

*Some of these stories are recalled by **Ed Hong-Louie**, **Vhalleri Hohn** and **Ben Yee**.*

*“Is the blending of nations a story of shame and pain? Or is it a story of courage and pride? Or both? And is the blending of nations only through bloodlines or does it encompass living together in a caring community?” These questions which arise by **Vhalleri Hohn** (grand-daughter of Louie Hong), born to **Mary Chang** (Duncan, BC) and **Henry (Hank) Hong** (Cluny, Alberta) is one of the backbones of this research.*

Vhalleri is rooted in Aboriginal, Chinese and European blood; born in Canada, She is a Canadian. Both her grandfathers were born in China and immigrated to Canada, and both married outside Chinese bloodlines. The focus of this story is to talk about the blending of Aboriginal and Chinese people in Alberta.

*By **Vhalleri T. Hohn** as researched by **Teddy Kwok***

### ***A Blending of Nations***

**Louie Hong** (雷)<sup>1</sup> immigrated to Canada in the late 1800's looking for the promises of the Gold Mountain.

His journey started as a cook for the Canadian Pacific Railway and later as one of the crew members for the building of the Kananaskis dam project.<sup>1</sup> His family knew him as an industrious, hardworking man. In the winter of 1910, Louie cooked for one of Alberta's Big Four ranchers, Pat Burns.<sup>2</sup> As Pat and his ranch-hands herded cattle back and forth across the Alberta Prairies, Louie scrounged for firewood so he could keep them fed.

Around 1913 Louie homesteaded in Cluny<sup>3</sup>, Alberta, where he built and ran several successful businesses. Over the next 80 years Louie supplied people with everything from eggs to fencing, it was the only place to buy supplies for miles around, it serviced people on the reservation as well as farmers<sup>4</sup>. His businesses included the Louie Hong General Store, a confectionery, laundry service, a

---

1 His Chinese name was Hong Louie, but immigration officials thought it “sounded better” if they switched his name, thus he was known in Canada as Louie Hong. Some of the descendants changed their last name to Hong-Louie to recognize the common mistaken change that happened to many Chinese immigrants. In this article, we address the family as “the Hong family”.

2 According to interpreters from Bar U Ranch National Historical Site, Chinese cooks working at ranches in southern Alberta are dated back to before Alberta was given provincial status. Some cowboys were probably Aboriginals.

3 Cluny was a village; incorporated in 1921.

4 During the two World Wars, when goods were short, anything one needed could be found at the Hong General Store. However, there were several other stores since 1917: Quong Kee was operated until 1929; a store that operated by Fred Boisvert was sold to Louie Hong. <sup>1</sup>

hotel, restaurant, a DODGE dealership and at one time a bank. <sup>1,3,4</sup> Life on the prairies was harsh, living through The Great Depression with nine children, Louie and Nellie did what they had to do to support their family.

According to Mrs. Brenda Dingwall, whose husband, Donald, knew Louie before he ever opened a business in Cluny, said that Louie was once “the cook on the cook-car” and he was known as “a great friend to all the older Indian people, as he could speak and discuss things with them and help settle many misunderstandings”.<sup>1</sup>

Cluny is located on the main line of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and in its time was the supply hub for all of the local farmers. Not only was the CPR the major mode of transportation in the early 1900's, it was also the boundary between the Siksika Nation reserve (Siksika 146); the south side of the tracks belonged to the Siksika. In more than a century ago, the town's population was mainly made up of French immigrants, Aboriginal people and two Chinese families (the Hong and Quong families).<sup>1</sup>

Despite having two wives and family in China, Louie married **Nellie (nee: Tuck also known as Nellie Bertha Chin)** in 1925. According to **Edward Hong-Louie (Ed; 雷京權)**, fourth child of Louie Hong, his mother was “purchased” at the age of 15 – to have children and work in the store. Bride-buying was a fairly common practice at this time, especially for the Chinese.

Nellie and her two brothers were born to an Aboriginal (Chinook) father and Chinese mother. Though no records of birth are available, the family believes she was born in the Fraser Valley, British Columbia. Prior to being sold as a bride, she was sold at a very young age to the Chin family as “a slave”. Being of mixed race was shameful for Nellie, Vhalle remembers her grandmother timidly speaking of the abuse she endured as a child; often locked up and beaten by her “mean aunt”.

Nellie was a tiny little woman of 4'10” who worked hard in the family store from 1925 until it's closing in the 1980's. “It is difficult to believe such a tiny woman had nine children,” Vhalle recalls, “she was such a gentle soul.” In order that she could continue to work in the store between pregnancies, Louie hired an English nurse, Mrs. F. Derksen, who raised the children and taught them the “English way”.

Nellie was multilingual. Ed remembers hearing his mother speak Chinook, and in order to do business it was necessary for her to learn Blackfoot from Louie. She also had keep up her Chinese, as this was her husband's first language<sup>5</sup>. Nellie passed away in 1998, predeceased by her two brothers and her

---

<sup>5</sup> Mae Mak, a Chinese tutor was hired in 1940 for a year and a half to teach the Hong children the Chinese language.<sup>1</sup>

husband.



*From left: Millie and George Tuck, Nellie's brother, with their son, Roland, Nellie and Louie Hong, Johnny Tuck, Nellie's Brother - taken in Cluny 1960's. (Photo provided by the Hong family.)*

There were separate schools in the area, one for the Aboriginals and one in Cluny for everyone else<sup>6</sup>. A Catholic mission on the reservation housed and taught the Blackfoot children. Despite being educated separately, the Hong children developed many close friendships with their Blackfoot neighbours. They learned the language and were invited to fish and hunt on the Blackfoot land. Conversely, the Blackfoot people worked off the reservation and were very much part of the Cluny community.



*Louie Hong's store on the old No. 1 highway.*



*(Left) Ed Hong-Louie, photographed in the book known as "Cluny Archive" as a child riding a bike in front of his father's general store, recalled that the family was allowed fishing on the Reserve. 2,5*

*(Right) Ed, currently resides in B.C., was photographed at outside a corner mall in Edgemont, a northwest community in Calgary on Tuesday, July 18, 2017. He and his niece Vhalle were interviewed for a history research on the*

---

<sup>6</sup> The children of the Hong family who were in school in Cluny all had the same primary teacher Mrs Ann Reese (nee Riley).

*relationship between Chinese and Aboriginal people in Alberta. (Photo taken by Teddy Kwok)*

**Henry Hong**, second son of Louie Hong and father of Vhalle, had a very close relationship with the Blackfoot people. **6** Vhalle says, “my Dad was a 'blood-brother' fully initiated as 'Prairie Chicken', he was named Sue Was Giss and honoured with a headdress and traditional beaded clothing, which I still have today.” With this initiation, Henry claimed he had Treaty Rights, though his card has never been found. Henry was very proud of his blended roots of Chinese and Aboriginal, he jokingly called himself a “Chindian”.

Vhalle’s family moved to Calgary when she was six. Her sister, **Mavis** and cousins **Leslie** and **Tara** (daughters of **May Culham**, nee: Hong, the eldest daughter of Louie Hong), would spend many of their summers in Cluny working in store. “We would stock shelves, sell candy, get orders together for customers, count money and sweep the floors. After working we would often go down to the Bow River on the Reserve to fish and swim”, Vhalle recalls.

Vhalle's memories of the Hong Store are filled with sweet smells of tobacco and the wet smoked leather coats of Chief One Gun and Ben Calf Rope. They would sit for hours on a bench outside in the summer and on colder days beside the butcher shop rolling and puffing on cigarettes. Vhalle says, “I even can hear the song of the Blackfoot language as my grandfather chatted with them.”

However, as with most experiences, not all of her memories are so positive. Vhalle remembers when alcohol was legalized for the Aboriginal people which brought about changes to their community. Crime increased, which brought risks to the Hong Store. She can remember people breaking into the store looking for money and things like vanilla extract and spray paint. “One time, my poor little grandmother, who was living alone at the store, got beaten by someone who had broken in”, said Vhalle. Despite these few negative experiences, friendships between the Hong family members and the Blackfoot people remained strong for her father’s generation.

Vhalle and Ed recognize Aboriginal blood as part of heritage. Throughout her life, Vhalle has volunteered and will continue to volunteer in the communities where she lives. It is important to her to bring awareness and encourage acceptance for diverse backgrounds. She says, “I have taught my children to embrace their diversity which includes encouraging them to engage as non-status Aboriginals at their universities. My children are proud of their heritage, they volunteer on campus and feel they can embrace this part of their identity through their involvement on campus.”

The Hong family honours Nellie’s tenacity, having lived through horrific experiences of shame and prejudice. They honour Louie’s courage and lessons of hard work that have opened doors of

opportunity for his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. This family believes the blending of nations has enriched their lives.

*As a well-respected businessman, Louie Hong was described as a “community-minded, generous, a reliable friend who... garnered a legion of friends over a very large area of southern Alberta”.<sup>7</sup> The older generations of the Chinese Calgarians well knew Louie and Nellie Hong.*

***Interview Ben Yee as researched by Teddy Kwok***

### ***His Oral Memory of Two Nations***

**Ben Wee Foy Yee (余偉奎)**

Ben Yee came in 1951 to join his father, **Nin Fon Yee (余年院)**. It just so happened that Nin Fon Yee was one of the employees of Louie Hong in Cluny long before Ben’s immigration. Ben said that Louie was a customer and/or supplier of Ben’s father’s restaurant, Crystal Café, in downtown Calgary. Ben recalled that the Chinese community in Chinatown of Calgary generally knew Louie Hong as a businessman who married “an Indian princess”, Nellie Hong.

“There were only a handful of Chinese families with the wife also lived in Chinatown of Calgary before perhaps 1967, the year recognized as the liberalization of Canadian immigration policy. Due to the fact that there were disproportionately low of female Chinese Canadian population, that was why, for some single males or even married ‘bachelors’ may marry or be a common-law of a local wife, the wife usually was an Aboriginal if not the same race,” said Ben Yee.



*(Left) Ben, the one on the right with shiny jacket, was photographed with his friend Circa 1950's on the street as a young teen first coming to Calgary. (Photo provided by Ben Yee)*

*(Right) The photo was taken during an interview at his home in Calgary on September 15, 2017. (Teddy Kwok)*

On May 1947, the Canadian Parliament repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act (or known as the Chinese Immigration Act, 1923). Chinese were once again allowed to immigrate to Canada; however, this restricted to the dependants of Chinese Canadian citizens<sup>7</sup>.

Ben Yee, born in 1937, immigrated to Calgary under this category in 1951, as the fourth generation of immigrants, following the footsteps of his great-grandfather (**Yee Hang Wo 余恆和**), and father. However, his grandfather (**Wing Tun Yee**) who Ben never met was in the Philippines and killed in WWII.

Upon immigrating, he went to James Short School for a couple years, along with other Chinese immigrants. Working mostly around Alberta and one time in BC, in grocery stores, farms, laundries and restaurants. Ben then worked for his dad's restaurant, Crystal Café, on the second block of 9 Avenue southwest in downtown.

“This was the only line of work for Chinese. Because of race, you cannot do anything else or work with other people except Chinese,” recalled Ben Yee.

During his daily work life, Ben encountered some Aboriginals, with vast majority being males as they are relatively more educated among the communities, while Aboriginal women and children are believed to live on Reserves.

“They were generally nice, and we had ‘hi-bye’ social life. We sometimes had casual chats, but it really depended whether they were drunk,” said Ben.

Ben continued, “Even they were pretty drunk, they didn’t often create a disturbance or be a riot. They don’t make trouble.”

Locals in downtown Calgary, back in the days, often visited beer parlor before and after supper time; Aboriginals who mostly lived around downtown east and worked as day labor used to hang out likewise.

Ben recalled, “Drunk Caucasians, indeed, sometimes fooled around at our restaurant, and Aboriginal folks, who are also customers, became like a peacemaker between us [Caucasians (whites) and Chinese] as if they have such [moral] obligation.”

He believed that Chinese and Aboriginals, with similar skin color tone, were somewhat “weak minorities” in the eyes of Caucasians, making two ethnic groups occasionally “united together” to voice out concerns when unjust incidents or oppression occurred, even if, Ben admitted, nothing much could be changed.

He said, “We could not rebel, or even so, it was useless.”

“The Indian people lost their identity, the white people took it - how do you fix it? The drink has made them forget. The Chinese culture always on your mind.”

---

<sup>7</sup> also refer to Appendix A

Today, the impression of Aboriginals has been changed in the view of Ben. He said, “They likely have a full-time job and more educated. They less rely on government’s financial help. This is such a good change to society.” Ben continued, “they have to do for themselves – no one can tell them who they are. They make their own laws now to ‘block’ white people from making them lose their identity.”

## References:

1. Cluny and District Historical Society (1985) *Memories of Cluny: a story of Cluny and the surrounding districts: Cluny, Ouelletteville, Crowfoot Creek, Blackfoot Reserve in Alberta Canada*. Alta: Inter-Collegiate Press (2002, January 1) pp. 98-104, 435-437, 553, 639, 673 Retrieved from <http://www.ourroots.ca/toc.aspx?id=13231&qryID=22bd4911-508c-4ba4-9198-36d62d1d2371>
2. Alberta Settlement: Book Excerpt: Louie Hong (2001, February 3). Retrieved from [http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/eppp-archive/100/200/301/ic/can\\_digital\\_collections/pasttopresent/settlement/chinese\\_hong.html](http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/eppp-archive/100/200/301/ic/can_digital_collections/pasttopresent/settlement/chinese_hong.html)
3. Voices of Alberta: Louie Hong's Life on The Canadian Pacific Railway. Retrieved from <http://changemakerbios.weebly.com/louie-hong-by-lucas.html>
4. Voices of Alberta: Louie Hong and Wong Yet. Retrieved from <http://changemakerbios.weebly.com/louie-hong-and-wong-yet-by-ally.html>
5. Harvey McCue, Harvey (2015, April 22). *Reserves* Retrieved from <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/aboriginal-reserves/>
6. Obituaries: Hong, Henry (Hank) Retrieved from <http://www.yourlifemoments.ca/sitepages/obituary.asp?oid=964102>
7. Dawson, J. B. , & Dawson, P. M. (1991) *Moon Cakes In Gold Mountain: From China to the Canadian Plains* Calgary, Alta. : Detselig Enterprises

---

## Appendix A:

### *According to Library and Archives Canada:*

“By the early 1950's, the Chinese were a declining, aging population. The 'married bachelors' had been cut off from all contact with their families for almost a decade. The 1951 census revealed a decline from 34,627 in 1941 to 32,528 in immigration numbers a decade later. Full immigration did not occur until 1956 when the federal Order in Council P.C. 2115 was repealed. In human terms, this meant that for the first time in the history of the Chinese in Canada, Chinese Canadians could sponsor adult children and aging parents.”

(<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/eppp-archive/100/205/301/ic/cdc/generations/postwar/endexclusion.html>)