PAINFUL PAST ON DISPLAY

Chinese American Museum remembers Angel Island

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The photograph that changed Charles Wong's life went on display Friday at the Chinese American Museum in Los Angeles. It is a small black-and-white portrait of a somber woman, a little boy in a new suit, and a handsome youth on the cusp of manhood.

Wong found the family portrait — his family portrait — tucked in a suitcase, hidden in a closet, on the day his father, Gun Chown Wong, was buried.

The woman in the photo was his mother, Jook Sue. The boy was Wong himself, 6 and scared. And the young man? He was the family secret.

In 1935, Gun Chown boarded the U.S. liner Cooledge and headed to Los Angeles via San Francisco, leaving his family behind in the Chinese village of Ho-Seur. His first stop was Angel Island, the notorious immigration station in San Francisco Bay, which processed more than a million immigrants before closing in 1940.

By the time the Wong family could afford to reunite, Angel Island was history. So Jook Sue took her sons to Hong Kong. That was where the portrait was taken, where she was interviewed repeatedly by immigration officials, where she was finally granted permission to fly west.

DISCOVERY: When Charles Wong, right, found this photo of him, his brother Liang, 18, and their mother, Jook Sue, he revealed a family mystery.

Until Wong found the portrait, "I didn't know I had a brother. I had suppressed his memory," he recalled, as he wandered the Chinese American Museum, where workers were busy installing an exhibit. [See Museum, AA8]