

Lee Fum Suey, known as Frank Lee, shows immigration certificate that was issued to him showing he'd paid head tax.

Chinese group to press Ottawa for redress over \$500 head tax

By ANN SILVERSIDES

Canada's Chinese have begun a campaign pressing the federal Government to acknowledge that Chinese immigrants were discriminated against when Ottawa imposed a head tax on those entering the country to work.

Tomorrow, the Chinese Canadian National Council will hold a forum in Toronto, to be attended by representatives from across the country, to discuss the head tax and subsequent legislation that virtually excluded Chinese from entering Canada between 1923 and 1947.

The Chinese were the only racial group made to pay a head tax when entering Canada.

Last month, after the Chinese community across the country had expressed keen interest in the issue, the CCNC passed a motion that "appropriate remedial action" be sought from the federal Government.

"The important thing is not only redress for the sake of redress; there is an additional educational purpose," said Lilian Ma, CCNC president. "We have to make clear that these sorts of things have hap-

pened, and that they should never happen again."

When CJVB, the Vancouver radio station "Chinese Voice," asked last February for Chinese who had paid head taxes to make themselves known, about 400 people came down to the radio station office that same weekend, said Hansen Lau, in charge of program development for the station.

To date, more than 2,000 people — the bulk of them in Vancouver and Toronto — have registered with copies of the original head tax certificates. About 30 to 40 per cent of those who registered were Chinese — almost all of them elderly men — who paid the head tax themselves. The rest were surviving relatives of those who paid the tax.

"Everybody saved the (head tax) certificates because, up until at least 1947, it was their only identification that would allow them to stay in Canada, and you could not leave or enter the country without it," Mr. Lau said.

The aging of the Chinese population who paid head taxes is one reason the issue has come up now, he said. "If we wait 10 years, there won't be many people left."

But Sui Lee, president of the CCNC's Toronto chapter, notes that the timing is appropriate for other reasons. Next year marks the centennial of the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, which was built in large part by Chinese workers.

Next year is also, not coincidentally, the 100th anniversary of the imposition of the head tax, said Mr. Lee. "The obvious pressing need for cheap labor was over."

A long-standing dispute between the federal Government and industrialists, who wanted Chinese immigrants for cheap labor, and the B.C. and Alberta governments, which wanted to keep the non-voting Chinese out, led to a 1902 royal commission on the issue, said Irving Abella, history professor at York University in Toronto.

The commission found that Chinese immigrants were "a menace and not really fit for Canadian society," with the result that the head tax, which was \$50 in 1885 and raised to \$100 by 1901, was increased in 1904 to the then hefty sum of \$500.

By 1923, when new restrictive

immigration legislation effectively stopped all Chinese from entering Canada, about 10,000 to 12,000 Chinese had come to Canada, Mr. Abella said.

Torontonian Lee Fun Suey, 72, was one of the last Chinese to pay a head tax and enter Canada. Mr. Suey was 11 years old in 1923 when his father, who ran a laundry in Winnipeg, visited China and brought his son back with him.

Chinese women were not allowed — of the 550 Chinese with head tax certificates who registered in the Toronto office of Daniel Heap, NDP member of Parliament for Spadina, there was only one woman, said community worker Olivia Chow.

Mr. Suey returned to China and married in the 1930s, but was not allowed to bring his wife to Canada until after the Second World War.

Last week at a Toronto CCNC meeting attended by 400 people, 95 per cent of those who had paid the head tax (or were related to people who had) indicated in a questionnaire that they wanted individual compensation for the head tax. Almost 83 per cent said they would not be satisfied with only an apology from the federal Government.