

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHINESE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: George F. Woo
 Chinese Name: 胡飛
 Date of Interview: 6/19/81
 Interviewer: Suellen Cheng
 Others Present: None
 Language: English
 Summarizer: Rodney Chow

Interview Number: 153
 Number of Tapes: 3
 Length: 2 Hours & 30 Minutes

Contents

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary	Tape No.	Side
1	000-010	Been in business, one-man operation, six to seven years with one truck, second truck, then hiring help. All the members of the family went their own way.	1	A
	011-016	W. Fay Company is the name of the business.		
	017-020	Did very well, advanced to four trucks before the war, six to eight workers.		
	021-026	Competition was very keep against the Japanese.		
	027-029	Chinese, 70%, owning one-door small business.		
	030-034	During the war, I went up to eight trucks. After the war, I moved from the yard to an inside store.		
2	035-040	I still went out to pick up produce from growers until 1945 -- then I stopped going myself except to see the growers.		
	041-046	At that time growers would give us the vegetables to sell and we did not have to buy anymore.		
	047-049	Business was on cash basis -- growers were kept up on sale price once a week.		
	050-054	\$150 a week profit then was good. Apartment rent for housing was \$20 a month. I had friends, the Wong family, and two or three brothers: Don, Tommy, and Lee stayed with me at the apartment.		
3	055-080	It was the custom then to live together and share the living expense.		
	081-083	Everyone cooperated in food expense by supplying rice, meat, vegetables, etc. Lee Wall worked in a restaurant.		
	084-087	Don worked in a laundry. Tommy worked in a market.		
	088-091	I was in this business first so I was doing better.		
	092-098	Lee, Don, and Toomy did pretty good. Got married, had family, bought a house. Don sent his children to college.		
	099-100	We lived together for four years. I was first to marry.		

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	101-107	Apartment was on Merchant Street -- now a vacant lot.
	108-111	Owners of the apartment are Caucasians.
	112-114	We ate both American and Chinese food, same as now.
	115-126	I was buying locally, that is Orange County and Los Angeles County. Shortly after I married, I bought a house, when I married, on Woodlawn Avenue in Vernon.
	127-140	I had no trouble buying a house -- it was a mixed neighborhood.
5	141-146	Stayed in Vernon until after the war. In 1952 I moved to the neighborhood I am in now and had difficulty buying in. The neighborhood was all Caucasian and I had to double escrow in order to get the house.
	147-150	It is on Ladera Heights. My insurance broker bought the house and I bought it from him, that's how I double escrowed.
	151-157	I had no trouble after I moved in. I attended PTA and let them know I wasn't bad. They were afraid of Orientals because of the stories of opium dens and tong wars.
	158-166	It was the builder who wouldn't sell. It was a new house. He said, "If we sell to you, we would not be able to build again in this territory."
	167-179	Our standard of living was above their standard. It's our pride.
	180-184	Quite a few in the produce business was successful.
6	185-195	In this generation, the younger people have become doctors and professionals and not into the business because they do not like the long hours.
	196-203	It is hard to get anyone to step into my business.
	203-204	Before World War II, anyone can start out small. Now it is too expensive to start a new business.
	205-222	There are a few Italians still in the business. There are more Mexicans coming in and starting and growing, the older businesses like myself are not expanding anymore.
	223-227	Japanese -- their sons and daughters, do not like this business and are moving out. They have made their fortune and their children do not want to take over, so they sell out to Mexicans or others.
7	228-242	Japanese were never strong in produce business after World War II. The Chinese had small stores prior to World War II, kept it and grew big when the Japanese moved out.
	243-260	They expand by lease purchase of space.
	261-268	This is all Southern Pacific property.
	269-271	My help is mixed colored: Chinese, Mexicans, all union help.
	272-273	When I started, all help was non-union and most were Mexicans. I also had Chinese help.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
8	274-295	Prior to World War II, unions began. Prior to World War II you were lucky to earn \$20 a week as a laborer, 12 hours a day.
	296-305	Owners have an association when unions came in -- "Produce Market Association."
	306-320	We had a Chinese Association formed in the 30's for social, still have it. I only pay dues, do not go to the functions.
9	321-336	We had a lot of friends and produce merchants. We still have meetings once a month and have banquets, but I don't go.
	337-345	We are all competitors and friends.
	346-365	Our friendship extends beyond business. Mostly have lunch together.
	366-380	In my case, I have very little chance to have Chinese friends because I am not around them
10	381-396	There is a lot of Caucasians here in the produce business, you are judged not as a minority but what you do, regardless of color or nationality.
	397-411	Business did not have discrimination, it only depended on reputation, in other words, pay good and promptly.
	412-430	This business is basied on a 15% commission. We have field men from Stockton to the Mexican border. And one field man in Nogales to deal with the Mexican produce.
11	431-476	I do not handle Chinese vegetables.
END OF SIDE A		

TAPE 1 SIDE B

1	000-012	My parents were born in Los Angeles. Mother in Los Angeles, Dad in San Francisco. My father was a merchant in Chinatown in San Francisco. My grandfather had a dress shop, a tailor in Old Chinatown.
	013-021	Grandpa and Grandma came in a sailboat. My mother was born before 1900.
	022-024	Dad came here and started a herb business in Chinatown. He died when I was three and Mother died when I was six, and I stayed with Grandma and Grandpa until I was thirteen or fourteen.
2	025-036	Grandpa had ten acres in Cudahy, raised asparagus and had a small peach orchard. We raised chickens and goats and I had to milk the goats.

Contents (cont'd)

Tape: 1 Side B

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
2	037-050	Those days we were one of the few with families. We were one of the few that owned property because Mom was born here and the property was bought in her name.
	051-057	Those days if you weren't a citizen you couldn't buy property.
	057-058	I was born by the Santa Fe Depot area because my mom and pop died and I went to live with my grandparents. We were the only Oriental family at the country home of grandparents. School had only two teachers.
3	059-081	At that time sixty years ago, it was few Chinese, Japanese, Italians, doing most of the farming. I went to Laguna School.
	082-088	When I was eleven years old, my uncle took me to his place and I moved to Watts and went as high up as eighth grade. I was sixteen years old and went on my own. Grandpa and Grandma died in their seventies.
	089-102	Farm labor was Mexican.
	103-104	Japanese leased their own ground for farming. The Mexicans were local people.
4	105-116	Grandpa raised Chinese vegetables. Wholesalers would buy the vegetables.
	117-120	Grandpa did very good. Did not need to buy much.
	121-132	Once a month Grandpa took me to Chinatown for a haircut or to shop for shoes or other needs, and to buy goodies to eat. Chinatown was small and you knew practically everyone.
5	133-145	Grandpa was Toishan, he was a Soo Hoo. Soo Hoo Mong Sing was Grandpa's name.
	146-150	Grandpa had number four daughter, Aunt Carey, who had a home in Chinatown. We would go there and have dinner before going home.
	151-163	Grandpa and Grandma has six daughters and four sons. My mother was the oldest of the daughters. We came in because of Aunt Carey, otherwise we wouldn't have come to town.
	164-175	Chinatown then was crowded -- Ferguson Alley ruts and muddy when it rained -- horse and buggy then.
6	176-190	We would go back the same day. Started at 6:00 a.m., left Chinatown at 4:00 p.m. and got home before dark.
	191-198	We had a two-story home -- big house. Three bedrooms downstairs.
	199-210	My sister and two brothers -- one younger than me, all lived with our grandparents. Sister stayed -- all the brothers and I left.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
7	211-232 233-244	Those days everyone helped chop wood, pull weeds. I didn't have the opportunity to study Chinese. I spoke Chinese at home but all our brothers and sisters spoke English. I was the only one to finish grammar school only. The others finished high school.
	245-253	We were picked on in school because we were different -- Oriental -- really picked on. Nothing you could do about it but take it. Neighbors were okay, besides they were too far away from us. Grandpa shopped at the country store.
	254-275	He baked his own bread so not much shopping.
8	276-277	This was not uncommon because 60% of the people then made their own bread.
	278-285 286-300	Grandpa did most of the cooking. Grandma watched over us. Grandma came after Grandpa, she came to some church and met Grandpa.
9	301-329	I went through the eighth grade only. My first job was working on other people's ranches for \$80 a month, room and board. Worked from sunrise to sundown. It was a vegetable ranch. I drove a tractor.
	330-350	My older brother worked in town in a market. My sister was a bookkeeper. My first boss was Chinese. The ranch was in Maywood.
	351-362	I worked three or four years at the ranch. That time \$80 a month was good money.
	363-378	When I had money, I bought a used truck and started in the produce business.
	379-381	The produce business was my own and I started with one truck in 1927. I was eighteen and started in this market. Wholesale Terminal Market. I started on a stall and a truck.
10	382-413	I went to Maywood, Downey, around here, for vegetables. At that time, Grandpa and Grandma had died.
	414-440	Potatoes, onions, in small boxes, were bought from small farmers, ten acres and twenty acres. Mostly Japanese and a few Italian farmers.
11	441-447	Those days when you made five or ten cents per box, it was something. Labor was cheap.
	448-454	A load per truck was about 150 boxes. Gas was 15¢ to 18¢ a gallon.
	455-462	That was the only business that could be started with small capital.

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
11	463-467	Those days you could start the business with \$150 to \$200.
	468-473	A used truck would cost \$50 to \$70. I started single-handed.
END OF TAPE 1		

TAPE 2 SIDE A

1	000-001	Started business in 1927 -- there were fifty or more Chinese produce markets prior to World War II. Chinese did not dominate, had about one-fourth of the business; some Greeks.
	002-019	Chinese had more when World War II broke out.
	020-021	There were close to 350 Chinese in produce business as owners and workers. As we modernized and unionized, it helped decrease the people working.
	022-032	Before World War II, the market had better than 4,000 employees -- one-third were Chinese, including owners and peddlers.
2	033-039	Working hours were 16 to 17 hours a day for everyone, not only Chinese. Unions were formed in the 30's and that cut hours to eight hours and 48 hours a week.
	040-048	Now we have two shifts. Early receiving people come in from 8:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Delivery and salesmen come in at 1:00 p.m. Close our doors at 11:00 p.m. Office work to 4:30 p.m. Now I am semi-retired.
	049-060	When I was fully in charge, I worked 12 to 14 hours a day like everyone else.
	061-063	Buyers come in shifts: San Diego buyers come in at 10 to 11:00; San Bernardino buyers come in 1 to 2:00; local buyers come in from there on. Some days you sell out early.
3	064-076	In the early 20's very few buyers from out of state. Today they come from Texas, Oklahoma. In the 20's buyers came from as far as Sacramento.
	077-091	My store now has five departments: One department handles lettuce; one department handles cherry tomatoes; one department handles fruit -- citrus.
	092-106	We started handling lettuce in 1946.
4	107-114	In the 20's there were no standardization and containers were different but did not have to sort.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	115-131	I hired mostly Mexican help in the beginning because they were cheaper than Chinese help.
	132-140	In those days, the Chinese were putting up orders and sorting and the delivery boys were Mexicans. They are stronger and do the heavy work.
5	141-145	In the depression days, produce market paid good wages, higher scale. During the depression days \$20 a week, that was big pay. Those days you would say, "Have you got a job?" instead of saying "Hello," or "How are you?"
	146-170	During Roosevelt's time, the average wage was \$20 to \$25 a week.
	171-177	The Union started in the middle 30's. Then workers worked shorter hours but at the same pay.
	178-182	It didn't matter what ethnic background you were from; pay was the same then. Men were laborers, women were wives who took care of the books then.
6	183-202	Men did the cleaning then. When I had one truck -- 20¢ to 35¢ a package, 50¢ a package, that was real good money.
	203-218	Those days I would pick up a load, sell it, then go pick up another load. The average was one load per day.
	219-228	Help came to ask for work -- those days was during the depression there were plenty of help. Chinese help were all single -- new immigrants and locals. Typically lived together as bachelors. Most lived close to the market.
7	229-248	This neighborhood was at one time all residences.
	249-260	I do not recall boarding houses, but bachelors would get together as coop. Entertainment was mahjong, gambling.
	261-274	More modern Chinese would hunt a lot -- shoot quail, doves at Belevedere.
8	275-283	Only time we went to Chinatown was to buy Chinese groceries.
	284-285	The first Chinese generation in the market had different recreational activities. First generation Chinese played mahjong. Second generations were more active, went to ball games and did hunting.
	286-296	In those days, Chinatown had no Chinese operas but maybe some groups may have come to Chinatown.
	297-312	Our group just gathered together to go to Lancaster -- on Sundays only.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
9	313-334 335-336 337-347 348-358 359-373 374-377	Before union, we worked six to seven days. Chinese stores would open on Sundays to clean up left-overs. The Chinese saved money and then returned to China to their families. These people would go back to China and spend all their money then borrow more to return to America. In the early days, ten to fifteen Chinese boys would get together to farm 100 to 150 acres in cauliflower, potatoes, etc. Los Angeles and Orange County financing would be done by a store in Chinatown. The store would then get 25% of the profits. Generally the financier would own a grocery store, meat market. They financed by supplying food and money.
10	378-388 389-390 391-400 401-417	These stores made good money on the loans. Those days the farmers didn't need bank loans because they were financed by Chinatown stores. They were not financed through the produce market. The market wasn't big enough. Gradually the produce market got big enough to finance the farmer. When Chinese workers worked for me and went back to China, spent all their money, then wrote to me to lend them money to allow them to come back to work again.
11	418-449	I was back in China in 1926 for one year. My Grandma on my father's side had bound feet, my uncle sent me. I tried to go to school there but found it difficult.
END OF SIDE A		

TAPE 2 SIDE B

1	000-006 007-030	My mama and father was born in Frisco. I don't know how Grandma and Grandpa got there. They had returned to China, I don't know much about it. When I was in China, they called me "fan guey doy" (foreign devil boy) -- it was funny when I think of it. Our ways were different from their's. Grandma passed away while I was there. Grandma had quite a bit of property in China. I believe my grandpa went back fairly wealthy. They had a two-story house and Uncle sent back money. Uncle married and brought his wife over here (USA) in 1918. He has grown sons now. He passed away in 1942.
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Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
2	031-048	Grandpa had returned to China before I was born. In this village (ours in China) about thirty families had relatives in America. Some had come to work on the railroad. To their standards, these families in China were well off.
	049-055	I was fifteen or sixteen years old and all the other kids were ten to twelve years old and I was in the first grade.
	056-069	My father had only one brother. The relatives were I did not write to them because I did not know how to write Chinese.
3	070-086	I got married in Las Vegas. My wife is from Honolulu. I met her in Honolulu. It was in a bowling tournament. I had already established in business. She raised the family and stayed home.
	087-097	We had two older daughters, 41 and 40 then the others -- 27, 28, 30 and the youngest is 26.
	098-104	My wife helped with the family business. The business is now a corporation. Most stockholders are relatives except one. He is a Japanese. He has been with me for thirty years.
4	105-114	I didn't join the union because I was an owner.
	115-120	When the union was formed we then formed the market association to meet the union demands. I have been a member of the association since, and served as a director for quite a few years. At that time the membership was not incorporated, in 1960 they elected my president and I incorporated the association.
	121-130	I am semi-retired and no longer active -- still pay dues. There are monthly meetings. Now about 95% of the owners are members. When the association was formed there were very little dues. Now it is based on how many employees you have. There is now insurance available. We have a lobbyist. We started having a lobbyist in the late 1950's.
5	131-162	We provide insurance as a group to employees.
	163-172	Q: Do you feel more Chinese or American? A: My ways are more American than Chinese.
		Q: Do you ever feel you are Chinese? A: In certain things I do such as eating.
	173-182	Q: Do you think you are typical among Chinese? A: In my generation I was different.
		Q: Did you use Chinese herbs and Chinese doctors when you were sick? A: I prefer American doctors but we do cook certain herbs and certain vegetables for health. I still use some herbs to cook ox tail.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
6	183-204	I was born into the Woo Association (Chin Woo Yuen) I donate dues to them and go to the banquets.
	205-215	I started to participate (in the Woo Association) right after I came back from China. I was seventeen or eighteen years old.
	216-222	The Wongs (Association) was the largest, second was Chin Woo Yuen and Lui were third (in the early days).
7	223-234	I was a director in the Chin Woo Yuen Association. I quit going to the banquets because of my diet.
	235-246	Q: Did the family association help those who needed help? A: They were suppose to. Now, they have scholarship funds. In the old days, they saw to it that members had enough to eat.
	247-256	Q: Can you name some of the most important families in the early days in Los Angeles? A: I was the most important. Dan Louie Junior's dad was the biggest produce market. Then there was David Woo. Louie Quon started the 9th street market.
	257-283	Of course those days what the Chinese started they could not finish because they were second-class citizens.
8	284-294	Because they couldn't continue, the Americans and Japanese took over. The Japanese had more push than the Chinese. In those days you couldn't do much without being a citizen.
	295-312	I was what you call a "C" grade, I did my own and I did what the Chinese do.
	313-319	Before the war, the Chinese were also in the hand laundry. The hand laundries were all over, especially close to the hotels. They had small restaurants. We never compared who made more money. We talked about money. Some laundries did very well. It didn't require much money to start a laundry. All you needed was a couple of irons and rent. A lot of Chinese worked in the laundry, families helped.
9	320-367	The restaurants were small and were in small towns. Mom and dad shops. The Chinese did not go into the grocery business. Those days the large groceries had departments that were owned by different people, independent owners, such as the meat department, groceries, vegetables.
	368-378	Japanese and Chinese would always have the vegetable department. There were also quite a few Chinese in meat, too.

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
10	379-393 394-404	I didn't have any friends in the meat markets. They would go to the slaughter house and pick up the odds and ends like tripe, blood, etc., which was given away. They would bring them back and clean them. They were very successful this way. Not only Chinese salvaged this way. Mexicans and Filipinos also. Filipinos used more blood than anyone else.
	405-420	The Chinese lived where they established their business. They did not necessarily stay where other Chinese were. They lived close to their business.
11	421-454	There were a lot of Chinese peddlers until the depression, then they began to disappear.
	455-465	In the early days 99.5% of the business was cash, now 50% is charge and 30% is cash. The peddlers would purchase boxes of vegetables and fruits and peddle them door to door.
	466-492	There were some non-Chinese peddlers. About one-third of the peddlers were Chinese then.
END OF TAPE 2		

TAPE 3 SIDE A

1	000-006	No, we never made comparisons with Jewish people. We never took nationality into consideration, just individuals. This is called a real mixing pot. We got all nationalities coming in to buy.
	007-012	No, I don't know of any Chinese involved in politics. I was too busy making a living.
	013-023	Oh yes, Chinese were affected by the depression. Farmers were affected because they couldn't sell their merchandise for what it cost to raise. They weren't hungry because they had everything to eat on the ranches. The family took care of each other. That's why you never saw any Chinese on the bread line.
	024-031	Produce market was affected less during the depression, they just ate less expensive but were able to pay bills.
2	032-046	Good neighborhoods had housing discrimination. When I moved to Ladera Heights I had to double escrow to get in. In Beverly Hills you couldn't buy land no matter how much money you had. In Chapman Woods I put up money to buy a house and two days later, my check was returned.
	047-056	In the good middle class white neighborhood, they looked down on Chinese but the market had no discrimination, it was based on how good your service was.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	057-074	It made no difference whether I had sons or daughters -- same as my friends -- they are treated equally.
	075-080	I don't think anything of intermarriage. It makes no difference -- I have a son married to a Caucasian.
	081-093	In my early days those (relatives) people would object to intermarriage.
4	094-112	If people lived around Chinatown, they would send the children to Chinese school.
	113-114	In those days I did not question why -- I needed a Chinese education. I just obeyed. I disagreed but I didn't dare raise my voice.
	115-127	I always lived away from Chinatown so my children did not have a chance for a Chinese education. I never talk Chinese at home, it was easier to speak English. We spoke Chinese together with Mama, but not to the kids. I do now feel Chinese (language) is good. Because the more languages you speak, the better you are.
	128-141	Q: What do you think of movies like Charlie Chan? A: I rather not talk about them. It doesn't bother me.
5	142-157	I never did think about what job was ideal. I just enjoy my business. I did not try to influence my children on their jobs. My two older children are school teachers. The third one graduated as an Education teacher. The youngest is in a computer office. I have four daughters, no sons. Last one is not married. I have one boy and one girl grandchildren. These grandchildren are picking up some Chinese from the in-law side.
6	158-188	My friends now have about the same attitudes. Their sons are professionals, they don't want to work hard anymore.

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