Greenhead Pak

It was May 18, 1968, and a young Chinese immigrant from Hong Kong had made his way to Winnipeg, Canada. It wasn't an easy journey, and leaving a successful import and export business at home made the decision to leave a tough one.

BY BRAD FENSON

Pak Wong was just 20 years old when he got the call from his family and was told he had to go to Winnipeg to help his uncle, who was suffering from health problems. Chinese tradition dictated that the family would send someone – in this case a nephew – to help out. Being the "chosen one" meant giving up everything the young man was familiar with for a chance to help his relatives keep their restaurant business alive. Born in Canton, China, in 1948, Wong moved to Hong Kong at age five but leaving for Canada was the toughest shift ever in the young man's life. The big move was considered by many to be an incredible opportunity, as North America was looked at as a country to fulfil dreams and aspirations.

Pak's efforts to help his family were too late – by the time his paperwork was approved and he had arrived in Canada his uncle had passed away. His aunt, now alone, had tried to keep up the business but simply found it too much and was forced to sell the restaurant.

Over the next couple of years in Winnipeg Pak put himself through school, while working full time. He continued to support his mom back in Hong Kong and in 1976 got married. The hard work and diligence paid off with an education in commerce and accounting. Life was beginning to look good but soon afterward a sudden accident took the life of Pak's young bride and again his life was changed.

With his degrees in hand and the need for a fresh start, Pak decided to leave Winnipeg and took a federal banking position in Grande Prairie, Alta. It was a welcome change and he soon found himself an active member of the community through his work and love for local sports like baseball and basketball.

Pak's roots and passion were still in the food and beverage industry and he changed careers, going to work for a large hotel in Grande Prairie. Allyson, a young lady he worked with, caught his eye and the two eventually married. They started a family and in 1985 the couple's desire to own their business led them to move to Provost, Alta., where they bought a restaurant.

The small town in the eastern parkland of Alberta was a stark contrast to any place Pak had lived before. The rural, farm-based community had a much different feel from Hong Kong, Winnipeg or even Grande Prairie. The Wongs settled into their new environment quickly and in 1990 they purchased the Greenhead Motel and Restaurant, next door to their existing business. This

was when Pak's life took a serious change and a new world of opportunities soon opened up.

The game-rich country around Provost attracted a wide diversity of outdoorsmen and hunters from across North America and many stay at the Wongs' motel. Business boomed in fall as waterfowl enthusiasts flocked to the region to experience the migrating bounty. As each fall progressed, waterfowlers were replaced by big game hunters and Pak was treated to regular stories about feathered and antlered creatures from the area.

Pak enjoyed the stories but had never hunted a day in his life. He often chuckled when friends and clients would ask him to join them in the field. He would usually respond by telling them, "You must be crazy to get up at 5:00 a.m. to chase geese, and besides that, I have better things to do."

Above: Pak Wong (second from right) with friends from California during a 2008 goose hunt. Opposite: Pak, with son Jonathon.

Being in Provost for years and seeing the excitement and enthusiasm of hunters coming through his establishments, Pak decided to take up a long-standing offer from a local landowner to take him out for a goose hunt. It was an afternoon shoot and not having to get up in the wee hours of the morning made the decision to try hunting a little easier. They headed for the field and set up decoys and blinds. It was all unfamiliar to Pak but he worked alongside his mentor to make the most of the event. What happened next changed Pak's life forever.

The first flight of geese appeared on the horizon and watching the birds approach, and hearing the calls around him, generated a sense of excitement. It didn't take long before the birds had their wings cupped and their feet splayed out for a landing amongst the decoys. Shotguns roared and awoke something in Pak that he had never experienced before. The shooting was fast and furious and in just half an hour the hunters had a limit of geese gathered around their blind. It was a miraculous feeling. In a single outing Pak went from thinking people had to be crazy to get up early in the mornings to go hunting, to knowing he had to be crazy not to experience more of it.

Hunting quickly became a big part of Pak's life. Waterfowl hunting was incredible but he knew from listening to his clients that there was much more to experience. The Provost area is rich with game and has everything from white-tailed and mule deer to antelope, elk and moose. It didn't take Pak long to find a new hobby, pastime and passion. The hunter inside him had been ignited. Nobody knows for sure where it comes from but the instinct to hunt may be in all of us.

Pak's passion for the outdoors grew quickly and like wildfire it spread. Daughters Pamela and Wendy and their husbands are now avid hunters and Pak's son Jonathon could only be described as a chip off the old block. Allyson, an accomplished chef, has found herself preparing gourmet meals of wild game that the whole family enjoys. When he moved to Canada in 1968, Pak never dreamed about hunting. However, it turned out to be one of those unique opportunities that became an important part of his life.

One of the most memorable experiences in Pak's hunting life was hunting whitetails with his son-in-law Geoff. On one of those occasions, after sitting several hours in a ground blind they stood up for a stretch and no sooner extended their arms when they heard a noise behind them. Slowly sinking back into their seats they anxiously looked out the window to see what was approaching. Minutes started to feel like hours and when it seemed like the noise was a figment of their imagination Geoff tapped Pak on the knee and motioned with his eyes that their quarry was close. Straining to see the white-tailed buck, Pak eventually made eye contact with the animal, which sent it in a full-out retreat.

Anticipating the deer's movements Pak had earlier cleared a section of trees behind the blind and was able to locate the deer in his scope and make a single, well placed shot to collect a six-by-six buck that now graces his trophy room.

The Wong family loves Provost and the people in the community. Pak says it was the best move he ever made. He chuckles, with his great sense of humour, when he says his wife Allyson is the best thing he ever took from Grande Prairie.

Hong Kong and Winnipeg were big cities with lots of people but a small circle of friends. Grande Prairie, and especially Provost, are small, with fewer people but more friends than Pak could have imagined. Friends who share stories, sports, participate in community events and introduced Pak to hunting.

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Above: Wong, with wife Allyson, outside the Greenhead Motel in Provost, Alta., which they purchased in 1990 and have operated since.

The Wongs have been active in their local Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) chapter for over a decade. The annual fundraiser still produces $25,000 to $30,000 for the ducks. They have a sealed bid auction in the lobby of their motel, which continues to be extremely successful and popular with wildlife art enthusiasts.

Pak regularly attends DUC fundraisers, bidding on unique trips and opportunities to experience new hunting adventures. He's bought packages that have taken him for wild boar in California, to Nova Scotia for sea ducks and to Saskatchewan for sandhill cranes. Hunting with Pat Kehoe, a friend and biologist from DUC, Pak found his favourite game recipe (and Pat apparently has the best Korean barbecue sauce recipe that goes with any type of game). Allyson has perfected the recipe and the entire family, including grandchildren, feast on the wild bounty brought home by the entire clan. Pak's current dream is to hunt red stag in Europe and he hopes to see more of the world through his passion for hunting.

Pak was out this spring watching the migration of ducks and geese. The feathered traffic that flows through the region each spring is often indicative of what will follow in the fall. He is always out spotting for deer, looking for areas to set up ground blinds and trying to calculate the right time to take his family and friends into the field.

Besides hunting, the Wong family is engaged in their community. In 2005 Pak was recipient of a Centennial Medal from the Province of Alberta for outstanding service to the people of Alberta. In 1998 he was elected president of the Motel Association of Alberta. Pak was also founder of the Provost Soccer Club in 1996, and is still president.

Everyone in and around Provost knows there is a unique ambience to the Greenhead Restaurant, which is well known for its Chinese and western cuisine. And anyone who has stayed in the region knows that the Friday night special is always a 16-ounce Alberta T-bone grilled to perfection.

Being the "chosen one" has taken on new meaning for Pak. Moving to Canada has meant opportunities so far-fetched they would have been unimaginable. Where did the new love and passion for hunting come from?

Perhaps hunting is part of every culture and taking a risk to try it is all that is required to open new doors in our lives – like a young man leaving Hong Kong to help family and find his dreams in Canada. ✗

The Greenhead Motel and Restaurant is a family-owned and-operated business, where they treat guests as extended family. The motel is located just off of Highway 13 in Provost, Alta. The Greenhead Motel features 42 guest rooms, a great restaurant, trophy room and sports bar.

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