

ARTHUR TOM

Arthur Tom was the son of Emma Hoo Tom, one of two women who made history when she and Clara Lee became the first women of their race to register to vote in the United States. They did that in 1911, in Oakland, California. On August 24, 2004, I interviewed Arthur Tom, who made history in California too, by being the first ethnic Chinese employee of the California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). He passed away on March 2, 2006. This is a condensed excerpt of that interview.

-- William Wong

CHILDHOOD AND PARENTS

I was born in Oakland, California, on July 24, 1912, the first child of three. I lived in the building on 8th and Harrison Streets, right in Chinatown.

The building is the CACA (Chinese American Citizens Alliance) building now. The CACA was formerly known as Native Sons of the Golden State. My father was one of the original members, along with Thomas C. Lew, Frank Yick, and Jue Yut, and Jew Geng. They were the ones who tried to get Chinese to vote, one of the first Chinese organizations for Chinese Americans.

My father was Tom Lung. We were of the Tom family. My mother was Emma Tom. My father was born in 1884, my mother in 1889, both in San Francisco. Their parents were from China. My father's family is from *Hoi Ping* [Guangdong Province]. I don't know where my mother's family came from.

I had a sister, Margaret, and a brother, Edward. Ed passed away in 2002, my sister passed away in 2003. We were each two years apart.

My parents had a laundry and cleaning agency, on 8th Street, 311, 313. We lived in the back of the store. We did not do the laundry there. We were merely an agent picking up for a laundry. You leave laundry there, and we send it out and you come back and pick it up.

PIONEERING MOTHER

My mother passed away in 1928. She was always at the store. She was very helpful to people who came in. The store had a little room that people came to play *mah jongg*.

A lot of single men came in, and my mother cooked and sewed for them. She helped out in any way she could. She also taught Sunday school at a church on 5th Street. She was a grand lady.

I have no idea why my mother decided to register to vote, other than the fact that my father was with the Native Sons of the Golden State. Dr. Charles Lee was also very

active. All registered Chinese voters went to them to find out who to vote for. They were friends of a few judges at that time.

I wasn't born yet when she registered to vote. I found out about it from news articles, after my parents had passed away. My parents never mentioned it.

When Lester Lee's mother [Clara Lee] turned 106, there was an article in the paper about her, and this incident was brought forth.

MEMORIES OF CHINATOWN

The people I grew up with were the Chan family, on 8th Street. The father was the minister of the Chinese Methodist Church and the boys were Freeman, Edwin, George, and Edward. They had quite a few sisters.

Harry Chin's family owned a store next door. The church was downstairs and the Chan family lived upstairs. The person across the street, on the corner, was 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.

On 9th Street was the Fung family. They were electricians and contractors. One of the fellows I went to school with was Paul Fung, who became a well-known doctor in San Francisco. He started the Buddhist Church in San Francisco.

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. The park at 7th and Harrison was an open park. We didn't play much ball in Lincoln Square.

Other friends were all along 6th and 7th Streets. There was sort of a division between the 8th and 6th Street gangs. The 6th Street gang used to be the Chan family. Further down on 8th Street was the Wong family, Worley Wong, 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.

We had a ball team, the Chinese C-9. That came before the Wa Sung baseball team. There was also the Young Chinese Athletic Club. I belonged to the C-9 when it started. I never belonged to Wa Sung.

I played baseball and basketball. Young Chinese had a good basketball team. The biggest team we ever played was *Lo Wah* from Los Angeles, and we beat them. There were Chinese teams from elsewhere too.

The Chinese school was called *Lai Hon Som*, a private school on Harrison Street. 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, on 8th Street, where the Joy Luck restaurant is now. I went to both.

I went to American school, Lincoln, during the day. I got out at 3 o'clock, went home and had dinner, then went to Chinese school between 5 and 8. Most Chinese families had more or less the same routine.

Chinatown was almost exclusively Chinese because it was restricted at that time. 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.

The restaurant most well known was New Home at 7th and Webster. All the Chinese butchers and grocery men were there in the morning for coffee and biscuits. They served American food -- *ngow may* (ox tails), roast pork, and roast beef.

There was also *Say Hoy Lau*, upstairs, the biggest restaurant in Chinatown. Now, it's the Legendary Palace, which was also called *Buck Ghing Low*, Peking Low. On Webster Street was *Sun Yuet Wah*, where they used to make *chow fun*.

How I miss these people – Phillip Fong, 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. I called him *Ah Lok*.

There was Hamburger Joe, Hamburger Gus, and Hamburger Pete. They were Greeks. Fifteen cents for a hamburger, and nickel more for French fries.

We didn't want to pass over Broadway. Just never had the urge or any reason to do that. We don't even want to see what was beyond there.

EDUCATION

My first languages were both *som yup* and *say yup*. 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*.¹

I learned English at Lincoln School. The teachers were mostly white women. I started at Lincoln about 1917. The students were mostly Chinese. Others were white. There weren't too many black kids, and no Mexicans. There were some Japanese. We enjoyed the company of all the kids.

After Lincoln, I went to Oakland High directly. There were no junior highs at that time. Oakland High was on 12th Street and Jefferson. They called it the Old Brick Pile. We were the first or second class to graduate from that new school (on Park and MacArthur boulevards) in 1929, I believe. More whites than Chinese went to Oakland High, but there were many Chinese there.

¹ *Som yup* is spoken Cantonese. *Say yup* is a Cantonese dialect spoken in certain villages of Guangdong Province.

After high school, Cal Berkeley would be the closest college we would be tempted to go to. I didn't think my family could afford it.

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

EARLY WORK LIFE

I worked part-time in a buffet and bar in downtown Oakland, owned by Americans², from 5 or 6 o'clock till midnight, to earn money to go to business school.

Then I got the idea of taking the state civil service test. For Chinese 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.

The first civil service exam I took was for clerical work. While I was working at the restaurant, I got a call to work for the DMV [Department of Motor Vehicles].

That is how I started at the DMV, in 1935. It was a temporary thing during the vehicle registration renewal period, which used to be January, when they did it all at once. February 4 was the last day for auto registration. I took a temporary job for those many weeks.

WORKING FOR THE DMV

It was just a job. I found out later I was the only Chinese working for the DMV. I worked in a tiny corner office, in a big garage on 14th and Harrison. I did clerical work. That included learning how to register vehicles.

I mingled very little with white people before, but at the DMV, I did. There is one thing I have always said, that working for the state and DMV, I have felt no discrimination of any sort.

In every move I made in the DMV, everybody helped me, which was very nice. I got along very well. That was a good thing, particularly when you heard a lot of stories about discrimination against Chinese.

Becoming Permanent

After the registration period, they kept me on. There seemed to be a lot of other work, but there was a shortage of help. At that time, the ruling of civil service was that if you

² Meaning "white" Americans.

worked a temporary job, after six months, you became a permanent employee. That is what happened.

My education in the business school helped me, particularly in the accounting field, when you collect and kept track of money.

Eventually, we moved to a new location, 1107 Jackson Street, and then to the new office at 5300 Claremont Avenue. This was before the 1950s.

I started as a junior clerk at \$70 a month. A few months later, because of the state budget problems, my pay was cut to \$60 a month.

I continued to take promotional examinations, and passed. The next step was an intermediate clerk. I earned maybe a hundred dollars a month. I had some benefits, like vacation and a pension. The next step was the senior clerk, with a little bump in pay, maybe thirty or forty dollars.

Helping Chinese Applicants

I was in the Division of Registration and then wandered over to the Division of Driver's Licenses because there were so many Chinese coming in who were unable to pass the test. I helped the Chinese in the drivers' license part. Many had trouble reading and speaking English.

I gave oral examinations to the Chinese. I boosted myself up there by helping them out. They say, "Go and see Tom Lung's boy at DMV." That's how I knew most of the Chinese in Chinatown, and most of them knew me.

I took the examination for Driver's License Examiner and passed. I got a little more money. I enjoyed doing that for about ten years. It's a challenge to take drivers out to test their driving skills. It's good to learn public relations too.

Next, I took the test for Motor Vehicle Representative and passed. In this new job classification, you are supposed to shift from one job to another, from registering vehicles to driver's licenses, say, in a small office.

Eventually I became a Motor Vehicle Representative in Oakland. It was a step up. I went to San Francisco for two years on a temporary basis. 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 for two years.

Switching to Computers

In 1948, they started the electronic computer stuff. Before that, everything was done by hand, like filing. They had to have an experimental office, to prepare all the documents for IBM keypunching. I was the area office manager, converting to IBM.

All the applications that came in from, say, Hayward and San Francisco came into my office to be converted to IBM computerized files. Those were hectic days.

After my crew and I got all the bugs out, it became the ordinary thing. I went to Los Angeles and Sacramento to help them set up their IBM programs.

When DMV opened a new temporary office at 319 MacArthur Boulevard, in San Leandro, I became manager. This was about 1958. We built a new office building at 2000 Washington Avenue in San Leandro.

At some point, I went back to Oakland as manager of the Claremont office. Then I went back to San Leandro before I retired. I worked for the DMV for thirty-seven years, retiring in 1972.

It's a funny feeling to be a manager. You have a lot of problems, and naturally anything the employees can't solve falls into your lap. I think I was pretty good in doing that. I liked the responsibility. It was a challenge to me. When you have a disgruntled customer, you have to soothe his tail feathers. When you can do it, it feels good.

Driver's License Examiner School

I ran the first driver's license examiner's school in the state. Before that happened, a new examiner was taught by the one who was formerly in his place. There were no criteria for driver's licenses.

The school we started trained new examiners for six weeks. Each new examiner had to go through the same thing, like grading a driver's test. My two instructors or I would take two or three examiners in a car and we checked to make the driving test was uniform.

That's why now there is a set course in each office, a set number and types of turns. They're all graded. You start with 100 percent. You take off a percentage when they do something wrong.

Before, it was just the examiner's opinion. He took you around the block or around six blocks, depending on what he wanted to do. Each office now has a standardized route. You cannot deviate from the route. If you do, you will be suspended. It is very strict.

Another pilot program I did was taking photos of drivers applying for a license.

The DMV was my only working life. As a Chinese, I feel that we have to work harder, twice as hard probably. We do try to work harder and do the best we can. Why? Because we have to overcome and offset what people think of us. You know, "Well, he's only a Chinaman."

WORLD WAR II SERVICE

In between the DMV work, I was drafted and joined the Army Air Corps for four years, but never out of the country. This was in 1942.

I had very good jobs in the Army Air Corps. I was more or less a civilian employee, a personnel consultant assistant in the psychology unit, doing psychological testing and test interpretation and case history work. I became the sergeant major at the unit. Our unit stayed together pretty well throughout the four years.

I went from Monterey, California, to Atlantic City, New Jersey -- from overlooking the Pacific to overlooking the Atlantic. The troops were there in Atlantic City.

I took my basic training there. One day I was called in for an interview to get a permanent assignment. Two captains, one a psychologist from New York, the other a professor from the University of Pittsburgh, asked me to join the personnel consultant unit and the classification unit where everyone is tested and put into different categories.

This was one of the best breaks I had in my life. This was my first time away from home. I was homesick. They asked me whether I wanted to be a permanent party there. I hesitated, saying I'd rather be transferred to a base closer to home.

Those two officers told me to think it over and let them know by Thursday. This was a Monday when we met. I went back to my hotel room and thought it over. Even if I got back to California, the closest base would be in Sacramento, so close to home and yet I couldn't get home.

I told them I would stay there. So I became a permanent party in Atlantic City, with 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, the newest hotel at the time. 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 could not adapt to the Army.

What we did was test them. We used the Wexler B psychological test, or the Minnesota personality test. Then we wrote up a case history on each of them. They went before a psychiatric board and were either retained or discharged from the service.

I had on-the-job training to do this work. 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. I enjoyed doing that.

You can't let the person know you're testing him. This is just a normal conversation. You don't make any notes when you are talking to the fellow. It's all in here [*points to his head*]. After he leaves, you have to write up everything.

Take 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 homosexuals 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 in the Army.

MARRIED LIFE

I met my wife, Gladys Kwock, through friends. She was born in China. We met on these group dates. Our group of friends went out because we had cars. We would go to Lake Merritt and Neptune Beach in Alameda and different places out of town.

Her father had a restaurant out of town somewhere. She lived with her mother, sister, and brother in West Oakland. Her mother used to work at Pacific Coast Canning, started by Lew Hing. She's actually a Lew, distantly related to Lew Hing.

Gladys and I got married in 1942. We didn't have any children. She passed away in November of 2003.

When we first married, we lived with my family, at 8th and Fallon. Then we moved off of Seminary Avenue. We built a place there. I bought a lot before the war.

A builder friend heard about this lot. He looked at the deed, and the non-Caucasian restriction had expired. Usually the restriction is automatically renewed on a sale. I had him buy it in his name without renewing the restriction. Then he turned it over to me.

It was a very nice neighborhood. Then it changed. Most of the houses were owned by the people (living there). Later on, it all became rentals. It was getting to be a lousy place to live. I got so damned disgusted, I got out. The good thing was, I had bought this lot here [elsewhere in the Oakland hills], a whole acre.

Gladys and I were very busy with organizations and traveled a lot, mainly in the U.S. We had made so many friends when I was in the service, and we traveled to see them in different places like Missouri and Massachusetts.

We were just like family to them. They're not Chinese. They're all Caucasians, in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Maine. They're practically all gone now.

Grace and I also traveled a lot to China, Hong Kong, Thailand, and other places in the Far East. We went back to her village, where she was born, in Toisan (Guangdong Province). The communists took over her home and made a bank out of it. We found her home, and some relatives were there.

We've been all over Europe too -- London a couple of times, France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, and Morocco too.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Frank Lee and I opened a gas station at the two curb pumps outside the Heburn Building, that beautiful building at 8th and Harrison Streets. We opened it because we knew all these lottery guys, *tong yun sow bew* [Chinese lottery ticket sellers], had cars that drove over for gasoline. We rented those two curb pumps and blocked off a place for a little office. This was in the early 1930s.

Right next door to the Heburn building was *Wing On Cheong* [a grocery store]. There was an empty lot between the Heburn building and *Wing On Cheong*. Harry Chin and I built a gas station there, Mandarin Service, financed by his mother. We were the first Chinese gas station. We built a garage and a building in the back, and there was a little coffee shop in the front.

Harry and I opened a gas station at 59 Columbus in San Francisco, where Clown Alley is now. That's the first all-Chinese full-service gas station over there. We didn't do so hot over there. We gave it up. Gas was not a good business to go into.

BECOMING A FREE MASON

I joined a Masonic Lodge in Oakland in 1953. Billy Chew, who ran the only Chinese garage in Oakland, on Alice Street, helped me get into the lodge. I became a Master Mason in 1964.

The main thing about the Masonic order is to make a good man a better man. Free masonry is not a substitute for religion. You have to believe in God and so forth.

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 high moral standards and aiming to achieve them in their own lives.

There are lodges in practically every city, maybe twenty or thirty lodges in each city. Before it was hard for Chinese to get in locally. By the time I got in, there were a lot of Chinese Masons.

There are no Chinese Lodges, but we have a Chinese Acacia Club within the Masons with members all over the world. When I was president of the Chinese Acacia Club, I took eighty people to visit the Taiwan lodges. They treated us royally.

Being a Mason has meant a lot to me. It has taught me to be a good man and neighbor, every day in life.

REFLECTIONS ON CHINATOWN

I love Chinatown. As I said, with DMV, everybody knew me and I knew everybody. I lived in Chinatown for a long time.

I think about old Chinatown a lot, 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.

I don't go to Chinatown now because of the parking. 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. People get old like me. How many people do I know who are still around?

Chinatown was not a big thoroughfare like it is now. When I was young, you played in the streets, and it was mostly deserted. It's completely different than what it is now. Now, it is just swarming with people.

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