PLACENAMES

Statement

HON PIERRE YANG (North Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [6.20 pm]: Thank you for the opportunity. On previous occasions in March and May 2023, I talked about placenames bearing the word “Chinaman” in Canada, New Zealand and the United States and a number of east coast states in Australia. I also talked about the courageous pursuit by Roger Mah Poy and his colleagues in Canada to change the name of Chinaman Peak to Ha Ling Peak in Alberta, Canada and a Colorado community in Chaffee County that changed Chinaman Gulch to Yan Sing Gulch. These are encouraging stories that demonstrate the social progress and community sentiment towards a more inclusive and respectful community.

Today, I would like to talk about placenames in Western Australia. As I have a lot of information to go through, I plan to conclude my remarks in a second members’ statement in due course. To start the conversation about Western Australia, to recap, the word “Chinaman” is a racist term. It is derogatory and contemptuous in nature. It is on par with the n-word. In twenty-first century multicultural Australia and multicultural Western Australia, this word is no longer acceptable and that is why we do not hear this word often. That is until we look at a Western Australian map. There are 26 places in Western Australia that bear the word “Chinaman” in their names. They are as follows: Chinaman Bridge and Chinaman Well in the Shire of York; Chinaman Claypan, Chinaman Pool and two Chinaman Wells in the Shire of Ashburton; Chinaman Creek, Chinaman Springs and Chinaman Well in the Shire of East Pilbara; Chinaman Gully and Chinaman Gully Road in the Shire of Mundaring; Chinaman Road in the Shire of Serpentine Jarrahdale; Chinaman Rock, Chinaman Rock Well and Chinaman Well in the Shire of Yalgoo; Chinaman Well in the Shire of Dalwallinu; Chinaman Well in the City of Karratha; Chinaman Well in the Shire of Menzies; Chinaman Well in the Shire of Leonora; Chinaman’s Beach, Chinaman’s Drive and Chinaman’s Rock in the Shire of Northam; Chinaman’s Garden and Chinaman’s Gardens in the Shire of Halls Creek; Chinaman’s Pool Nature Reserve in the Shire of Carnarvon; and Chinaman’s Well in the Shire of Broome.

As discussed on the previous occasion, placenames can reveal much about a region’s historical, geographical, social and linguistic background and they also offer insights into the belief and value systems of the name-givers, as well as the political and social circumstances at the time of naming. In 1829, Mr Moon Chow was the first person of Chinese cultural heritage to come to Western Australia, shortly after the proclamation of the Swan River Colony. Moon married Mary Ann Thorpe in 1847 in Fremantle and they had six children together. Their descendants are still living in Western Australia today. In Western Australia, Moon was a well-known shipbuilder and carpenter who contributed significantly to building early Fremantle, including houses, shops and warehouses. He was unfortunately struck down and killed in the 1870s by a mail cart in Fremantle and this tragic accident prompted the authorities to impose a speed limit and night lights on the streets of Fremantle.

In fact, there were very few people of Chinese cultural heritage in the Swan River Colony until the late 1840s when the colonial government began to organise indentured labourers to come in response to chronic labour shortages in the agricultural and pastoral sectors. Indentured labour is one form of contract labour that required the person providing the labour to surrender the freedom to quit his job for an agreed period, though historically, deception, coercion and kidnapping were frequently used to obtain such labourers and, thus, contractual terms often reflected the disadvantageous position of the labourer. The words for an indentured labourer is “coolies” or “kuli” in Chinese, which literally mean “bitter strength” or “hard labour”. Throughout Western Australia’s colonial era, the authorities on a number of occasions spent public funds to arrange Chinese labourers to come to Western Australia, primarily from Singapore. Acting Governor Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Irwin did that in 1847 and 1848. His words to the Legislative Council were —

... I have every reason to believe that a supply of Chinese may be procured, a very valuable class of laborers, being an athletic race, of sober, industrious and persevering habits, and satisfied with moderate remuneration for their services.

These are very flattering words compared with many of the words used in the decades after. A couple of decades later, the Legislative Council authorised the Governor to spend public money to bring in Chinese workers on three other occasions in 1874, 1878 and 1879 for up to £1 000, £4 500 and £2 000 respectively. Nonetheless, opposition to this policy and anti-Chinese sentiments were always there in the community and indeed grew stronger over time. In the late 1840s, Western Australia’s weekly newspaper, the *Inquirer* published a number of opinion pieces questioning this policy. For instance, a piece published on Wednesday, 26 May 1847 exclaimed —

As for the proposed importation of Chinese, we have received advices from York stating the unanimous opinion there, that they would be perfectly useless for the hard work of the agriculturist—in fact, that their pigtails would be of as much service.

Again, three decades later, the then member for York, Joseph Monger, remarked during the debate in 1879 that three coolies he knew in his district were “perfectly useless” and “almost useless” and had to be returned to Perth

“at the public expense”. The then member for Vasse, Thomas Carey, declared that he would oppose any further importation of Chinese coolies as —

... there existed a very strong public feeling against their introduction in the districts where they were not required ...

The then member for Perth, Stephen Henry Parker, echoed the same sentiment and claimed —

... these coolies were only fitted for light employments, and were little or no use where down-right hard work had to be performed ...

He would oppose the “continued introduction of Chinese coolies”. Perhaps Mr Parker did not know that some 10 000 to 15 000 Chinese workers went to the United States to assist with the building of the Central Pacific Railroad in the 1860s. I would think building railways would not exactly be light employment as it could get a little heavy, especially when there was no mechanical machinery at the time.

As I said at the beginning of my statement, I have a lot of information to go through. I wish to continue my remarks at another opportunity.