

When we arrived in San Francisco, immigration officers boarded our ship to cross-examine us. When I said my name and that I had emigrated from Vancouver via Seattle, the officer examining me said, “I see no record of your emigration. Do you have a passport?”

My eyes widened, and my heart raced. “No,” I replied.

“Without proof of citizenship, we cannot admit you to the United States,” the officer said. “Stand over there until we can take you to the immigrant detention center.”

“What happens there?” I asked.

“If you can’t establish proof of citizenship, you may be deported.”

I felt faint. Had I made this journey across an ocean for nothing? What could I do now? I had the address of one of my mother’s relatives in San Francisco, but how could I get a message to him?

I then noticed a crowd gathered around the ship’s cook. He was Chinese, and many other detained Chinese were begging him to take messages ashore to their relatives. The cook was sympathetic. He had endured this process himself once, and he agreed to help all his countrymen as best he could.

“Sir,” I pleaded, “I am being detained. Would you kindly take a message to my uncle in Chinatown?”

“I will.”

“Thank you,” I replied, hurriedly scribbling my uncle’s address.

Now my fate depended on the kindness of a stranger. I gave the cook the address of my mother’s cousin, Uncle Fong Bing Sheung, who went by “B. S. Fong” in his business correspondence. He was president of the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce, and his vocation was providing legal assistance to the Chinese regarding immigration matters. If anyone could help me, he could.

In the meantime, I was deported to Angel Island on a tiny motorboat with hard wooden benches. The rough sea tossed the little boat up and down, so my rump hardly touched my seat before I bounced up again. The boat bruised my backside badly by the time I arrived at the island. There, I was to await my records.

Upon arrival, I was assigned a bed in one of the women’s barracks. These barracks had three narrow bunk beds on each side for six beds in one small space. At the end of the sleeping area was a small bathroom. Strung across the beds were lines for drying and storing laundry, for there were no closets. After an official had escorted me to this room, he locked the door behind me. My new roommates told me that we could not leave until mealtime.

“My name is King Ying,” I said, “or Helen.”

My roommates introduced themselves.

“I am a citizen. I don’t expect to be staying here long,” I said.

The women exchanged knowing looks. One said, “There are some women here who have waited two years for their paperwork to clear up. Some have had to go back to China. You’ll be lucky to get out in a month.”

At this, I was scared and fervently hoped the cook would keep his promise to deliver my message to Uncle.

At mealtime, our keepers unlocked the door and spoke tersely. “Time to go to the dining room.”

We stood and walked out double-file on the narrow sidewalk to the mess hall. I followed the other women.

The place looked like a prison to me. Everywhere, there were locked gates. In the mess hall, stew was served cafeteria-style in bowls on trays. After eating, we were escorted back to our barracks and locked in our room again.

Fortunately, the cook was true to his word and delivered my message the day he got it. Since my uncle specialized in immigration matters, he knew just what to do. When he heard, he went to Western Union to wire for my papers. The next morning, a worker brought me to a room where officials interviewed me.

“To verify your identity, we will ask you some questions. What is the name of your father’s brother?”

They were referring to my Uncle Ho Huang. Only I didn’t know his name at that time.

“I have never known his name. I simply call him Yea Sook, meaning Second Uncle.”

Fortunately, they asked me a few other questions about my family, which I could answer. Also, my papers had arrived and appeared to be in order. Combined with my English-speaking abilities and perhaps the straightforwardness of my answers, the officials were satisfied.

“Everything appears to be in order. You are free to go.”