

Ging Wei Wong 黄景煒 was born into a market gardening family in Edmonton, Alberta. He has been working on his family tree since 1990 after the passing of his parents who left Toisan, Guangdong Province, China for a better life in “Gold Mountain” (Canada).

He retired after a 35-year career in air traffic services. He is the Associate Producer of the award-winning documentary film *Lost Years: A People's Struggle for Justice* (2011). Wei was a presenter at the 2015 and 2019 Alberta Genealogical Society Conferences. In January 2021 he presented an AGS webinar “Immigration to Gold Mountain: Chinese in Canada.” His writings have been published in the AGS *Journal Relatively Speaking*.

“The Forgotten History of the Chinese in Canada” August 2015, which was also published in *Families Journal of the Ontario Genealogical Society*, November 2015, “Retlaw and Bark G. Wong’s Razor” August 2017 “Harvest: Autumn Fields of Green” August 2019, “Chew Ging to Edmonton: Journey to the West” August 2020, Wei was the winner of the Peter Staveley Memorial award in 2018.

Chinese Market Gardening: Unanticipated Compensation

By *Wei Wong*

Is it not ironic that our family name Wong - 黄 in Chinese, contains the character 田 which means field or farm?

My father, Wong Bark Ging 黄柏振, was third-born in his family and he was the oldest son born into an agrarian society in Chew Ging, Toisan, Guangdong Province in southern China.

As Chinese tradition would have it, the oldest son is destined to take care of his parents. Born into the dreadful conditions of the last years of the Qing dynasty, Bark Ging was chosen to leave his ancestral home in 1921 to find better opportunities to support his family. A heavy burden indeed, as he was only 13 years old. What formal education he had, if any, is unknown. His family was willing to send their oldest son away to Gold Mountain 金山 (Canada), in hopes that he would find employment with ample wages to be able to sustain himself and to send money home to his poverty-stricken family.

Even though there must have been a network of people to guide and assist him along his journey, it must have been a daunting experience for a young teenager. His travel to the maritime port of Hong Kong from his home, a distance of about 200 miles, may have had any or all of these possibilities:

Paul Yee’s book, *Saltwater City* provides a glimpse of what the trip might have been like. “It took days trekking on dirt roads and through mountains, riding horse carts and travelling by sampan, riverboat, train and then steamship, to cover the distance to Hong Kong.” He then sailed across the Pacific Ocean on the *Empress of Asia*. “...At the docks of Hong Kong, authorities checked the immigrant’s belongings and fumigated them with foul-smelling sulphur...The voyage across the Pacific took one month...the passengers slept, ate, and gambled to pass the time. The meals covered by the passage fee were badly prepared...There was fish and all kinds of things, but it wasn’t cooked very well...If you weren’t seasick, you could visit around the ship. If you were seasick, you slept.”

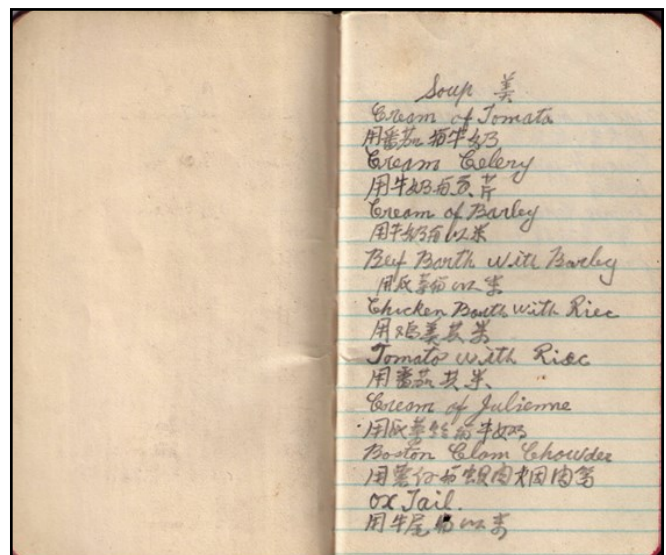
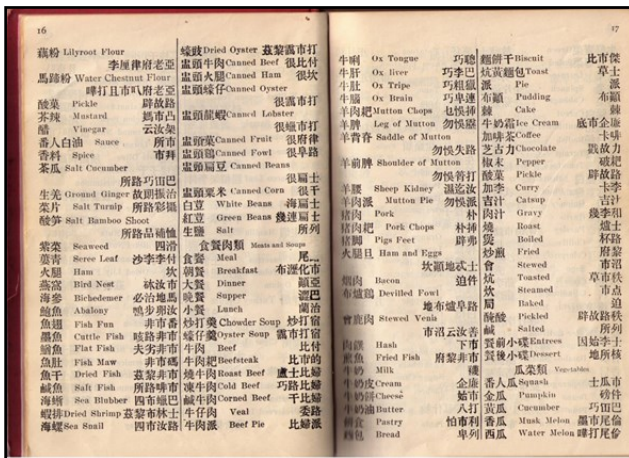


Wong Bark Ging arrived in Vancouver on August 8, 1921.

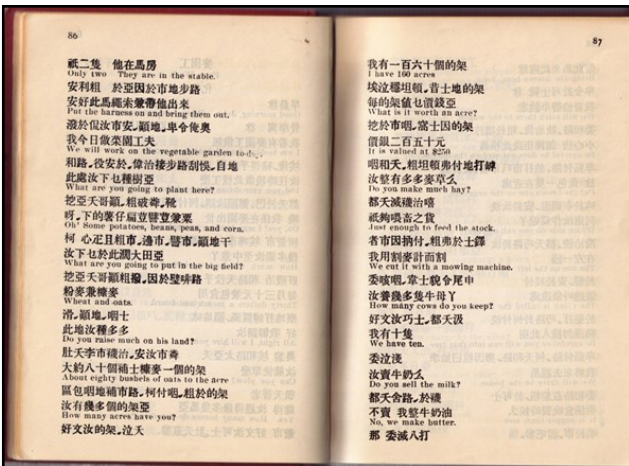
“When the ship finally docked in Vancouver, a stony welcome awaited arrivals at the immigration station on the waterfront at the north end of Burrard Street. Immigrants have few fond memories of their enforced stay there while officials checked their papers and their health...We were like prisoners. There were bars in the windows. There was roll call, bed call, a time to sleep, a time to wake up, just like in the army camp. The Chinese called it “the piglet pen.” There were guards to keep you in line: you

couldn't go outside the compound without permission, and visitors were regulated. The food was very bad: generally there was a dish of soup, then they used the same meat from the soup and mixed it with vegetables and served it with rice. That was supposed to be Chinese food. The station was noisy too, with trains going back and forth all day long."

The C.I.30 Immigration Certificate was issued to persons entering Canada who were exempt from Head Tax payment. Exemptions to the Head Tax were granted to diplomats, tourists, merchants, "men of science" and students. My father came as a merchant's son, so he did not have to pay the Head Tax. The merchant was a neighbour in the ancestral village that was successful with a business in Canada and was willing to help a desperate family.



Notebook with menu items in Bark Ging's handwriting in English and Chinese.



enough to strike out on his own and ended up in Alberta in 1924 working as a cook. The means and route that he took are unknown.

One theory is that he made a circuitous route with a stop in Retlaw, Alberta. [See my story Retlaw and Bark G. Wong's Razor, published in August, *Relatively Speaking*, Volume 45, Number 1] By 1930, his documents show that he was a market gardener in Edmonton, Alberta. That year, after harvest, he made a trip back to his ancestral home of Chew Ging in Toisan, Guangdong Province, China for the purpose of getting married.

After a few short months together he left his bride behind and returned to Canada alone due to the Chinese Exclusion Act that prohibited Chinese immigration. After marriage, in the Chinese custom, Young See immediately joined Bark Ging's family and was tasked with looking after every need of his mother and father. Her burdens were alleviated after their deaths in 1939 and 1941.

My father eked out a living as a labourer, cook and finally a market gardener. With his meagre earnings, he was able to sustain himself and send remittances home from the time he arrived in Canada in 1921. From 1921 to 1939 those



This photo, probably taken before 1930, was the only image that Bark Ging had of Young See 袁氏 before their arranged marriage. She would have been only nine years old the year he sailed for Canada. The wedding took place on December 30, 1930. She was 18.

GENERAL REGISTER OF										CHINESE IMMIGRATION									
NO.	NAME	AGE	SEX	DATE OF ARRIVAL	PLACE OF ORIGIN	STATUS	REMARKS	NO.	NAME	AGE	SEX	DATE OF ARRIVAL	PLACE OF ORIGIN	STATUS	REMARKS				
99614	Lee See	18	Female	1930	China	Immigrant		99614	Lee See	18	Female	1930	China	Immigrant					
99615	Wong Pak Hing	9	Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99615	Wong Pak Hing	9	Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
99616	Horn Lee	10	Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99616	Horn Lee	10	Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
99617	Lee Shing Lee		Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99617	Lee Shing Lee		Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
99618	Yee Shue Rose	11	Female	1930	China	Immigrant		99618	Yee Shue Rose	11	Female	1930	China	Immigrant					
99619	Wong Kwai Sing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99619	Wong Kwai Sing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
99620	Chan Kwai Lee	15	Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99620	Chan Kwai Lee	15	Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
99621	Yee Shue Rose		Female	1930	China	Immigrant		99621	Yee Shue Rose		Female	1930	China	Immigrant					
99622	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99622	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
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99624	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99624	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
99625	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99625	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
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99627	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99627	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
99628	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99628	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
99629	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99629	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
99630	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99630	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
99631	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99631	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
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99637	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99637	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
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99649	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99649	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant					
99650	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant		99650	Wong Pak Hing		Male	1930	China	Immigrant					

remittances enabled his family to build a two-storey house in Yuen Long, New Territory, Kowloon, Hong Kong. His mother, father, and some of his siblings moved into the new house. We have no records of the wages that Bark Ging might have made as a single man but this was an amazing achievement.

Families in China placed great importance on having a son. Living separate lives 11,000 kilometres apart, there was no possibility of Bark Ging and Young See to have children so arrangements were made to

adopt a son around 1945. Young See and her adopted son, Fook Kwan, lived in the house that Bark Ging's remittances financed until they immigrated to Canada. After he obtained his Canadian Citizenship in 1949 Bark Ging applied to have Young See join him in Canada.

Leaving her adopted son, Fook Kwan, in the care of Bark Ging's extended family members, Young See travelled by air, likely taking a couple days, and arrived in Vancouver, B.C. on June 27, 1949. She stayed for a time with the same family that sponsored Bark Ging when he first arrived 28 years prior. There, she awaited the results of her medical. No evidence of tuberculosis was found in the x-ray. Arrangements were made for her to board a train in Vancouver destined for Edmonton. The trip could have taken up to two days. When Bark Ging arrived to pick her up at the Strathcona Train Station, the conductor was locking up the terminal. Bark Ging and Young See lived very different lives as they were separated for 18 years until the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1947.

For Bark Ging, it must have been financially precarious starting in 1949 with preparations for the arrival of his wife Young See. His house was moved from behind Government House to its new location in Calder. It had to be put on a new foundation and upgraded with front and back porches, new stucco, natural gas and electricity. Immediately, assuming the role of housewife, Young See also became a contributing member of my father's market gardening business at two locations – Riverdale and Calder.

After that first year together Young See and Bark Ging were expecting their first child. Young See would have contributed little to the farm work as she was pregnant. After Lillie Mee was born on May 25, 1950 she would have been busy with her newborn. Young See had no experience with childbirth and Bark Ging had no experience raising a family. Due to medical complications, the infant died on June 29, 1950. She was buried at Beechmount Cemetery on July 3, 1950. The death may have put Young See into a depression. A primitive rectangular headstone with Chinese words scratched into the freshly poured concrete form was eventually erected to mark the baby's grave.



Christmas 1953 to join the January 6, 1954.



With the birth and death of their baby girl, unexpected extra expenses must have been incurred. Two years later, their adopted son arrived in Edmonton in July 1951 amidst the growing season and was expected to help out on the market gardens after school and on weekends. Although the 11 year-old could help with light farm work, he was an additional mouth to feed. Young See was now in the second trimester of her second pregnancy. To make ends meet, Bark Ging rented land from his neighbours in Calder and planted cabbages on the nearby properties.

The growing season of 1952 must have been an immensely busy time for the growing family. Their adopted son attended school and helped out on the farm with every spare moment. Not long after the harvest, Young See gave birth to a healthy baby boy, Ging Wayne, on October 25, 1952. A little over a year later, Bark Ging's 21 year-old nephew, Suey Lai arrived days after family. After ringing in the New Year another baby boy, Ging Wei, was born on



Young See and market garden truck.

In a matter of five years, Bark Ging and Young See had endured the heartache of losing a daughter (their first child born in Canada), welcomed their adopted son, brought two healthy baby boys into the world and welcomed the arrival of their nephew.

To improve their lot, his 1956 income tax records showed that Bark Ging rented an additional 20 acres of land for market gardening in Clover Bar located on the river flats on the east side of the North Saskatchewan River immediately south of the Beverly Bridge on Highway 16 East (Yellowhead Trail Eastbound). This was referred to as the Beverly farm.

From 1956 onward, income tax records proved that market gardening income was seldom predictable. Market gardening success depended largely on the timing of planting crops and was truly weather-dependent. Fortunately, their gross income from 1956 and 1957 showed improvement and culminated in the largest gross income of \$13,375.66 in 1958 that was never again achieved. In the winters, nephew Suey Lai worked in the kitchen at the Mandarin Gardens Restaurant at 9928 Jasper Avenue and the Purple Lantern Restaurant at 10049 – 101A Avenue. After working for Bark Ging's market garden for several years, Suey Lai ventured out on his own to operate a convenience store on 149 Street in Jasper Place.

On September 1, 1958 Bark Ging and Young See bought a three-bedroom bungalow in Dovercourt at 12261 – 134 Street. This house became the home of Bark Ging, Young See, Fook Kwan, Ging Wayne and Ging Wei. The Calder and Beverly Market Gardens were vacated in 1959. Years later, the Calder property became affectionately known as Onion Park. Most likely, the green bunch onions from the market gardening operation regenerated themselves every year as a subtle organic reminder of what was there before.

On October 15, 1959 a ten-acre parcel of land was purchased in Waldemere located north on Highway 28 (now 97 Street). This was referred to as the Namao Farm. This is the market garden I grew up with. The house in Calder was moved once again to the new property but was never lived in. It was repurposed for shelter and storage. The Namao Farm was prepared by burning off the brush and weeds before it was cultivated for crops for the first time.

Farm Income History of Bark Ging Wong

Source: Retained copies of Individual Income Tax Returns

Year	Address	Location of Farm	Total / Cultivated	Gross Income	Expenses	Net Income
1956	12782-113 St	SE of 7-53-25-4 Clover Bar Block 1 City View	20	\$ 6,995.62	\$3,685.75	\$3,309.87
1957				\$ 9,109.51	\$5,524.00	\$3,585.51
1958	12261-134 St	SE of 7-53-25-4 Clover Bar	20	\$13,375.66	\$7,319.51	\$6,056.15
1959				\$ 9,303.80	\$6,976.33	\$2,327.47
1960	12261-134 St	Municipal District of Sturgeon - Waldemere Plan 6215V Lot 58.14 Bk 2	10 / 5	\$ 3,982.65	\$1,789.20	\$2,193.45
1961	12261-134 St	Municipal District of Sturgeon - Waldemere Plan 6215V Lot 58.14 Bk 2	10 / 7	\$ 5,639.75	\$2,668.65	\$2,971.10
1962	12261-134 St	Municipal District of Sturgeon - Waldemere Plan 6215V Lot 58.14 Bk 2	10 / 7	\$ 4,927.15	\$2,391.27	\$2,535.88
1963	12261-134 St	Municipal District of Sturgeon - Waldemere Plan 6215V Lot 58.14 Bk 2	10 / 7	\$ 4,072.85	\$1,949.95	\$2,122.90
1964	12261-134 St	Municipal District of Sturgeon - Waldemere Plan 6215V Lot 58.14 Bk 2	10 / 7	\$ 4,465.35	\$2,180.02	\$2,285.33
1965	12261-134 St	Municipal District of Sturgeon - Waldemere Plan 6215V Lot 58.14 Bk 2	10 / 7	\$ 1,953.45	\$1,365.71	\$ 587.74
1966	12261-134 St	Municipal District of Sturgeon - Waldemere Plan 6215V Lot 58.14 Bk 2	10 / 7	\$ 5,911.82	\$2,674.17	\$3,237.65
1967	12261-134 St	Municipal District of Sturgeon - Waldemere Plan 6215V Lot 58.14 Bk 2	10 / 7	\$ 4,800.36	\$2,103.77	\$2,696.59
1968	12261-134 St	Municipal District of Sturgeon - Waldemere Plan 6215V Lot 58.14 Bk 2	10 / 7	\$ 4,073.53	\$1,721.44	\$2,352.09
1969	12261-134 St	Municipal District of Sturgeon - Waldemere Plan 6215V Lot 58.14 Bk 2	10 / 7	\$ 5,077.58	\$2,805.59	\$2,271.99
1970	12261-134 St	Municipal District of Sturgeon - Waldemere Plan 6215V Lot 58.14 Bk 2	10 / 7	\$ 4,110.35	\$2,074.75	\$2,035.60
1971	12261-134 St	9404-157 Ave - Waldemere 6215V (City annexed)	10 / 7	\$ 2,320.20	\$1,384.62	\$ 935.58
1972		9407-157 Ave	10 / 7	\$ 5,543.00	\$2,928.96	\$2,614.04
1973	12261-134 St	9407-157 Ave	10 / 7	\$ 5,358.98	\$3,021.47	\$2,337.51
1974	12261-134 St	9404-157 Ave	10 / 7	\$ 3,833.79	\$2,357.72	\$1,476.07
1975	12261-134 St	9404-157 Ave	10 / 7	\$ 9,159.42	\$3,250.30	\$5,909.12
1975	November 1	Farm sold for \$ 165,000				
1976	12261-134 St	Retired				

Some vegetable crops grown by Bark Ging Wong market gardens were: beets, radishes, carrots, rhubarb, vegetable squash, dill, parsley, suey choy, bok choy, broccoli, bunching onions, cabbage, cauliflower, gai lan, kohlrabi, gai choy, onions, spinach, turnips, and snow peas.

Our major crop was green cabbage which were germinated in hotbeds in the backyard garden in Dovercourt and transplanted to the Namao farm after the risk of frost was over – typically after the May long weekend.

Weeding was a continuous chore mostly done on hands and knees, with hoes or using wheel hoes. We recycled wooden crates, potato sacks and cabbage sacks. We repaired crates using bent nails that were straightened and used again. Fences were mended to keep the neighbour's horses off our property. My father would

scrounge wooden crates and sacks from the wholesales we sold to. Our produce was sold to MacDonald's Consolidated, Scott National, Brown Fruit Company, Woodward's, Westfair Foods and a couple of merchants and restaurants in Chinatown.

After operating the Namao Farm for 16 years, it was finally sold after a decent harvest on November 1, 1975. This enabled Bark Ging and Young See to retire. My father was 67; my mother was 64.



Many of the crops that required seeding in rows was accomplished by a Planet Jr. Hand-push Seeder.

In the off season, between harvest and spring seeding, neither Bark Ging nor Young See sought alternate employment. Bark Ging possessed enough English language skills to run the market gardening business but it took the energy of both he and Young See to raise their family. Pay for work on their market garden was not what was expected in the usual sense. It was basically room and board and all the living necessities that were provided to every family member. From the income tax records available, 1965 was definitely a tough year with net income of only \$587.74, which translates to under \$50 a month to support a family of five! In 1965, the average per hour rate for a general labourer in Edmonton was \$1.81 per hour.

When my brother completed his B.Sc. at the University of Alberta my father bought a brand-new Ford Galaxie 500 from Shirley Ford so he could commute to and from university with the understanding that he would also transport his two younger brothers to and from the farm to work after school and on weekends. In my teens, in the

late 1960s, I remember my father sitting us down on a winter's day every year and wrote out a cheque for each of us and told us to save it in the bank for our future education. This was the "pay" we received for being part of the family's market gardening business. It was totally unexpected, but truly welcomed. We did not choose this work or occupation; we were born into it. There were no educational requirements for the job. Rather, it was totally on-the-job training right from the time we could walk. It is without sarcasm when I say that the fields 田 filled the bellies of the Wongs 黃.

My parents made enormous sacrifices and worked extremely hard to take care of their families and gave their children educational opportunities that they could only dream of. In a metaphorical sense, they paid us by giving us shelter, food and a strong work ethic enabling us to succeed in school and seek better opportunities in life.

For this, we honour their legacy. Married in China in 1930, Bark Ging and Young See were separated by the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean, 11,000 km apart for 18 years. After they were reunited in Edmonton in 1949, my parents operated the market gardens together for 27 years. Until my father's death in 1988, my parents were never apart for 39 years. Two years later in 1990, my mother joined him in the spiritual world.

For more insight into the history of the Wong's history:

2009 The Edmonton Horticultural Society publication *A Century of Gardening in Edmonton*

2012 Nancy Ng's book *No, Really, Where Are You From? Personal Stories of Chinese Identity Retention and Loss*

2015 Kathryn Chase Merrett's book *Why Grow Here: Essays on Edmonton's Gardening History*

2019 Nancy Ng's book *Bend It Like You: Personal Stories of Resiliency and Perseverance From People Just Like You*

References available on request from: rseditor@abgenealogy.ca

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