

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHINESE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Suey Yen Wong Interview Number: 47
 Chinese Name: 黃瑞英 Number of Tapes: 4
 Date of Interviews: 12/17/79, Length: 2 Hours & 21 Min.
1/14/80, 1/28/80
 Interviewers: Beverly Chan & Suellen Cheng
 Other Present: Mrs. Suey Yen Wong
 Summarizer: Suellen Cheng

Contents

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary	Tape: 1 Side A
1	001-004	Introduction	
	005-011	Suey Yen Wong (SYW) came to America in 1915. He was 12 years old and came with a 16 years old friend.	
	012-014	Mother told him to go to America and to send some money home.	
	015-017	Father worked in a construction company in Canton. Mother stayed home in the village.	
	018-023	SYW had one brother and one sister.	
	024-028	SYW came to look for his uncle in Los Angeles.	
	029-032	SYW came from Nam On village, Toishan.	
	033-035	There were about four five hundred Chinese on the same boat to the United States.	
2	036-038	The boat fair was seventy to ninety dollars. The trip took thirty two days.	
	039-053	SYW took the third class. People got nothing to do and gambled. SYW was seasick.	
	054-066	SYW was sent to Angel Island for questioning. SYW recalled some questions.	
3	067-076	SYW stayed in the Angel Island for seven months. SYW knew two or three could not wait and hung themselves.	
	077-081	Gambling was one form of the recreation in Angel Island.	
	082-094	SYW took the train to Los Angeles to meet his uncle. Uncle had a very small grocery store on Los Angeles Street.	
	095-110	SYW went to Boyle High School for six months. He went to Arizona and worked in an American restaurant for five years. He only went to school for one and a half years. He helped in chopping wood in the restaurant. Uncle sent him to Arizona.	

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	111-126	SYW lived with his uncle in the store. Uncle left his wife in China.
	127-140	He did not get paid for the first one and a half years while he went to school. He worked in the restaurant and got free room and board. Later he quit school and was able to earn fifteen dollars a month.
5	141-151	He worked from 7:00 a.m. till 11:00 p.m. The restaurant served American food. A steak dinner would cost 25 cents. The restaurant was at Casa Grande.
	152-162	After the restaurant changed ownership, SYW came back to Los Angeles in 1920.
	163-183	SYW went to Wong Kim's produce market in the Terminal Market, to look for a job. He worked as a swamper for eight months for the exchange of room and board.
	184-192	He worked for New York Produce for a year and got 25 dollars a week. He also did the buying.
6	193-205	A year later he started his own market, the Mutual Produce, in 1924.
	206-254	SYW worked for the owners of the Mutual Produce as a buyer. It was a losing business. Mr. Jue sold the business to SYW and cosigned a loan of \$30,000 with SYW, SYW's brother, and Mr. Yee.
7	255-268	They started working from 7:00 p.m. till 4:00 p.m. the next day.
	269-289	They bought produce from the brokers, and sold to the small grocery stores and American restaurants. They also delivered produce.
	290-305	During the World War II, SYW bought directly from the ranch and sold to the wholesalers.
	306-321	There were many Chinese in the produce business in the 1920s. After 1935, there were more Japanese in the market. There were approximately 100 Chinese owned store.
	322-331	SYW had good business. You could buy a box of corn or a box of potato with 25 cents. One could make 15 cents profit from selling a box of corn.

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Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
9	332-347	They hired mostly Mexican helps as well as Chinese helps. They paid them 25 dollars a week. During the Depression, the workers got \$7.50 a week.
	348-351	The workers in the asparagus ranch in San Fernando Valley earned 15 cents an hour.
	352-367	SYW made good money during the Depression, because he and partners worked long hours. The business was very slow at the time.
	368-381	The profit was about 35 to 40 dollars a day, \$12,000 a year.
	382-405	People did not worked in the produce market. It was a hard work. People got less pay working in the restaurant, because it was an easier job than produce market job.
10	406-426	They hired about thirty to thirty five workers in the asparagus ranch. The Mexican workers got 25 cents an hour.
	427-449	They furnished the workers housing. The workers were contract workers through the Labor Department.
11	450-464	The ranch was about fourty acres. The foreman was Chinese.
	465-477	SYW finished the third grade and had to quit school to support himself.
	478-481	SYW first had a little difficulty communicating with non-Chinese.
	482	END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

Tape: 1 Side B

1	001-008	SYW learned his English mostly from newspaper.
	009-018	SYW had two years of Chinese education in China, six moths education in Boyal Heigh Street School, and one and a half year education in Arizona.
	019-035	There were few Chinese students in school. SYW did not know what the teacher talked about because he did not understand English. SYW felt more comfortable when in Arizona school because he know some English.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
2	036-041	SYW spoke half Chinese and half English now.
	042-055	SYW had two more ranchs in the Imperial Valley. He grew one hundred acres of water-melon and fifty acres of lettuce. In the war times if a person worked in the farm he did not have to serve in the army.
	056-072	Father was born in San Francisco, so SYW came to America as a citizen's son.
3	073-086	Grandfather was a railroad worker. SYW had two uncles.
	087-096	Uncle was born in China and was not a citizen.
	097-108	Brother came to America one year earlier than SYW. Brother also worked in Casa Grande. Later he worked in Calexico.
4	109-129	SYW had a American foreman who did not want to serve in the army and asked a job from SYW. He managed the ranch for a couple year. He cheated SYW. SYW took him to court and won the case.
	130-134	SYW hired an American lawyer.
	135-146	SYW only leased the ranch in the Imperial Valley during the War. They sold the ranch after the War for a big profit.
5	147-169	SYW bought the property of the ranch in San Fernando Valley in 1937. They put five thousand dollars down payment.
	170-173	SYW had the produce market since 1924 and quitted around 1970.
	174-183	SYW did not work after that. One has to push forward to be successful.
6	184-205	Most Chinese produce businessmen made money on farm land.
	206-238	Chinese had difficult time to purchase houses. SYW purchased a lot 20 years ago and built his house on it. Before that he could not purchase a property in some neighborhood. The family even had problem to rent a house.
7	239-265	Even just a month ago, SYW's brother-in-law had a little difficult time to purchase a house in Temple City.

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Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
	266-274	The ranch owner had the first chance to purchase the farm land. Owning lands could make the ranch owner rich later.
	275-287	In the 1920s, SYW had about three or four helps. After that he had about 10 to 11 people helping him. He hired a Caucasian bookkeeper.
8	288-301	SYW's office has a head bookkeeper, one person took care of consignment, and one took care of the all reports. He hired Chinese, Japanese, and Caucasians.
	302-310	The big Chinese owned produce market would have 15 to 20 helps.
	311-324	A market with the size of 50 feet by 75 feet space would run 1 million dollars business.
	325-336	In the early days, the average business for Chinese produce merchants would be \$750,000 to 1.5 million dollars a year.
9	337-339	SYW went back to China in 1941, and returned to America right before the Pearl Harbor.
	340-380	SYW was treated nicely when he returned to China. SYW sent money back to China three times a year to support his parents.
	381-391	SYW started sending money back to China in 1918. Each time he sent about 150 dollar a year.
10-	392-400	All SYW's friends sent money back to China too.
	401-415	Chinese workers gambled. They played mahjong or Pai Giu. SYW did not gamble.
	416-419	SYW put his savings in the bank. Most of the Chinese spent what they got.
	420-446	SYW was a president of Wong Family Association in 1955-1957. He was two terms vice president when Thomas Wong was president of the association.
	447-467	The Wongs got together once or twice a year. When a member of Wongs need a job, they would ask help from the other members of the association. Mutual aids among own people was very important in those days.
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Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	001-008	Introduction
	009-025	Most Chinese went back to China to get married. They could not bring the wife to America right away.
	026-037	There were few Chinese married to non-Chinese. SYW's oldest son married to a Chinese.
2	038-040	Most Chinese parents felt happier if their sons married to Chinese.
	041-051	SYW's children went to Chinese school for a couple years on Sundays. SYW liked to see his children to learn Chinese.
	052-070	SYW did not think to return to China to stay, because both his parents have passed away. He had a brother and a sister in China.
3	071-094	In the old days, most Chinese thought their country was China and would like to return to China. After the Communist took over China many of them did not think of returning anymore.
	095-108	SYW has friends of different nationalities. He dealt with all of them in the business.
4	109-130	Most of his close friends are Chinese. He met his friends in the Chinese Produce Association meetings. SYW is the advisor for the Produce Association. SYW still attended the meeting every month.
	131-137	SYW is a member of the Wong Family Association and was past president and vice president.
	138-159	During the war time, there were 500 members in the Produce Market Club where the members could have their recreations. It was a social club. SYW was the president for 20 years. The club was no longer there.
	160-170	In the early days, Chinese worked hard. The younger generations do not work long hour, therefore do not work in the produce market.
	171-198	SYW was refused to be served in a Phoenix restaurant before the World War II. Before 1925, SYW took a train to Arizona without carrying his passport. He was put in the jail.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
6	199-219	One immigration officer who used to eat in the restaurant where SYW worked, recognized SYW in jail. He was released.
	220-236	SYW ran into discrimination when he tried to rent in Los Angeles around the Westmoreland area.
7	237-286	SYW rented a house near Chinatown from 1950. The house was owned by an Italian. From 1947 to 1950 he rented an apartment on 25th Street. Before he was married he lived on Adams Boulevard with other three Chinese.
8	287-290	He lived close to the market.
	291-318	In 1957, SYW built a house in the Silverlake area because it was close to Chinatown, and Hollywood. The area had a few Chinese families such as Ida Lee, Lily SooHoo, and Eugene Choy.
	319	END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

Tape: 3 Side A

1.	001-008	Introduction
	009-024	SYW identified himself as a Chinese. He never felt sorry to be Chinese. One could not do anything about the discrimination in those days.
	025-035	SYW used both Chinese and American medicine and doctors. For the major illness he went to see American doctor.
2	036-044	SYW came to America in 1916. He left the village in 1915, but had to wait in Hong Kong for a few months before got on the boat to America.
	045-057	The family was very poor, so his mother sent him to America to make money.
	058-066	One of SYW's partners was his cousin, not his brother. His cousin also came from China.
	067-072	When young, SYW obeyed his parents' wish.

*Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	073-083	SYW had a uncle who was a vegetable peddler.
	084-094	Joe Chu was a rich man and financed SYW's business. He was well know rich person in Chinese community.
	095-117	Wong Keung was called Chinatown mayor in 1920-1937. He had a grocery store in Chinatown. He was a president of the Wong Family Association in the early days.
4	118-124	The Wong was the biggest family in Los Angeles Chinese community.
	125-134	SYW did not join the family association until 1935. The due was two dollars a year.
	135-156	Most Wongs were laundrymen, restaurant workers, produce men. They worked six days a week and went to the association on Sundays. Whoever was looking for a job could go to the association and to find the job opportunity from the members there.
5	157-160	Annual party was held at the New Year or Thanksgiving time.
	161-182	The association rented the old building, and built its new building (on Broadway). It costed the Association 30,000 to purchase the lot, and 100,000 for the building. Eugene Choy was the architect.
6	183-200	If there was a fight involved with Wong fmaily member, the Association would try to stop the fight.
	201-227	In the early days there were tong wars between two tongs. Sometime the tongs protected gamblers.
	228-232	SYW did not stay in Chinatown very much. He stayed in the produce market.
7	233-255	A lot of Chinatown businessmen joined the tongs. Each tong would fight for its members.
	256-275	The head of the tongs were elected by members. In the early days there were about two three hundreds members in Bing Kong Tong, and a couple hundreds members in Hop Sing Tong.
	276-286	In the old days Chinese were not welcomed by the Caucasians, so they joined tongs.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
8	287-309	Chinese joined tongs for protection. The tongs mostly were in fighting and gambling.
	310-328	In the early days, if a police saw a fight between Chinese and Caucasian, he would just walked away and pretended that he did not see the fight.
9	329-339	SYW did not know other prominent people in the Chinese community.
	340-362	The City did not hire Chinese workers. There were Chinese Jewelry stores.
	363-369	In the early days some Chinese worked as a houseboy.
	370-378	A lot of rich families hired Chinese as houseboys.
	379-389	Not many Chinese women worked in the early days. They stayed home.
10-	390-403	In the old days, very few factories hired Chinese. Some Chinese worked in the ship yard as welders.
	404-410	There was no garment factory in Chinatown in the early days.
	411-430	In 1925 to 1930, the average income for Chinese was 75 to 100 a month. Everything was cheap in the old days. One could buy a sandwich for 10 cents, a loaf of bread for 5 cents. Chinese were not big spenders.
	431-442	One bedroom apartment would cost 35 dollars.
	443-457	In the early days, there were very few Chinese women around. After the 1930s, the Chinese began to settle in America.
11	458-477	There were quite a few Chinese old men went back to China in the 1920s and 1930s.
	478-482	A lot of people got married in America and could make a better living in America than in China. They decided to stay in America.
	483	END OF TAPE 3 SIDE A
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1	001-003	After their sons came to America, most Chinese did not want to return to China.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
	004-014	Most Chinese lived among Chinese. American people did not like Chinese who lived in American neighborhood.
	015-022	A friend of SYW's bought a house in Bell district. The neighbors threw rocks at all the windows. His friends had to sell the house right away.
	023-042	Mr. Chew bought a house in a high class white neighborhood. The neighbors would not let him live there. He fought at the court.
2	043-069	SYW was not involved in politics. He was a director of the Board of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association.
3	070-079	In 1937, the CCBA raised fund for the China Relief. SYW was involved in fundraising. He and other members worked on Saturdays, often till midnight.
	080-092	The CCBA got the support from the Chinese consult to build a playground.
	093-100	Now the politicians listen to the voters because they need the vote.
	101-105	The CCBA also built the Chinese School.
	106-114	Chinese community did better than other ethnic community.
4	115-135	The disadvantage for Chinese in the early days was not having enough chance to get education. They had to work when they were young and to support their families.
	136-140	Very few Chinese went through college in the 1920s and 1930s.
	141-154	The Jewish people are very smart. They had good education too.
5	155-161	There were Jewish produce merchants in the produce market. The younger generation Chinese did not working in the market.
	162-176	Most people in the early days rather to have son. They figured that son could support the parents.
	177-195	The Chinese parents sent their children to Chinese school. The children did not think it was important to learn Chinese.
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Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	001-003	Introduction
	004-020	There were a couple times that the Chinese Consult protested against the way Chinese were portrayed in the American movies.
	021-032	Charlie Chan series were good. SYW explained the movie characters.
2	033-039	SYW saw a couple movies of Anna May Wong.
	040-051	In the early days, Chinese parents wanted to give children education and to send them back to China for government jobs before the 1950s.
	052-062	SYW wanted to see his son become a doctor. He has a son who is a pharmacist. A doctor can make a living easier than a person who works in business.
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