

# Amid the devastation in Lytton, some glimmers of hope remain

Barbara Roden

When the Lytton Chinese Museum opened on May 13, 2017, an altar was the first thing visitors saw as they entered the snug little building at the south end of Main Street. The museum was built on the site of a historic joss house, erected by the Chinese community of Lytton in 1881 as a place of worship, and it survived until 1928, when it was torn down.

In 2016 the site was designated as a place of historic interest by Heritage BC, and owners Lorna and Bernie Fandrich had plans for it. Big plans. Many people who find themselves the owners of a historic site would be content with erecting a sign and calling it a day, but Lorna was looking for something to do with her time after retiring from Kumsheen Rafting, the family business.

So Lorna and Bernie, with help from some friends, built a museum.

Not just any museum. The Lytton Chinese Museum would honour the history of the thousands of Chinese workers who came to the B.C. Interior in the 19th century, first to search for gold, then to build the Canadian Pacific Railway. Many eventually settled in the Lytton area, and Lorna began acquiring artefacts.

In May 2017 the museum opened to great fanfare, with nearly 150 people — including Buddhist monks to bless the site — in attendance: no small feat in a town whose official population is 250.

In 2019 Heritage BC conferred an Award of Outstanding Achievement on the museum, to recognize “special projects and accomplishments in the field of Education and Awareness”. By July 2021 the museum held hundreds of artefacts relating to the history of the Chinese community in the area.

The original joss house held representations of two deities (that we know of). One was Shen Nong, the God of Cereals and Medicine, to teach people how to cultivate the land and look

for medication. The other was Quan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy.

Both deities were represented on the altar of the Lytton Chinese Museum. A third one was added: Zhu Rong.

The God of Fire.

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Fire marks the northern approach to Lytton along Highway 1. South of Lytton the land is giving way to the temperate rain forests of the coast, but north of Lytton is arid semi-desert land. In 2014 fire claimed the row of distinctive gambrel-roofed houses beside Ashcroft Manor, built during World War II as part of a radio range facility. In 2018 the historic Morens House near Spences Bridge — built in the late 19th century, and one of the most distinctive houses in the Southern Interior — was destroyed. The shadows of fires past stain the hillsides adjacent to the highway, dark patches where “ghost trees” still stand.

There is little sign of the fire that devastated Lytton on June 30 until a few miles north of the town, when you begin to see signs of something amiss. Power lines on the east side of the highway trail like tendrils of spider web over and through bushes at the side of the road, many of the poles gone. On the west side of the highway, at Skihist Provincial Park, there are a few burned trees. A bit further down the road the main lodge of Kumsheen Rafting is intact, but the field abutting the road to it — a field that in May is awash in green grass and the bright yellow of balsamroot flowers — is charred and black.

A semi has melted by the side of the highway a short distance from Jade Springs, where all that remains is a sign beside the highway, a mass of rubble and burnt-out vehicles. Jade Springs was designated as a staging point for emergency vehicles when the fire started on June 30; by the time firefighters from Ashcroft, an hour’s drive north, arrived, Jade Springs was



(top) The memorial to Chief Cexpe'nthlEm (left of centre), along with (from l) the community hall, parish hall, and Anglican church of St. Barnabas, survived the fire. (middle) The Lytton post office survived the fire of June 30, and appears almost untouched. (bottom) There is nothing left of the property immediately to the south of the Lytton post office. (Photo credits: Barbara Roden)

stage

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# Quan Yin, Goddess of Mercy, has watched over Lytton since 1881

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gone, and the staging point had been moved half-an-hour north to Spences Bridge, such was the ferocity and unpredictability of what was happening to Lytton.

From the highway above Lytton the scale of what happened on June 30 starts to become apparent. Fire has scorched the ground right up to the no-posts lining the side of the road; the trees scattered along the bank below, and the soil surrounding them, are black. Below, what can be seen of the town is mostly black-and-white, a stark contrast to the Technicolor of the blue sky above and the green forests on the other side of the river. Highway 1, which on a sunny day in early July should be teeming with traffic, is silent. There are no crickets chirping, no sound of birdsong from above. A line from Keats comes to mind: “The sedge has withered from the lake, and no birds sing.”

The air is acrid. It is not wildfire smoke, which residents of the Interior have become unhappily familiar with over the last few summers. That is bad enough, but this is something different, something more bitter and sharp that bites the nose and the back of the throat. It is the smell emanating from the charred remains of a community, from brick and wood, concrete and metal that has been through an inferno. We understand why no one is allowed off the buses that have been taking residents through the town, and why N95 masks are mandatory even on the bus, with all the doors and windows firmly closed.

We enter town from the south, along Main Street. Beside the highway a sign greeting visitors still stands, surrounded by green bushes. “Lytton: Canada’s Hot Spot” it reads, with an arrow pointing to the village centre. A smaller placard affixed to it reads “Firesmart Community 2018”. On June 29, the day before the fire, Lytton was busy living up to its motto, recording a temperature of 49.6°C: the hottest temperature ever recorded in Canada. It was the third day in a row that Lytton had established a new Canada-wide record; on the day of the fire the temperature reached a relatively modest high of 39°C, bringing short-lived relief to the residents.

The bus swings past Kumsheen ShchEma-meet School, until recently the town’s secondary school. It is not the first Kumsheen School on the site; a previous school burned down several decades ago, a reminder that Lytton is no stranger to fires. Major fires occurred

downtown in 1931, 1938, and 1949; hence the presence of Zhu Rong in the Chinese Museum.

Kumsheen was recently converted to a K-12 school, and in January the students from Lytton Elementary on Main Street transferred to the newly-renovated facility, which has survived, along with the upper end of Main Street. It is not until the bus has wound its way into the downtown area that the scale of what has happened becomes terribly, gut-wrenchingly apparent.

The fires in 1931 and 1949 each destroyed two blocks of the downtown. In 2021, almost the entire downtown section of Lytton is gone. Block after block is nothing but charred rubble, half-standing walls, burnt-out vehicles. The south wall of Lytton Super Foods looks intact, apart from a seared and drooping sign, but the glassless, blackened front windows allow a clear view of the interior, where nothing has survived. Houses have vanished, leaving only chimneys standing, thrusting into the sky like exclamation marks. Here there is a chair frame; there a bathtub. Behind one property a small, neat, brightly-white wooden archway stands unscathed, the building that was once in front of it reduced to ashes.

The village office and library are gone. So is the RCMP detachment, St. Bartholomew’s Health Centre, the ambulance station, the drugstore, Lytton Elementary, the café and art gallery, the gift store, the hotel. At the west end of 4th Street the brightly-painted mural at the pool is still visible, but the buildings either side are gone. One of them was the Lytton Museum, a repository for the history of a town that is one of the oldest colonial settlements in B.C., named in 1858 after Secretary of State for the Colonies Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, he of “It was a dark and stormy night” infamy.

Across the Thompson River at the north end of town is a CN rail bridge. The steel rails are warped in places; beneath them, the charred ends of wooden ties jut out at odd angles like bad teeth. Beneath that, the river flows serenely along as it has for millennia, only seconds away from meeting another mighty river, the Fraser. The confluence of the usually bright-blue Thompson with the muddy Fraser is a striking sight, and gave rise to the community’s Nlaka’pamux (Thompson) name, Camchin or Kumsheen, which means “where the rivers meet”.

The site has always been at the heart of the Nlaka’pamux nation. It was here where



Jade Springs north of Lytton on Highway 1, July 9, 2021. (Photo credit: Barbara Roden)

hundreds of Nlaka’pamux gathered to meet explorer Simon Fraser in 1808, the first European known to have visited the site. The great Indigenous leader and peacemaker Chief Cexpe’nthlEm (known to non-Indigenous people as David Spintlum) said of the site “At Lytton is my centre-post. It is the middle of my house and I sit there.”

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Fire is destructive, but it is also lazy and capricious. If it meets something that presents a challenge it will often give up and go around, while in other places where there are no obstacles it will make brief, tentative forays, sending out fingers of flame and then closing its fist and withdrawing, for no apparent reason.

At the north end of Lytton sits the Chief Spintlum Memorial Precinct, containing a stone monument commemorating the man who helped end the Fraser Canyon War of 1858. Clustered beside it are a small community hall, the Anglican church of St. Barnabas, and its parish hall. Amazingly, miraculously, the memorial and all three buildings appear untouched by the fire that swept past the site and came agonizingly close, as charred grass and trees perilously close to the church attest.

They are not the only buildings that were spared. The post office, built of cement blocks, seems unscathed, while the block beside it has been mostly levelled, apart from a metal staircase leading to a walkway that now hangs, unsupported, over the rubble, leading nowhere. A house on Main Street, between the health centre and the elementary school playing field, is completely intact. At the corner of 4th and Main, outside the ruins of the village office, the rainbow crosswalk — installed in June 2019 and recently repainted — gleams brightly, a vivid splash of colour amidst the monochrome that surrounds it. The playing field at the elementary school is green; beside it the playground still stands, the school beyond it gone.

There is already talk of rebuilding the community. Lytton has done so before after previous fires, but none have had the extent or impact of the fire of June 30. The work that will be necessary is staggering; the cost — not only in money, but in terms of resilience — unimaginable.

But Lytton has been the beating heart of the Nlaka’pamux people for thousands of years, and there is no reason to think it will not continue to be that, as long as there are people who want to live where the rivers meet. The newly-renovated Kumsheen school includes the Nlaka’pamux word “ShchEma-meet”, which means “children”. Perhaps it is a sign of hope

for the community that the school — the place for children, the future of any community — has survived.

Below the school, at the south end of Main Street, the Lytton Chinese Museum is gone. The altar bearing the likeness of Zhu Rong, the God of Fire, is no more. It is perhaps worth noting, however, that by far the largest of the three deities gracing the altar was that of Quan Yin. In addition to being the Goddess of Mercy, she is also the one who takes away fear, and who hears the cries of those needing help. Perhaps she still hovers over the site of the joss house and museum that once held her likeness, and is listening.

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CN rail bridge over the Thompson River, July 9, 2021, showing burned rail ties. (Photo credit: Barbara Roden)