

Virginia, 1935

INDIAN SUMMERS

A MEMOIR OF FORT DUCHESNE  
1925-1935

BY

VIRGINIA CARLSON PARKER

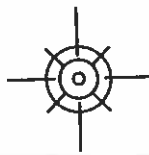
*Virginia L Parker*

Logan, Utah  
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The road to Wong Sing's

crossed the bridge just outside the entrance to the Fort, then meandered easterly along the base of a jagged red stone mesa, turning past a green field of alfalfa edged by a grove of cotton-woods. There was Wong Sing's!

The distance was about a mile. On my sixth birthday, November 28, 1928, I went with my father to Wong Sing's to fetch a surprise. I had waited impatiently for Daddy's working day to end. When at last he came, I climbed up into his farm truck and settled onto the narrow leather seat. Leaning forward, I wished speed into the turning wheels that left plumes of red sand behind us.

*Wong Sing, ca. 1928  
Courtesy of L. C. Thorne Collection*



The day was sunny, but the air was crisp and cool. Indian Summer had spread a special glow on the now leafless trees. We rattled over the long rusty bridge which stretched like a giant tanker toy over a river of stones. The stones were self-arranged in the dry river bottom, and formed a giant mosaic paving to mark the water course. No water moved over the round stones, nor was there any evidence of the violence of the spring torrents which tumbled them along their journey from the high Uinta's. Wong Sing's trading post consisted of half a dozen low wooden buildings lined up along the roadside. They were tied together by a plank porch and a hitching rail that marked the edge

excerpt from *Indian Summers: A Memoir of Fort Duchesne, 1925-1935* by Virginia Carlson Parker, 1998

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of the road. Over the door to the biggest building hung a sign which read:

### WONG SING GENERAL MERCHANDISE.

An irrigation ditch along one side of the buildings impounded a small reservoir which served as a watering trough for horses. A narrow bridge and footpath led to a clump of trees, sheltering a tiny house built of river stones where Wong Sing lived. Carts, horse drawn wagons and booted cowboys, all stopped at the rail. Daddy, too, stopped at the hitching rail. I jumped down and ran toward the main door. Usually open, on that day it was closed against the cold November air. As I pushed open the door, a waft of exotic smells poured out. The draft set into motion a colorful glass wind chime which hung over the counter, sending a delightful cascade of notes to summon Wong Sing from his store-room.

When I knew Wong Sing, he had been in business more than forty years. His round face was ageless and smiling. As I entered, he came toward me. Grinning, he bowed slightly, "Ah! Missy Blue Eyes, yoh have come foh yoh plize? Come, fust we toast yoh buthday." With a fat finger he beckoned me to follow him.

I followed Wong Sing down a narrow aisle between tea boxes, chests and lumpy sacks which were stacked from floor to ceiling. His moccasin shod feet moved silently over the worn board floor. He wore a black silk cap and he was dressed like the Indians in beaded moccasins, jeans, silk shirt and vest. He smoked cigars and smelled of aromatic tobacco. Sunshine poured through the open door at the far end of the storeroom. There, Wong Sing stopped beside a huge oak cask. With great ceremony, he picked up a large green glass and held it under the wooden spigot. An amber stream of apple cider poured into the glass. Filling my glass to the brim, and another one for himself, he raised his glass, "Yoh big gull now. We drink!"

I thanked him, and emptied the glass. With a round gentle hand he smoothed my white hair and handed me a narrow red silk box embroidered with golden flowers. Inside lay a string of blue glass beads. Holding them up to the sunlight, they flashed

prisms of color into the shadows. Sliding them over my head Wong Sing said, "To smile, like yoh eyes foh me. Happy Buthday!" And so, smiling like a recently crowned princess, I returned to the salesroom where a fire burned in a potbellied stove flanked by the benches that sat on the porch in summertime. On one of them sat a large box tied with red ribbon.

"Foh Happiness!" Wong Sing exclaimed, as he helped me cut the ribbon. Inside was a child-sized rocking chair, which I had wished for all summer. It was just like the one in our cozy book-lined reading room—golden oak with a square back and arms. Now that I had started school, I would have my very own reading chair. Wong Sing set the chair beside the stove and I sat down in it to wait for Daddy, who had business to discuss with Wong Sing.

I looked around as I rocked in my new chair. Near the door Wong Wing sat on a high stool inside a bamboo-like cage, alternately clicking beads on his abacus, and painting characters on long slips of paper with a brush dipped in ink. Unlike his father, Wing was tall and slim, and he wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His face was very round, and his dark eyes sparkled when he smiled. He was speaking Ute to two men who filled flour sacks with their purchases. Wing stopped counting and winked at me as he lifted the top from a glass jar filled with colorful lollipops, indicating I should help myself. " 'Tis your birthday today Missy? Be happy today, and always."

"Thank you," I said and chose an orange lollipop.

I sat down in my little chair, licked the lollipop and looked around. The store was a virtual bazaar. It contained everything imaginable. Just inside the door the bookkeeping area where Wing worked was partitioned off with bamboo. Behind the meat counter, where sawdust covered the floor, an old Chinese, called Wee, presided over the butcher shop. In the grocery department sacks of flour and sugar were stacked in rows. Piled on the counter were wheels of cheese, tins of crackers, and colored candy in glass jars. Huge, burlap sacks of grain and seeds stood open along one wall. A large scale hung from the ceiling over bins filled with nails and hardware supplies. Shoes and boots hung from a line overhead. Bolts of silk and cotton spilled over a large table.

Wooden drawers contained dried herbs and medicines. Bars of soap, tins of spices, and exotic glass jars filled the shelves, adding to the poppourri of scents. Inside a glass case, strings of pearls, glass beads, perfumes, folding ivory fans, coloring books, crayons, and paper dolls crowded the shelves. Furniture and farm equipment filled adjoining buildings. Hanging from large pegs were horse collars and harness, saddles and wagon wheels. Indian rugs, blankets, and shawls were piled between wooden chairs and iron bedsteads. And on the walls hung Indian drums, spears, baskets, beaded saddle blankets, leggings, gloves, and other artifacts taken in trade for food and tobacco. Wong Sing's was a warehouse of enchantment.

Going to Wong Sing's at any time was a special kind of adventure. It was the only store near the Agency. During summer, we often made the journey on the footpath crossing through the river bottom. In summer, it was a delight for then only small pools of green water remained of the river. The trail began below the pump house, crossed over hot rocks and sand bars, and then threaded its way under a canopy of green leaves. The gray limbs of the cottonwoods stretched skyward, resembling the stone ribs of a Gothic cathedral. Dust motes danced in the sun beams glinting through the leaves. The trail emerged finally onto an alfalfa field across the road from Wong Sing's store. We crossed it along the irrigation ditch that drained into the river.

Next to the ragtag collection of buildings stood a clump of trees growing on a patchy lawn, which also served as a picnic and playground for the women and children, who waited outside while the men did their trading and visiting in the store. For his customer's convenience, Wong Sing provided a large wooden picnic table, and a standpipe of clean drinking water.

Sometimes we were sent to Wong Sing's to buy something as simple as a spool of thread or a bottle of vanilla extract. More often we had a list of things that would be delivered to the Fort the next day in Wong Sing's delivery wagon.

As a child, it did not seem strange to me that the trading post on the Indian reservation should be run by the only Chinese I ever knew. Long after I left Fort Duchesne, I became curious about Wong Sing. I wondered how he came to live among the

Indians. What I learned about Wong Sing was as romantic as anything I remembered.

Wong Sing had not always been round and jolly. In the beginning his boyish figure was dressed in the conventional padded blue cotton clothes of the Chinese laborer and he wore the long queue decreed by the Manchu Emperor as a sign of servitude. He was born in Canton, and was recruited by the Six Companies to labor in the gold mines in California. Like most Chinese sojourners, Wong Sing left his home in China confident that he would return from America as a wealthy and honorable merchant. Wong Sing's trading post became legendary, but it had begun humbly.

On a bend in the river just below Fort Duchesne, young Wong Sing established what was the only Chinese laundry ever located on the Ute Reservation. The year was 1889, a mere two years after the army post at Fort Duchesne was established. There, in the unlikely desert of sage brush and sand, populated mostly with Indians, the young Cantonese immigrant found his *Gum Shan*, or Gold Mountain, among the Utes of eastern Utah.

Wong Sing made his way to Fort Duchesne by way of San Francisco and the silver mines. In 1889, there were two troops of cavalry, and a company of infantry stationed at the Fort. After an unsuccessful attempt to establish a restaurant at Ouray, Wong Sing built a primitive laundry on the banks of the Uinta River near the entrance gate of the stockaded Fort. Bending over wash-tubs filled with water taken from the river and heated on open fires of driftwood, Wong Sing washed clothes for the soldiers stationed at the Fort. He spread the clothes to dry on the wild rose bushes and willows growing on the river banks. His laundry prospered, and Wong Sing expanded his services. He acquired pieces of chinaware, ribbons and trinkets which he sold to the officer's wives when he delivered their laundry. Thus began his career in merchandising.

While working in his laundry, Wong Sing came into contact with the Utes. He mastered several dialects of their language, but his speaking ability in English remained limited. Wong Sing's first big opportunity came when an enterprising pair of troopers opened a poker game in a rented room at the Fort Duchesne Hotel. Wong Sing was a skillful gambler, and his Chinese face was

inscrutable. He played with both soldiers and Indians. With his winnings, together with the profits from his laundry and china sales, he started a small restaurant and a little store on the grounds of the Fort.

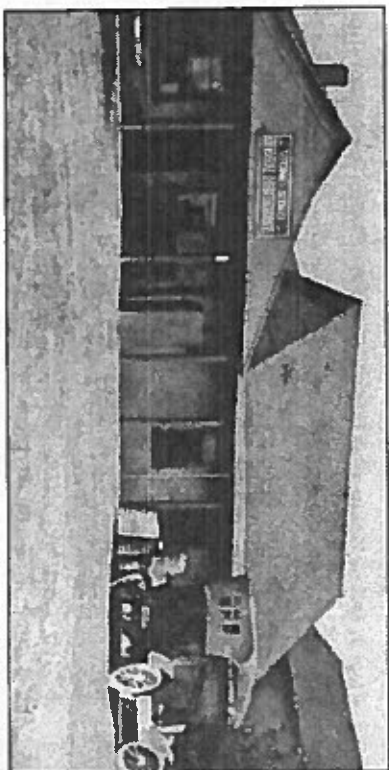
His successful dealings with the Indians aroused jealousy on the part of several white settlers who plotted to have his store banished from government property. Determined to continue his commercial activities, Wong Sing purchased a few acres of land across the river about a mile and a half east of the Fort, on what was known as *The Strip*. The Strip was an area of some 7,000 acres in the western part of Uintah County, adjoining Fort Duchesne along its eastern boundary. It had been segregated from the Uintah Reservation by Act of Congress because of the presence of a vein of asphalt, or Gilsonite (umtate), for which northeastern Utah was famous in those years.

*The Strip* soon gained notoriety for violence. A log saloon was located there, and outside the boundary of the military post. It became known as a den for gamblers, prostitutes, intoxicated soldiers, and the local inhabitants. Arguments generated in the saloon resulted in several violent incidents. Beyond direct jurisdiction of either the Agency or the Army, *The Strip* became a sort of no-man's land where only the nonresident sheriff had power to enforce the county's law. After much pressure to abolish this den of iniquity, the Uintah County Commissioners terminated the license for the saloon. The commanding officer at the Fort placed vigorous restrictions on the troops. A guard was posted on the bridge over the Uinta River to search all vehicles crossing it. The outlaw ways in *The Strip* were suppressed.

This was Wong Sing's opportunity. He purchased the abandoned saloon, and moved it to his land as the first of the string of buildings which became his trading post. As his reputation grew and his business prospered, his range of acquaintances widened. Wong Sing cut his queue, and adopted the moccasin of the Indian. He shipped goods far beyond the limits of eastern Utah and the Reservation. Each year he distributed colorful calendars which depicted the culture of the Indians.

As his growing business required additional space, he acquired other old buildings which were added to his original store. There

were three or four frame houses with mismatched roofs standing side by side. They were a ragtag assemblage of abandoned frontier buildings which Wong Sing found useful, and which all his customers enjoyed.



*Wong Sing's Trading Post*

*Courtesy of Norma Denver*

In 1928, Wong Sing employed eight clerks. When the Depression set in, he reduced his force and extended credit to his trusted customers. He had a reputation for scrupulous honesty. His personal checks were honored as cash by all the banks in Salt Lake City, and were accepted by the U.S. Post Office. In fact, he frequently cashed government vouchers so that the large sums of cash needed for payment of the Indian allotments did not have to be transported over the isolated road between Salt Lake City and the Agency.

Wong Sing's loyal customers delighted in the often repeated story of the salesman who tried to sell him an adding machine to replace his abacus. Wong Sing saw no advantage in the new machine, but he accepted the salesman's challenge to a race adding up a long column of figures. Not only did Wong Sing finish first, but when their totals differed Wong Sing's proved to be correct. The salesman had pushed a wrong key on his machine.

On March 21, 1934, Wong Sing was returning to Fort Duchesne from Salt Lake City. Near Snyderville, his truck was forced off the road by a passing car. His truck overturned, and Wong Sing died instantly. The people in the Uintah Basin were stunned by his un-



Wong Sing served his neighbors and friends with integrity. He contributed greatly to a better understanding between the races living on, and near, the Reservation. Due to the wide distribution of his calendars, he was known throughout the West. He was rewarded with material success, and the same measure of devotion which he extended to those he served. Wong Sing died an Honorable Merchant, and an Honorary member of the Ute tribe. He will never be forgotten by those who knew him, most especially his little friends who were always received with his friendly smile and a jar filled with free lollipops, as he queried, "Yoh velly good today?"

When the Utes built the Bottle Hollow Resort on the site of the old rodeo grounds, a merchant named Brotherson opened a country store, and used the old buildings as warehouses. Behind the country store stood the old picnic table, now covered with the carved initials and names of Wong Sing's customers and friends. Like a large rune stone, the table recorded the deeds of a local hero.

Wong Sing had returned to China as a wealthy and successful merchant, but he did not stay in Canton. He brought his son, Wong Wing, back to share in the bounty of his adopted land. After Wong Sing's death, Wing moved the buildings once more. Facing the improved highway, U.S. 40, they bore a new name: WONG C. WING, MERC. Wing continued the mercantile business until it was again sold.

Not all of Wong Sing's efforts were devoted to business. He quietly conducted welfare work among the Indians, assisting them in their business transactions. He preserved many of their fine artifacts. He photographed many of their tribal customs and ceremonies. He was generous in the White community with his support of the scientific and commercial development of the Basin. His benefactions had been many and generous. His loss was deeply felt.

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