About AIISF

Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (AIISF) is a non-profit organization whose mission is to promote a greater understanding of Pacific Coast immigration and its role in shaping America’s past, present and future. AIISF raise funds to restore, preserve and interpret the U.S. Immigration Station at Angel Island, a National Historic Landmark. In partnership with the California State Parks, AIISF educates the public about the complex story and rich cultural heritage of Pacific Coast immigrants and their descendants.

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2009 has been an exciting and nerve-wracking year filled with great joy and much trepidation. We began the year on the highest of notes as 1,600 people boarded ferries in San Francisco and Tiburon to journey across the water on a wet and windy morning for the Grand Reopening of the U.S. Immigration Station on February 15. After three and one-half years of restoration work and the expenditure of $15 million, the entire Detention Barracks and new Administrative Footprint were open to the public allowing visitors to feel the presence of so many immigrants and their hopes, fears, dreams and aspirations. We felt proud to announce the new sister park status with Ellis Island and look forward to a long-lasting partnership. It is a joy to hear so many visitors praise the wonderful tour guides for creating a moving experience. Please see the accompanying photos for some highlights.

We followed the successful reopening with a heartfelt poetry reading, “Voices Old and New at the Wooden House,” on May 17. Over 250 people came to hear Angel Island poems read by special guests David Chiu, President of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, his colleagues Supervisors Carmen Chu and Eric Mar; San Jose councilmember Kansen Chu; San Francisco State University professor Charles Egan; Assemblymember Paul Fong; author William Poy Lee; poet/playwright Genny Lim; AIISF volunteer Greg Marutani; Angel Island State Park superintendent Dave Matthews; Dr. Tom Peters, President of the Marin Community Foundation; Danita Rodriguez, Marin District superintendent of the California State Parks; historian Maria Sokovich; and new poems by the Kearny Street Workshop Postcard Poets.

In June, the worsening state budget deficit led to the possible closure of the state parks. With the help of the California State Parks Foundation, AIISF quickly mobilized our supporters to write letters to the governor and state legislators. We testified in Sacramento at the budget hearings and sent a clear message: Keep Angel Island State Park open! The public outcry prevented a total closure of the parks, but Angel Island State Park will face a small budget cut. One of our big challenges will be to work with our partners to build public support for a steady, predictable source of funds for the California State Parks.

Throughout the year, we have continued to uncover new stories about the immigrant experience at Angel Island. With the support of the Look Lowe Family Trust and the Takahashi Charitable Foundation, AIISF has expanded the Angel Island Legacies Project. We have been able to conduct several oral history interviews with Chinese, Japanese, and Russian former detainees and descendants. Many friends have submitted their family stories and photos for us to post on the AIISF website. By sharing these stories, the true significance of the hardship and perseverance of the immigrants comes alive. Next year, we plan to build out an online exhibit that will feature the stories of diverse groups of immigrants. Please also see the article on Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America, our exciting new book authored by Judy Yung and Erika Lee.

We look forward to an exciting year as we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Immigration Station. It will be a time to expand our circle of friends as Angel Island becomes better known as a National Symbol of Pacific Immigration.

Eddie Wong
Executive Director
Visit the new AIISF.org

Visit www.aiisf.org to see our new, enhanced website. You’ll be able to learn much more about the immigration station’s history, find links to video interviews with former detainees and other great resources, join our monthly e-newsletter mailing list, learn how to reserve tours, and learn all about our Centennial Campaign!

Looking Ahead to 2010

Mark your calendar for these exciting Centennial Year Events! More details, including information about the book tour featuring Judy Yung and Erika Lee, will be on our website at www.aiisf.org or call 415-262-4429. Sign up on our home page to receive our e-newsletter, which will get monthly news straight to your inbox!

January 21  Commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the opening of the United States Immigration Station at Angel Island, which opened January 21, 1910. Special guest: Alejandro Mayorkas, director of the office of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, who will swear in 100 naturalized US citizens. 10 a.m., Herbst Theater, San Francisco.

February 5  South Bay centennial luncheon, tentatively featuring Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren and Assemblyman Paul Fong, at the Hilton Santa Clara.

May 8  Poetry reading on the island, featuring works by young people participating in our “Poetry in Motion” project.

June 12  Book launch: World premiere reading from “Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America.” 1 p.m., Chinese Cultural Center, 750 Kearny Street, 3rd Floor, San Francisco, with authors Erika Lee and Judy Yung. This event kicks off a national tour (see page 8 for book details).

July 31  Public Commemoration of the 100th year of the immigration station. Performers, authors, tours, artists – a big party for the whole family! Location: Ayala Cove and the Immigration Station.

September 11  AIISF’s annual fundraising dinner, location to be confirmed.

September 17  Naturalization ceremony for new United States citizens on Angel Island.

For information on all these events, call 415-292-4429 or email info@aiisf.org.

By the Numbers

Number of people who visited the Immigration Station from reopening on February 15, 2009 to September 30, 2009: 23,187

Number of unique visitors to www.aiisf.org from July 1, 2008 to November 11, 2009: 31,675

Number of countries and territories represented by website visitors: 109

Estimated number of countries of origin for Angel Island immigrants from 1910 to 1940: 80+

Estimated number of immigrants processed at Angel Island: over one million

Estimated number of Chinese immigrants who were detained at Angel Island due to the Chinese Exclusion Act: 175,000
Reopening of Immigration Station Attracts Huge Crowd on Rainy Day

Many months in the making, the reopening of the United States Immigration Station on Angel Island created much excitement throughout the country. Local newspapers and electronic media, National Public Radio, the Los Angeles Times, USA Today, AAA's Via magazine, the Washington Post, and the Associated Press among others covered the story before or after the opening. So it was with anticipation and worry that the State Parks and AIISF staff and volunteers read the weather forecast for February 15: “Heavy wind and rain.” Would anyone show up? Would the detainees, all at least 70 years old, be scared away? Should the event be postponed? The immigration station had been closed for over three years and too much work had been done to delay the opening any longer, so it was full steam ahead, regardless of the elements.

Fears were eased when people showed up at the ferry docks early Sunday morning. There were so many people that the ferries took longer than expected to load their passengers. People of all ages were bundled up against the storm, but happy that they would once again have the opportunity to visit the immigration station. All told, over 1,600 people journeyed to the immigration station on that rainy day, exceeding all expectations.

Many of the attendees squeezed into a canvas tent on the footprint of the former administration building to view the program. A number of former detainees filled the first several rows of chairs, along with a number of dignitaries. Members of the Federated Indians of the Graton Rancheria (Miwok and Southern Pomo tribes) blessed the site, and Dave Matthews, Angel Island State Park superintendent, welcomed the throng.

Brian O’Neill, general superintendent of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (who, we’re sad to say, passed away in May), said, “today is a triumph for all of us, to get to the detention barracks and to see how carefully this special place has been preserved, and the emotion that it evokes in all of us.” Cynthia Garrett, superintendent of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty National Monument, announced that Angel Island and Ellis Island were now established as sister parks, noting, “there are only a few locations where the setting reaches out to make this part of our history real, where immigration becomes a set of ideas that add value to community relations and personal interaction, where immigration reminds us of who we are. Ellis Island is one of those special places. The detention barracks on Angel Island are another.”

Ruth Coleman, director of the California State Parks, noted the importance of the interpretation aspects of the immigration station, “If we don’t tell the honest story about Angel Island, we’re not going to be able to inform ourselves, inform our children, inform the rest of the nation on what it means to function as a democracy.” Other speakers included Gao Zhangshen, consul general of the People’s Republic of China, Ming Hsu, AIISF board member and senior advisor to American President Lines, Russell Lowe of Senator Dianne Feinstein’s office, and Kathy Lim Ko, AIISF board president, who recognized the detainees who were present and thanked the many supporters who had been involved in making the preservation and renovation of the immigration a reality. The Marin Chinese Cultural Association Lion Dance Troupe wrapped up the program, followed by a ribbon cutting.

Visitors got to tour the newly refurbished barracks and also enjoyed cultural performances including Charlie Chin’s “Uncle Toisan,” Japanese dance by Melody Takata, and Russian songs by Nikkolai Massenkoff. Silvia Lange recreated the life of Katherine Maurer, the “angel of Angel Island” and exhibit designer Daniel Quan and San Francisco State University professor Charles Egan all made presentations. The immigration barracks also hosted a community fair with many organizations and individuals.
From 1910 to 1940, over half a million people sailed through the Golden Gate, hoping to start a new life in America. But they did not all disembark in San Francisco; instead, most were ferried across the bay to the Angel Island Immigration Station. For many, this was the real gateway to the United States. For others, it was a prison and their final destination, before being sent home.

In this landmark book, historians Erika Lee and Judy Yung provide the first comprehensive history of the Angel Island Immigration Station. Drawing on extensive new research, including immigration records, oral histories, and inscriptions on the barrack walls, the authors produce a sweeping yet intensely personal history of Chinese “paper sons,” Japanese picture brides, Korean students, South Asian political activists, Russian and Jewish refugees, Mexican families, Filipino repatriates, and many others from around the world.

Their research uncovers new stories of people like Karl Yoneda, a labor organizer who wrote poetry while detained on Angel Island in 1927, describing the “different sounds of voices from next room—Chinese, Russian, Mexican, Greek, and Italian;” Har Dayal, a leading Indian nationalist whose deportation hearing on Angel Island in 1914 appeared on the front page of San Francisco newspapers; the Russian students who wrote poems and gave theatrical performances during their three-month-long detention on Angel Island in 1923; John Birge Sawyer, whose diaries describe his frustrations with the daily work of immigration law enforcement; and Chicano activist Ernesto Galarza, who recalls his experiences on the island and the “gringo” immigration officials that excluded his Mexican relatives in the 1910s.

By examining the great diversity of immigrants who passed through America’s Pacific gateway, Angel Island reframes our understanding of both the Angel Island Immigration Station and America’s complicated relationship to immigration, a story that continues today.

Angel Island, the official publication of the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation commemorating the immigration station’s 100th anniversary, will be published by Oxford University Press in June 2010. Check www.aiisf.org for information on availability in the Spring.