

INTERVIEW WITH CHARLIE QUAN
CONDUCTED BY A.M. NICHOLSON
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A.M. Nicholson This is A.M. Nicholson, M.L.A. for Saskatoon, who is interviewing my very good friend Charlie Quan for the Saskatchewan Archives. Charlie was a restaurant owner and operator for many years in Saskatchewan, and is well known for his hospitality and for the excellent meals he served. He and his wife have now retired and are living with his son and daughter-in-law at 85 Northdale Boulevard, Toronto, where his son is one of the senior engineers with the Ontario hydro. Their four children are all most interesting. Mae Anna happens to have been born in China and was called after our daughter Mary Anna. She's 22. Sherry, 17, was called after the elder daughter of the then Premier Douglas of Saskatchewan, and Franklin is called after a very famous American, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Corinna, aged 6 is called after herself. And I'm sure that the children are delighted to have their grandparents with them and able to devote more time to seeing them growing. Charlie has taken the trouble to write a few paragraphs to tell us something about our associations over the years, so I will now ask Charlie to read these. Charlie didn't have the chance to go to school very long, but he writes English and Chinese very well and I appreciate very much the sentiments that he committed to writing when he heard of my visit.

C. Quan Today it is the 16th of August, 1964. It is my great pleasure to have my good friend, Mr. A.M. Nicholson, with me here at 85 Northdale Boulevard, Toronto, Ontario, the home of my son. Mr. Nicholson was a member of Parliament in Ottawa for many years and until recently he was the Minister of Social Welfare of the Saskatchewan Government in Regina. He is now the member of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Saskatchewan. Of course he has been my long time and good friend. I happened to know Mr. Nicholson when I was at Somme, Saskatchewan, and he was the United Church minister in Somme. I used to go to his congregation and listen to his preaching. Since then Mr. Nicholson has taken good care of me and won my great respect. No matter where I was, in Somme, Hamilton, Assiniboia or Toronto, he always visited me as he could. Or telephoned me at the nearest station during travelling. We have went together in a streetcar, walked in streets or go to meeting. I remember that in 1943 on Mr. Nicholson's invitation I sat beside him in the House of Commons Chamber to hear Madame Chiang Kai-Shek's address. Today Mr. Nicholson wanted me to tell something of my early life. I was born in a village in the province of Kwangtung in the southern part of China. My father won a military title from the government through the examination. Because of his good nature and his title he gained respect from the people of our village. He received no pay from the country and later in teaching his pupils. Shortly and physically training also on and operation of a store in order to support my family including my mother, two brothers and four sisters. I was the one in the family

C.Q.

that had the deepest affection from him. Living with him in the store the accommodation was fine. I had a big piggy bank with a lot of coins but never spent one of them. I began to realize my father's situation. At my age of 13 after seven years of schooling, I had my father's consent to leave home for Singapore with the ambition to help my father. I worked in a store. My wages was four dollars a month for the first year. Every year raised two dollars a month for the next three years and one dollar more for a month, another next three years. During these seven years I sent money to my father and still saved some to go back home. I returned home from Singapore and got married. Then I went to Hong Kong. On arriving with the help of two ladies I managed to get by and found a job after. I remembered pretty well that one day the Crown holiday. All restaurants were closed. I only could buy three cookies for the day's meals. Three years were spent in Hong Kong. I landed in Canada for the first time in 1913, and my age was 25, stayed on the west coast for a short while and then came to Saskatchewan. For 30 years in the restaurant business I was around Aneroid, Cadillac, Consul, Vanguard, Hazenmore, Willowbunch, Arcola, Somme, and Assiniboia, Saskatchewan, and Toronto, Ontario. The longest period was spent in Somme. Somme was a new town surrounded by plenty of bush inhabited only a handful of people and business was in general poor. I had to stay there for 10 years before I had a chance to go out. I remember pretty well that I sold only a piece of pie since one day at noon, and a chocolate bar for a five cent piece, the next day at 10:00 in the evening just before closing time. Bread and potatoes were my only food, hard wood my bed, and rain and snow my drinking water. In very cold days the water in the rear part of my store froze. I slept beside a wood burning stove in the front, I did not care how much of the hardships. I only cared for the living of my family in China. My acquaintance, Mr. Nicholson, kept me happy a great deal. I'm now 75 years old, living comfortably in retirement with my wife in my son's home. Thanks to my wife, my son, my daughter-in-law and my grandchildren who all take good care of me. I am feeling that I am a lucky man in the world after all. Thank you.

A.N.

Well Charlie, that has been very interesting. It occurs to me that going from China to Singapore when one was 13 was a very courageous thing to do, particularly when the motive was to help your parents and the other members of the family at home. Would you say something about the conditions in China and also about your work and your general life in Singapore.

C.Q.

The conditions in China were difficult. There we are too many people in a village and I was anxious to help my parents. In Singapore I worked in a Chinese drugstore.

A.N.

Earlier, Charlie, you mentioned that in your first year in Singapore you earned \$48, the second year \$72, \$96 the third, \$108 the next year, \$120, \$132, and by the time you were there you were earning the magnificent amount of \$144. Would you remember how much you were able to send home to your father in those days?

- C.Q. I remember I sent \$10 the first year and \$40 the second year. The third year my father had special needs so my employer in Singapore gave me an advance on my future earnings so that I could send home \$200.
- A.N. Well, Charlie, you told us about spending the seven years in Singapore and coming home with two or three hundred dollars in your pocket and you mentioned that you were married in 1910. Could you tell us something about the wedding.
- C.Q. Well, that was 54 years ago. But I remember that it was quite a big wedding, with two or three hundred people and was held over a two-day period. The people in the village brought presents as well as the gifts of money.
- A.N. Before you came to Canada, Charlie, I understand you spent some time in Hong Kong. What were you doing there?
- C.Q. I was a waiter in the Astor House for about three years.
- A.N. What sort of wages would you be receiving at that time?
- C.Q. Wages would be about \$15 a month.
- A.N. And how often were you able to get back to the Village while you were there?
- C.Q. About three times.
- A.N. When was your son, with whom you're staying, born, Charlie?
- C.Q. 1912 when I was in Hong Kong got home for a visit after I heard he was born.
- A.N. And when did you come to Canada?
- C.Q. I left China on June 13, 1913, arriving in Victoria in July.
- A.N. Did you have to pay a head tax in those days?
- C.Q. Yes. Five hundred dollars.
- A.N. And how much was the boat ticket, do you remember?
- C.Q. About two hundred dollars.
- A.N. And how did you manage to raise the \$500 headtax and the \$200 ticket.
- C.Q. My father sold a piece of land.
- A.N. What work did you first do when you came to Canada, Charlie?
- C.Q. I washed dishes in Victoria, picked potatoes in Vancouver for about three months.

- A.N. How did you happen to come to Saskatchewan?
- C.Q. My cousin who owned a restaurant in Canada wanted me to become his partner.
- A.N. And where else did you live in Saskatchewan?
- C.Q. I was also in Cadillac and in Consul before returning to China on a holiday.
- A.N. In what year would this be that you made your first trip back to China?
- C.Q. I was on the ocean on November 11, 1918 the day World War I ended.
- A.N. Had you been able to save enough money to make a trip back home by that time?
- C.Q. Yes. Conditions were good in Saskatchewan. These years with so many immigrants coming.
- A.N. How long did you stay in China when you went over?
- C.Q. I stayed one year. When my daughter was born.
- A.N. How old would your son be at that time?
- C.Q. He would be seven and had started his school.
- A.N. When you returned to Canada where did you settle after this visit?
- C.Q. I went to Vanguard for three years -- for two years and then I went back to China for my second visit.
- A.N. In what year would that be, Charlie? And how long did you stay in China?
- C.Q. 1924. And I stayed for two years, which was the limit then.
- A.N. Was your youngest boy born during the two-year period you were home?
- C.Q. No. The Canadian immigration would not permit me to remain home more than two years. So the baby was born shortly after I returned to Canada. Although he lived to be 14 I never saw him. The depression and drought set in and I never got back to China during the time of the Japanese war. My wife and our children moved to the city. He became sick and we lost him.
- A.N. When you returned to Canada, where were you prior to moving to Somme?

- C.Q. I was in partnership at Hazenmore, Willow Bunch and Arcola.
- A.N. In what year did you go to Somme?
- C.Q. I moved there in the summer of 1930.
- A.N. How did you happen to go so far north?
- C.Q. People were going north to homestead in the bush country. Some of my friends said there was need of a cafe at Somme.
- A.N. How large an establishment did you have at Somme?
- C.Q. I was all alone. I baked pies, cakes and made the ice cream in summer, washed the dishes and waited on the tables.
- A.N. Well, Charlie, since your son and family have never had the pleasure of visiting Somme--would you tell them something about the Somme Cafe, as you remember it.
- C.Q. Yes, I remember it very well. The building was 12 x 30 and about 8 feet high. The front part was about 12 x 20 and the part at the back where I baked, washed the dishes and slept. I did not have a bed, but I made a double decker bunk with neither spring or mattress. I usually slept in the lowest bunk, but when I had guests I took the upper bunk and left the lower for the company.
- A.N. I remember those days very well, Charlie. When I used to have a church service at Somme the first Monday each month, there was always an argument that you should not give up your lower bed for company, but you always insisted on having your own way. Well, I'm interested in noting that you have some of the special souvenirs which were prepared when you had guests in for special anniversaries. This one that we were looking at was for your birthday in 1935. And I noticed that you had some very good friends. And I wonder if you would read the verses which you composed for this occasion.
- C.Q. I am come back to Canada this time seven years. My age today is 47. I'm very anxious to see my family in the winter. I wonder when I will be back. Mr. & Mrs. Mallard, Miss Nan and Mrs. _____ from a thousand miles apart come to be friends. Name on this page for souvenir. Weather today was nice, nice sky. All the people here, ladies, gentlemen, young and old all look so lovely. I'm very sorry I have no orchestra, singer or wine the entertainment of my intimate friends. But we have a good conversation, happy and cheerful, seems to me are all enjoyment in themselves. Charlie Quan. Day 26, March, Canada, 1935, Saskatchewan, Canada.
- A.N. Well, now, Charlie, we're looking at the special souvenir which you prepared for your birthday party in 1936. And this is a very

- A.N. beautiful souvenir--has a great many flags and pictures of the guests. You must have had nearly all the people in Somme to your birthday party. Would you read this first group of verses you composed for the occasion?
- C.Q. North America and Asia are separated by the Pacific Ocean. I extend my sympathy to my many Chinese friends in Canada. Preventing from visiting their homes, by the long lean years of the depression and many times I worry about the trouble in my country caused by its cruel neighbour of Japanese.
- A.N. Well this is a very interesting piece of work. No wonder you're interested in the Canadian flag at the moment when you were thinking of flags at that time. Would you mind reading the verses that are on the other side of the souvenir.
- C.Q. I am so lonesome one day seems a year to me. My wife and children I am always thinking of them. In 30 long years I have not succeeded. I am still working.
- A.N. Oh well, I wouldn't say you haven't succeeded Charlie, you haven't been able to get your family out -- Well now Charlie, we're looking at a souvenir which was done following your visit to Hudson Bay Junction. We were living there in the year 1939. It's a beautiful piece of work. "Welcome to Charlie Quan's" I see that I am shaking hands with you under the station marked Hudson Bay Junction. Would you read what's written underneath here.
- C.Q. Nicholson and Quan at station of Hudson Bay Junction, Saskatchewan. The year 1939.
- A.N. Well, here's the old car I was driving, what does it say?
- C.Q. Charlie Quan and A.M. Nicholson.
- A.N. My wife had some company for the Sunday dinner when you were there. Would you read the names that are underneath this picture.
- C.Q. Tom Simpson, Charlie Quan, A.T. Speedie.
- A.N. He was the railway conductor that used to run through Somme, you'll remember.
- C.Q. Doc Hughes, Edy the Smith-Windsor, Mrs. A.M. Nicholson, Ruth Nicholson, June Butcher, Gladys Byrnes.
- A.N. And here is a note about Charlie Quan who was our guest of honor. Will you read what this says.
- C.Q. Most of the people of the village of Somme had a hard time in the bush country to maintain his family in China and look forward to success in the future.
- A.N. Well, this has been A.M. Nicholson, M.L.A. for Saskatoon City, interviewing Charlie Quan on the 16th of August, 1964.