

## **CHURCH AND COMMUNITY, IV: JIMMY HONG AND THE LIMITS OF INCLUSIVENESS**

by Tom Cox

Hong Kee and Hong Bing were among the first to step forward when fundraising commenced for the initial chapel for the First Presbyterian Church. Many people remember the initial donation of \$5 that came from Amelia Frost and her Shoshone friends, but few know of the donations of the Honges. Even more than American Indians, Chinese lived in a world beyond the consciousness of white Americans. Viewed through racial and cultural stereotypes, if at all, much that they did has remained historically invisible. But the story of Hong Kee and Hong Bing, and of Jimmy Hong, who followed them, is instructive. It tells a part of the history of the First Presbyterian Church that might otherwise be overlooked — and which ought not to be forgotten.

Hong Kee was born in 1867 in the Chinese city that Westerners knew as Canton. Times were hard throughout South China as result of over-population, famine, landlord oppression of peasants, and the aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion — during which upwards of twenty million people had been killed, making it in all probability the bloodiest war in world history. Fleeing the countryside, thousands crowded into Canton in search of means of survival. There, they provided recruiters from overseas — including agents for American railroad builders and those supplying them — with a rich reservoir of potential workers. Hong Kee was among those who left China in quest of a better life, coming to the United States in 1882 (just before the Chinese Exclusion Act banned further immigration of Chinese laborers) to work on the construction of the Oregon Short Line, which provided connections from Utah, through Pocatello, to Portland. When the railroad was completed in 1884, Hong stayed on in the Gate City as a cook at the railroad's depot café. He saved his money carefully, and in 1892 opened a restaurant of his own, the Grand Café, on South First. Sometime during the decade, he may have made a return visit to China, but the records are not clear. In any case, in 1902 he sold the Grand Café to raise money to return to China to bring his family to America.

Hong spent the next year in Canton, where he engaged in mercantile trade, but by 1904 was back in Pocatello with his wife, one son, and Hong Bing, a nephew. Since he was now a merchant, rather than a laborer, Hong Kee was able to avoid the continuing ban on the immigration of Chinese laborers — but, even if he had wanted to, there was no way to get around the legal prohibition against Chinese becoming naturalized citizens; he never did. His eldest son, Jimmy, born in China, stayed on in Canton with an elderly grandmother until her death in 1911. Back in the Gate City, Hong Kee opened a mercantile establishment, Wah Yuen Company, four doors south of the Grand Café in the heart of Pocatello's Chinatown. It was at this point that fundraising commenced for the original chapel of the First Presbyterian Church, and two days after Amelia Frost's charges brought \$5 from Fort Hall, Hong Kee came forward with a \$5 donation of his own; young Hong Bing, who seems to have worked for Hong Kee, added a \$1 donation, a sizeable gift considering his circumstances and the value of the pre-inflation dollar.

The story behind these donations is no longer clear. One relative recalls that Hong Kee's father had been a Christian convert — perhaps even a minister — in China. Certainly, Presbyterian missionaries were active in South China at this time. Thus, it may well be that Hong Kee was a

Christian — and perhaps a Presbyterian — before he ever left China. As such, he would have welcomed the formation of the First Presbyterian Church on Pocatello's east-side, where he, his family, and his business all were located — as was the rest of Pocatello's Chinese community, then numbering perhaps as many as 400. But there is another possibility. Presbyterians had proven themselves good friends of the Chinese in the American West, fighting to protect them against prejudice, violence, and legal harassment, especially in California where such things were rife; this would have been well-known in the close-knit Chinese community, and Hong Kee may have come forth with his donation because he saw the First Presbyterian Church as a potential friend and ally in a sometimes hostile environment.

Some time before 1914 Hong Kee joined the church, and he contributed regularly although he seldom attended. Two of his children (Frank and Jennie) were baptized in it in 1920; Jimmy, the eldest, became a member in 1928 — a membership he was to maintain until his death in 1981; and daughter Helen joined in 1930 — but beyond that the record is silent. In the meantime, Hong Kee's business interests grew. After completion of the Center Street underpass in 1911, he invested in west-side property and subsequently built the Crow Hotel (later known as the Benson) at the corner of Main and Lewis and opened the U.S. Café.

On the death of his grandmother, Jimmy Hong came to Pocatello, where for a time he attended public school (although he was twelve years old, he started in the first grade, for he knew no English). After five years of schooling, which included a double-promotion to the seventh grade, he quit school to work at the U.S. Café to help the family, which now included eleven children. In 1920, at the age of 21, his father sent him to China to marry Louie May Ying, a woman he had never met. Because of anti-Asian immigration laws, he could not bring her to the United States, so she continued to reside in China and he in Pocatello. Over the next 27 years, he made three trips to be with her, each of some ten-months duration. Not until 1947, when immigration law changed allowing Jimmy Hong to become a naturalized citizen, was she able to join him in the Gate City.

After his father's death in 1922, Jimmy Hong had taken over the U.S. Café, managing it until 1933 when he moved to Los Angeles to work in the import-export business, leaving the restaurant in the charge of others. After a year in California, he left for China to be with his wife, and by the time he returned to Pocatello the U.S. Café had gone bankrupt. But Hong persevered and soon bought the Shanghai Café on East Center Street in partnership with Hong Bing and Louie Woon; the business prospered, and Jimmy subsequently bought the adjoining building in order to enlarge the dining room. He later sold his interest in the restaurant to Hong Bing, who ran it until his death in 1981, after which his son took over. In the meantime, in 1964 Jimmy Hong had opened a fine new establishment, Hong Kong Cuisine, on Yellowstone Avenue. By then Hong had made a multitude of friends in Pocatello and beyond. The dedication was a tuxedo affair, with Governor Robert Smylie delivering the dedicatory address.

Governor Smylie's presence was indicative of how far Jimmy Hong had come. He was more than a successful Chinese businessman, he was a much-respected citizen of the community. From 1938 to 1945 he headed the Chinese Refugees Relief Fund in Pocatello to raise money for victims of the Sino-Japanese War. He was a member of the Pocatello Chamber of Commerce from 1940 and, in 1947, the first Chinese to become a member of an Idaho Rotary Club — all

before Congress deemed Chinese worthy of becoming naturalized citizens. He was active in a variety of community drives — Red Cross, United Way, and the like — and, as one biographer put it, “ever ready to do his part in any worth-while community enterprise.” Nor was Smylie his only friend in high places. Frank Church was another, and when Senator Henry Dworshak died in 1962, Jimmy Hong was among the honorary pallbearers at the funeral in Washington, D.C. — “the shortest one,” he would note with a grin. All in all, he had not only lived out a Horatio Alger poor-boy-makes-good tale, but also the sort of life of service that is incumbent upon true Christians.

Yet where was the First Presbyterian Church in all this? His father had supported it, two of his siblings had been baptized in it, he had joined it in 1928 and was buried from it in 1981. But the record seems clear, the church played a limited role in Jimmy Hong’s life. As his daughter-in-law, a devout Methodist, notes, he always kept his pledge up to date, but the restaurant was open seven days a week, making attendance at church a sometime thing for Jimmy Hong, just as it had been for his father before him. Still, one suspects there is more to the story than this. How could a dedicated, successful businessman who made friends wherever he turned belong to the church for over a half a century and almost never appear in the records of its doings? The sad truth is, the church must have done far less than it could have to incorporate him in its activities and to utilize his talents. A congregation that had once prided itself in being the Church of the Open Door had become increasingly tied to the relatively affluent college neighborhood, the roster of its leaders reading like a *Who’s Who* of Pocatello — a *Who’s Who* in which Chinese-Americans, even successful ones like Jimmy Hong, were only beginning to find a place.

Racism can be a subtle thing, infecting even decent, well-intending people. It can be something as innocent as blinding one to the potential of an individual from a different background and to the fact that such individuals share much with one’s own group. Like missionaries to the American Indians, Protestant missionaries in China had difficulty separating their religion from their culture and often fell into the trap of judging success by how Westernized their charges became, rather than by their spiritual growth.

Perhaps racism is too inflammatory a label for this sort of cultural tunnel-vision, but by whatever name it goes Presbyterians were not immune to it. One of the early sections of the *Presbyterian Christian Endeavor Handbook* for 1903 dealt with China, emphasizing that although the problems then current there stemmed from its government, there was much about the Chinese people and culture to admire. Such statements undergirded a condescending approach that made China and the Chinese appropriate objects for philanthropy and missionary outreach, but failed to go beyond that to more inclusive approaches. The same thing was true at home. As the Rev. Andrew E. Murray noted in his history of the Synod of Colorado, in that state “Chinese were regarded as ‘special’ objects of missionary and philanthropic effort rather than as potential full-fledged Presbyterians.” In Colorado, the vision of the church was so tied to mainstream American culture that members and leaders alike had difficulty imaging it outside that context; they saw no real place for a group as different as the Chinese.

Pocatello’s First Presbyterian Church did somewhat better. Hong Kee and Jimmy Hong both were admitted into membership, but consciously or unconsciously old views and stereotypes seem to have kept them from being invited into the inner circles of the church. There was room

for Mary Norby with her heavy Swedish accent and Lutheran background, but even her role was limited. Members of the congregation might laud it as the Church of the Open Door, but leaders consistently came from less “foreign” types.

The limitations on the activities of Mary Norby and Jimmy Hong may have been in large part self-imposed; they may have hesitated to push themselves forward when they were not sure how comfortable others would be with their leadership — certainly that was the case with Mary Norby. But any such restraint surely stemmed from a recognition of attitudes that were at work, however unconsciously, in members of the church. The church thus bears a measure of responsibility for whatever limitations were imposed on their activities.

Ironically, Pocatello’s Chamber of Commerce and Rotary — and Kiwanis, in which Hong Bing was active and which still has an annual Hong Bing Pancake Breakfast fund-raiser — did a better job than the First Presbyterian Church in living up to the inclusive commands of Christianity. A good man stood ready to be welcomed into full participation. It was the community’s civic organizations and service clubs that rose to the challenge.