

Museum in L.A. recalls the pain of Angel Island

[Museum, from AA1] called "Remembering Angel Island."

"Our story is representative of Angel Island, of the possibility, of the difficulty and traumas that many others went through," said Wong, now 62, as he spoke of immigration's effect on his life, of his mother's depression, his father's silence, his own ongoing survivor's guilt. "It was not just our family."

The immigration station opened 100 years ago, and the exhibit highlights the stories of Angelinos who entered America through its doors. "Remembering Angel Island" is on view through May 29, 2011.

There are photos of the station's cramped quarters and dining halls, reproductions of poems that were etched on the walls by Chinese immigrants acting for home and fearing the future. The passport of 9-year-old Florence See is on display; a U.S. citizen, she was still detained and interrogated. See was the great-aunt of Los Angeles author Lisa See.

Actor Jack Ong created an installation in honor of his mother, Jeung Shee Ong, who fled Japanese troops in 1939 with five children in tow. She made it to Hong Kong, then sailed to America aboard the Coolidge only to languish for more than a month on Angel Island, according to the exhibit. "terrified of the ghosts of those who committed suicide in the barracks rather than face deportation back to China."

Angel Island is often de-



Photographs by KATIE FALKENBERG For The Times

HONOR: Jack Ong created an installation at the museum in honor of his mother, Jeung Shee Ong, that includes a suitcase that she carried when she fled Japanese troops in 1939 with five children. After reaching this country, she spent more than a month on Angel Island.

scribed as the Ellis Island of the west. But Pauline Wong, executive director of the Chinese American Museum, is quick to point out that most immigrants processed in New York Harbor were quickly sent on their way, while those who came through the California facility were often held for weeks, months, even years.

Opened after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, it became the physical symbol of America's aggressive policies. Although im-

vasive medical exams was an experience that "seared the psyche."

"For people like Tyrus Wong to speak out now," he said, "is a way of reconciling inner turmoil."

Artist Tyrus Wong, who is almost as old as the Angel Island Immigration Station itself, spent two weeks there alone as a young boy, a so-called paper son.

Because the exclusion act capped the Chinese population in America, very few new immigrants were al-

lowed into the country. When the 1906 earthquake and fire destroyed the San Francisco Hall of Records, many Chinese immigrants claimed the identities of those whose paperwork was lost.

They became free to travel to China and bring back relatives or sell their documentation. Paper sons would study "coaching papers" with information about their stolen lives so they could pass detailed interrogations on Angel Is-

land.

The coaching papers of Tyrus Wong's brother are on exhibit at the Chinese American Museum, and visitors can listen to a reenactment of his own interrogation.

His sojourn on Angel Island, he said, was a combination of terror and boredom. "I wouldn't recommend it to anyone. To me, it was just like jail."

maria.laganga@latimes.com