

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHINESE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Jennie Lee Wong Interview Number: 32  
 Chinese Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Number of Tapes: 2  
 Date of Interview: 3/3/79 Length: 1 Hour & 27 Minutes  
 Interviewer: Jean Wong  
 Others Present: None  
 Language: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Summarizer: Stella Ling

Contents

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary	Tape: <u>1</u>	Side: <u>A</u>
1	005-014 015-020  021-026	Introduction Jennie Lee Wong (JLW) was born in Toisan, Guangdong, China. JLW was born in 1924. She came to the United States at the age of three. JLW's parents were in the United States originally. Most of JLW's brothers and sisters were born in the United States. When her mother was pregnant, she took the family back to Canton. That was where JLW was born. Subsequently, at the age of three, the whole family immigrated back to the United States with the exception of one older sister.		
	027-044	JLW's parents were born in China. They got married in China but JLW does not know how they got to the United States. She does know that her grandfather was here -- he probably immigrated here with the railroad workers or may have been born in Honolulu. JLW's grandfather became a citizen and then brought JLW's father here. JLW's own citizenship was derived from her father's relation.		
2	045-066  067-072	JLW does not understand exactly how her family immigrated to the United States. JLW's parents first came here around 1916 and settled in Los Angeles. JLW's grandfather started a restaurant and they have been identified with the restaurant business since then. The restaurant was called "Man Jen Low" at the time, and the name was changed to "General Lee" around 1953. Man Jen Low was originally located on 309 1/2 Martisol. It was on the border of Alameda Street which is now the Union Station. Their restaurant was located at the same place as the tower of the Union Station is now.		
3	073-093	The restaurant was three-stores high and could accommodate around one hundred people. JLW's grandfather was the sole owner of the restaurant. When JLW's		

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	073-093	grandfather returned to China in 1928, her father was left with the ownership of the restaurant.
	094-099	JLW's grandfather went back to China since his wife was still there. He returned to China to retire. He came to the United States to make money but had planned on retiring in China.
	100-104	The restaurant has been passed on to JLW's brothers, Walter, David, Burton, and Norman.
4	105-124	When JLW's father returned to China in 1933, her mother took over the business. When her father went back, he took with him JLW's oldest sister Rose (Sung) and her youngest brother, David. The children were taken back in order to obtain a proper Chinese education. David was the only brother that went back. He stayed around six or seven years. Rose stayed around six years. JLW's father returned to the United States in 1935 or thereabouts.
	125-133	JLW attended Mei-I-Mei Christian School in Los Angeles. She attended Chinese school for about six years -- until the age of twelve when Old Chinatown was torn down.
	134-150	JLW was forced to go to Chinese school. She hated it like most of the other children and swore that if she ever had any children, she would not force them to go to Chinese school. She regrets that now. Yet it was difficult for a child in elementary school to go to regular school for a whole day and then attend Chinese school for three more hours.
5	151-162	JLW attended Chinese school and took piano lessons on Saturdays. JLW enjoyed attending Methodist Church on Sundays because she liked the singing. Otherwise the service was long -- it took another three hours.
	163-187	The Chinese children were fortunate to have a playground in Chinatown to play in. From Mondays to Fridays, the children would have to go to school from nine to six so there was no time to use the playground. They were able to go to the playground during the summer months and during the weekends. All their spare time was spent at the playground. The playground was a great source of entertainment for them. The playground was located where the Union Depot is now. The playground was the only recreation they had but they were fortunate to have that.
6	188-203	JLW's brothers go to movies about once a week. JLW did not get to see movies since her brothers would not take her with them. The only opportunity she had was when her uncle took her.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
6	204-225	JLW was the youngest child of the family. Kao was the oldest in the family. She lived in China until about twenty years ago when she moved here. Rose is the second oldest. Then there is Walter, the oldest son, and then the pair of twins, Norman and Burton, and David is number six. JLW is number eight. Number seven died at a very early age. He died of small pox in China. The oldest and the youngest in the family were both born in China. All the children in the middle were born in the United States.
	226-247	All the children that were in the United States attended Chinese school. When Chinatown was forced to move, the language school located in the Methodist Church was also torn down. Thus JLW no longer had to attend Chinese school -- that was the happiest day of her life. By that time the Chinese were becoming separated so transportation was hard if the Chinese school had been relocated. JLW thinks that by then the mothers just gave up.
7	248-257	JLW did learn something from attending Chinese school for six years. She may have retained ten Chinese characters. Her Sam Yup became more fluent as a result of going to Chinese school.
	258-315	At home, they spoke Hokshan, Sam Yup, and Sze Yup. Thus JLW speaks three Chinese dialects. JLW spoke Chinese to her parents but they spoke English among the children. JLW spoke Chinese to her parents automatically. JLW's mother took private lessons in English when she first came to the United States. Thus she was one of the very few Chinese women of her generation to learn to speak English and to have a private tutor. Her knowledge of English came in handy when JLW's father returned to China and left the business to JLW's mother. They did do some Caucasian business in addition to the Chinese business. To this day, their restaurant is more noted among Caucasians than among Chinese. In those days there were more Caucasians than Chinese and their restaurant tried to extend to the population rather than to a small minority. In addition, the Chinese were very poor and did not dine at restaurants very often. When they did go out they would probably end up eating roast beef or roast pork dinners for thirty cents. Each dinner would consist of roast beef (prime rib), potatoes, apple pie, and a dinner roll.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
8	316-327	JLW feels that Chinese do not bother to leave something behind for someone to carry on. A restaurant called Sa Yum used to make a delicious bread which JLW can no longer find today. When the breadmaker died, he took the bread with him.
9	328-338	In those days they could get a basket of food for lunch, along with a pot of coffee, sent to their house for thirty-five cents. The children would just stand by the door watching their father eat. They could not afford to buy lunch for the children because there were so many of them.
	339-350	JLW's grandfather was called Wu Hoi. Her father is Wu Pak Fung, and her mother is Lam Chuk Shiu.
	351-388	When the Union Station was built, the restaurant had to relocate. In 1934 or 1935, there were rumors that Chinatown had to be relocated due to the building of the Union Station. From then on, they started looking for a place to relocate the Chinese community. By 1936, they tore down the big apartment building JLW's family lived in as well as all the buildings in Old Chinatown up to their restaurant.
10	389-414	At that time, they wanted JLW's father to move to San Pedro Street, where the Produce Market was. JLW's father refused to move there and insisted on living in a neighborhood with a good school for his children which they could walk to, and there had to be a big street for his restaurant business.
	415-462	JLW's father was considered an unofficial mayor at that time. He owned the oldest and most well known Chinese restaurant in Los Angeles. Herbert Lopcome, Peter SooHoo, JLW's father, and an attorney by the name of Robert Craig were the four principal people who made the decisions concerning the relocation of Chinatown.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

## Contents (cont'd)

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	012-018	There was Herbert Lapham, JLW's father -- Lee Fan, the attorney -- Robert Craig, and the interpreter -- Peter SooHoo, Sr. These four principals made most of the decisions regarding where Chinatown was going to move to.
	019-020	The Chinese were holding up the progress of the building of the Union Station.
	021-023	The Santa Fe Railroad Company owned the piece of land where Chinatown is located now. They offered the Chinese this piece of land.
	024-027	The Chinese decided to incorporate Chinatown and so everyone would buy a share. Everyone bought stock according to how much money they could invest.
	028-034	Chinatown Corporation was thus formed and the original people who bought into Chinatown Corporation were the ones who were evicted from Old Chinatown. The Santa Fe Company gave over the deed and agreed to give Chinatown the property once it was paid for.
2	035-037	Chinatown started with four buildings.
	038-043	One side of Alameda Street was considered downtown Chinatown while the other side of the street was considered uptown. The downtown Chinatown people were wholeheartedly in support of the project of moving to New Chinatown while the Chinese in uptown were not too enthusiastic because they did not know how it would turn out.
	044-057	Four buildings went up. It was a success. JLW carried the bouquet for Governor Marriam. Chinatown became very popular, for many years, it was the center of Chinatown.
	058-100	After WWII, people acquired property across the street of Hill Street. The land was individually owned. Unfortunately, the builder went bankrupt and the Chinese did not have a contract. The building got stuck halfway through construction. Brother and others got together to fight for their rights. Finally they got the building finished. That's just to who you that Chinese did not know how.
3	101-107	Chinese began confronting discrimination in the early days. Chinese did not have proper educations. If the Chinese got through high school they were lucky.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	108-113	It would have been better if Chinese could get more formal education instead of being tied down with a business.
	114-118	JLW went to California Street School, Central Junior High School, Belmont High School. Some people went to Lincoln High School. JLW graduated in 1942.
	119-132	After graduation, she worked for the OPA Rent Control for about six months as a clerk.
	133-159	The JLW was offered a job as a salesperson. Women were never thought of as salespeople. But due to a shortage of manpower, women worked for wholesalers who sold sundries, beer, wine, film, cigarettes, etc. JLW was about 19 years old and was believed to be the first Chinese woman salesperson in Los Angeles.
5	160-167	JLW got \$35 a week salary plus commission. She made about \$400 a month.
	168-172	JLW never had a job like that, so she never asked about how they paid her the commission.
	173-197	Very few Chinese worked as salespeople. If an owner could use a Caucasian they would use a Caucasian. Even today in Chinatown, there are still not many Chinese salespersons. There is a lot of buying power in Chinatown, but still not enough Chinese salespeople.
6	198-224	JLW's husband was in the maintenance business for the Chinese commercial buildings in Chinatown. They started about six years ago and did not think of this kind of job before.
END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B		
1&2	005-010	Introduction.
	011-020	Blank.
	021-069	JLW was not able to get the maintenance business from the Bank of America. JLW felt that the Bank of America in Chinatown should give their business to Chinese since the Bank had been getting business from Chinese.
3	070-077	JLW's maintenance company was highly recommended since they do a good job. They do five to seven Southern California Automobile Club buildings.
	078-082	JLW stayed in sales for about three years. When she got married in 1945 she left the job.
	083-088	Then JLW and her husband left for New Mexico where he was stationed. He was in the Air Force.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	089-098	Three months later, husband was discharged, so they came back and settled in Los Angeles in 1946.
	099-111	JLW worked for Chung King Produce as a collector. After her daughter was born she quit the job in 1948.
4&5	112-115	JLW became a regular housewife.
	116-131	Right after the war, Man Jen Low was like a mom and pop restaurant. When her brothers came back from the service, business was very poor. The brothers were young and energetic and decided to have a new concept of dining.
	132-175	Everybody in the family contributed something to make the restaurant successful. Walter was very artistic. David was very enterprising and was a fine chef. All brothers and JLW came out with the fine dining concept. They started selling gourmet dinners by selling individual parties different dinner combinations suggested by JLW. It went over very well.
	179-224	The food columnist for <u>Mirror</u> Paul Coats wrote about Man Jen Low in his column. The restaurant was remodelled by Jimmy Lim, a Chinese architect, with \$1000 in 1947. From that day on, they started building their business. The word of mouth was very important. Willa Kim designed the bar downstairs.
6	225-235	Since they were doing so much business, the Chinese from all over the United States came to see what made the place click.
7	236-256	It takes more than just manu and cook. It took a combination of a lot of things: personality, warmth, ability to communicate with Caucasians.
	257-267	In the old days, Chinese restaurants served only chop suey style. Man Jen Low served full course dinners. You don't make much money from the food, but from the drinks.
	268-279	In the old days, Chinese did not understand much of the drinking and dining.
8	280-298	JLW lived on Appablaza Street. The restaurant located on Marchassault Street, then they moved to Broadway. After JLW married she moved to an apartment, later to a house they built and then moved to Griffith Park.
	299-306	JLW has two daughters and one son. Son is studying at UCLA.
	307-312	Sorry not sending children to Chinese school.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
8	313-336	Parents believed in Chinese herbs for colds and flue. But mother had a miscarriage and was in the hospital for three months. Children were exposed to western doctors in the 1930's.
9	337-346 347-357 358-369 370-379 380-400	Parents went to a Chinese herbalist. JLW does not use Chinese herbs as much and uses a little herbs only in the soup. Family always ate in the restaurant. JLW doesn't have much home life. JLW didn't learn to cook until she was married. They worked harder during the holidays. If you don't have a college education to become a professional, you always can fall back on to the family owned business. JLW has been in the travel business for 18 years. Brother David Lee is very enterprising and opened all kinds of businesses.
10	401-414 415-432 433-444 445-481	They started the maintenance business in the right time. They did not hire any help. Their first account was with East West Federal Savings and Loan. The whole family worked after dinner. JLW and her brother opened the travel service in 1961. JLW enjoyed doing the business. The experiences are different from the experiences from teachers, educators, etc. The restaurant and travel service business enabled JLW to meet a lot of fine people. JLW associated mostly with non-Chinese. Her travel service business was established by word of mouth. She is licensed by the government so can't offer a discount, therefore she doesn't get business from Chinese speaking customers.
END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A		
1	021-028 029-043	Doesn't use advertisement in her travel service business. Restaurant business is as hard as the travel service business. In the old days, the restaurant workers worked every day. They didn't have any days off. Now the government does not allow them to work over eight hours per day.



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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
2	044-058	In the old days, the wage for waiters was about \$1 a day and they kept their own tips. They worked 10 hours a day. The cooks worked 12 hours a day. Now the restaurant workers work 8 hours a day and get minimum wage.
	059-070	JLW didn't think that they will have a fifth generation to run the restaurant. They are well-educated and have professional backgrounds. They can work 8 hours a day, 5 days a week at a job and get good benefits.
3	071-088	When the new immigrants came, the only thing they knew was to open a restaurant. There are Chinese restaurants all over, people don't have to travel to Chinatown to eat. Due to the bad publicity of gang fights, etc., white American customers do not come to Chinatown anymore. There are more Chinese coming into Chinatown.
	089-093	Man Jen Low does not do much Chinese business. Sometimes they do Japanese business.

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END OF INTERVIEW

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