National parks were my family’s door to America. Doubling the entry fees would limit access to immigrants like my father.

by Ruth Tam December 1

When I was 7 years old, my father packed our family into our blue minivan and drove 930 miles from our Illinois home to the Black Hills of South Dakota. From there, we traveled to Mount Rushmore and the Badlands. Then west, to Devil’s Tower in Wyoming.

I remember my 2-year-old brother pulling himself up to meet my face in his travel crib. My twin 5-year-old sisters struggling to retain their toilet training on long hikes. My mother cry-laughing in terror over mules we encountered on the road.

Every year for the next 11 years, my family vacations involved road trips across the United States, hitting national parks, battlefields and historic sites. While my classmates got their hair braided in Cancun and friends bonded at beaches off Lake Michigan, my family hunted for Oregon Trail wagon ruts and traced Lewis and Clark’s expedition trail.

I didn’t know it then, but my father — a Chinese American immigrant — was working toward a goal he set after my siblings and I were born: Drive to all 48 contiguous states.

The people we learned about on the road didn’t look like my family, but my father wanted us to understand the road other Americans traveled before they were considered truly American. He took us to reservations where Indians lost land and livelihood. We paid our respects at plantations and battlefields that saw countless casualties. We visited formerly segregated schools and churches that had been bombed.

These national parks and sites — which would become less accessible if the Trump administration implements a proposal to increase entry fees — did more than history classes ever could: They made us feel American. When we were older and headed west to learn the history of Chinese Americans at Promontory Summit and Angel Island, it was within the context of the larger story of Americans who were abused by this country but rose in spite of adversity.

We reached our 48th state, Washington, right as I was about to leave home for college — our family’s unofficial deadline.

What compelled my father to spend years driving across the country with four young kids? His answer was simple: “I wanted you to know this country. This is your country.”

Born in poverty in Hong Kong shortly after his family escaped Communist China in 1949, my father immigrated to the States in 1968 at age 12. Did he ever feel unwelcome during our domestic travels?

“I probably should have … because I’m Asian American,” he said after a long pause. “But I didn’t feel out of place because I looked at the American flag and thought it was my flag, too. Whether they look at me as American or not, I didn’t care. I’m just as American as anybody else.”
His patriotism propelled him, but the National Park Service’s low cost of entry made it possible for my frugal father to show us our country on his minister’s salary. When we first started traveling two decades ago, most national parks were free or charged a fee of $5 or $10 for our family of six to enter in one car.

Next year, a proposal to increase entry fees for certain national parks could change the way families like ours travel. The Park Service plan would raise the price to visit 17 popular parks during their peak seasons to $70 per car, $50 per motorcycle and $30 per bicycle or person on foot.

Joshua Tree Park, which saw 2.5 million visitors in 2016 — making it one of the most popular parks in the country — would see its fee for cars grow 180 percent, from $25.

The Park Service says that the fee increase will “protect and preserve” the parks for future generations — a mission my family certainly supports — and yet the proposal, which has a public comment period that closes Dec. 22, seems to undercut the Park Service’s recent push to diversify visitorship.

In 2013, the agency created the Office of Relevancy, Diversity, and Inclusion to address the comparatively low number of park visitors of color. Because while the parks have never been more popular (recreational visits to Park Service sites surpassed 330 million in its centennial in 2016), visitors are 78 percent white. African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans and American Indians make up 20 percent of park visitors despite being about 40 percent of the national population.

In the most recent report published by the Park Service, the highest-ranking response for why people didn’t visit national park sites more often was that hotel and food costs were too high. Entrance fee prices were seventh on a list of 13 other reasons.

Many of the parks considered for fee increases have already seen steady price hikes in recent years. If the Park Service raises the cost of entry for the most popular ones when costs are already a deterrent, the doorway may narrow for families like mine, who visited not just for the views but for a greater understanding of our mixed cultural identity.

For my immigrant father, who learned English on Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land,” the fee hike, which he calls “prohibitive,” is disheartening.

“Tax it some other way,” he, a lifelong conservative, offered. “Let it be free to all, whether you are rich or poor.”

Interestingly, the most frequented national park by far is not affected by the Park Service’s proposal. Great Smoky Mountains National Park doesn’t charge any fees, thanks to the conditions of its land sale in the 1930s. And it saw 11.3 million recreational visitors last year — well over twice as many visitors as the second most popular park, the Grand Canyon.

Is it any wonder that the most popular national park is free of charge?