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AIOH-13, David Chan Leong  
Interviewer Christine Trowbridge  
June 10, 2005

**Time and Place:**2:30pm, San Francisco

Christine: When and where were you born?

David: I was born in Canton, China, in a village there, in 1932.

Christine: How large was your family?

David: Two boys, two girls.

Christine: Did they all immigrate with you?

David: No, I came over by myself.

Christine: Was anybody accompanying you?

David: My distant aunt and her family was in the... you know, so they sort of take care of me on the ship.

Christine: Oh, OK. How did that come about?

David: Well they were citizens of the United States. So they were coming over at the same time I was coming over so my parents put me on [the boat].

Christine: Were your parents already here?

David: No, my parents... my older brother and two sisters was in China. At the time I came over they were in Macau and my father was over here.

Christine: How and when did you decide to come to America?

David: (Laughs) I didn't decide, my parents decided.

Christine: So, your parents were in China, who was going to take care of you when you came to the US?

David: Oh, my father was over here.

Christine: How old were you?

David: I was eight.

Christine: So what were your expectations of America?

David: Hmm... [Chuckles] I wouldn't have any idea.

Christine: Any preconceived ideas?

David: Right, because I was small and I would rather be with my brothers and sisters than coming over here. And even though my father was over here- he was sort of a stranger to me because I don't see him that often.

Christine: [Pause] How did you prepare to come to America?

David: That I don't recall.

Christine: Did you come over as a paper son or daughter?

David: Paper- yeah.

Christine: And do you have any recollections about what papers you were using? Or what the information was on those documents?

David: Oh, yeah. I was using some papers, which my father purchased. And so I have to become familiar with the story and all of that stuff. The family history...

Christine: Did you have coaching papers?

David: Yes.

Christine: What was on the coaching papers? What do you remember about that?

David: Well, where I was living at, how many brothers and sisters I had, and, I guess, who was my father, you know.

Christine: Do you know who your father purchased the papers from and how much?

David: I am not to sure how much. But I know who he is. He passed away, but I mean, we came to know each other.

Christine: Oh, ok. That's interesting. [Pause] What specific things did you bring with you on the ship?

David: Myself! [Laughs] Not too much. The only thing I have... maybe about five dollars on me, you know, American money but outside that, just my clothes. Whatever clothes I had, that was it.

Christine: What do you remember about the journey over here?

David: It was rough. I was seasick the first five days. After that it was very enjoyable on the ship, seeing flying fish as we go by, I don't know where it was. And then in Hawaii people was pitching money overboard, and people were diving in. The natives would dive in to receive the money.

Christine: Where did you sleep on the boat?

David: In a bunk. In the lower bunk, I guess. I mean the lower deck and I don't know what bunk I had. So there was a family of let me see; one, two, three, four, five, six of us was in one room.

Christine: Oh, wow. So aside from that room, how crowded was the boat? Was there a lot of families coming over?

David: I guess there is a lot of families, but there is no recollection.

Christine: Do you remember where and what you ate on the boat?

David: [Laughs and shakes his head no]

Christine: Do you remember any of the passengers you met on the boat?

David: Eh, no.

Christine: What did you do to pass the time?

David: Oh, play like any eight year old would. I would play with my cousins, you know, after I got better from my seasickness. Playing what? I forgot, you know.

Christine: How long did that journey take?

David: About eighteen days.

Christine: Oh. Tell me again, it was yourself and you aunt and your...

David: Cousins.

Christine: How many cousins were coming over with you?

David: I think there was, lets see, four... three cousins and one in-law which was because one of the cousins was married- they came over together- and my aunt.

Christine: Did they all have papers as well or...

David: No, they were family.

Christine: Oh, OK. Did you encounter any problems along the way, on the trip over?

David: On the trip? No, the only problem I had was seasickness but outside that it was...

Christine: When did you arrive?

David: Umm, let's see it was November or September of 1940.

Christine: And where did you first land?

David: San Francisco, and then to Angel Island.

Christine: Ok. How were you transported to Angel Island?

David: I don't know what you call them, a little boat.

Christine: A ferry?

David: Not ferry, it was a six, seven passenger boat going over there.

Christine: What were your first impressions of Angel Island?

David: Uhh... it wasn't too much to begin with, but I was told certain parts- going to the latrine at night was kinda scary because they say ghosts, you know [chuckles]. People there hung themselves and all that stuff. That was scary. I was afraid to get out of bed at night.

Christine: Do you remember when you first got off the boat for the first time and saw the administration building for the first time? Do you remember what your recollections were of arriving at Angel Island?

David: Hmm... No, not uh... I don't know if there was some caretaker that looked after me a little, since I was by myself. I forgot whether there was any or not- there probably was... telling me what to do and all of that stuff.

Christine: Do you remember the initial questioning and physical examination?

David: Well, yeah, there was some examination. But I forgot how it went, and questioning? Questioning about my homeland and who my parents were.

Christine: Describe your living quarters?

David: Well it was big, hall-like, and it has wire bunk, which was, I think, three or four high and almost one-third size of a twin bed.

Christine: How many people did you live with in one room?

David: I would say quite a few. A rough guess is about thirty or forty, you know, maybe fifty, people.

Christine: Were you separated from your aunt or were you in the women's quarters?

David: I was separate. My aunt didn't have to go to Angel Island. They were citizens.

Christine: Ohhh. I see. So you were at Angel Island by yourself?

David: Right.

Christine: Who took care of you while you were at Angel Island?

David: Well, like I said, I don't recall that anybody did take care of me. Once I got there a few days, I probably befriended someone, I forgot on that...

Christine: It must have been hard as a young child on Angel Island by yourself. Do you recall anything on how you felt at Angel Island?

David: Yeah, very lonely, you know. Lonely at night but in daytime, playing, you could see things and playtime, that, you know, it's not so painful.

Christine: In what way did you understand... what was your perception of it as a child?

David: I don't recall how I understand it. I don't know if I *did* understand it, my life, or not.

Christine: Yeah, definitely. Wow. [Pause] What was the general sanitary conditions of the living quarters, as you recall?

David: It wasn't bad; I would say clean, the dorm was clean.

Christine: What stands out the most in your memory about where you lived?

David: Oh - When I went down to the grocery store and bought something to eat which is different from what the canteen, or the cafeteria.

Christine: Do you remember what you bought?

David: Yes. Sardine fish. [Chuckles]

Christine: Describe the people who you lived with, for example, what were their ages and where did they come from?

David: Hmm... I couldn't describe that I don't know.

Christine: Was there other young people there?

David: There probably was. I don't recall many young people.

Christine: Describe your daily life at Angel Island- was there a schedule?

David: I don't think there was much of a schedule for me. It wasn't like you were in the army or anything like that. You get up; you do certain things- you're on your own. The only time that might be would be for interviewing to go ashore, or not to go ashore, but to make sure the report or any question that they want to ask me is correct.

Christine: Do you have any impressions of how often new arrivals came and other people left?

David: No.

Christine: What were the meals like?

David: Well, it wasn't to my liking, as I would like to have it. That is why I went and bought something like spam, or sardines.

Christine: Where did you get the money to buy the food?

David: I think my father gave me some money before I went to Angel Island.

Christine: Oh, did you see your father before, when you stopped originally?

David: Mmhmm.

Christine: Oh, ok... was he able to come visit you during your stay at Angel Island, did you have visitors?

David: Uhh.. I don't recall on that.

Christine: Do you recall contact with outsiders, such as guards, matrons, missionaries, social workers?

David: No

Christine: What was your general impression of the people who worked at Angel Island?

David: Hmph. That I don't even want to recall.

Christine: What happened if you became sick?

David: Well, I don't remember because I didn't get sick.

Christine: That's good. [Pause] Was there thievery?

David: That I don't recall. Course, I don't have much for them to steal so they wouldn't bother me, you know.

Christine: Do you remember who told you the stories about the bathrooms and them being haunted?

David: Oh, it was some male, elderly male- I wouldn't say elderly, I would say people that was in their twenties or thirties; which is older than me.

Christine: Can you tell me what it was that they said?

David: Yeah, just 'there's people walking around there that shouldn't be there.' And so... [Short pause] -some of them, you know, were hanged. So I don't even want to recall how it is until I went back and visit the latrine, [and saw] what it really looked like.

Christine: Yeah, it's not too pleasant, I remember from when I visited. Did they tell it to you as a ghost story or as a warning story?

David: A warning, a warning story.

Christine: Do you remember if there was any poetry on the walls?

David: I think there were. Cause at that time I could read some Chinese, no more, but...

Christine: Do you remember reading the poetry on the walls while you were there?

David: Well, I would say I know most of the words, but I don't know all of the words because I didn't have much schooling then because of the war in China. So we were moving back and forth from one town to another, so...

Christine: Tell me more about the situation in China before you came over, and how your family was affected? The reasons they decided to emigrate?

David: Well, I guess when I was about four or five years of age, and Japanese came into our village start attacking us and we have to move onto Macau. And that's where we stayed for a few years. We went there once for a couple of months and then we went back to our village because everything was calm down, and then they act up again. And then the last time was 1936, 37, when we finally moved to Macau and we stayed there until I came over.



Christine: Oh, ok. Did the rest of you family come over later- were they able to?

David: Yeah, my mother and sister came over later.

Christine: Ok. Did you still have brothers and sisters there then?

David: No, no.

Christine: So your whole family came over?

David: Yeah, my whole family. My brother, which is older than I am, he's over there in Canada, Montreal. But my two sisters are over here in San Francisco.

Christine: Did your mother and sister- were they also get processed through Angel Island?

David: No. No, there was no Angel Island then... I was the last or very last few, that, uh... [Pause and Cough]

Christine: Going back to the poems on the walls, did they have any significance to you?

David: I don't recall effects it had on me, or what it meant or anything like that...

Christine: Did you see anybody writing on the walls?

David: No, no I didn't. I mean if they were I didn't pay much attention to them.

Christine: Did you see anyone passing coaching notes?

David: Uh... no.

Christine: Do you recall any extraordinary events while you were there, at Angel Island?

David: I wouldn't say... No.

Christine: ... For example suicides, or punishments or protests or special entertainment?

David: No.

Christine: Describe the interrogation process?

David: Hmm. They got me in a room and just keep asking me questions. That's about where was I born, who my parents was and, um, how many brothers and sisters I have.

Christine: What was the attitude of the interrogators to you, were they kind to you or were they rough? As a child it must have been...

David: I wouldn't say it's kind, I wouldn't say it's rough but uh, it was questions that- they try and put a lot of pressure on me. But I guess that at that time I have a very good memory, or something like that. I was coached on those things back in China before I came over here and you know. Whatever they say; this is your story, your life, you're new family and all. So, I had very good coaching before I came over.

Christine: What was the coaching information, what was the name, the family?

David: You mean who taught me what my family history would be like?

Christine: Well, just a brief description of what the papers said; what was your paper name?

David: My name? My name was Chan Wey Tong.

Christine: Do you remember the history of the name, your brothers and sisters- the things you had to remember? Do you still remember?

David: That... I don't remember much of that. When I was born, and then who my parents was, what house I live in back in China, that's about all.

Christine: Was there any surprising questions that the asked you, that you weren't prepared for?

David: Well, I don't recall any of that. Since I was the first of the family- the second family, I would call, came over. Later I find out that I'm a twin. Which... My twin came over too but I was never being interviewed on it so... and so that was something. [Trails off].

Christine: Do you recall how you felt- were you nervous to go into the interview?

David: I don't think I was nervous or not. Because I did not know what nervous was, probably! [Laughs] I was too young to say that I know... But I remember that whatever questions they ask I think I answer correctly, because I am more nervous today than I am yesteryear.

Christine: How long was it before the called you in for the interrogation?

David: I would say about three or four weeks after I was in Angel Island.

Christine: Where was it held?

David: I don't know if in Angel Island or in the office over in San Francisco, you know. I forgot.

Christine: Do you remember what the room looked like?

David: Well, it wasn't a big room, I would say about the size of the kitchen, with a desk and a couple of chairs.

Christine: Who was there? Who was doing the interrogations?

David: I think there was a Caucasian and an interpreter, that was it.

Christine: Do you remember the questions they asked?

David: Just what I said before, you know, who was my parents... I don't think there was many questions that was being asked.

Christine: How long was the interview for?

David: Half an hour, forty-five minutes, something like that.

Christine: Was there only one interrogation or was there several?

David: I think there was two or three before I came off the ship, I mean, before I went to my parent's house.

Christine: How long before you were given the results of whether you passed or not?

David: Um, I guess the last one, then within a week I was released from...

Christine: After the last interview?

David: Right.

Christine: And did you have to sign anything?

David: Boy, if I did, I didn't sign any. I mean, I didn't know if I did 'cause I didn't know how to sign- I mean, if anybody would sign I guess it's my paper-father that's signing anything.

Christine: And... obviously you passed the first time- how did you feel about the results?

David: When I pass, I guess I feel good, I guess. But, ah, it was just, well what I have to go through was just a little different, you know.

Christine: What was your feeling when you were finally allowed to leave the island and were reunited with your father?

David: It's almost like meeting a stranger. I mean I was more nervous in that than I was in Angel Island. I guess I got accustomed to Angel Island, but then meeting my father was just like meeting a new person, you know.

Christine: I see. In general, what would you say the effects the experience had on you?

David: The Angel Island...?

Christine: -and the trip, and the month... in general.

David: It was hard...it was hard, at times it was nice, I mean, I'm seeing adventure of the world.

Christine: I'm sorry, what was that?

David: It's a new adventure for me- but if I was very happy about it, I couldn't tell you.

Christine: You must have been a brave little kid. Wow. How would you describe your personality as a child? It seems like you were strong-willed, would you agree with that?

David: I wouldn't say that I was strong-willed. My choice of coming over here wasn't my choice; it was the choice of my parents.

Christine: Definitely. I see that. But just in terms of how you coped and how you handled it. What aspects of your personality do you think helped you handle the hardships of travel and staying by yourself? In what ways did you cope with that?

David: I think just like you said good strong willed. Cause I don't think that I was a weakling. You know, cause I doubt that I would get past, well, being what I am today. For a child, yeah, I think I was.

Christine: Yeah, I would agree. So aside from the feeling of adventure what other effect did it have on you, or is there any other effects?

David: Hmm. No, I don't think there are any other effects on it. I mean, I kinda regret leaving my mother. But I think I have more fun back home than over here. And since how rough it was back there, then there was no regret leaving China and come over here. But then over here was hard life too, you know, at that time.

Christine: Ok. This is a broad question- briefly describe your family, work and social life since Angel Island.

David: Since Angel Island? Well... left, went to school, and got married, raised four kids.

Christine: What school did you go to?

David: Well I didn't go through... highest level was ninth grade.

Christine: Here in San Francisco?

David: No Burbank Junior High- So I started working when I was sixteen.

Christine: And what was your career?

David: I had many jobs until I became optician back in 53' and that is what I was doing all the way until I retire.

Christine: We talked about this a little bit, but how did you feel about returning to Angel Island?

David: Returning to Angel Island? Well I took... I forgot if I took just my wife or the whole family over there, you know, and see what it is like. Seeing that- well, it's a history to me and what I have to go through but then I don't recall too much about what I have to go through. That is the worst part about it. But reading some of the hardships that some people have in Angel Island that is really something.

Christine: Yeah. Do you think future generations should know about Angel Island?

David: I think, I would say yes. Because it is part of history.

Christine: That's all that I have for the questions. Is there anything else that I might not have asked that you think is important to share about Angel Island and your experience?

David: Not too much. I guess you "Angel Island Memorial"- is that what you call it? - want to know, and I am one of those that does not have too much to say. Because I don't have too much experience- I was too young to remember, you know.

*End of Transcript*