

ART TOM

This is an edited version of an oral interview conducted on August 24, 2004.

CHILDHOOD AND PARENTS

Q: *When and where were you born?*

A: I was born in Oakland, at the building on 8th and Harrison Streets, on July 24, 1912.

Q: *Right in Chinatown.*

A: Right in the corner of Chinatown.

Q: *Eighth and Harrison is a famous corner.*

A: It's the CACA (Chinese American Citizens Alliance) building now. It's been remodeled and changed since then.

Q: *So you were born at home.*

A: No, I was born in a hospital, as far as I know, but I lived at 8th & Harrison. I was the first child of three.

Q: *What were the names of your parents?*

A: My father's name was Tom Lung, L-u-n-g. In Chinese, the last names come first. We were of the Tom family. My mother's name was Emma Tom.

Q: *What were the ages of your parents when you were born?*

A: My father was born in 1884, my mother in 1889; you can figure it out. My father was born in San Francisco. So was my mother.

Q: *Their parents were from China?*

A: Yes, both of them. My father's family is from *Hoi Ping* [Guangdong Province in the Pearl River Delta region of southeastern China]. I don't know where my mother's family came from.

Q: *Who were your siblings?*

A: I have a sister, Margaret, and a brother, Edward. Both passed on already. Ed passed away the latter part of 2002, my sister passed away in 2003. We were each two years apart.

Q: *What was your father and mother's work?*

A: They had a laundry and cleaning agency, on 8th Street, 311, 313, almost next to the place we were born. We lived in the back of the store after that.

Q: *What was a laundry agency?*

A: It means we do not do the laundry there. We're merely an agent picking up for a laundry. You leave the laundry there, and we send it out and you come back and pick it up. We were representing a laundry.

MEMORIES OF EARLY CHINATOWN

Q: *What do you remember about Chinatown in those days?*

A: On 8th Street, there were not too many people. I recall people I grew up with, the Chan family, on 8th Street. The father was the minister of the Chinese Methodist Church. Freeman Chan, Edwin Chan, George Chan, Edward Chan (were the boys). They had quite a few sisters. We played with and went to school with the boys. There was a store next door, owned by the Chin family, Harry Chin's family. The church was downstairs and the Chan family lived upstairs.

There was a person across the street, on the corner, Frank Yick, a contractor; the son was Robert Yick, who eventually moved to San Francisco, and opened the company that made all the Chinese kitchens, the woks and stuff. Most Chinese kitchens were made by him. On 9th Street was the Fung family. They were electricians, contractors and what not. One of the fellows I went to school with was Paul Fung, a doctor. The Fung family was a big family, quite well known in Oakland. Paul Fung became a well-known doctor in San Francisco, and he was the one that started the Buddhist Church in San Francisco.

Q: *Did you go on Harrison and Webster Streets? Were there well-known businesses there?*

A: There weren't too many businesses on Harrison Street. It was a quiet little street. We used to play mostly on Harrison Street because there was little or no traffic.

Q: *Was there a park at 7th and Harrison?*

A: Yes.

Q: *Were there railroad cars in the park then?*

A: No, it was just an open park. Other friends were all along 6th and 7th Streets. There was sort of a division between 8th and 6th Street gangs, as we would say. The 6th Street gang used to be the Chan family, George Chan and Ben Chan and Ernest Chin. They all lived on 6th Street, *Look Guy* [Cantonese for 6th Street]. Of course, we were all friends. Further down on 8th Street was the Wong family, Worley Wong. Worley was the well-known architect. We were very close friends, Worley, Jenny and I went to school together. Jenny, the sister, eventually married Dr. Lester Lee. Their family was one of the most well-to-do families at the time. I don't know what the father did.

Q: *Were there quite a few families in the neighborhood at the time?*

A: Oh, yeah, we grew up with them. We went to Chinese School together too. The Chinese school was quite well known. It was called *Lai Hon Som*, a private school on Harrison Street, I recall. You had to pay a monthly charge, \$3 or something like that. The other school was *Wah Kue Hok How*, the most well known one, right on 8th Street, where the Joy Luck restaurant is now. I went to both of them. *Lai Hon Som* was sort of a private school, and *Wah Kue* was sort of a public school. I went there when I was real young. I went to American school during the day, came down at 3 o'clock, stayed home and had dinner then went to Chinese school between 5 and 8. Most of Chinese families have more or less the same routine.

Q: *American school was Lincoln School?*

A: Yes, Lincoln School.

Q: *Was Chinatown mostly Chinese?*

A: Almost exclusively Chinese because it was restricted at that time. There was discrimination against Chinese. No Chinese could live or buy property outside of that area because of the racial discrimination clauses in the property deeds. You couldn't even rent a place. You had to keep within the compounds of Chinatown.

Q: *Did your parents talk to you about that at all or did you have a feeling about that at that time?*

A: No, no, we didn't feel that. We just figured it was part of the thing, you know. In that building (at 8th & Harrison Streets) was CACA, which was formally known as Native Sons of the Golden State, a real big Chinese organization that tried to promote the Chinese people in the community, which was good. My father was one of the original members, along with Thomas C. Lew, Frank Yick, and Jue Yut, and Jew Geng, who owned a cigar box factory on 4th Street. They were the ones who tried to get Chinese to vote, one of the first Chinese organizations for Chinese Americans.

EDUCATION

Q: *What was your first language?*

A: *Som yup* and *say yup*, both. Mother spoke *som yup*, father spoke both. We were more or less *som yup*, but we understood and spoke *say yup* too. Chinese school was *som yup*. [*Som yup* is spoken Cantonese, while *say yup* is an offshoot of Cantonese spoken in certain villages of Guangdong Province, whose capital city used to be called Canton, but is now known as Guangzhou.]

Q: *Do you recall when you first started learning English?*

A: I learned English in American school. The teachers were mostly white women. I learned my English in Lincoln School.

Q: *You went to Lincoln in 1917 or thereabouts?*

A: Yes, about then. It was a mixture (of students), but mostly Chinese. Others were white. There weren't too many black kids, and no Mexicans. There were some Japanese.

Q: *Was school fun for you?*

A: Yes, I would think so because it was a growing-up period. We all enjoyed the company of all the kids, playing around.

Q: *After Lincoln School, what was your path in American schools?*

A: After Lincoln, I went to Oakland High directly. There were no junior highs at that time. The high school was the old Oakland High School on 12th Street and Jefferson, somewhere around there. They called it the Old Brick Pile, at 12th and Jefferson. We were the first or second class to graduate from that new school (on Park Boulevard and MacArthur Boulevard) in 1929, I believe.

Q: *Were Oakland High students mostly white?*

A: More whites than Chinese, but there were many Chinese there. The Chinese I went to Lincoln with, they were there too.

Q: *Why did you go to Oakland High and not Oakland Technical High (which is closer to Chinatown)?*

A: We didn't have a choice; we were sent there.

Q: *You went to school a lot, with Chinese school too.*

A: Oh, yeah, most of the Chinese kids were like that. They were taken up with school.

Q: *Did you think about what you were going to do after high school?*

A: No, that was one of the things that never came to mind. I was sort of playing it by ear as to what I would do. We didn't know whether we could afford college, which I was pretty sure we couldn't.

Q: *What were the possible colleges for you at that time? Cal Berkeley?*

A: Oh, yeah, Cal Berkeley would be the closest one we would be tempted to go to. I didn't think my family could afford it.

Q: *Did you go to college?*

A: I went to Poly Tech, a business college in Oakland, and took some UC extension courses, business administration, accounting, right after high school. I did that for two to three years, possibly a little more. I didn't earn a degree. I went there to learn business skills.

EARLY WORK LIFE

Q: *Did you find work after that?*

A: No, no work after that. Especially when I was going to school, I was working part-time in a buffet and bar in downtown Oakland, owned by Americans. I just worked there at nighttime, to earn money to go to school. I made sandwiches, waited on the public. I worked there from 5 o'clock, 6 o'clock till midnight. I did this while going to business school, to help out (to pay business school costs).

Q: *What did you do right after business school?*

A: I still worked at that job I just told you about. Then I got the idea of taking the civil service test, which I did, for the state. When you have no experience, you just qualify for the lowest form of civil service, which was a clerk, which I did. For Chinese people at that time, the greatest job was working for the post office, and civil service. That was quite a deal then. I didn't care for post office work. My mind was not made up. So I started taking the civil service examination, and the first one I took was for clerical work for the state. While I was working at the buffet restaurant, I got a call to go on the job for the DMV [state Department of Motor Vehicles]. That is how I started. It was a temporary thing during the (vehicle registration) renewal period, which used to be January, when they did it all at once. The renewal period was in January and February, when the lines were clear around the block, not staggered like now. February 4 was the last day for auto registration. I took on (a job) as temporary for those many weeks.

Q: *You started in 1935?*

A: Right.

Q: *Did you think that was a long-term permanent job then?*

A: No, but when I got in there, it seemed like they needed people after the (registration) period.

WORKING FOR THE DMV

Q: *I read that you were the first Chinese to work for the DMV. Was that a big deal at that time?*

A: Oh, no, I didn't know anything about that at that time. It was just a job. I found out later on I was the only Chinese (working for the DMV).

Q: *Where?*

A: In Oakland, in a little tiny office, in garage on 14th & Harrison. There was a big garage there for cars, and in one corner, was a tiny (DMV) office. I did clerical work, whatever was necessary.

Q: *Were you at ease mingling with white people?*

A: I had very little mingling with white people (before), but at the DMV, I did.

Q: *Was there any funny feeling from DMV people toward you?*

A: No. There is one thing I have always said, that working for the state and DMV, I have felt no discrimination of any sort, or any different from any other people. In every move I made in DMV, I was helped right along. Everybody helped me, which was very nice. I had no feeling of discrimination whatsoever, and I got along very well. That was a good thing, particularly when you heard a lot of stories about discrimination against Chinese. The people I worked with were exceptionally good to me and helpful to me.

Q: *When did that job become more permanent?*

A: As I worked along after the busy period, after the deadline period, they kept you on to finish the work. As we were finishing up the work there, there seemed to be a lot of work, but there was a shortage of help. That was a chance to put on more people permanently. At that time, the ruling of civil service was that if you have worked on a job temporarily after six months, you permanently became an employee. That is what happened.

Q: *Did you continue doing clerk work?*

A: I don't know what you mean by clerk work. Clerical work included learning how to register vehicles, and ordinary office work, doing paper work and stuff like that.

Q: *Did you feel your education in the business school helped you in your DMV job?*

A: Yes, particularly in the accounting field, when you collect money, and account for money, and keeping track of money, and bookkeeping. So it has helped.

Q: *How long did you work for the DMV?*

A: Thirty-seven years.

Q: *When did you retire?*

A: In 1972.

Q: *What path did you take within the DMV?*

A: In Oakland, it was just a small office at that time. Eventually, we moved to a new location, 1107 Jackson Street. We were there for I don't know how many years, and eventually moved to the new office at 5300 Claremont Avenue, which was a big building. I don't remember what year, but it was before the 1950s.

Q: *Were you continuing to get more responsibilities?*

A: Yes. In the meantime, I was taking promotional examinations for higher jobs and stuff. The steps I recall, but the time elements I do not. I started as a clerk, a junior clerk. A junior clerk started off at \$70 a month. A few months later, because of the state budget and all that, they had to cut us down to \$60 a month. (*laughs*). That was really funny. It wasn't funny at that time, but when you think about it, it was funny. I continued to take promotional examinations, and I took each step. The first step was junior clerk, the entry level. The next step was what they called an intermediate clerk. That's the second step. I was promoted. I earned maybe a hundred dollars or so (a month). It wasn't bad (money). I had some benefits, like vacation, and a pension. The next step was the senior clerk. I took the test and got that too with a little bump in pay, maybe thirty or forty dollars. Actually the Department of Motor Vehicles was in two divisions. One is the Division of Registration which handles car registrations, and the other is the

Division of Driver's Licenses which handles driver's licenses. I was in the Division of Registration. I gradually I wandered over to the Division of Driver's Licenses because there were so many Chinese people coming in who were unable to pass the test. So I got myself into the deal there by trying to help the Chinese people in the drivers' license part. (Many had trouble) reading English, and they were non-English (speaking). I gradually eased myself in there to help them, giving oral examinations to the Chinese. I boosted myself up there by helping them out. That's why so many Chinese people know me, young or old. They say, "Go and see Tom Lung's boy at DMV." That's how I know most of the Chinese in Chinatown, and most of the Chinese in Chinatown know me. What happened then was there is a classification called Driver's License Examiner. I took the examination for that and passed. So I became a Driver's License Examiner and got another boost, a little more money. I enjoyed doing that. It's a challenge to take drivers out (to test their driving skills). It's good to learn public relations too.

Q: *How long had you been working at DMV before you got the Driver's License Examiner job?*

A: I'd say perhaps ten years.

Q: *Where did you go?*

A: I was still in Oakland. I could've been moved. But they fitted me in there. Eventually, what happened was this. With my knowledge of driver's license and registrations, the department had a new classification, Motor Vehicle Representative. Motor Vehicle Representative is supposed to be able to shift from one job to the other job, from registering vehicles to driver's licenses, say, in a small office. So I took the test for that and passed. Eventually I became a Motor Vehicle Representative in Oakland, but I had a fill-in job. In other words, wherever a person is missing due to sickness or vacation, and they needed a man to fill-in, I'm there. I'm the traveling man. I did a little bit of that for a while. On the other hand, I didn't do a lot of moving around, but it was a step up. I went to San Francisco for two years on a temporary basis. They asked me to fill in over there for a while, which I did. When I was over there, I was still living in Oakland. The commute was terrible, driving over the bridge. The manager over there liked me so much, he made me assistant manager of the San Francisco office for two years. Then in 1948, they started the electronic computer stuff. Before that, everything was done by hand, like filing. They had to have a pilot office, an experimental office, to start the thing going, to prepare all the documents for IBM keypunching. I was involved in that, in the area office. An area office is a central place where all the work comes in, all the applications, into one central part where it is checked over and made ready for keypunch operating. At that time there was the old time keypunch. I worked with that. I was in the registration end, preparing these things for the keypunch operators. When they decided to do the area office, they didn't know where to put it, whether in San Francisco or Oakland. San Francisco didn't have the physical space for the area office. Oakland did, so they moved it back to Oakland, so they moved me back to Oakland. I was the area office manager, converting to IBM. They called it the lost year because the (paper) files were being converted to IBM (computerized files) so everything was lost. We called it the lost year, but we

were able to find them, naturally. They were just kidding by calling it the lost year. Those were hectic days when we were converting to IBM. I was in the midst of that.

Q: *What was your specific role in transitioning from paper to computer?*

A: In taking all the applications and checking the necessary information to flag down things like the VIN, the vehicle identification number, the license number and all that, all the substantial (papers) were gone. We had to eliminate all that and put in a little thing for the keypunch operator to read. They could only read certain things. We had to edit down the applications. I had a crew that did that. All the applications that came in from, say, Hayward and San Francisco, all that work came into my office.

Q: *This was really the cutting edge, the pilot program, and you were there.*

A: Right. After we got all the bugs out, it became the ordinary thing, I went down to Los Angeles to help them set up their program and went to Sacramento to help with their program. Everything went to Sacramento eventually. Then they opened a new office in San Leandro and I took that job as manager.

Q: *You were not manager before in Oakland?*

A: The civil service title was not manager. I was on the manager's list (when the San Leandro office was opened). There were different grades of manager. I opened the San Leandro office in a temporary storefront building, 319 MacArthur Boulevard in San Leandro.

Q: *What year?*

A: 1958 maybe, I don't quite recall. There were only six of us in the office.

Q: *You were the boss?*

A: Right, and we opened the office there, and remained there a few years. We built a new office, a new building at 2000 Washington Avenue.

Q: *How long did you spend in San Leandro?*

A: I don't recall that either. I went back to Oakland as the manager, at the Claremont office.

Q: *Was that your title when you retired in 1972, manager of the Oakland office?*

A: No, I went back to San Leandro before I retired.

Q: *At the manager level?*

A: Oh, yeah, at the same manager level.

Q: *What was your top salary when you left the DMV?*

A: Oh, I think it was over a thousand dollars a month, but I don't really recall.

Q: *You said earlier that throughout your career at the DMV, you didn't feel any discrimination and that people treated you well.*

A: No, no (discrimination). It's a funny feeling to be a manager, and you have a lot of problems, and naturally anything that the employees can't solve falls into your lap, I think I was pretty good in doing that.

Q: *Did you like to do that? Did you like that kind of responsibility?*

A: Oh, yes, yes, very much so. It was a challenge to me.

Q: *You like to solve problems?*

A: When you have a disgruntled customer, you have to soothe his tail feathers. When you can do it, it feels good.

Q: *As you know, the reputation of the DMV is that it's a place that is difficult to deal with.*

A: That is the worst misnomer of anything else.

Q: *Is that right?*

A: Yes, because people think bad of it, and that gives us a bad reputation. To me, if people think straight, they would know better. It's a tough thing for any tax-collecting agency. It's a tough job to be in a tax-collecting agency because everything is you, you're doing this to me, you're taxing me. Take the DMV now. It's a tax-collection agency and we are doing things for other agencies which you don't know about, you don't even think about. For example, years ago, getting a transfer of a vehicle was very simple. You come in and present your pink slip and white slip and a dollar and you're done. Nowadays, when you go into the DMV to transfer a car, OK, they all get written up for a dollar or ten dollars or whatever the fee is now. You're willing to do that; you expected that, right? Next thing they ask you, "Do you have a smog certificate?" "What do you mean smog certificate?" They say, "All right, smog certificate has nothing to do with DMV." It's under the pollution control thing. (But the DMV tells you that) you can't transfer without one of those slips. They say, "We have to be responsible for checking in a smog certificate." But that has nothing to do with DMV, right? All right, fine, you smooth his tail feathers and he's OK, and he says, "OK, I'll get the smog certificate and come back." When he comes back, and he says, "Here's my smog certificate and here's my transfer fee." Then you say, "OK, now there is a \$60 use tax." "What do you mean a use tax? I am not buying anything." There is a use tax on used vehicles, but that's state Board of Equalization, so we're collecting the use tax for the Board of Equalization. (People) blame us. They say, "You're charging me for the use tax -- how come?" You have to soothe their tail feathers, "Well, you have to pay the use tax." There you are, see, it's things like that. Another thing too, we're registering boats. Why boats? We're motor vehicles. In (testing people for their) driver's license, it's the same old thing because a person never blames himself when they fail a driver's license test. Either the examiner is tough or did something wrong, or, "He didn't like me, and (that's why) he didn't pass me." Years ago, that was possibly true, (but not now). I ran the first driver's license examiner's school in the whole state.

Q: *Was that a state function at that time?*

A: Yeah, it was part of motor vehicles. Before, when an examiner comes in, he was taught by the one who was formerly in his place. There is no formula, no criteria for driver's licenses. We started a school that each new man who is hired as an examiner comes into this school for six weeks. I was in charge of this school. I had two instructors and they stayed six weeks at a motel, and they came in every day for classroom and on-the-job training. What did they do? Each one has to go through the same thing, like grading a driver's test. We would take two or three examiners in a car and they will check to make it uniform. That's why now each one has a set course in each office, a set number of turns, the type of turns. They're all graded. You start with 100 percent. You take off a percentage when they do something wrong. Before, it was the examiner's

opinion. He takes you around the block, takes you around six blocks, depending on what he wants to do.

Q: *These rules that were set up, the standards. Did you have something to do that? Was this your idea?*

A: Oh, no, it was the idea of a group of people, but I was the one that started the thing going. I started the school. Instructors stayed six weeks and were put through different offices. Now there is standardization on driver's license (exams) so you can't very well say, "That the guy was wrong." We can say, "Here is your sheet. You didn't stop at this stop sign, you made a left turn wrong, you started in the wrong lane," and all that. There is now a standardized test, so each office has a standardized route. You cannot deviate from the route. You deviate from one route and you will be suspended. It is very strict.

Q: *Boy, you did some pilot programs.*

A: Yes, I did. Like the photos (of drivers for their licenses). I did the pilot program on that too.

Q: *How come you got so many pilot programs?*

A: I don't know. Maybe they liked me. *(Laughs)* At least I hope so.

Q: *Did they tell you that?*

A: Oh, yeah. "Give it to Art Tom. He can do it." *(Chuckles)*

Q: *During your thirty-seven years with the DMV, was this a good working life for you?*

A: Oh, yeah, it was my only life, my only working life.

Q: *You got into it, not exactly by accident, but you wanted something to do, so you got into it, and it turned out that your skills were good for this kind of work.*

A: I don't know about my skills, but as a Chinese, I feel that we have to work harder, twice as hard probably. Most of people don't say that, but you do (have to work twice as hard). We do try to work harder and do the best we can.

Q: *Why do you think that you have to work twice as hard?*

A: Because we have to overcome what people think of us. You know, "Well, he's only a Chinaman." You have to offset that to begin with.

Q: *When you were at the DMV, did you think you had to perform at a higher level?*

A: I don't think so. I was in a very good spot. I did work very hard, not because of that but because of my own volition to work hard.

Q: *Where do you think you got that from – your parents, or growing up in Chinatown?*

A: I can't attribute that to anything but to my birth, to my parents, I guess, my upbringing, and things like that from my childhood.

Q: *Did you ever hear from your parents that you should work hard?*

A: No, but growing up, I could see the trend of things, how tough it was to make a living.

Q: *For your parents?*

A: Oh, yeah. In between the DMV work, I was in the service too, you know, for four years. I was in the Army Air Corps.

WORLD WAR II SERVICE

Q: *Was this before or after your business school?*

A: After business school because it was 1942. I served four years.

Q: *Where did you serve?*

A: I served in the Air Corps, but never out of the country.

Q: *What were some of your jobs in the Air Corps?*

A: Very good jobs. In fact, I was more or less a civilian employee. I was a personnel consultant assistant in the psychology unit, doing psychological testing and test interpretation and case history work and so forth. I became the sergeant major at the unit. Our unit stayed together pretty well throughout the four years.

Q: *Throughout the United States? Tell me some of the places.*

A: I went from Monterey clear to Atlantic City, from overlooking the Pacific to overlooking the Atlantic. I went to Atlantic City, which was not much of a place for basic training. After all, it's called an airfield, but it isn't. We took over all the big hotels in Atlantic City. The troops were there in Atlantic City. I took my basic training there and one day I was called into an office for an interview. I didn't know what it was for. They said, "We would like to see if you would like to be a permanent party here." Permanent party means a sort of a permanent assignment there in that basic training center. To this day, I don't know why I was asked to do this. I went into the personnel consultant unit and the classification unit where everyone is classified and tested and put into different categories. Classification is the magic word, you might say, in any Army. That is where you first go through and (get) classified in a different place where you are going to be. You have certain classifications. You are given special identification, names or marks. Anyway, I was asked (to join the unit) by a captain. I found out he was a well-known psychologist from New York. The other captain was a professor from the University of Pittsburgh. Those were the two officers who interviewed me. This was one of the best breaks I had in my life. My first time away from home and I land up in Atlantic City. How would you feel? I was homesick. So they asked me whether I wanted to be a permanent party there. I hesitated. I said, "Gee, no, I rather be closer to home." In other words, I'd rather be transferred to a base closer to home. Those two officers looked at me and (told me to) think it over and let them know by Thursday. This was a Monday when we met. What a break! I went back to my hotel room and thought it over. Even if I get back to California, the closest base would be in Sacramento. I could be in Sacramento, so close (to home) and yet I can't get home -- so near, yet so far. Finally, I said maybe I wouldn't get there (home) at all. On Thursday, I said I'll stay there. So I became a permanent party in Atlantic City, with this group of eight other GIs. Most were big college graduates from Yale and (places like that). I stayed in the best hotels in Atlantic City, the Claridge Hotel, the newest hotel at the time, on the 14th floor, two people in a room. Our office was the sun deck of the Ritz Carlton Hotel, three rooms overlooking the boardwalk. Our duties were to take care of "problem children" sent to us from classification. You had a lot of problem children coming in, people that are not adapted to Army, homosexuals, just people that can't get along. We got all these people. What we did was test them. We used the Wexler B psychological test, or Minnesota personality test or one of

the tests we had. Then we wrote up a case history on each of them. And these people went before a psychiatric board and then they were either retained or discharged from the service. That was our duty -- to test these people, write up the reports and so forth.

Q: *Did you have any training or education in psychology?*

A: No. These two captains held classes for us and taught us. It was on-the-job training. I had a lot of cases. I brought a lot of home. They were restricted information. You wrote up a case history of a man, took him from his date of birth to the time he was in the service. When the psychiatrist read that, he knew exactly what the man was. Just like you talking to me, about my birth, schooling, occupation and all that. I enjoyed doing that.

Q: *So that is how you spent your Air Corps years.*

A: Yeah. You can only test one person at a time, anyway, during the day. You don't make any notes when you talk to the fellow and test him. It's all in here [points to his head] so after he leaves, you have to write up everything.

Q: *You didn't have a tape recorder.*

A: No, no tape recorder. To begin with, you can't let the person know you're testing him. This is just a normal conversation, and then you have to write all that stuff up. Like Fred Astaire, the choreographer, I got him out of the service. He was a homosexual. He was a very nice person. Quite a lot of them are just not adaptable to Army life. You get them out. A lot of them are well educated, college educated, (but that was) of no use.

Q: *Were you drafted or did you volunteer?*

A: I was drafted.

Q: *What was your reaction when Pearl Harbor happened?*

A: No reaction, except naturally, against the Japanese.

Q: *Did you know Japanese Americans in Chinatown?*

A: Oh, yeah, lot of good friends too. I went to school with some of them.

Q: *Did you know Japanese American families who were taken away? Did you have any ill feelings toward them?*

A: I had no ill feelings. I don't think I had that feeling at all about them going away. That was furthest from our thoughts. Other than the fact the government was saying, they're going away, that's it. I never thought that was right or wrong.

PIONEERING MOTHER

Q: *I want get back to your social environment. During the business school years or when you were working for the DMV, did you continue to live at home with your folks?*

A: Yes. When I started to work for the DMV, I was still with my family. My mother passed away in 1928, so she wasn't there, but my father was still living, and he died in 1936. I became the head man of the family.

Q: *I want to ask you about your mother. You gave me a clipping that said she and Dr. Charles Lee's wife were the first two Chinese American women to register to vote in the United States and both were from Oakland Chinatown. She died when you were fairly young. Tell me what you remember about her.*

A: She was very open with friends. We had the store. She was always there. Lots of friends came in. She was very helpful to people. When we had the store, we had a little room that people came to play *mah jongg*. There were a lot of single people, men, that came in, and my mother would take good care of them.

Q: *Did she cook meals for them?*

A: She cooked for them and she sewed for them, and she helped out in any old way. She was a grand old lady -- I wouldn't say old lady -- young lady.

Q: *Did she speak both Chinese and English?*

A: Mostly Chinese. She also taught Sunday school. She taught the kids.

Q: *At which church?*

A: A church on 5th Street. I don't remember which one, just an old church next to the *ha po*, the shrimp (store), of the Leong family, George Leong, and Lloyd Leong. The church was next door.

Q: *What is the story behind her registering to vote?*

A: I have no idea, other than the fact that my father was with the Native Sons of the Golden State [which later became the Chinese American Citizens Alliance]. Dr. Lee was also very active. They were the ones that all Chinese voters went to to find out who to vote for. Registered Chinese voters would ask them.

Q: *At CACA?*

A: Yeah, CACA. That is probably how it happened, I would guess. They would ask, "How come the Chinese don't vote?" They were friends of a few judges at that time.

Q: *She registered in 1911, when she was about 22 years old.*

A: Something like that.

Q: *And you weren't born yet.*

A: No.

Q: *Did she tell you stories about that, or did your dad tell you this story?*

A: No, no.

Q: *How did you learn about it?*

A: From the articles.

Q: *How did you find out about the articles?*

A: I saw it somewhere. I don't recall. (My parents) never mentioned it.

Q: *So you learned about it after they passed?*

A: Right.

Q: *How do you feel about your mother? She really made some history.*

A: That's why when I dug (the articles) out, I tried to talk to a few people. When Lester Lee's mother [Clara Lee, the other Chinese American woman who registered to vote] turned 106, there was an article in the paper about her, and this article was brought forth.

Q: *What did your mother die of?*

A: Tuberculosis.

Q: *Your dad died a little bit after that. He was a fairly young man himself. So you lived mostly with your parents even during the early years at the DMV. Were you still at 8th and Harrison?*

A: Oh, no, we moved a couple of times.

Q: *In Chinatown itself?*

A: At first we were living behind the laundry. Then we moved to the end of 8th Street, 8th & Fallon.

Q: *I am a little confused. You said you were born in a hospital, but you lived at 8th & Harrison. And again you said you were born at 8th & Harrison.*

A: I guess I was born at the hospital, I don't even know that.

Q: *But your family was living at 8th and Harrison.*

A: Oh, yeah.

MARRIED LIFE

Q: *How did you meet your wife?*

A: Just through friends, and going to different places.

Q: *What was her name?*

A: Gladys Kwock. She was born in China. We used to go with a bunch of boys and girls in downtown Oakland. We just happened to meet.

Q: *Kind of group dates?*

A: Yeah, group dates.

Q: *And her family lived in Chinatown also?*

A: Her family lived in West Oakland.

Q: *What did her family do for a living? Grocery store?*

A: No, her father had a restaurant out of town somewhere. She lived with her mother and sister and brother in West Oakland. Her mother used to work at the cannery.

Q: *Which cannery?*

A: Pacific Coast Canning.

Q: *Oh, Lew Hing.*

A: Yes, Lew Hing. She's a Lew. Kwock is her family name, but her actual name is Lew.

Q: *So she was part of the Lew Hing family?*

A: Distantly related. Her uncle was in the Lew Hing family. That is how they used to work there.

Q: *You got to know Gladys because it was just a lot of Chinese kids hanging out. What kinds of stuff did you do as a group?*

A: What didn't we do? Like any other youthful group.

Q: *You were able to do that even though Chinese were forced to live mainly in Chinatown, there were some in West Oakland, not a lot, but in terms of going out into Oakland socializing, going to the movies, or going for sodas, that was OK?*

A: Yeah, because we had cars.

Q: *You didn't experience any kind of discrimination or bias or racism?*

A: No, not really. I don't think we wandered out to the places we shouldn't be.

Q: *Tell me some of the places you went as a group – all around town? Lake Merritt?*

A: Oh, yeah, Lake Merritt, Neptune Beach (in Alameda), different places out of town.

Q: *Because you had cars.*

A: Yeah.

Q: *When did you and Gladys get married?*

A: 1942.

Q: *Did you have children?*

A: No.

Q: *She recently passed, right?*

A: She passed away in November of 2003.

Q: *You were married in 1942 until she passed away in November 2003. You've lived in this place...*

A: Since 1961.

Q: *We're at 4500 Mountain View Avenue. Where had you lived before with Gladys when you were first married?*

A: When we first married, we were living where I had lived before, with the family, at 8th and Fallon. Then we moved off of Seminary Avenue. We built a place there.

Q: *Was this after the war?*

A: Oh, yeah. I bought the lot before the war.

Q: *How were you able to do that? I thought there were restrictions.*

A: It's a long story, but I'll try to be brief. A friend of my mine heard about this lot. He was a builder. He looked at the deed, and the non-Caucasian restriction had expired. Usually when they do that, they automatically renew the restriction. So I had him buy it in his name without renewing the restriction. Then he turned it over to me.

Q: *How did he turn it over to you?*

A: Just a real estate transaction. He bought it in his name.

Q: *Wasn't the restriction still on there?*

A: No.

Q: *It had expired already?*

A: It expired, and he did not renew the restriction when he bought it. When he transferred it, there was no restriction.

Q: *This was before the war?*

A: Before the war.

Q: *So you had a piece of property on Seminary.*

A: Off of Seminary, Laird Avenue, top of a hill, enough for one house. That's another thing too. We bought it. Some day we were going to build on it. No restriction on it. That's how I bought the thing. Then I came back and later on we decided to build on it. It was a very nice neighborhood, then the neighborhood changed. Most of the houses were owned by the people. Later on, it all became rentals. For example, the guy next door. He rented the place, had five cars, double garage, but the garage wasn't used. All five cars were on the street. If you wanted to visit me, you couldn't even find a place to park. I got so damned disgusted there, I got out. But the good thing about it, I had bought this lot here. I bought this lot when I was over there. I bought a whole acre here. That place changed because it was getting to be a lousy place to live.

Q: *Homeowners were moving out and renters coming in?*

A: Yeah, right.

Q: *Was there a different racial composition too?*

A: Not particularly.

Q: *But more transient?*

A: More kids and more transient and more traffic. You know how renters are -- they don't take care of their property. I knew a Chinese real estate agent, Dave Quan. I talked with Dave one day and told him I got a house I may want to sell one of these days. I gave him a picture of the house (to show on a listing). For six months, I never heard a word. One day at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, he calls me, and says, "Art, I got somebody interested in buying your house." I said, "OK, fine, let's arrange to show it." He said they're going to come up today at 6 o'clock that same day. I said, "My God, both of us work, we don't even clean our house when we go out in the morning. It's a mess." I said if they come up, I'm not going to show them the whole house. Six o'clock, they came out and looked through the house. We gave them the price, and they didn't say boo. They took off. Ten o'clock that night, Dave called, "The people want your house." So I sold my house underneath me! I didn't expect to sell it that fast. I said, "OK, OK, I'm going to make it tough for them. If they want it, they got to let me stay here for six months at \$50 a month." By God, they agreed to it. I figured I had this lot. I figured a couple of months to draw plans, two, three months to build, and I'll be in my new house in plenty of time. I couldn't make it on time. Six months was up, the guy wanted to move in, so I said, "Dave, will you tell them to extend my thing for another month." Dave went and asked them. No, they had to get out of their house. So, we had to live in a triplex for a month, a rental, before we had the house completed.

Q: *So this house was completed within seven months?*

A: Yeah. This is a whole acre here and there was a normal split level lot. You had to have a split-level home. My house on Laird Avenue had thirty-six steps to the first door and the garage was downstairs. What I did is I cut a driveway here, cut off the top of the knoll and I have no steps, nothing, here, and it's on solid ground.

Q: *Except your driveway here.*

A: It's a little narrow.

Q: *Narrow and steep.*

A: But I have no steps here.

Q: *I'm pretty amazed, Art, that you can negotiate it and can still drive.*

A: Oh, yeah. I had the whole acre, and I gave part to Joe [a neighbor] and he built that home over there.

Q: *Tell me what you and wife did for recreation, since you didn't have children. Did you get together with friends? Did you join organizations?*

A: We were very busy with organizations and traveled a lot.

Q: *All over the world?*

A: Not quite.

Q: *The U.S. mainly or what?*

A: The U.S. mainly when we were in the service and after the service because we made so many friends in different (places) like Missouri and Massachusetts. We were with them for four years, and we were just like family to them. They're not Chinese, they're all Caucasian, in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Maine.

Q: *These are your Air Corps friends.*

A: Yeah, I call them my family. They're practically all gone now. We used to visit each other almost every other year or so.

Q: *You became so close to them that you would visit them years later.*

A: Oh, sure. We're just family. We did a lot of traveling. We traveled a lot to China. Been there eight or nine times. We went back to her village, where she was born. It was still there. She was born in Toisan (Guangdong Province). The communists took over her home and made a bank out of it, and they gave the thing back to them, and we went back to the place and found her home, and some relatives are there.

Q: *You say you've been to China eight or nine times?*

A: Not China particularly, but Hong Kong and Far East, you might say. Then I've been all over Europe.

Q: *When I said all over the world, well, practically...*

A: Yeah, well, we went to London a couple of times, and France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain.

Q: *These were mainly vacation trips?*

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: *So that is how you spent your life together.*

A: Yes, Spain, Morocco, Thailand.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Q: *Tell me about the Mandarin service station.*

A: I don't recall what year it was...

Q: *Some time in the 1930s, early 1930s.*

A: It's that Heburn Code [spelling?] Building, that's what they called it, that beautiful building at the corner (of 8th & Harrison Streets), which remains there now. Down below was a multi-level garage. They had a couple of curb pumps, so Frank Lee and I opened a gas station because we knew all these lottery guys, *tong yun sow bew* [Chinese lottery ticket sellers], that had cars that drove over for gasoline. That was a natural thing. We thought maybe we could rent those two pumps and block off a place for a little office. We called it curb service, a pump on the sidewalk.

Q: *Did you have to buy that? How did the business transaction happen?*

A: Rent.

Q: *Did you eventually own it?*

A: No, That was owned by a fellow who owned the garage. We subleased from him. Eh, it didn't make any money.

Q: *But you also opened a place in San Francisco, a Texaco station.*

A: No, but then right next door to the building was *Wing On Cheong* [a grocery store]. There was an empty lot (between the building and *Wing On Cheong*). Harry Chin and I talked about building a gas station (in that lot). We built a gas station there, Mandarin Service, financed by his mother.

Q: *The curbside pumps were how close to that?*

A: Next door.

Q: *Were you one of the first to do that in Chinatown? Were there other gas stations in Chinatown?*

A: We were the first Chinese gas station. Eventually, it went to the Lim boys, George Lim, he was one of the partners. They moved down to 8th...

Q: *Between Webster and Franklin.*

A: No, no, they moved down to Alice Street. It's still there, that gas station.

Q: *Oh, yeah, 8th and Alice, next to the Baptist Church now.*

A: That's George Lim. We were partners at that time. They moved down there. They changed that to Mandarin Service after we sold out. We built a garage in the back [at the 8th Street lot, between Webster and Harrison Streets], and there was a building in the back too. And there was a restaurant in the front, a little coffee shop.

Q: *You did that for a few years?*

A: We leased it out to a well-known Chinese family, the son-in-law, *Lun Bew*. When I moved out of the gasoline business, Harry's brother took over, and it became Center Auto Parts in that building. Where the restaurant was became Center Auto Parts. In the back was still the garage. Harry ran the garage. Eventually it sold out and then Kenny, the brother, had Center Auto Parts moved to where *Sam Yick Market* is [on 8th between Webster and Franklin Streets]. That's how Center Auto parts started. I had a chance to go into that, but I didn't go in with him.

Q: *But you did open in San Francisco.*

A: We opened one on 59 Columbus, where Clown Alley is now. That's the first all-Chinese full-service gas station. Before, they never had Chinese gas stations. They had garages that sell gas, but never a gas station. We were the first gas station over there.

Q: *Was it you and Harry again?*

A: Yeah. We didn't do so hot over there.

Q: *Did you eventually sell it?*

A: We gave it up. It was pretty hard to watch. Gas is not a good business to go into.

Q: *This was right around when you were getting your DMV job, right?*

A: Yeah.

BECOMING A FREE MASON

Q: *Tell me about some of the organizations you've been active with. I know that you've been close to the Masonic movement.*

A: The Masons were the most active one I've been in. I've been in since 1953, when I joined a Masonic Lodge.

Q: *Explain to me what the Masons are, what kind of organization it is?*

A: Oh, I don't know. I have something written here.

Q: *Was there an Oakland Masonic Lodge in 1953.*

A: I joined a Masonic Lodge in Oakland.

Q: *Were there other Chinese in it?*

A: Very few, but in my lodge there were. A Chinese helped me through the thing. His name was Billy Chew, who ran the only Chinese garage in Oakland, on Alice Street.

Q: *What was your interest in becoming a Mason?*

A: Actually, the Masonic Lodge is the largest fraternal organization in the world. They have Masonic Lodges all over the world. There is no place there isn't a Masonic Lodge, even in Iraq.

Q: *What attracted you to the Masons?*

A: I think the people that were Masons that I met seemed to have a different feeling about people, seemed to be good people. The Masonic order, the main thing is to make a good man a better man. That's what it is. They say the Masonic society is a secret organization. Actually, it is not a secret organization. It has its secrets, yes, but for being a secret organization, no. You see everybody wearing rings and pins and Masonic Lodge signs are out and even in publications and when they meet and where they meet, and so forth.

Q: *What have you done with the Masons?*

A: You have to know what Masonry is all about to begin with. I don't know what to tell you. Free masonry is not a substitute for religion. You have to believe in God and so forth. I have it written down here. Free Masonry has three great principles. One is brotherly love. Every Free Mason will show tolerance and respect for the opinions of others and behave with kindness and understanding to his fellow creatures. The next thing is relief. Free Masons are taught to practice charity and to care not only for their own but also for the community as a whole, both by charitable giving and voluntary effort in works as individuals. The third thing is truth. Free Masonry strives for truth, requiring the high moral standards and aiming to achieve them in their own lives. Therefore, brotherly love, relief, and truth are the Free Masonry principles.

Q: *So friends of yours who were Masons got you interested?*

A: Yes, I have friends who were Masons. The first important thing about Masons is that you cannot solicit. If you are not a Mason, nobody will ask you to become one. A whole group of friends, about seven or eight of us, we're all Masons and we're talking about Masonry. That eighth guy there has nothing to say. He's probably wondering, "How come they don't ask me to join?"

Q: *Because you can't?*

A: You cannot solicit. You have to be the one to ask.

Q: *So you asked.*

A: I had to ask to join. All you have to say is you are interested in Masonry, and then you can ask for an application to join. When you do apply, you have to go through the motion of being voted in.

Q: *What kind of activities have you participated in as a Mason? Is it a social organization or is it a service organization?*

A: It is not any of those. It's a fraternal organization that teaches you to be a better man. Those are all done by degrees and word of mouth.

Q: *Does this learning go on at conferences, at meetings, or over the phone or through papers?*

A: You're taught to do certain things. There are certain things we teach. Fifteen of our presidents were Masons, and a lot of Congressmen and Senators are Masons. George Washington was the first Mason, and then Harry Truman, the Roosevelts, Gerald Ford. Those were some of the presidents that were Masons.

Q: *What kind of Masonic activities have you participated in? You must have meetings or conferences or things like that.*

A: Oh, yeah, we have a meeting every month, a meeting every week, actually, for conferring of degrees.

Q: *Do you still attend those meetings?*

A: Not actively. I gave that up some time ago. The Masonry is composed of three degrees. The Masonic Lodge confers three degrees to a person before they're a Mason. First, you're initiated, and that is what they call it an apprentice degree. Then you go on to the second degree and the third degree. After you have the third degree, you are a Master Mason.

Q: *Is that what you are?*

A: Yeah, Master Mason. There are seven steps to be a master of a lodge. You have to ascend each station each year. You start in as a steward, junior steward, senior steward, junior deacon, senior deacon, junior warden, senior warden, then master. All these steps you have to ascend each year to become a master of a lodge. You have your duties to do each year. I went through as master in 1964. There are lodges in every city practically, maybe twenty or thirty lodges in each city. Before it was hard for Chinese to get in locally.

Q: *Were you one of the first Chinese to get in?*

A: Yes, one of the first Chinese.

Q: *Or were you the first, in Oakland?*

A: No, no, there were lots of them. Billy Chew was the first one over here, I think. Anyway, you are a Master Mason. There are lodges all over Oakland, depending on where you want to belong. You can ascend from being a Mason. You can join the Scottish Rite; that's on the lake. I am the third degree. That's all the Mason you can be, but these are all the extracurricular degrees. After you get into Scottish Rite, you can also go to York Rite. There are Mason, Scottish Rite, York Rite, then you join the Shrine. Those are the steps. You have to be a York Rite Mason or a Scottish Rite Mason to join the Shrine, to be a Shriner.

Q: *Shriner is the highest level?*

A: There is no highest level. It is an affiliate of the Mason, that's all. They say, you can never be higher than a third degree Mason.

Q: *What has it meant for you, because you have been a Mason for more than half of your life?*

A: It's meant a lot to me. It teaches me to be a good man, every day in life. It teaches me to be a good neighbor.

Q: *So there are lessons that you've learned from being a Mason that apply to everyday life.*

A: Yeah, yeah, as I said, brotherly love, relief, and truth.

Q: *What other organizations have you and or your wife been active in? Any Chinese organizations?*

A: I've been active in the Grand Lodge too. The Grand Lodge is in charge of all the lodges in California. You know where the Grand Lodge is, 1111 California, California Masonic Temple in San Francisco? That's a big place. Every year they have a convocation for the Grand Master. There's a Grand Master for all the lodges. I was not a Grand Master, because I was a grand lodge officer one year in 1973. We do all the corner stone laying of buildings because we champion public schools. That is one thing of the Masonic order. That year, 1973, I was the Grand (Potentate?) of the Grand Lodge of California, so I traveled thousands of miles. I was in Los Angeles, sometimes two or three times a week, San Diego, Eureka the next day. Also, there are no Chinese lodges. Why? Because we don't want one.

Q: *Chinese members are members of all different lodges?*

A: All different lodges. And then we have a Chinese club within, all Chinese Masons, the Chinese Acacia Club. It has members all over the world, China, Taiwan, Japan, New York. I can give you a roster of 300 members of the Acacia Club.

Q: *But it's not a lodge unto itself.*

A: We don't want a lodge. In China, they have their own lodges. Also in Taiwan. When I was president of the Chinese Acacia Club, I took eighty people to visit Taiwan, to visit the Taiwan lodges. They treated us royally.

Q: *Is the Acacia Club worldwide?*

A: Worldwide. We have no clubroom, but our address is San Francisco because we meet in San Francisco every month. As I told you, the Masonic order is composed of three degrees which has to be conferred. Each degree is done by people in the lodge, so the Chinese Acacia Club has what we call a degree team. Sometimes if a lodge has a Chinese candidate, our Chinese degree team will go there, if we are invited, to confer the third degree on the Chinese candidate. We used to go all over the state.

Q: *Would it be accurate to say that your participation in the Masonic order has been a very important part of your life outside of work?*

A: Yes, very much so, because I devote a lot of time to it.

RETIREMENT LIFE

Q: *You've been retired for thirty-two years, and you appear to be in good spirits and in good health. Tell me about your retirement life. What have you done since your retirement? How do you keep yourself busy?*

A: Other than Masonic activity, we do a little traveling, that's about all. My life has changed now with the loss of my wife. But we seem to be busy. However, we are busy with other organizations, like the Order of the Eastern Star [affiliated with the Masonic order]. My wife was a worthy matron, in 1972, of her Eastern Star chapter in Castro Valley, so she ascended to the chair. I followed along and became her patron. In 1973, I was appointed the Grand Lodge officer, as I told you, and traveled throughout the state for a year. After my Grand Lodge thing, I became a district inspector for the Grand Lodge. A district inspector is an inspector who has so many lodges under his control. An inspector supervises the ritual work, to see that officers are proficient in the work as they ascend each

year. I had six lodges to take care. In other words, I had to travel to the six lodges to check the officers to see their degree work and see that they are proficient.

Q: *This was all after your retirement.*

A: Yes. At the same time, my wife Gladys was appointed deputy grand matron of the Order of the Eastern Star, and she had seven chapters where the duties are similar to mine, to (make sure) her Eastern Star officers were proficient in their work. Funny part, we meet each other coming through the door. Sometimes she had to visit two chapters in the same night. But her chapters were all in South County – Pleasanton, Livermore, Hayward, Castro Valley, San Leandro. She had to drive every night to a different chapter. I was district inspector for six lodges. My lodges were in Berkeley, Albany, El Cerrito. So I had to travel over that way to cover my six lodges, and she covered her seven chapters, so you see how busy a life we had.

Q: *I can tell. What did Gladys do for work?*

A: She worked for the Naval Air Station. She retired at the same time I did.

Q: *Did she work a long time the way you worked for the DMV?*

A: Not quite as long. When I was in the service in different places, she worked there too. I was not only in Atlantic City, I was in Greensboro, North Carolina, and we lived two years in Mississippi, in Biloxi.

Q: *What did you do in Mississippi?*

A: Same thing. I was in the Army. My duties were the same.

Q: *What kind of work did Gladys do at the Naval Air Station?*

A: She was in payroll accounting.

Q: *Do you have hobbies other than your Masonic activities?*

A: No time for hobbies.

Q: *Today, as we talk, are you somewhat active in the Masons?*

A: No, slowed down quite a bit. Things change. I am still pretty active in the Acacia Club. Then I belong to the *Wah Ying Club*, a social club in San Francisco.

Q: *It has nothing to do with the Masons?*

A: No, although half of the members are Masons too.

Q: *What does Wah Ying do?*

A: Mainly a social club, a nonprofit organization, and they donate to various organizations, like the YMCA, *On Lok Center*, things like that. We own the building over there. It has a restricted membership, only about a hundred or so membership, and now the initiation fee is \$1,000, and \$50 a year. I am a lifetime member. It does a lot of good. It has a meeting every month. It has a lot of social activities, like golf tournaments. The club has good income and they pay for a lot of things. We go to a banquet and it doesn't cost us a dime. Golf tournaments don't cost us a dime. It's a good social club. I belonged to the Rotary Club too, the San Leandro Rotary. I was the only Chinese. Of course, Rotary is a service club. It's a good club. I enjoyed it. One thing good about working in a small town like San Leandro, at that time, you know everybody, everybody knows you. It was pretty good to be in a small town. And then I partake in the school safety program, always in the paper, pictures in the paper, talking to students and stuff like that.

Q: *You were never active in Wa Sung or CACA?*

A: Not really. It was my dad who was doing CACA.

REFLECTIONS ON CHINATOWN

Q: *Thinking back now, how do you feel about Chinatown? Do you go back there at all to shop and eat? Do you know people there? [Art Tom's current home on Mountain View Avenue is about ten miles southeast of Chinatown.]*

A: I love Chinatown. In fact, Chinatown was my main thing before. As I said, with DMV, everybody knows me and I know everybody.

Q: *Because some of people came to you for help.*

A: Yeah, and some of them are friends anyway. I mean, I lived in Chinatown for a long time for people to know me. And I know every merchant there. Some of the newer merchants were Louie from Silver Dragon. I have known him for many years. When I first knew him, he only had a little restaurant in East Oakland somewhere. Way back when, the restaurant most well known was New Home.

Q: *On the corner of 7th and Webster.*

A: Right. Your folks had a restaurant across the street there.

Q: *The Great China.*

A: Before Great China, people used to convene (at New Home), all the Chinese butchers and grocery men were there in the morning for coffee and biscuits.

Q: *Did they serve American food?*

A: Oh, heck yeah, and lunch, *ngow may* (ox tails), and roast pork, roast beef, and they were all packed there. Going down to Chinatown, well, gee whiz, gosh, how I miss these people – *Sang Cheong*, *Ah Lok*, Phillip, I knew him very well, the owner [of *Sang Cheong*, a fish market on 8th Street between Webster and Franklin Streets]. He's the father of Heather Fong, the chief of police of San Francisco.

Q: *Yeah, they used to have Sang Cheong. What was the man's name again?*

A: Phillip Fong. *Ah Lok*, I called him *Ah Lok*. These were all good friends. And down the street, Charlie, *Yet Sun* [another fish market].

Q: *Yet Sun is still there, but it has changed ownership many times. Do you remember going to Hamburger Joe and Hamburger Gus? Those were not Chinese. They were Greeks.*

A: Yeah, they were Greeks. Fifteen cents for a hamburger, and nickel more for French fries. Hamburger Pete, Pete and Gus, and three of them there. The one on the corner was Hamburger Joe.

Q: *Hamburger Gus was in the middle of the block.*

A: I used to patronize all of those.

Q: *I've heard that Broadway was kind of a border.*

A: Yeah, yeah. We didn't want to pass there.

Q: *Why?*

A: I don't know. Just never had the urge or any reason to cross Broadway.

Q: *What was the impression you had? Were you told or warned that this was not a place that Chinese were welcome?*

A: We didn't know anything like that at all. Just seemed to be no desire to just go there and stop. We don't even want to see what was beyond there.

Q: *But you spoke earlier that there was discrimination against Chinese.*

A: But I learned that after, when I was getting older. When I was younger, I didn't know that.

Q: *How did you learn that? Did something negative or racist happen to you?*

A: No, no, just gradually hearing people talking about it and things like that.

Q: *How about your friends, your Chinese friends?*

A: No, no.

Q: *When you were growing up through your teen years, were your friends mostly Chinese?*

A: Right.

Q: *Were you ere aware that Chinese couldn't move to parts of Oakland because of covenants in deeds that prevented that?*

A: Yeah.

Q: *You told me that when you were young, you played in the streets in front of your parents' store. Did you also go to Lincoln Square?*

A: No, we used to play in the streets. Years ago, when we were young, we got together to play games and do things together and kick the can. We didn't play much ball in Lincoln Square.

Q: *Because it was safe.*

A: And then you had a ball team, Chinese C-9.

Q: *The C-9, which preceded the Wa Sung.*

A: *Wa Sung*, and then from *Wa Sung*, we break into the Young Chinese Athletic Club, YCAC.

Q: *Were you active in that?*

A: Yeah, in Young Chinese. I belonged to the C-9 when it started. I never belonged to *Wa Sung*.

Q: *What sports did you play?*

A: Played baseball, basketball. Young Chinese had a good basketball team.

Q: *Who did they play?*

A: The biggest team we ever played was *Lo Wah* from Los Angeles, and we beat them. I don't know what year.

Q: *So these were Chinese teams from elsewhere?*

A: Yeah, Chinese teams. Oh, yeah, those were the days. Then, Chinatown was *Say Hoy Lau*, upstairs, a restaurant, the biggest restaurant in Chinatown.

Q: *It was a second-story banquet kind of restaurant?*

A: Yeah. Right now, it's the Elegant Palace, which is *Buck Ghing Low*, used to be Peking Low.

Q: *Now it's called Legendary Palace.*

A: Yeah. Then on Webster Street was *Sun Yuet Wah*, where they used to make *chow fun* [stir-fried rice noodles].

Q: *You've been physically removed from Chinatown for quite a few years. I was wondering how you think about your Chinatown youth. Do you have some nostalgia for it? Do you have some warm feelings for it? Or do you not think about it at all?*

A: I think about it a lot, about the old times, when you go on the streets and greet everybody and everybody greets you. There is no such thing like that now. You

go out there now and you don't know a soul. They are all new people. I've outgrown all of them. Once in a while, I see an old friend, but not very often.

Q: *Do you go down to Chinatown much at all yourself?*

A: No, because of the parking, and all that. I don't do much shopping now that my wife is gone. We used to go down there and do a little shopping, but that's about it, but still you don't meet people you know too often. People have moved out too. People get old like me. How many people do I know who are still around? I can name dozens of people who are no longer my friends.

Q: *Are you in touch with Freeman Chan at all?*

A: Seldom. Freeman and I are very close friends. But we don't, in fact, (see one another much anymore). Freeman and I kept track (of each other) during the war. He worked in New Jersey for his sister in a restaurant. I went back to see them. And I met Mary [Freeman Chan's wife] in New York. We used to go out with Mary every weekend, before they were married. So you see how long that is.

Q: *You've had a long productive life. You've done a lot of things. But you also grew up at a time when Chinese didn't have all the opportunities in the world.*

A: That's right.

Q: *I was looking at the albums that you lent me. It looked like you were having a great time, traveling. You had friends.*

A: Chinatown was a not big thoroughfare like it is now. You play in the streets, and it's mostly deserted. It's completely different than what it is now. Now, it is just swarming with people.

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE

Q: *You made a good life of it. You took advantage of some opportunities especially through the DMV, and you rose. That's all to your credit. Do you sometimes think that had you been born at a time when there was no discrimination against the Chinese in a legal sense, the way there was when you grew up, that you would have even greater opportunities, perhaps to get a college degree or rise up even more in the economic ladder, or do you have any regrets about that at all?*

A: No, I don't think it would change much that way. I would say that what I went through, I tried to make the best of it. I was lucky in some instances, when the opportunity presented itself,

Q: *The stories you are telling about all the pilot programs or the experiments at the DMV, that you were in charge of, you can at least feel good about doing that.*

A: Yeah. At least I had a part in it. But who knows? DMV doesn't know that. At that time, different people were in charge, different directors of motor vehicles, different supervisors. You were told to do a certain job, and you do it. That's all there is to it.

Q: *Did your siblings have children? Are you in touch with your nieces and nephews?*

A: My sister had two sons.

Q: *Are you close to both of them?*

A: Oh, yes, we're close, but they don't live close.

Q: *How far away do they live?*

A: Ricky is the older, that's Richard Chinn. He lives in Hillsborough, and he's a consultant of some sort. And the other one is Randy, or Randall, and he lives in Walnut Creek and he's a retired teacher.

Q: *Are you in touch with them by phone or do you see one another?*

A: Oh, yes. Both of them adopted children. Ricky adopted a Chinese girl, Jamie, and Randy has Danielle. My brother has a son, Marshall, and he lives in Las Vegas, and he is an owner of a research company working with health care and hospitals doing mostly computer stuff.

Q: *Do people and friends check up on you? I don't mean to suggest you need that.*

A: I need that badly.

Q: *Do you have people calling you up just to see how you are?*

A: Oh, yeah, friends and family.

Q: *You like that kind of connection.*

A: Oh, yeah, particularly my neighbors. The neighbors call me quite often. The neighbors are very good.

Q: *Through this project, the fact that I am taping you and talking to you about your life, even though you are a modest man, I want people to know that you've been here. I think people will be interested in hearing you talk about your life and life in Oakland's Chinatown when you were young, because I really do believe that you and people of your generation, many of whom have passed already, should have an opportunity to talk about yourselves because I don't want to interpret for you. This is your own voice.*

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