

“I was the only Chinese woman in town”

Reminiscences of a Gold Mountain Woman (1982)

Helen Hong Wong

The voices of Gold Mountain women are finally entering the public record. Judy Yung met and interviewed Helen Hong Wong in 1982 while researching the history of Chinese women in America. A petite and spry woman of seventy-four years, Wong immigrated to the United States as a merchant's wife in 1928. During the interview she spoke quite openly about her detention experience at Angel Island, her hardworking life in the Midwest, where she was often the only Chinese woman in town, and her struggles raising a family of four children during the depression years. Although she never realized her Gold Mountain dream of a life of wealth and leisure, she nevertheless found fulfillment in her work, family, and community. Wong made her home in Chicago, where she passed away in 2001 at the age of ninety-one. Her story is one of the few first-person accounts we have of life in the Midwest, where Chinese immigrants such as her husband went to start small businesses in the 1920s.

LIFE DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

When you heard people talk in China, you wanted to come. But when you actually arrived, you usually wouldn't like it. There were very few Chinese women in Fort Wayne then. Just a few dozen Chinese in town, two restaurants and two laundries run by bachelors. I was the only Chinese woman. Even in [Chicago] Chinatown, when we lived at this hotel above the Universal Restaurant for a week, I would look out and never see a Chinese woman walk by. No one for me to socialize with, I felt lonely.

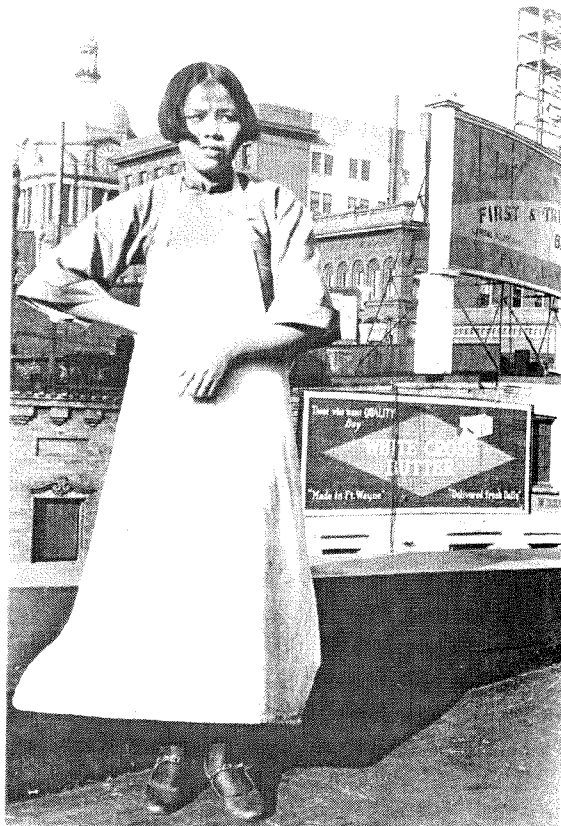
We lived upstairs above the restaurant and I would come down to help. Peeled potatoes, cut vegetables, washed the rice, helped with the dishes, everything. I was young then and didn't feel it was hard work. When I had free time I took my daughter [Lilly], who was a little over a year old, with me and went browsing in the dime store. No one bothered me. Fort Wayne had an open marketplace on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. So at night, I would go there and walk around. When I had the second daughter, Nellie, I didn't go out as much.

When we first arrived, the restaurant business wasn't bad. We made \$200 during lunch time. But come 1930 it was difficult. People had no jobs and no income. Then we made only \$2 during lunch time. The department store business was slow too. In 1932 we closed the restaurant because we couldn't pay the rent.

We moved to Chicago for a year. We had nothing to eat. The government was giving out corned beef, cabbage, potatoes, and bread to needy families, but my old man was afraid to go stand in line. Instead, he borrowed money from gamblers in Chinatown. Rice only cost 80 cents for one hundred pounds.

We rented a flat with six rooms for \$19. But there was no electricity, even when my son [William] was born, because we couldn't pay for it. During the winter the windows were all frosty and we closed all the doors and stayed in

building where the women were housed was destroyed in a fire in 1940, so no records remain of women's poetry. There are also very few documented cases of suicide, but many of the detainees remember hearing stories of suicide.



Helen Hong Wong
after her arrival in Fort
Wayne, Indiana, 1930.
(Courtesy of Helen
Hong Wong)

one room. Wrapped the two girls with blankets. We could only afford one bushel of coal for the week, which cost 90 cents. It got to be 40 degrees in the house.

No one in Chinatown had any money, just a quarter or a half dollar in their pockets, no dollar bills. A year later, a friend opened a laundry and we moved to Anderson, Indiana, to work for him. That's how we got into the laundry business.

THE LAUNDRY BUSINESS

We lived above the laundry in two rooms. [Their fourth child, Betsy, was born in Anderson.] I helped out with the wash, pressing, and ironing. It was hard work, long hours. We did everything ourselves. We hardly slept. There was no time for anything else. We worked Monday through Saturday, even Sun-

day if we didn't finish on time. Or I would clean house on Sunday. We did this for four years. Then the nephew came from Hong Kong and caused trouble. So we left and went to Kokomo, Indiana, to open our own laundry.

Kokomo was a small town about one and a half hours away. We lived on the premises again. Business was so-so. We started making \$20 a week and that grew to a \$100 a week. It was still hard work from morning to night, washing and ironing four hundred shirts a week. If we got behind, no Sunday off, nor time to sleep. I helped at the front when someone came to pick up laundry. Even though I couldn't read, I knew how to find the package by number. There was no time for anything else, only time to go get my hair cut. Again, we did this for four years. It was always four or five years and we would move again. Then their father died. It was wartime and there was no one available to hire. I couldn't do it alone, so I moved to Chicago, where I had friends.

WORKING AT A COOKIE FACTORY

I found a job working for relatives at the Dong Kee Bakery. Only made \$20 a month working over ten hours a day. After work, I had to do all the cooking and housework, but the kids helped out. Stayed there about three years, from 1944 to 1947. It wasn't a better or a worse job, just a matter of having enough to eat and a place to live. There wasn't anything to put in the bank. I wanted to send money to my brothers in Hong Kong, but I couldn't.

I left the bakery to go work for Nabisco cookies, folding boxes, packing cookies. My Italian landlady's daughter found the job for me. I was the second Chinese to be hired. Everyone was good to me, called me Mama, Mama. They asked me why I never complained to the union. There really was no reason to. I took the bus to the west side at 5:10 A.M. in the winter; 5:30 A.M. in the summer. I had to take three buses. Worked until 3:15 P.M. The hours were better. It was only 75 cents an hour when I started, but the foreigners [white employers] always have better working conditions—raises, insurance, vacation benefits. But by the time I got home and had dinner, I was tired and went straight to bed. Besides, there really wasn't much going on then. Not like now. I retired in 1977.