Interview:

The interview dealt with George Gee’s early life, his family’s history in the US, Chinese life in Houston, religion, politics, education, and Chinese culture.

[0:00:12.2] GG: This is an interview in which Mrs. Daisy Gee is talking to me.

DG: How long have you lived in Houston?

GG: Since 1940, which is almost forty years now.

DG: Where did you live before?

GG: I was born in Lake Village, Arkansas on October 26, 1928.

DG: Where did your parents come from?

GG: My parents came from Guangdong, generally the village area.

DG: How did they get here?

GG: I think they came by plane. Dad came first and established a business and then he went back two years later to get Mother, who came by way of Seattle, Washington.

DG: Where was the business?

GG: The business was in Lake Village, Arkansas. It was a small grocery store.

DG: Did he come to Houston in 1940?

GG: Yes, he came in 1940. All of us were, ten of us were born in Arkansas, two were born here in Houston, Texas. The youngest brother and sister.

DG: Why did you come to Houston?
GG: We sort of came because we had an uncle here, Harry Gee Sr., who had written my father and said that maybe the opportunities are greater here, especially for your family. So we sold the grocery store and packed and boarded the train and came on.

DG: Did you have any Chinese friends here at the time?

GG: He was probably the only one that we knew, my father knew the Gee’s. And there were, I think there were a few Gee’s here already at that time. And so the clan was considered a pretty good size for the Chinese population.

[0:02:18.0] DG: Can you name those Gee’s, at that time?

GG: There was Wan Tu Chu, and the other one C.Y. Chu and Mamie Chu, Albert Gee and Jane Gee were here. That was just about the few that I remember at that time.

DG: Who did you stay with when you all first arrived?

GG: When we first came here we had to stay in a motel, all of us, and I remember we all had to sleep on the floor, it was during the war time and facilities were not that great. Later we moved to 101 Milby, which was a house.

DG: What were your first impressions of Houston?

GG: Before I came to Houston I thought it would be filled with cowboys and they would have riding their horses and hitching them up to the racks in saloons and I was surprised it was such a modern city. It was just a tremendous eye-opener to me.

[0:03:40.3] DG: Do you know how many Chinese lived here at that time?

GG: I think there were about three to five hundred Chinese at that time.

DG: Do you remember any major problems because there were so few Chinese here at that time?

GG: The prejudice at that time was a little bit greater than today. But still it was very live-able. It wasn’t as bad as back home in a little town. In a little town they would really always tease you and call you names. But here they seemed to be a little bit more educated and up to date.

DG: What kind of job opportunities did you find when you first arrived here?

GG: When I came I was going to school, I was attending Jackson Junior High, but after that I would take the bus and go to my uncle’s restaurant, which was on Telephone [and Wayside] and there I washed dishes and cut potatoes and anything that was necessary.

DG: Were there many Chinese grocers (?) here at that time?

GG: At that time there were not too many, just a handful. I would imagine there were probably about twenty, fifteen to twenty stores at that time.

DG: Are there many Chinese restaurants?

GG: There were just about that same number. Maybe about ten to twelve Chinese restaurants.

DG: Can you name one of these restaurants?
I remember one was Silver Bowl that was on Fannin, and there was a China Clipper that was also here. Then there was a Golden Gate that was also on Main. These three I remember. And then there was a Chinese Village where my uncle owned, which was on Telephone and Wayside.

DG: How about grocery stores?

GG: Grocery stores, I remember. The first one I went to was Sun Yick and that was on Lyons but it moved from another area and I think my uncle, Gin Clam Souk, I forgot his English name, was probably the first grocery man here, because I remember going to two of his stores which were located on, one on Dowling.

[0:06:09.3] DG: Did your family follow a business?

GG: Yea we opened up a business just about two years after we came here, and that was on Holman Street, Holman and Samson we opened a grocery store.

DG: What was the name of that grocery store?

GG: At that time it was Holman Food Market, and Daddy had a partner at that time.

DG: Did your children help in the grocery store?

GG: Well no, I wasn’t married at that particular time. Later on when we grew up the children, we were almost out of the grocery store when our children were born.

[0:06:57.7] DG: You said you worked for your uncle[...] how did you get to and from work at that time?

GG: At that time, riding the bus.

DG: You said you’d come in 1940. Can you name some families that came to Houston between the 40’s and 50’s?

GG: When I was here, I remember, especially at the church group and then others, there was a Lee family that had a few children who were here, but they had moved out to, last I had known they moved out to Arizona. There’s Alfred and Janet Chu, I remember you Daisy from that time, and your brothers David, Charles and Bertha Chan, and Jane, Albert, there were quite a few let’s see, Wayne Lim, at that time some missionaries, quite a few collection that were at that time.

DG: Between the years 50 and 60 where more Chinese came to Houston, can you name some of them.

GG: In the 50 and 60, let me see, generally it was about the same group. I think Dr. [Joyce] Fan and her husband came at that time. And then there was also the Jeu family from Arkansas City that came here.

DG: Between 60’s and 70 what class of Chinese come to Houston?

GG: 60’s and 70’s we still saw more of the village Cantonese, but it seems like we were beginning to get quite a few also of the Chinese coming from Hong Kong the city, and also from Taiwan. Some engineers and people along that line, more of a professional group.
DG: How about 70’s up to now? What class of Chinese?

GG: 70 to now it seems that most of the largest group is professional people coming from Taiwan. Some of them, and there are a few from Hong Kong. Not as many coming now from the village, as the early days.

DG: Who did you marry?

GG: I married Gloria Luy Chua from Manila, Philippines.

DG: Where were you married and when?

GG: I was married in September the 8th, 1959 here in Eastwood Baptist Church in Houston, Texas.

DG: Is she Chinese?

GG: Yes, she was born in Amoy, but her family had migrated to the Philippines. She came here more or less as a student, and came to church and that’s how I met her.

[0:10:15.9] DG: How many children do you have?

GG: I have two children.

DG: Where were they born?

GG: They were born here in Houston, Texas

DG: What are their names?

GG: Their names are Alice Lu Gee and Zenobiah Daisy Gee.

DG: Tell me about their education.

GG: They went to schools here in Houston, and then later on they went to what was called the Magnet school program, which is you’re taking top students out of the schools and sending them to schools to integrate to schools. And both my children went to a magnet school, which is Lanier, Lanier Junior High. And then eventually both of them went to Lamar and one has finished from Lamar and is going to University of Texas. The other one has another year.

DG: Where was your wife born?

GG: She was born in Amoy, Amoy, China.

DG: Where did your parents come from?

GG: They came from Canton originally.

DG: Are they still living?

GG: No, both of them have passed away. Dad passed away about 1954. Mother passed away about seven years ago.

DG: What were your grandparents’ names?
GG: I don’t remember my grandparents. Don’t even hear about Mom and Dad talking about them.

DG: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

GG: Oh yes, quite a few brothers. I have six brothers and five sisters.

DG: What are their names?

GG: Uh, let me see if I can remember their names. I had a sister who passed away who was Daisy. She was the oldest. Then I have another older sister, Ruby, is on the west coast. And then I am the third one. Then following me there’s Robert, David, Mamie, Mary Ann, Jon, Joe, Tommy, Marguerite, and Alfred.

[0:12:37.4] DG: Can you tell me what are their occupations?

GG: They run in a variety. I still have two brothers who are in the grocery business. I have one brother who is an accountant at MD Anderson. One brother is in the theater business. One brother is with me in the insurance business, and one sister is a former school teacher in Hawaii. And another one is in Washington DC, she’s in social work. The other sister just works for a bank out in California, and then one is another young one in Seattle, Washington, she’s also still teaching.

DG: Where did you go to school?

GG: I went to school here. In Arkansas I went to St. Mary’s High School, that was a Catholic school, and then when I came here to Houston I went to Jackson Junior High, Marshall Junior High, and then Jeff Davis High School, and then University of Houston.

DG: How many years did you go altogether?

GG: At that time we had an eleven year system so I finished up the high school and then I went two and a half years in college.

DG: Do either of your parents have any schooling?

GG: I don’t think they had very much schooling. Just probably if they did it was just a minimum of schooling.

DG: What do you remember about your school days?

GG: Well, I enjoyed my school days. They seem like they were more peaceful and the kids enjoyed going to school more so than today. The family seemed to be a little more closer knitted and the kids were not as mischievous as they are today.

DG: How do you feel about the quality of education in Texas and also in Houston (?)

GG: Well, when it comes to the reading, writing, and arithmetic I think they have gone down in that area. There are more scientific instruments that they’re using today, they seem to have a lot more exposure with TV and all these things but I think that as far as the basics are concerned we are going away from them.

DG: Is the schooling in Texas compared to other places in the United States better or worse?
GG: I think that they’re probably about the same. We see people coming from other states coming to school here in Texas and then we have children going out of Texas, but overall I think that the University of Texas and the University of Houston, all these are quality schools today. Rice also.

[0:15:35.5] DG: Was your educational opportunities as good as your children’s?

GG: No, I think that probably the children have a better opportunity because my wife sort of emphasizes a tremendous need for education.

DG: Do you think that school in Houston needs improvement?

GG: Yes I think there are. I think most of the good students are going out into the suburbs and the inner schools sort of have deteriorated.

DG: Did you stress the importance of education to your children?

GG: Well I stressed the importance of it but not really as much as my wife. She seemed to have that as a first priority.

DG: Did you encourage them to enter a profession?

GG: Yes I asked them that whatever they feel comfortable in and whatever they like to become, it would sort of be up to them.

DG: What is your religious preference?

GG: My background is Baptist.

DG: Your religion is the same as your parents’?

GG: No. Well, my parents never really went to church until their very late years. They became Christians when they were in their sixties, which is real unusual.

DG: What, did they…

GG: Well the reason was that we had a Chinese pastor come that time who could really communicate with them.

DG: I mean what religion before then, before that?

GG: I don’t think that Dad or Mother had any religion. They just were…

DG: Atheists?

GG: Not especially atheists. I think they believed, but they just had no exposure to any religion. They believed in their children going to church though.

DG: Are your children following your religion?

GG: Yes, they probably will even be more active than I will be in the years to come.

DG: Do you go to church regularly?
GG: Yes, every Sunday.

[0:17:41.7] DG: Are you a member?

GG: Yes, I’m a member, active also in the church.

DG: Do you contribute financially?

GG: Yes, I believe in contributing financially.

DG: In what capacity are you involved in the church?

GG: I think I’m quite active, having been exposed to the Baptist church as early as 1942. So since that time I’ve been quite active in the church.

DG: In what way?

GG: Oh I teach Sunday school. I’m a deacon. I’ve led the music before. I’ve even preached in the church when our pastor has been absent. I’ve worked with youth groups and brotherhood almost every organization as you come up through them.

DG: What church do you think most Chinese in Houston belong to?

GG: The Chinese Baptist Church that’s located at 900 Brogden Road.

[0:18:43.3] DG: Do you think the China-born members of the church still making some previous (?) belief and customs into the religion they now belong to?

GG: By China-born you mean those who are just…have…

DG: come over from China

GG: Just come over? As far as religion, they seem to be very active and very keen. There still seems to be a division in the American born and the Chinese born Chinese. It’s not a big division but it’s not the type that we would like to have.

DG: What I mean is, do they maintain some previous belief and customs?

GG: The ones who are born in China do, but those who are born here, I think we are slowly losing any of the traditions that we have. Some of us, like my generation, still believe in the closeness of family and respect for family and that the husband is still the head of the household.

DG: Do you vote?

GG: Yes.

DG: Did you vote for the last election.

GG: Oh yes. I just finished voting just a few days ago. May the fifth was the last time.

DG: State elections?

GG: Yes.
DG: Presidential elections?
GG: Yes. All of the elections I've tried to vote in.
DG: Do you go to political meetings?
GG: I have been to a few, and also met a few of the political leaders in our community and also supported them.
DG: How about party meetings?
GG: Party meetings I only went to one that I know of. Generally I meet the people that are in regular parties that are called by someone else.
DG: Have you ever run for public office?
GG: No I never have.
DG: Can you tell me why not many Chinese run for public office?
GG: I think we may have the feeling of keeping to ourselves just trying to be a good citizen, rather than make noise in the community. But we will support some that we feel that are qualified.
[0:20:54.3] DG: Would you encourage any prominent, qualified, capable Chinese to work for some kind of public office?
GG: Yes, I thought at one time like Albert Gee probably would have made a good politician. He’s passed away now but he had a good personality for that. And there were some back in history but I don’t think the timing was right at that particular time.
DG: Do you speak any other language besides English?
GG: I speak the Cantonese, which is sort of a village dialect, not the city dialect.
DG: What language or languages did your parents speak?
GG: They also spoke the village Cantonese type.
DG: How about your children?
GG: Well the children understand a little bit, but it seems that they’re slowly losing that area. They speak mostly English.
DG: Did you ever attend any schools that learned other languages?
GG: I attended a school that was held at our church one time. Someone just taught a Chinese school, but not many days, maybe about a week, that was about all.
DG: Did your parents put any emphasis on speaking the Chinese language?
GG: Well they always wanted us to learn Chinese but I think in a family as large as ours we didn’t have the opportunity that we thought we would have.
DG: How did you learn English?

GG: Oh I went to school here in the English school system. That’s about all I know basically. English is the greatest portion.

DG: Did you have any problem in learning English?

GG: No, I think English was very easy for us.

DG: What do you do in your leisure time?

GG: Leisure time I just usually involved in the church work, and also helping people with immigration and also showing people around our city. This is sort of my civic duties.

DG: Do you attend any classes now?

GG: What type of classes? Oh I still continue to take up courses in the field of insurance because of the changing laws. This is my profession.

DG: Do you have any hobbies?

GG: Well I like to watch TV. All the sports and athletes. As far as hobbies like playing golf or some of them I don’t do too much of that.

DG: Do you socialize with your neighbors?

GG: Yes. I know both of my neighbors, both of them are very friendly.

[0:23:43.8] DG: What do you do when you socialize with them.

GG: We just sort of talk to them about the weather and how was their day and what they done today.

DG: Do you socialize with your working associates?

GG: Oh yes, quite often. In fact, there’s an association that we go to once a month where all of the insurance people, most of them gather together for lunch and fellowship.

DG: Do you socialize with your relatives?

GG: Yes, we get together but not as often as we should.

DG: Do you belong to any community clubs that are mostly Caucasian?

GG: Yes, that is the HALU. That’s the Houston Association of Life Underwriters I guess about 95% are Caucasian.

DG: How often do you have meetings?

GG: We have a meeting once a month.

DG: Do you belong to any Chinese club or organization?
GG: Yes, I belong to, well if you call the church an organization and also the Chinese Professional Club, but I don’t attend too many meetings. Originally, years ago I had attended the Chinese American Citizens Alliance but as of the past ten years I haven’t been active in it.

DG: Who was instrumental in forming these clubs that you…

GG: Well in the Chinese American Citizens Alliance I was one of a group that was instrumental in forming that. And before even that time, we had a youth club, which we called the Dragoneers, and I was instrumental in forming that one.

DG: How about the Chinese Professional Club?

GG: The Chinese Professional Club, no I was not instrumental. I’m just a member there.

DG: When you went to church in 1942 do you know who was instrumental in forming…

GG: Well, yes there were a group of, actually called missionaries and WMU workers from the churches that were interested in forming the church. And that’s where I sort of attended because my older sisters were going to church at that time.

DG: Are you active in business now?

GG: Yes, I have a full time career. Life insurance, I’ve been in it for the past 13 years.

DG: Do you ever go to Chinatown?

GG: Yes, I’ve been to Chinatown quite a few times.

DG: How often do you go?

GG: Oh I imagine probably about once every two weeks.

DG: For what occasion?

GG: Just to sort of maybe eat in the restaurants and maybe buy Chinese food.

DG: Do you ever go to the Chinese theater?

GG: I only went to the Chinese theater one time and that was during the opening of it. I haven’t seen any of the movies or anything there.

DG: Are you interested in Chinese opera?

GG: Not too much. I really don’t know too much about it.

DG: Are you interested in Chinese art?

GG: Well art, I have seen some of the shows but still not too heavy on art.

DG: Are you interested in any other Chinese culture?
GG: Well the culture I’m interested in more or less is the maintaining of the family. And the respect that the children should have for their elders. This is the big tradition that I’m interested in.

DG: Do you think the Chinese younger generation has lost some of their Chinese culture?

GG: Yes I think they have. They have become Americanized. They’re almost American in character except just for their appearance.

DG: Do you think they ought to uphold some Chinese culture?

GG: I’d like to see them, and maybe down the future. You tend to try to, you have to have this association so that they’ll remember it. The family gatherings, and also bring up some of the things in the past.

DG: Have you traveled to mainland China?

GG: No, I went to Hong Kong one time. That was all. But I’d like to go inside inner China.

DG: Do you have any future plans to go to China?

GG: Yes, I’d like to take a trip to China in the future.

DG: Would you like your children to visit China?

GG: Oh yeah. I would love for them to visit China and also different areas of the country to get an education.

DG: Do you have any relatives in China that you know of?

GG: I have some aunts and uncles and some nephews. I had visited some aunts in Hong Kong at one time, but I remember my mother saying there were quite a few relatives in China.

DG: Do you read any newspaper or magazine from China?

GG: No, I can’t read Chinese. Only the English newspapers.

DG: Do you maintain Chinese traditional custom?

GG: Nothing that’s extraordinary. Respect for parents has always been very strong. That’s the major thing.

[0:29:00.1] DG: Do you celebrate any Chinese holiday?

GG: Well we have a clan association that we have dinners every year which is Chinese New Year. I usually attend those. But I’m not very heavy on the (?) holidays.

DG: Does your children maintain any Chinese traditions or customs?

GG: Not too much, I think they’re more Americanized.

DG: Are there any Chinese customs you have abandoned that your parents strictly observed?
GG: My parents really were not that heavy in Chinese customs also, and I sort of don’t really recall any of them. Except we sent money back to parents and relatives back home. That was one thing that they stressed.

DG: What Chinese customs do your Chinese friends observe that you do not?

GG: Well when they have the birth of a new child they usually have what we call the red egg party. When they have a birth in the families and also have, some holidays they have some particular meals, different meals but we don’t really go heavy in that.

[0:30:24.1] DG: How many Chinese would you guess live in Houston now?

GG: I would say about 20 to 25 thousand are in Houston now, including those who are also in transit.

DG: Do you view the Chinese as an ethnic group in Houston?

GG: Yes I still think it is an ethnic group but they seem to be fitting well into society though.

DG: Do you think the Chinese are closely knit?

GG: No…[0:30:51.7]

[0:36:25.4] GG: …about the ethnic groups in Houston.

DG: Do you think the Chinese are closely knit?

GG: No I don’t think the Chinese are closely knit. They have factions in the community like Taiwanese, even from Taiwan they seem to have political differences. Those from Hong Kong also seem to keep to themselves. These from the village sort of keep to themselves, there seems to be this type of grouping in our community. And also the American born, they sort of keep to themselves too.

DG: Do you see any political divisions in the Houston Chinese community?

GG: Oh yes. Just recently I’ve seen political division among those that are born on Taiwan and those who went to conquer the island of Formosa or Taiwan, and also since the recognition of Red China there seems to be some political emphasis in the community.

DG: Do you see any changes in political support among these divisions with U.S. opening relation with China?

GG: Well from my own viewpoint I don’t have any malice towards any of the groups. Probably being American born I’m may be thinking just like the Americans, just welcoming any group that comes to America.

DG: What Chinese tradition and custom is most important to you?

GG: Well, there are not too many traditions that I’m really heavy on. It’s just the respect of the parents and the family. The maintaining of family.

DG: How were you disciplined when you were young?
GG: Well, the discipline I had actually came from association with older brothers and sisters, because Mother didn’t really have that much time to devote to each of us individually. So I was quite privileged to have a sister that was a Christian, a very devout Christian, and it was from her that I learned a great deal.

DG: Have child-raising techniques changed since your parents’ time?

GG: I think they have in a sense, but there still seems to be more independence now. We give our children a little bit more independence than our parents did, as we were coming up. They seem to have more activities and more things to do.

DG: How did you discipline your children?

GG: We just sort of tried to live before them, and also when we went to church we took them to church. We asked that they might consult with us any time when they have decisions or when they go out, and Gloria especially, my wife, was always very conscious of them coming in at a time that was appropriate.

DG: What did you do in your leisure time as a child?

GG: Well leisure time I, In Arkansas I remember a great deal of playing games. They didn’t have the type of games that they have today but, playing hopscotch and running races, swimming, and playing touch football or those activities.

[0:40:13.0] DG: What kind of toys did you play with as a child?

GG: As a child, didn’t have as many toys as today I know for sure. Slingshot, hopscotch, we played marbles, we hunt for birds and we went fishing, and crawfishing.

DG: What kind of toys are your favorite?

GG: Don’t really have any favorite toys. There’s so many I notice that there are today that really are attractive.

DG: Do you see your childhood as much different from your children’s?

GG: As far as exposure I do. I think they are exposed to many more things earlier today than we were.

DG: Have you noticed any change in family size in the Chinese community?

GG: Oh yes. This definitely has decreased. I think even the Chinese community now is looking at maybe just two or three children. When you see a family like the one we had in the past, twelve, those are becoming obsolete in the family here.

[0:41:30.9] DG: What kind of problems do you think Chinese coming to Houston now can expect to encounter?

GG: Probably not too many problems in Houston. I think Houston is a good city for most ethnic groups.

DG: What different and new problems do you think the boat people could expect to encounter?
GG: Well the boat people were a group a different group and classification. At the present they live near the waters and they seem to be having problems as far as fishing rights and shrimping rights there. The other ones who come to the city usually keep to themselves. They work for some profession.

[0:42:17.7] DG: Is there anything you would like to add to this interview?

GG: Well I’m glad that you’re getting a history together. I think that it’s important that some of these things are put down on paper and put down in history because I think the Chinese are a part of America and well do play a very important part in the morals and ethnic things in America, and they will contribute in many ways now and also in the future.

DG: Do you suggest any other prominent, respected Chinese in Houston we should get on tape for our oral history study?

GG: Well we do have Mr. Jeu who came from Arkansas and I remember my father knew him. There was Gum Jeu’s father, he was an early bird and I think y’all already interviewed Mamie Chu, and Jane, and several other community. Wallace Gee would probably know a lot of the history also.

DG: Do you have any documents that you want to use to support our oral history study?

GG: I have a picture of Mother when she first came to the United States from Seattle, Washington. She came in 1922, the year in which my older sister was born. We have some also in church history and those things, but you might have quite a few of those when you interview so many people.

DG: What do you think led to the impressively large population of Chinese in the Houston area?

GG: I think the opportunities really led, and as one was satisfied with the community here they wrote the other ones and said. “Come to Houston. The opportunities are good, especially for Chinese. The racial prejudice is not here that’s in some of the other states and is continually growing.

DG: Can you name some professions that Chinese have contribute?

GG: Oh we have quite a few people now, even in the medical field. They are also in the research. We have quite a few engineers, we’re all getting away primarily now from the restaurant and grocery stores. We’re finding people spreading out today into professions that they were not formerly in.

DG: Thank you very much George

[0:45:09.6] GG: Thank you Daisy.