

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHINESE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Keong Lee (S. K. Lee) Interview Number: 125
 Chinese Name: _____ Number of Tapes: 2
 Date of Interview: 7/21/80, 2/20/81 Length: 1 Hour & 54 Minutes
 Interviewer: Beverly Chan
 Others Present: _____
 Language: English
 Summarizer: George Yee

Contents

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary	Tape No. <u>1</u>	Side: <u>A</u>
1	001-008	Mother born in China. Father naturalized.		
	009-011	Father actually born in China. Made claim of being born in San Francisco after earthquake destroyed records.		
	012-017	Parents from Lone Gwall Village, Toishan (台山) County, Kwangtung, China.		
	018-022	Father was cook at Franciscan or Francis Hotel.		
	023-025	Father came before the earthquake on boat with sail.		
	026-028	Father claimed being born here after the earthquake because everyone else did it.		
	029-030	Keong Lee (KL) does not know father's original entry status. Father was married.		
	031-033	At the time, father first came, Chinese could not bring wife over.		
2	034-040	Father came to make a living. Stayed in San Francisco until 1925. Then came to Los Angeles.		
	041-048	Father came to the United States. Stayed for a few years. Then went back to China. Got married. Came back. Earthquake destroyed records. Claimed to be born in San Francisco. Went back to China. Brought KL to the United States.		
	049-054	KL born in 1909 in Lone Gwall Village. Came to San Francisco in 1922. To Los Angeles in 1925.		
	055-064	Father worked in (or owned) Chinese restaurant in San Francisco downtown. Tired of cooking. Heard of produce market opportunities in Los Angeles. Came to Los Angeles in 1925.		
3	065-084	KL came to Los Angeles alone by train. Father believed in self care. Father directed KL to immigration building on		

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	065-084	Grant and Clay street the day after arrival. Made KL go in alone to get I.D. papers. KL did not understand English at the time.
	085-091	KL had two uncles in San Francisco and two aunts in Oakland.
	092-106	Father worked on mother's papers to come to the United States. Stopped. Decided to retire in China in 1933. KL went with father to China. Father stayed. KL returned.
4	107-116	KL had a younger brother who died in China, 18 years old. Father wanted brother to stay in China to be a scholar.
	117-123	Village had over one thousand people.
	124-139	Family owned farmland in China. Share cropped with other farmers. Farmers turned over one-third to one-half of crop to family, depending on farmer and crop yield.
	140-143	A lot of oversea Chinese did this with their money.
5	144-155	Father already owned land before coming to the United States. Could not make a living on it. That is why many Chinese came to America.
	156-160	KL spoke Sze Yup dialect unless in Canton or Hong Kong.
	161-169	KL took three trips to China -- 1933 with father, returned to America in 1935; back to China in 1935 again, returned to America in 1937.
	170-173	While he was away, cousin took care of produce business, friend took care of house.
	174-182	KL lived at the store in San Francisco. Store was the Wak Yown Company formed by fathers and friends.
6	183-191	Store was catering to Filipinos who went to work in the Alaska Cannery. Store acted as contractor for salmon cannery workeds -- supplied labor and workers' needs.
	192-203	It was a store and a habardashery. Sold clothing, luggage, and shoes. Dealt with Filipinos mostly. There were other stores contracting for Chinese.
	204-209	Father spoke good English and a little German from working as a cook. Father was actually a partner in the store. KL was too young to work in the store.
	210-225	KL wore knickers (knee pants) and cap when he first came to America.
7	226-237	In China, KL lived in a brick house, later father built brick and concrete house. Family was considered middle class as most Chinese who had been to America.
	238-268	KL went to school in China, but forgot everything by the time he came to San Francisco at 14 years of age.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
7	238-268	He only learned simple things in the village school. He graduated from Chung Wah school in San Francisco.
8	269-286	In San Francisco, he helped out at the store. Cooked breakfast, went to school at 8:00 a.m., came home at 3:00 p.m. No time to do homework. Only had time on Saturday afternoons and Sundays.
	287-304	KL had three years of American school. Reached eighth grade and dropped out. Got disgusted. No time to do homework.
	305-321	Lived near Central Avenue and 8th Street in Los Angeles in 1925. Rented a house there. Walked to work.
9	322-333	In 1927, they owned a Mondel-T truck (Ford). Lived in a frame house. Running water. Toilet. Rent about \$25. Three bedrooms.
	334-349	House was shared with a Negro family. Did not know if share of rent was \$12. KL, father, and uncle shared the house with the black family. Got along well.
	350-360	Learned English fast. Had chance to study English -- for six months -- in Hong Kong before coming to America.
	361-379	Lived with the black family for one and a half years. Moved to another house near by. Chinese could not buy a house in those days. No need for father to try. After World War II, you could buy a house.
10	380-386	A lot of Chinese college graduates worked in restaurants washing dishes.
	387-400	KL stayed around Central and 8th Street area with Chinese who worked in market. Chinese who worked in restaurants lived elsewhere in Los Angeles.
	401-423	Father's store was wholesale. Clients were mostly Japanese, American, Italian, Greek, Armenian, restaurants. KL drove a truck to suburb of Los Angeles to pick up produce from Chinese farmers to sell. There were many Chinese farmers around those days.
	424-438	Before World War II, 65% of produce business was Chinese. Easily 200 to 300 Chinese owners and workers.
	439-448	There were many Chinese peddlers. Horse and buggy selling produce around Adam Street and the West Los Angeles area.
11	449-471	Chinese owned about 75% of produce market at the city market between San Julian and San Pedro Street, at Union Terminal Market where KL works. Between Alameda, Central, and 7th and 8th Street, there were less Chinese because it was newer.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
11	472-497	Difficult to get into produce business. You have to know someone to lead you in. Mr. Wong helped KL's father.
		END OF SIDE A
<u>TAPE 1 SIDE B</u>		
1	001-006	Workers worked 18 to 20 hours a day. Seven days a week during December to March. Other months of the year, worked 12 hours.
	007-018	No definite working hours. Sometimes we got home at 3 p.m. and came back to work at 9 p.m. There was no union. The three of us worked together as a partnership.
	019-023	KL took over the business when he returned from China. When KL was in China in 1933, uncle wired him after six months to return or he would have lost his job. So he came back.
	024-034	Long hours were spent sorting tomatoes and vegetables from Mexico by train. Too cold in California.
2	035-050	Tomatoes were separated -- green, pink, and ripe. Put lamp in the middle of the canvas to cover the pile of tomatoes to speed up the ripening process. Cabbage had to be trimmed. Other vegetables had to be cleaned.
	051-054	Not like today. Took days for produce to reach Los Angeles from Mexico. All hard work. Mostly Chinese put in those long hours. Caucasians put in less hours. They were mostly jobbers.
	055-076	Produce business was an adventure -- a gamble. KL put up orders, grade, size, depending on buyers' demand.
3	077-080	Sometimes they had to deliver if buyers had no transportation.
	081-089	No income tax or social security. Had to have business license. Do not remember the cost of the license.
	090-102	Store made \$4,000 to \$5,000 a year net profit divided three ways. Sometimes nothing, money went to capital. We charged rent, food, to the company. Compared \$5,000 profit with today.
4	103-125	Produce packaging was different. Potatoes were in 125 pound sacks. Today they are 100 pounds or 50 pounds. Potatoes were sold by the pound, \$1.00 to \$1.50 per sack.
	126-133	Business partners were friends. When KL and father went to China, two friends took their place. Cousin was hired later on.
	134-142	KL left about \$1,000 in capital in business when he went to China.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	143-149	Produce business is peculiar. You do not sell business, you sell good will. When you pull out, you take your money out.
5	150-167	Do not need much capital to run business. Farmers bring produce. Sell produce. Pay farmers. KL did not know how much it cost father to set up the business. Rent was about \$35.
	168-176	There were many Chinese squatters around. Did business on sidewalk in a put-up tent
6	177-192	Pricing was by demand and supply.
	193-210	Only business the Chinese can "cut out" an outside customer. Call then S.O.B. and get away with it when supply is limited and produce is being saved for regular clients.
	211-219	Business is a gamble. Like buying stocks. Sometimes you lose money. Sometimes 5 to 10 percent profit.
7	220-237	Health Department came around. Inspected produce for chemicals or insecticides. Issued red tag. Most dumped produce. Do not pay farmer, just show farmer the Health Department red tag.
	238-241	Sometimes you buy outright from farmers and you can lose money.
	242-245	No formal contracts between farmers and producers. Faith.
	246-260	Local farmers were located by leads or by a field man who contracted the farmer (Salinas, Paso Robles, Santa Maria). Sometimes several people would share one field man.
8	261-296	Union Terminal Market was 50% Chinese. Mostly sold to non-Chinese. Not many Chinese grocery stores. Restaurants got their supplies directly from "hauling men." Hauling men went to restaurants to get supply orders.
	297-308	Most people in produce business had wives in China. Very few Chinese families were here. Cannot bring wives over.
	309-321	Jobbers handled large quantities of produce. Called "brokers" today.
9	322-330	Few new help is hired by produces. Work all done by people in the store.
	331-352	Workers lived in "A Frame" houses. Little social activity. There was a Chinese Agricultural Association "Noan Chun Shoong Woy" (農產商會). Few members left now. Members used to play pool or mahjong -- that is about it. There was no other gambling games. For those who wanted, there was a gambling house at the restaurant.

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
9	353-365	There was no time for social activity. Only time was on Saturday. In the summer time they do not work on weekends, but sometimes they could if they wanted to. There is no client business on weekends.
10	366-393	Produce came in wooden crates. Sometimes it had to be broken up to suit buyers. Lettuce came in four dozen per box those days. It was split up into smaller boxes.
	394-417	Cannot complain about making a living. Knew it was hard. Money could be saved if you had no bad habits. Saying: "Three Chinese get together, they want to gamble."
	418-441	In the 20's and 30's most produce was obtained from Chinese and Japanese farms. Americans did not farm. Farms were small those days. They were located in suburban Los Angeles -- El Monte, Artesia, Fountain Valley, Puente, San Fernando Valley. Quite a few Chinese grew asparagus in the San Fernando Valley. There was a Wong family asparagus grower up there.
11	442-455	Only vacation KL had was when he took off and went back to China in 1933, 1937, and 1951.
	456-486	KL went back to China in 1933. Got married. Back in 1937 for a visit. Was going to bring wife over in 1941. Got passport in July. Received a letter from State Department saying, "Sorry, no space available for you." By November, they cancelled the trip. War started. Wife died in Hong Kong of cholera.
	487-497	KL had a boy and girl. Raised in Hong Kong. KL went back to Hong Kong in 1947 and brought his children to the United States.

END OF TAPE 1

TAPE 2 SIDE A

1	001-014	KL was a member of the Arbitration Association, an organization to fight the union. He was also a member of the Chinese Produce Association, a Chamber of Commerce type of organization.
	015-019	Everyone belonged to the Arbitration Association. Only Chinese belonged to the Chinese Produce Association. It still exists today. KL never held any position in the Association.
	020-026	Chinese Produce Association dues were \$7.50 a month. Association had about a dozen Chinese members.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
2	027-047	Purpose of Association was to send representatives to bargain with the union. All employees belonged to the union. Chinese had to join the union to work in produce. Only union people are hired. Wife did not work. Had to take care of the kids.
	048-057	Spoke some Chinese at home with wife. Kids do not speak Chinese. In 1930's, KL spoke mostly Chinese. Understood both Sze Yup and Sum Yup dialects. Somewhat missed his birthplace in China.
3	058-076	KL associated mostly with Chinese those days. Felt more like Chinese. Now feels more like 75% American. Never felt bad about being Chinese. Never disagreed with family about being Chinese. KL feels like all Chinese except when he is with outsider of family. Most Chinese felt that way.
	077-092	Prefer Western medicine when sick. Occasional use of Chinese medicine. Whole family likes Chinese food. When KL was growing up, always used Chinese medicine. KL never got sick. He does not believe in medicine, oriental food, or tea.
	093-103	KL had little recreation except playing mahjong. Never played ball. Went to movies once in a while. Prefers mahjong over movies.
4	104-113	Did not write to China very often. Did not send money because no one depended on him. Father sent money back. KL said he did send money to wife.
	114-120	Never belonged to any Chinatown Association. He was too young. Father belonged to the Lee Family Association.
	121-142	KL could not think of any important Chinese families. Did recall a Mr. Woo with the Bank of America. A Mr. Gee in the Chinese department of the downtown Security National Bank. Could not recall another Chinese manager with the California Bank on 9th and San Pedro.
	143-163	Manager of Chinese department in Bank of America was Woo Hay. Banks had Chinese managers because the Chinese had difficulty with American tellers. Chinese went to Chinese managers to take care of sending a money draft to Hong Kong to send back to the village.
	164-173	KL does not know of any Chinese organization that handles or sends money back to China.
	174-182	Before World War II, the majority of Chinese were in laundry business. Few in restaurants. Quite a bit of farmers before World War I. In World War II, some Chinese draft dodgers were "farmers."

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
6	183-193	Before World War II, Chinese wages of \$3,000 a year was a good wage. Rent was cheap -- \$15 or \$20 for three to four bedroom houses. \$5 for expense money was plenty.
	194-218	Chinese lived like bachelors those days. Lived in groups. Up to eight people would rent a house. Share food and house jobs. It was fun. Like a college dormitory.
	219-226	Chinese lived where they worked. Laundrymen lived in laundry. No cars to get around. Produce people rented houses around produce market area to live in.
7	227-240	Chinese liked to gamble. There were gambling halls in Chinatown. Old saying, "Get three Chinese together and they gamble."
	241-261	Not everyone sent money back to China. Some did to buy land. KL's friends sometimes asked him to open an account in the bank for them when they could not speak English. Friends would ask KL for money. KL gave money. Went to friend's bank account to get refund back. Sometimes KL would lose money if he forgot to keep good records.
	262-272	Some Chinese hid their money. They did not know how to rent a safety box.
8	273-297	Did not know of any Chinese personally active in politics in China. Just heard of some. Had some friends working in airline in China. For Central Airlines (中央航空公司) and for Sai Nan Hong Kong Kung Si (西南航空公司).
	298-320	Met some friends at Canton White Cloud Airport (白雲機場). He was flying transports for a civilian airline. Transported goods. Had benches for people.
	321-334	Knew some friends who went to the Japanese. They were with the Canton Air Force. They wore nice uniforms. Walked around like big shots. When war started, they came back. Three are still in town.
9	335-351	Chinese feel they have support obligations in China. Depression had an affect on the Chinese. Father lost in bank stock. Depression did not affect the produce business.
	352-365	Chinese were on the conservative side. Produce business is small. People have to eat. Produce business did not lose much.
	366-393	Up to 1945, Chinese were better off than other people. They can survive better. Cannot compare Chinese and Jews. Jew are cooperative. Chinese are selfish. Jews are shrewd, cannot beat them.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
10	394-426	Most Chinese found their wives through matchmakers. Even in America, those days. Not many married here. Most Chinese went back to China to marry. They feel the girls are more dependable and "homelier."
	427-455	Chinese like sons. Very few intermarriages those days. KL knows of Chinese marrying American woman. Get along well. Do not know if girl's family accepted them.
11	456-486	KL knew a Mr. Shue who married a German lady. They spoke English. Mr. Shue was a pilot in China. He is now an insurance agent. He also practices accupressure (點穴) and martial arts. Mr. Shue was going to teach KL martial arts but KL had no time.
	487-495	Many Chinese want their children to speak Chinese.

END OF SIDE A

TAPE 2 SIDE B

1	001-011	Chinese wanted kids to go to Chinese school. KL went to three years of Chinese school here. Had some basic Chinese schooling in China. Few Chinese sent kids back to China for schooling at the University if they could afford it.
	012-021	75% of the Chinese wanted to go back to China to retire if they could afford it. 60% of the 75% who wanted to go, actually made it.
2	022-045	American Chinese did not care how Chinese roles were played in movies. KL did not like Fu Manchu character. Charlie Chan was okay. Chinese did not have power or time to protest those days. KL does not feel embarrassed to be Chinese unless insulted.
	046-070	KL does not know what an ideal job was those days. There were not choices. Produce business was independent business. No use wanting to be a doctor or lawyer if you cannot get an education. There were a few doctors. KL does not know of any lawyers. Father has to be rich for kids to go to school.
3	071-103	All of KL's children got an education. Before war, Chinese did not have thought of having children get an education. In the 30's, there were not many Chinese children in Los Angeles. The ones here came from China. After spending money to get kids here, there was no

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	071-103	money left for college. After the war and after President Kennedy gave people civil rights, Chinese changed and gave kids education.
4	104-168	KL had four years of American school all together. Went from first to fifth grade in foreign beginners school. KL first went to the Chinese Presbyterian Church school in San Francisco. At sixteen he left to go to fifth grade school on the outside white neighborhood. He was very big for the class, but teachers were very nice. They understood. Went to sixth grade. Then came down to Los Angeles, and went to eighth grade. Went to school near 9th and Stanford. Then to Lafayette Junior High School near Niomi and Jefferson. They had some black and white teachers. KL lived near 7th and Central. Lafayette School is near Long Beach, Alameda and Washington and 15th Street. There were other Chinese kids in school too. Most Chinese quit school after junior high. There was no time.
5	169-187	KL gets up at 6:00 a.m. Cooks. School from 9 to 12. Lunch. School out at 3:00 p.m. Cook. Chinese school from 5 to 8 p.m. Come home. Help clean store. Saturday, Chinese school from 8 to noon. Sunday off. When KL came to Los Angeles, he did not go to Chinese school, only English school. Father yelled at him for going to the library to study.

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