



Ging Wei Wong 黃景煒

was born into a market gardening family in Edmonton. He retired after a 35-year career in air traffic services. The year he served in Tuktoyaktuk on the Arctic Coast, the locals thought he was Inuit. Wei is the co-editor of *Millennium Messages: An Anthology of New Asian Canadian Expressions* (1997), co-founder of Edmonton's inaugural Asian Heritage Month (1999), Statistical and Historical Advisor of *Talk to the World: Edmonton's Chinese Bilingual Program – The First 25 Years* (2007) and Associate Producer of the award-winning documentary film *Lost Years: A People's Struggle for Justice* (2011). He has volunteered with the Edmonton Chinese Bilingual Education Association for over 30 years and is web-master of www.asianheritage month.ca

Wei was a presenter at the 2015 Alberta Genealogical Society Conference in Edmonton. He has been working on his family tree since 1990 after the passing of his parents who left Toishan, Guangdong Province, China for a better life in "Gold Mountain" (Canada).

Retlaw and Bark G. Wong's Razor

By Ging Wei Wong

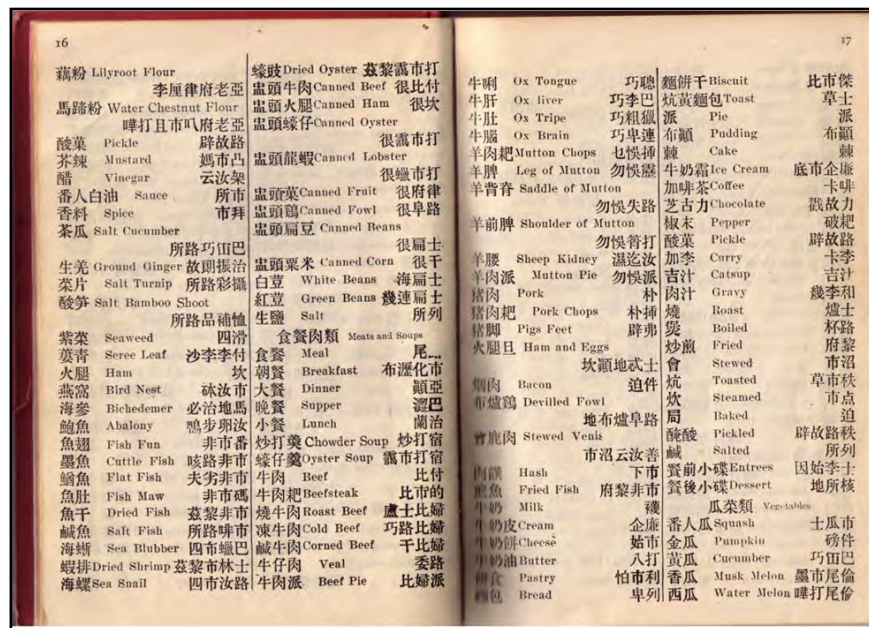
As I was reading the article *Being a Child Wasn't All Fun and Games* by Belinda Crowson in the August 2015 edition of *Relatively Speaking*, the mention of Retlaw, Alberta resonated with me. In 2003, I was researching the possible movements of my father, Bark Ging Wong since his arrival in Canada in 1921 as a 13 year old child from China. His immigration certificate records his arrival on August 8, 1921 on the Empress of Asia. He sailed from his home in Chew Ging, District of Sun Ning, Guangdong Province, in southern China.

As the oldest son in his family, in those days, he was expected to find work to support himself and send remittances home to help his family. No matter what kind of work he may have found, he would fit the description of a child labourer.

His sponsor may have given him some work initially, but he most likely had to become self-sufficient in short order. What kind of employment he found as a 13-year-old is uncertain. His early contacts may have given him some leads and references.

I do recall Bark Ging remarking that there was a kind gentleman in Vancouver who had the patience to teach him English, perhaps along with others, after his work day was done. He must have paid attention to his teacher as his handwriting in English was legible for the most part.

I wonder if that is where he obtained the *English-Chinese Phrase Book* (Thomson Stationery Company Ltd. 1897). The time period would have been between 1921 and 1923 as he made his way into Alberta by 1924. Bark Ging also acquired *A Practical English-Chinese Dictionary* that remained close to him for the rest of his life.



English-Chinese Phrase Book (Thomson Stationery Company Ltd. 1897) (Source: Wong Family Collection)

As far back as I can remember from the early 1960s, these two books were always present on the end table beside my father's favourite chair. He was also a long time subscriber to the *Edmonton Journal* and the *Chinese Times* newspaper that was published in Vancouver and mailed to our Edmonton address.

He did have an adequate knowledge of Chinese in order to correspond with his youngest sister in Hong Kong. He received letters from his sister on light blue Hong Kong Aerogrammes.



The Chinese Times, January 4, 1965
Source: <http://chinesetimes.lib.sfu.ca/>

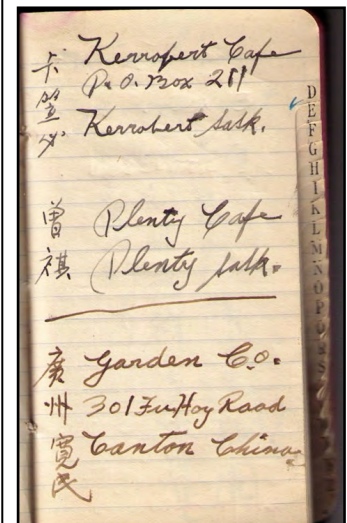
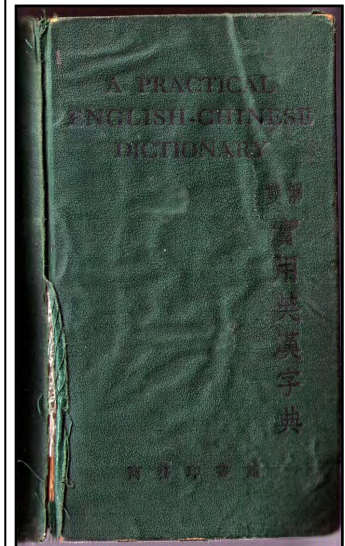
Many entries in an old 3 x 5½ inch black-covered address book that he kept were the names of cafes in towns in British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan. This led me to believe that he was referred to these places, worked at some of them, or had friends who did.

Some of the eating establishments recorded in his own handwriting in English and accompanied by Chinese characters were:

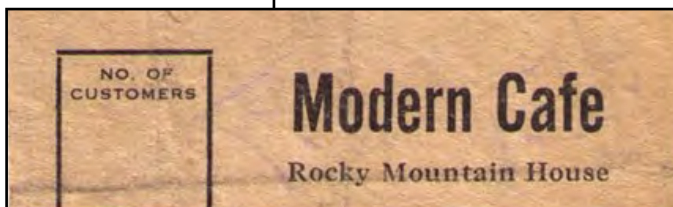
- Druid Hotel, P.O. Box 19, Druid, Sask.,
- Royal Café, Lamont, Alta.,
- Rox Café, P.O. Box 9, Alliance, Alta.,
- Boston Café, Tompkins, Sask.,
- Dominion Café, 10365 – 97 St., Edmonton, Alta.,
- New Public Café, 804 2nd St. E., Calgary, Alta.,
- Depok Café, Lacomb, (sic) Alta.,



Sample Hong Kong Aerogramme

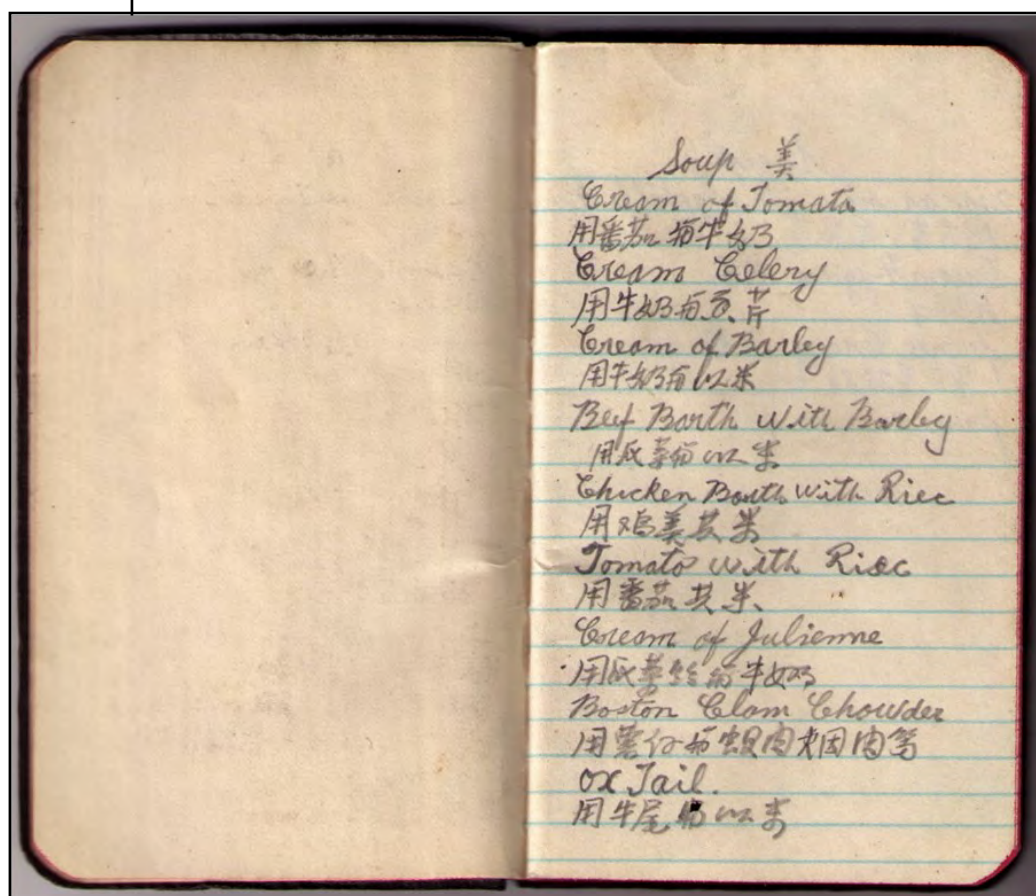


Address book and some entries.



Top part of a sales slip from Modern Café in Rocky Mountain House
(Source: Wong Family Collection)

Modern Café, Rocky Mountain House, Alta.,
Main Café, Saskatoon, Sask.,
Kerrobot Café, P.O. Box 211, Kerrobot, Sask.,
Plenty Café, Plenty, Sask.,
Lake Side Coal, Wabamon,(sic) Alta.



Bark Ging Wong's notebook with menu items in English and Chinese
(Source: Wong Family Collection)

There was also an entry, which would confirm the remarks from a couple of my relatives who said that Bark Ging worked in a coal mining camp kitchen.

In another black notebook measuring 3 x 5 inches, there were English menu items in Bark Ging's neat handwriting. After each entry, there were Chinese words possibly roughly translating the ingredients or a description of the dish. This could have been a sort of "cheat sheet" to jog his memory between English and Chinese to become more efficient at his work as a cook.

Soup

Cream of Tomato, Cream of Celery, Cream of Barley, Beef Barth (sic) With Barley, Chicken Barth (sic) With Rice, Tomato With Rice, Cream of Julienne, Boston Clam Chowder, Ox Tail, Macaroni with Vegetable Puree, Celery.

Entrees

Baked Stuffed Cabbage Roll, Irish Stewed With Damppling, (sic) Baked Individual Chicken Pie, Turkey Giblets w. Spaghetti, Saute of Beef w. Vegetable, Baked Pork Spar Rib gravy, Stewed Beef w. Corn Fritters, English Meat Roll, Fricasse of Veal w. Green Pea, English Lamb Chop w. Celery Sauce, Kidney Stewed w. Bacon, Baked Veal Steak pie Family Style, Baked Kidney Pudding English Style, Fried Chicken Liver w. Scrambled Eggs, Fried Leg of Chicken Cream Sauce, Baked Short Ribs Brown Potato, Stuffed Pork Tenderloin Conutry (sic) Gravy.

Boiled

Finnan Haddie Steamed Potato, Halibut Sweet Pickle Sauce, Boiled White Fish Spinach Sauce, Corned Beef w. Cabbage, Spar(sic) Ribs With Cabbage, Fresh Flank Beef w. Spinach Sauce, Fresh Pork Hock w. Hot Slaw, Young Fowl w. pickle pork, Boiled Ham w. Cabbage, Pickle Pork w. Lima Beans, Boiled Leg of Chicken w. Sauce.

Like many of his compatriots, I'm confident he acquired his cooking skills in one or more of the prairie restaurants, cafes or the coal mining camps listed in his little black book. But which restaurant did he work at that compelled him to record the menu?

If he indeed learned to produce each of these menu items, he would have acquired enough knowledge and skill to run his own restaurant.

I remembered one of my father's possessions – a Gillette safety razor inside an embossed case. I saw him faithfully use this razor every day until he suffered a stroke in early November 1988. The box was embossed with: Compliments of LANG GUM Groceries & Meats, Phone 12, RETLAW, ALTA.



*Bark Ging Wong's gold-embossed 1930 Gillette Safety Razor case
(Source: Wong Family Collection)*



Contents of Bark Ging Wong's Gillette Safety Razor case
(Source: Wong Family Collection)

An email I sent on July 13, 2003 to the late Brian L. Evans, University of Alberta Professor Emeritus, asked if we could find out when the business of Lang Gum operated. It may give us a clue as to when Bark Ging Wong may have been in the Retlaw area. One of the clues was the 2-digit phone number.

This elicited a response not even 12 hours later and it turned out that Retlaw was very close to where Brian Evans grew up, north of Taber. "It was across the river not far from Vauxhall," he said. Turned out that he had a Directory of Chinese Businesses for 1934 and Gum Long Groceries was listed at Retlaw, but without a phone number. He had a record with a photo for Leung Com of Retlaw who settled there in 1913 and ran a restaurant there in 1918.

It was not uncommon for Canadian Immigration Officers to record Chinese names as best they could in English, but in the next instance, they could spell it differently. A Gum Long arrived in Canada on April 5, 1899, age 18 and went first to Taber, he told me. Before the day was done, Brian Evans had more information to give me. He quoted from page 230 of the *Retlaw Local History*:

GUM LANG

Gum Lang was born in Canton, China in April of 1890. He moved to Lethbridge at the age of 16. He resided in Lethbridge for about ten years during which time he was chef at the former White Lunch Café. In 1918 he moved to Retlaw and while living here he was engaged in farming, restaurant work and general merchandise. During the hardship years people were never stuck for food and clothing as Gum ran a charge account with one fall payment. Gum was one of the long time residents to see Retlaw boom and gradually fade away. He retired to Lethbridge in 1962 due to ill health and passed away the same year. His wife Dorothy resides in Lethbridge. Source: *Drybelt Pioneers 1967*

Brian went on to say "Quite by chance, a couple of weeks ago, I met the son of the Greek gentleman who established the White Lunch Café in Lethbridge. Van Christou, who is now in his seventies, said that Gum Lang was the very best chef his father ever had."

Brian attached a Xerox blow-up of a photo of Gum Lang in the *Retlaw Local History*.

At the time I was satisfied with the information at hand. It may have placed my father in Retlaw, but without knowing when. Bark Ging made his way into Alberta by 1924 and worked as a cook. He would have been 16.

Is there a chance that he could have worked for Gum Lang as a child labourer in his restaurant kitchen or farm or maybe both?

In September 2015 as I was reorganizing some family artifacts, I finally



Gum Lang

decided to take a closer look at this razor and found that it is a model that most probably was made by Gillette in 1930. It is a 1930 Gillette Tech Ball End Safety Razor.

Could this have been a gift from Gum Lang to Bark Ging? It may have been a parting gift as I have a photograph of Bark Ging which I believe was taken in Edmonton in 1930. Or, it could have been a wedding gift as Bark Ging departed Canada for China in October of 1930 for the purpose of getting married. The arranged wedding to Young See occurred in his ancestral village on December 30, 1930. He was 22; she was 18.

He returned alone to Canada via Vancouver on May 25, 1931, not knowing when he might see his family or bride again due to Canada's discriminatory Chinese Exclusion Act that was enacted in 1923.

In 1932, Bark Ging's occupation was listed as "farmer." It is likely that the depression years forced him to find alternate employment as fewer people could afford to eat at restaurants.

Several personal accounts from relatives said that Bark Ging was a cook before he became a market gardener.

Prior to becoming a farmer, I have been told, the enterprising Bark Ging Wong operated a café with a partner located in Edmonton, but it was short-lived and unsuccessful because of a poor combination of its location and clientele who engaged in frequent rowdiness and fighting.

But where did he acquire his skills to be a farmer? Having been born into China's agrarian society certainly would have given him some experience in growing vegetables before he sailed for North America at 13 years of age. If Bark Ging did work for Gum Lang on his farm in Retlaw, he would have learned skills valuable in the Canadian context.

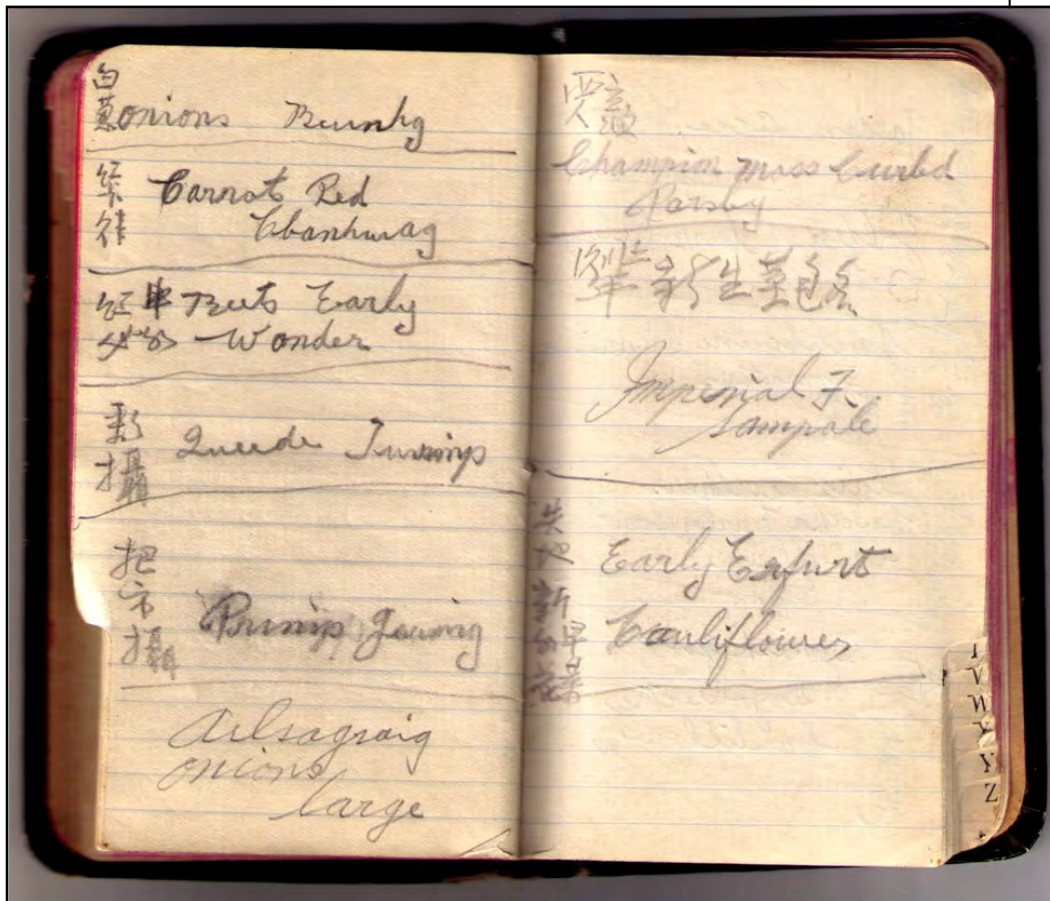
That same little black notebook measuring 3¼ x 5½ inches with alphabetical tabs was used by Bark Ging Wong as an address book, notebook and used to record assorted lists.

Bark Ging did not use the alphabetical tabs as intended. Instead, names and addresses were recorded as he saw fit to write them down and only occupied the book up to the "H" tab. The vast majority of entries were accompanied by several Chinese word characters, most probably the Chinese name of the person, or of the owner of the business.

There was a date entry of October 29, 1930 elsewhere in the notebook which puts some light on when he may have started recording items within.

After the "S" tab in his little black book, three pages contained Bark Ging Wong's record of vegetable seed varieties in English with accompanying notes in Chinese.

Were these vegetable varieties gathered through years of experimentation or was this list given to him? Or did he accumulate this knowledge from working on farms and market gardens before he chose market gardening as his own occupation?



Bark Ging Wong's black notebook vegetable seed variety entries (Source: Wong Family Collection)

I have included websites that have descriptions and images of each vegetable.

Onions – Bunching

<http://homeguides.sfgate.com/grow-bunching-onions-39227.html>

Carrots – Red Chantenay(sic)

<http://www.veseys.com/ca/en/store/vegetables/beets>

Beets – Early Wonder 50 days. An old heirloom, pre-1811 variety. Early, smooth, round beet; makes lots of tall tender greens, too! Perfect pickled, fresh, cooked, or in borscht. <http://www.rareseeds.com/early-wonder-beet/>

Turnips – Swede

<http://www.bordbia.ie/consumer/aboutfood/veg/pages/swede.aspx>

Parsnip – The Guernsey variety was the most popular parsnip of the 19th century. Introduced prior to the 1850s, this variety is medium-long, and has thick shoulders and smooth white skin.

<http://www.rareseeds.com/store/vegetables/parsnips/>

Onions large – Ailsa Craig Long day type—Very well-known globe-shaped heirloom onion that reaches really huge size—5 lbs. is rather common! The skin is a pale yellow and the flesh is relatively mild and sweet, so is recommended for fresh use—not a storage type. Introduced in 1887 by David Murray, gardener for the Marquis of Ailsa, at Culzean Castle in Maybole, South Ayrshire, Scotland.

<http://www.rareseeds.com/ailsa-craig-onion/>

Parsley – Champion Moss Curled
<http://www.vegetableseeds.ie/ParsleyseedsChampionMossCurled.htm>
 Lettuce - Imperial F. Iceberg Lettuce
<https://archive.org/details/imperialstrains0596jagg> pages 2 and 7

The following pages from February 1941, United States Department of Agriculture, Circular No. 596, The Imperial Strains of Lettuce.

2 CIRCULAR 596, U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

TABLE 1.—The Imperial strains of lettuce, listed in order of their date of introduction

Strain	Year introduced	Relative proportion of 1939-40 acreage of various strains
Imperial 2	1936	Discontinued.
Imperial 3	1926	Do.
Imperial 6	1928	Do.
Imperial C	1930	Do.
Imperial F	1930	Practically discontinued.
Imperial 13	1932	Small acreage (winter).
Imperial D	1932	Small acreage (late fall or early spring).
Imperial 152	1934	Small acreage (fall).
Imperial 615	1934	Large acreage.
Imperial 847	1936	Large summer acreage.
Imperial 44 ¹	1938	Eastern States.
Imperial 850	1939	Not tested sufficiently.

¹ Developed in cooperation with the New York (Cornell) Agricultural Experiment Station.

UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE COMMISSION
Applicant's Identification Card
EMPLOYMENT AND CLAIMS OFFICE
EDMONTON

CANADA

No. 50690

THIS CERTIFIES THAT GING WANG BARK
 (NAME)
9013-101 AVE. CITY
 (ADDRESS)

REGISTERED AT THIS OFFICE FOR EMPLOYMENT
 AS GARDENER & COOK ON 194

APPLICANT'S		
AGE	WEIGHT	HEIGHT
38	155	5'6"

UIC 711-500M-12-42

(MANAGER)

Henderson's Directory had a listing in 1935 for "Hop Woo mkt gardener 9013 101st Ave" (page 435, 719). Hop Woo was the company name of the market gardening business that Bark Ging Wong had with his partner Chew Lung Kie in Edmonton. His partner definitely would have wanted someone as capable and equally committed to the success of their market gardens.

In 1943, Bark Ging Wong's occupations were recorded on his Unemployment Insurance Commission Applicant's Identification Card as gardiner [sic] and cook. The Employment Insurance Act was passed in August 1940.

Around 1946, Bark Ging Wong was able to rent a parcel of sloping land south and below Government House. The location afforded Bark Ging to secure city water for this market garden through his connection, Ernest J. Stowe, the Chief Provincial Gardener at Government House.

In 1949, the house where Bark Ging lived "at the rear of Government House" was moved via Groat Road to the market garden in Calder and set on new foundations before his wife arrived from China. The house was transformed with a new coat of stucco and the address became 12782 - 113 Street. Eighteen years after being married in China, this is where Bark Ging and Young See finally started their family together in Edmonton. He was 41. She was 37. **RS**



House at rear of Government House



*Bark Ging Wong at the home
12782 - 113 Street in Calder*

Note: All photos from Wong Family Collection unless otherwise stated.