

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHINESE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Dorothy Siu
 Chinese Name: _____
 Date of Interview: 1/12/79, 11/6/80
 Interviewer: Jean Wong
 Others Present: none
 Language: English
 Summarizer: Rodney H. Chow

Interview Number: 56
 Number of Tapes: 2
 Length: 1 Hour & 51 Minutes

Contents

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary	Tape: <u>1</u> Side <u>A</u>
1	000-024	My parents are from Canton. I do not know which are or what village. However, practically everyone from this area [meaning someplace in California] are from Toishan (台山). I (suppose) they are from Toishan. I spoke Sze Yup.	
	025-026	My parents married in California. I think in San Francisco.	
	027-031	I have no idea when my parents came to the United States other than my mother was a very young girl and my father was a young boy [when they came].	
	032-035	There were eleven children. Four died before I was born and I am the last, number eleven.	
2	036-044	One was Dr. Margaret Chung, Andrew, Anna, Virgil and Venus, Mildred and Florence.	
	045-047	There was about fifteen years between the oldest and youngest.	
	048-049	I know that at one time my mother was a court interpreter in Los Angeles. My father was (I think) most of his life a farmer and at one time he had a dairy. But mostly it was farming.	
	050-053	My mother's name was Minnie Chan and my father was Chung Wong.	
	054-063	I was six when my mother died. She died of tuberculosis. My father was killed in an auto accident in his first and only auto. He got caught between two Pasadena Red Cars. They were going opposite ways and he got caught in between them. I was eight years old then. He died from loss of blood.	

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
2	064-093	While my mother was still living we lived down on Hewitt Street. At the time she died we were living on the east side. I have no idea what street. My father's dairy was in the town of Vernon at Vernon and Santa Fe. We then moved to 54th Street, not too far from where the dairy was. That is where we were living when he was killed. Then we moved closer to town on 10th Street so my brothers could work in the City Market. Then when my sister did her internship we moved with her to Pasadena. We lived there until 1927, when I graduated. Then I moved back to Los Angeles with my sister Anna. It wasn't too far from the 9th Street Market. I met my future husband in my last year in Pasadena. He and I joined the circus together.
3	094-103	It was the L.G. Barnes Circus. I was the prima donna. It was in the spectacled.
4	104-139	The L.G. Barnes Circus had its winter quarters in Culver City. But we started our tour in San Diego and worked up the coast all the way to Seattle. They thought they could take me over to Canada under bond like they did the Chinese giant. He was over seven feet tall. But because I was an American citizen, they couldn't do that and I don't know why they couldn't use my birth certificate to get me over. Maybe because they were paying me so much more than all the other girls and the only thing I did was this one thing on the stage. I was a little prince and there was this golden lamp, it was "Alladin and his wonderful lamp." That's what it was and I took all these little midgets out of this lantern and there was this big tree on stage and a big part of it would fall down and a fairy queen would come out of the tree. One day the guy who was supposed to let this board down let it down too soon and it conked me on the head. When I came to I was staggering around on my knees. The audience tried to find out what happened so they hurried up and pulled up the curtain. I was playing Alladin.
	140-152	My husband started out as the assistant time keeper. Then he was the manager for the commissary car. We lived right on the train. Our trunks were on another car. I was making \$75 a week while the girls working in department stores were only earning \$18 a week.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
5	153-157	My husband was making about \$50 a week. I really don't remember.
	158-171	I worked for the circus about two months. It was the time it took to work from San Diego up to Seattle except for the big towns they were one night stands. When they said they couldn't take me into Canada, my husband and I left the circus and took a ship (the Ruth Alexander) and sailed home and landed in San Francisco. Stayed with my sister.
	172-184	The circus was looking for a Chinese girl and asked my sister, the doctor, who was in San Francisco at that time, so she told them to look me up. Because I had stage experience in high school and most other Chinese girls were rather shy.
6	185-191	I went to some grammar school in Los Angeles until I moved to Pasadena, then I went to grammar school there (Pasadena) then I went to John Muir Junior High and Pasadena High.
	192-193	I didn't get married until 1930.
	194-199	I just worked at odd jobs. There wasn't much movie work. There were no guilds then between 1927 and 1930.
	200-223	We got \$9 a day [worked as an extra] then it went to \$10 a day. It was about \$8 or \$9 per day eight hours a day and they didn't feed us either. I worked for an importer-exporter at the Biltmore. The owner was not Chinese. They made several trips around the world every year and of course landed in China. They had an awful lot of Chinese things. They were very fond of the Chinese.
224-227	At that time we were only making \$18 a week.	
7	228-236	They didn't trust us in the sales department. I worked in the repair department. I restring beads, etc. I didn't do the repairing, I was the liaison between the customer and the repairman.
	237-261	They didn't hire Chinese girls for sales until the 40's. This was in the late twenties. They just didn't hire minorities for sales positions. We just dusted the place and did cashiering. In those days minorities just weren't given good jobs.
	262-274	He (Dorothy's husband) lived here all his life (in Los Angeles). His sister had met me when I was working at National Dollar Store one Christmas. And their Baptist Church was having a skating party in Alhambra so she asked me if I would like to join them, so that's how I met him.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
8	275-276	My husband is American born.
	277-279	The first child was born in 1932. The second was born in 1934.
	280-289	My husband was farming with my brother. Then we took a place of our own in Perris Valley. The first born was born in San Francisco. My sister delivered him. The second boy was born when we were living in Riverside.
	290-323	That was during the depression. It was hard to get work. We lost what little we had so we came back to town. That was when Christine Sterling started China City. The rents were very reasonable because she took this old building which was a blacksmith shop and had carpenters from MCM come in and built little stores. There must have been about 10 little stores in this building. There we started our store called the Flower Hut (gift shop). We were there (started in 1938). Then Mr. Macy, who owned the property built a building on a little space he had where we had the store below and an apartment above, where we lived.
	324-328	I remember when they had just started the foundation for our store when Pearl Harbor started. That is how I remember the date.
9	329-334	It was in 1942 when that building was completed. We lived there for 15 years until we bought this place.
	335-362	I worked along side my husband. The boys, Ronald had one year of college when he got drafted and went into the navy. Gilbert was never drafted because he was younger and he married when he was very young. When he finished high school he was working at the assessor's office where he met this cute little Japanese gal and got married.
	363-373	As long as they were in love, Japanese and Chinese are so close that it was alright. She turned out to be a very good wife and they have beautiful daughters.
	374-387	Ronald worked at the telephone company until he went to work at the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
10	388-456	We were there [in China City] about 2-3 years. Our specialty was flower arranging with the silk flowers from China and the little statues, etc. When we moved to the new building we changed the name and called it the Eurasian because my husband was part Norwegian. We lived there for 15 years. During World War II it was impossible to get Chinese things so I started doing movie work and opened only when we felt like it. My husband worked in the sheriff's office for a while. But the store was our main business and the movie work. Then he went into his own business called TBA (Tires Batteries and Assessories). He had worked for a business doing this before doing his own business. He had a van which he carried his equipment. Then he had his heart attack and had to give it up.
11	457-481	My husband's mother was Norwegian. His father was Chinese. My sister Margarite was a physician and surgeon. She had a practice for a short time and worked for the Santa Fe Railroad. Then she went to San Francisco. She saw the desperate need for a woman doctor up there. The women were too shy to let a man examine them and even in childbirth they would have a midwife instead of an M.D.
END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A		
1&2	000-012	She [Dorothy's sister] opened an office on Sacramento Street. Then she moved to Kearney Street until she died.
	013-016	While working at Santa Fe, she took care of the workers.
	017-068	In Los Angeles and San Francisco, Most of her patients were Chinese. She also had Caucasian patients, some of which were very famous. The wife of the President of Bethlehem Steel. She also became good friends with the people in the theatrical fields. And everyone who came into town would come to meet her. She would prepare a home cooked meal for them. Some of them were Pauline Frederick, etc., Sophie Tucker. Her wall was covered with photos of these famous people. She also befriended some naval reserve men who became pilots, some who became flying tigers. They called her mom; because she wasn't married they called her mom's fair haired bastards. Those who didn't fly were called kiwi (birds that couldn't fly).

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Tape: 1 Side B
2 Side A

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	069-087	Lily Pons, Andre Kostelanetz, John Hamilton, who was in charge of Pan Am's Far Eastern office in Hong Kong, and Harold Zellerbach of the Zellerbach Paper Company were all her pall bearers when she died.
	088-107	Margarite sent them candies, Christmas cards and wrote to their family.
4	108-111	My sister studied medicine at U.S.C., interned at the Mary Thompson Hospital in Chicago. After she completed her internship she became the psychiatrist for the state of Illinois.
	112-127	Margarite graduated in 1916 (about) from U.S.C. Medical School. She was the first woman doctor in San Francisco.
	128-146	I don't remember my parents using Chinese herbal medicine. However my father-in-law was an herbalist.
5	147-169	My father-in-law was Siu Yee Chong. He didn't practice as an herbalist but sold insurance. However if someone asked he would help them.
	170-179	I used to speak Chinese at home until my parents died then we spoke only English at home. So I don't speak enough Cantonese but if I am around Cantonese people it comes back to me.
	180-185	We didn't have any aunts or uncles. My sister Anna was 13 when mother died.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

1	000-010	I was born on January 23, 1908.
	011-019	When I was young I associated mainly with non-Chinese because my parents died when I was very young and did not go to Chinese school.
	020-028	I tried sending my children to Chinese school but because we didn't speak Chinese at home the teachers at school (Chinese) took it for granted that they knew what the Chinese words meant so it didn't help them any. So I later gave it up because the children weren't getting anything out of it.
	029-044	I really couldn't tell you what other people felt but I know those parents who came from China would send their children to Chinese school. But as far as the American born Chinese parents I don't think they sent their children to Chinese school.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
2	045-053	I felt more American because I spoke English, went to American schools and we weren't singled out in school.
	054-058	I can not remember if my parents used much Chinese herbs (her parents died when she was very young).
	059-084	I was the youngest of seven children. We played ball and had a huge pepper tree which my brother tied a rope and a sack to and we used it for a swing. We would take the peppers (from the tree) and have pepper fights by blowing them through tubes at each other. These are little tiny balls (black pepper).
3	085-087	We played soft ball. My brothers belonged to the Los Angeles Chinese baseball team and so we had to go watch them play.
	088-097	When I was in my teens I did see some Chinese operas but it was so noisy I didn't enjoy them. I played mahjong until the children came and I didn't have enough time left.
	098-115	We didn't join any family associations but we did go to some of the dances that were held by the Native Sons of the Golden State the Chinese Branch (now known as CACA). I joined them to come in contact with Chinese people.
4	116-127	The Wongs, Lees, Chans, Quons, are the ones I remember. I don't know if they were important families in Los Angeles.
	128-133	Our presbyterian Church was our Chinese Congregation.
	134-147	Before the war the Chinese worked on the vegetable farms and in the market. In those days they (Caucasians) wouldn't give us important positions. Even though I had my own store and did my own buying, when I applied for a job at Robinsons, they would only allow me to work in packaging in the wrapping room, only menial jobs.
5	148-155	The average income before the war. I don't know, when I graduated from high school I made \$18 a week. That is why when the job at the circus came along I took it because it paid \$75 a week.
	156-168	My expenses took everything I made to exist on \$18 a week, the food, rent, carfare used it up. I put whatever I was able to save in a savings account.
	169-172	The men all gambled.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
5	173-177 178-182 183-189	I didn't know anyone involved in Chinese politics. We didn't know of any relatives in China until the late 1920's. Somebody went to my sister the doctor in San Francisco and told her they had found our grandmother. I think on my father's side in China, and that she was very poor. So my sister gave him some money to give her.
6	190-197 198-199 200-210 211-232	Then later we found out our grandmother was dead and this guy was just pocketing the money. I wouldn't know if my parents sent money back to China. I think others felt an obligation to send money back to China. The depression was rough--but one thing was the Chinese style of eating which helped because a hunk of meat would be sliced up and not everyone got a large piece. So everyone had some meat. This helped out a lot. I remember times when I went hungry. There were times when I felt hostility from Caucasians. One time when I went to Brookside Park, a city owned pool, I went with my class, and they wouldn't let me in because I was Chinese. That was in the early 1920's. After I met my husband and I was in my mid-twenties, another Chinese couple and Jake (her husband--not married yet) went to Bimini and they refused to let us go in. This event went on all the time. The change did not come until after World War II. I think the Chinese, as compared to other minorities, have done quite well. Not my generation but the generation after. Because they have a good education. They have done better than the Mexicans or Blacks.
7	233-299	Jewish people love Chinese food whether or not it was pork. Our best friend is Jewish and we get along very well together. I think the Jewish people are a lot like the Chinese.
8	300-324	I kind of think American born Chinese men prefer to have sons. I believe it is influenced from the older generation.
9	325-328	Although I wanted a girl, my husband did too. But we had two boys and when the second boy came we were both very disappointed because we both wanted a girl.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
9	329-354	In those times, Chinese from China tended to marry those from China but since then--But also not having mixed marriages but today it makes no difference. Those born here had a tendency to not go to China to marry a mate they just intermarried among themselves here.
	355-379	Back in those days interracial marriages were not too accepted. My husband suffered some (he is half Chinese and Norwegian) because the Caucasian part of him didn't count they only looked at his Chinese side and he suffered some racial prejudice. His parents suffered an awful lot by both Chinese and Caucasian. The most prejudice was from the Caucasians. The Chinese accepted them more readily. My husband looked like an Indian. His name was Jacob and everyone called him Jake.
	380-388	I think quite a few Chinese did go back to China.
10	389-398	I don't think we were portrayed too badly (in American movies).
	399-429	It was true to life--Chinese portrayed houseboys, maids, etc.
	430-468	I worked as a saleslady for the National Dollar Store. I hated it (as a young girl). I think most people wanted a profession like a doctor or lawyer.
END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A		
1	000-003	After I graduated from high school I wanted to be a nurse but my sister the doctor discouraged me because she said the nurse did all the dirty work and the doctor got all the credit. Back in those days people wanted a profession.
	004-027	Jacob's parents met in Montana but how they got together I don't know.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	028-056	There were only four families that I knew who were racially intermarried. F. See On, I think he has been in the Chinese art business longer than anyone in Los Angeles. He was way up in his 90's before he died. His wife, I believe is English. In fact the one daughter she is still living is married to Gilbert Leong, the architect. The other family was the Chews. The son is still alive and lives in Burbank. The Chew's mother was Irish. Then there was this lady who was a teacher. I don't remember the husband's name or what he did. They all suffered because they married Chinese. Consequently these families banded together.
2	057-END	My mother-in-law spoke no Chinese. My father-in-law was an insurance salesman. He lived on 52nd Street but was so poor he had to walk to the 9th Street Market for work. He came from China.

END OF TAPE

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