

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHINESE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Leon Lee Interview Number: 150
 Chinese Name: _____ Number of Tapes: 2
 Date of Interview: 6/17/80 Length: _____
 Interviewer: Emma Louie
 Others Present: None
 Language: English
 Summarizer: Stella Ling

Contents

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary	Tape: <u>1</u> Side <u>A</u>
1	001-013	Introduction.	
	014-020	Leon Lee (LL) was born in Kwang Chou Tsi in China. He is from the Sun Yup district (<u>三 邑</u>). LL's mother was from the Sun Wei district.	
	021-026	LL was born in 1911. LL lived in Canton City. His father had a jewelry store.	
	027-031	LL moved to Kwang Zai when he was nine years old. He attended school there. He was there for three or four years and then returned to Canton City. He then graduated from high school.	
	032-039	LL came to the United States in 1928. He was about 17 years old. LL came to the United States to go to school. He attended grammar school. He then went to junior high school and high school. This was in San Francisco.	
2	040-041	LL attended Gene Parker Grammar School, then San Francisco Junior High, and then Galileo and Commerce High Schools.	
	042-045	LL graduated from high school when he was 22 years old.	
	046-057	LL's father came to the United States around 10 years before LL. LL's father was about 45 years old when he came over. He came to San Francisco to be a partner with LL's uncle in a jewelry store business.	
	058-060	LL's mother stayed in Canton City and never came to the United States.	
	061-064	LL has two brothers. They came to the United States occasionally but never to stay.	
	065-069	After high school, LL came to Los Angeles with his father to start a jewelry business. The store was located at 446 North Los Angeles Street in Old Chinatown.	

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
3	070-077	LL belonged to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce because of the business. He did not belong to any other of the Chinese organizations.
	078-081	For the jewelry store, they imported the merchandise directly from China.
	082-092	In the late 1930's, Old Chinatown was torn down to make way for the Union Station. They gave the stores about two or three months notice. The Union Station is below Alameda Street so LL's store was all right since it was on Los Angeles Street.
	093-099	LL's store was torn down a while later to build the Hollywood Freeway, not the Union Station. They rented the store.
	100-105	Since Old Chinatown was torn down, Mrs. Christine Sterling built China City while Peter SooHoo had plans to build a New Chinatown.
4	106-110	In the beginning, the merchants did not like the new plans but they could not do anything else. Some people moved to Ninth Street and San Pedro while others moved to Broadway.
	111-127	For New Chinatown, the Chinese merchants bought shares in order to transfer their businesses to the new location. They bought their own property and built their own stores.
	128-145	At that time, LL's family had a branch store in China City for about four or five years. Then the store was torn down because of a fire and because the building was so old. Mrs. Sterling wanted to sell the property to Tom Gubbins. The store was torn down around 1942.
5	146-151	Because Old Chinatown was torn down and New Chinatown was not yet built, a lot of Chinese merchants went to settle down on Spring Street because they did not have anywhere else to go.
	152-163	The Lee Family Association was called Lee Ga Kong Guo. It was also called Lee Tong Kong.
	164-173	In the 1940s, there were about two thousand members of the Lee Family Association. Everyone with the same surname belonged to the same family association.
	174-180	Each member would donate money to build a new meeting house. LL's family also participated in the family association's activities.
	181-186	LL goes to Joe Jung Wei. He is not yet baptized but will be pretty soon.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
6	187-194	LL's father stayed in the United States until he passed away. He returned to China a couple of times. LL's father died here.
	195-199	LL's father was buried according to American customs.
	200-212	LL met a girl while going to school in San Francisco. she was from Honolulu and came to go to the University. They met and then got married. The marriage was of the typical American style.
	213-219	LL has five children -- three boys and two girls. LL's father chose the Chinese names for LL's children. LL's wife gave them their English names.
	220-230	LL's Chinese and American names are exactly the same. His Chinese name is Lee On and his English name, Leon, is the same thing. LL adopted that name when he went to school.
7	231-245	LL's three sons are Lee Eng Wei, then Lee Eng Wa, and Lee Eng Wan. LL's daughters are Lee Wei Lin and Lee Mei Lin.
	246-252	When they had the store in Chinatown, it was too small for them to live in it as well. They had a house on 28th Street. LL lived there with his father.
	253-259	After LL had kids, the house was too small so they bought a bigger house in Echo Park. LL has never lived in Chinatown.
	260-268	When they were living on 28th Street, there were a lot of Chinese living there. There were about three or four Chinese families on LL's street.
	269-276	When they moved to Echo Park, they were the only Chinese family there. That was in 1948. LL still lives in the Echo Park area. There are much more Chinese living there now.
8	277-283	One of LL's children went to Chinese school when they were living on 28th Street. There was a Chinese school there. After they moved to Echo Park, it was too far away to attend Chinese school.
	284-292	Chong Loh Wei was the Chinese school. The teacher was Mr. Tong. The classes were taught in Cantonese.
	293-303	All of LL's children graduated from UCLA. The oldest one graduated from the University of Hawaii. One of his children went into education. All his children have masters.
	304-323	LL was given another Chinese name after marriage but LL never bothered to use it.
	324-334	The Lee family has a record of the family tree back in the village.

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1 Side A

Tape: 1 Side B

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
9	335-339	LL did not return to China after the war.
	340-350	LL felt terrible about attending grammar school when he first arrived in the United States. He was taught English in China but when he came here, no one understood what he was saying.
	351-373	There was a special English class in grade school. LL also went to a Chinese church school where they taught English by explaining it in Chinese.
	374-393	LL remained friends with his other classmates until now. Some of them have passed away. LL then went to Galileo and then Commerce High. After school, LL helped his father in the business.
10	394-405	LL's father wanted to open up a branch store in Los Angeles. The company was located in San Francisco and LL's father opened his own store in Los Angeles. There were a few jewelry stores in Old Chinatown, on Alameda Street.
	406-419	LL's father was in the jewelry business all his life. He made jewelry himself. Caucasians did come to their store to buy their merchandise.
	420-428	They did not do much advertising outside of the telephone books. At that time, there were not many Chinese jewelers so people who wanted Chinese jewelry would look for LL's family business.
	429-434	LL is also in the antique business. The antiques bring customers from outside of Chinatown.
	435-448	LL did not have any difficulty in entering the United States since he was a merchant's son.
	449-474	When LL arrived, he had to stay on Angel Island for one week. They asked LL questions like who was his father, why he was coming here, and those kinds of things. They did not claim citizenship since they were merchants.
11	475-492	LL's wife is a citizen since she was from Honolulu. Thus they did not have any problem buying property here.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

Tape 1 Side B

1	001-007	After LL got married, he applied for citizenship. He had to go through naturalization.
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Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	008-016	LL's mother did not want to come to the United States. She had a lot of friends in China. Life was easy for her there and she did not want to come to the United States and work so hard.
	017-027	During the Sino-Japanese War, LL's mother and the rest of their family fled to Macao. After the war, LL's mother stayed in Macao but LL's brothers returned to Canton to attend to their family business there.
	028-042	During the Communist takeover, they had to give up their entire business. They went back to Macao to be with their mother. LL's brothers were not married at that time.
2	043-046	LL's brothers came to the United States for vacation only. They did not want to come to stay.
	047-050	LL also has some cousins, nieces, and nephews that came to the United States for school. There were also some more distant relatives that came.
	051-054	LL has gone to Hong Kong but has never returned to China yet. LL plans to go to China someday to visit.
	055-057	When LL was younger, he always thought about going back to China. After the war, they just gave the idea up.
	058-062	LL's father also did not return to China after the war because the conditions there were not good.
	063-071	LL feels that Chinatown has improved over the years. The welfare of the Chinese has also improved. Before the Chinese all came from Canton but they now come from all over the place.
3	072-077	There are now many more stores that are Chinese-owned. The newcomers always ask LL about how to conduct their business.
	078-081	The Chinese Chamber of Commerce does not give courses in business.
	082-091	In the early days, almost everyone in Chinatown was from Canton. There were both Sze Yups and Sam Yups. Now there are more Sze Yups than Sam Yup.
	092-096	Some of the newcomers also belong to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Some of them may have formed their own groups.
	097-099	In ten or twenty years, there will be many more Chinese here. It is getting harder to find a place in Chinatown.
	100-107	A lot of the Chinatown property is owned by Hong Kong.

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1 Side B

Tape: 2 Side A

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	108-112	Chinatown is changing a lot. The buildings and the people are all modern.
	113-125	A lot of young newcomers join the Chinese family associations. They have a lot of new ideas.
	126-131	All the newcomers have free education from the government. Some of the new family association members are well educated.
	132-143	There are not many American-born Chinese members of the Lee Family Association. LL's own children are not members but they join in with the holiday festivities. Their family association celebrates Thanksgiving.
5	144-154	Sometimes they cook the meals and sometimes they order the food from the restaurants. Some Lee's own restaurants and donate a lot of food.
	155-165	When LL first came to the United States, he never dated. He just went to school, both day and night. LL came into contact with people at Church.
	166-173	With his Church friends, LL would go to the YMCA once in a while. Otherwise he would be studying or helping his father out at the store so he did not have much leisure time.
	174-182	LL met his wife later. He understood English better and had more friends. LL met his wife through a friend.
	183-192	Sometimes, LL did not understand his lesson and she would help him out. LL's wife was teaching at that time. She graduated from the University of California at Berkeley.
6	193-210	In those days, there was a law forbidding interracial marriages between Chinese and white Americans. They did not change the law until around 1938. In those days, the Chinese could not even get married in California.
	211-221	LL's father told LL to get an education and to start a business. LL's father told LL to marry someone who could help him.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

Tape 2 Side A

1	003-011	Introduction.
	012-024	LL's wife is Chung San. LL's father did not care about LL not marrying within his own village. There used to be hostile feelings between the Sam Yup and the Sze Yup a long time ago.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	025-030	LL's wife speaks Chung San Hua. She reads and writes some Chinese. She is native born in Hawaii. She helped LL with his English. Her English is very good.
	031-035	One of LL's children went to Chinese school but he did not learn too much. When they moved to Echo Park, there were no Chinese schools so his children did not get a Chinese education.
2	036-040	After LL's children graduated from UCLA, they learned Chinese on their own. They learned both Mandarin and Cantonese.
	041-043	LL's oldest son learned Mandarin at the University of Hawaii.
	044-047	LL speaks a little Mandarin. He learned it when he was in Kwong Zai but forgot it when he returned to Canton City.
	048-052	LL's family had a jewelry store in Kwong Sai.
	053-065	LL's children are all Americanized. LL's family celebrate both the Chinese and the American holidays. Chinese New Years is the biggest Chinese holiday that they celebrate.
	066-068	For Chinese New Years, LL closes the store and his family has a good meal together.
3	069-078	LL's family has a big party at home for Christmas. They serve both Chinese and American food. They have a turkey as well as Chinese dishes.
	079-096	When LL first started business in Chinatown, most of the businesses there were locally owned. When Old Chinatown was torn down, the New Chinatown was built which depended a lot on American business. Nowadays, there is so much more people and many more businesses. The businesses cater both to the Chinese and to the Americans.
	097-098	LL's own business has both Chinese and American customers.
	099-113	LL speaks a little Mandarin. He does not speak Vietnamese but some of them speak Chinese. A lot of the Vietnamese merchants in Chinatown are of Chinese descent.
4	114-126	In ten or twenty years, Chinatown will be much bigger and better. There may be more business because it is presently easier to get imports from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Once the people here can get more merchandise, they can open more stores.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	127-138	There are no restrictions on Taiwan imports. Chung Hua Wei Kong cannot do anything.
	139-148	During the breakdown of the trading relationship between America and China, the imports from China were charged 85 percent duty. Imports from Hong Kong had a 12.5 percent duty.
5	149-153	Nowadays, China imports are also 12.5 percent duty. There are not many imports from Macao.
	154-156	The Taiwanese governments has its own trading agreements with the United States.
	157-172	LL can now conduct business directly with the firms in China. There are no regulations on the importers in the United States. The businesses buy whatever they think will sell here.
	173-182	There is a Canton Fair now twice a year. LL's brother goes there. LL does not go. LL's brother buys whatever they want. They also go to the stores in Hong Kong to purchase goods. If LL does not want it, his brothers will sell the goods themselves.
6	183-185	LL has had a prosperous life so far. LL's family has enjoyed the best of both worlds.
	186-189	LL's son helps LL with the business.
	190-199	LL thinks that Chinatown will prosper with time.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

TAPE 2 SIDE B - BLANK

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