

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHINESE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Taft Leong
 Chinese Name: _____
 Date of Interview: 2/11/80
 Interviewer: Bernice Sam
 Others Present: _____
 Language: English
 Summarizer: John Yee

Interview Number: 65
 Number of Tapes: 2
 Length: 1 Hour & 9 Minutes

Contents

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary	Tape No. : <u>1</u>	Side: <u>A</u>
1	001-015	Introduction		
	016-020	Taft Leong --- was born in Los Angeles on March 30, 1909 at 903 South Olive Street in a Vistorian house.		
	021-023	Two story house with nice back yard -- see May Company from front porch called Hamburger Department Store.		
	024-028	All Caucasian neighborhood -- no Chinese. Parents came from Canton, China. Sum Yup district in Sun Duck "Gim Joke Village".		
2	029-033	Father's occupation was a Chinese herb doctor. Came before mother -- after getting established went to China and brought my mother over. They came in the late 1800's. He made another visit to China in 1920.		
	034-046	Father stayed in the herb business all his life. There were quite a few herb shops and they were popular. All the patients were Americans.		
	047-051	Language spoken with parents was Chinese. English among brothers and sisters. We understood both.		
	052-065	At age 10 or 12, parents hired a Chinese tutor for two to three hous and two times a week to teach us Chinese. At junior high school age, we went to the Chinese school in Chinatown from 4 to 8:00 p.m. six days a week. Hardship on three brothers and returned home for our American homework.		
3	066-069	We hated Chinese school but our parents made us go. Later in life we wish we could have learned more.		
	070-090	Attended 10th Street Elementary School at Union and 10th Street. All teachers were Caucasians. Principal took special interest in the three brothers. William, Howard,		

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3	070-090	and Taft were named after the president. Principal would show us off to school visitors. Louise Larson, our sister, was a good student. We were pretty good students.
	090-101	We had problems with only one or two at school who would call us names. Other students stuck up for us. We had both treatments. Mostly good treatment.
4	102-107	Had good treatment from junior high to senior high school from more educated people -- uneducated people are more prejudiced.
	108-116	Los Angeles High School -- five Chinese who were very close. Lots of Japanese. 90% were Caucasians in Los Angeles High School.
	117-129	After high school I went to USC. Liked it very much with Chinese and American friends. Childhood times lots of American friends who moved from Olive Street to Pico Street. Mostly Chinese in college.
	130-142	College took up Chemistry. Changed over to accounting. Father passed away in 1932. Finished school by going to night school.
5	143-168	First job in April, 1935. Newport Meat Company which was Chinese owned. Company in business for one year and the books were all messed up. Company progressed and purchased own trucks and fairly big. Located east side of town -- Santa Monica Freeway was built and put them out of business.
6	169-203	Other employment -- restaurant, produce in World War II years. All in accounting. Met a friend who managed a clothing store and wanted me to take care of books at his new store at 6th and Olive. In two or three years he became very successful and expanded to two more stores. In 1950 he expanded further. He made me Secretary and Treasurer of the corporation. No other jobs then accounting. When father died I closed the herb shop.
7	204-243	When we were five or six years old our father would take us to Chinatown often. He was very proud of us. He would go from one store to another and talk. It was very boring for us. When we got older he took us to movies and plays to broaden our minds.
	244-272	Our home was opened to college students. Once a month on Friday, the Chinese Student Club met at our home. My sister would be the host of these meetings. Chinatown looked like Marchessault and Apablasa Streets not paved when it rained the cars slid around. There were few restaurants there. All the restaurants were about the

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
7	244-272	same. Remember one upstairs. Restaurants fancier banquets with eight or nine courses. Remember Tuey Far Low, Mun Jen Low -- San Pedro Street, Lim Cafe, Dong Gain Tokyo. Low on First Street. Once a week we ate in one of these restaurants after a drive to the beach or to Pomona.
8	273-282	There were more men in Chinatown at that time. When we were boys we had a hard time finding girlfriends. Few girls for the boys. The Exclusion Act barred the Chinese in America -- they had no chance to raise a family.
	283-294	Got married in 1937. Met my wife in a church in Chinatown. We have two children, boy and girl, all grown up now.
	295-307	I have never been to China before -- we were all set to go to Ling Nam University but a war broke out and it was cancelled.
	308-321	I feel I am more Chinese. It was hammered into us when we were children. Parents had pride being Chinese -- never felt sorry for being Chinese. Maybe when kids would tease us when we were kids, but I got over it.
	322-324	I never disagreed about being Chinese or American. Some Americans would say I am American but I always felt I was Chinese.
9	325-355	Sickness in the family---I went for Chinese medicine. Genseng for older folks -- herb soup.
	356-373	Family got together for mahjong, chess. I learned mahjong in the 1920's. No Chinese music. I played the trumpet, sister played the piano, other sister the violin, brother the drums, we had enough people for a family orchestra.
10&11	374-462	. In 1910 father attended a show and he heard a man play a cornet. He bought himself a horn and took lessons which were not too good. He encouraged me to learn and bought me a cornet from a second hand store for \$10.00 and hired a teacher to teach me. I played in grammar school, junior high, high school and university orchestra. We signed up for the USC Football Band. We were accepted at first but were turned down later. We found out it was an all white band -- no Chinese, no blacks, in 1929. A meeting was held with the Chinese Club. George Chan, Dr. Edward Lee, and I went to see the president of the University. The president said, "If you had an all white band except two, don't you think it would extend out?" We did not try to go back, but three years later they accepted us. We enjoyed football and basketball.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	001-007	Never corresponded with relatives in China. I never knew who the relatives were, but my father did. One stayed at our house when he came over from China to study at USC.
	007-010	Father kept in contact with people in China. Father made another visit in 1920 for a visit and mother stayed in the United States.
	011-017	Joined the Native Son of the Golden West for a short time when growing up. Dropped out during the depression years.
2	018-033	Peter SooHoo I considered the most famous among the Chinese. He was the founder of New Chinatown. He was in the Engineer Department and helped the "Chinese laundry" because all sorts of regulations were imposed on them by the city. Other group he helped so I consider him to be very important at that time.
	034-047	Employment for Chinese Americans before World War II was more or less servant type of work. Brother was cleaning apartments on Wilshire Blvd., houseboy for movie stars. Laundry, restaurants, herbs companies, after the war, things really changed.
	048-055	Average income before World War II was about \$20.00 per week. Houseboy with room and board about \$60.00 per month.
	056-059	Price of food was low. At \$20.00 per week a person could make it.
	060-064	Most Chinese lived in Chinatown. There was a group near 37th Street near Vermont and Normandie, the rest were scattered.
3	065-073	Some of the old timers in the laundries would save their money and return to China. Of course some of the Chinese gambled in Chinatown quite a bit.
	074-075	Chinese believed in banks at the time, maybe before they did not.
	076-088	I do not know of any Chinese involved in politics in China. Some Chinese had obligations in China. Some of our relatives would write for help and we would send some money back to them. After father's death and the Communists took over, the relatives would write. We would send whatever we could spare.
	089-100	Depression years, the Chinese seemed to keep busy doing something. Some students could not continue going to school.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	100-118	In 1952 there were lots of restrictions. I could not buy a house in many places, so I gave up. When I came here (present address) it was wilderness -- no sidewalks. Now it is all built up -- mostly Blacks.
	119-135	I consider the Chinese have done better than the rest of the population in Los Angeles -- so much improvement and they come up very fast, especially in the professional field. The success was seen even when I went to school the Oriental people made good grades. Maybe the success came from that.
5	136-154	I think Chinese Americans are eager to have sons rather than daughters. I am happy to have my son and daughter.
	155-165	My father and mother were very against interracial marriage. My daughter is married to a Caucasian, but another generation older, one is very much against it. Chinese are very proud people -- they do not like to see any mixture.
	166-178	The ideal job for my children is more or less what they want to be, but my son happens to do the same thing as I do, so I did not have to make a choice.
6&7	179-239	Prejudice part in 1913 when we had our house on Pico Blvd. I was taken to three barber shops for a hair cut. The barber refused to cut Chinese hair. Chinese could not go swimming in public pools when I was in junior high school. I guess all minorities were barred. College years, about 1929, I went to a big ballroom near UCLA where Benny Goodman was playing. We paid to get in all right, but they would not let us on the floor. We were told that trouble may be caused. I guess all the halls were like that even on the beaches, to the minorities. At the Forum Theatre there were restaurants that would not serve us for a snack. Many places my father went anyway and he got served. There has been a great change in the last twenty years. My children do not find any of the prejudice.
	240-265	The big change after the war, people became more educated, better communication and the world is bigger than just the United States. In the old days there were American people who were glad to know my father. They invited us to their home in Pasadena. There was Judge Thomas T. White who helped my father a great deal. The American Medical Board was jealous of the Chinese herbalist. Chinese herbalists were very popular with the American people.

END OF TAPE 1

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	001-031	We had very good neighbors like Paul J. Hard who ran a nursery across the street when we lived on Olive Street when I was five years old. Even after we both moved, we still visited him out in the Valley in 1929 just a few years before my father died. Tom Boger was my father's patient. He ran a big Boger Seed Company in Lompo, California. We used to visit him several times. It was feast or famine. The Caucasians were very close or very few were very prejudice.
2	032-034 035-055 056-063	We had lots of American friends. For recreation, I like to drive to Palm Springs or Santa Barbara in my car. I'm not really active like I used to be -- go play tennis or dance. I go to Chinatown at least once or twice a week -- shopping and eat. Chinatown has changed quite a bit. I could not see how they did business in the old days in the old broken down buildings. Now there is a big change. Except for the element of the gangsthey have, Chinatown is beautiful now. I have four brothers and three sisters. Eight children. One sister and two brothers have been back to China in the past two or three years.
3	064-079 080-140	I would like to make a visit to China since I am retired. My sister made a visit to the village which is now a power plant. She brought back samples to each of us. I do believe in Chinese herbs. My father used to have me sit in the corner while he examined his patients. Later I became a secretary and answered his letters. Even today I use herbs for colds and many uses. I have my father's formulas and when I need them, I get my prescription filled in Chinatown and take it back and fix it. I have great faith in Chinese herbs even being Chinese American. Many Caucasians have great faith in it, because I have seen it happen.
4	141-158	World War I there was a killer flu going about. My father had a formula which saved many lives. He made a great deal of money. Maybe that is why he made the trip to China and purchased lots of antiques for his collection. My father took his last trip to China in the 1920's.
5	159-227	My father was a great buyer. He bought the right thing at the right time -- such as popular cigars, champaign, wishees, tailored suits. Although his English was not that good, he managed to get the right things and got the best jewelry for my mother. His most interesting things were students. He was interested in education. The house was always opened to Chinese students, education to him was

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5	159-227	very important. He always stressed it.
	228-238	My father came to American because his relative, a herbalist who was very successful, invited him over.
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