

With reflection and tears, Angel Island turns 100

San Jose Mercury News (California)

January 19, 2010 Tuesday

Copyright 2010 San Jose Mercury News All Rights Reserved

Section: BREAKING; Politics; Communities; San Jose - Valley; Special Reports; News; State; Local

Length: 1241 words

Byline: By Joe Rodriguez , jrodriguez@mercurynews.com

Body

Malin Tom is an "emotional man," which explains why he kept his journey through Angel **Island** mostly to himself for 60 years.

"I did not want to cry in front of people," says Tom, now 81 and living in Santa Clara. "It is a sad story. I was so scared and poor. I was ashamed, and **Chinese** don't talk about their shame."

But he could not resist a granddaughter's plea a few years ago. Would he talk to her classmates about passing through the "Ellis **Island** of the West"?

"My granddaughter gave me courage."

And when Tom finally spoke it was as if a dam holding back **immigrant** tears had cracked, replenishing the soil of American history with bittersweet truth.

On Thursday, a ceremony in San Francisco will commemorate 100 years to the date the opening of Angel **Island's** immigration station. The government will swear in 100 new American citizens. Some of the nation's top immigration officials will speak, as well as people who actually went through the **island** in San Francisco Bay, including poet Nellie Wong and her sister from Sunnyvale, Lai Webster.

The speakers won't sugarcoat the **island's** checkered past. Angel **Island** was different from its welcoming counterpart in New York Harbor.

About 500,000 **immigrants** passed through the **island** from 1910 to 1940. Of these, 300,000 were detained, a third of them **Chinese**. While most were ultimately allowed in, many, like Tom, waited months in a torturous limbo while their backgrounds were investigated.

"Angel **Island** was really there to keep people out, not to welcome them," says Judy Yung, a University of California-Santa Cruz professor emeritus of American studies and author of two books on the subject. "We need to remember that. How can we use the lesson of Angel **Island** to live up to our ideal as a nation of **immigrants**?"

By the late 19th century, the easy gold in California was gone, an economic recession had settled in across the country and a new wave of **immigrants** from Asia and southern Europe stirred up a nativist backlash. Congress looked for scapegoats.

Even today Tom asks, "Why did they home in on the **Chinese**?"

He was 12 years old in 1939 and living with his mother in a poor village in Canton province. His father, Yip Way Tom, had sneaked through Angel **Island** in 1916 as "Jack Chew," the supposed son of a **Chinese**-American family.

With reflection and tears, Angel Island turns 100

Under the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, laborers could only immigrate if they were the children or grandchildren of U.S.-born, Chinese-Americans.

"The Chinese figured out a intricate system right away," Yung says.

American-born Chinese who could sponsor relatives often sold their immigration slots to underground brokers, who sold them in Hong Kong to desperate immigrants like the Toms. Sometimes, undocumented Chinese here created entirely new identities on paper, especially after thousands of birth records were destroyed by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire.

The Chinese men who came to Angel Island with these false identities were known as "paper sons."

At 4 feet, 8 1/2 inches tall, young Tom boarded a ship in Hong Kong with a new identity, May Kwong Chew, son of Jack Chew, and "coaching" notes about the Chew family. He had to study notes between bouts with seasickness because he would be grilled by interrogators on Angel Island bent on ferreting out paper sons and daughters.

"After three weeks on a ship," Tom says, "the next three months were even worse."

Tom remembers going through three or four interrogations: Where was the water well in your village? How many steps did your front porch have? When did your uncle in America die? What company did he work for? Did he have birthmarks, and where?

Then he, like the other detainees, waited as immigration agents checked out his answers. Tom waited three months, about average, but some detainees were forced to remain on the island up to two years.

Nothing frightened him more than the whispers of suicides. Yung says some immigrants who flunked the questioning probably killed themselves on the island, but there is no official proof.

"They would have been too ashamed to go home and face their families and villages," said Yung, whose own father was a paper son and adopted the surname "Yung."

She estimates that 4 percent of Chinese were deported from the island.

Immigrants channeled their hopes and desolation into poetry, which they etched on the walls of their prison barracks. Tom read some of these, but "they made me feel even more sad."

To help pass the time, he played games with other Chinese boys in the recreation yard and picked up a few words of playground English. Because of the strict segregation, he never met boys from other nations, though he could see them during their allotted time in the yard.

Mostly though, he mulled over the interrogation questions during the day, complained about "terrible mush" and other western food, and cried silently under his blanket at night.

"I didn't want to make noise for the others," he says.

After three months, he was released and traveled to San Diego, where his father delivered produce to restaurants. On a much better diet, Tom sprouted to nearly 6 foot tall and played basketball in high school. He mastered English and kept his Chinese.

When he and his father returned to China in 1947, they learned Tom's brother and sister had died during World War II, probably from disease. Tom married, but with the communists taking over, he and his new bride moved to the United States in 1949 and sailed through immigration as Mr. and Mrs. Chew.

He might have remained a Chew were it not for the "Chinese Confession Program," a sort of amnesty for undocumented immigrants in the early 1960s, so long as they weren't communists or criminals. After three decades in the shadows, he became Malin Tom again, and a U.S. citizen. More than 18,000 Chinese paper sons and paper daughters also confessed and were allowed to stay.

With reflection and tears, Angel Island turns 100

He raised a family, and owned a nursery in Silicon Valley. And he never talked to anyone in detail about Angel Island.

"Not even to me," says his wife, Jean.

Too much shame.

In 2001, Tom returned to the island after 61 years with his adult children and grandchildren, who had begged him to go. He says the hardest part was visiting a restored dormitory, where he spent so many tearful nights, remembering the sound of doors being locked behind him.

"I cried again," Tom says. "I'm still an emotional guy."

Contact Joe Rodriguez at 408-920-5767.

An immigration station opens on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay on Jan. 21, 1910 to enforce the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

As immigrants from Asia, Russia and Mexico arrive, the station is dubbed the Ellis Island of the West, but its detainees are segregated by race, ethnicity and gender.

About 500,000 immigrants pass through over the next 30 years, the majority of them Asians.

While Europeans arriving at Ellis Island passed through in two to three hours, Chinese immigrants at Angel Island endure interrogations that often lasted two weeks to six months, with a few forced to stay up to two years.

On Nov. 5, 1940 the last group of 200 immigrants on the island " 150 of them Chinese " are transferred to San Francisco. Congress repeals the exclusion act in 1943.

Today, visitors to Angel Island can visit a museum, restored dormitory and read the poems carved into the immigration station's walls. Guided tours are \$4 for adults and \$3 for children. For schedules and directions, go www.aiisf.org or call 415-435-3392.

Source: Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation

Graphic

January 15, 2010. Portrait of 79-year-old Lai Webster of Sunnyvale, who made it through Angel Island as a child, at her home in Sunnyvale. This is the 100th anniversary year of Angel Island, the "Ellis Island of the West." Angel Island in SF Bay was where US immigration officials mostly tried to disqualify Chinese immigrants from entering the county. (LiPo Ching/Mercury News)

January 15, 2010. Portrait of 79-year-old Lai Webster of Sunnyvale, who made it through Angel Island as a child, at her home in Sunnyvale. This is the 100th anniversary year of Angel Island, the "Ellis Island of the West." Angel Island in SF Bay was where US immigration officials mostly tried to disqualify Chinese immigrants from entering the county. (LiPo Ching/Mercury News)

Malin Tom, 81, reflects on his experiences living on Angel Island at his home in Santa Clara on Jan. 14, 2010. Tom immigrated from China when he was twelve-years-old. Angel Island was his point of entry. It was not a friendly place. Sentiments against Chinese was still strong during the 1940's with laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 still looming. Angel Island celebrates it's 100th anniversary. (Gary Reyes/Mercury News)

With reflection and tears, Angel Island turns 100

Malin Tom, 81, holds the tattered cover of the original immigration documents that were issued to him upon his arrival to Angel Island in 1940 when he was twelve-years-old. This photo was taken on Jan. 14, 2010 at his Santa Clara home. Tom immigrated from China when he was twelve-years-old. Angel Island was his point of entry. It was not a friendly place. Sentiments against Chinese was still strong during the 1940's with laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 still looming. Angel Island celebrates it's 100th anniversary. (Gary Reyes/Mercury News)

Malin Tom, 81, reflects on his experiences living on Angel Island at his home in Santa Clara on Jan. 14, 2010. Tom immigrated from China when he was twelve-years-old. Angel Island was his point of entry. It was not a friendly place. Sentiments against Chinese was still strong during the 1940's with laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 still looming. Angel Island celebrates it's 100th anniversary. (Gary Reyes/Mercury News)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); ASIAN AMERICANS (89%); GRANDCHILDREN (89%); WRITERS (89%); CITIZENSHIP (76%); HISTORY (75%); FAMILY (65%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (63%); ETHNIC & CULTURAL STUDIES (63%); RECESSION (50%)

Industry: WRITERS (89%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (63%)

Geographic: SAN FRANCISCO, CA, USA (92%); SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA, CA, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (94%); GUANGDONG, CHINA (79%); NEW YORK, USA (79%); SOUTH CHINA (79%); UNITED STATES (95%); HONG KONG (79%); EUROPE (79%); ASIA (79%)

Load-Date: January 20, 2010