

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHINESE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Henry Lowe
 Chinese Name: 劉觀華
 Date of Interview: 12/4&18/79
 Interviewer: Suellen Cheng
 Others Present: _____
 Language: English
 Summarizer: Rodney H. Chow

Interview Number: 53
 Number of Tapes: 3
 Length: 2 Hours & 15 Minutes

Contents

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary	Tape No.:	Side
			<u>1</u>	<u>A</u>
1	000-009	My father came from Chung San (中山). My mother was born in California.		
	010-015	My father came about 1885. My father came to seek livelihood.		
	016-022	My grandfather was very poor. He had a small piece of land to grow vegetables to support ten children.		
	023-027	All my father's brothers except one didn't come. Only one or two of my mother's brothers and sisters visited China, the rest never saw China.		
		All my mother's brothers and sisters were born in California, in Mendocino County.		
2	028-037	My maternal grandfather was Lee Lai Ming. He was born in Chung San. His family village was Nam Long. My maternal grandmother was also from Nam Long.		
	038-043	My father was a dry goods merchant and also operated a garment factory in San Francisco, then Oakland, Taft, and San Diego.		
	044-054	First it was a garment factory, then it was a dry goods store. Their retail business got larger and the garment factory got smaller.		
	055-058	It was a "mama papa" business. Store front was for retail and sewing was in back and we lived upstairs. We hired a few people, mostly men.		
3	059-070	We helped my brother sew the buttons and I folded the clothes. Later on when we were older, we waited on the customers.		
	071-072	The customers were mostly Americans. Our last store in San Diego was downtown, next to Woolworth Department Store. We owned the building on Fifth Street, called		

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	071-072	the San Diego. We owned a one-third interest. In San Diego it was a dry goods store.
	073-082	There was the labor supply and getting the orders. In San Diego we did not have the wholesalers like in San Francisco and Los Angeles. That is why we went to dry goods and away from garment factory.
	083-088	The Los Angeles garment factory (in general) expanded in the last twenty years because it had the wholesalers. That is why it was not practical in San Diego-- no wholesalers. So we went into dry goods.
	089-102	Dry good stores have always been our family business. Those who came later could not compete with stores like Sears so they went into the grocery business. Now their children with some education have taken over and expanded into supermarkets.
4	103-126	My father sold mainly lady garments. He carried some men clothese like shirts, overalls. We did not handle can goods.
	127-139	Most Chinese dry goods stores were small. My maternal uncle was in the dry good business all his life. He was originally in Oakland, then Fresno and Hanford. My uncle's daughter now lives in Hanford. His son was a former mayor of Hanford. His name is Stan Hom.
5	140-154	My father came from China -- went directly to Sonora where he had a dry good store. The people were very nice to Chinese (the older people), but the younger American boys.... One day, they took my uncle by his queue and swung him around. But fortunately my fifth uncle, his older brother, rescued him. But he never attended school again. But in Oakland he attended the Protestant Church school and learned his English there.
	155-172	He had no formal school education. He finally had to start a business, a large department store called Oakland Emporium. Subsequently, the store changed management after he had an accident and almost lost his life.
	173-174	Then later on as times got bad, the business was liquidated.
	175-180	On my mother's side, she had seven sisters and three brothers and Uncle Harry Lee. He was born here, never been to China. He told me he didn't learn the ABC's until he was twenty years old. In those days, they felt the Chinese was more important than English. Besides, some of them had difficulty getting to school. My uncle learned very quickly. If he had a formal education,

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
5	175-180	he would have gone very far. But despite that, he acted as an interpreter in the courts and did a lot of work among his people and promoted their welfare and was very well liked.
6	181-195	Subsequently he went into the herb business in Hanford and grocery business and bought a lot of property when property was cheap.
	196-205	I was born in Fresno County in January, 1904, and lived in California all my life. First in Hanford. After the San Francisco earthquake our folks moved to Oakland where I started grammar school -- Lincoln School
	206-215	Then I went to Taft and finished grammar school in 1915. Then I went to San Diego and entered high school there. I dropped out of high school to work in the bank. Southern Trust and Commerce Bank which is now part of Bank of America. My brother came into the bank after me. My brother was the manager of the bank in Calexico. My cousin was the assistant manager of Market Street Bank of San Diego.
7	216-233	I was in the credit department. In those days \$252 a month was considered good wages but in order to get ahead, we started looking for other things to get into business for ourselves. I did some interpreting in the immigration office and acted as an agent for the Dollar Steamship line.
	234-243	Then I was a clerk in the District Court in Los Angeles, being the first Chinese serving in that court. Then I started the Chinese Travel Service Company which I knew would be helpful to the Chinese.
	244-254	After the war, I felt that people would be traveling to China and felt it was a good service. Stayed in that business for 33 years. Started in 1946. Now sold the business and retired.
	255-272	I came to Los Angeles in 1937 by myself and worked as an interpreter in the immigration service. In those days the ship would bring in the new immigrants. The immigrant was not allowed to land until they have given their story to prove their citizenship and right to come here or right to come here as an alien.
8	273-303	It was a long process. Sometimes they would have to wait two or three months. They were held at the retention station at the harbor at San Pedro. In San Francisco at Angel Island.

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
8	304-323	<p>I sat in a board of inquiry. And the immigration inspector would ask a question then the secretary would take notes and I acted as an interpreter. There were three of us.</p> <p>We were (interpreters) called into court to interpret people when they were arrested -- particularly the Chinese who came in illegally through Mexico.</p>
9	324-338	<p>In the old days the Chinese were the most arrested for illegal entry and they were called contrabands. They were smuggled in mostly by the Americans and by Chinese. But some just walked across the line. But there was a time when the Chinese were driven out by Mexicans to America. They were in business in Mexico. Their property was taken away from them by the Mexicans because the Chinese were doing so well. The only way the Mexicans could get rid of the Chinese was to establish some harsh laws from which the Chinese had a hard time to deliver. So when they had to leave, they just came over to the United States and walked across the line and hailed the immigration office to "come and get me."</p>
	339-366	<p>By doing that the United States would ship them back to China without cost. There was a provision in the law that said they must be deported back to the country where they originally came. The Chinese were called "free trippers." A lot of them would send their money back to Hong Kong then walk across the line and let the immigration officer arrest them.</p>
	367-375	<p>Then they would get a free trip back to Hong Kong. There were two to three hundred per month. They were deportees, in other words, they admitted to being here illegally and were willing to go back to China. They spent a few weeks in the county jail and the United States would put them on the first boat back to China. Every Monday there would be about fifty of them standing in line and I would ask them their names. They all pleaded guilty.</p>
10	376-402	<p>I also interpreted for Chinese who wanted to leave the country and wanted a permit to come back. Even citizens used to have a Form 530. Even though I was born here, if I wanted to go to Mexico, I would need that form in order to get back in.</p>

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
10	403-409	I worked off and on as an interpreter for four to five years. Sometimes I moonlight or do piece work. I did court work-- and was an insurance agent and did income tax.
	410-430	My customers were anybody, mostly Chinese. I worked first in 1942 as a clerk in the court. I came out of Olive View Sanitarium in 1941. I was there 37 months, then started the Chinatown Service in 1946. As a clerk in the court, I did various clerical work; then I was in charge of the passport division.
	431-446	Before they had the Department of State, I handled all the passport applications and the passports in those days were issued in Washington D. C. I was the first Chinese hired as a clerk in the mainland. The first was in Honolulu.
11	447-460	The pay was \$350 a month in 1936. I got paid \$8.00 a day. Maybe \$10 a day when I went out of town, then I would have expenses.
	461-480	I lived near U.S.C. campus. I had a room in Willard Hall. I didn't go to school there, just lived with some of the students.

END OF SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

1	000-012	My wife's aunt used to be a Chinese Consulate. My father was matched with my mother. I associated half and half with Chinese and Americans. I felt more Chinese than American -- I always say, "Don't be ashamed to be Chinese."
2	013-035	There are those that live away from the Chinese community and learned English and did not speak Chinese. They eventually regretted this. We used to go to Chinese school after American school. I went to Chinese school about four to five years.
	036-050	In school we assimilated with the non-Chinese but we really didn't participate in their activities, that is, proms.
	051-060	I happened to live in a small town and was the only Chinese student in Taft. I mixed with all the non-Chinese. The Catholics treated me mass and the Jewish kid treated me to his temple.

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	061-074	My brothers and sisters all speak Chinese. Only my oldest daughter can speak good Chinese. The other children can understand, but can't speak Chinese.
	075-088	My family did observe the Chinese holidays. New Years, May Festival (五月節). On New Years we dressed up and when people came, we addressed them as bok (伯) and got lay-si (lucky money). We had the moon cakes. When you finished the year you fill up the rice bin.
	089-104	You are not suppose to say anything bad on New Years, etc.
4	105-107	My family did not worship ancestors but my grandmother did. She had an altar in her home. And all the Chinese daughters knelt. One day my grandmother said to my aunt that she wanted to be a Christian. So my aunt said, "Why don't you wait one year." After one year she said, "Yes, I want to give up all these customs and become a Christian." So she was baptized. You see all her grandchildren were active in the mission which was close by. Later she told her children that she didn't want a Chinese funeral but a Christian one. She remained a Christian all her life. After she became a Christian she never criticized anyone for dancing anymore. In fact she encouraged my uncles to go out and have fun.
5	108-147	My family was very typical Chinese.
	148-156	I never disagreed with my family about being Chinese.
END OF TAPE 1		

TAPE 2 SIDE A

1	000-024	I feel more Chinese. I never felt sorry about being Chinese. I went to Chinese school about four years. We were reluctant. We played most of the time. My brothers went. But my sisters didn't go because they didn't care for it. The Chinese school had only one or two girls. My parents did not push them. They were more interested in pushing the boys. This was very typical. All the girls attended public school. When the members of our family got sick -- up to 1920, there were more herb doctors. After that the American medicine was more known to them, so more Chinese used the American medicine.
	025-055	In San Diego there were no professional herbists, just amateurs.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	056-078	I ate special foods for tonics, boa. The old folks went to the Chinese operas. I didn't care for it. I enjoy American entertainment.
	079-083	In Taft, I would go with all the Occidental kids -- there were no Chinese environment. There were less than one hundred Chinese in Taft. My father had the only dry good store. There was gambling, lotteries, that were sold to the Americans.
4	084-108	In San Diego there were more stores but most Chinese were wage earners in Chinese restaurants and laundries. The lottery was a main business. The grocery was a secondary business. They would have the grocery in front and sell lotteries in the back.
	109-127	The Chinese lottery is not much different from American lottery. The Americans call it Keno and replaced the Chinese words with numbers. Most of the lottery customers were Americans. There were a lot of Chinese too.
5	128-150	They had lottery up to 1940 in Los Angeles. Then it died out because the grocery and laundry business grew.
	151-168	The Chinese get more involved in American activities nowadays.
	169-174	I do not have anymore relatives in China. I did write to some relatives when they were around. We have some first cousins and I have never seen the other generations. Sometimes we do get a letter asking for money.
6	175-185	In a few weeks I'll have to send some money back to China. Because when my uncle died, he instructed in his will that part of his money be sent back to China every New Years.
	186-195	My father sent money to China. My father would send the money to two or three stores in San Francisco. They in turn sent the money to China. These stores were operated by Chung San (中山) people, the Leung Doo people.
	196-225	One of the stores is Sun Loy, the other Ging Loy. They charge a service fee -- for \$20, they would charge \$2.
7	226-234	These stores were like a money exchange. Each year we would send about \$100 to China.
	235-249	We joined the family association and district association, Yong Woh Association. I belong to Leung Kwong Association. In the early days the dues were \$10 a year. Just the head of the family paid but when the boy becomes of age, then he joins and pays a separate fee.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
7	250-266	Primarily social activities, now they have picnics and about four banquets per year so that the younger generation would know what and why about the association.
	267-275	In the 1930's the activities did not have picnics. Because there was not a big enough group. I also belong to the Chinese American Citizen Alliance. I have been a member for sixty years. This organization has a newspaper called the Chinese Times.
8	276-301	It came out in 1923. It was published in Chinese. It had general news about immigration laws, etc.
	302-315	The objective and purpose of CACA is still about the same. Traditions changed. CACA was the first to have conventions and CACA was the first to have picnics. Then CACA was the first to have beauty contests. Now it is copied by the others.
9	316-347	The organization helps people by finding places for people from China to stay. Helps them become part of the community. The organization might be considered a form of social security. They were helped somewhat when sick. The organization would exhume the Chinese graves and send the bones back to China. The coffin would always have a piece of paper which would give information of the deceased so these organizations would know where to send the bones to and fulfill the wish of the deceased to have someone visit their graves (in China -- relatives).
10&11	348-450	When the Chinese returned to China, they would report to the association and pay up their dues before leaving. If you didn't, the association would try to hold you up, actually there is no legal hold, but.... In the old days, they would stop you at the peer.

END OF SIDE A

TAPE 2, SIDE B

1	000-013	The District Association also does the matching for marriages. It is mostly done by the district. The function of the family association is about the same as the District. However, the district takes care of any family while the family association is limited to that family (surname).
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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
2	014-043	The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (中華會館) is more or less a supreme peace broker. Nowadays everyone goes to court. It is also an organization to promote the Chinese people. It handles business disputes that can't be settled in the family association. Then they go to the CCBA.
3	044-074	The Wong Family Association is the largest in Los Angeles. They have more people, therefore more money to operate with. The Wong is by itself. The others are combinations of other families.
	075-090	Before 1945 there was a Lew Sing Kai. He was the president of 中華會館 for many years.
	091-100	In San Diego there were more Toms. I belong to the American Institute of Banking.
4	101-118	I belong also to the American Society of Travelers. I was treasurer, and vice president, of the American Society of Travelers in the 1950's.
	119-123	I was also the president of CACA in 1958.
	124-127	Before World War II, most Chinese were engaged in groceries, laundries, restaurants. The Chung San people had the dry good stores and most of the Chung San people were in the garment industry. The Chung San were engaged in restaurants, farming, and dry goods. The Sze Yup people went into laundry and grocery stores. Sum Yup people were in the meat business and Chinese provisions, herb business.
	128-142	All the different people were in gambling. Before World War II, if they were earning \$5000 a year, they were doing good.
5	143-153	They were just earning about enough. Before World War II they sent money to China to buy land. My parents didn't have too much because the opportunities were not there; after they tried to educate their children, there wasn't much left.
	154-177	They didn't gamble the money away, they sent it back to China.
	178-180	Prior to World War I, at the time of 1911, there were quite a few American born that joined Dr. Sun Yat Sen and one of them, Wo Buck Yew. He later became a member of the legislator. There were quite a few more involved in Chinese politics than American.
6	181-208	Mrs. Wo Buck Yew was Walter Lum's sister. He was involved in American politics. He was one of the early ones that recognized the power of

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
6	181-208	the vote. But in those days, there was not enough volume. But he urged the Chinese here not to ignore the vote.
7	209-227	Walter Lum and I were both members of the Chinese Alliance. We solicited stock and got subscribers and advertisers. The stock sold for \$3 a share. CACA had a rule that every stockholder of the Chinese Times must be a member of CACA.
	228-261	It was very hard to sell newspaper stock. However the Chinese Times was not intended to be a money maker. It was intended to be a mouthpiece for the Chinese American citizens.
8	262-281	The Chinese Times during World War II made a lot of money. However the new generation cannot read Chinese (so they do not buy). After World War II, there was 50% dividend one time. We didn't get any dividend for the first twenty years.
	282-294	Most of the Chinese businesses in those days were partnerships not corporations. The people didn't buy stocks from the companies in China such as the railroad because there was no information about them here.
	295-314	I guess the politicians would know about it.
9	315-325	I personally didn't witness any hostility towards Chinese in Los Angeles before World War II.
	326-333	Years ago there were hangings but it was way before my time.
	334-338	The Chinese have done better than other people in Los Angeles. This was in the last two decades. In the old days, there was no opportunity.
	339-356	Before 1950, very few took engineering courses because when they got through school they couldn't get jobs except dishwashing and janitors. I knew of some who did that.
	366-370	I was the first Chinese working as a clerk in the Federal Court. Prejudice prevented others from getting in. I got in because during the war there was a shortage and anyone could get in (during World War II).
10	371-392	This job was a good way to break out from the lower pay of the Chinese. It was a good thing to have your resume because it showed you knew something.
	393-410	It did in some way make me more Americanized. But it didn't add to it because I was already Americanized. My colleagues treated me very well. During the war it was easy to get a promotion. But I did stay long enough to know if being Chinese hindered chances for promotion.

Interviewee: Henry Lowe

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2 Side B

Tape: 3 Side A

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
10	411-434	My relations with other Chinese were helped by having this job as a travel agent because the people respected me for it.
11	435-481	Before 1920 there were a lot of match making. Very few of the American Chinese would let their parents match them with a wife from China.
END OF TAPE 2		

TAPE 3, SIDE A

1	000-012	CHENG: You were talking about very few Chinese women going back to China to marry Chinese men. LOWE: Mostly for a mother to take a daughter back to China to get married they must be pretty well to do. From those I have personal knowledge of, the marriages did not work out successfully. It seemed to be too wide a difference in customs. It was not compatible. They got divorced. I think it was usually the in-law involvement which was hard to understand for the American born wife.
2	013-039 040-048 049-057	In the early days they looked down on divorces and unfairly blamed the girl. Usually it is the husband's family who was more eager to have sons. By and large, the American born Chinese weren't that eager to have mainly sons. CHENG: What do most people think of interracial marriages? LOWE: No good, not healthy, bad -- in the early days. Because they can't see a Eurasian mix marriage. It was pretty hard for the marriage to succeed when there is so much animosity in the family.
3	058-073 074-081	The children of the interracial marriage suffered because they are not accpeted by the Americans or by the Chinese. Eventually, after twenty years, the grandparents slowly accepted the children. In many cases, the parents dis-owned their daughters for intermarrying. CHENG: What do you or others think of the way the Chinese were portrayed in American movies? LOWE: Not too good in the early days -- always an image of a Chinese laundryman. We tried to protest, but didn't make our voices loud enough. It didn't do any good.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	082-088	Some people would go to the studio to talk to them but they will listen and promise but by that time the movie making was over and they would be making a new movie.
	089-099	I seldom see a Chinese who was ashamed to be Chinese.
4	100-105	Before World War II working in the bank was considered prestigious. Working for a large American company that didn't have Chinese was prestigious. Then the insurance companies started hiring Chinese (in San Francisco). These people were considered better than say those in a restaurant.
	106-125	There were no lawyers until the 30's. The first one was Yu Chong Hong. He was the earliest specializing in immigration. Subsequently, other Chinese started studying law. In the old days prejudice prevented them from entering the profession. Those days when they graduated they had to take anything in order to make a living. I heard some say -- "There is no change but I will take the course in school, whether I get a job or not."
5	126-144	Some went back to China after studying engineering. Some continued schooling and started teaching.
	145-157	Los Angeles Old Chinatown -- the land belonged to a Mexican (named Apablasa). The Chinese leased the ground and the Chinese built the buildings. In those days they wouldn't let Chinese live in towns and back then Chinatown was the outskirts.
	158-168	I never lived in Los Angeles Old Chinatown. I visited there for pleasure. The buildings were brick buildings two story high and the doors and windows were covered by heavy iron bars to keep out the hoodlums. A lot of the buildings didn't use nails, they used wooden pegs.
6	169-188	The ground floor was for business and the second floor was for homes. They used to allow to kill and dress the pig in Chinatown. The businesses were Chinese provisions, meat markets, restaurants, ordinary general merchandize sometimes there will be a tailor, herb store. They had gambling in the back. In the old days, there were about twenty gambling houses.
	189-206	Then later when gambling stopped, the Americans used them for barbecue places. For instance, Jerry's Joint, it was four gambling houses. They left the outside the same so it was a treat to go through one door and then another door and then you entered the dining room where you had barbecue spare ribs.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
6	207-211	Jerry's Joint was owned by Americans but all the cooks were Chinese. Then there was F. C. On. He had the most authentic Chinese goods and he rented them to the movies.
	212-223	There were very few Chinese living in Chinatown then because there was not enough room.
7	224-240	CHENG: When did they decided to build the Union Station, what did the Chinese think? LOWE: The Chinese knew they had to leave but they took their time. There was one case where the bulldozer went through a building when they were still operating a business. They had been given one whole year to leave. In those days we were looking for a place. Peter SooHoo, he was an engineer graduated from U.S.C. working for the Department of Water and Power. He was born in Chinatown.
	241-257	He was the one who was looking for a location and found a piece owned by the Santa Fe Railroad and the railroad was very helpful. There were three other sites and each were trying to promote their site. They were offered (Santa Fe) a lease option to buy. We had to do a lot of promotion -- that was the time of the rice bowl, the Japanese attacked China and when the American public sympathized with the Chinese and the movie companies helped. We had a parade and the movie companies sent their stars. We went to Coca Cola and quite a few of the large businesses got Coca Cola and buns and sold them and raised thousands of dollars and bought an ambulance to send back to China. I was just an amateur but I got up and spoke and all the Chinese took it in. The Chinese were united then. That started Chinatown then Governor Marion came down and dedicated Chinatown. At that time we had nothing to lose. The Chinese who were citizens asked him and he came.
	258-263	Peter SooHoo found this site on North Broadway that was owned by the Santa Fe Railroad. Santa Fe was good to us and said they would give us the land at their cost. They said we could lease it with the option to buy. But it was difficult to convince people that this was a good offer. Other people had picked out other sites and there were words said about each other's choices. Finally we said time was running out, "So let's start collecting the money to hold the land." The money came from the various businesses that would locate themselves there.

END OF TAPE 3

END OF INTERVIEW

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