

James Mah Poy

James Mah Poy knew everyone in Ponoka and they knew him.

Although his English was limited, he had no trouble communicating. The famously generous proprietor of the Union Café, in Ponoka, Alberta, never let a customer go hungry, extending credit to those short of cash.

Trained as a teacher in China, Mah Poy paid a head tax of \$100 to immigrate to Canada in 1902. Before starting his first cafe in Coronation, he worked in British Columbia, sending money home to China and planning for his family. For his wife to immigrate in 1912, he had to pay a \$500 head tax, then an enormous sum. Their children straddled both worlds but integrated completely, and despite the prejudice common at the time the family was well respected.

In 1952, when the Mah Poy's retired, more than 800 people dropped by the Union Cafe to wish them happiness. James Mah Poy and Liang Shi never returned to China, Ponoka was their home, and the Union Cafe centred that community.



James Mah Poy, Ponoka, Alberta
Glenbow Archives NA-5671-14B

Hog Day in Ponoka

Hog Day in Ponoka was the highlight of the week. Every Wednesday afternoon in the 1930s and 40s, when most communities shut their stores for a half-day holiday, Ponoka buzzed with farmers and auctioneers. Here was the leading hog shipping point in Canada and, on a good Hog Day, 20 carloads of pigs could be sent to market from the central Alberta town.

Once the pigs were sold, the farmers would gather to have a bite to eat, talk about the weather, and chew the fat with their neighbours. Their favourite spot was the Union Cafe, advertising “A-1 Service, with Special Attention to Farmers and Travellers.”

Owned and operated by James Mah Poy and his family, the Union Cafe served mainly western food, hamburgers and fish and chips. But customers could request fried rice, chow mien or sweet and sour pork.



Union Café, Ponoka, Alberta
Glenbow Archives NA-5683-16

James Mah Poy presided over the cash register while his children served. The culinary landscape of Alberta was changing, and he knew that hungry farmers were willing to try different food. Especially on Hog Day.

Born: 1878 – Died: 1959

Additional Resources

- **Alberta on Record**
<https://albertaonrecord.ca/mah-poy-family>

Our Collections

Glenbow Museum

<https://www.glenbow.org>

Glenbow Western Research Centre | Glenbow Library and Archives

<https://libguides.ucalgary.ca/glenbowlibraryandarchives>

Glenbow Library and Archives | Digital Collection

<https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca/asset-management/2R340826N9XM?WS=PackagePres&Flat=1>