

CHAPTER SAMPLER

THE

LONGEST SHOT



HOW LARRY KWONG
CHANGED THE FACE
OF HOCKEY

CHAD SOON AND GEORGE CHIANG

ILLUSTRATED BY AMY QI

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —

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GEORGE CHIANG

illustrated by
AMY QI

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

*To Zoe, for giving me a chance. To my children,
Quinn and Jasmine, and to every kid with a dream—
I'm cheering for you to give it your best shot. —C.S.*

To my son, Lee, for the fond hockey memories we share. —G.C.

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PREFACE

When I was a kid in the 1980s, my grandfather George Soon told me about one of his heroes, a Chinese Canadian hockey player named Larry Kwong, who was a star of the 1940s and '50s. I read every hockey book and magazine I could find, but not even one mentioned Kwong's name. Decades later, a newspaper article by journalist Tom Hawthorn reminded me of that mysterious name from the past. In 2007 there was little else about Larry Kwong on the internet. So I phoned the then 84-year-old man himself. I thanked Larry for inspiring my grandpa. I asked him to share his story with me. He graciously did, over countless hours, during weekly calls and on many visits, for more than 10 years until his death in 2018.

I miss Larry, my hero and friend. The story of his life never ceases to amaze me. I hope you feel the same.

—Chad Soon



One

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS



LARRY'S HOMETOWN IN THE 1920s

Nestled between three lakes at the head of the Okanagan Valley, the Vernon of Larry Kwong's youth was a picturesque town of 5,000 people. Orchards, farms and pastures spread from the valley floor up the rolling hills and mountains. Just south of the main-street shops was Chinatown, where the Kwongs lived above their general store. About 500 Chinese Canadians called the modest buildings on the neighborhood's three streets home. Boarding houses were packed with Chinese farm workers. Some ran small businesses like restaurants and laundries, which attracted white customers to Chinatown. Many other white residents wanted the Chinese community gone.

ANTI-ASIAN HATE

The idea that Chinese were filthy, diseased and drug-addicted was commonplace in North America at that time. Racist **stereotypes** caused fear of and hate toward Chinese immigrants and their families. People also accused them of stealing jobs from white workers. In 1907 an anti-Asian rally in Vancouver drew thousands of people and turned into a riot. The mob attacked Vancouver's Chinatown and Japantown, smashing windows and terrorizing residents. In Vernon, the Kwongs hoped that their neighborhood would be spared a similar fate.



KWONG HING LUNG

Larry's father, Ng Shu Kwong, came to Canada from China in 1882. He opened his store in Vernon's Chinatown in 1895. Kwong Hing Lung (which means "abundant prosperity") was a "Canadian" shop with something for everyone, from tea and silks to macaroni and cowboy hats. The store brought in a diverse crowd, including Chinese, Japanese, white and Indigenous customers. Around town people began to call Larry's father Kwong, after the name of his store. "Our real family name is Eng," said Larry, "but

CHINESE HEAD TAX

As the Canadian Pacific Railway was nearing completion in 1885, thanks in large part to Chinese workers, the prime minister, John A. Macdonald, turned around and slapped a hefty tax of \$50 on any Chinese person entering the country. The tax was later raised to \$100, then to \$500.

as the store my dad had was called Kwong's, we decided to adopt that as the family name."

TWO MOTHERS

Business was good, and in 1904 Ng Shu Kwong arranged to bring a second wife, Loo Ying Tow, to Canada. He paid the Chinese head tax, which by then had risen to \$500, or about two years' worth of wages for an immigrant worker. Mr. Kwong already had two children with his wife Rose. At that time, it was considered acceptable in Chinese culture to have more than one wife. As the second wife, Loo Ying Tow was expected to take over most of the housework. Rose, or First Mother, would have six children in total. Loo Ying Tow gave birth to nine more, including Larry. He was born in Vernon on June 17, 1923, the 14th of 15 siblings and the youngest son. Larry was given the Chinese name Eng Kai Geong.



HUMILIATION DAY—JULY 1, 1923

When Larry was only two weeks old, the Canadian government scrapped the head tax and passed a new ***Chinese Immigration Act***. No more Chinese people, with very few exceptions, would be allowed to come into the country at any price. So while most Canadians celebrated the country's birthday on July 1, there was a day of mourning in Canada's Chinatowns. There it became known as Humiliation Day. Under this racist law, also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act, families like the Kwongs were separated. Larry's sister-in-law Sue was ***deported***. To be with his wife, Larry's oldest brother, Harry, had to move to China.



GREAT LOSS

When Larry was five, his father became sick. “He had to stay in the parlor because it was the quietest room,” said Larry. On January 13, 1929, Ng Shu Kwong died of cancer. Before the funeral procession, Larry’s mother tied a white mourning band around his head and told him not to look back as they were

walking, as that was bad luck. “I remember walking quite a ways to the cemetery,” said Larry. “Finally I was picked up by a family friend, trudging through snow. The town’s marching band was out.” Later that year the **Great Depression** hit the Kwongs’ family business hard—they had to scrape by.

FIRST GRADE

In September 1929 Larry started first grade at South Vernon Elementary. School was a big adjustment for Larry. He was used to the people and language of Chinatown, and he knew only a little bit of English. He felt out of place. “For me, in those days, Canadian meant white people,” explained Larry. He felt lucky to



find two friends in George and Edgar Dobie. Their family ran the Vernon Hotel. Larry's sister Betty said the trio was inseparable and always easy to spot because they were "two redheads and one black head." The Dobie brothers, who helped Larry fit in at primary school, would be friends for life.



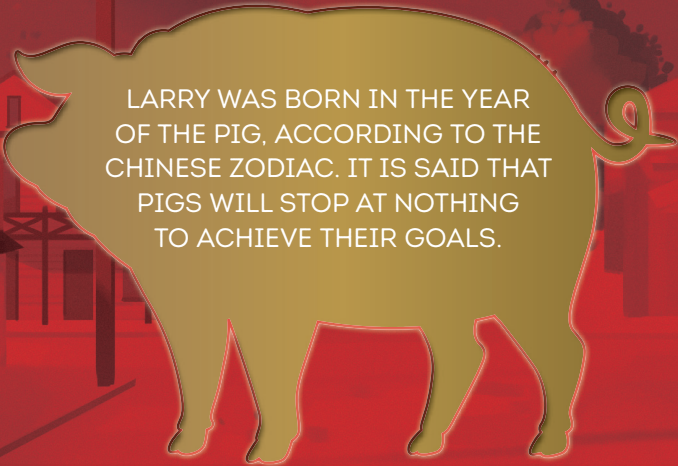
THE KWONG FAMILY SPOKE THE
CANTONESE DIALECT OF JUNG SENG.

SECOND MOTHER

Larry's mother worked around the clock to keep the Kwong household running, leaving the house just once a year. Her only outing would be for Chinese New Year to buy special treats like year cake, made of sweet sticky rice. Loo Ying Tow spoke only Cantonese. She did almost all the cooking for the busy family. Larry loved coming home to the smell of her baking bread. She was strict about table manners. A table full of hungry kids was not a problem, because, Larry said, "My mother had her chopsticks ready to knock on us if we got out of hand."

CHINESE UPBRINGING

From a young age Larry was taught how to behave outside the house. “My mom used to say, ‘When you go out, you’ve got to be very, very polite,’” he remembered. For Chinese Canadians at that time, avoiding trouble was especially important since they did not have equal rights or social standing. Larry had to carry a card that identified him as a legal **alien**. He also understood that he was to speak only when spoken to. No drawing attention to himself. “That was the whole Chinese upbringing that, when you’re out in public, just be seen and not heard,” said Larry. “That’s the old Chinese way.”



LARRY WAS BORN IN THE YEAR
OF THE PIG, ACCORDING TO THE
CHINESE ZODIAC. IT IS SAID THAT
PIGS WILL STOP AT NOTHING
TO ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS.



心想事成

Two

“HOCKEY NIGHT IN CHINATOWN”





THE CALL OF HOCKEY

On Saturday nights, the Kwong family gathered around the radio like so many other Canadian families in the 1930s. The big draw was Foster Hewitt. His play-by-play call of National Hockey League action electrified listeners across the country. Over the airwaves, Hewitt transported Larry thousands of miles from Vernon's Chinatown to a great ice palace—Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto. Hewitt called hockey “the fastest game in the world” and “the king of sports.” He pioneered the phrase “He shoots, he scores.” Larry jostled for position next to the big wooden radio stand in his living room. He was hooked.


IN 2000 THE ASIAN CANADIAN BAND NUMBER ONE SON RELEASED A SONG ABOUT LARRY KWONG CALLED “HOCKEY NIGHT IN CHINATOWN.”

VANCE STREET GARDENS

As soon as the temperature dropped enough, Larry's big brothers Jack and Jimmy would flood the vacant lot on Vance Street with a hose. Once it was frozen, Larry and his siblings would pretend

that the humble patch of ice was a big-league arena. Larry’s sister Betty would also play with the boys. They would each be a Toronto Maple Leaf, picking one of the names immortalized by Foster Hewitt. Jimmy supplied the hockey sticks. He would collect broken ones from the town rink and fix them up. Boots stood in for goalposts. Horse droppings were frozen into pucks. Larry’s hand-me-down skates were several sizes too big, and his stick was held together by tape, but he couldn’t stop smiling. “Right away, when I put skates on, I said, ‘Gee, I want to be a hockey player,’” Larry said. There were no Chinese Canadians





in **professional** sports, but that didn't stop seven-year-old Larry from shooting for the stars.

TWO SCHOOLS

Larry was not an honor-roll student like his sister Betty or brother Edmund. "I didn't have a favorite [subject] except for sports," confessed Larry. After school was over, Larry would go home for a snack and then report to the Good Angel Mission for two hours of Chinese-language lessons. He had a hard time sitting still there too and was often let out for breaks. "I went out and played marbles instead," said Larry.

CHORES

Larry rushed through his household chores so that he would have more time for hockey and other sports. He would hurriedly chop wood in the backyard, put the small

pieces in a sack and run it to the furnace box. Before bed in the winter, Larry would help carry store items like pickle jars upstairs to prevent them from freezing overnight. Another





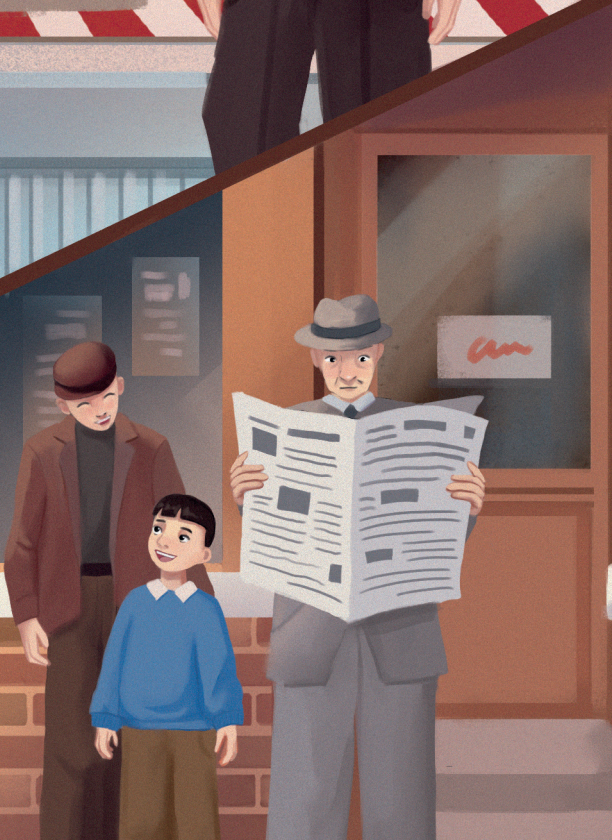
IN 1931 A KANYEN'KEHÁ:KA
PLAYER NAMED HENRY ELMER
“BUDDY” MARACLE CRACKED
THE BIG LEAGUE FOR 15 GAMES
WITH THE NEW YORK RANGERS.

IT WAS A BREAKTHROUGH
FOR INDIGENOUS
REPRESENTATION IN THE NHL.

of Larry’s tasks was running to the butcher shop, where he would buy 25 cents’ worth of meat for his family’s dinner. These physical chores were good training for the budding athlete.

CHINESE HAIR

Larry hoped that the world of hockey would be more accepting of him than some of the places in his hometown. “You had to watch where you [went],” said Larry, “because some stores would not take Chinese as a customer.” Vernon’s White Lunch restaurant was for white people only. Even getting a haircut could be a challenge. At one barber shop, Larry was told, “We don’t cut Chinese hair.” That message stayed with Larry. “It was hard to take,” he admitted. “I just had to swallow my pride.”



OKANAGAN PRODUCTS

Larry’s dream was to be a big-time hockey player. He didn’t think about the overwhelming odds against him. No one from Larry’s hometown had ever made it to the NHL. The Okanagan Valley was known for producing apples, not hockey players. There were no organized teams for kids in Vernon until high school. The nearest NHL arena was thousands of miles away. For a kid from Vernon, there were no tracks to follow. Larry would have to find his own way to the top of the hockey mountain. While growing up west of the Rockies was a huge obstacle to NHL stardom, there was an even bigger one for Larry—the **color barrier**.



THE COLOR BARRIER

Hockey was commonly known as “a white man’s game.” When Clarence “Taffy” Abel played with the New York Rangers in 1926, few knew that he was Indigenous. Born to an Ojibwe mother and a white father, Abel hid his ancestry throughout his career for fear of **discrimination**. A racist incident in 1938 showed that there was still an unwritten rule that non-white players weren’t welcome in the NHL. That was when Conn Smythe, the owner and manager of the Toronto Maple Leafs, told a brilliant Black player named Herb Carnegie that he would take him for the Leafs, but only if someone could turn him white.