

Archive Package: 1923–1946 (Exclusion Act)

Story Sheet: Wong Toy & Frank Wong – Alert Bay

Frank Wong was born in 1916, in Chinatown, in Vancouver. At the time, Chinese were restricted to living in Chinatown. They were not allowed to live outside of Chinatown. His father, Wong Toy, had a pawn shop, and they lived there. In 1934, the Wong family was looking to escape poor conditions during the Depression. When a friend of his father's offered them property in Alert Bay to open a store, the family moved. Frank was 14.

At the time, Frank recalls that the population of the town of Alert Bay was mostly Caucasian, with one Japanese family, who were ship builders—and three Chinese Families. The Long Chong family ran a general store too... "like a competitor," Frank jokes, about the shop right across the street, and the Dong family. There were a few single Chinese men—who were unable to bring wives from China during the exclusion period—a shoemaker, and another single man running a laundry, and a cook in the cannery.

Wong Toy decided to open a cafe, but the Depression meant that not many people had the means to eat out. Wong turned the cafe into a grocery store. The store also sold shoes, loggers' boots, supplies for fishing boats, and hardware items. The family lived on the top floor, above the store. Frank and his brother built a shower room that was used by the fishermen, who would come in on Friday and leave on Sunday.

Frank's first impression of the small village on Cormorant Island, across from Port McNeil on Vancouver Island, was that everyone was friendly. "It's like one big, happy family. You know everybody. You never lock the door. Even a lot of First Nations—we know them, they come to the store, it's more of a happy group there." He remembers life in Alert Bay as radically different from the discrimination faced in his urban life in Vancouver before. Frank recalls attending many potlaches, and recalled how everybody was invited. Everyone knew everyone in the small town, and no one locked their doors. "That's the thing about an island," Frank recalls: "Once you get on, you can't get off."

Frank recalls his family's friendly relations with the First Nations. The Wongs liked to eat rock cod, and when they found out the fishermen just threw it away when they caught it, the Wongs told the fishermen that they liked to eat it. After that, the fishermen would save some rock cod for Wong Toy and his family. Some of the First Nations in Alert Bay used the Wongs' store as a bank. They would ask Wong Toy to hold onto their money

when the fishing season was over and they'd been paid, so they wouldn't spend it. The Wongs were honest, and they never had any problems with this arrangement. When the fishermen needed their money, they'd come back and get it.

In Alert Bay, they used to can a lot of abalone. There was so much, Frank recalls, that they'd get sick of eating it! They used to only take the big ones, by hand, or spear them from rowboat. But then with the advance of scuba gear, divers cleared it all out. "If they left some of them behind, they'd still have some."

Frank and his brother used to go over to Nimpkish River, where it was warm and sandy, to swim in the summer, since Alert Bay's shore was too rocky and cold for swimming.

When Japanese fishing vessels were rounded up in Alert Bay and brought down to Vancouver, Frank Wong thought he would join the army, to prove his loyalty to his country. His mother, Leong Shee Wong, was upset. She didn't know why Frank was willing to risk his life for a country that denied him citizenship in the place of his birth. But Frank thought that maybe, after the war, there would be the possibility to get the franchise.

Frank went overseas, and fought in World War II, returning to BC. Frank's brother maintained Wong Toy and Sons Co. for a few years after his father, but sold the property after a while, as there wasn't enough business in Alert Bay over time to maintain it. The Wongs time in Alert Bay came to an end, but it had provided the quiet and accepting community, and the opportunity to prosper, that Wong Toy had hoped for his family when he first immigrated.



Main Street in Alert Bay showing the Dong Grocery, and Wong's Café, 1936

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