

# The Wong Family of Buffalo and the Chinese Exclusion Act

by Trish Hackett Nicola

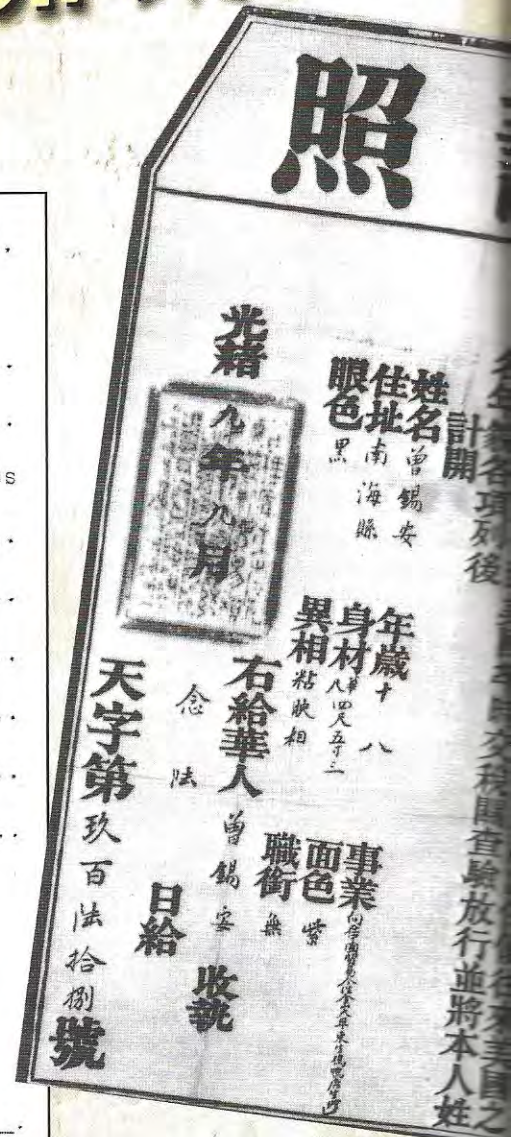
No. 33640 ..... Seattle, Wash., *Feb. 15* 1916..  
 RECEIVED FROM the Commissioner of Immigration,  
 Certificate of Identity number *20658*.....  
 Name *Wong Hong Sun*.....  
 Age *19*.....; height *5*.....feet *5 1/2*.....inches  
 Occupation *Student*.....; place *Buffalo, N. Y.*.....  
 Admitted as *W. S. A. Wong Ming Bow, solely because of his status as a citizen*.....  
 Physical marks *Small scar under left ear, lower lip; small pit near left temple; numerous other small scars on face.*.....  
 No *19*.....; ex s.s. *Titan*....., *Jan. 2* 1916..  
 Address *64 W. Genesee St.*.....



*黃同新*

Applicant.

Attest: *L. H. Mangels*



After the Exclusion Act passed, section 6 certificates, like this one from 1883, were given to the few Chinese immigrants that were exempt from the law, which included merchants. But the 1888 Scott Act nullified these, and the 1892 Geary Act renewed the original act and added more restrictions. COURTESY NATIONAL ARCHIVES, PACIFIC ALASKA REGION (SEATTLE)

After more than a month of waiting, this admittance form finally allowed Wong Ming Bow's 19-year-old son, Wong Hong Sun, to enter the country on February 15, 1916. COURTESY NATIONAL ARCHIVES, PACIFIC ALASKA REGION (SEATTLE)

- *Do you know the exact number of windows in your house or how many steps there are from your front door to the water line?*
- *What about the name of the person who lives in the second house on the left side of the street three blocks from you?*

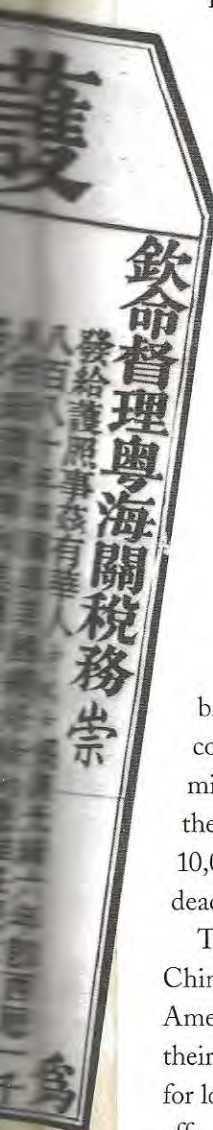
These are the types of questions a Chinese person had to answer every time he or she left or returned to the United States after the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882. Even if someone had not been to their ancestral home in twenty years, they still had to be sure their answers matched those given all those years ago. Wong Ming Bow, a Buffalo resident in the early 1900s, was born in about 1875 in San Francisco and was thus a legal U.S. citizen. But under the Chinese Exclusion Act, he was forced to register and carry a certificate of identity at all times and to assure that he could re-enter the country. Today, his accumulated file is just one of thousands held by the National Archives branch in Seattle. Perhaps ironically, the paper trail generated by a local family attempting to live with this unjust legislation now provides valuable genealogical information, as well as a rare personal glimpse into Western New York's early Chinese community.

### Suspending Chinese Immigration

The 19th century was a chaotic one for China; between 1802 and 1840, its population increased by 100 million, bringing its total populace to more than 400 million people. In 1838, China's Great Recession began, destabilizing the country for 100 years. Combined with a series of natural disasters that brought further devastation, this caused about 2.5 million Chinese to leave for other parts of the world before 1900. The United States, meanwhile, needed cheap labor for the mining and railroad industries, which the Chinese were willing to provide. Between the 1860s and 1880s, more than 10,000 Chinese laborers helped build the railroads, backbreaking and highly dangerous work that left at least 1,000 of them dead. Their bones were shipped back to China to be buried.

There were only 54 Chinese immigrants living in California in 1849 when gold was discovered, but by the end of the 1850s, Chinese immigrants made up 20 percent of the mining population in Northern California. Most believed the stories about America being the "Gold Mountain" and thought this to be a temporary move. They hoped to get rich quick and return to their homeland, but, of course, most did not find wealth. Those who came for gold were usually unskilled and willing to work for low wages at jobs most white laborers didn't want. Labor brokers would pay the passage for poor peasants who could not afford to come on their own, and the immigrant would pay back the loan amount at an extremely high interest rate.

Annual Chinese immigration peaked in 1873, when 23,000 Chinese entered the country. By 1880, there were more than 106,000 Chinese head of households recorded in the U.S. Census, most of who lived in California, with a few thousand in New York State and just six in Erie County. At the same time, the Panic of 1873, caused in part by a decreased demand for silver internationally, ushered in the Long Depression. Railroad overbuilding, coupled with large amounts of investment and risk, caused a chain reaction of bank failures and railroad bankruptcies. When the railroads were completed, many Chinese immigrants and other laborers lost their jobs.



Motivated by a fear that Asians would take over the West Coast and the desire to preserve jobs for whites, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The act suspended the immigration of skilled and unskilled Chinese laborers to the United States and prevented those already living here from becoming naturalized citizens. This was the first federal law excluding a single group of people from the United States on the basis of race or ethnicity alone. The first Exclusion Act was in effect for ten years, and each time it was renewed it became more and more restrictive.

In addition, things turned violent for Chinese immigrants already living in this country. In the fall of 1885, with a shortage of jobs in the West, many workers turned aggressively anti-Chinese, complaining of overly cheap labor competition. There were several massacres of Chinese at Rock Springs, WY; Hell's Canyon, ID; Squak Valley, WA; and at mining camps in Coal Creek and Black Diamond, WA. \*

In Tacoma, a horde of 300 expelled the Chinese before moving on to force similar expulsions in smaller towns.



On October 31, 1880, a mob attacked Denver's Chinatown area, destroying businesses and beating one man to death. This anti-Chinese riot was just one of more than a hundred like it across the country. \*A correction was edited after publication.

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With the caption, "A typical Chinese 'joint' in Buffalo," this image of a Chinese laundry appeared in the *Buffalo Evening News* in February 1902. BUFFALO & ERIE COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Panic of 1893, another financial crisis, caused even more anti-Chinese feelings, leading many Chinese in the West to disperse to other parts of the country. By 1900, there were Chinese people living in every American state and territory, including more than 5,000 in New York State. Chinese immigrants began settling in Buffalo in the late 1890s, and by 1900 there were 97 residing in Erie County. Many of these first residents were men who established Chinese laundries or restaurants, mainly on Michigan Avenue, Oak Street, William Street and Broadway; as of 1902, there were about 40 laundries throughout the city.

Unable to obtain legal immigration, many Chinese still found ways into the country, either by sneaking over or by being smuggled across the border. *Harper's Magazine* writer Julian Ralph investigated in 1891 and wrote that thousands entered the country this way every year. Though this happened most frequently in the Pacific Northwest, Western New York was also the site of many illegal border crossings because of its close proximity to Canada. *The New York Times* reported in August 1890 that two Chinese were captured after crossing the river and landing "under cover of darkness" near Ferry Street. "This seems to be a regular shipping point for the Chinamen, and it is said that many of them are being smuggled into the country daily," the article reported, noting that a man charged the pair \$5 to row them across the river. Other *Buffalo Daily Courier* articles from November 1901 reported on more arrests for Chinese violating the Exclusion Acts. Later, a February 1902 article in the *Buffalo Morning Express* titled "Big Chinese Haul" described two recent arrests, one of three Chinese on Abbott Road in Lackawanna, and another during which the officer noticed "a carriage

passing at a rapid rate of speed," held up the carriage at gunpoint and discovered five Chinese inside. It was in this climate that the Geary Act extended the original Chinese Exclusion Act in 1892, requiring all Chinese people in America to register and obtain a certificate of residence, which they had to carry at all times. Those without the proper paperwork or witnesses could be deported or imprisoned.

### The Chinese Exclusion Act Files

By the time the law was finally repealed in 1943, tens of thousands of case files on Chinese Americans had been created. Many of these files now contain valuable historical information, which is why regional National Archives facilities have independently decided to index these records. The National Archives facility in Seattle alone has 650 cubic feet of files; about 25,000, or 65 percent, of these records are indexed in a database so far. "The records are a major resource for the study of Chinese immigration and Chinese American travel, trade and social history from the late 19th to mid-20th century," says compiler Waverly B. Lowell, noting that these files document both the activities of the Chinese Americans who struggled against this prohibitive legislation, as well as the federal officials and their rationale. The files on the Wong family specifically provide a snapshot of Buffalo's early Chinese community, unavailable through many other sources.

In earlier files, a person's name was recorded in traditional Chinese order with the last name first, followed by their age, height, physical marks, occupation and place of residence. The inspector then usually added remarks, such as how much English they knew, places they had lived in the United States and how long they stayed in each one. Every person had a photo taken before leaving America, and this was compared to the person re-entering the country. A file also included the port at which they entered, their date of arrival and the vessel name, while the

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outside was stamped with the date the person was admitted, rejected or deported. Early files also sometimes have copies of affidavits from local courts that the person was given before they left the country.

The Chinese names can make these files quite confusing sometimes. The traditional name order was last name first, then first name and middle name. But sometimes there was a childhood or school name, and a married name, which usually had the same last name or family name, but completely different first and middle names. The person might also have a westernized version of his name, like Charlie or Jim. Immigration officials sometimes spelled out names phonetically as well, which meant that a name could be spelled differently on every record or even within a single document. When searching the files, it's important to consider all possible names the person could have used during his or her lifetime. Files also contain many numbers – port arrival numbers, alien registration numbers, court cases, certificate of residency and certificate of identity. When a Chinese person is looking for an ancestor, any of these numbers could provide an important clue.

As the laws became more restrictive and enforcement became tighter, the size of the files increased and now included a formal

interrogation, usually one to three pages long, listing both the questions and answers. If the inspectors were suspicious about an incoming Chinese they might interrogate several Chinese and Caucasian associates. Typical files also contain the name of the Chinese village and province or the American city and state where the person was born. Sometimes included are lists of family members with cross references to their files; return certificate applications; affidavits from witnesses; drawings or descriptions of a home or village in China; and birth, marriage or death certificates.

## Wong Ming Bow

Longtime Buffalo resident and U.S. citizen Wong Ming Bow made several trips back to China over his lifetime, and every time he re-entered the country he was required to go through a long process to prove his right to be in the United States. On July 7, 1911, Wong filed Form 430, Application of Alleged American-born Chinese, for a pre-investigation of status before he left the country. He signed his name in English and Chinese and gave his address as 64 West Genesee Street in Buffalo. Wong indicated that he planned to depart from Vancouver, and Frank N. Steele, the acting Chinese and immigration inspector, signed the application and interviewed him, with Wong Joe (no relation) acting as interpreter.

Born in San Francisco, Wong Ming Bow's boyhood name was Wong Pong. By 1911, the 35-year-old had already been

back to China twice, first with his parents when he was about 4. He had stayed until 1897 when, at 21 years old, he re-entered the country at Malone in Franklin County, NY, on the steamship *Empress of Japan*. Since he did not have papers and thus couldn't prove his citizenship, Wong was arrested at the depot and held in a two- or three-story brick building with about nine or ten other Chinese. Wong's father helped him, and after about two months Wong was discharged with the necessary official document that stated he was a native-born citizen. This precious document was the only proof he had of his citizenship – without it he could be deported.

The 1911 file reviewed all of Wong's dealings with the immigration authorities since

<p>..... Office of Inspector in Charge</p> <p>IN THE MATTER OF THE APPLICATION OF</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>W O N G M I N G B O W</u></p> <p>for a preinvestigation of his status as an alleged native-born citizen of the United States, under rule 16 (a).</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Frank N. Steele, Chinese and Immigrant Inspector</p> <p>Wong Joe, Chinese Interpreter.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">.....</p> <p>WONG MING BOW, being first duly sworn, testifies in English and partly through Wong Joe, as interpreted and sworn:</p> <p>Q. What are all your names? A. My boyhood name was Wong Pong; my married name is Wong Ming Bow.</p> <p>Q. How old are you? A. 35.</p> <p>Q. Where were you born? A. San Francisco, California.</p> <p>Q. Where do you live and what is your business? A. 64 W. Genesee Street, Buffalo; I am the proprietor of a restaurant.</p> <p>Q. Have you ever been to China? A. Yes, two times; first time was when I was with my father and mother and stayed until I was 21, then I came to the United States.</p> <p>Q. Where did you then enter the United States? A. Malone, N.Y.</p> <p>Q. What kind of a paper did you have then? A. I had no paper; my father came to get me and he had a paper bearing the seal of William P. Hall, for the Northern District of New York, dated 1906. It appears that said Commissioner found that I was a native-born citizen of the United States.</p> <p>Q. Have you been back to China since that? A. Yes, in 1906, in Chinese September, through the United States, through Malone, September 1906.</p>	<p>Buffalo, N.Y.,</p> <p>July 7, 1911.</p> <p>Wong M. g Bow....2....</p> <p>Q. From what steamer did you then land? A. Empress of Japan, at Vancouver.</p> <p>Q. Where do you live in China? A. Tung Mee village, Sun Ning District.</p> <p>Q. This paper which you present shows that you were arrested in the United States? A. Yes, I was arrested about two months. I was arrested at Malone in the daytime at the depot and they put me in a brick building which was two or three stories high.</p> <p>Q. How many Chinese were arrested at the time you were? A. There were about nine or ten of us at the depot in a bunch.</p> <p>Q. Who was the commissioner who discharged you? A. His name was Badger.</p> <p>Q. Did you get this paper from Mr. Badger in person (indicating discharge paper)? A. Mr. Badger handed it to me right in the court room.</p> <p>Q. Was there no photograph on that paper at that time? A. No, no photograph.</p> <p>Q. Is this the only paper you have to show your right to be in the United States? A. This is the only one.</p> <p>Q. When you came to Malone last time, from China, how long were you kept there before you were landed? A. I was discharged the same day I arrived there.</p> <p>DESCRIPTION OF APPLICANT: Age 35; height 5' 4 3/4"; diagonal scar one inch long under left eye; burn scar base of left forefinger; small black mole left cheek; front upper and lower teeth very irregular.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">*****</p> <p style="text-align: center;">F. N. Steele Chinese and Immigrant Inspector.</p>
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Wong Ming Bow's 1911 pre-investigation interview, during which the interrogator noted his physical appearance and asked about his previous trips to China.

COURTESY NATIONAL ARCHIVES, PACIFIC ALASKA REGION (SEATTLE)

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.--Northern District of New York.

Before me, Wm. P. Badger, a United States Commissioner within and for said district, complaint was presented by Nelson M. Porter, a Custom House Officer, of Malone, N.Y., charging in substance that on or about the 29th day of June, 1897, near Constable, in said district, one

WONG MING BOW

in violation of the statutes of the United States, did unlawfully come into the United States from the Dominion of Canada, and was then and there found within the United States, he being a Chinese person and laborer and not a diplomatic or other officer of the Chinese or any other government, and without producing the certificate required of Chinese persons seeking to enter the United States; and on the 29th day of June, 1897, said defendant was brought before me, the said Commissioner, at my office in Malone, in said district, and the proceedings adjourned from time to time, and upon a full hearing upon said charge, it was adjudged by me, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of July, 1897, that the said defendant

WONG MING BOW

was not guilty of said charge; that he was born in San Francisco, Cal., and a citizen of this country.

Given under my hand and seal of office at Malone, in the Northern District of New York, this 27<sup>th</sup> day of July, 1897.

*Wm. P. Badger*  
U.S. Commissioner for the Northern District of New York.

The discharge papers given to Wong Ming Bow on July 27, 1897. These papers were then his only way of proving his status as a native-born U.S. citizen.  
COURTESY NATIONAL ARCHIVES, PACIFIC ALASKA REGION (SEATTLE)

1897. In 1906, he left from Malone and returned the following year. Later, as he left Buffalo in August 1911, heading for Vancouver, Wong carried his native's discharge certificate that he was issued in 1897. His 1911 interview also gave his physical description: Wong was 5 feet 4<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches tall, had a diagonal scar one inch long under his left eye, a burn scar at the base of his left forefinger, a small black mole on his left cheek and "irregular" front upper and lower teeth. Besides comparing his departing photo to what he looked like when he returned, the inspectors could check his height, scars and other unique physical characteristics to verify that he was the same person.

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Wong Ming Bow applied to leave the county again in 1913. At that time, he was still the proprietor of the Yuen King Lim restaurant at 64 West Genesee Street in Buffalo. The interviewer asked about Wong's wife, Lee Shee, a 38-year-old native of Ong Hong village in China. The couple had three children: two boys aged 17 and 7, and a daughter born in 1912. Wong exchanged his discharge certificate for a certificate of identity, number 10150. A certificate of identity had a photo, was made of sturdy paper and, at 4-by-9 inches in size, fit into a durable storage pouch, making it much easier and safer to carry than discharge papers.

When Wong Ming Bow was about to enter the United States in 1916, he needed to once again prove that he was a U.S. citizen and had a right to come back into the country. He testified before the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of New York in Utica. Over a period of two months, William S. Doolittle, the clerk, reviewed a copy of the 1897 docket entries for Wong's case and declared they were a correct transcription. Wong Joe, who served as a witness, stated that he had known Wong Ming Bow for nine years and that he was the same person described in the original docket.

## Wong Hong Sun

On their return trip to the United States, Wong Ming Bow and his son, Wong Hong Sun, had arrived on the steamship *Titan*



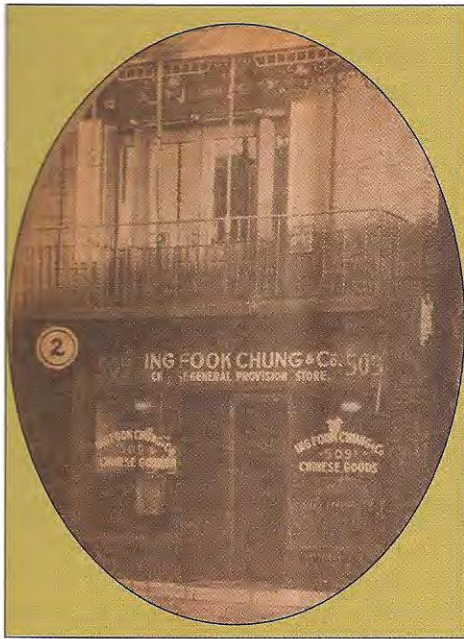
Each time a Chinese person entered the United States, a photo was taken and enclosed in their file. These shots of Wong Ming Bow were taken nearly 20 years apart, in 1913 and 1932, respectively. The 1913 photo appeared on his first certificate of identity. COURTESY NATIONAL ARCHIVES, PACIFIC ALASKA REGION (SEATTLE)

on January 2, 1916. Wong Hong Sun, who spoke no English, applied for admission as the minor son of Wong Ming Bow, and stated he was coming to America to join his father and attend school. Wong Hong Sun was 5 feet 5½ inches tall, had a small scar under the left end of his lower lip, a small pit near his left temple and numerous other small facial scars. During the interrogation, Wong Hong Sun was probably very nervous; at first, he said he had last seen his father when he was ten, but immediately said he was mistaken, that he'd seen him the previous year. He described his village of Me Wah as facing north with seven rows of seven houses, his house being the first home on the west side. Wong Hong Sun said he lived in a regular five-room house with his mother and younger brother and sister, and also had to describe his father's parents and their extended families, listing

their names, ages, addresses and children. Some other questions the interviewer asked were: Did his father know any of his teachers or playmates? Whose house is the seventh house from the west side of the village? Describe the families in the houses, including their names, ages and number of children. Then his father was interrogated to see if his answers about the village and his extended family matched his son's. Wong Ming Bow also answered questions about his finances and if his wife had bound feet. The files contain five pages of interrogation for the son and six for his father. Finally, on February 15, 1916, a month and a half after arriving in Seattle, Wong Hong Sun was



This section of Michigan Avenue, captured in the 1920s, was home to many of Buffalo's Chinese immigrants, who often lived above or near their workplace. Wong Hong Sun's family lived just out of this shot at 481 Michigan for four years. WESTERN NEW YORK HERITAGE PRESS COLLECTION



Published in 1930 in the *Buffalo Times*, this photo shows 509 Michigan Avenue. The Chinese Merchant's Association resided upstairs, while downstairs the Ing Fook Chung & Co. store operated, apparently having moved from 475 Michigan in the '20s.

BUFFALO & ERIE COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

approved solely because of his father's status as a native-born U.S. citizen and received his certificate of identity, number 20658.

Wong Hong Sun registered for the draft around 1918 in the second district and served in the U.S. Army as a private, number 5067632. In 1922, Wong Hong Sun went back to China to get married and planned to bring back his wife, mother, brother and sister when he returned. At that time, he was 25 and a cook at the King Wah Lo restaurant at 353 Main Street in Buffalo, the same address at which his father now resided. Passenger lists reveal the family did return on June 22, 1923, on the *President McKinley*, arriving in Seattle and then going on to Buffalo. Wong Hong Sun and his wife had five children while living in Buffalo, four daughters born between 1924 and 1931 and a son born in 1932, all delivered at home by Dr. F.A. Hayes. Wong Hong Sun's file indicates the family lived at 448 Pearl Street in 1924; 481 Michigan Avenue from 1926 to 1930; and 499 Michigan from 1931 to 1932.

By then, Michigan Avenue was at the heart of Buffalo's Chinese community, boasting several Chinese restaurants and



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An August 1922 meeting inside the Chinese Merchant's Association clubrooms. The officers, including President Lee Gan seated center, were discussing relief aid to China, which had just endured the devastating Swatow typhoon. BUFFALO & ERIE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

stores selling imported Chinese goods. The Buffalo Chinese Merchant's Association had its headquarters at 509 Michigan Avenue. The city's Chinese colony was a supportive network for local Chinese, who totaled about 130 people by 1944. "There are about 80 Wongs here, not all related by blood or marriage, but all from the same province in China," a 1944 *Courier-Express* article reported. "If a Wong comes to town, they take him into their homes and give him a job if he wants to stay here." The story went on to quote Peter Chin, a Buffalonian who re-entered from China around 1936: "Members of the colony always are ready to help each other. If one of us needs money for an emergency, the rest lend it at once, and if it is not paid back, they wouldn't dream of going to court to collect."

On Sunday, December 4, 1932, Wong Hong Sun – now indicated as owner of Joyland, an American-Chinese restaurant at 640 Main Street in Buffalo – arrived in Seattle from Buffalo with his parents, his wife and their five children. On December 10, the family left for China on the steamship *President Madison*,

hoping to come back in four or five years, though Wong Hong Sun's wife and mother did not apply for any return papers. In Wong Hong Sun's interview, he stated that his brother, Wong Sow Chuen, was married and working in a laundry at the corner of Elm and Eagle streets in Buffalo and that his sister, Wong Kim Fun, and her husband lived in North Chicago.

Wong Ming Bow returned to Buffalo by way of Seattle in September 1936. While away, living in Nom Hom in the Toy Shan district of China, his first wife died at age 60, and he remarried, this time to Hui Shee. Meanwhile, Wong Hong Sun, now 40 years old, was living in Nom Hong, but returned to the United States in April 1937 on the *S.S. President Jackson*, arriving in Seattle and continuing to Buffalo from there.

Four years later, his children arrived in San Francisco on the *S.S. President Cleveland* and were admitted as natives on July 9, 1941.

That year Wong Hong Sun, four of his children and his father, Wong Ming Bow, moved to San Antonio, TX. Wong Ming Bow died in Bexar, TX, 18 years later. His Chinese Exclusion Act case file provides an overview of his life from 1897 to the early 1940s, shedding some light on the lives of his children and grandchildren as well. It includes photos of him and his extended family at various ages, and lists the file numbers for his family members. It's hard to say if Wong's file is unique in giving so much information about his family. Many early files do not give much information, and some don't even have photographs, but if a person made several trips out of the country, a file would be created for every trip.

Each time this immigration law was renewed it became more restrictive, until it was repealed at last in December 1943. By then, as reported in the *Courier-Express*, there were 130 Chinese living in Buffalo, mostly men who had intended to make a



These photos appeared in the paperwork for Wong Hong Sun's children as they prepared to leave in 1932. Pictured from left are Hango, age 8; Hong Kew, 6; Dock How, 4; Tai You, 18 months; and Hang Jew, two months. COURTESY NATIONAL ARCHIVES, PACIFIC ALASKA REGION (SEATTLE)

living here and then return to their families in China. Earlier this year, the House of Representatives finally issued a formal apology for these injustices, echoing a Senate resolution from 2011. The Chinese Exclusion Act files will continue to call attention to the discrimination these laws instituted. Moreover, from a genealogical standpoint, they are rich in historical and personal information; the photos and documents are priceless. Despite their discriminatory origin, indexing these records will make it easier for Chinese Americans to find information on their immigrant ancestors. Buffalo resident Wong Ming Bow is just one of thousands of Chinese whose lives were impacted by these laws, and like so many others documented in these files, his story reveals an ugly – but important – aspect of American history and the history of Western New York. 🏠

Trish Hackett Nicola is a certified genealogist and owner of Family Traces. She has been a professional genealogical and historical researcher since 1991 and certified with the Board for Certification of Genealogists since 2000. A former librarian and retired CPA, her research interests are Washington State pioneers, the Chinese and the Irish. She lives in Seattle and has volunteered at the National Archives in Seattle for the Chinese Exclusion Act files indexing project since 2002. Trish was born in Buffalo and grew up in Java Center.

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