

A Visit to the National Archives

By Philip Chin

As part of our effort to honor Asian Pacific American Heritage Month in May 2003, Asian American Curriculum Project (AACP) staffers Leonard Chan, Mas Hongo, and I visited the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) - Pacific Region. We decided to try to find whatever information exists about our immigrant ancestors. In later articles we'll keep you posted as to how we go about this process so that you can learn from our experience and try it yourself.

The center is located at 1000 Commodore Drive in San Bruno, California, near the Golden Gate National Cemetery. The purpose of the archives is to preserve and provide access to valuable, non-current Federal records with historical, legal, or fiscal value. Only about 2% of all Federal records are saved. Among the few items saved are original census records, immigration records, military draft records, federal land documents, and federal court and legal documents among others.

We met four of the staff at the center at that time. They were:

Daniel Nealand, Director - Archival Operations **David Piff**, Senior Archivist
Shirley J. Burton, Regional Administrator **William Greene**, Archives Specialist

Among the collections of particular interest to Asian Americans are the immigration records. Mr. Greene brought several original document files for us to examine. Some of these documents included photos, affidavits, legal testimony, letters of recommendation, and transcripts of interrogations that Asian immigrants had to go through before being accepted or rejected from entering the United States. Ironically the most complete and detailed records of any immigrants were kept on the Chinese because of the requirements of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. These requirements were so detailed as to include incoming and outgoing ship passenger lists as well as the normal documents one would expect in immigration records. Despite our current concerns of terrorism, it seems like more detailed and complete immigration records were kept in the 19th Century than in the 21st Century. For genealogists and family members this depth of information provides an unparalleled opportunity to trace ancestors or to catch a glimpse of a distant relative. In some cases the only photographs known to have been taken of some 19th Century Asian immigrants are contained in their federal immigration records.

Some of the documents are in very poor condition due to their age and the high acid content of 19th Century paper. These vulnerable papers have been placed in acid-free folders to slow their deterioration. Some photographs have almost completely faded into whiteness. Among the things we discussed with the archivists were the practical issues

of storing and keeping such old records intact. Files are kept in temperature and humidity controlled rooms and away from light as much as possible. However, it is still impossible to stop the steady deterioration of paper. We also discussed the practical limits on what can be done to preserve these records. First, the cost of transforming all the paper records into microfiche or microfilm is prohibitively expensive. The Chinese immigration files alone contain hundreds of thousands of individual documents and photos. Multiply that by the number of other immigration documents, federal court documents, and millions of other federal documents that date back to the 1850s that are also contained in this single archive and you get a small sense of the huge problem. Second, there is no guarantee that any modern form of recordkeeping will still be in use many years or even a few years from now, especially those kept in digital formats. For example, some NASA electronic documents of the 1960s and 1970s are now essentially lost to history because the computers and the human programmers that could open them either no longer exist or have long ago been retired. Document preservation is difficult no matter how it is handled.

All of the fourteen National Archives regional facilities across the nation face critical storage problems. The US Congress appropriates money to build archive space based only upon the current needs of some given year, not on future needs. This means that space that was just sufficient for document storage in 1974 when the center opened are severely congested today in 2003. Saving 2% of federal documents each year translates into tons of documents that must find space somewhere. Sadly, this is the situation faced by many libraries and archives across the nation. In 1998, the center in San Bruno floated the idea of moving the immigration records out of state to clear room for other documents. Only the strong resistance by the Asian American community kept this move from happening. Because of the Asian American community's continued strong interest there are no foreseeable revivals of any such proposals.

Access is fairly easy at the federal archives. If you are doing research in the archives you must fill out an application and show some identification to get a pass that is good for one year. The facility has pay machines for the duplication of documents. For photographs, you can have the archive staff send the pictures out to a professional paid photographic duplication service. If you prefer, you are welcome to bring your own equipment with you. Equipment such as digital cameras, camcorders, scanners, and laptop computers are allowed, but arrangements and approvals must be secured in advance.

Most of the material at the archive can be used without issues of copyright infringements or privacy concerns. As a result, many of the users of the archives are writers and documentarians. Privacy restrictions apply to documents that contain personal information about living individuals. Such documents are normally restricted for 75 years.

To start a search for someone in the federal records, be prepared to provide any bit of information that you can find. Any federal documents or federal identification numbers such as related to Social Security, draft registration, or the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS.) can be particularly useful. Mr. Greene described finding an

unknown number on the back of a provided picture and matching that number up to the specific immigration file even though the interested descendant spelled the ancestor's name wrong. Relatives can also be traced back to the street addresses they used in reporting themselves to the US Census. The Census taken in 1930 is particularly well detailed, listing children, jobs, and other interesting bits of useful information that could lead to other files.

It is best to gather this preliminary information before contacting the regional archive offices and arranging a visit. The number of archive employees and their time is extremely limited so you should maximize the benefit of their help by doing your own homework first. With this information the archive staff can get you started in the right direction and assist you during the course of your research. Mr. Piff particularly emphasized that archival research does not require advanced degrees. Ordinary people with little academic background show up all the time to do research and are often successful. However, the process of research requires patience and perseverance. If you find that you lack these characteristics, there are private organizations and individuals that can do the research for you, but be prepared to pay large amounts for such services.

Student groups are welcome to visit the Federal Archives but it recommended that these groups should be limited to 20 or less. In setting an appointment for the visit the class should have some unified research goal so that the staff can be prepared with relevant materials and specialized staff. Our archive staff hosts gave us an example of how they recently helped some students research the Italian Americans interred during World War II.

The National Archives and Records Administration - Pacific Region in San Bruno can be contacted at (650) 876-9009.

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- [NARA's genealogy page](#)

Research at NARA: A Personal Account By Philip Chin

In researching your ancestors you generally start out knowing some information about your father and mother and if you're lucky something about your grandparents as well. I didn't start out with much beyond my father's name, birthdate, the street in San Francisco where he was born, some vague information about a trip to China in the 1930s, and equally vague information from a cousin that the family had at one time lived in Deadwood, South Dakota as well as in San Francisco. I also knew that my grandfather had been born in San Francisco but didn't know when. Unfortunately, my father's family has never been prone to talking much about the past. This is probably the first lesson if you ever want to look into your ancestors. Make sure your relatives talk about or write down the information so that you will have a better clue as to where to start looking.

Through searches of the indices (described in the side bar) I was finally able to find reference numbers to case files belonging to people that could be my father, uncle, and grandfather.

I gave the reference numbers listed in the ship landing cards to David Piff, the archivist assisting us, and he soon came back with the files. I looked into my supposed father's file first. At first Mr. Piff and I didn't believe it was him. The file photo looked far too young. Then the details began to fall into place. The street he was born on was the one I remembered in San Francisco. The date of birth was also correct. It turned out that the first photo in the file had been taken when my father was 8 years old and when he'd gone through his first "Immigration Service" (IS - predecessor to the INS and the Department of Homeland Security) interrogation. I'd never seen any photos taken of him at that early an age and it was a shock to realize he'd ever been that young.

I was less surprised when I examined my uncle's file. He had pretty much the same glum expression in the photos taken when he was 14 that I was used to 40 years later. Amazing how some people never change isn't it?

My grandfather's file was fairly thick. It contained the record of his multiple returns from China and multiple documents related to his children and his wife. The IS was very thorough in cross-referencing because this was one of their main tools in enforcing the immigration acts against the Chinese.

The documents in my grandfather's file covered the period from 1911 when he'd first applied for pre-investigation to 1956 when the Social Security Administration accessed the file. Form 430 was an application for pre-investigation to the IS. To facilitate quick reentry into the US, a Chinese person would have to apply to have their status in the US investigated before they left the country. A denial of Form 430 meant either deportation or a denial of re-entry to the US. I was shocked to discover a letter from IS Inspector J.W. Nicholson recommending that my grandfather have his Form 430 denied in December 1911 based upon "discrepancies" in the accounts given between the applicant and witnesses.

I'd heard about the detailed answers required of Chinese immigrants by IS inspectors at the time but never before have I read any actual interrogation transcripts. These transcripts were obviously very moving to me because of my personal connection to the people involved. Reading about the discrimination and suspicion that Chinese faced at that time has always been disturbing but actually knowing that it affected your own relatives is something that disturbs you far more.

My grandfather had moved to Deadwood, South Dakota when he was 12 year old in 1903 and returned to San Francisco when he was 19 years old in 1911 when he put in his application. He was first asked about the building he lived in when he was 12. How many floors did it have? Where was the stairway located? Was it to the left or right of the ground floor store? What business was in the store? How many stories was the building? This proved to be a major point of interest for the IS. As part of the pre-investigation, the IS also interrogated my great-grandfather and great-grandmother.

Grandfather remembered the building as having four stories, great-grandfather remembered two, and great-grandmother remembered three. Another point of IS interest was that my grandfather didn't remember living in a previous building that the family had moved from when he was 6 years old. As far as grandfather remembered, he'd lived in only one building on Commercial Street in San Francisco before he'd left for Deadwood. Inspector Nicholson stated in his recommendation, "It seems apparent to me, from these discrepancies, that this applicant is not the son of this couple, as he claims."

With this far from promising start another interrogation was ordered by a different IS inspector.

Another round of questioning ensued... "Do you remember the plaza in 1903?" "Did it have a fence around it?" "Don't you remember if there was ever any railing or fence around any part of it?" "Do you remember the Globe Hotel in Chinatown before you left?" "Where was it?" What were the location of other prominent buildings in Chinatown? What were the locations of churches and missions, and their orientation to Chinese stores in the area? Then the questions went back to the plaza. "Are you sure there was no monument in the plaza when you left here?" "Nothing in the center?"

In his concluding report of March 1912, Inspector Charles Mayer stated "Applicant was re-examined by me and I found that he speaks English very well. He has the appearance of being thoroughly Americanized. I questioned him concerning San Francisco's Chinatown at about the time he claims to have gone to Deadwood and, from his ready answers, considering the length of time that has elapsed, I was impressed that he must have lived in San Francisco for a number of years before going to Deadwood, in order to have been so familiar with things that he described. I am inclined to think that the investigation at Deadwood and the re-examination of applicant, together with his ability to speak English, and his Americanized appearance, outweigh the discrepancies pointed out by Inspector Nicholson, for which reason I recommend favorable action."

I might never have been born except for Inspector Mayer. Grandfather was returning to China in 1912 to marry my grandmother. She would finally arrive in the US in 1917 as the "wife of a native."

Why Am I Looking

By Leonard Chan

When I started this genealogical research process with Philip, my mom kept asking a vital question, "Why are you doing this and what are you going to do with it when your done?"

My short answer is that interest in history is piqued when one studies their own past. My uncle got my curiosity juices flowing a few years ago when he wrote a short article on our family history for a reunion. I returned the favor :) two weeks ago by giving him an early report on my finding from the archive. My email to my uncle has gotten him excited enough to offer to join me on my next research visit to NARA.

For me, the fun part of this whole experience is in the sharing of my findings with the rest of my family - I really hope my nieces will appreciate this someday.

As for other reasons why I did it and why others should try it - by learning about my predecessors, I felt as though I was bring a piece of them alive again. Like many have said before, "no one is truly gone as long as you remember them."

This reminds me of something former President Nixon use to say about how no one would ever write a book about his mother. Most everyone will leave this Earth with not much ever being written about him or herself. If searching ones roots inspires people to record their own personal history too, then I say go do it. Perhaps people in the future, if they care to read it :), will learn about us and in so doing may benefit from our experiences.

Start researching your roots and writing about yourself. Somebody will care.

Steps Taken For Our Research

1. Get info from living and willing relatives
2. Make contact with the regional archive that you plan to visit - share what you know with an archivist and set an appointment for a visit
3. Equipment that we brought to the archive: Notebook computer and scanner
4. When you arrive at the archive, the first thing you get will be a researcher card (it's like a library card) - you will need to show some picture ID
5. What we started with: The archivist that was helping us started us off with immigration (INS) records - they're classified as record group 85. Inside the research room are shelves of "Finder Aid" binders to each of the record groups. The group 85 binders contain the names of people that were processed through the immigration department. We were also shown the record group 85 microfilm cabinets, which contain a much more thorough list of names. The binders are organized by date and the names are sorted alphabetically. Next to each name is a number used for finding the case file for that particular person.
6. Write the case file number on a form to request the file and give it to an archivist for retrieval. A cross-reference list of related files can be found in the back of most files, so finding a correct match can often lead to other files with information.

Please Note: These original articles were written in 2003 and personnel at the National Archives in San Bruno and other information may have changed since then.