

Newspapers in Education Presents

ANGEL ISLAND

IMMIGRATION STATION

CHINESE IMMIGRATION

From 1910 to 1940, Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay was a major port of entry for many immigrants from the Pacific Rim and Central and South America.

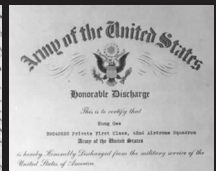
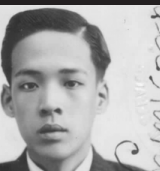
Chinese Immigration in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

Chinese immigration to the United States in the 19th century was first fueled by the prospect of wealth and fortune with news of jobs, opportunities, and gold in America. Chinese primarily left Guangdong Province in Southwest China to escape a cycle of poverty and chaos propelled by the Opium Wars, a deteriorating economy, natural disasters, food shortages, and political unrest and violence. In the U.S. Chinese immigrants filled labor needs, by working in the railroad, agriculture and fishing industries, and by opening laundries and restaurants.

However, economic depression in the 1870s raised anti-Chinese sentiment as white laborers and politicians blamed Chinese labor for California's economic woes. After increased violence and discrimination by anti-Chinese movements, the United States passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, banning all Chinese laborers into the country and severely restricting large-scale Chinese immigration. Only merchants, diplomats, scholars and students, tourists, and children of American citizens were allowed. Partially due to China's participation with the Allied nations during World War II, the U.S. repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 allowing Chinese to become naturalized citizens and permitted 105 Chinese to enter into the U.S. annually. In the late 1960s, larger numbers of Chinese were allowed to immigrate as the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 abolished the restrictive quotas based on race and nationality.

At the Angel Island Immigration Station

Established as a site to enforce the Chinese Exclusion Act, Angel Island Immigration Station processed approximately 1,750,000 Chinese immigrants. Upon arrival, immigrants underwent a medical examination, were housed in crowded barracks, and interrogated in hearings lasting two to three days. Inspectors had wide discretionary power in determining the fate of each applicant. Because of the exclusion laws, some Chinese immigrants adopted false identities, becoming "paper sons or daughters" - members of the exempt classes or children of American citizens who were allowed to enter the country. All Chinese were considered suspect and had to prove their identities by matching details about their lives, homes and families with those of their relatives in the U.S. Many Chinese relied on coaching books to help them prepare for the interrogation sessions. The average length of detention was two to three weeks, but ranged as long as two years. Some detainees carved hundreds of poems in Chinese into the walls of the Immigration Station's wooden barracks expressing their hopes, sadness and isolation.



An Individual's Story: STANLEY GEE

Stanley Gee was born in Hong Kong in 1917 and raised and educated in a village in Guangdong Province. In order to escape the Japanese attacks in China, his brother who immigrated to America in 1912, arranged for Stanley to come to the U.S. in 1937. Stanley came on a freighter where he slept below deck; he was seasick everyday of the 21 day journey.

After arrival in San Francisco Bay, Stanley boarded a ferry and spent 11 days at the Immigration Station. Although Stanley remembers that he expected to go through an immigration process, he did not realize that he would be locked up with fifty other Chinese men in one room. The officials regulated the men's meals, outdoor activity, and sleeping times. He says, "I didn't expect to be treated that way." He remembers seeing many depressed people and poems carved on the walls. A good word from an interpreter (who was Stanley's brother's relative) helped speed up Stanley's immigration process. Compared to others, his time at Angel Island was relatively short and his interrogation did not include many detailed questions.

Upon his release, Stanley met his brother in San Francisco. In order to learn English, he attended Lincoln School in Oakland and worked as a houseboy. Later he worked at the Richmond shipyard and served in the US Army Air Corp during World War II. After the war, he became a draftsman, attended UC Berkeley with assistance from the G.I. Bill, and worked at the Alameda Naval Air Station and Lawrence Livermore Laboratory. Stanley lives in Alameda with his wife Amy; they have five children and eight grandchildren. In 2003, Stanley's son Delbert Gee became the third Chinese American to be appointed to the position of California superior court judge in Alameda County. For over fifty years, Stanley has met weekly with a group of friends, some who share similar experiences of immigrating through Angel Island.

Activity

Research how your family came to America by interviewing older family members, looking at documents, or using the files at the National Archives & Records Administration in San Bruno. Share your stories with other students.

What are some of today's immigrants' experiences like? Look through the paper to find a story about the issues and difficulties that today's immigrants face.

photos: California State Parks, Stanley Gee, and Chris Huie graphic design: Stephen Lowe
Teachers: Order no-cost newspapers for your class, call (415) 777-6797 or visit www.sfchron.com/nie



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