

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHINESE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Mabel L. Lew  
 Chinese Name: 林 瑞 愛  
 Date of Interview: 10/18/79, 10/24/79  
 Interviewer: Suellen Cheng  
 Others Present: None  
 Language: English  
 Summarizer: Stella Ling

Interview Number: 22  
 Number of Tapes: 2  
 Length: 1 Hour & 6 Minutes

Contents

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary	Tape: <u>1</u> Side <u>A</u>
1	019-025 026-038	Introduction. Mabel L. Lew's (MLL) parents were both born in the United States. MLL's paternal grandparents were from Sun Wei province in Canton, China. MLL does not know about her maternal grandparents.	
2	039-042 043-046 047-057 058-063 064-068	MLL's parents were both born in the 1800's. MLL's mother died when she was 44 years old. MLL's father was an editor, reporter, and translator. He also did a lot of things for the community. MLL's mother did not have to work since MLL's husband was such a good provider. MLL's father would turn his whole paycheck over to his wife who would then give him an allowance for the month. MLL claims that not many old-fashioned families will do it. In a typical Chinese household, the husband will keep all the money and the wife will ask for money when she needs it. MLL's father and mother were so Americanized that they lived like an American couple. MLL's mother was like a millionaire's wife because she had beautiful clothes and other things. MLL was born in the 1900's. She was born on Washington Street in San Francisco.	
3	069-074 075-081 082-093	MLL's father spoke English all the time whereas her mother spoke Chinese. MLL attended Chinese school after American school. That is how she learned both English and Chinese. MLL cannot write many Chinese characters. MLL learned Chinese in an Episcopalian Church. The teacher was from China. MLL attended Chinese school for five or six years. There were about thirty students in the school. MLL spoke both Chinese and English to her siblings. MLL has found sisters and two brothers. MLL's mother was very busy. MLL was the eldest child. MLL's mother was 14 years old when she got married and then 17 when MLL was born.	

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	094-100	MLL was married when she was about 16 years old. She was married in San Antonio, Texas. She lived there for twenty years. She was also married for twenty years.
	101-106	MLL came to Los Angeles in 1939 to live permanently. Before that she used to travel back and forth between Texas and California.
4	107-114	MLL's present residence is her fifth house. MLL lived in Culver City, Mar Vista, and then Inglewood.
	115-132	MLL met her present husband when she got lost looking for a voice school in Beverly Hills. MLL's husband's boss found MLL at a market and asked her if she needed help. He told her that the place she was looking for was only a block away from his house. MLL walked home with him. He then called his sister, Peggy, and told her to come and meet MLL.
	133-146	The man then asked MLL in and they started conversing. He tried to get MLL interested in his cook who was on his day off. MLL was interested in the music the whole time, and not in the cook. MLL and the man exchanged phone numbers and that is how she first conversed and got acquainted with her husband.
5	147-153	At first, MLL did not want to see him. He then told MLL that he could get her a job if she was not satisfied with her own job. She told him that she was very satisfied with her job but that her friends were looking for jobs. They were refugees from the war in China.
	154-157	He then told MLL that he had to meet these friends of hers before he helped them find jobs.
	158-163	MLL was a housekeeper. She did domestic work for an American family. The home belonged to a Christian Scientist who did not believe in working seven days a week. So MLL was fortunate since she only had to work five days a week and had Saturdays and Sundays off.
	164-167	The family was very nice to MLL. MLL was their cook, housekeeper, as well as their answering service since they had their real estate office in their home.
	168-170	MLL worked there for almost a year. She then met her husband.
	171-172	MLL's husband was from China.
	173-175	MLL needed to have domestic work so that she could have free room and board in addition to her salary.
	176-185	MLL enjoyed her job. She pretended that she was in her own home. She received \$40 a month. That was a lot of money to her in those days.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
6	186-203	When MLL met her husband he suggested that the two of them team up and in case she got sick, he could still cover for her. MLL found that to be a good idea and the two of them teamed up. He was the cook and she was the maid. They lived together for over a year in another household. They worked for a movie star household. MLL was a nursemaid. She also did the laundry and cooked a special diet for the baby because she had stomach trouble.
	204-205	MLL worked for Brenda Marshall and William Holden. They worked there for almost a year.
	206-213	After that year, they worked for another household together. They worked for the wealthy family of a financier. They had two children. They had a two-story home. They entertained all the time. That was the hardest work MLL did in her entire life. They worked there for about a year.
	214-225	After that, they had a small restaurant business of their own. It was a chop suey cafe. They bought the place on Western and Vernon Street. The chop suey place was originally owned by some Japanese but they got rounded up and placed in a concentration camp. At that time all the Japanese were trying to sell their businesses.
	226-231	MLL and her husband saw ads in the paper and went to look around. They found this place with living quarters and liked it. If they did not have a business at least they still had a place to live. They did not have to rent an apartment.
7	232-234	The business was terrific. The customers were white Americans since the store was in a white neighborhood.
	235-247	MLL's husband cooked American food. He did not know how to cook Chinese food. The Japanese owner taught him how to cook chop suey, fried shrimp, roast pork, and everything else on the menu. So the restaurant did not serve American food, just all kinds of Chinese dishes. The prices were very cheap.
	248-255	The Japanese owner even had a Japanese college graduate working for him as a waiter. He told MLL that he got very good tips. MLL decided that if he could do that, then so could she. So she was very courteous to the customers and she got good tips too.
	256-260	They had a good business. MLL felt that was better than working for other people.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
7	261-268	They were opened six days a week. Monday was their day off. At first they just had a small restaurant and then later they also had a take-out counter.
	269-275	They had that business during the war time. People had money during World War II. People were doing defense work and they got too tired to go home and cook so they went out to eat.
8	276-281	The restaurant was opened from four o'clock until two o'clock. They did not serve lunch.
	282-288	It used to be called the Sun Cafe. One of the customers suggested that they could improve their business by changing the name of the restaurant to a Chinese name. So MLL's husband changed the name to Fong's Chop Suey. Fong was his name.
	289-292	They lived in back of the restaurant. There were two bedrooms which the Japanese built. It was made out of plywood. There was even a Japanese bathtub.
	293-302	MLL's husband was the cook. MLL was the waitress. She took care of the dining room all by herself. She cleaned the booths and set the tables while her husband took care of the kitchen. All they needed was a part time dishwasher. They hired a white American boy to do the dishes.
	303-311	MLL's husband was classified as A-1 during the war but he did not want to go to war. The newspaper said that they had to either "fight or produce" so he decided to produce and went to work for the defense plant.
	312-318	They closed up their cafe every day except for Saturdays and Sundays. But then they wanted him to work on Saturdays as well and that became too much work for him.
319-327	They closed the restaurant at two o'clock but then they had to spend about two more hours cleaning up the place.	
9	328-339	MLL's husband worked as a riveter. He placed rivets in the bomber door in order to bomb the enemies.
	340-356	When they overproduced, they let the men go and MLL's husband was let go too. At that time they rented out the cafe to an older man for a year. Since he was older, he did not have to go to war, but his waiters were young and did go to war. The restaurant was rented out to a variety of people.
	357-362	MLL and her husband were guaranteed the master lease of the cafe for twenty years.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
9	363-371	MLL worked as a salesperson and a cashier at a liquor store. She worked part time.
	372-384	Then MLL and her husband found another restaurant in Culver City. It was an American restaurant. It was a good restaurant but they were losing money every month. The owner was drafted and the wife could not run the restaurant by herself so she hired a cook. Since she was in the red all the time she wanted to sell the restaurant.
10	385-391	So MLL and her husband bought the restaurant for around \$4500. That was cheap for that kind of business. The first restaurant cost \$1000.
	392-409	MLL does not remember how much money they made. She does remember depositing \$100 every week into the bank. They purchased all the groceries at Chinatown. MLL's husband went to Chinatown every week to get the supplies.
	410-411	MLL would accompany her husband to Chinatown occasionally.
	412-423	They had a much better business at the American restaurant in Culver City. They had seven white American girls working for them over there. They had the restaurant for twenty-five years until they retired. They have retired for ten years now.
	424-441	When MLL was working in the liquor store her boss left her a telephone number. Some people wanted MLL to participate in a pageant. Her boss kindly offered to close the liquor store down for two days in order to chauffeur her if she wanted to go.
	442-453	Her boss wanted to chauffeur her so that he would also have a chance to see Madame Chiang Kai-shek. Madame Chiang came to the United States to make a long speech at the Hollywood Bowl.
11	454-469	They offered MLL \$15 a day to work at the pageant. MLL donated the \$15 to the Chinese Relief Fund. MLL went one day for rehearsals and another day to be in a professional play. MLL was an extra. There were about one thousand people on stage for that play.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

## Contents (cont'd)

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	001-019	The play was produced by the Chinese Screen Extras Guild. They did not do any talking.
	020-029	A young, good-looking man came and talked to MLL and asked her if she wanted to work in pictures. MLL did not know the intentions of this man. He came back and gave her a telephone number to call when she got home.
	030-032	MLL called the next day but never found out who answered the phone. MLL assumes that it was a casting officer.
2	033-035	MLL went to work on location in Calabasas.
	036-047	MLL rode a bus to Chinatown that morning at seven o'clock. She went to the Asiatic Company that was owned by Tom Gubbins at that time. He was an Eurasian casting agent for Chinese. At that time he was not working. The agent was a Chinese woman by the name of Bessie Loo.
	048-053	That was during the war and they hired Chinese extras by the hundreds. They were used in the background scene.
	054-058	The first movie MLL worked in was "Dragon Seed" by Pearl Buck. Pearl Buck was a missionary in China. MLL met her on the set. MLL did not talk to her, but she knew who she was.
	059-065	MLL did not get very much pay in those days. She got around \$15 a day. As she went along, they increased her salary up to \$35. By the time she was making \$35 she could not work anymore because she had a stroke. MLL worked in pictures for thirty years.
	066-074	Sometimes MLL was selected to do a pantomime with the stars. The stars would talk to her and she would just gesture. She would get more money for these bigger roles. At one time MLL got a screaming role and she received \$100 a day for that.
3	075-077	When MLL was working for "Dragon Seed," she worked every day for six months as an extra. That was good money.
	078-082	When MLL worked on location, she got two free meals a day. It was good food.
	083-088	MLL went into the movie business because she enjoyed entertaining people. The money was secondary.
	089-100	MLL does not know if the other Chinese extras were satisfied with their pay. Most of them were satisfied. MLL was friends at the studios with the other extras but they were actually competitors. MLL did not have any personal friends.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	101-108	One time, around seven women of MLL's age and size were interviewed for a part and the director picked MLL. All the other women got mad at her and were very rude to her.
	109-119	All the directors and producers were very nice to MLL. They treated her as a person because they thought she was adorable. MLL is very congenial and she mixes well with others.
	120-123	MLL does not know whether the other Chinese actors were treated well or not.
	124-131	MLL did not care if she did not become a star. To be a star, one had to memorize lines. MLL did not have to memorize lines, she just went out there and had a good time. MLL felt as if she was going on a picnic and getting paid for it.
	132-150	When MLL was not working in the movies, she worked as a waitress and a cashier at their restaurant. She was also a part time typist for the defense plant. While MLL was typing the menus at the restaurant, a man commented on what a fast typist she was and how he could use a typist. She told him she would work for him if she could bring the work home. She was just kidding around and she actually got the job. He said that he had three typists but that they would just sit around and talk.
5	151-157	MLL always spoke English in the restaurant. Her husband told her that the American customers would not like it if they spoke Chinese because they would not be able to understand and think that they were talking about them.
	158-166	MLL's children from her first marriage were taken care of by MLL's sisters. They knew that MLL could not take care of her own children since she had to find a job. MLL would pay them a small fee for taking care of her children.
	167-169	MLL had her two younger children by her second marriage when she was in her forties.
	170-173	MLL quit working for a few years in order to take care of the children while they were still young. They built a home in Culver City.
	174-177	MLL speaks English to her children. Her children can understand Chinese but they cannot speak. They used to laugh when MLL tried to teach them Chinese. They thought that Chinese was a funny language.

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Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
	178-186	MLL never sent her children to Chinese school. Chinatown was too far away from their home. In MLL's days, she lived in the heart of San Francisco Chinatown and would just walk to school.
6	187-191	MLL's daughter worked as a waitress at their restaurant when she was a teenager. She got a lot of tips.
	192-204	They bought their first house in Culver City. MLL's husband took a boy in and fed him. He did not have any money to pay for the food. MLL's husband thus offered him a job as a dishwasher. He then stayed in the back of their restaurant and also got a small salary.
	205-206	At that time he was a young boy in his twenties. He is married now.
	207-209	There were only one or two Chinese families in Culver City at that time. MLL did not know them personally but she knew who they were. They owned the Shanghai Cafe in Culver City.
	210-213	MLL's family owned their cafe just as long as the other Chinese family. They had their restaurant for twenty years. They also owned the building which they just sold a couple of years ago.
	214-223	When MLL and her husband retired, they sold everything they had. They were too old to handle all their properties. They sold the building to a couple of doctors on an installment plan. They will be paying until a few years from the time the interview was conducted.
	224-239	MLL liked to have a lot of friends but she was busy from morning until night. When they did have some extra time, they would go to the movies or to see a show. They did not have time for friends at all. They did not have any Chinese friends at all. They only had American friends.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

1	013-019	MLL was a housekeeper, cook, and answering service. She was an answering service because the woman had her real estate office in her home. The house was a two-story mansion. They had one of the two bedrooms as an office.
	020-021	They also hired a man to come in and work as a bookkeeper.



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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
	021-023	MLL answered all the phones when they went out to solicit real estate. MLL also cooked their meals for them.
	024-027	MLL worked from eight in the morning to eight at night. She had own time after eight at night. She could go out if she wanted to but she had to return at midnight.
	028-035	MLL ate in the kitchen while they ate in the dining room. She had to serve the meals as well as wash the dishes. There were not many dishes since there were only two of them. MLL did not want to sit with them during the meals and listen to their conversation. She also felt that it was not right.
2	036-042	MLL made forty dollars a month including room and board. She also had a uniform. She had Saturdays and Sundays off. She used to visit her sister during the weekends and stay over there in order to be with her children.
	043-044	MLL's sisters took care of her three children for her.
	045-049	MLL spent about \$5 a week to go to the show to have a good time as well as to visit her relatives. She was able to save \$20 a month.
	050-056	MLL's ex-husband sent her \$15 a month to help support each of their children. That is all she got. She did not get any alimony, just an allowance for the children. In Texas, they did not give alimony or property settlements. Everything belonged to the husband during a divorce.
	057-064	MLL's second husband was a cook and MLL worked as a babysitter and cook for the baby.
	065-067	MLL worked from eight to eight at this second place too.
3	068-073	MLL was just responsible for the baby's clothing, food, and well being.
	074-078	The baby did not eat with her mother. MLL ate with Mr. Lew and the baby. MLL had to cook for the baby. She had an upset stomach, so MLL had to broil all her meat for her.
	079-090	MLL and her husband made about \$125 a month for working there. MLL's son from MLL's first marriage was also living with them at that time. He was ten years old. They all shared a garage apartment. They did not live in the house. The house was very small. They had acres of land and many walnut trees. The baby got an upset stomach by eating too many walnuts. MLL had to watch the baby like a hawk to make sure that she did not eat walnuts.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
	091-099	MLL's older two children were living with MLL's sisters. MLL would send her sisters the check that her first husband would send her. MLL probably got \$35 a month for those two children.
	100-116	MLL and her first husband did not get along during the last ten years of their marriage. MLL stayed with him for their children's sake. Her husband would go out at night three days a week until two o'clock in the morning. When MLL asked him where he went he told her that he went to the movies with his sister. MLL said that she wanted to go to the movies too but he claimed that she had to stay at home to take care of the children. MLL finally decided that she had her own life to live and he had his own life to live.
4	117-124	MLL's first husband did not want her to ask so many questions. So MLL kept silent and tolerated his behavior for a long time. MLL pretended she was a woman from China since the women from China always tolerated their husbands.
	125-159	MLL's first husband seemed to be dissatisfied with MLL. Everything she did was wrong in his eyes. She wanted to participate in charity drives and he got mad at her for doing that. MLL wanted to help the Chinese refugees in China and her husband felt that everyone should help themselves. MLL could not help but do charity work because she knew that the people in China were starving. MLL went to the Chinese grocery store and got Chinese food donations. She then brought the ingredients to some Chinese cooks that cooked the food for free. MLL rounded up some Chinese girls to help MLL serve the dinner at the YMCA. They also provided entertainment. MLL sang songs for free although they offered to pay her. People were eager to hear her sing and they sold 2000 tickets at 50 cents a piece.
5	160-167	MLL's first husband did not like anything she did. He did not tell her what he did and she did not tell him what she did. They led separate lives.
	168-175	MLL raised \$500 to make a down payment on her house. MLL's first husband did not pay the taxes on the house and gave the house back to the government.
	176-183	MLL's husband refused to pay the taxes on the house before the deadline. He told MLL that if she wanted the house under her own name she should give them \$300 to pay for the taxes. MLL said that she did not want

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
5	176-183	the house for herself. She wanted him to pay the taxes because it was their house, not her own. MLL's husband promised to take care of the taxes and the installment plan but he did not.
6	184-194	MLL had three husband dollars but she would not give it to her husband or to the government. She was quite mad. She decided to leave him and go to San Francisco.
	195-205	MLL's oldest daughter was over sixteen and she stayed to help her father at the grocery store after school and on the weekends. MLL took the younger children with her to San Francisco.
	206-215	When MLL returned to Texas to pick up her remaining things, her daughter wanted to go with her. Her daughter did not want to stay in Texas with her father. MLL wanted to leave at least one of the children with him to help him out.
	216-225	MLL's other daughter was staying with MLL's sister. She did not have any children of her own. Every year she told MLL that she wanted to keep her for another year. MLL's sister wanted to adopt her but MLL refused since she had both a living mother and father.
7	226-231	MLL's mother had already passed away when MLL filed for divorce. She died at the age of 44. MLL's father did not say much about the divorce.
	232-235	MLL did not tell her friends that she was getting a divorce. She told her friends that she was coming to California to visit her relatives.
	236-244	MLL did not tell her friends about the divorce because they were very old-fashioned and did not believe a woman should divorce her husband. Later on, after MLL stayed in California for so long, she was forced to tell her friends.
	245-248	MLL did not want any money or property settlement. She was so mad that all she wanted was her freedom. Nevertheless the court gave her an allowance for her children.
	249-258	MLL knew of no Chinese women in her time that wanted to divorce her husband. MLL's own mother told her about the bad "freedom girls" and those thoughts stayed in MLL's mind.
	259-265	MLL felt that she tried to be true to her husband but he was not true to her. She did not know what he was doing out so late at night. He could have been going to see his girlfriend or something. MLL did not hire a detective since she did not have that kind of money.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
7	266-268	MLL does not know if other Chinese women hired detectives to follow their husbands. MLL did not even know of any woman that divorced her husband aside from herself.
	269-276	All the other Chinese men in Texas were married to women from China. MLL was the only one who was AMERICAN born and married to a man from China. MLL's husband tried to be AMERICANIZED but he was not. MLL's own father was good to his wife as long as she lived.
8	277-289	MLL did not pay attention to the hardships encountered by working in the movie studios. She did it for the fun of it. They were making good money in the cafe so MLL did not need the job. MLL worked in the studios because she enjoyed it.
	290-309	MLL always wanted to say something in the pictures. Only one time she was asked to scream and holler. At first MLL did not scream loud enough and they asked someone else to scream. MLL told them that she would scream louder if they wanted her to. She then screamed so loud that someone heard her a block away.
	310-316	MLL asked her agent for a talking part. Her agent was a Chinese woman.
	317-321	MLL joined the Screen Extras Guild a few months after she started working as an extra.
	322-334	MLL's first picture was "Dragon Seed." It was entirely on location. It lasted for six months. The catering truck would come out and serve them meals. MLL had the most delicious food from the truck. It was like a picnic. MLL did not consider it as work as all.
	9	335-371
372-395		Working as an extra brought in some money but not a lot. They did not need that money to help support the family since there was enough income from the restaurant business.
10	396-416	MLL and her husband have a joint account. Every time MLL saved up \$1000 she would put a down payment for a house. She would keep the house for a few years and then sell it again for \$5000.
	417-427	MLL realized that she could not earn a few thousand dollars by putting a thousand dollars in the bank for a few years. So she made down payments for seven different houses.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	011-013	That was a long time ago when they only had to pay a thousand dollars for a down payment of a house.
	014-018	MLL got her first house for a thousand dollars down during the war. MLL bought the house on Jefferson Boulevard in Los Angeles.
	019-029	MLL never encountered housing discrimination. They were the only Chinese family living in a Caucasian neighborhood. Her neighbors came and told her that they were glad that she moved in because her garden was so beautiful. The yard was run down before they moved in. MLL made friends with all her neighbors.
	030-038	MLL never encountered any difficulties when buying property. MLL did telephone a real estate agency once and they told her that the house she was interested in was not for Orientals. MLL did not care because she was just speculating at that time.
2	039-042	Most of MLL's friends are Caucasians. she was well accepted and was always treated as a person and never as someone of an inferior race.
	043-050	MLL's family is in an American neighborhood and there were no Chinese around. None of her Chinese friends would come to visit her.
	051-056	MLL's family goes to Chinatown to shop and to buy groceries. MLL's two younger children take part in Chinese New Years sometimes. Bessie Loo called them up in order to get them to participate in the New Years program at Chinatown.
	057-061	MLL's son also worked in the movies but he did not care for it. He was in the movies when he was four years old. MLL's daughter was also in the movies. The three of them worked together in one set.
	062-077	MLL sang for the American Legions and sang patriotic songs first in English and then in Chinese. The consulate from China was there in Houston, Texas. Everyone stood up when she sang "America." MLL and her guitar accompaniment were both paid.
3	078-084	[MLL signs "My Country 'Tis of Thee" in Cantonese.]
	085-090	MLL does not know who translated the song into Cantonese.
	091-099	[MLL sings a Cantonese translation of a religious song called "Jesus Always Remembers Me."]
	100-108	[MLL sings a Cantonese translation of a religious song called "I Like to be Close to Jesus."]

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	109-114	MLL learned these songs at a Presbyterian Church when she was a young girl. MLL's family used to attend the church services every Sunday.
	115-123	MLL met her first husband through the Church. MLL's ex-husband's relatives were members of the same Church. One of his relatives was a matchmaker. He kept telling MLL's mother that she could marry one of her daughters off to a good family. MLL was married to a family, not to a husband.
	124-134	MLL's mother never worshipped ancestors. She was very modern. She worshipped God. MLL's father did not go to Church. He does not believe in God. He believes that if you are good then your conscience is God.
	135-144	MLL was brought up in a Chinese way although her father was very American in his ways. MLL's aunts would call her father "fan guey lo" (番鬼佬) which means that he is American.
5	145-158	MLL's family mixed with Chinese people while they were living in San Francisco Chinatown. The Chinese who were living in Chinatown at that time were old-fashioned Chinese. They used to wear Chinese clothes on New Years. They would celebrate Chinese New Years the way people did in China.
	159-160	MLL went to Chinese school for about seven years. She does not remember anything she learned because she did not keep it up.
	161-165	MLL attended Chinese school after regular school. It was a private school at a church.
	166-173	All MLL's brothers and sisters went to Chinese school. MLL was too young to like or dislike attending Chinese school. She would do whatever her mother said without questioning her. MLL was a very obedient daughter.
	174-176	MLL's mother told her to get married and she did. She did not know why she got married to a strange man from Texas.
177-183	None of MLL's brothers or sisters had arranged marriages. MLL would write letters home telling her mother that she was not "sitting pretty" as her mother thought she was. Instead, she was a maid in the household. Thus all her brothers and sisters knew that she married the wrong man and was unhappy.	

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
6	184-190	All MLL's siblings did not get married until they were thirty years old. MLL married at too young an age. She was only sixteen. She was going to school until the day she was married.

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