

Designed to Detain

by Grant Din



Angel Island has been called the “Ellis Island of the West,” but it also is referred to as the “Guardian of the Western Gate.” Although it was modeled on New York’s famous immigration station, Angel Island Immigration Station did not offer the same welcome to newcomers. Federal laws had been passed to discourage or restrict immigration from Asian countries. Inspectors at Angel Island looked for reasons to reject the mostly Asian immigrants that came through the station.

Most of the immigrants who ended up at Angel Island had traveled by ship across the Pacific Ocean. First- and second-class passengers and those returning from a visit abroad were usually questioned aboard the ship and allowed to disembark at a pier in San Francisco. Most third-class immigrants were transferred by ferry to Angel Island. By the time many of those immigrants set foot on the island, they had been traveling for several weeks.

After storing large luggage in a shed on the dock, immigrants carried their smaller bags down a long pier to the island. The immigration station consisted of a small cluster of wooden structures: a large administration building, a detention barracks, a public health hospital, and a power plant. A chainlink fence surrounded the complex of buildings.

The first stop was the administration building. Immigration officials separated Europeans from Asians and men from women. Each person was given an identification number and assigned to a dormitory. Chinese and Japanese men were housed in the detention barracks. Europeans and Asian women were kept in separate quarters on the second floor of the administration building.

The accommodations don't sound pleasant.



Stools are bowel movements.

A stenographer is a person who takes notes during a testimony.

The immigration station could accommodate up to 1,000 detainees. Rows and rows of metal bunk beds, three beds to a column, filled the dormitories. Stark bathrooms were equipped with showers, sinks, and toilets.

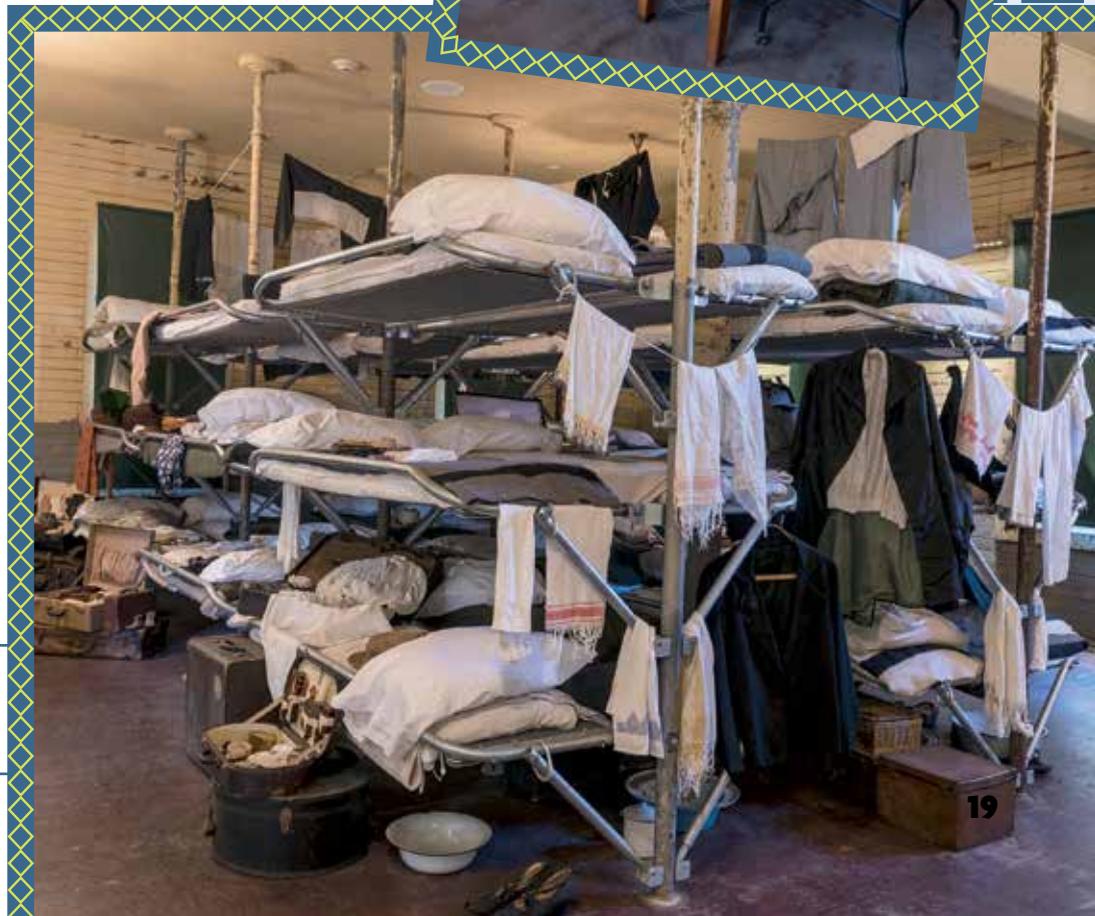
Immigrants were locked inside the barracks except for mealtimes, when guards escorted them to the dining hall in the administration building. Meals for the mostly Chinese detainees consisted of coarse rice, steamed vegetables, and a little meat. Food was plentiful but not tasty, and Chinese men started food riots to express their dissatisfaction.

All immigrants underwent a physical examination to make sure they were of sound mind and in good health. Asian immigrants were subjected to an invasive examination of their blood and *stools* for signs of diseases. If sick, they were sent to the hospital for treatment. If carrying a contagious disease, they were automatically deported.

After passing the physical examination, immigrants were interviewed by a Board of Special Inquiry consisting of two immigrant officials, a *stenographer*, and an interpreter. Officials wanted to make sure that newcomers had the ability to support themselves or had family members in the country who were prepared to help them. Many Chinese immigrants also tried to get around the Chinese Exclusion Act by claiming to be related to a merchant or a U.S. citizen. Birthright citizenship, or being able to claim a father who was a U.S. citizen, gave an immigrant legal status and the right to enter the country.

Aware of those efforts, officials subjected Chinese immigrants to more difficult interviews than they did for other detainees. They questioned each individual Chinese and anyone he or she claimed to have as family in the United States. They asked a long list of detailed and obscure questions, such as “How many houses are there in your village? How many windows are there in your house? How many steps does it take to get to the village well? Is there a fishpond in the front? Where are your grandparents buried?” If any answers between family members did not match, the immigrant would be

Most immigrants were interviewed multiple times as officials tried to find inaccuracies in their stories.



Detained immigrants slept in crowded dormitory rooms.

scheduled for deportation. Even some husbands and wives or fathers and children who were truly related failed the examination.

Most of the immigrants stayed for a few days or a few weeks. Some immigrants who faced deportation hired attorneys to appeal their cases—if they could raise the funds. An appeal took anywhere from several months to as long as two years. In those cases, there was not much to do but wait. A recreation room in the barracks provided a few games. Detainees also had access to a small yard near the barracks. Many Chinese immigrants captured their emotions in poems, which they carved onto the barracks walls.

In 1940, an electrical fire destroyed the administration building. By that time, immigration to the United States had tapered off. Official functions moved to San Francisco. A few years later, in 1943, the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed.

Historians Erika Lee and Judy Yung estimate that about 1.2 million immigrants were processed through the port of San Francisco between 1910 and 1940. That number includes 550,000 people entering the country and about 665,000 people leaving the country. About 300,000 immigrants were detained at the Angel Island Immigration Station, including 100,000 Chinese, 85,000 Japanese, 8,000 South Asians, 8,000 Russians and Jews, 1,000 Koreans, and 1,000 Filipinos. Altogether, people from more than 80 different countries passed through Angel Island.

In the end, about five percent of the 300,000 immigrants who came through Angel Island were denied entry and deported, compared with only one percent of the 12 million immigrants who came through Ellis Island. 🌀

Grant Din is a descendant of four grandparents who came through Angel Island. He is the community relations director at the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation.



The bathrooms offered rows of sinks (ABOVE) . . . and rows of toilets (RIGHT).