

Wes: This week, History Detectives comes from California, and our first investigation begins in the San Francisco Bay. This is Angel Island. Between 1910 and 1940, it was the first stop for 175,000 Chinese immigrants arriving on our shores. Today, the story of these immigrants, like the island itself, remains largely forgotten. Most of the immigrants who passed through Angel Island never spoke of what happened to them here. This reticence means that, for their descendants, the story of where they came from and what it meant to be detained on Angel Island has often been lost. But the bitterness and misery of that experience is recorded in hundreds of Chinese poems written on the walls of the barracks. Kathleen Wong from Oakland wants to know if her ancestors were on Angel Island and if they suffered in the same way these poetic testimonies depict. I'm Wes Cowan, and I've come to Angel Island with Gwen Wright to solve this mystery. So Kathleen, tell us, what's your connection to Angel Island?

Kathleen: Well, according to my family story, my grandfather and my great-grandfather came to Angel Island before they were allowed to enter the United States. And I'm interested in finding out whether they were here for sure and whether or not they wrote any of the poetry on the walls of the barracks.

Wes: Kathleen, I think that we can probably help answer your questions, were your grandfather and great-grandfather here on Angel Island? Answering the question about, did they write any of the poems on the walls here in the barracks, is a very different matter. You know, before we get started, we need more information. Have you got a name of either of your ancestors?

Kathleen: In Chinese, my grandfather's name was Wong Doong Kay. I may have one other piece of information that might be able to help you. According to the family story, my great-grandfather died on Angel Island and his body was sent back to China.

Gwen: So could there be a link between Kathleen's family and the Chinese poems on the walls? We don't have much to go on, as Kathleen knows hardly anything about her family history, so I'm leaving Angel Island to visit Kathleen's relatives to find out what they remember.

Wes: In the meantime, I want to take a closer look at the poems, so I'm staying on Angel Island. Fortunately for me, a team of Chinese language scholars has spent the last year preserving and translating the poems as part of a new project to restore the building. The scholars are making computer enhancements of the Chinese characters to create better images of the poems that are difficult to decipher. By doing this, they hope to work out who actually wrote them. Newton, show me an example of a poem that's on the wall here.

Newton: This poem starts from here. This is four lines and seven characters. You know, I can see some ghosts there of characters but they're very difficult to read. [Reading in Chinese] The translation is right here, you see.

Wes: Ah, okay.

"My belly is so full of discontent, it is really difficult to relax. I can only worry silently to myself. At times I gaze at the cloud and fog and shrouded mountain front. It only deepens my sadness."

Is this a tradition that would have been common to all the Chinese immigrants?

Newton: I would say the poetry is in their blood, and poetry has a very strong tradition. Whenever there's a disaster, personal or national, the people always use poetry to express themselves, and they think that's a

very noble way to do things.

Wes: So far, nearly 175 poems have been translated. Many of the poems express the bitterness and anger felt by the immigrants detained on Angel Island.

"There are tens of thousands of poems composed on these walls. They are all cries of complaint and sadness. The day I am rid of this prison and attain success, I must remember that this chapter once existed."

"I suffered misery on the ship, and sadness in the wooden building. After several interrogations, still I'm not done. I sigh because my compatriots are being forcibly detained."

"The insects chirp outside the four walls. The inmates often sigh, thinking of affairs back home. Unconscious tears wet my lapel."

Wes: So why were these Chinese immigrants detained on Angel Island? During the gold rush of the 1850s, tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants arrived in California. At first, they thrived, but in the economic slump that followed, the Chinese became the easiest targets for white Americans facing poverty and unemployment. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was a blatantly racist law that imposed strict limits on Chinese immigration. And from 1910 on, most Chinese immigrants were sent to the Angel Island immigration station, where they suffered repeated interrogations and humiliating medical examination. Far from being a land of opportunity and freedom, America had been transformed into a place of fear and racism for Chinese immigrants. It was on Angel Island that they encountered this for the first time.

Gwen: I'm on my way to see if Kathleen's aunts and uncles can tell me any more about the family history. They probably know very little, so I don't think I'll get much useful information. First, I asked them how much they knew about their ancestry.

Relatives: No, not very much. Parents never told us much about their past.

Gwen: I wondered if Kathleen's great-grandfather had ever been to the u.s.

Relatives: No. I doubt that very much.

Gwen: And whether either ancestor had ever been detained on Angel Island.

Relatives: We don't know. No. No.

Gwen: I wasn't getting anywhere, until Kathleen's aunt Phyllis came up with something useful.

Phyllis: My brother recalls that Kathleen's grandfather's name on my brother's birth certificate was Wong Song Kay. And that we also remember that they traveled to the United States together, her grandfather and her grandmother, on the "Abraham Lincoln" sometime in the spring of 1924.

Gwen: So now I have an alternative name for Kathleen's grandfather, Wong Song Kay. And I have the name of a ship and the date it arrived. I'm at the national archives in San Francisco to search for both Chinese names in the immigration file indexes. These are available to relatives, and to anyone doing bona fide research. First, I'm looking for any reference to the name Wong Doong Kay, the name Kathleen had first given us. And I can't find anything. Now I'm looking in the passenger lists for the "President Lincoln" for any reference to Wong Song Kay, the name of the grandfather that aunt remembered. Here it is! "Wong Song

Kay." wonderful! Phyllis was right. Wong Song Kay came over on the "President Lincoln," and this gives me the complete identification number. With this number I can find Wong Song Kay's immigration file. This is the key. Phyllis told me that Wong Song Kay made the journey on the "President Lincoln" with his wife. This probably means that it wasn't his first trip to the U.S., as many Chinese men went back to China to collect their wives after they'd become U.S. citizens. His file contains records of all his trips, so I hope to find something that will tell me about the first time he arrived, which is when he would have been held for processing on Angel Island. Here's a picture of him as a young man. Nineteen, although he looks much younger. The person's becoming real. And here it is. "Commissioner of immigration, Angel Island, California." Now we have proof. Wong Song Kay was at Angel Island, the date, "September 18th, 1920." He came aboard the "S.S. Nanking," and he was there -- we'll have to find for how long. "Wong Song Kay, born October 29th, 1902, was admitted to the United States as a citizen September 29th, 1920." So he therefore would have spent 12 days, only 12 days, on Angel Island. Not much time. In fact, he was quite fortunate.

Wes: So now we know for sure that Kathleen's grandfather, Wong Song Kay, was definitely held on Angel Island.

Newton: The next question is, are there any poems written by someone called Wong? Wes, you had said that Kathleen's family name is Wong. There's -- the name Wong is associated with this poem. It's right up here. This is the character Wong. Do you know which character Kathleen's family uses? Because there's more than one Chinese character that's pronounced Wong in Cantonese. Gwen faxed me that information this morning and -- yeah, here it is. You know, those are different surnames altogether. In mandarin this is pronounced Waung, and this is pronounced Hwong, but in Cantonese they're pronounced the same, Wong. So this is the wrong surname. And this isn't going to get any easier, because most of the poems aren't signed at all.

Gwen: I need to find something on the great-grandfather. Here, the only lead I have is the name Wong. Maybe if I go through all the Wongs, I'll find something that will leap out. It's a long shot, but worth a try. And here's a file for someone called Wong Tsue. And look, he has a son named Wong Song Kay, who we know is Kathleen's grandfather. So if his son is her grandfather, he must be her great-grandfather. And here's a picture of Wong Tsue. Oh, here's Angel Island. So we have now he's arrived on June 21, 1915. And here, the 27th of July, 1915, he is denied entry. The application is turned down, but he's allowed the right of appeal. I now want to find something on the outcome of this appeal. This is important. "Medical certificate of release, October 13th, 1915." Wong Tsue has died at Angel Island. He's been there almost four months waiting for that appeal, waiting to try to get into the United States. And he's died there and his body will be sent back to china. But during those four months that he was on the island, did he express his frustration in writing?

Wes: I'm looking for poems written by anyone who might have been ill on the island, and there were plenty. There's a poem here which is about someone who was in the hospital and is now recovering from a serious illness. Let me just take a look at the translation here.

"When I began reflecting, I became sad and composed a poem. It was because my family was poor that I left for the country of the flowery flag. I only hoped that when I arrived it would be easy to go ashore." Who was to know the barbarians would change the regulations?"

I guess the barbarians are the American customs officials? In this case, it is.

"Imprisoned in the hospital, I was miserable with grief and sorrow."

We know that Wong Tsue was in the hospital at Angel Island.

"I do not know when I will be cured. If one day I can escape and rise to my aspirations, I will leave this place for once and for all and not be dependent on anyone."

Well, and of course, he didn't escape. He didn't rise to his aspirations because he died here. I know in my heart of hearts that there's virtually no chance that this poem was written by Kathleen's great-grandfather, but it seems to me that it expresses the kind of frustration that he must have gone through. It's just so hard to find anything concrete to go on. But hang on. Here's one that's really interesting. Let me just read this to you and tell you why I think it's really important.

"It was on the day that the weaver maiden met the cowherd that I took passage on the 'President Lincoln.'"

The "President Lincoln" is the boat that Kathleen's grandfather came to America on in July, 1924. So I think what I need to know is, what's this day that the weaver maiden met the cowherd? That could be a real critical key. According to Chinese myth, this is the day the separated lovers are reunited, which is usually in mid-august. It looks like another dead end, guys. Unfortunately. I may not have been able to find any poems that were written by Kathleen's grandfather and great-grandfather, but for me, it's been an incredibly moving experience. The many poems I've read have given me a whole new insight into the terrible suffering of Chinese immigrants detained on this island.

Gwen: Our research into whether or not her grandfather and great-grandfather were detained here has been more successful than we could have imagined. It's time to tell Kathleen all the news. Kathleen, we have a lot of news to give you about your family. First, we can tell you for sure that both your grandfather and your great-grandfather were here on Angel Island.

Kathleen: Oh, okay. And I'm so curious as to what happened.

Gwen: Kathleen, we didn't find any evidence that your grandfather or great-grandfather wrote any of these poems.

Kathleen: Guess that's the way it goes. Not enough information.

Gwen: But by reading them and looking at the contents of each poem, we got a pretty clear understanding of what your grandfather and great-grandfather must have experienced by being interned here. They were isolated. They were bored. They couldn't leave this place. They were angry. They were angry at the U.S. Immigration officials. They were angry at the Chinese government for not being powerful enough to have the United States automatically accept them. Probably the most difficult news that we have for you is that your great-grandfather did die here. In 1915, he spent four months being detained here. His -- his request for entry had been turned down. He was waiting for an appeal, and he died of heart disease.

Kathleen: Oh, how sad. Do you know any details about the circumstances other than that?

Gwen: Well, he might well have been sick before he came, but the conditions of living here were very difficult. People were living in very close quarters. His health failed. Kathleen, we've made for you copies of the immigration records of both your grandfather and your great-grandfather.

Kathleen: How wonderful.



## Episode 6, 2003: Chinese Poems San Francisco, California

Gwen: You'll be able to learn more about them.

Kathleen: Wow, that's my grandfather? He looks so much like my father. Thank you so much.

Gwen: We also have something else that we think you're going to be very interested in. Here's a picture of your great-grandfather, Wong Tsue.

Kathleen: Oh, wow! Thank you so much.

Gwen: It's our pleasure.

Kathleen: It's amazing.

Gwen: Before I left San Francisco, I felt obliged to share this information with the rest of Kathleen's family.

Relatives: My god. That's amazing. I'm just so happy...to know. It's good to know.