

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: George Gee

Interviewers: Tracey Lam, Pin-Fang Wang

Date/ Time of Interview: June 17, 2010, at 2:00PM

Transcribed by: Tracey Lam, Pin-Fang Wang

Edited by: Priscilla Li (1/2/2017), Xingyi Li (3/20/2017)

Audio Track Time: 1:27:51.7

Background:

George Gee was born on October 26, 1928, in Lake Village, Arkansas. He helped out in his father's grocery store before his family of eleven siblings moved by train to Houston. Here his father opened another grocery store, and later, he and his brothers did the same. He worked in all the stores as a child as well as in his uncle's restaurant, Chinese Village. He worked while attending UH and graduated in 1945. Out on his own, he started his own Snow Cone business and Exotic Imports store which were not as successful. He later came to work in Albert Gee's Polyasian restaurant from 1964-66 to put his two daughters Alice and Zenobia through college. Eventually, he settled down in the insurance business with MetLife where he worked for thirty years. He has been a valuable asset, even starting a joint venture with Taiwan during his time there. He is now retired and living with his wife, Gloria in the Montrose area, but still remains very active in Chinese Baptist Church and in his leadership positions in several Chinese organizations.

Setting:

The interview centers on the areas of labor and capital to develop a working history around the context of childhood experiences, family life, and daily activities.

The interview was conducted in Room 213 in the Fondren Library. The interview required an hour and a half. Mr. Gee recounted several stories of his childhood and gave us a very succinct outline of his copious work experience. His copious work experience will provide great information in the area of labor and capital. He has played a big role in the development of Asian Americans in Houston, having a hand in the establishment of the CACA, Chinese Baptist Church, and others. Mr. Gee was very cooperative and seemed to enjoy telling us his life story.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

GG	George Gee
TL	Tracey Lam
PW	Pin-Fang Wang
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate

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Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)
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TL: So, let's start the interview.

GG: Huh? Yeah. Okay.

TL: Okay, well, today is Thursday, June the 17th, 2010, and we are in the library on the Rice University campus with Mr. George Gee, and my name is Tracey Lam.

PW: And I'm Pin-Fang Wang. Would you like to introduce yourself a little?

GG: Yeah, uh, I was born in uh Lake Village, Arkansas, in uh—, on October the 26th, 1928. And, and we had a little grocery store uh at that particular time—was called N...N. G. Food Market. N, uh, as letter, okay? And then it was on the main street. Uh we were one of two Chinese, uh, that lived there, lived there. The Fong family was another family that lived there.

So I left, uh, Lake Village. Lake Village was, uh, we sort of, uh, took care of the black business, at that particular time, and my father, uh, was, uh, came to, uh,...uh to America at the age of fifteen, and he was a young man out in San Francisco, so I thought he was born in, uh, he came over, and he settled in, uh, Lake Village, Arkansas, but I didn't realize that he was out there, so I, uh, did archives and wrote to Washington— Seattle, Washington—and got, uh, the particular answers that I had been looking for, yeah. My father was left here, and his father went back to China, and, and he was, uh, his mo—, wife had died, you see, so he stayed there. And later on, in 1922, uh, probably before that time, uh, my father, uh, went back and he married her, you see. And then he brought her here to China—to Lake Village, Arkansas. Uh she was the first Chinese woman uh in the state of Arkansas.

TL: Oh, wow.

GG: Mm-hmm, yeah, at that particular time. Yeah.

PW: What made y'all move to Arkansas?

GG: Uh, we do not know, uh—

TL/PW: [Laughs]

GG: Yeah, in fact, there were a couple of friends that, uh, settled in Louisiana, and I guess, uh, Arkansas was uh the easiest way to go because uh if you establish a business there, see, so I was the third member of the family that was born there. There were two older sisters, Daisy and Ruby Gee, and then later on, other siblings—siblings—were born, and so we came here and, uh, we, we, we came there. I'm one of twelve uh children, you see, yeah. Yeah.

TL: And going back to your childhood experience in Arkansas, did you experience any racism or prejudice?

GG: Yes uh, because, uh, usually at that particular time they used to call us 'Chinks,' yeah, at that particular time. And, and we had always had the sign 'White Only,' you see, and then when the Japanese War took out, we had to put on a badge 'I am Chinese,' you see, you know, because uh the Japanese was at war from Pearl Harbor, you see. But I went to, uh, church for, uh, my two sisters went to church. It was a Baptist church there at that particular time.

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I only went when I was a young man because of the chili—chili supper—that took place [Laughs],

TL/PW: [Laughs]

GG: But I attended a Catholic high school there, St. Mary's High School.

[0:05:25.4]

TL: And when did you move to Houston?

GG: I moved in, uh, when I was twelve years old, but I attended junior high school in the part—part of St. Mary's that was there.

TL: Oh okay. So you weren't actually in high school when you were twelve?

GG: No, no, I did, uh, I went to junior high school at that particular time.

TL: I was just wondering, even though, like, there were—I guess—there was a lot of racism in Arkansas, with like the 'Whites Only' you said, you went to school with white people?

GG: Uh, mostly my friends were black people, yeah, because they were also a part of that group that, uh, colored only, yeah. But most of the time was uh Italian and so uh that, that uh particular—my sisters going to the church helped us to uh establish ourselves there, see.

TL: Okay.

GG: I came to Houston in 1940 because of, uh, my uncle had invited me, Harry Gee, Sr., you see, in our family. Harry Gee Jr. is still living. And he has an immigration service over there on San Felipe.

PW: In your questionnaire you stated that your first job was in a grocery store? Or did you work in your father's grocery store?

GG: Yes, I did work in a grocery store, yeah.

PW: Um, how old were you when you started, and how did you start to work there, and what were some of your duties?

GG: Well, uh, generally went to school after, after I worked in uh the grocery store, see. So we lived upstairs in the quarters in the back, and most of us were delivered at home. Yes, yeah. See because sometime there was prejudice, uh, going to the hospitals and all that area, you see.

TL: Can you tell us a little bit about your dad's grocery business back in Arkansas?

GG: Where?

TL: Back in Arkansas, your dad's grocery's store. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

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GG: Yeah, it, uh, actually catered to the black people, and usually because we gave them credit, and uh, they would pay up on a monthly basis. In fact, uh, a lot, a lot of the items were in big quantities, you know like rice was in a ten-pound bag or something, and so, so, uh, I got along with uh the kids at the Catholic school, you see, because I—I was a big runner, you see. I used to run, run a lot, you see, and my uh sister who went before me, she was a— really an outstanding runner because she was called ‘Rubber Stretcher.’ Ruby, because she even ran in races with the boys, you see.

TL/PW: [Laughs]

TL: So why did you decide to move to Houston? Did you not have family anywhere else besides your uncle in Houston?

GG: Yeah, uh, because uh, well, we all took—took—the train and came here, came here. I was, uh, aware of the—we had a dog uh that was a pure white dog, you see, and so we wanted to put him on the train too, but we had to give him uh to the sisters and the—the nuns at the school because uh it would require additional passage for him, and I remember that very much. We had a stove that uh we used to warm bread on, uh in those early days, and butter and, uh, bread and butter and salt, and I really miss the butter, you see—

TL/PW: [Laughs]

GG: Because uh it was sort of a—the type that's homemade butter, butter, yeah.

TL: And how did you come up with the money for the train ride?

GG: Uh, we, we were still, uh, able to, to take care of that because my father was uh very successful in uh in the business, you see, but three of the kids were born here [in Houston]. So, uh, nine, nine of us were born in Arkansas.

[0:11:12.9]

TL: And what was Houston like when you got here? What were the conditions you came in and lived in?

GG: We stayed in a—all nine of us lived in a, uh, apartment, see, and then we moved to Milby Street, and all of us were in a two-bedroom home.

PW: Were times harder here or—compared to when you guys were in Arkansas— were the times harder here? Because your father didn't own a grocery store anymore, how did he get the money to raise you guys?

GG: Well, [clears throat] at that particular time we uh were dealing with the black people. They got paid on a monthly basis. And so we waited for, uh, them to pay, pay us, see. And my bro—, father also had a cripple brother that was in Bonita, Louisiana, so he would send support also to him. And I remember, uh, a group—Jung family from Dallas—that came down to, uh, Arkansas, and at that particular time, uh, they were uh—during the Depression they were—in dire need of money also, so I remember my father, uh, giving money to Mr. Jung, see. And so uh, Mr. Jung had always sent a package down to our family uh in appreciation of that particular loan, see. And so, he also gave a god brother—a Jung family god brother that was to me, to our family—at that particular time, you see.

TL: And this was, all when you were in Arkansas? So when you moved to Houston—

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GG: Yeah, no, it was in Arkansas.

TL: Okay.

GG: And I had always wondered why he had always sent a package to us, and then he told me uh when we arrived here and over a period of time that, uh, my father was very generous. Uh, yeah, he helped a lot of people, in that particular time, see?

TL: Can you tell us about your education?

GG: Uh, I went to, uh, Jackson Junior High, and at that particular time because I finished elementary before I came here, and then I attended Marshall and then Jeff Davis. Yeah, and I graduated in Jeff Davis at the age of fifteen because we had an eleven-year system, and we went to— a lot of us went to— summer school, you see. And so we, we started our first business, uh, U-Need-A at Holman and Samson, which is not uh—which is—not too far from Rice, see. And, and I, uh, received an award for helping in that grocery store in sending uh three, three brothers—six brothers—all the kids because I was in the grocery business also, you see. At the age of eighteen I was in a partnership, see, with a grocery store, and we were very successful. And so I helped educate all my younger brothers and sisters. Although they received scholarships also, you see, but my older sister, uh, graduated from Sam Houston High School at that particular time. She was, uh, a top student, yeah. What you call it, the highest honors?

[0:16:03.9]

TL: The valedictorian?

GG: Yeah, okay. Yeah, but she never did choose her, her scholarship, you see, because she worked in the grocery store while, uh, several of us, uh, attended school, you see.

TL: Did you go to college?

GG: I went to two years in college, yeah. At the, uh, when I graduated in uh '45, uh, I went to two years at the University of Houston. The University of Houston at that particular time only had three buildings, yeah.

TL: How did you pay for school?

GG: Uh I had a, uh, sort of scholarship, and also, from high school, and so I went there. Sometimes I rode the bus and got there in the early morning. And I was a, uh, taking engineering, you see.

PW: Going back—

GG: Me—

PW: Oh, go ahead.

GG: Yeah, mechanical engineering at that time. And also played, played on the B Team, basketball.

PW: Did running—did running—in elementary school help you in basketball?

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GG: Yes [Laughs], but I played basketball and, and uh amateur baseball also, uh, in, in school, see.

PW: How did you balance raising—you said you put your, your, your siblings through school—how did you manage going to school yourself and working in the groceries business, and putting them through?

GG: Well, uh, usually I work late at nights uh and then uh we had a panel truck, and so I took my brothers and sisters to schools, and dropped them off. Uh in the weekend, I would take a nap or something after cutting all the meat and everything, see. I was a sort of a butcher, yes, at that particular time, you see.

TL: Did you have plans for what you wanted to do after graduating from college? Did you always intend on owning a grocery store?

GG: No, no, I went into, uh, ice, ice, ice cone business and also went into the import business, yeah, and in the insurance business. I think the insurance was my salvation because, uh, the other, uh, two businesses were not really successful. I had a, uh, store called Exotic Imports that was out in Memorial, you see, and the snow cone business I had, uh, was Three Snow Cones, and you had that machine that came from New Orleans and you run the block through there, and so, uh, these, these were, uh, the times were—was a difficulty, yeah.

PW: How did you get the money to start those two—first two—businesses?

GG: Uh my father helped me, you see—to start—and I was a partner in the grocery store with my brother-in-law and older sister, see. And so I was the butcher in that store. Business was very good uh during the war years, and so we had saved enough money, see. And I was able to buy my first car, you see, at that particular time, which was a 1948 car.

[0:20:11.0]

PW: Do you remember how much it cost?

GG: Yeah, at that time it was, uh, four thousand dollars, yeah.

PW: What kind of car was it?

GG: Yeah.

PW: What kind of car was it?

GG: It was a, uh, Desoto.

PW: That's cool.

TL: Can you clarify your work history for us? Could you give us an employment timeline?

GG: What?

TL: Because you said you started working—so first you worked for your dad's grocery in Arkansas, and then you came here and worked in your uncle's restaurant, the Chinese Village, and then...

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GG: Yes, okay, alright. Uh, at the Chinese Village it was, uh, the early, uh, 1940s, you see, and my father was also there. My father had lended Harry Gee Sr. a few thousand—a couple of thousand dollars—and so that helped us tide it over, but I remember, uh, working at Chinese Village with, uh, Gordon Gee and Henry Gee. Yes, and I watched, uh, three or four cashiers that were on different shifts. Jane Gee, that is still living now, and, uh, my sister Daisy Gee, and, uh, the other one was uh Ruby, and Albert Gee was the manager at that time, you see.

And then, I remember, uh, Harry Gee Sr. going back to China, and he brought his wife back and their two year, two-year-old son, and so Harry Gee Jr. was, uh, two years old when he came to, uh, America, you see. And he developed a very successful law practice, you see. In fact, he's a stockholder of the Texans. He has one share, but that one share is worth eighteen million dollars.

TL/PW: [Laughs] Wow.

GG: And so he has, uh, Gordon Quan, Tim Seo, worked for him, and so Gordon Quan has a successful law practice now. Uh he was a councilman, yeah, Chinese councilman, at that particular time, you see.

TL: And just going back to the restaurant, what kind of customers did you guys cater to?

GG: Uh mostly Caucasians because our main item was fried chicken, you see. And we stayed on the premises in, uh, in the back, my father and I. And then, uh, we went home to, uh, also, to uh, to the Milby Street address, see, so sometime we took food there, yeah, because uh, a lot of times, I remember, uh, coming to Houston it was difficult to go out and buy food, see, so a lot of times we brought food home from the restaurant, you see.

TL: And by difficult, what do you mean it was difficult?

GG: Well, we didn't know the city, see, yeah, and that particular town, see, yeah.

PW: Just to clarify— did you—was the restaurant when you worked in the restaurant—the same time when your dad had the grocery store in Houston as well?

GG: No, no.

PW: Was it after or before the restaurant?

GG: No, that was before.

PW: That was before the restaurant, okay.

GG: Yeah, uh, before was 1940, so we had the grocery stores in, uh, 1945 and, uh, to '48. The first one was on Holman St. and the second one was, uh, on Market St. 3601 Market St. And the third one was, uh, location was G & G Food Market. That was on 5412 Lyons. So all during that particular time uh, I had worked uh as a student, yeah.

TL: Okay, so you worked in the restaurant right when your family arrived in Houston?

GG: Yes, uh-huh.

TL: And then, so while you were working in the restaurant, you were still living in the apartment?

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GG: Uh no, it was a house.

TL: Okay.

[0:25:14.7]

GG: The apartment we came first. Uh it was a motel. Actually a motel. And I remember hearing the sirens and all...and all that blaring, and you don't hear that very often in the small town. And also would look forward to cowboys on the street and so forth [Laughs], but there were no cowboys on the street.

TL/PW: [Laughs]

GG: Houston was a very big city, from the—from the—little town that I came from, you see. The little town that I came from was, uh, less than three thousand people, you see. And most of the immigrants were Italian, you see, yeah.

TL: And so, after Chinese Village, your family opened a supermarket, or grocery store?

GG: No, grocery stores— regular pop and mama grocery stores.

TL: And that was Sunlight Food?

GG: No, Sunlight Food was the second one.

TL: Okay.

GG: Yeah, U-Need-A Food Market was the first one, yeah. That was on Holman and Samson.

TL: Could you spell that name for us?

GG: Holman, H-O-L-M-A-N.

TL: U-Need-A?

GG: U-Need-A, U-Need Food Market. U-Need, N-E-E-D, Food Market, yeah.

PW: Who came up with the name?

GG: Yeah.

PW: Who came up with the names for your grocery stores?

GG: Well because uh you need groceries—

TL/PW: [Laughs]

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GG: Usually, and the uh the second one was, uh, Sunlight Food Market.

TL: And then after that was G & G and you were the co-owner of that one?

GG: Yes, uh-huh, yeah.

TL: Okay. So why did you decide to move from U-Need to Sunlight?

GG: Well, uh, when my sister got married— the older sister got married— and we needed a partnership, because business was not that good at uh 3601, uh, Market St., yeah. And then my uncle uh, Kim Sam, that, uh...Chu— his last name was Chu— uh he had built a store there, and he wanted us to go in that particular store, see. And it was a much larger store at that particular time.

TL: So Sunlight was your uncle's grocery store?

GG: Yeah, yeah, Uncle had, uh, sev—several grocery stores, not, uh, Harry Gee Sr., but uh, Kim Sam, uh that's the Chinese name, you see. He had, uh, a few food markets here, yeah and he was a Gee also.

TL: Okay.

PW: Do you remember some of the prices of foods during that time and what you guys sold at the grocery store?

GG: Uh, [clears throat] [silence] [Laughs] yeah, dozen of eggs was probably around uh fifteen cents, yeah. Loaf of bread was probably about five cents, yeah, yeah.

TL: What kind of neighborhood were these stores in?

GG: Uh, in the black neighborhoods. Most of the Chinese stores were in the black neighborhoods, see, because uh the white neighborhoods were, uh, difficult combinations, with supermarkets and so forth, you see. We had to sort of compete against Weingarten's at that time, you see.

TL: And you guys didn't look into going into Hispanic neighborhoods?

GG: Uh there were some stores that went, went into Spanish neighborhoods, but at that particular time there was only about a hundred neighbor— a hundred grocery stores at that particular time, and while I was in business there it grew to maybe three hundred uh grocery stores at that time. See that was in the, uh, late uh fifties, yeah; and the early sixties, yeah.

TL: And did you guys employ the same kind of credit system that your dad had used back in Arkansas?

GG: Uh, no, we still had credit for customers, but, uh, usually it was weekly credit, see.

PW: How did you get along with African Americans in Houston?

GG: After what?

PW: How did you get along with the African Americans in Houston?

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[0:30:40.8]

GG: Very good, you see. They trusted us more than the blacks, see.

TL: And when you were part owner of G & G, were you married at that time or where you still—

GG: Uh, no, no, I married in 1959, see. The, uh, I also attended church at that particular time. We were missioned in First Baptist Church that was located downtown at Lamar and, uh, Main, uh, Fannin St. Yes. [clears throat]

TL: And were you, so you didn't really have to compete with the larger supermarket chains because you were in black neighborhoods?

GG: No, no, uh we, we catered mostly to the black people, you see.

TL: Okay. And I know that you're a member of a lot of community organizations. Did you get any help from them in starting your own business?

GG: No, no, uh, no help from the community, see, at that particular time. We were all on our own, you see, yeah. But the grocery business was the simplest type of business to get in, especially in the black neighborhoods, see.

PW: Did you guys employ any other helpers other than family members?

GG: Uh no, mostly family members, you see. And we worked, uh, we came home, and our older sisters worked at—worked at—stores before, uh, and we, uh, and I, uh, drove the kids at that particular time. I got a driver's license at fourteen—at age fourteen—and so I was able to drive the truck, [clears throat] the delivery truck, to—at that time—my brothers and sisters that were there. But the older sister, that's why the older sister had to work in the grocery store, see.

TL: Did you run into any troubles when you were running the store?

GG: No, no, we had no trouble. We got along uh pretty well with the black people.

TL: Okay. And well, we want to move into—well first off—why did you decide to leave the grocery business and go into imports?

GG: Uh well, uh, at that particular time also, I used to take uh the kids to church and they had, uh, two rows of seats in the back—wooden—uh so I would pick them up and take them down to the, uh, Chinese mission, see, and so, uh, I learned a great deal about the Church at that particular time, see, especially a Miss Pearl Johnson that came into our home, and so, uh, she uh had asthma, she would ride the bus and come out into our particular home which was a central location for the kids to come to, and because of her, uh, I was won to Christ as a young man, you see, yeah, yeah.

TL: Okay, and so just going back to Exotic Imports, your import business, why did you decide to leave G & G to go into Exotic?

GG: Well, uh, ...my brothers were old enough and my sister, older sister, had died, and so my brother-in-law had to

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leave—to leave—the particular store, and he had at that particular time—we had three stores, and one was L & G Food Market and one was J & G Food Market, and so he went to the other stores after my sister passed away uh from childbirth, you see, at that particular time. So my uh my brothers were old enough to uh take over when I went into the Exotic Imports business, you see. And that was uh two years, yeah, see. Earlier, earlier than that, I went into the snow cone business.

[0:36:01.4]

TL: So sno-cones were before Exotic Imports?

GG: Yeah, yeah.

PW: What kind of clientele did you sell your sno-cones to?

GG: What?

PW: What kind of, um, clients did you cater to when you had your sno-cone business?

GG: They were in the, uh, Hispanic area, yeah. I had one on Airline, and uh, another one was in the black area, and, uh, one on Lockwood, see, and uh, then Memorial area side, I had a snow cone in the back, you see, but that uh was, uh, real bad because they, uh, would drip the food on the ice with sugar on the floors, so I had to keep mopping up, yeah.

PW: Were they little stores in each of these areas or were they larger stores?

GG: No, it was a small uh store. Uh it was, uh, in, uh, one hundred and, uh, twenty-four hundred, uh, one—twelve thousand—it was a particular center there at the white area, you see, yeah. We felt that, uh, that I had two other partners that went in there, uh in that particular area. One was, uh, a Chinese person that uh came over and he, uh, well, I met him in the uh in the Dallas food market, see, yeah.

And the, uh, so I went to Dallas to carry merchandise at that particular time, see, and we went by trailers see. And we—but there was one also in Houston, here uh, but, so you uh rent—rent—booth in this particular shopping center, yeah.

TL: And your Exotic Imports, did you cater that to a specific group?

GG: No, that was carryover from this particular group, because, uh, the Chinese fella that had merchandise here, so we used his merchandise. He was, uh, in a share, then I put in a share, and this other person put in a share, see, so we were three partners together. See, and I ran the, the particular store. But, uh, it did not have, uh, work out, and so the Chinese fella had to go out for, uh, outside for business, see. And, uh, he was sort of a salesman there, see.

PW: What kind of merchandise was sold at Exotic Imports?

GG: It was, uh, big wood carvings and things like that and uh different statues, see, and also there were uh things that, uh, we, uh, took from local businesses on consignment. That seemed to be the bulk of our business. See, the big, big items uh were harder to sell.

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TL: Okay, and, so, going into your insurance job, how did you get into the insurance business?

[0:40:07.6]

GG: Well, uh, [clears throat] there was a young man that—T.K. Ng—that was a medical student uh, and I had to house him for, for a while in one of—in the—apartments that I had. At that particular time, we had a six unit apartment at 1221 Welsh, you see, and so I've sold him recently, about a couple of years ago, see, but, uh, he was housing there and he went in the grocery store, uh, insurance business before I did, but he invited me to come in and, uh, with the manager. At that particular time, I was working out at the, uh, Polyasian Restaurant after, uh, the Exotic Imports, you see. And so, uh, that was the Polyasian Restaurant job, where, on Westheimer and Sage.

PW: Was that the one owned by Albert Gee?

GG: Yes, uh-huh, yeah. That was a—there used to be a restaurant there where the Marriott Hotel was, see.

TL: So you went from your dad's grocery store in Arkansas, to Chinese Village which was your uncle's restaurant, and then U-Need Food Market was the first one that your family opened—

GG: Yes.

TL: And then Sunlight Food was the one that your uncle Kim Sam opened that you helped out in, and then you opened G & G with your sister?

GG: G & G was the one store that he built. The Sunlight Food Market on Market St. was, uh, because we had a house next door, and it was attached, so we all lived there and walked in the grocery store, you see.

PW: Was that the same setup for all the grocery stores, that you always lived next to it?

GG: Yes, yes, uh-huh, usually they had living quarters. Most of them had living quarters in the back of it, see. Even at G & G I had, uh, living quarters upstairs. And, and...there were two rooms two rooms—living quarters—yeah.

PW: How did you come to work at Polyasian after Exotic Imports?

GG: Yes, in 1964 to '66, I became manager because Albert Gee invited me out there, uh see, after the Exotic Imports closed, you see.

PW: How did you get to know Albert Gee and why did he invite you?

GG: Well, I got to know him from, uh, Chinese Village.

PW: Oh.

GG: Yeah, he was manager at that time.

PW: You also talked- you said you got into the insurance business after meeting Mr. T.K. Ng?

GG: Yes, uh-huh.

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PW: Um and you said he lived in the apartments, the housing that you owned?

GG: Yes, uh-huh.

PW: How did you come to own those apartments?

GG: Well, uh, T.K. and I had bought them together, see.

PW: Okay, how did you—how did you—get the money to start that? —

GG: From the grocery business, yeah.

PW: Okay.

TL: And what was it like transitioning into insurance?

[0:44:06.5]

GG: Uh it was, uh, easy because I knew all the people in the community. See, at that particular time I had, uh, from the grocery business I had been uh Chairman of the United Food Stores, and that was some three hundred stores, so I got to know them uh—different people—and besides, I used to take, uh, do the uh advertising for the group, see, and so this was an easy transition because the insurance people, uh it's uh the people that you know that will make you successful, you see, yeah.

[0:44:55.0]

GG: I spent 30 years in the uh insurance business and uh 18 as a, uh, sales person and 12 as management. But, as management, I got to run my own agency, and I was one of the first to hire uh Asian women, uh, especially in Houston, see, yeah. And they were very successful, you see.

TL: And, going back to United Food Stores, were all or were most of the 300 grocery stores Chinese owned?

GG: Yes, uh huh. [clears throat] Yeah.

TL: And so, in selling insurance did you cater to mostly Asian Americans?

GG: Yes, uh huh. Mostly Asian Americans.

TL: Okay. And then...

GG: Especially those that—families that also [were] church members you see—that I, I helped to uh start the Chinese Baptist Church. See, when I was a mission uh at—I was uh...when we were a mission at First Baptist Church and I was Chinese Sunday School Superintendent, at that time, see.

TL: Can you tell us a little bit about the joint venture between MetLife and Taiwan? It said that you were a big part of it.

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GG: Yeah, um, well he—I felt a need for him because he was here and not having the money to go back to Taiwan. I thought that he did not have the money to go back to Hong Kong at that particular time...and Taiwan. He was born in Taiwan but he was a—his business was in Hon—Hong Kong at that particular time.

TL: And who is this?

PW: Who are we speaking about?

GG: Huh?

PW: Who is the person we're talking about?

GG: Uh, [clears throat] I forgot his name.

PW: How did you come to meet him?

GG: I met in the World's Chinese Fair here in Houston. They, they used to—at the coliseum, they used to have a sort of booth there, and you used to lease it out, different spaces, see. And uh, they had—you would haul the merchandise down there and lock it up and see, just like uh flea markets. Yeah.

TL: So in one of the articles it said that the cooperation between MetLife and Taiwan was largely due to you?

GG: Yes.

TL: Could you tell us a little bit about that?

GG: Yes. Uh, the, uh, person that is...was here in the business, sort of—I sort of mentally forgot his name—but he had an uncle over in Taiwan and you had to be invited uh to Taiwan, and so when I interviewed him—he was—I asked him how much uh that they were willing to invest and he said, uh, 300 million dollars, see uh, which was probably Taiwan dollars at that time. And so, I sent him up to uh New York, and so uh that was—that was the beginning of the relationship. And, so a lot of times over the years, he had invited me to go to Taiwan to maybe speak to the group, but I, I do not like to fly. See. Yeah. Especially long distance. See, I dreaded even the conventions that I attended to in Hawaii and San Francisco, Canada, and Florida, see. These were different rewards that we had for a successful office, see, and I was glad to go into the insurance business because I would not have survived on social security uh in the—from the grocery business.

TL: What do you think made you successful as an insurance broker?

GG: Uh personality. Uh, and uh relationships with the community and the church.

TL: So it seems like your community organizations helped you a lot with your insurance?

GG: Well, I was a member of the, uh, different organizations at that time. But, I did not attend as much, but when I went into the insurance business, I attended more. See, yeah.

TL: And were you given training for your insurance job?

GG: Yes. Yes, there was training—there was a six-weeks trainings and periodically training to go to home office and regional offices, see. The product that you had to concern with was very important, you see.

PW: What kind of insurance did you deal with?

GG: Uh...life and health and annuities and even groups. So, it was all of the portions of insurance, and I studied CLU, which was an eight-course event, and I obtained my CLU during that 30 years that I was in business.

TL: Can you talk to us a little bit about your participation in the community?

[0:52:13.0]

GG: Uh..

TL: Well, first off, maybe about the Chinese Baptist Church? It said that you were a founding member of it?

GG: Yes, uh huh. I was—I was called in to bring in a pastor at that particular time and he was Travis Key. I, I uh was Chinese—because I was Chinese Sunday School Superintendent, so Dr. Hunt called me in. He was the pastor at First Baptist Church downtown. And, uh, I got to know uh the, the group that helped us form uh the Chinese Baptist Church where a group of 12 churches here: uh First Baptist Church, Westboro, Second Baptist Church, Third Baptist Church, Trinity Baptist Church, Baptist Temple. See, at that particular time, they were major churches here, so they bought bonds to help us to go from...establish our church, at 1823 Lamar. And, we sold that property to a group that were—because we were in a location that...where it's the Toyota Center, at that particular time. And so, we sold that location, and for the land and for uh a couple of million dollars, and then we went out to 900 Brogden, which is in Memorial area, you see. And, we built a church there, and it's a big church, it's like five or six acres of land, see. And, so, we've had a senior pastor, and we have helped to establish other churches in the community. Uh, the church out on South Main, and that one also went out into Sugar Land and established a few other churches. And, so most, most of the Chinese churches here—Are you a member of any particular church?
[Silence]

PW: Uh...used to go to Second Baptist.

GG: Yeah, okay. Yeah, because we were instrumental in most of those churches. They sort of—uh rushed in.

TL: So was your role sort of...like your church's role in helping these other little churches form—was sort of like a motivational role as well as...

GG: I used to speak at some of the churches, you see and I—and because of testimony that I was brought up with, uh I was able to give to this testimony and many messages in our church. I was uh—I've been Sunday school teacher also for 40 plus years, see. And I continue to serve as deacon and uh several different committees.

TL: Does the church help out with community things? Like, that are not exactly church related?

GG: Yes. We have food drives, and we have—collect donations and give to different organizations. See, especially uh like the flooded people in China. Then we have given to AIDS, the cause of AIDS. Uh and so, we've given to Women's Center, see. Uh, Hispanic organizations, different food drives.

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TL: And were you active with church even while you were working in the grocery business?

GG: Yes, uh huh. Because, Sunday we would only open until 11 o'clock in the morning. And, so church started at 3 o'clock, and that's Sunday afternoon.

TL: And this is before Chinese Baptist Church?

GG: Yes, before Chinese Baptist Church.

TL: And, why did you decide to open Chinese Baptist Church?

GG: Well, uh, there was need for uh—from the mission there was a need for a Chinese church in Houston at that particular time. And so, a group of us uh who uh—actually we grew up in the...we attended also the training union and that train helped to train us for uh launching out in the church. My, uh, ol—, ol—, two older sisters, uh we were all were members of the First Baptist Church, and before we took the church down to 1823 Lamar. See.

TL: It seems as if you've been very active with organizations that sort of promote Asian Americans, do you have any particular motivation for that?

GG: Yeah. I still continue to go out to the Chinese community center, and I still attend most of the functions, like OCA and the different Galas. Uh, the Youth Gala, they used to meet here at Rice, also. Jane Kish was the, uh, former uh founder of that particular group, and Rice students also, uh, they would mentor, also, those that are coming in. See. You're not a mentor?

TL and PW: [Shakes head]

GG: Yeah, OK.

[1:00:03.1]

TL: But, what got you, what got you started with these organizations?

GG: Well, the CACA, Chinese American Citizens Alliance, was the first one, and I helped to start that also. I was a founding member of that, see. And so uh, that was Albert's pet peeve, and he was uh chairman of that particular group.

TL: And how did, I guess, how did you come up with the idea to do it?

GG: Well, we had someone come from San Francisco that was the owner of a newspaper, and he asked for us to start this particular organization here, see.

TL: Okay.

GG: And so, probably about 10 people met at that particular time. And, uh, so, I was going to help put up money for the initial, uh but Albert said, don't worry about money, they, they don't need any money, see...yeah.

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TL: And the Chinese Community Center? It says that you give out billion dollar and two dollar bills in red envelopes? These, well I guess I don't know if they're really billion dollar bills, but what sort of ventures do you generally support?

GG: Well, I was uh fundraising. That's one of my biggest strengths, fundraising and marketing. I learned that from my, my, uh, management at MetLife, and a young man, Joseph Chen, invited me to Chinese Community Center, and that—because uh we were matching a thousand dollars that he donated at that center. And so, in 1997, I went out there, and I met them, but the, the Chin—, community—the board was speaking in Chinese so I—eventually when I was chairman in 2000, uh I changed the language to English, see, and brought in other community leaders, see. And, did fundraising on the side.

PW: How did you come to be involved in so many leadership roles? Do you think anything in your past helped you to facilitate becoming a leader in say, the Chinese Community Center?

GG: Yes.

PW: or Chinese Baptist Church?

GG: Yes, uh, all my life I have been in positions of leadership. See, even in the church, uh in MetLife, see, uh in the CACA, see uh in the communities, in the Youth Group, uh OCA, uh. There's so many organizations that I'm, I'm member of even in insurance, I still attend insurance meetings like uh once uh every Thursday, second Thursday of each month, see. And uh, that's at the racquet club. So, I attend—continued to support the industry because it has been good to me, see. And, I think uh any organization that has uh contributed to the support—my growth, is worthy of me joining them.

TL: Ok, how did you come to be in these leadership positions? Was it that once you started with one, a whole bunch of other ones just came asking for you to help lead them or did you volunteer to lead a lot of these organizations?

GG: Well, on the Chinese Community Center, they invited me to—Joseph Chen, who was the past chair, invited me uh to start serving there. Uh and, that because he felt with my knowledge of marketing and fundraising with metropolitan and hiring different people and different agents, that I was able to assume the role, that position. A lot of the boards that uh—like Chinese Professional Club, uh Youth—the Youth Club, OCA, different—invited by different communities, leaders who have served in the past to be a part of the leadership, the new leadership that's taking place.

PW: I have a question... You said that you started out as an engineering major, right? What made you—did you have a mentor who pointed you in this direction of higher leadership roles and marketing and advertising?

GG: Well, no. I think I learned it mostly on my own. Uh, growing up, being part of life, and then having the exposures, and I was determined to be part of a community because we grew up in this community in the early years, so we watched it grow. And so, I've been involved with different leaderships—with Martha Wong and uh Gordon Quan, Harry Gee, Teresa Chang, Joseph Chen, Jimei Lin, and so all of the—and the different pastors, Asian pastors, yeah like—I had a relationship with David Chen, who was pastor of the church on South Main that formed the other churches in Sugar Land.

TL: I think you said you didn't have children until you were out of the grocery business?

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[1:07:54.9]

GG: Uh, I uh, married in uh '59, so after marriage, I still became active in uh even in the different communities. But, uh, it was only in '67 that I really became active in different organizations. I helped to form them, but being active is part of the lifestyle that I was engaged in. So, in 1967 uh through 1997, then I really became active in the community. But, uh, in the church, even like San Antonio and New Orleans, uh we—they used to come together, and we would have retreats together, we would have uh bowling tournaments together, we would have dances together, and so I got to know uh people from San Antonio and also from New Orleans, see, and the, uh, the big people who were at that time in communities. Uh, I knew uh Harry Lee from New Orleans uh at that time, passed away just last year, and he was probably the most famous sheriff in uh Metairie at that time.

TL: What was that last word? Metairie? He was the most famous sheriff in...in what?

GG: Speak up louder.

TL: You said that he was the most famous sheriff in...in Metairie?

GG: Yes, in Metairie, Louisiana, in New Orleans.

TL: How do you spell Metairie? How do you spell Metairie?

GG: Huh?

TL: How do you spell it?

GG: Harry, H-A-R-R-Y. Oh, Metairie? M-E-T-A-I-R-E.

TL: And, just wondering did your children have anything to do with you becoming really active in the community?

GG: Uh, no, uh.

TL: Or did you just sudden realize that...

PW: Or, how did your family change your involvement in the community?

GG: Well my daughters were active, and they went to college. One went to U—uh both of them went to UT, and then one went to uh SMU. And they went by scholarships. See, of course, I helped to get loans for them also. You see, because at that particular time, uh in 196-...let's see, when they were attending college, I was not uh...in high income at that time. Yeah. So, I was working in Polyasian during that, that particular time, you see.

TL: Can you tell us...

GG: But I was...

TL: about your work at Polyasian? What kind of work did you do when you were there?

GG: I was manager, I hired the waitresses, and I did marketing. And so, Albert left the whole thing to me, to

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manager, see. And, sometimes I was there at 11 o'clock 'til 2 o'clock in the morning. So, sometimes I would come home and my kids would be sleeping, and when I wake up, they would be gone to school. My wife uh took, took them to school. She was a school teacher, you see. And, also, uh one of the sch—earliest schools was just...one, uh, two...uh on Michigan. And then when they went to Lanier, and then they went to Lamar. But the uh the early years, they, they could walk from—cause I was the third house from the school. Yeah, see.

PW: Did your involvement in the community and in your work-experience, change the family values that you taught to your children?

GG: Uh, in a sense. We have all been Christian. We have all been brought up, uh and I take all my children and grandchildren to uh to church, see. And then, my uh daughter that's in Fort Worth married a deacon, and my uh younger daughter in uh Chesterfield, Missouri, which is St. Louis, uh she married a Jewish doctor, see. And, so, these relationships uh helped guide the grandchildren, and I recently had a granddaughter graduate with—from UT in Biochem, with honors. And she had a four point. And, my uh grandson, uh graduated from high school, and he was high up, he was number three. But, my granddaughter in St. Louis, probably is—will be the most outstanding, cause she's sort of like a genius.

ALL: [Laughter]

PW: Do you think she learned from you?

GG: No, no.

ALL: [Laughter]

GG: I've—I uh I had a good mind, but I had also help during the years that I had—growing up I had the training and I had the knowledge and then the good Lord gave me the wisdom.

PW: What kind of legacy do you want to leave behind, given all your wisdom? What kind of legacy do you want to leave behind for your children...for the future to see?

GG: Well, I always have a famous quotation. 'There's a destiny that makes us brothers and sisters. None goes his way alone: All that we send into the lives of others comes back into our own.' And I know leaders in the uh Black community, uh, Hispanic community...uh Bill Lawson, uh William Lawson in the Black community and the Hispanic community. They're good friends of mine. In fact, I sort of grew up together with them, and Bill Lawson used to come, come by our church, and he would—the first Black preacher to preach in our church. But, he was our retreat leader, also on a few occasions I think. He's well known in the community, yeah, yeah.

PW: So out of everything you've done, what do you consider your greatest accomplishment?

GG: Uh...I think probably being a father to uh my children and to our grandchildren and watching them take place in the community and having a loving wife that has supported me all these years. Because uh, a lot of times, I go into community by myself, but occasionally I take her when uh when I'm being honored.

TL: I know you won an AARP Voice of Civil Rights Award in 2004? Can you tell us about that and how you came to win that? Like what kinds of things you were active in?

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GG: Yes. Uh, AARP. That's a community project, and I went to be honored because someone had submitted my name. See, uh for that particular honor, and Bill...Bill Lawson was also one of the honorees at that time.

PW: How would you say you've tried to better Houston for Asian Americans? And, also you said that you started—also hired the first women in your insurance agency, how do you think you've played a role in bettering Houston in the civil rights area?

GG: Well, in uh, in hiring the first women...sort of in Houston, community wise—especially Asians. I helped the other offices to go into hiring women, you see, especially Asian women, you see, because they are, they speak a different dialect, the ones that I hired. They speak English and they speak Chinese and Taiwanese, Cantonese, uh Cambodian, uh Singapore. So, I hired uh different ones, agents, and I had the uh most successful uh office operation here, especially with the joint venture of Taiwan, see. That opened the door to another thirty million potentials, see.

[1:19:57.9]

TL: And do you remember the first year you hired an Asian woman?

GG: Uh when I became manager, 19, uh...80 uh...I was—I went into business in '67 and...[Calculates the years on scrap paper] Let me see.

[Silence]

GG: Probably in '88. Yeah, '88, because I spent twelve years in management. So...

TL: Was there any controversy when you hired the first Asian woman?

GG: No. Because each office was allowed to hire different people.

PW: What gave you the idea to do that?

GG: Well, I thought they were uh good sales persons because they had had Asians in real estate and Asians in management and business, see. And when I went to uh New York, I discovered that they had been hiring uh Asians already.

PW: Is there anything that we missed that you would like to add?

GG: No, uh. You've asked good questions.

ALL: [Laughs]

[1:21:41.4]

TL: Just a couple of spelling clarifications...you said the first house you lived in was on Milby street? How do you spell that?

GG: Uh...what? [Silence]

TL: The first house you lived in was on Milby St?

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GG: Yes. Uh huh.

TL: How do you spell that?

GG: Milby, M-I-L-B, M-I-L-B-Y.

TL: And then you said the Jung family from Dallas? Is that J-U-N-G?

GG: Yeah. Jung.

TL: And then you mentioned a Tam Sui?

GG: Uh...Bak Jung, he owns the Oriental Imports. [writes]

GG: Bak was the uh god—godson that was given to my mother. Yeah.

TL: And then you also mentioned a 12—1221 Welch or Welch?

GG: Yeah. That was the apartments. Six units.

PW: Did you rent to anyone else? The apartments, did you rent them to anyone else?

GG: What?

PW: The apartments, did you rent them to any other customers?

GG: Yes. Uh huh.

PW: Do you remember how much you rented them out for?

GG: Uh, \$150 a month. At that particular time, uh in 1966, I rented to immigrants, mostly— Korean immigrants— to help them give a good start.

TL: So you were very active in helping immigrants as well...earlier on?

GG: Uh...T.K. Eng.

TL: And also, you mentioned a Ji-Mei Lin? Ji-Mei Lin?

GG: Yeah...let me see...uh...I'm trying to think of his first name. Oh, I only know his Chinese name.

PW/TL: That's fine.

GG: I know his brother's name. Oh! C.Y. Chu.

TL: And, you also mentioned a Jane Kish?

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GG: Yes. K-I-S-H. She is uh the uh the one that's in the Youth Group—Rice students that were here...when they graduated, even when they were seniors, they mentored them. Yes.

TL: And you also mentioned a Lanier High School?

PW: Yeah. Lanier.

GG: Who?... [Writes] I'm trying to think of the—then they went to college...high school at Lamar.

TL: And while you're on this, can you can write down like a chronology of your work history?

PW: I think we have it.

TL: Cause he mentioned a G&G and a L&G and an R&G?

PW: Those were the grocery stores that your brothers went out to open right? There was a R+G and then a T+G. Were those the grocery stores that your brothers opened?

GG: Yes, yes, uh huh.

PW: You did not work at any of those did you?

GG: Yeah, I worked at all of them.

PW: Okay.

GG: Yeah. That was before, uh, I went to uh high school—junior high school at Marshall uh when I was driving the other kids to school.

PW: Okay.

TL: Well, thank you very much for your time.

GG: Yeah, okay.

TL: Do you mind if we took a picture of you?

GG: Yeah, okay. That's alright.

[1:27:51.7]

[The recorder is turned off; interview ends.]