

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHINESE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: David Lee Interview Number: 16
 Chinese Name: 胡 順 Number of Tapes: 2
 Date of Interview: 12/5/79 Length: 1 Hour & 42 Minutes
 Interviewer: Suellen Cheng
 Others Present: _____
 Language: English
 Summarizer: Suellen Cheng
Don Loo

Contents

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	000-009	David Lee's (DL) family originally came from Canton, Chung Sun, Siek Kei (<u>石岐</u>).
	010-012	Grandfather came first around 1860's or 1870's; somehow ended up in Los Angeles after the Gold Rush around 1872.
	013-025	Grandfather and his brother started a little eating place on the sidewalk near the produce market on the old railroad terminal - the Southern Pacific and the Santa Fe.
	026-027	Later the grandfather moved to Alameda and Marchusault Streets in Old Chinatown. The restaurant was on the second floor because the rent was cheaper.
	028-035	The ground floor was a grocery store.
2	036-040	The restaurant name was Man Jen Low (<u>萬珍樓</u>).
	041-042	The grandfather brought DL's father over when he was eighteen years old. When the father reached twenty years old, he was sent back to marry in China and had one child who was left in China to accompany the grandmother. DL's mother came to the United States.
	043-046	The rest of DL's five brothers and sisters were born in the United States.
	047-052	DL's father came around 1909.
	053-054	The grandmother came to the United States in 1941 and went back to China in 1946 or 1947.
	055-058	In the old days, the Chinese females were not allowed to come to the United States. The fewer females, the fewer Chinese children would be produced.
	059-065	DL's father was born while DL's grandfather was in the United States and was the only child.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	066-073	DL's father came to join the grandfather in the restaurant business.
	074-077	In the early days, Chinese did not have many businesses to go into besides restaurants, grocery stores, laundry and gambling, so called Sei Dai Kuen (四大館).
	078-081	DL is the sixth in the family and was born in 1920 in Los Angeles at home, delivered by an American midwife assisted by Sun Mou (孀母 aunt).
	082-089	Mother had the most difficult time when she had DL's twin brothers.
	090-092	DL was born around where the Union Station is, near the stable which facilitated the house and buggy for the vegetable peddlers.
	093-101	DL remembers that only by 1929-1930 the street was paved with tar.
4	102-104	DL's family lived in an apartment called (保皇樓) Bow Wong Low. Downstairs was a store and a shoemaker. In the apartment also resided five or six of the restaurant workers.
	105-117	The restaurant workers were not married or left their families in China.
	118-122	Other apartments were all like rooming houses with gas lights until electricity came.
	123-125	At home, DL spoke Chinese all the time. The Chinatown English, English with a Chinese accent was spoken by DL.
	126-132	DL went to California Street School and Central High School next to it. Both schools were located where the Board of Education is now.
5	133-139	DL went back to China when he was twelve years old. Father believed at least one of the sons should be familiar with China and the Chinese customs in case deportation of the family should occur.
	140-143	Chinese were not allowed to purchase land. Family was afraid of being forced back to China.
	144-149	Stayed in China for seven years, first to Canton then went to high school in Beijing.
	150-151	During the vacation time stayed with his grandfather, but stayed in a boarding house at school the rest of the time.
	152-155	There were about 700 to 800 Chinese in Los Angeles in the early days. In the 1920's there were 5,000 Chinese, then in the 1970's 25,000. Today probably there are over 100,000.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
5	156-164	Never lived outside of Chinatown. First in Old Chinatown where the Union Station is, after the Old Chinatown was condemned, DL's family moved to New Chinatown in 1938.
	165-176	Herbert Lepetent, a Santa Fe realtyman, bought the property for building the Chinatown for Chinese. He bought it for twenty to twenty-five cents per square foot.
6	177-188	DL paid off the property after World War II.
	189-195	Man Jen Low is supposed to be 100 years old, in 1938 the restaurants moved to New Chinatown. In the meantime, the family purchased a house on 1315 North Broadway for \$2,000.
	196-207	The house had eight bedrooms.
	208-212	When the apartment in Old Chinatown was torn down, DL's family moved to 120 Ord Street. Downstairs was the Southern California Poultry Company.
7	213-228	China City was formed in the 1940s. China City was very close to Alvera Street and was founded by Christin Sterling.
	239-240	What Christin Sterling was trying to do was to tie the Chinese together on Alvera Street so that she could have more power in the area and become more influential. Chinese tried to move away from there.
	241-244	China City was built like a movie scene. There were about two restaurants. When people visited Alvera Street they ended up visiting China City.
	245-271	The New Chinatown at the beginning had one grocery store, four restaurants, and eight curio shops.
8	272-276	Chinatown didn't grow until after the War (World War II).
	277-284	Yee Huen Guen was run by the Gee family, Hop Gaei made bean curd. Ting Hing owned by the Wong family, Duey Duey Woo, a coffee shop was owned by Dr. Liu - one of the two dentists, then Man Jen Low, then Sun Shue Hong by Mu family, then Soo Hoo family. They all knew each other very well.
	285-299	Tuey Far Low by Quan family, downstairs the Louie family ran an antique shop, then Yee Sing Chong, the grocery store.
	300-319	In 1942, Y.C. Hong moved in to Chinatown. He was a good lawyer and owned most of the property in Chinatown.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
9	320-340	DL wanted to borrow money from the Bank of America which the family had been banking with since his grandfather's time, but DL wasn't successful.
	341-347	Until 1955, DL was not able to borrow the money to remodel the restaurant.
	348-359	Purchased the house with \$250 down and \$25 a month. The house cost \$2000. The street car ran in front.
10	360-374	Mostly Italian and Slavic people lived in the New Chinatown area.
	375-385	Chinese were the minority even in the New Chinatown area.
	386-394	Customers were mostly non-Chinese. No Wah Ching. Chinese dinners were cheap, thirty-five cents for lunch and fifty cents for dinner.
	395-413	In 1935 to 1936 there were three Chinese groups fighting: one in New Chinatown, one in the Spring Street area, and the third group in the 9th and San Pedro area.
11	414-435	Father had better farsight so he settled in New Chinatown which used to be next to the cemetery and the steel mill.
END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A		
1	001-012	The plan for this Chinatown was designed by Alvin Wilson. It had a nice Chinese atmosphere, clean and unique. People started to move to this Chinatown.
	013-022	At first the rent for this restaurant was \$50 per month and they finally purchased it for \$12,000.
	023-026	People down in the San Pedro Chinatown conceded that the Chinatown North was a success but they didn't go any further.
	027-030	The Poon family, New Moon Restaurant, partially owned most of Chinatown in the San Pedro area.
2	031-037	DL goes down to shop for his produce in the market down there in San Pedro.
	038-055	Used to be that Chinese did their own farming and brought their produce in to sell. The depression hit many of them. Most Chinese were owners of their own markets.
	056-060	Chinese would come over, start a business, work for a few years, then go back to China to visit their wife, have a family, then come back to the U.S. This is the reason that we see families where children are separated by six years. When the men come back, they start over again. The men were not rooted to one place.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	060-100	During World War II and the Communist take-over, Chinese started to become more rooted. Chinese could buy land and started to own their own stores.
4	101-135	A restaurant waiter made about \$1 per day, cooks about \$60 per month, a dishwasher \$40 per month. The thrifty ones could afford to go to China.
5	136-161	The gamblers could not afford to go back. A lot of people came from Sze Yup. They had no chance to go to school so they would gamble. There were about four gambling houses.
	162-198	If they lost all their money, their family association would take care of them. They would pick up their mail at the association. The association would help them by loaning them some money. Members paid a nominal fee.
7	198-218	Associations had their own kitchens.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

1	001-026	The restaurant was originally called Man Jen Low (萬珍樓). It was established by his grandfather. After World War II, brothers came back from the service. Restaurant was frequently visited by journalists and writers from newspapers. The name General Lee was adopted by Paul Cope in 1948 or 1949.
	027-034	DL has all kinds of friends of different ethnic origin. Very few Black friends because of lack of contact with them.
2	035-038	Identifies self as being Chinese American. Feels very Chinese because of the time spent in China as a youth.
	039-049	Proud of being Chinese. Has gone back to China about four times. Proud of his long Chinese cultural heritage.
	050-064	This increased awareness and sense of pride in his heritage is a recent event - post "Roots" period. DL feels that his attitude is typical of those Chinese who are in touch with the Chinese community, such as those who live close to Chinatown. This attitude might not be prevalent among Chinese who are isolated, such as those who live far away from Chinatown.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	065-072	When DL's mother was alive, Chinese customs were observed. After his mother passed away, because of his busy life, he slowly started losing these customs.
	073-078	Western medicine was practiced in the family. Chinese medicine was used very sparingly. Mainly followed after taking western medicine.
	079-088	In the old days there were a few herbalists. Like the cooks, the new generations does not go into these professions. The reason the herbalist profession slowly died out was because after World War II no herbs entered this country.
	089-095	DL's mother used to observe the old customs, such as on August 15. With his generation, this is no longer observed. Even when DL's mother was alive, Chinese family remedies were seldom followed.
	096-102	Family went to very few cultural events such as the Chinese opera or to Chinese movies.
4	103-110	In 1927, there was a Chinese opera house. The whole family would go. They would also go to cowboy movies.
	111-120	In 1928, there was a Chinatown playground. Everybody volunteered to clean up the playground by picking up rocks. There was a baseball diamond and a couple of basketball hoops.
	121-131	There was a playground director. Her name was Miss Cook.
	132-135	Parents used to write to relatives in China and sent money to them and relatives in China wrote to parents in America.
5	136-138	Every family in those days always had roots (family) in China; always took good care of them.
	139-165	After the Communist take-over, overseas Chinese underwent a great change. They stopped sending money back to China and instead began to buy property. They also saved their money. The Chinese are very thrifty people. The Chinese community with the four banks in Chinatown have saved over 300 million dollars.
	166-175	In the old days they would either leave their money with the family association or they would leave the money with the stores because they would drift from job to job.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
6	176-194	DL's grandfather belonged to the Bing Kung Tong Association. The association tended to protect those who belonged to them. The family also belonged to the family associations Chan Kung So and Chan Van Yan.
	195-197	DL's father's name was . Father's American name was Lee Faun.
	198-205	The important families in Los Angeles at the time were the Chan Van Yan, Wong, and Lau Quan Jong families. The Quan family was very strong in the laundry business. The Wong family was strong in farming, produce and groceries. These families would all help each other in business.
	206-220	The families got along well with each other except for the gambling money. They were competing for the gambling dollars.
7	221-240	The gambling went on until Major Bowerling approximately in 1940. There was no gambling in the New Chinatown area at that time. Gambling was primarily in Old Chinatown.
	241-270	Two persons were prominent in the Chinese community, one was Y.C. Hong, the attorney. He was the only Chinese lawyer. He was a hunchback, and passed the bar at age 23. Practiced mostly as an immigration lawyer. Peter Soo Hoo was the person who put the Chinatown project together. He was at the time the only Chinese engineer. He worked for the Department of Water and Power.
8	271-275	Before World War II, the Chinese worked primarily in four businesses, laundry, restaurant, gambling, and grocery store. Some of them used to be house-boys, janitors and farmers. Initially, there were a lot of Chinese in farming. A lot of people left farming after the depression and the Japanese took over.
	276-294	Farms in the San Fernando Valley area - Woo and Chew family. In Downey - Woo family, Wong family, Quan family.
	295-305	Chinese did not have a chance to go into non-Chinese jobs. For instance, Charlie Lauk, who graduated in pharmacy, could not find a job in pharmacy.
9	306-311	Most of the Chinese lived as close to other Chinese if they possibly could.
	312-330	Very few Chinese were involved in politics at the time, perhaps none.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
9	331-345	Most of the differences among Chinese were settled between themselves via relatives since they knew that the court system would not give them a fair deal.
	346-365	All of the Chinese felt that they had an obligation to relatives back in China. Usually the most able one in each family would be sent over to America.
10	366-372	DL's grandfather and his brother came over to America. The two of them would send money back to China.
	373-400	All Chinese were severely affected by the Depression. Since they were on the bottom of the economic ladder, they all suffered.
	401-418	There was no doubt that there was hostility towards Chinese. For instance, white customers would occasionally come into the restaurant and not pay their bills. Since they were physically bigger, the Chinese were usually intimidated.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

1	001-016	Most of the children growing up would help out in the family business.
	017-028	All of the children went to Chinese school. Chinese school kept the children busy after school.
	029-040	Went to Jong Wah School (中華學校) on Los Angeles Street. (Los Angeles and Ferguson Streets). There were about fifty to sixty students. Some of the parents would drive their children to school. The Japanese children had a bus.
2	041-067	Comparison of Chinese and Jewish people. The Jewish people are more united. The Jews came to America to settle down whereas the Chinese viewed America as a place to "make money" and then go back to China.
3	068-075	Initially, the Chinese men in America met their wives by blind marriages in China. In time, with a growing population, they would meet each other in America.
	076-089	In 1920 to 1930 there were very few Chinese women. A very high percentage of Chinese men went back to China to marry. The American born Chinese girl did not want to marry an ordinary cook or waiter, they preferred to marry someone with a higher economic position.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	076-120	There were interracial marriages. Children of these parents were isolated from the Chinese people in general. Chinese had a greater tendency for intraracial marriages. They had a weaker sense of being Chinese and felt more American (children of interracial marriages).
4	1 1-134	In the old days, the Chinese had a yearning to return to China. In DL's generation this is no longer the case.
5	135-140	DL's grandfather and grandmother went back to Siek Kei to settle in 1926. Father went back to China to visit but was buried in America.
	141-164	Until World War II, the majority of the Chinese returned to China. There was a Chinese cemetery here in the east side. It is still there.
	165-176	The biggest dream that the Chinese would like is their children to be a doctor or a lawyer. Prestigious, highly respected and earning high wages.
6	177-182	Most of DL's nephews are in engineering. His own son is still very young.
	183-262	Advice to young men and general philosophical discussions.

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