

Hockey legend immortalized in film



Larry Kwong, making his New York Rangers debut, from a 1946 Acme News picture.

submitted

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As a young Chinese-Canadian, Chad Soon had few sports heroes from the same ethnic background as himself to look up to until he heard about Larry Kwong.

One of the subjects of a new film that will be screened at the Towne Cinema Wednesday, Kwong, born in Vernon in 1923, is a Second World War veteran who became the first Chinese-Canadian to ever play in the National Hockey League.

Covering 150 years of history and shot in five countries -- with Vernon and Penticton representing Canada -- the film introduces Kwong's story to a global audience. And it's a story that Soon, a teacher now based in Vernon, grasped onto when he first heard it.

"I picked up on Larry Kwong's story when I moved to Vernon from Ontario three years ago. I always had an interest in hockey and my grandfather, who was also a fan, told me about Larry," said Soon. "When I looked into it, I was frustrated that there were hardly any tributes to him. He broke the colour barrier 10 years before the first black player came on the scene, but he was ignored and forgotten."

Twelve years in the making, *Lost Years* ventures into that history to the sites of lost Chinatowns around the country, uncovering past injustices, such as the treatment of Chinese immigrant workers on Canada's railways, and follows the reverberations to the present day.

For the filmmakers, Kenda Gee and Tom Radford, who has won several Gemini Awards, including a pair this year for his documentary *Code Breakers*, Vernon was the perfect choice to have the world theatrical premiere for the film.

"When we had the opportunity to screen *Lost Years* in Vernon, we jumped," explained Gee, a leader in the Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion Act redress campaign. "We thought it was really appropriate that the documentary should be premiered in the theatre somewhere in British Columbia, and we thought, what better place than Vernon, where Larry Kwong, one of our characters, grew up?"

Lost Years features exclusive footage of Kwong, who fondly recalls his hometown, with memories of skating on the frozen road that is now Coldstream Avenue in what was then Vernon's Chinatown.

Kwong's father came to Canada in 1882, seeking fortune in the gold fields of Cherry Creek. Eventually settling in Vernon, he ran a grocery store from 1895 until his death in 1929, when Larry was only five. The second youngest of 15 siblings, Kwong eventually moved to Alberta in the mid-'40s in the midst of his trailblazing career.

"With his hockey money, Larry bought a house for his mother in Calgary," said Soon.

Kwong made his name locally as the star player of the Vernon Hydrophones, winners of the 1939 B.C. midget championship and the 1941 provincial juvenile title.

As a teenager he made the legendary Trail Smoke Eaters team, but was denied work alongside his teammates in the town's smelter, because of his Chinese heritage. He returned to Trail after the war, and after helping the Smokies to victory in the senior men's provincial championships, was signed by the New York Rovers.

Kwong led the team in scoring, earning him a promotion to the NHL. When he debuted with the New York Rangers against the Montreal Canadiens, Kwong became not only the first Okanagan product to make the grade, but also the toast of Chinatowns across North America.

Besides being immortalized in *Lost Years*, Kwong was honoured by the Vernon Vipers in a pre-game ceremony in 2008, and last year he received the Okanagan Hockey School's inaugural Pioneer Award.

Kwong and the filmmakers will be in Vernon when *Lost Years* premieres at the Towne Cinema Wednesday at 5:45 p.m. and 8 p.m.

A Q&A will follow the second screening. All profits from the two screenings will go to the Vernon Museum and Archives, which houses the Kwong family collection among many other artifacts from Vernon's old Chinatown.

The premiere will also be the Towne Cinema's debut presentation using its new \$100,000 upgrade.

Tickets are \$7 at the Towne, the Bean Scene and the Vernon museum. A \$1.75 fee applies to tickets purchased at the Ticket Seller box office, 549-SHOW, www.ticket seller.ca. More information on the film is available at www.lostyears.ca.

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