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Year of the Lamb in Ft. Erie

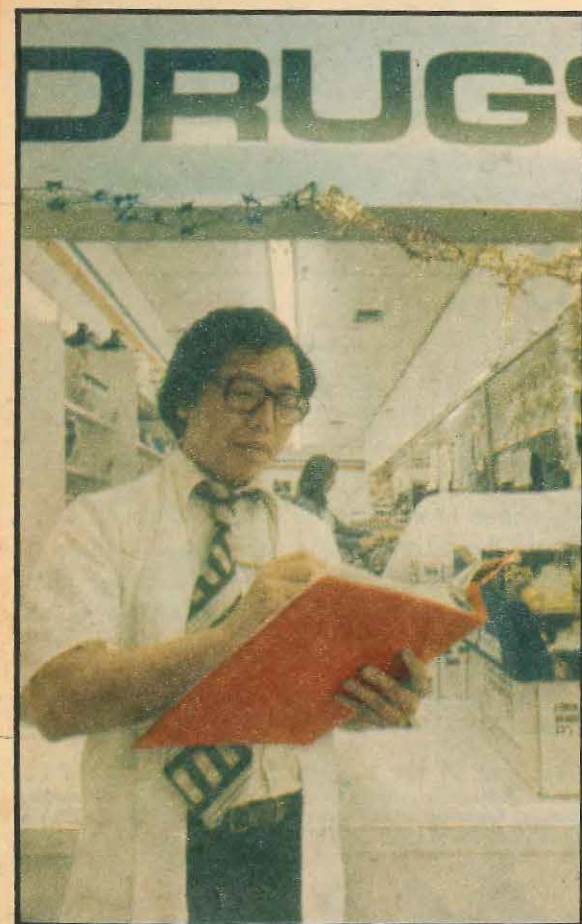
THE YEAR OF THE LAMB

BY WENDY FREEDMAN KATKIN

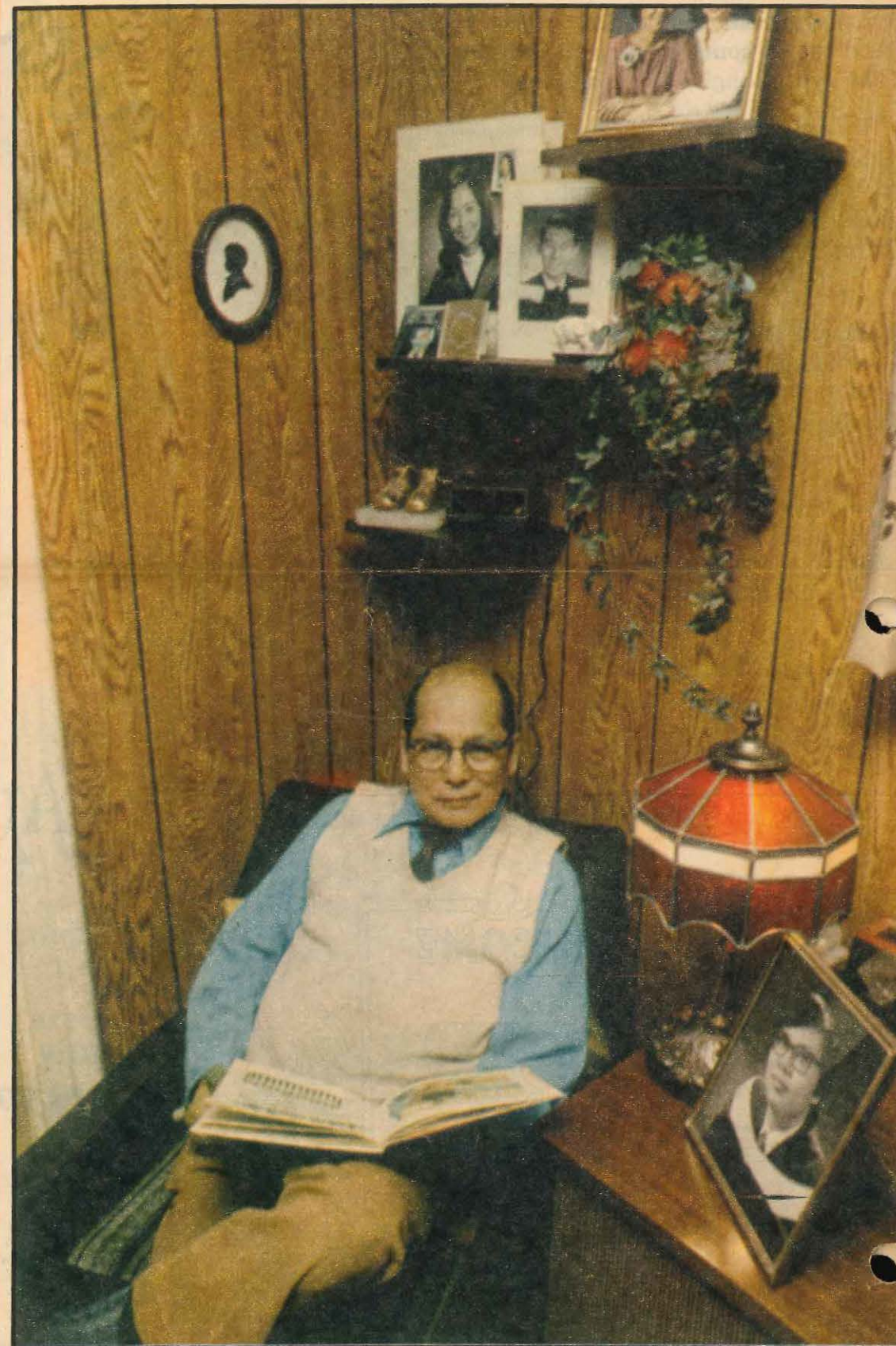
NEXT SUNDAY is an important day for the approximately 200 Chinese people who live in Fort Erie, Ont. The date marks the start of the Chinese New Year, the Year of the Lamb. It also signals the beginning of a week of celebrating for the Chinese and a time for reaffirmation of their identity and heritage.

Chinese people have been living in Fort Erie ever since 1915, when two brothers, Charlie and Sam Pong, emigres from China, opened a small laundry in the middle of the business section. Until the mid-1960s, the town's Chinese population remained tiny — no more than five or six families, all first-generation, all poor, all in the laundry or restaurant business, all from the same area in China. In the '60s, however, more Chinese began to settle there. Since 1971, at least 25 new families have moved in.

Moreover, the recent arrivals represent a diverse group, from many parts of both China and Hong Kong. They include not only restaurateurs (there are about a dozen Chinese restaurants in town), but also doctors, pharmacists, teachers, jewelers, a printer and a service station operator. As a result, the Chinese community — at last a significant part of Fort Erie's population — today finds itself in a



Alfred Liu, who came to Fort Erie from the University of Toronto in 1973, is a pharmacist who is active in many organizations in the Chinese community.



The dean of the Chinese community is G.Y. "Skippy" Wong, now semi-retired, who for years ran the first restaurant in town to serve real Chinese food.

curious state of transition, with the newcomers trying to become more "Canadian" while the oldtimers seek to rediscover their heritage.

Why have so many Chinese decided to plant their roots in this small Canadian border town? Mrs. Susie Lam, a resident of Fort Erie for 48 years, conjectures: "They seem to swarm here because they think Fort Erie is going to be booming." Mrs. Helen Wong, who is the wife of one of Fort Erie's original Chinese residents; agrees: "It's like the gold rush. They started coming and continue to come because they think they'll find gold."

Most of the newcomers are attracted to this plain, low-income town because, ironically, they see it as their proverbial pot at the end of the rainbow — a place where other native Chinese like themselves started out with nothing, yet through hard work managed to earn a living, purchase their own homes and educate their children. The newcomers are equally determined to succeed. In Fort Erie, which has relatively low property values and taxes, those who want to start their own businesses can do so with little working capital. As one new restaurant proprietor suggests, the town offers an "opportunity which I wouldn't have in a large city or an economically growing area."

For newcomers with a profession, the reasons for choosing Fort Erie are more varied — a job opening, an available practice, a good opportunity. Pharmacist Alfred Liu originally came to Fort Erie to visit a teacher he had known in Hong Kong. Five years ago, after he had completed his studies in Toronto, he accepted a job in the town. Today he owns a pharmacy there. One Chinese physician decided to open a practice in Fort Erie because, as a hockey fanatic, he wanted small-town life but big-time hockey. Fort Erie, just across the Peace Bridge from the Buffalo Sabres, fit the bill.

Some Chinese residents are worried, however, because the newcomers are "shaking things up," disrupting the safe and comfortable niche they feel they have created for themselves. Only a decade or so ago, Fort Erie's few Chinese blended into the plainness of the town. No one took special notice of them, and they themselves did little to encourage attention.

Their lives consisted mostly of running their businesses, and they had little time for socializing, even with other Chinese. As restaurateur G. Y. "Skippy" Wong, who has been living in Fort Erie for 45 years, recalls, "There were so few of us, and we were so busy working all day and night."

Mrs. Lam suggests that the children were the first to be Canadianized: "Until they were about five years old they spoke Chinese, but once they went to school, they began to talk English," she says. Louis McDermott, Fort Erie's local historian and a classmate in his youth of some of Fort Erie's original Chinese children, agrees: "It was inevitable. There weren't too many Chinese children, and all their friends were Canadian. There was nothing else they could do." Skippy Wong, who left China when he was 15 and settled in Fort Erie in 1929, admits that his own children "were not actively encouraged to learn either the Chinese language or their heritage." His son did not learn to speak

THE HISTORY of the Chinese in Fort Erie goes back to the late 1800s. Interestingly, though large numbers of Chinese in Canada and the United States were coolies, imported to this continent to work on the railroad a century ago, almost none of Fort Erie's Chinese trace their roots to the early railroad workers. Most of the town's Chinese — oldtimers and newcomers alike — are first-generation immigrants who came from China via Hong Kong.

The first Chinese on record to take up permanent residence in Fort Erie were the Pong brothers. Because there were no Chinese women in town around 1915, Charlie Pong went back to China to get himself a bride. McDermott relates that "it was quite an event" in Fort Erie "when Charlie Pong returned from China with his bride."

Most of the first Chinese to come to the border town however, did so in transit. Because

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Robert May holds Hanna while Marie May watches her mother, Francis, shop in Alfred Liu's pharmacy.





Siuki and Julie Cheung, who run the Ming Teh Restaurant, relax within.

Welsh Club, which became popular drinking and dancing night spots. Among the Chinese who came to work in these clubs were Kee and Skippy Wong who remained in Fort Erie and eventually opened up their own restaurants. Kee Wong's establishment, the Niagara Tavern, purchased in 1927, is now in fact the oldest Chinese-run restaurant in continuous operation in Fort Erie. Skippy's old place, "Skippy's," opened in 1937, was the first restaurant in town to actually serve Chinese food.

Although these several Chinese lived in Fort Erie at various times prior to World War II, only about five families stayed for longer than five years. Four of the original residents — May Wongkee (Kee Wong's wife), Skippy Wong, and Mr. and Mrs. Lam — still live there. Most of the others who came between the end of the war and the mid-'60s owe their presence in the town to Skippy. Every time he needed additional help in his busy restaurant, he went to Toronto, where "through word of mouth I got someone." Three of his original assistants — his chef, his manager, and his waiter — remained and opened their own places. In turn, their employees have likewise stayed and also gone into the restaurant business.

Skippy explains that he and the other Chinese immigrants left China because "things were bad. There was no opportunity." About his own emigration at age 15, he says, "I had no choice. I had to leave to survive. I didn't know anything about America or Canada except that in our village we lit our lights with oil sent by Standard Oil.

"Fort Erie has been good to me," adds Skippy, now semi-retired, who works weekends as *maitre d'* at Happy Jacks.

The newcomers are hoping that the same will

Dan Chang and his son, Dan, Jr., outside of the family restaurant, George's.

