

Southern China and the road to Gold Mountain

(華南僑鄉與鄉民啟程去金山 - 余賢鐸 - 積彩)

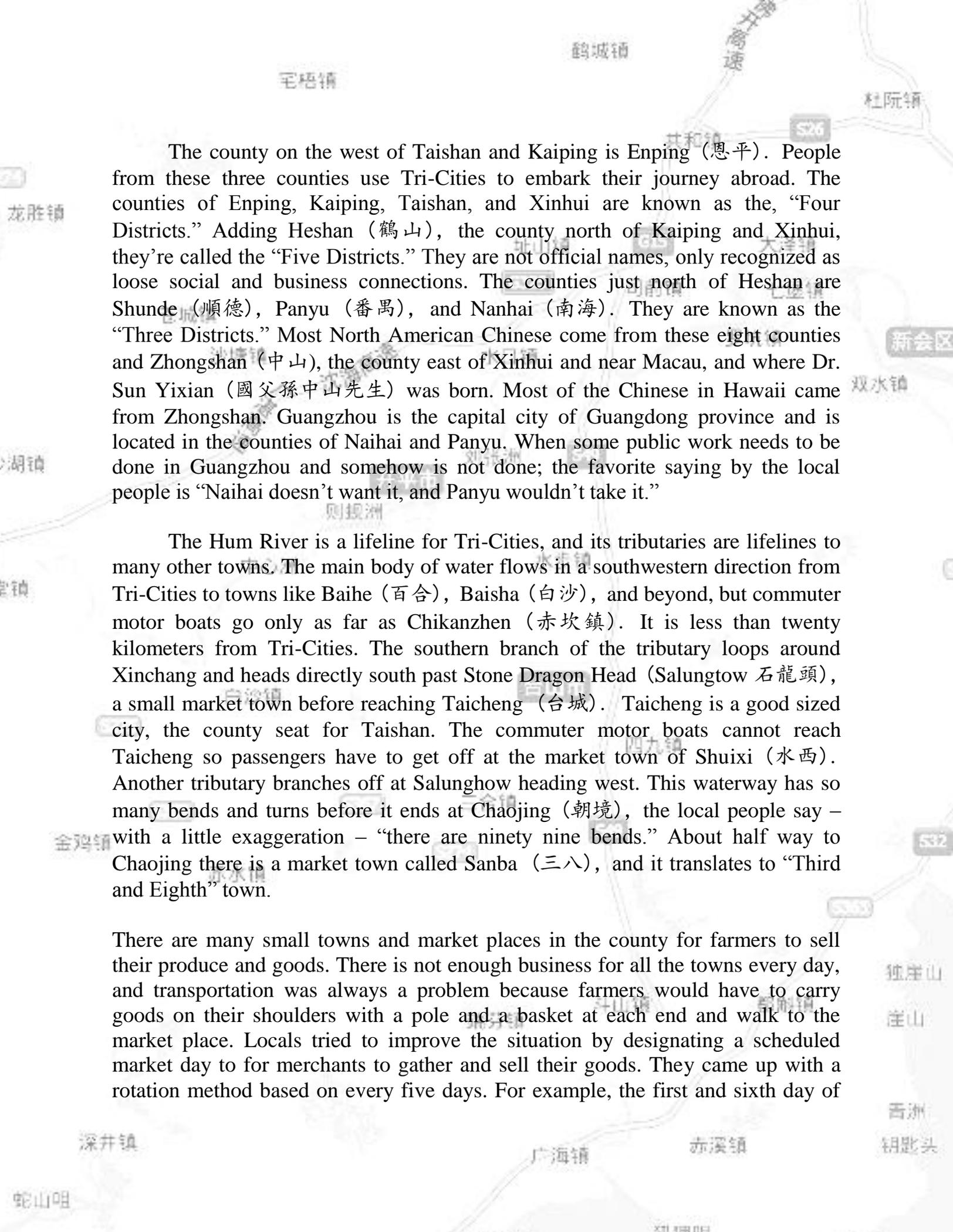
Yen Ock Dong – Detroit



Our home town in China is Tri-Cities Sanfu (三埠) of Kaiping County in Guangdong Province, situated upstream on the Hum River (Humjiang 潭江). The Hum River is in the southern most region of the Pearl River Delta. The Tri-Cities consists of Changsha (長沙), on the north bank of the river, Xinchang (新昌), on the southeast bank, and Dihai (荻海), on the southwest bank. The river at this point is deep enough to allow large boats to dock thus allowing the Tri-Cities to become an inland port city. Other tributaries allow smaller boats further inland on high tide. Before the motor vehicles and paved roads, riverboats were the only means of transportation to faraway places like Canton (Guangzhou 廣州), Macau (澳門), and Hong Kong.

The Hum River at Tri-Cities flows northeast approximately forty kilometers into a large body of water, then changes its course to head straight south for another thirty kilometers before emptying into the South China Sea. This portion of the river is much wider than the area near the Tri-Cities; and is called the Silvery Lake (銀洲湖). Silvery Lake is in the county of Xinhui (新會). The entrance of the waterway is called Yanman (崖門), where there is a fort standing guard. Here, the last battle of the Southern Sung army fought the barbarians from the north, the Mongols. The Prime Minister and the eight-year old emperor perished at sea rather than surrender. Thus, the Mongol conquest of China was completed.

At the west side of Silvery Lake is the county Taishan (台山). Rising alongside the bank of Silvery Lake is a mountain range called Gudou Shan. Occupying a vast area with high peaks and deep valleys, it's a well-hidden place for bandits and pirates. Ship owners and travelers always worried what could happen. One of the last attacks happened to a boat from Macau in 1949. Pirates murdered the machine gunner of the boat because he had put up such a heroic battle trying to prevent them from taking the boat.



The county on the west of Taishan and Kaiping is Enping (恩平). People from these three counties use Tri-Cities to embark their journey abroad. The counties of Enping, Kaiping, Taishan, and Xinhui are known as the, “Four Districts.” Adding Heshan (鶴山), the county north of Kaiping and Xinhui, they’re called the “Five Districts.” They are not official names, only recognized as loose social and business connections. The counties just north of Heshan are Shunde (順德), Panyu (番禺), and Nanhai (南海). They are known as the “Three Districts.” Most North American Chinese come from these eight counties and Zhongshan (中山), the county east of Xinhui and near Macau, and where Dr. Sun Yixian (國父孫中山先生) was born. Most of the Chinese in Hawaii came from Zhongshan. Guangzhou is the capital city of Guangdong province and is located in the counties of Naihai and Panyu. When some public work needs to be done in Guangzhou and somehow is not done; the favorite saying by the local people is “Naihai doesn’t want it, and Panyu wouldn’t take it.”

The Hum River is a lifeline for Tri-Cities, and its tributaries are lifelines to many other towns. The main body of water flows in a southwestern direction from Tri-Cities to towns like Baihe (百合), Baisha (白沙), and beyond, but commuter motor boats go only as far as Chikanzhen (赤坎鎮). It is less than twenty kilometers from Tri-Cities. The southern branch of the tributary loops around Xinchang and heads directly south past Stone Dragon Head (Salungtow 石龍頭), a small market town before reaching Taicheng (台城). Taicheng is a good sized city, the county seat for Taishan. The commuter motor boats cannot reach Taicheng so passengers have to get off at the market town of Shuixi (水西). Another tributary branches off at Salunghow heading west. This waterway has so many bends and turns before it ends at Chaojing (朝境), the local people say – with a little exaggeration – “there are ninety nine bends.” About half way to Chaojing there is a market town called Sanba (三八), and it translates to “Third and Eighth” town.

There are many small towns and market places in the county for farmers to sell their produce and goods. There is not enough business for all the towns every day, and transportation was always a problem because farmers would have to carry goods on their shoulders with a pole and a basket at each end and walk to the market place. Locals tried to improve the situation by designating a scheduled market day to for merchants to gather and sell their goods. They came up with a rotation method based on every five days. For example, the first and sixth day of

the month were assigned to town A, second and seventh days to town B, third and eighth days to town C, fourth and ninth days to town D, and fifth and tenth days to town E. This is how Sanba got its name. Shoppers got more choices, better prices, and more convenience.

If locks were to be installed in all tributaries, water would be available for irrigation, transportation, fisheries, recreation, and help to clean the polluted streams, but that would inhibit the trade and boat traffic on the rivers. The boats that sail on the Hum River were wooden junks with sails. Ferry and water taxis used human power to cross the river in a sampan. The human power was supplied by women and girls most the time. Male members usually worked on junks that sailed with cargo to other ports. Two people were needed to operate a sampan, one at the rear of the boat steering the rudder and the other propelling the boat forward with a long bamboo pole. This was done by pushing the bottom of the river with the pole while walking rearward along the side of the boat; or rowing the boat with oars in deep water. Often you saw a baby carried on the back of one of the members. There may be other children on board, and for those little ones who have yet to learn how to swim, a floatation device was tied to their body in case they fell in the water. The sampan was home for them because they were not allowed to own any property on land. Life was hard for these water people. Without public assistance, they had to rely on each other to survive all the negative conditions of daily life. This is a mirror reflection of the North American Chinese's experience in the first 100 years.

The passenger boats sailing on the rivers were wooden barges pulled by tugboats. They were the largest boats, which are over a hundred feet in length and forty feet wide. They had three decks. The main deck was not very high with a walkway on both sides for loading and unloading of freight and passengers. The main deck had a kitchen about twenty feet from the bow of the boat. Next to the kitchen was a double stairway leading to the cargo holds below the waterline. The area by the stairway had bunk beds and canvas chairs for third class passengers. Next to the double stairway to the rear on the main deck were three big rooms with seating spaces on the floor. One room was for male passengers, one for female, and the other for families and fourth-class passengers. At the rear end of these three rooms was a stairway to go up to second deck. This deck was for first and second class passengers. The front half of the deck from the stairway to the area above the kitchen had bunk beds on both sides and lines of canvas chairs for third class passengers in center area. The rear half of the deck contained staterooms on both sides with offices and crew's quarters taking up the rear center area. The area between the staterooms and offices was an activity center.

As soon as the boat set sail, somebody would solicit donations for a local charitable hospital. There were other hawkers following to pitch their goods of candies, cookies, and even a snake catcher try to sell you a bottle of snake oil, or mint snake gallbladder tangerine peels. Those hawkers were good speakers, very witty, and funny - good entertainment! The top deck was wide open except for the rear area which housed the pilots and security people. The rudder for the barges was very large and had a pivot on a post that lead to the top deck, connecting to a huge forty foot rod that steered the barge. In order to steer the barge, the pilot needed to push the rod to make the rudder rotate. To make it easier for the pilot to steer the rudder, they built a rack on the deck large enough to walk on where the pilot stood on the rack with his back leaning against the steering rod pushing his feet on the rack to rotate the rudder. I always loved getting up to the top deck and watch the scenery to go by. Many times I would walk up to the pilot and ask him few questions, but most of the time he was just too busy watching the traffic and taking instructions from the tugboat up ahead. In the early 1930's the economy was the best in Chinese history, with economic and social conditions relatively normal. Many industries including shipbuilding were booming. Many bigger, better, and more fancy barges were built. One of the barges on Guangzhou line was Xinlunwo (新聯和). It had decorative paintings on both sides and on the back face of the boat. An electric generator powered the many light bulbs on top of the boat, with many banners flapping in the wind. It was an impressive sight. With the powerful tugboat, the Hindenburg pulling, all other barges fell behind.

The trip to Guangzhou or Macau took all day because they had to stop in many cities and towns. The time to set sail was early in the morning and passengers living far away from the Tri-Cities had to spend a night in the city to catch the boat. The first stops were Gongyi (公益) and Shuikou (水口), heading north to Xinhui River (新會河). The scenery changes after entering this river. There were sugar cane plantations, orange and tangerine orchards, and palm trees that line both banks of the river. This area is more fertile than Taishan. This river is very narrow, and for one short distance, it is so narrow one could almost jump onto the boat from shore. The local police provided armed guards marching on the shore to escort the boat for a safe passage. Shortly after the narrow portion of the river, it gets much wider and runs into a bigger river, the Xijian (West River 西江). Xijian is the border between counties of Xinhui and Zhongshan. At the junction of these two rivers is the city Jiangman (江門); it is the biggest city in the Five Districts. It's a port city and a manufacturing center for variety of goods, such as sugar and paper. A northern suburb of Jiangman is Beikai (北街) and is situated

on Xijian. A two thousand ton ocean-going ship could dock there. Boats to Macau follow the waterway of Xijian to sea, where Macau is located at the south side of the mouth of Pearl River (珠江). The Pearl River Delta has many tributaries that crisscross between the big rivers. Boats to Guangzhou have to zigzag northward about fifty kilometers and stop at towns like Xiaolan (小攬), Rongqi (容奇), and Dailang (大良). Dailang is famous for its combs and handicrafts.

Guangzhou is the seat of provincial government, a center of communications, commerce, education, transportation, and religion. It is a city with a long history, modern with much western influence. It was overseas Chinese money that built the city. Guangzhou was not an industrial city, but the nearby city of Foshan (佛山) was. Foshan was rated as one of the foremost industrial cities in of all China. Historically, Foshan produced metal tools, fixtures, farming equipment, household goods, musical instruments, and many kinds of handicrafts.

On the coast, Macau consists of three small islands, the main island connected to mainland by a causeway, with a total area of about 6 square miles. It was a Portuguese colony since 1557 (until 1999). This was a stepping stone for travelers from the Five Districts to Hong Kong. Gambling was and is the main industry. Fishing and firecracker works were other livelihoods.

Hong Kong was a British colony and included the leased nearby territory of Kowloon since 1849. It has one of best natural harbors in world. With the organizational skill of the British, and the hard work and determination to make good of the Chinese from the nearby countries, they transformed this little fishing village into one of the biggest shipping centers anywhere. Many overseas Chinese embarked on their journey from here.

There were and are many travel agencies to help the travelers to make connections, tickets and apply for legal documents. These agencies served their own people from the same district or with the same surname. For a peasant or a country boy going to Hong Kong the first time, he needed to have someone to take him to the agency. He might be somebody from the next village and he acted as a guide, messenger, delivery man, and a trustworthy person known as an “Ocean Cruising Pony (巡洋馬)”. He made a round trip every three or four days, to provide all these services for a small fee, usually with very little gratuity as the overseas bound travelers were mostly poor. But he might meet someone just returning from overseas, and he might get a generous tip for his past service. The travel agency provided a valued service for the travelers, arranging for them room and board,

instruct them in the do's and don'ts while they are in town and make sure they got on board the right ship at the right time. The Yee family had one of best agencies named the Cheng Sing Goldsmith (昌盛金鋪) store on Wing Lok Street (永樂街). However, it was not a jewelry store or a store to sell gold, it's in name only. The store had been in business over a hundred years; many generations of Yee's had passed through this place. From the owners and management down, you were greeted warmly with old traditional courtesy. You are home away from home.

For those coming to Hong Kong for the first time, he would experience many firsts. He would see big ocean going freighters anchored in middle of the harbor, loading or unloading cargo to the big junks moored next to them, the green and white Star ferries zipping back and forth between Hong Kong and Kowloon. He might see a huge white liner with three funnels, the Canadian Pacific's Princess Marguerite or S.S. President Cleveland at Kowloon's Tsim Sha Tsui dock. He may have seen the Blue Funnel ships and the tall ships before the turn of 20th century. They would see the tall white people with brown or red hair, big, tall whiskered Indians with turbans as doorman at hotels, public buildings, or as guards at banks with a shot gun in hand. They would see big, tall buildings with large department stores such as Tai Sun or Sincere, beautifully decorated restaurants and teahouses such as Luk Hoi Tong. Double Decker street cars would clink and clank on Des Voeux Rd, with rickshaw runners zooming in and out of traffic.

There is a tram to go up to Victoria Peak, which affords a panoramic view of the whole harbor; one can see far in the distance on a clear day. The view is more spectacular at night, with the lights on both sides of the harbor. With activity slowing down in the harbor, one still sees the Star Ferries crossing the harbor continuously until 11:30 at night. The fog would move in and out at the peak, at one moment could see Kowloon clearly, the next moment you couldn't see the lights at Central District below.

It's a sad tale for the people going on a long journey abroad to the South Pacific or South America. Most everyone wanted to go to Gum San (Gold Mountain) in North America. Many of them went to strange places as a contracted slave labor, sent to a farm as a field hand, or as a laborer building railroads. For those who came ten or fifteen years later, some went to join their father, grandfather, or uncles to work in their restaurant or clothing store. The clothing stores were not the ones that sell clothes; it was a hand laundry.

They faced long hours of hard work with low wages, a bleak future, one just hoped there would be a better opportunity coming your way someday. For some,

managing to save a little and send a little money home every year, to take a trip home to see the family every few years was an accomplishment. There were also a few people who turned out relatively successful. When these ambitious Gum San Hak (Gold Mountain sojourner 金山客) returned back to the village, one of the first things they did was to acquire some rice fields that produced enough to feed the family, build a new house with new furniture, and buy some income (generating) properties in Guangzhou or Hong Kong. A greater dream was to send the boys to Zhongshan University or Linnan University, or better yet to Peking University in Peking. When the boys graduated from the universities, get them a wife of your choice. If, by chance this highly educated intellectual, by his ability, luck or whatever method, ended up with a high position in the government, he could take a second wife, one that suited his position in high society. When the Gold Mountain sojourner reached fifty, he hoped to retire and return to the house he built in the village and become a village elder. You bought the respect from the villagers with your money; and you could settle any arguments and disabuses in the village. For some, the wealth had changed their attitude by showing less humanity and more arrogance to others. Then they could enjoy their grandchildren and plan a big sixtieth birthday party. In China they say it is very rare for a person to reach the age of seventy. He worked hard all his life, now he could enjoy the fruits of his success.

As for the daughter, the angel! She is very helpful when she is home. She can go away to Taishan #1 High School or Changsha Girls Teacher College; they can come home every weekend for expense money. When the time comes, they would find her a nice young Gold Mountain boy to get married with lots dowries and she would go to live in Gold Mountain.

He had put in lots of effort, and with luck to end up as good as he was. But for others who liked to indulge in a little gambling or other bad habits, there was a very different ending. Gambling is very bad habit, not easy to get out of. The chances were that he will never be able to go back home to see his family again. The high hopes the family had on him, the promise he made to the family, gone with the wind.