

Midcentury Memories

Letters from an adventurous life

In early August we prepared ourselves to leave at a moment's notice, and were ready when Keith was called in by Mr. Murphy, supervisor of all plants in the Far East. His announcement that we were to go to Hong Kong, if we were agreeable, came as a complete surprise to all concerned, especially us. It took us only a few minutes to decide, for it meant a definite promotion for Keith – and, well, who would refuse an offer to live in fabulous Hong Kong?

The year was 1955, and American newlyweds Keith and Donna Young had been married less than two months.

The move from Japan, where they had both been working, to Hong Kong, marked the beginning of their new lives together. In Hong Kong, they would become a part of the American community, build a family, and spend six, eventful years.

Recently, *Eagles and Dragons* had the pleasure of chatting with Donna about her memories of Hong Kong and The American Club. Our conversation occurred shortly before Donna celebrated her 96th birthday, surrounded by many of her children and grandchildren, at her home in Oregon.

With a sharp and curious mind, Donna was just as keen to ask about today's Hong Kong as she was to share her remembrances. She also passed along a treasure trove of photos and a file of her yearly Christmas letters. These letters (excerpts in italics, from 1955-61) are filled with vivid, thoughtful and often humorous descriptions of American life overseas, from a woman who embraced all the opportunities that Hong Kong had to offer.



A sampan flies the American flag as it ferries Club members to shore for a Fourth of July party (1959).

WHIRLWIND ROMANCE

Christmas greetings to all our friends!

Little did we know the wonderful life ahead of us when we first met, thousands of miles from home, on the small island of Okinawa. We'll never fail to marvel at the effect the institution of marriage can have upon two people, and how wonderfully it can change their lives. (And that is a statement you would never have heard from either of us a year ago!)

Donna writes that their friends “knew” that she and Keith would make a great couple, even if she didn’t. But one thing was clear – they were both adventurous types, who had discovered a taste for expatriate life even before they arrived in Hong Kong.

Keith grew up in Oregon on a dairy farm. He worked for an international

dairy company, which sent him to Japan to oversee the production of milk and other dairy products.

Donna was a Midwesterner and Kent State graduate who longed to teach and travel. Her first job took her to a school on Hawaii’s Lanai island, several years before the island chain became a state. While there, she was offered a job with the U.S. Army to teach elementary school in Okinawa.

Keith’s company had a supply contract with the U.S. military in Japan. He met Donna on a blind date, and within months they were married.

“He courted me with chocolate milk and ice cream,” Donna says with a laugh. It might have been a whirlwind romance, but it was a marriage that lasted for 62 years.



The Young family (L/R) Keith, Bruce, Ayden and Donna, pregnant with third child Craig, gather on the beach with other Club families to celebrate the Fourth (1959).

NEW HOME, NEW HORIZONS

Holiday greetings to all our friends!

We think you will agree that we have a background both picturesque and unusual in Hong Kong as our present home. We still feel that this city is one of the most fabulous places that must exist in the world. Now that we have become residents, we find that some of our original impressions have altered slightly, though most still firmly stand. We now feel more intimately associated with this unusual place, and, as you might imagine, we have hundreds of impressions infixed upon those first ones of a year ago. We are firmly convinced that there cannot possibly be any other place like it! It is a city where anything can be done, and usually is.

Through Keith's job with the International Dairy Engineering Company, the Youngs joined The

American Club during their first year in Hong Kong. Back then, the Club was located in The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Building and had a membership of around 200.

The Club served many functions for the small, but growing, American community: a comfortable and lively lunch spot; a place to unwind after work and enjoy a steak dinner; a meeting point for visiting American VIPs; and, crucially for the Youngs, an opportunity for family gatherings and celebrations of American holiday traditions.

FAMILY BEGINNINGS

Dear friends everywhere,

Our "family life" (and we can now authentically and proudly use this term), as far as we are concerned, leaves little to be

desired. As you know, in March of this year (1956) we were blessed with the arrival of the most wonderful little son that anyone could ever, ever hope for. He has already made our lives so full and rich that we still often marvel that he is our very own.

The Youngs named their first son Ayden, after Donna's father. Three more children followed over the next five years – Bruce, Craig and Heidi – all born in Hong Kong. The Club was where the "Young 'uns", as she described them in her letters, could visit with Santa and celebrate holidays such as the Fourth of July and Halloween.

As Donna's photos show, life at the Club was more formal back then. For Christmas that year, Donna arranged for Ayden and Bruce to wear matching jackets and ties – tailor-made in Hong Kong.

"In those days, even when flying on planes, everybody would dress up," Donna says. "And, of course, Ayden started at the British school, and they had to wear flannel pants. He could tie his own tie at age five!"

Donna explained that the Club offered them the best chance to meet other Americans. She and Keith also did charitable work. Keith was a chairman of the Serviceman's Guides Association while Donna volunteered with the then new American Women's Association (founded in 1956), which often met in the Club's library.

One of the AWA's main fundraisers supported Hong Kong's leper colony on Hei Ling Chau island. Donna participated in the AWA's craft workshops, afternoon teas and Christmas fairs, which raised money for the leprosarium.

Even with their busy schedules, the Youngs found time for many "only-in-Hong Kong" experiences. Donna described junk trips, Cantonese language classes, and local wedding and birthday celebrations in her yearly letters.

Some experiences, however, were extremely challenging. Water rationing, cholera outbreaks, landslides and typhoons also made the family newsletters during their years in Hong Kong.

DEEPER MEANINGS

Christmas greetings once again to all our friends!

Earlier this year we had a bit of excitement in our neighborhood (Repulse Bay). It was during the rainy season and it had rained steadily for three days. In fact, the rainfall for that three-day period was about 30 inches. Part of the hill which rises above our building all along one side gave way and came sliding down against our apartment. The weight was so great that, besides filling in the driveway to the second floor level, it pushed in the windows of the boys' room and the

earth came tumbling in! Fortunately, it happened during the day and the room was empty so that no one was hurt. Nevertheless, for some time there was much confusion, which seemed to center about our household, as the only entrance to the six apartments had suddenly become through our garden and into and out of our house.

With their small children, two domestic helpers and a family dog, Sheba, the Young household was a full and lively place. And in keeping with Club

tradition, Keith and Donna would regularly host visiting Americans, such as Naval personnel, either for a family dinner or junk outing.

In 1960, the Youngs also participated in a foster home plan through the International Social Service. As Donna described, local expatriate families would take a child into their homes for a period of two weeks to three months to help them adjust to Western ways of living before they were formally adopted by overseas families.



A visit from Santa Claus has been a Club Christmas tradition for over 60 years! Here's Ayden Young, dressed for the occasion, accepting a gift from 'Club Claus' (1960).



Bruce Young, dressed to match his big brother Ayden, takes his turn at the popular Santa meet-and-greet while other children wait in line (1960).



Long before the Country Club was built, Club members, like the Young family, could enjoy water sports and al fresco dining through Club-organized boat trips and picnics (1959).



All hands on deck! Club staff hurry to move tables and supplies after an unexpected swell engulfs the beach (1959).

Donna writes of the profound impact of that experience:

One of the highlights of our year came when we had with us in our home for a period of three and one half months, as one of the family, a little Chinese orphan girl of three. Bik Mun left an imprint upon our hearts and memories which will always remain, I feel sure...

It was fascinating for us to watch that child blossom. It was no time at all before she had become an individual in her own right. She soon picked up enough vocabulary to make herself understood, and let us know that she expected as much attention as each of the others got. She adored Craig who was still a baby, but who loved her and the attention she gave to him. Being in the company of two very active and often rough big "brothers," she soon learned to defend herself, and I'm afraid left us a bit of a tomboy.

EXPANSIVE VIEW

Dear friends,

To think back over the time we have spent in Okinawa and Japan, plus these five years in Hong Kong, our lives have certainly been not only interesting, but illuminating, educating, and just plain fun. If only there were

a way of transporting each and every schoolchild into the far-away places of which he studies in his tedious and, too often, boring schoolbooks, what a different outlook the peoples of the world might have upon one another. Perhaps we might become not just one big neighborhood, but one big brotherhood, as well.

In six exciting and intense years in Hong Kong, Keith and Donna built the foundations for a lasting marriage and large, happy family. They remained in Asia for over three decades, as Keith's career subsequently took them to the Philippines and South Korea.

To this day, Donna sends out a Christmas letter with her reflections on the year. We thank her for her time, her photos and her generous spirit, and we leave you with the closing to her last holiday letter from Hong Kong, December 1961:

At this point, we don't know whether we'll be returning to Hong Kong, or whether we'll be transferred elsewhere overseas. The suspense is great, and we are curious, admittedly. However, we do feel quite sure we'll be happy wherever we might go.

Until then, we wish you all the very merriest of Christmases, happiness and good health, and a grand and joyous New Year.

Sincerely yours,

*Keith and Donna Young
Ayden, Bruce, Craig and Heidi*



Keith passed away in 2017, but Donna, who remains a Heritage Member, continues to pursue her love for travel – and inspire adventurers everywhere. At age 91, she made a return trip to Hong Kong to visit her granddaughter Shannon (Ayden's daughter), who lives here. And for Christmas this year, Donna plans to revisit the Philippines with her sons! Photo courtesy of Shannon Young.