

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

GOVERNMENT OF CANADA commemorates national historic significance of Chee Kung Tong building in Barkerville

BARKERVILLE, BC, August 24, 2009 – On behalf of the Honourable Jim Prentice, Canada’s Environment Minister and Minister responsible for Parks Canada, Mr. Richard M. Harris, Member of Parliament for Cariboo–Prince George, unveiled a Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada plaque, commemorating the Chee Kung Tong building as a site of national historic significance this past Saturday, August 22. The ceremony was held in front of the Chee Kung Tong building, located in the Chinatown area of Barkerville Historic Town, western Canada’s largest heritage site.

“Today’s commemoration will help Canadians to appreciate and understand this important chapter in Canada’s history,” said Mr. Harris. “It recognizes the important contributions the Chee Kung Tong Building - the Chinese benevolent society’s hall - made to the life of early Chinese immigrants.”

This rare example of a 19th-century Chinese Freemasons hall conformed to a Chee Kung Tong tradition that placed services to members on the ground floor and formal functions above. With its hostel, kitchen, and meeting and ceremonial spaces, this hall offered members a refuge where they could find support, work, and shelter. The benevolent services, ceremonies and celebrations, and membership rules of the Chee Kung Tong fostered a sense of belonging in many immigrant Chinese and helped promote interpersonal and business relationships in early Canadian Chinatowns.

“The Chee Kung Tong Building in the gold rush town of Barkerville was built by the mid-1870s, making it one of the oldest surviving structures in the town site,” added Mr. Harris. “This building exemplifies the community building and sense of belonging produced among immigrant Chinese labourers and merchants in new settlements throughout Canada.”

On behalf of the people of Canada, Parks Canada manages a nation-wide network of national historic sites that commemorate persons, places and events that have shaped Canada’s history and which offer visitors the opportunity for real and inspiring discovery.

- 30 -

ABOUT THE HISTORIC SITES AND MONUMENTS BOARD OF CANADA

CREATED IN 1919, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada advises the Minister of the Environment about the national historic significance of places, persons, and events that have marked Canada’s history. The placement of a commemorative plaque represents an official recognition of their historic value.

The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, supported by Parks Canada, works to ensure that Canada’s cultural and natural heritage are protected and presented for the enjoyment, education, appreciation and inspired discovery of all Canadians, today and in the future.

ABOUT THE CHEE KUNG TONG NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

THE CHEE KUNG TONG building in Barkerville is the oldest known ethnic Chinese structure in Canada and represents a group of significance locally, nationally and internationally. The Chinese Free Masons, the builders of the Chee Kung Tong, represent a group that was dedicated to the overthrow of the Ch'ing dynasty. A secret society in China, they flourished in the Cariboo and British Columbia, providing services to their members in both in sickness and in health, as well as a community leaders and organizers for special days/events, funerals and the welfare of their members. Most Chinese who came to British Columbia were members, or affiliated with a member. Ninety-five percent of the Chinese in British Columbia were from a small area of Guangdong Province. They were the central and largest social grouping for the Cariboo, integrated with business and all socio-political aspects of the Chinese.

The Chee Kung Tong structure represents a continuing presence well into the 20th century and after the fulfillment of their initial goal of overthrowing the Ch'ing in 1911. The initial structure was built some time prior to 1877, possibly as early as 1869. The kitchen was added in 1882-83 and site analysis indicates that the northern portion of the building was added around 1905. The last head of the Barkerville chapter of the group passed away in 1949, less than ten years prior to the establishment of Barkerville as a heritage town. This continuation demonstrates the importance of the group in their role in other social activities, including:

- lobbying for the emancipation of people of Chinese heritage in Canada,
- lobbying for the repeal of restrictive immigration laws,
- the creation of seniors housing,
- the creation of medical facilities, and
- cultural enhancement of British Columbians through the sponsoring of special event, lion dancers, athletic clubs for children, special language classes, Chinese heritage groups, and major cultural events.

In total, the building and what it represents in Canadian life is a celebration of Chinese-Canadian cultural traditions from internal social interactions, to the larger socio-political scene over a 90-year period. Its interpretation in Barkerville Historic Town takes us one step closer to legitimizing Chinese history in Canada.

Its recognition as a Canadian National Historic site brings Canadians of Chinese Heritage hope that their ancestors will be also be venerated along side those of the other founding nations of this great country.

ABOUT BARKERVILLE HISTORIC TOWN

BARKERVILLE HISTORIC TOWN is the largest historic site in Western North America (www.barkerville.ca). Barkerville is provincially, nationally and internationally recognized for its historic significance associated with its place in western Canada's gold rush era and the role the gold rush played in BC joining Canada. Barkerville is widely known as a "must see" for travel itineraries in western Canada. The historic town is also a significant contributor to the Cariboo regional economy and is widely regarded as a unique component of the regional identity.

The Barkerville Heritage Trust, as Barkerville's operating and managing partner, works in conjunction with the Province of British Columbia, the owner and statutory guardian of Barkerville's heritage resources, to ensure that Barkerville is efficiently managed, entertaining and educational to visitors, and financially stable as the premier heritage resource and tourism attraction for the Cariboo. The ultimate aim is to maintain and enhance Barkerville's position as a nationally significant heritage resource and tourism attraction for British Columbia and Canada.

Barkerville is situated 80 km east of Quesnel, British Columbia in the foothills of the Cariboo Mountains, close to Troll Mountain Ski Resort and Bowron Lake Provincial Park. The nearby community of Wells (8 km from Barkerville) is the service and housing centre for the area (www.wellsbc.com) and is itself a dynamic cultural community, home of Island Mountain Arts, the acclaimed Toni Onley Artists' Project, the International Celtic Harp School (www.imarts.com), the dynamic indie music festival ArtsWells (www.artswells.com), and the Sunset Theatre (www.sunset-theatre.com). Wells is also situated close to a wide variety of winter and summer outdoor activities.

MEDIA INQUIRIES

James Douglas
Marketing and Communications
Barkerville Historic Town
Box 19
Barkerville, BC V0K 1B0

250-994-3302 ext. 41
888-994-3332 toll free
250-994-3435 fax

james.douglas@barkerville.ca
www.barkerville.ca

