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**LONG WAY HOME: JOURNEYS
OF A CHINESE MONTANAN**

WRITTEN BY: Flora Wong with Tom Decker

PUBLISHED BY: Wing Shing Company LLC

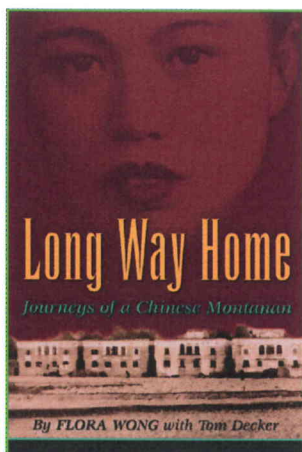
PRODUCED BY: Sweetgrass Books

PUBLICATION DATE: September 2011

SPECS: 248 pages, 6 x 9 inches, softcover,
20 black-and-white historical photographs

ISBN 13: 978-1-59152-083-2

PRICE: \$18.00



HELENA WOMAN WRITES OF HER FLIGHT FROM WAR TORN CHINA

When 82-year-old Flora Wong hears the starting gun, she's usually the first into the water.

The mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother is a passionate swimmer and athlete, having competed in four National Senior Games and one World Senior Game. Wong was named Montana Big Sky Athlete of the Year in 1999. In 2009, the Helena Sports Hall of Fame named Wong to its list of honored athletes. She has completed the Portland Marathon four times.

That alone would make her a fascinating person. But there's so much more to Flora Wong.

Tom Decker, Wong's son-in-law, sat down with her four years ago with the goal of documenting her athletic achievements. The more they talked, the more Wong revealed about her early life in China during World War II, her arranged marriage—stories even her children had never heard.

"Soon enough, the scope expanded and we had a book on our hands," he says.

The result of four years of interviews and writing is *Long Way Home: Journeys of a Chinese Montanan*.

Wong says, "We sat down and he'd ask questions. Take a rest for a couple of hours and we can get back and talk some more."

Daughter Nancy Wong says that they had many laughs and many tears. Flora had a particularly hard time discussing the circumstances surrounding her mother's death at the hands of their neighbors.

"It was difficult to talk about my mother. I didn't want to share this. It was hard, but I did. It really hurt," she explains. "I cried much as I talked to Nancy about it. It's hard."

In *Long Way Home*, Wong retraces her family's odyssey as she shares candid insights, heartbreaking tragedies, and personal triumphs. It's the openness with which Wong shares her deeply personal journey, and that of her whole family, that makes her story so powerful.

Born in Boston in 1928, Flora was a shy girl, the fifth of eight children. In 1936, seven-year-old Flora, her parents, and her seven siblings left their home in Boston and set out across the Pacific Ocean on a twenty-one-day voyage to return to their parents' home village in rural southern China. Flora's father and mother sought a new, quiet life for their young family in their native land.

But this was a different China, and Flora's family would not find the peace they sought. Mao Zedong's Communist Party had begun its rise toward revolution. And in 1937, Japan invaded China. Within a few years of her arrival, full-scale world war engulfed Flora's new home.

Amid the turmoil, they managed to build a modest life in their small village. In time, this young girl, whose only home had been Boston, learned to adjust. She tended the rice and vegetables, drew water from the town well, sewed simple clothes, and trapped frogs and beetles. Her education ended in the second grade.

At eighteen, Flora learned she was engaged to be married. Working to ensure the survival of Flora and her five sisters, Flora's mother had set a plan in motion to arrange marriages for each in the United States so they could return to the safety of their home country.

Her husband-to-be was a business owner in Montana, a man who was born not far from her village in China. A matchmaker hired by Flora's mother had put the two together. Flora was a "picture bride"; her photo had been sent to Charlie Wong, who instantly approved of the beautiful young woman.

The two wed in 1946 in Hong Kong and they planned to start a new life together in Helena. Charlie Wong set off on a ship

back to the US to ready their new home. Flora prepared to say good-bye to her family and join her husband. Little did they know that they would not see each other again for almost 5 months. Despite Flora's American citizenship, wartime sentiments and laws made it virtually impossible for her to enter the country. The couple exchanged love letters, seen by family members for the first time only recently:

"Thinking back to the time when you left, I have the memory of seeing your boat leave. You were on the boat, but I couldn't see you. It was hard to see the boat sail away. I stayed until the boat moved and disappeared. It took my breath away. I felt you had the same feeling. Talking about man and wife, there is no end to our love. The sooner I arrive to the U.S., then we will be reunited as man and wife."

—Letter from Flora Wong to husband Charlie, September 11, 1948

"I received your letter. I know the love you have for me and it makes me miss you even more. I don't know when we will be together again. When we do get together, we will be very happy. But right now, one day feels like three seasons. I am thinking that you are feeling the same way. Our deepest affection that we have for each other as husband and wife will last forever, even when we are apart."

—Letter from Charlie Wong to wife Flora, September 25, 1948

Daughter Nancy says, "With the letters, I can't believe I had the opportunity to read my parents' love story. They never expressed affection in front of their kids, so I was astounded by the level of feeling in the love letters."

When Charlie and Flora were reunited, Flora began a new life in rugged Montana, worlds away from her small village. But Helena wasn't the end of Flora's journey. It was just the beginning of a new, fascinating chapter. Here the timid girl grew into a wife, mother, business owner, and athlete.

Charlie and Flora Wong and their family lived in and operated their Wing Shing Grocery in downtown Helena throughout the 1950s and 1960s. What is now the parking lot for the Lewis and Clark Library was once the Wing Shing Grocery, torn down during the urban renewal efforts in the 1970s.

After Charlie died in 1968, leaving Flora with five children to support alone, she opened the popular Chinese Kitchen on Euclid Avenue in partnership with George and Irene Wong.

In her spare time, Flora, who had never learned to swim, started to take lessons at the YMCA. Terrified at first, she gained confidence over time and began competing at age 63.

"Mother always told us, 'You can do it,'" Nancy says. "That was her motto."

It's also the title of the book's epilogue.

Decker says he's not much for messages, but if there's a takeaway from the book, it's that Flora and her family show how good can come from adversity.

When Wong wonders about Charlie and what he would think about all she's done and how far she's come—the many medals she's won, the book she's now written with her son-in-law—Flora says she doesn't think he'd believe it. "I can't believe it myself sometimes, when I look back," she admits.

She says, "It's just like Nike says. Just do it."

Long Way Home is available at local bookstores and gift shops, through online retailers, or from distributor Farcountry Press at 1.800.821.3874, www.farcountrypress.com.



About the Author

Born in Boston in 1928, Flora Wong moved to a tiny village in Southern China with her family in 1936 at age seven. During the Communist Revolution, Flora escaped China through an arranged marriage in 1947. She and her husband, Charlie Wong, owned and operated Wing Shing Grocery on Main Street in Helena. In 1968, Charlie died, leaving Flora with five children. She operated the store until

1970, then worked at McDonald's department store in downtown Helena for two years. In 1973, she opened the Chinese Kitchen in partnership with George and Irene Wong. In retirement, Flora took up competitive running and swimming. Flora has four daughters, Bess, Gloria, Thel, and Nancy, and one son, Poy. She is a very proud grandmother and great-grandmother. Flora Wong resides in Helena.

For an interview, contact the author at 253-752-7681.

Author's website: www.longwayhomebook.com

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