

In the early days of Territory settlement, Chinese settlers far out-numbered the European population. Many came as merchants, as part of the Arltunga gold rush or to work the alluvial mines around Brocks Creek and Pine Creek. Some arrived by sea, some from gold mines in Queensland.

Thriving Chinese towns developed, with shops and joss houses, in mining settlements such as Brock's Creek, where thousands of Chinese immigrants worked alluvial mines.

The Chinese were accepted grudgingly by Europeans because their labour was cheap and they worked hard in the harsh climate and conditions. The Millar Brothers were awarded the contract to build the northern railway by offering a price of 600,000 pounds to build it with 'Chinese coolies' as opposed to 713,000 for European labour. Millar purportedly said that "a first class European navy was equal to two and a half coolies; however, in the tropics, white men were useless as they could not work in the intense heat in the cuttings".

Opposition from the local Chinese community (at that time numbering 7000) led to the Millars seeking an indentured workforce in Hong Kong and Singapore. The Chinese worked hard, with minimal equipment.

In the very early days there were no power trolley, the Chinamen just pushed their cars along the rails. They carried a bucket of crushed anthills for the earthworks on each end of a long bamboo pole they balanced on their shoulders. In next to no time bamboo was growing near the earthworks where they had dropped those poles.¹

Adam Lowe, former President of the Chung Wah Society, in 2000² recalled that his grandfather Low Depp Chitt worked as a blacksmith for the Millars in the 1880s.

My grandfather came to Australia in 1878 at the age of 17 to seek his fortune in the goldfields and to send money home to China to support the rest of his family. He never achieved that ambition, otherwise I doubt if I would be here today addressing you.

He, along with thousands of his countrymen, worked in the goldfields near Pine Creek and at the Mt Wells tin mine as a labourer. He gleaned an existence in these diggings but never found the promised "Gold Mountain".

When the North Australia Railway was started, my grandfather switched employment and worked as a blacksmith with the Railway for the duration of the contract.

As Adam Lowe observes:

In October 1886, a local Chinese agent named Kwok Fook Long, recruited the first batch of coolies from overseas. The newspaper of the time "The North Australian",

¹ Nellie Flynn, quoted in Patsy-Adam Smith, 1983. *When We Rode the Rails*, Lansdowne, Sydney

² Adam Lowe, 2000, *The role of the Chinese in building the Darwin-Pine Creek railway*, presentation at an event at the NT Library in September as part of the *Hand Made Railway* photographic exhibition

very much anti-Chinese in its sentiment, described the coolies as being “a poor lot of sickly fellows and could not see them doing any more than skirmishing around a pick a shovel for eight hours”. I think history has proved otherwise.

At its peak, there were 3000 Chinese employed on railway construction in the Top End, compared with 369 Europeans. Despite some disputes and occasional racial conflict, the railway was completed in 30 September 1889, eight months ahead of the agreed date. The Indians and Chinese who had been brought to Australia as labourers were repatriated. The local ‘Celestials’ (as the local Chinese were called) were discharged. Many went on to work as storekeepers, market gardeners and merchants.³ Many plied their trade by foot and bullock cart on the rough tracks between Southport and the goldfields, then followed the railhead to Emungalen and Katherine.

Adam Lowe regretted the lack of official recognition of the role of Chinese workers and their hard work under extremely arduous and trying environmental and social conditions. There are few recorded personal histories giving the human side of working on such a project. Many died in industrial accidents, in conflict with Aboriginal people or from thirst and hunger on the track to the gold fields. They are buried in unmarked graves.

Once the railway reached Pine Creek, Chinese numbers declined as people left to seek work elsewhere or were forced back to China by the ‘White Australia Policy’ and the anti-Chinese sentiment of the early 1900s. The proud ABCs (Australian Born Chinese) who stayed, built the early social and economic fabric of the Territory. Names such as Que Noy, Ping Que, Fong Lim, Chin and Ah Toy became synonymous with mining, civic and commercial life from Katherine to Pine Creek and Darwin.

The Ah Toy family patriarch Cheong (Jimmy) Ah Yu arrived in Australia in 1880 from Canton and died in Pine Creek in 1940, aged 85. He travelled from Queensland as a single man during construction of the Palmerston to Pine Creek railway. Grandson Eddie Ah Toy recalls:

He worked as a teamster with six to eight horses with a dray. It was all manual labour in those days, with sugar bag gloves.⁴

Everything had to be done by hand, from lifting a six-metre length of 40 pound steel rail, to installing the ironwood sleepers, lifting the track, and hammering in the bolts and nuts.

Cheong Ah Toy worked a small mine at Mount Diamond, near Moline, then a butcher’s shop on Bonrock Station. He married in his 40s to Leung Tem Choy, who was half his age. They had 10 children, the last when Cheong was 80. Eddie’s father Jimmy Ah Toy was born in 1915. The family came to Pine Creek in the early 1920s and started Ah Yu’s bakehouse and store with other members of the family. Jimmy married Lily Wong, from Darwin, in 1936. They had five children (Eddie, the eldest, was born in 1937) and adopted another five.

Dr Clive Fenton delivered me in the hospital ... (at that stage) there were more than 2000 Chinese in Chinatown, up the hill behind the store.

³ Lowe 2000

⁴ Eddie Ah Toy, interview in Pine Creek with Jane Munday, December 2023

In 1935, Jimmy Ah Toy started his own store, which for decades provided mail, fuel, grocery and agency services to railway fettlers, buffalo and crocodile hunters, prospectors and pastoralists.

After the bombing of Darwin in 1942, the extended family of 19 Ah Toys was evacuated to Adelaide. Jimmy Ah Toy remained in Pine Creek and supplied bread to fettlers' camps at Katherine, Fergusson River, Burrundie, Pine Creek and Grove Hill.

The fettlers used to get supplies from Pine Creek. Dad used to send fresh bread up. The Ah Toy bread didn't go mouldy, it kept for four to five days.

Then the army asked him to supply fresh bread. Jimmy Ah Toy had learnt from the Greeks to build a dome brick oven. Army trucks helped cart the timber needed to fire it up. Jimmy eventually joined his family in Adelaide. After the war, they were among the first civilians to return. Eddie recalls:

I remember after the war quite well. We came back in 1945. We were the first civilian store in the Top End allowed to open. Dad went from Adelaide to Alice Springs on the train. Then he bought a second-hand truck from (Kurt) Johannsen. I think he helped dad buy it. There were wholesalers in Alice. He bought hardware and drapery there. We had a kitchen table, a six-foot wooden table. He put it on the cab of the truck and the four children had to sit under the table (on the return to Pine Creek).⁵

When Mum arrived, she went out the back and burst into tears. The army had cleared everything out.

The Ah Toys continued to supply fettlers at Grove Hill, Burrundie and Fergusson River. The fettlers would give guards their envelopes containing money and orders. The Ah Toys would meet the train as it headed south about midnight, make up the orders, put the groceries in the shed along with any change, then the guard used an M lock⁶ for the shed to pick up the orders on the way back.

In those days, there were no trucks on the Stuart Highway. Everything was on the railway.... They were steam trains. They used to have to stop for water. The tap is still there. They would pump water from the railway dam into the tank. There was a big (pipe) with a hessian hose. They would fill the tank of the train.

Supplies from Darwin were delivered once a week in a goods wagon allocated to Pine Creek.

The train would come through in the middle of the night. (It) would shunt on to one of the tracks and we would come and unload in the morning. There were no refrigerated trucks. So they had a big icebox with a big block of ice. We would get frozen lamb and butter. It all came from Darwin, Thomas Brown in Darwin.

⁵ After the War a large number of surplus trucks came on the market

⁶ A type of padlock used by the railways

A gang of four fettlers worked on a quad with a petrol motor, travelling every day from Pine Creek to Burrundie or Fergusson River. There was also a telegraph linesman who used for check for faults on the copper telegraph line built along the railway.

The Ah Toys also opened a store in Darwin which was run first by Jimmy, then Lily so the children could attend High School. Eddie went to school in Darwin from 1951 to 1955, then returned to work in the Ah Toy store for a 'short time' ... which extended to 60 years. From the 1950s, the mine provided clothing, beer and equipment to the mines such as Mount Todd. Eddie tells of carting fuel to the Rum Jungle uranium mine and bringing back drums of yellowcake to store.

Over the years, Jimmy Ah Toy served as secretary of the Pine Creek Progress Association, chaired the school committee and nagged authorities for power, water and sewage services.

Dad's philosophy was that if you lived in a town you should do your best to be part of it.

The Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, came to unveil a plaque celebrating the 100th anniversary of Stuart's crossing of Australia.

We had a tea chest and on the front one we put a candle. On the second one we had a hurricane lamp. Dad told the Minister than in 100 years, we had just gone from the candle to the lamp. He asked when we would get electricity.

The electricity was connected in 1964. A powerhouse was built on the railway loop where ore trucks came down from Frances Creek iron ore mine and turned around. Eddie was paid a pound a week to maintain the automated power system.

When the railway closed in 1976, four fettlers' houses opposite the Ah Toy store were sold and the area is now a park. While road transport took over from rail, the loss of railway public transport made it harder for Pine Creek residents to send and receive goods or travel to events such as the annual Darwin Show⁷ and eventually an upgraded Stuart Highway bypassed Pine Creek altogether.

Jimmy Ah Toy (1915 to 1991) was awarded an MBE in 1985. Eddie worked in the store until it closed, as an exodus of people made it unviable to keep operating. Four generations of Ah Toys had worked in the store over 80 years from 1935 to 2015.

Eddie Ah Toy was elected the first president of the Pine Creek Community Government Council in 1987. He has volunteered with just about every organisation in town, served on the Volunteer Fire Brigade, chaired the Progress Association, served on the Bicentennial Committee and donated many historic items to the local museum (previously the telegraph station and hospital where Eddie was born). He was recognised as Territorian of the Year in 2005. Eddie and his former wife Pauline Chin have four children.

⁷ Comment by Gaye Lawrence, interviewed in December 2023