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? US: DANVILLE, IL; New York, NY

NASH: Today is January 29, 1974 and I'm speaking with Mr. Edward Hong. Mr. Hong is a lawyer in Chinatown and he also owns a travel agency and insurance company. And it happens that Mr. Hong was the second practicing Chinese lawyer in New York State. Well, Mr. Hong, we'd like to know something about your immigration. When did you first come here?

HONG: Well, I was born in China in 1915. And when I was eight years old, I came to the United States in 1923 with my father and my mother and an elder brother.

NASH: Well, what do you remember about the place that you came from? What was the name of it?

HONG: I was born in a little village known as Hen Chin Village. Literally translated, that means it's "the heart of the fields" village, close to a city [not understood] city, about sixty miles from the big city of Canton. It's about eighty miles from Hong Kong. I had never seen my father after birth until he returned from the United States in 1923 to come back and bring my mother, myself and my older brother to the United States. He had been here in the United States for a long time. He had operated restaurants all over the country. He had a restaurant in Danville, Illinois, which is the area where the famous Lincoln-Douglas debate.

So when I immigrated from my native home in the China mainland, I came directly by ship, which took I think about eighteen days. I think it was the year that they had the big earthquake in Japan, and I remember coming over here, arriving in Angel's Island which is the detaining area for the Immigration and Naturalization Service at that time, which was part of the Department of Labor. And we were detained there until the inspection. And, well, Angel Island is right outside of San Francisco. And then after inspection, we were admitted and I remember coming in. It was a day or two before Thanksgiving of the year

1923, and since that time I have been a real member of the rest of the citizens of the United States.

NASH: What was the thing that made your father leave originally?

HONG: Well, my father -- I presume that any person who came to the United States -- well, I should say, I should go back to my grandfather who came over probably (I -- I do not know, I have no idea) I believe they must have come over during the days when they built the railroads in the West and so forth and I remember something that my great-grandfather or grandfather or something like that having operated a laundry in Portland, Oregon, and so forth and I think my father was born here in the United States. And then, of course, in those days there weren't too many Chinese women there and he went back to China to be married and I was -- and my older brother was -- were offsprings during his visit to China and his marriage. And then after that he returned back to America to pursue a living, and then in 1923, he came back to bring me over my f—my first – first time that I remember him ever meeting my father was when he came back in 19--I think he came back about 1922 and stayed about a year and then he brought the family over to the United States.

NASH: Do you remember your reaction when you saw your father for the first time?

HONG: I don't recall too much except -- not the occasion that I saw him, but I remember about a month or so before my mother had heard from him that he was returning and he was preparing me to say that my father was coming from the United States. And I sort of -- I remember about my childhood of – [not understood] to talk about World War I, so that nature of things -- but it's just fleeting things, nothing specific.

NASH: What do you remember about Angel's Island?

HONG: Well, Angel's Island – well, Angel's Island was a little island. I remember seeing my first motor car there and you'd go up there and they'd have, well, (cough), pardon me, I (sneezing) I don't know exactly whether--I don't remember any bars, but you know Angel Island is another island like, off San Francisco, like Alcatraz. So the only way you can go in there is by ferry. So they take the aliens and put them over there, which is similar to the New York when they had Ellis Island. And an immigrant comes to the United States, they would put the immigrant over on Ellis Island, hold him there until they are good and ready to give him a hearing. And when they have a hearing, they'll prove whether he is entitled to be admitted to the United States or not, and then after admission, he'll go in.

NASH: How long was your family there?

HONG: Gee, I do not remember. I – I would say maybe a few weeks.

NASH: Weeks!

HONG: A few weeks. That – that wasn't long. I even remember my ---my -- when I was practicing law and immigration law. And when the immigrants

came here, when they were detained at Ellis Island, why we waited three months before we even get a hearing. And some people were -- after the hearing, they were denied and people were detained n Ellis Island for a year, a year and a half before--and they weren't even given the opportunity to post bond -- to be out on bond until the appeal of their cases were over.

NASH: Well, what was the reason they held your family for so long?

HONG: It's not a question--holding, I think the question was that, there's too much case load and they only have so many inspectors, until the inspectors come around to your cases, like waiting in court until your case is heard.

NASH: What was your mother's reaction to all of that?

HONG: Well, I, you know, – I'm really realize that -- I was too young there to, you know. I would say that when they – after – when the hearing came, it was very quick because there was nothing asked – it was very quick because there was nothing asked [not understood]. All they asked me and my brother was that, "Is this your father, is this your mother?" We said yes to – "This is my father, this is my mother" And then we were admitted, you know, like everything else. It's the – it's the waiting time. It's not the actual hearing or the actual case that takes the time.

NASH: Did your mother feel like she was in prison or anything like that?

HONG: I don't think so. I don't think my mother were as enlightened as people are today -- that they fought for civil liberties and all that kind of rights. They though that it was routine that she was coming over and I think everyone accepted the facts.

NASH: Well, what kind of a time did you have getting used to the United States as an eight year old boy and later?

HONG: Well, I came to Danville and then I was put into school. I started grade school. Of course, I mean, being eight years old and not understanding a word of the language and put into --. Well, I started from the first grade, so I wasn't put in a grade that is equivalent to my age or anything of that nature. However, it was difficult because I come to class and I don't know the routine and I couldn't tell the teacher when something happened, and so there were quite a bit of problems there. A teacher would report back to my parents saying that I was, didn't follow this and didn't follow that, but, you know, I think that was only normal. And then, it was difficult because the things I read I didn't understand.

I had a couple of years of Chinese schooling before I came here. I mean in things like figures and mathematics and all that. I mean, I could do it in Chinese just as well as in English, so I had no problem, but the question was English and conversing and understanding. Yes, it took a little time just like any person would break into the -- a new area -- would face that difficulty and then in the summertime, my

folks had engage a teacher, one of the teachers in school, to give me a pri-- . Well, give me, my brother, I had a first cousin who also came same time with us. And so the three of us took private lessons in order to catch up for the lack of education. Like, if you're born here, by the time you go to school, you would have understood the language. Whereas I had to kind of catch up and understand the language and to accompany my thoughts there. And naturally, it is quite a hardship.

I can remember back that even when I got up too the eighth grade, so forth, my vocabulary was not that good and, you know, to speak grammatically correct and to really converse well took some time. See, another thing that is a drawback in a case like myself, I think is peculiar to all immigrants that your father and mother do not speak the language well. As a matter of fact, my mother doesn't even speak a word of English, and my father speaks very little English. And so when you come home, they are talking to you the native language and they tell you that you should continue the old tradition from the old country and so forth. So that there's really no help from your own family to improve your indoctrination or integration into the community the way that we--it was purely the process of your friends in school and, well as I told you my father ran a restaurant in Danville and, well, we weren't rich in those days. Every able bodied child or men has to help in the family so, I mean, I really didn't have any time to spend out playing with fellow classmates or anything else like that after school. I come home, I try to study and then I help out with the--my father's work in the restaurant and so forth. So I mean, practically, I spent my whole childhood in, well, in a way, you can say in servitude rather than enjoying yourself like today's children.

NASH: Did you get paid by your father?

HONG: Yes, my father paid me – paid me, yes. As a matter of fact, he paid me twenty dollars a month in wages and then plus my tips. As a matter of fact, I earned my money which in few-- a few years later permitted me to attend college during the depression. Otherwise, I would not have had that opportunity.

NASH: Were there many other Chinese families in Danville?

HONG: No. Ours was the only family. My uncle was there and I told you my first cousin, and then there were other, two other Chinese, no, three other Chinese men. Two of them had a partnership in a laundry and the other person had a laundry by himself. Those were the only Chinese in the whole town. It was a town of, I think in those days about thirty thousand people – today, I think, the average about forty thousand people. Danville is a town, you know, it's a mining town. It was next to Westville, Illinois, which is one of the big soft coal mining area. U.S. Steel used to have their mining area next to [not understood] Zinc Company and then it was more or less like the railroad center where all the farm people, all the products as well as the coal and the zinc. [not understood] Zinc Company was I think the second largest zinc company in the whole United States, so Danville was more or less a town where all these people come in on Saturday night and enjoyed--it's like Dodge City in the...

NASH: Really! (laughter)

HONG: It really is.

NASH: Was it that roughneck? (laughter)

HONG: Well, in -- when I was first there, people weren't roughish. It was, well, no, go back to 1923 – it wasn't the days of the automobile. We still had the horse drawn carts and you still had the ice man deliver ice. We didn't have refrigerators and other things. People come into town n Saturday shop and get the produce, but we don't have the saloons and stuff like that. We don't have the people coming in with guns and all that kind -- sort of thing, but in a way it was, how you say, twentieth century Dodge City and some of these people were very rough -- they enjoyed themselves. They come into town and have a few drinks and so forth . And it was a lively town compared to our town which is purely, I mean like the big farms out there, you know. Obvious, it's not like a metropolitan city New York. Why you have to go say fifteen miles before you see the next town and, say, what you -- from Danville --from there the closest town was Rossville which is thirteen miles away and from Rossville you go up to [not understood] forty miles, you go through forty miles of farm country without seeing anything but there were two gas stations. You can imagine what coun-- the country is like.

NASH: What was it like being one of the few Chinese families in the area?

HONG: Well, we didn't have a rough time. We had one or two occasions, you know, get interference from some of the other children that may give you a hard time, but I mean, obviously there was very few really, very little incidents. Maybe a little incidents because of the fact that I was not in contact with them. Because, I mean, well I mean -- in those days when a child goes to school, he doesn't go half a day, he goes a full day. You know you go to school eight o'clock in the morning. You don't get out until three thirty and by that time I, well, I come home. I come home about four thirty or five o'clock. I help my father, you know. By ten o'clock you go to bed, so you don't have a chance to get in trouble. And so there were hardly any incidents because of the fact, well, no distraction and my father kept a great discipline. So I study and I made pretty good grades.

I wasn't one that hated school and didn't study or anything else like that so there -- there was no occasion. And then because of the fact I – I was small and I grew up, I was more or less integrated into the system, into the community, and the people were very nice. They helped me a lot. As a matter of fact, my landlord to my father's restaurant had a real estate agency. He was old fellow and he did have nothing to do and he asked me to come to his office, you know, when he was not doing anything. He taught me English there, so we were -- had help from everybody and because we grew up there, practically everybody in the whole town knew us. We were the only Chinese restaurant in the whole town and there was a few others and many of the -- the well-to-do people, the – say, the upper strata of a city come in there and they knew me ever since I was a little kid and then go through school and

graduating from college and all that. So they were very sympathetic and I think the experience of working and learning the business and being in the business world had helped me to make myself successful when I came to New York.

NASH: I'm just curious. Where did your family get the supplies for the Chinese food when they were in Illinois?

HONG: Well, there's certain dry goods and stuff like that which you get from the supply house in Chicago, so they mailing by Railway Express. However, certain things you substitute like you don't have the Chinese bok toy so you use American fresh vegetable like--. Well, like here in New York they do not use all Chinese vegetables. They still use American vegetable like celery, onions, which is a staple, and other greens and so forth. There -- there was a German shoemaker in Champagne, Illinois, which is thirty miles away when I went to college there and he took the Chinese seed and he had a small Chinese restaurant and he know what to do with them He grew them and he put the fertilizer in and he grew the vegetables, even became large and bigger than the Chinese farmers..

NASH: And what did he do with them?

HONG: He gave – gave it to me by the bushes, so we had plenty. There was no trouble getting. He got the seed. As a matter of fact, we had a house in Danville. My mother has a little garden in back. Well, we don't use it for the restaurant part, but I mean we had--we'd grow it and practically all the Chinese vegetable we want.

NASH: Where are your parents now?

HONG: Well, my father died in 1933 in my first year of college and my mother died ten years later when I was in the service.

NASH: Well, how did you become a lawyer? Why did you become a lawyer? (laughter)

HONG: Well, to tell you the truth, I will -- as you know, my father had not had too much education and maybe -- well, after I finish high school, really, my elder brother, who's a doctor (we're a year apart) --. And some of the customers would come to the restaurant and ask us what we're going to do after graduating from high school – Well, that through their encouragement -- one of them was a dentist and all -- and wanted to talk about going to other fields then -- and then somehow (through my elder brother and all that) and I just more or less tag along. And we went, started going to the university, which is the University of [not understood] thirty miles away, and I didn't know anything about the university. I mean, it was the farthest—far f-- .

I had no idea that I was even going to finish college or knew anything what my goal was and I – but, anyway, after I graduated I took the college entry course and I was accepted. My brother was accepted and he started and he took a different course. I took an engineering course and I guess at that time I thought maybe perhaps after I graduate, I could go back to China and maybe become an engineer and maybe help

develop the country of China. But then after I graduated in '37, it was tough to find a job. I had an interview -- there Westinghouse Electric Company was about ready to hire m but right then and there (I graduated in June, 1937), on July 7, 1937, the Japanese bomb the Marco Polo Bridge in Shanghai and we had a war going on over there. And they s—and that's how I came to New York for the first time to be interviewed by the Hankow manager at Westinghouse who was a Chinese then.

I remember going down Wall street and he told me you know I'd like to have you in, but we can't do anything about it now because we have to divert all our shipment. We're not doing anything in China because of the Japanese war, and so I -- and '37 was still a depression year and it was tough to get a job and all that and so I continue to--I was looking for a job but wasn't successful--I went to Western Electric. I went to all these other places – although they would like to hire me and the question of discrimination in those days were there. They didn't know how they would feel to have a Chinese supervisor over other employees, so quite difficulties.

NASH: How did they put that to you?

HONG: Oh, they told me straight -- straight. As a matter of fact, one of them said to the head of the college there, he says, "You know, one of the nicest graduates that you have in your classes is this Chinese boy, but we couldn't hire him because he's Chinese. And well, in those days, you didn't have anybody fighting for you, so you accept the fact that the-- that they want to discriminate, they discriminate, choose whoever they want. And so that's the reason afterwards, I was out a half year and I said, "Well, now it's the first year, when you work for a corporation, you are subject to their mercy as to they will hire you or not. I mean, as a matter of fact, whether you work for anyone is a question of whether they like you, whether they want you or whether they don't want you.

And so trying to find something to be independent, but no whether -- whether depression or anything come that you can survive yourself. I myself had the question of whether the medical field or the dentistry field or go to the legal field. And because of my engineering background, I was able to go to a law school without taking any other courses, whereas if I had gone to the medical field or dentistry field, I would have take certain prerequisite courses in biology, chemistry and so forth. So therefore I -- I thought I would take a little law and see how I would like it, perhaps even as an engineer – a sales engineer -- it would help me. And after I got into law, I found law so interesting, one semester led to another and finally I graduated from law school.

After I graduated from law school, I took the bar exam and I passed the bar exam and I found myself a free man, you know. And one of the--Judge Steeley, who is the Committee of Fitness for all that district in Illinois in Danville. I had to come before him to be sworn in as a member of the Illinois Bar and he said to me, he said, "Eddie," He says, "I've known you ever since you were a little kid." He says, "With this act, I have given you a passport into the world.". And I don't think a truer word was ever said because after I became a lawyer, I think that it

opened up my life and because of my law degree and the profession, I had been able to go into many, many fields which I wouldn't have been able to break the ice.

NASH: When did you first become involved with the issues of, well, Chinese immigration?

HONG: Well, after World War II, I -- I went into serve the war from 1942 in February until my discharge in February, 1946. Then I started practicing law here in New York City and a lot of Chinese came to me with their problems, with questions of immigration and so forth. So therefore being myself a--in the same position-- I took a great interest in the problem of immigration. So therefore I studied law and the -- my people's problem channeled me into becoming an immigration expert. So I was the only Chinese lawyer to appear before the New York District of Immigration for many, many years before any other lawyer, Chinese lawyer, came in to appear on a case, and I pilot many changes in the immigration law of the – in order to permit the Chinese to attain equal rights as a citizen in the United States. The first immigrant member – the first immigration law enacted by congress was the Chinese Exclusion Laws. There were no other immigration laws. And so it has always been a discriminating law against Chinese and Orientals.

NASH: What year was that law enacted?

HONG: It began with a treaty with China in 1882, through the agitation of the people from the West saying that the Chinese (after they got through using them as laborers building up the railroads and everything else like that) that they were a threat to the laborers in the West. And so they want to bar any immigration or any Chinese to come to the United States. So therefore they made a treaty with China that no Chinese would come into the United States except as business, a visitor or as a student or a treaty merchant. So in 1892, ten years later after the expiration of the treaty, Congress enacted the law to exclude Chinese completely. And this law stay in the law books until World War II when China became one of the Big Five members and it was a matter of courtesy to recognize them as a big power participating in World War II. They repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act.

However, by repealing the Chinese Exclusion Act, they did not make the Chinese an equal citizen. They made them second class citizen because they said, "Well, the Chinese could come in, we're not excluding them." But at that time we had the quota system, and the quota system only allowed one hundred five Chinese to come in. And furthermore, the Chinese (even though the hundred five Chinese could come in) the Chinese who are citizens of the United States could not bring in their wives or their minor children in to the United States, non-quota, which was given to all the other citizens of the United States.

So in cooperation with the Japanese Citizens League, which did a great job in changing the law, I myself on behalf of the Chinese testified and said that it was inequitable to the Chinese and Congress enacted a law in 1948 which repealed that part of the Immigration Act -- permitting Chinese citizens to bring their wives and children into the

United States non-quota. And because of that and also the fact that the – no, what is known as the G.I. War Brides Act permitting veterans to bring their wives and children into the United States non-quota, I mean there's no restrictions on them except that their wives and children of bona fide veterans of the United States. That permitted the Chinese to bring their families and children to the United States.

So that they could have a normal family life and instead of in the old days when all you had were Chinese men or boys. Because when they couldn't bring their family over, the father didn't want to bring anyone over to the United States except somebody who could be a wage earner who could help support the family. Because the family, the women folks and the other children were in China, so all they did was bring somebody who could come over here, work, make a little money, whatever they have, send -- remit that money back to support the family in China. So with the repeal of the discriminating factors as to wives and children, they bring their family over here. They have a normal intercourse of social life and everything else like that. Today instead of a, say, one hundred to one ratio, men and women, we have almost attained equality of the sexes.

NASH: Would you say that the law is no longer discriminatory towards Asians?

HONG: No, I don't think the law is discriminating against the Chinese. I think they are, have just as much right as any other ethnic group now immigrating to the United States.

NASH: How has the picture of Chinese immigration changed since, oh let's say, oh, the last 25 years?

HONG: Well, you can see the changes in New York by the growth of Chinatown. In the -- 1946, Chinatown extended from Mott Street barely to Canal Street and from Mott Street over to the Bowery. Today I think the Chinese have expanded. Chinatown itself is going almost up to Houston Street, which is, I would say a half mile upward and then in width it has gone over to Broadway and all the way over to the East River. I think the population-wise it has grown, I would say at least 25 times than when it was in 1946 The amount of, well, to show how it has grown is that there was no Chinese sportswear manufacturers. I think today the Chinese Garment Manufacturers Association is about the second largest group of people sportswear and ladies garment. I think it has taken over the old garment factories that used to be more, I think, Jewish and so forth. I -- I don't think even the Puerto Rican people are as great in number in the garment manufacturing industry as the Chinese women and men.

NASH: Do you think that they're exploited?

HONG: No, I don't think they're exploited. I think they're hard workers. They work long, but that they are industrious. They like to get ahead. And if you want to get ahead, you have to work harder than the next person. You can't expect to really be like number one without trying harder.

NASH: Well, I noticed your picture is on a giant mural in Chinatown. How did it happen to get there?

HONG: My office is start on Chatham Square. Chatham Square is a well known square in New York It used to be, in the old days, was a center where the, I think, the American Exchange or one of the exchange used to be there. And the First Avenue, Second Avenue, Third Avenue elevated used to converge in that corner and there it divert down to City Hall into South Ferry. Now, about eighteen years ago, they had the subway platform in this entire square and then when they took it down, it made this whole square. I think there's about ten streets that converge into this square and my office happen to be built right on that square. And – it's -- there's nothing in front of it, nothing, well, I have three open sides. One facing Square, one facing Bowery, one facing the Cath— Catherine Street and this is exactly where Bowery begins and I have a [not understood] there.

And there was a big wall there and a couple of years ago, Arts Workshop --, what they are an organization in fo– what they are an organization of artist that try to bring some culture into the city of New York. They saw my big wall and they asked me if I would consent to give them space to paint a mural on my wall. I says, "Well," I says, "If it's anything for the good of the community, I would be glad to do it. So I gave them the wall. And the theme that they put into the wall was to show the history of the Chinese in America. And if you notice the mural, it shows a big face of an elderly Chinese. It shows the face of a middle-aged Chinese man and his wife and also a child. And then it shows in the background a scene when she in Wyoming -- when after the Chinese laborers completed building the railroad, they massacre the Chinese -- is shown of a Chinese elderly man with a lute as a form entertainment for him.

There's a picture of the railroad showing the Chinese building the railroad. There's a Chinese – I mean, a picture of a Chinese woman sewing on a sewing machine -- showing the fact that a Chinese, modern day Chinese are -- are greatly involved in the garment industries. So it more or less, it left out the Chinese laundry man and the Chinese rest-- people complaining and "Why didn't they have?" -- people complaining to me. why didn't the artist include that in the mural. But I said to them that have nothing to do with the design or of what they were doing. I only donated space for them to put it there. Well, above this mural--this mural is about thirty feet by sixty feet. Above that there's a space about twenty feet by sixty feet which originally I had my--an ad, I would say of my – my car agency and my insurance business in New York.

It was in letter form and so last year my sign painter was putting up my sign on the building next to me. So he asked me, he said, "Eddie, your sign is peeling. Why don't you do your sign while I got a scaffold up? It will save you a little money." I said, "Sure. Why not?" And so he said, "What are you going to put on it?" I said, "Well, put the same thing on." He said, "Oh, no, let's have something else, so put a slogan there." So I said, "Well, all right. I'll think up something, see." And so being that the -- had several faces. And I

thought, well, maybe if I put my face on my sign up there, it would harmonize into it. So, and then I thought of a slogan I thought it would be nice to say, "You got a friend in Chinatown." So I put that up to the -- my sign man. He said, "Gee, that's nice," and he called an artist and this artist who did my portrait up there happened to be, his name is Emilio Perez. He's a refugee from Cuba. He's an artist and he painted the big pictures of Castro in Cuba. So he thought it was great and all that. And so he painted my picture and then, so that's how the sign got up there. And I didn't know what the effects would be to people. I mean, I had more comments--favorable comments than disfavorable comments and the Chinese people themselves-- of Chinese or Chinese person is at least making themselves prominent. So that the people would know that the Chinese exists.

NASH: Is there anything that you would like to say about your experience as an immigrant in this country?

HONG: Well, I would say that I think I have accomplished as a lawyer (I do not say that I want to be a Clarence Darrow or anything of that nature). However, I did embark on the question of trying to bring the Chinese to be non-discriminated against in the matter of immigration and to bring their status up. That they can never be afraid of being deported which I have succeeded and the Chinese have legalized their status. They are now bona fide first class citizen of the United States. They're enjoying all of the benefits of the United States. And I'm also contributed to the development of New York as to -- to the field which they are engaged in. And I think that through my efforts in changing the immigration law, permitting them to bring the families over which I have brought in four generation of Chinese and I think, I would say from that viewpoints, I have attained my goal in my service to the Chinese community and to all the Chinese. I am glad that they can walk around without being, having any fear that the immigration is right behind them and ready to deport them.

NASH: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Hong.

HONG: Thank you.

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