

Immigrant Experiences: Marjorie Kellhorn

Marjorie Kellhorn emigrated from Ireland to New York in 1925 at age eighteen.

My father came to America first when he was sixteen years old. As a matter of fact, he was one of the men working on the Brooklyn Bridge when it was built... He came back in 1914, and I remember being very excited. I was about eight years old.... I was born in Offaly, King's Country, right in the center of Ireland.... I remember my mother's bread and stews and...Tapioca rich puddings, and Jell-O... fresh vegetables from our garden... and of course, potatoes was the main dish....

In America, my father had two brothers and two sisters. We corresponded with them all the time.... My father loved America, that's why he wanted to go back. But my mother absolutely refused, and she certainly never wanted me to come here. But at that time, everybody had the idea of coming to America. The people were leaving, boatloads and boatloads, you know, and I just got the same urge....

There was very little to pack in those days. I just brought one large suitcase.... Saying goodbye was very hard, very sad. A lot of my cousins came... to see me off. My parents too, of course. And I was young. I was eighteen. That's what worried my mother....

We spent three days...being examined by doctors. Our clothes were fumigated. They put stuff in your hair for lice. It was routine for everyone. There were many sent back. Several people had been turned away for heart murmur. One fellow had something wrong with a finger and he was turned down.... When I see these people coming in illegally today, it kind of annoys me because it wasn't easy at that time. It was very difficult, you had to be well.

I landed here on April 17. It was 1925. We came in the dark and docked in the harbor.... I was like everybody else: excited, but I didn't know what to expect.... They examined me all over again, but I was not there more than three or four hours.... Mr. Grimes, from one of the travelers' aid societies, followed me up to see that I was in the right place, which I thought was wonderful. I was looking for one of my sisters, but I didn't know what she looked like. Then she had called my name.

She took me to my other sister's apartment on the Lower East Side. A lot of Germans and Irish and Italian. She had five rooms there, two bedrooms, kitchen, dining room, and living room. She had electricity, running water, everything. I couldn't believe it. I stayed with her for about a month.

I got a job at Macy's, but I didn't take it. Instead, I took a governess job for this little boy. His father was a professor of English. They were going to Cape Cod for the summer. That summer happened to be very hot. A lot of people died in New York from the heat in 1925.

In the meantime, I wrote to my parents steadily and the following year, I paid all their expenses to come to America. My mother, she didn't like giving up her nursing job and her pension, but she wanted to be with her children. My sisters and I met them at Ellis Island. We were called in by the doctor. My father had become a sick man. He could not work, so they would not let him in.... The bond was \$500. My sisters and I had to sign a paper that my parents would not be a burden to the country and that my brother would be sent to school until he was fourteen years old and provided for. They moved into my sister's apartment....

Peter Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words*, (New York: Facts on File, 1997), 112-116.

Immigrant Experiences: Benjamin Choy

Benjamin Choy emigrated from China in 1930 at around age ten.

I had a cousin take me from my village in southern China to Hong Kong. We stayed in a hostel by the waterfront for one night. The next day he sent me off to America on the steamship President McKinley. My paper brother and I stayed in steerage in the rear part of the ship, where they had a whole bunch of people. It was a pretty long voyage from China to San Francisco, some twenty-one days, and I was seasick most of the time. When I would go up on the deck, I could see seagulls following the ship and miles and miles of ocean.

We arrived in San Francisco early in the morning. When I looked at the city and saw the big buildings and the bright lights twinkling I was amazed. I thought we would land there, but instead they took us to Angel Island for temporary confinement and interrogation, to make sure that everything was OK, before they permitted us to go ashore....

We stayed there for about two weeks. And when it came to interrogation, they called me first.... It was pretty tough, coming in as a paper son. Actually, it is illegal. But when you are a kid you are not intending to lie; you just follow what the grown-ups tell you to do....

I was in the fifth grade when I left China. I learned the English alphabet from our neighbor in the village. When I came here, I didn't have the

opportunity to continue my Chinese, because I had to learn a new language. I tried hard to pronounce in English so that people could understand me. It took me a long time to practice in front of a mirror to get it right....

It's good for people in this country, besides the Chinese, to go over to Angel Island, to look, and then to rethink the past.... They are making things much easier now for those who want to come here to be part of this country, to make something of themselves. Some Chinese kids come over here, and they have a chance to go to college, to the university, and then they have the knowledge to make some kind of contribution. They have already contributed a lot of things! In the old days people were prejudiced, especially during the times when the economy was bad. When the Chinese came over here, they had to build this country up, building the railroads—really hard labor. Although the Chinese took the low-paying jobs, still the people here said, "Gee, we don't want these people here because they are taking our jobs." That's why they passed the Exclusion Laws. Of course, now they don't have those laws anymore. People are better educated and more worldly. We've got black and white and others—so bias, prejudice, is bound to exist. But we are trying to associate with each other and get along as well as possible.

Emmy E. Werner, *Passages to America: Oral Histories of Child Immigrants from Ellis Island and Angel Island*, (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009), 127-130.