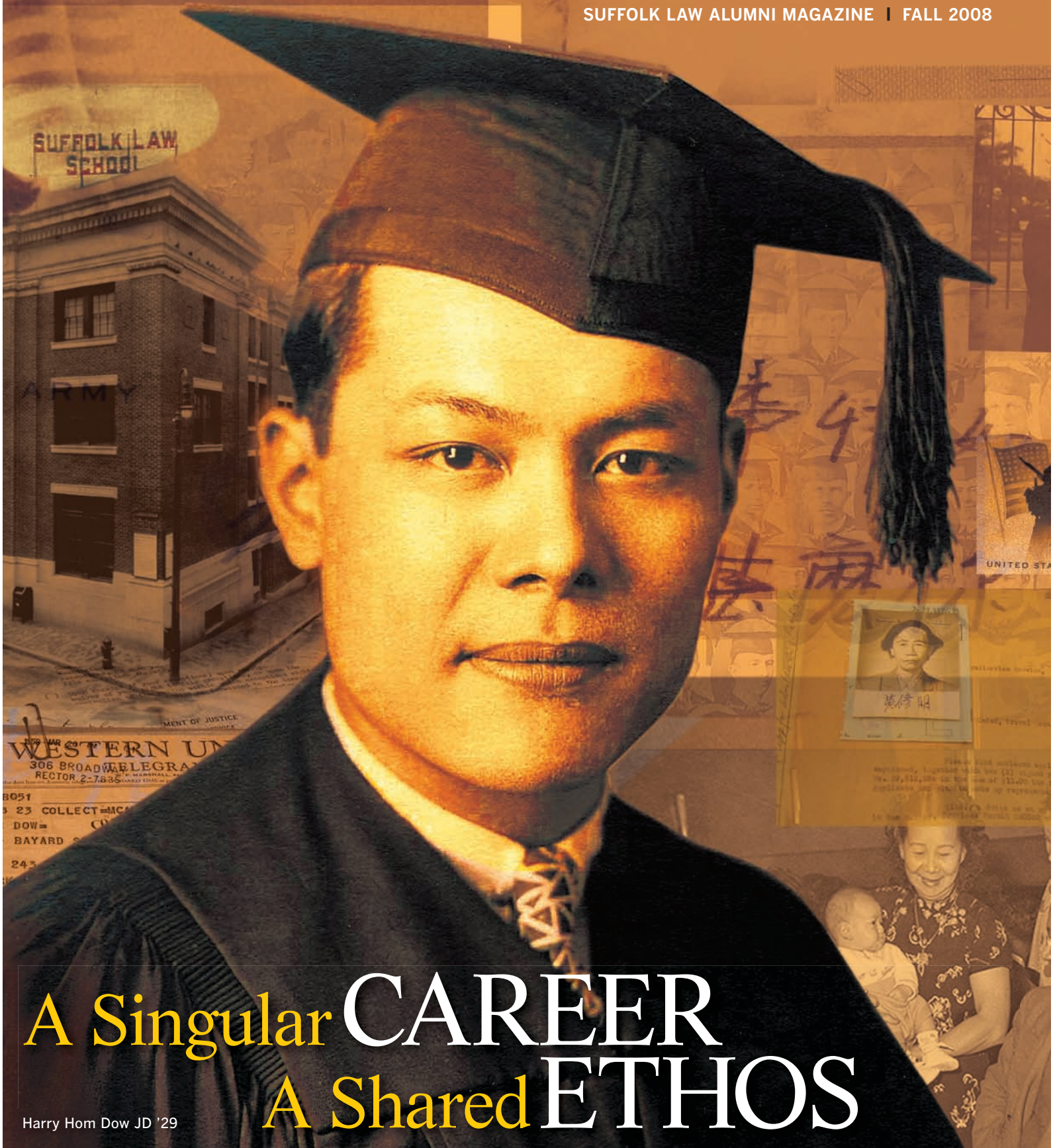


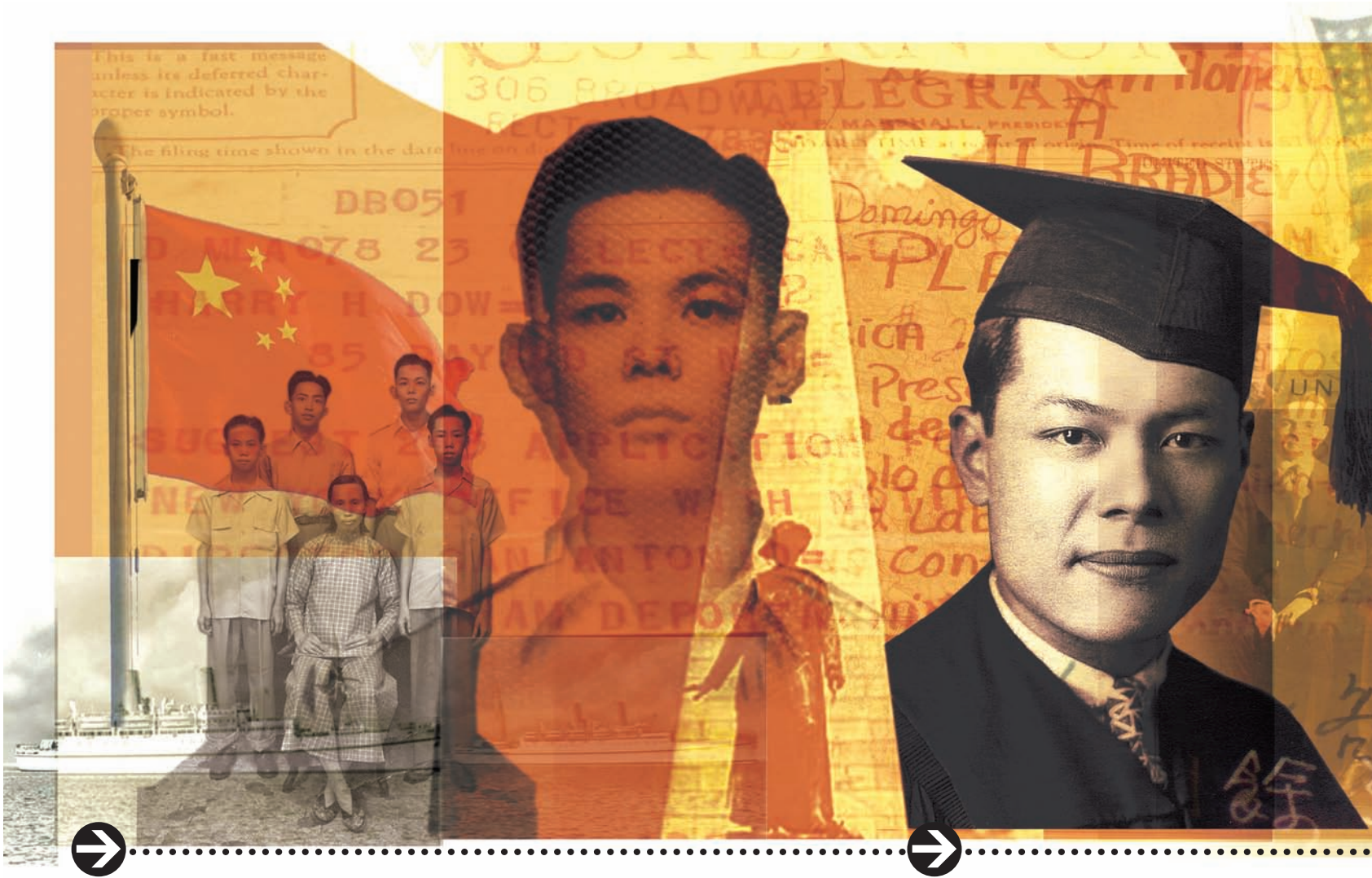
SuffolkLAW

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A Singular CAREER A Shared ETHOS

Harry Hom Dow JD '29



A Singular Career,

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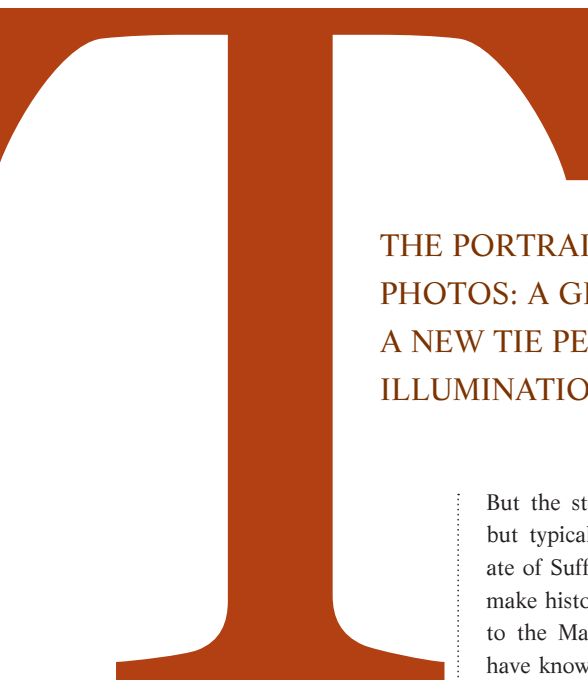


Ethos¹ A Shared

Ethos

BY THOMAS GEARTY + MEAGHAN AGNEW |

PHOTO MONTAGE BY ANASTASIA VASILAKIS



THE PORTRAIT OF HARRY HOM DOW JD '29 LOOKS LIKE MOST YEARBOOK PHOTOS: A GLIMPSE OF A FRESH HAIRCUT UNDER THE MORTARBOARD, A NEW TIE PEEKING THROUGH THE NECK OF THE BLACK ROBE, THE SOFT ILLUMINATION OF ANOTHER YOUNG FACE.

But the story of the man in the photo is anything but typical. In 1929, Dow, a newly minted graduate of Suffolk University Law School, was poised to make history as the first Chinese American admitted to the Massachusetts Bar. And though he couldn't have known it at the time, he was also on the verge of a groundbreaking career in public service, one that would reflect his selfless values, his indomitable spirit, and the ethos of the institution that first gave him the chance to succeed.

The script for Dow's extraordinary life is now at Suffolk Law. His children have donated Dow's collected papers to his alma mater—24 boxes of photographs, legal files, letters, press clippings, and other documents—where they will become part of the Suffolk University archives.

For Suffolk Law Dean Alfred Aman, the papers represent a vital piece of Suffolk Law's legacy. "It's important to realize that a big part of Suffolk's history as a law school is that it provided opportunities for individuals of great ability, like Harry Dow, who would not have had the chance at any other place," Aman says. "This is a wonderful opportunity to learn more about his life and his career—and how it reflects back on our institution."

An Early Promise

The early decades of the 20th century were an era of official prejudice against Chinese immigrants. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibited entry to the U.S. by all Chinese people except merchants, teachers, students, officials, and existing legal residents. "The coming of Chinese laborers endangers the good order of certain localities," the law stated.

Initially enacted as a 10-year policy, the act was made permanent in 1902.

But Hom Soon Dow was a business owner, and so in 1902 he and his wife Alice immigrated to rural Hudson, Massachusetts, from the Toisan district of China. When their first child, Harry, was born in 1904, the family moved east to the city of Boston, eventually settling on Shawmut Avenue in the South End.

An ambitious man with an entrepreneurial spirit and an idea for a new business, Hom Soon Dow opened H. S. Dow Laundry, the first fully mechanized wet laundry in Boston, in 1907. With a head start over the competition and an edge in technology, Hom Soon's business began to thrive. Soon he had customers all over Boston and purchased several trucks for deliveries. His family grew at a similarly rapid rate: after Harry, the Dows added three girls and two more boys to their brood.

In 1916, Hom Soon Dow died suddenly from a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 40, leaving behind a cloud of uncertainty over the fate of the family's lifeblood. In the United States in the early 20th century, it was rare to find a company owned by a woman, let alone one run by a Chinese widow with no business experience and six children. But Alice Dow decided not only to manage the laundry—with help from young Harry—but to expand it.

It was a bold decision, but misfortune struck again almost immediately. Alice Dow forged ahead with an existing plan to relocate the laundry to a more modern, up-to-date facility on West Dedham Street. However, the deal went bad, ostensibly over a contract dispute and other issues; family lore says Alice and her children were hoodwinked. The Dows were left practically penniless.

Fourteen-year-old Harry felt the weight of the world on his slender shoulders. As the eldest son in a Chinese



family, he had a special obligation to assume responsibility for his mother and siblings. Yet despite his best efforts, the family's fortunes had sunk even lower.

Then and there, the teenage Harry made a vow to himself: he would study law so that no one would take advantage of his family, or other families like his, ever again.

A Merging of Like Minds

On the other side of Boston Common, Suffolk Law School was making a name for itself as an institution committed to education for all. Gleason Archer, Suffolk Law's founder and dean, was emphatic in his insistence that Suffolk Law provide "an open door for opportunity." By decade's end, Suffolk Law was one of the largest law schools in the nation, with an enrollment of more than 2,000 students. The student body was made up overwhelmingly of working-class evening students; Archer also spoke proudly of the school's "cosmopolitanism," a then-current term for racial and ethnic diversity. It was an institution that prided itself on reaching out to those who might not otherwise be given an opportunity to succeed. And it was the perfect fit for a young man like Harry Dow.

Included in the archival material is Dow's 1925 law school application: a one-page, single-sided document with just enough space to list his educational credentials, employment, and two references, including one from Suffolk Law trustee and U.S. congressman Joseph F. O'Connell. Three letters can be discerned scrawled at the bottom of the page: GLA, the initials of his interviewer, Gleason Archer, who personally accepted Dow for admission.

The young man made the most of the opportunity. During the day he worked at the family's laundry, helping to keep it afloat; at night he dove into a full load of law classes. By his final year of law school, Dow was holding down a full-time job as a translator for the U.S. Bureau of Immigration while attending classes and pitching in at the family laundry whenever he had a free moment. Dow graduated in 1929; soon after, he and a few friends rented a cottage outside of the



➔ A Dow family photo from the mid-1920s. Back row, left to right: Harry Dow, Nellie Dow, Hammie Dow, Howard Dow. Front row, left to right: Grandmother Dow, Nora Dow, Nettie Dow.

city for a month to study for the bar. Several months later, Dow found out that he had passed the grueling exam, thus becoming the first Chinese American ever to gain admission to the Massachusetts Bar.

In a *Boston Globe* article celebrating his achievement, Dow was asked what he planned to do next.

"I hope to champion the cause of the Chinese in this country," he replied.

Fighting the Good Fight

It was, for a time, a dream deferred. After passing the bar, Dow went into government service, a temporary move that became long-lasting after the stock market crash of 1929. "It did



not seem prudent to give up the certainty of a monthly paycheck,” Dow wrote to Joseph E. Warner, his former professor at Suffolk Law, who went on to serve as the Massachusetts state attorney general and a superior court judge.

Dow spent nearly two decades in the “government rut,” as he called it, transferred to the New York office of the Bureau of Immigration in 1931. Dow was too old to be drafted when World War II started, but he enlisted voluntarily in 1942. He served in military intelligence, eventually leaving the service in 1947 with the rank of captain.

Finally, Dow could fulfill his pledge to dedicate his skills full time to the Chinese community. He was “perfectly positioned,” as his son Fred Dow puts it, to open his own immigration practice. He was smart, understood Chinese language and culture, and had experience inside the Immigration Bureau. Above all, he knew firsthand what it meant to be given a chance to succeed.

Dow’s timing was ideal. The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 finally permitted Chinese

residents to apply for U.S. citizenship, and for wives and children in China to join their husbands and fathers in the United States. Even though stringent quotas permitted only a tiny number of Chinese to enter the country each year, the cultural climate was changing, and immigration law services were increasingly in demand.

“My practice is almost exclusively among the Chinese and in the immigration and naturalization field,” he wrote to Judge Warner, “and since the Chinese community in New York is larger than that of Boston, I maintain an office there to draw upon the greater source of clientele. And so my time is spent between both places.”

Dow’s documents from that time vividly attest to the depth of his professional commitment. Stacks upon stacks of neatly organized files—many labeled “App. for Admin,” or “application for admission to the U.S.”—contain government forms, legal correspondence, handwritten case notes, photos, telegrams, and money order receipts, all meticulously organized by date and year. They tell the tales of family men securing passports to travel back to China to retrieve wives and children; of young boys traveling from Hong Kong to New York to reunite with their families; of Chinese American residents petitioning for naturalization. In one instance, Dow himself gives an affidavit on behalf of a client in order to help him secure life insurance from the Veterans Administration.

One file in particular stands out. In April 1951, Hoey Moy Fong, then 15 years old, saw his passport application turned down due to “wide discrepancies regarding material facts concerning which you and your alleged relatives should have been in agreement.” According to documents, Dow spent the next two years fighting to prove Fong’s relation to his family was legitimate and thus secure his U.S. citizenship. Eventually, Dow traveled with Fong and several family members to Washington, D.C., and spent two days arguing the case in U.S. District Court. The final judgment in that case—a copy of which is still contained in Fong’s file—came down on April 29, 1953, just days shy of Fong’s 18th birthday. In it, Judge Edward C. Tamm “adjudged, ordered, and decreed that the plaintiff, Hoey Moy Fong, is and has been since birth a citizen and national of the United States.” Dow had won.

But those years were also difficult. Dow struggled to adjust to the financial roller coaster of private prac-

➔ Harry Dow, with his ever-present pipe, in the early 1980s.





tice after two decades of government service. “I’d be better off on relief or collecting unemployment insurance,” he complained in a letter to an army buddy. Moreover, as a Chinese American working full time as an attorney in the 1950s, Dow faced an enormous amount of scrutiny. According to the 1950 U.S. census, there were fewer than 130 Asian American attorneys working in the entire country during that time; in the Northeast, including New England, there were fewer than 15. Dow wasn’t just fighting to better the circumstances of his fellow man; he was working by example to break down existing prejudices against the Chinese American community.

By 1958, however, Dow had found his professional footing. He was operating thriving law offices on Bayard Street in New York City and Chauncy Street in Boston. His finances had stabilized, and he was in the process of building a house on Long Island for his wife and children. He often hosted get-togethers for his extended family, and had developed a fondness for fancy suits. The future seemed assured.

And then, for the second time in Dow’s life, the roof fell in.

Victim of McCarthyism

In the early 1950s, perceptions of Chinese Americans had taken a hard turn. U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy had spent the late 1940s stoking anti-communist sentiment; soon, the country was in the grip of the Second Red Scare. Although most historical accounts of this time focus on the blacklists and the Americans unfairly accused of harboring communist ties, Chinese Americans were deeply affected as well. When China became a communist country in 1949, scrutiny of the Chinese American community only increased. Many Chinese residents were unfairly investigated and sometimes deported without warrant, and businesses and reputations were ruined.

Dow was the victim of such smear tactics. In 1958, one of Dow’s clients was charged with smuggling illegal immigrants into the United States; Dow was swept up in the investigation and indicted. He was forced to spend more than a year defending himself against charges of collusion, testifying repeatedly in front of grand juries—and watching a groundbreaking career 30 years in the making crumble into dust.

“Even though he beat the grand jury indictment, they pretty much blackballed him at the INS,” recalls son Fred Dow. “Nobody would return his calls. He couldn’t get any business done because he was a suspect. He was tainted.”

By the time Dow extricated himself from legal peril, he had already shipped his wife and children back to Boston to live with his sister at the old homestead on Shawmut Avenue. He hung on in New York for a while longer but could not revive his wounded career, and eventually he followed his family back to the South End in 1960. It must have all been tragically familiar to Dow: once again, his family was nearly penniless, the victims of a prejudiced society. Yet Dow’s belief system was still firmly intact. And so, with almost nothing left to give but himself, Dow once more dedicated himself to the disadvantaged.

“Nobody would return his calls. He couldn’t get any business done because he was a suspect. He was tainted.”

A Good Neighbor

In the 1960s, the city of Boston was at a crossroads. A decade before, urban renewal had become Boston’s battle cry, and the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) was established in 1957 with a broad mandate to remake large sections of the city.

But renewal was a double-edged sword. When in 1959 the BRA cast its eye on the South End for the nation’s largest urban renewal project, neighborhood activists knew they had to be better organized if they were to resist demolition without relocation. Over the next two decades, in project after project, South End residents successfully fought to retain the multiethnic, economically diverse character of the neighborhood.

And Harry Dow was front and center in the effort.

Mel King, a longtime community activist and lifelong South End resident, recalls Dow’s invaluable work on behalf of the neighborhood.



“They [the BRA] were going to do something drastic, but by then we were organized to try to deal with making sure that there was tenant participation in it,” King says. “And having someone like Harry with his background and his legal mind made a substantial difference in the discussions we were having.”

Dow put his legal skills to particularly good use as a member of the Emergency Tenants Council (ETC), formed in 1968 in response to a BRA plan to tear down a large swath of the South End between Tremont and Washington streets to build luxury housing. With Dow’s guidance, ETC was able to wrest control of the parcel from the BRA and build Villa Victoria, a low-income housing development for a largely Puerto Rican community that still exists today.

Michael Kane, now the executive director of the National Alliance of HUD Tenants, says Dow played a central role in formulating “the very practical, programmatic solutions that showed other people how you could do things like build racially integrated housing that was also economically diverse and attractive.

“There weren’t too many examples of that around at that time,” adds Kane, who also calls Dow his mentor. “And I think the South End, with Harry’s leadership and others, showed you could do that.”

Soon Dow expanded the reach of his activism, focusing on the needs of the poor, the elderly, and the otherwise underserved. He was elected a board member of the South End Neighborhood Action Program (SENAP), which today offers community development programs such as rental and fuel assistance, family advocacy and counseling, career development and counseling, and an emergency food pantry. (His papers contain reams of notes from monthly SENAP meetings.) He was also instrumental in the 1969 founding of the South End Community Health Center, which today serves as a model for private, community-based health care.

Dow was also still deeply committed to the local Chinese American community. In the early 1970s, Paul M. Yee JD ’74, now a solo practitioner in Boston, was living in the South End while attending Suffolk Law. One day, Dow knocked on Yee’s door, introduced himself, and asked Yee to run for an at-large seat on the South End Project Area Committee. Dow explained that this important

neighborhood committee needed Chinese voices—and by the time Dow walked back out the door, Yee had agreed to run.

“He was just inspiring. I’ve never run for anything in my life, and I wasn’t involved in neighborhood politics, but he just had a very gentle, persuasive way,” Yee recalls, adding with a laugh: “I still scratch my head and say, ‘Well, how did he do it?’”

In his later years, Dow devoted much of his time to board work, serving on the boards of almost a dozen organizations, including the South End Community Health Center, Central Boston Elder Services, United South End Settlements, the Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers, Greater Boston Legal Services, and South Cove Community Health Center, to name just a few.

Paul W. Lee, a partner at Goodwin Procter LLP, served with Dow on the South Cove board. “He was a very thoughtful councilor. He would listen to the discussion at the board level, then formulate his thoughts and conclusions and then speak,” Lee says. “His opinions were so highly respected that when he spoke, everybody listened very closely, and what he recommended based on his knowledge and his years of experience ended up usually being the structure of whatever we were working on.”

Dow never resumed a paid legal career, living on Social Security in a subsidized apartment in the South End. But even as his previous life as an immigration attorney faded into memory, Dow reveled in his new sense of purpose as a community activist.

“I think he really saw the soul of the community,” Fred Dow says. “He connected with so many people.”

And in that regard, he was again emulating the values of his law school alma mater.

“Harry Dow going on to do public service again epitomized the founding values and purpose of Suffolk Law,” says former dean Robert Smith. “I think his story really resonates with what this law school is all about.”

An Enduring Legacy

Tragedically, in 1985, Dow was struck and killed by a truck on Boylston Street in Boston. He was 80 years old. The outpouring of tributes and accolades was so intense that it surprised even some family members,



who were unaware of how much Dow had done for his neighborhood. At Dow's funeral, friend and fellow activist Martin Gopen spoke movingly of Dow's community work. "He did not accept, or find acceptable, inadequate health services, unsatisfactory housing, injustice for the poor, lack of respect or dignity for people, especially senior citizens," Gopen said in his eulogy. "His advocacy went beyond 'what could be' to 'what should be.'"


That same year, Paul Lee and several other area attorneys founded the Asian American Lawyers Association of Massachusetts (AALAM). It was only then, Lee says, that he realized the true significance of Dow's achievements. Fifty-five years after Harry Dow became the first Chinese American admitted to the bar, the AALAM founders could still only find two dozen Asian lawyers practicing in the commonwealth. When the group's members decided to establish a legal assistance fund to provide legal services to the needy, they named the fund after Harry Dow.

For almost 25 years, the Harry H. Dow Memorial Legal Assistance Fund has carried on Dow's legacy. The fund works to strengthen the capacity of the Asian American community through outreach and advocacy work. One of its longest and most substantial programs is its sponsoring of internships at the Asian Outreach Unit of Greater Boston Legal Services. This past summer, the recipients were two Suffolk Law students, third-year student Sean Chen and second-year student Anna Nguyen, both of whom point to Dow as an influence.

"Dow's life and work have inspired me greatly to continue to be a part of this ongoing cause to bring about the social justice and equality to the Asian American community," says Nguyen.

In the future, Dean Aman would like to see Dow's legacy honored at Suffolk Law with a scholarship for students interested in pursuing a career in immigration law. "It would be an extraordinarily important way of honoring his legacy to know that there would be Dow scholars at the school addressing today's immigration challenges," Aman says.

In the meantime, anyone who wants to learn about Harry Dow's remarkable achievements can come to Suffolk Law, and to the archives.

"Life presents itself in many ways," says Fred Dow. "I think my father showed the core of his humanity in responding to life's conditions and situations." 

Paper Trail


Fortunately for posterity's sake, Harry Dow felt his handwriting was "atrocious." He typed all his letters, frequently starting with an apology for using the impersonal machine. As a result, his personal papers provide an unusually meticulous record of his life and career.

Deciding where to house his life's record, however, was not an easy task for his family. The University of California Berkeley, known for its impressive archives on the history of the Asian immigrant experience, had long hoped to acquire the Dow collection. But former dean Robert Smith felt strongly that the papers belonged at Suffolk Law.

At a 2002 Harry H. Dow Memorial Legal Assistance Fund fundraising dinner, Smith approached Fred Dow and his siblings and let the family know Suffolk Law was interested in acquiring the papers. Over the course of several years, he continued to engage them in a conversation about how the school could preserve and promote Harry Dow's legacy. When Dean Alfred Aman came to the law school in 2007, he took over the dialogue.

In the end, the Dow family was persuaded.

"After thinking about it, we felt these papers really belonged in Boston and at Suffolk, because Suffolk opened up the opportunity for my father," says Fred Dow. "Suffolk is going to take care of these papers well—I believe that." **-TG**

 The archives staff—from left, Derrick Hart, Nicole Feeney, and Julia Collins—pose with Harry's sons, Alex Dow and Fred Dow, after transporting the Dow papers to Suffolk Law in December 2007.

