Interviewer: Daisy Chan Gee
Interviewee: Onne Jeu
Date: 1980
Track time: part 1- 31:10, part 1- 11:30
Transcribed by: Katarina Slobodova

Summary:

Onne Jeu, ethnically Chinese but originally from Arkansas, moved to Houston in 1945. Since then he has married and has had two children. While he originally owned a grocery store passed down to him by his parents, he now owns an electrical distributing business that he has merged with another electrical supply company. The interview focuses on a variety of topics including Mr. Jeu's childhood, current lifestyle, community involvement, and family.

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Audio file part 1:

DG: This is an interview with Mr. Onne Jeu for The Houston Center for Humanities and Public Policy. Mr. Jeu, how long have you lived in Houston?

OJ: I’ve lived in Houston since 1945.

DG: Where did you live before?

OJ: We lived in Arkansas City, Arkansas.

DG: What were you all doing in Arkansas?

OJ: My parents had a grocery in Arkansas.

DG: When did your parents come to Arkansas?

OJ: Come to Arkansas...I believe it was in 1909.

DG: Where did they come from?
OJ: They came from China.

DG: Where?

OJ: Guangdong (?) China.

DG: Why did they go to Arkansas?

OJ: They had friends in Arkansas.

DG: What kind of business did they have in Arkansas?

OJ: They had a grocery business in Arkansas. Their friends also had a grocery business in Arkansas.

DG: Is that the reason why you go to Arkansas?

OJ: I guess they did. Yes.

DG: Where were you born?

OJ: I was born in Arkansas City, Arkansas.

DG: When did you move to Houston?

OJ: We moved to Houston in 1945.

DG: Your parents moved to Houston also?

OJ: Yes.

DG: How did you get here? By plane? By car? By-

OJ: By car.

DG: Who else came with you to Houston?

OJ: My whole family: mother and father, 2 sisters, and a brother. Some of the family was already here, in Texas.

DG: Why did you move to Houston?

OJ: My parents looked at San Antonio and Houston and thought that Houston would be a good place to relocate.
DG: Did you have relatives here at that time?

OJ: We had some relatives in San Antonio.

DG: Did you-

OJ: We did not have any relatives in Houston.

DG: Did you have Chinese friends here at that time?

OJ: Some people who had moved from Arkansas. Yes.

DG: [inaudible]

OJ: I'm sorry?

DG: Was that friends of yours?

OJ: Friends of the family. I was very young at the time.

DG: Do you know their names?

OJ: The Gees. George Gee's family, and we had met the Albert Gees.

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

OJ: We stayed with some friends when we first came, but after we moved here we bought a grocery and lived in the living quarters behind the grocery.

DG: Where was that grocery?

OJ: The grocery was on Peden Street.

DG: What was your first impression of Houston when you arrived?

OJ: That's very hard because I was very young at the time.

DG: I know. What was it like? A big city to you? Different from where you come from?

OJ: Well it's quite different, because the city I was from was a very very small city. Maybe a hundred in population, so it was like coming to a big city. Yes.

DG: Do you know how many Chinese lived here at that time?

OJ: I would guess maybe a few hundred.
DG: Do you remember any major problems because there were so few Chinese here at that time?

OJ: I was very young at the time, but I don’t really recall any real problems.

DG: Did it take long for y’all to find your business?

OJ: No, it didn’t. In fact the store that we bought on Peden was basically taken over by my older-oldest brother, and then we bought another grocery, which the family ran. This was on Gillette Street.

DG: At that time are there many Chinese groceries?

OJ: I think most of the people here were in the grocery business.

DG: You don’t know how many groceries.

OJ: No, I wouldn’t.

DG: Were there many Chinese restaurants?

OJ: Compared to now, there were very few.

DG: Can you name those restaurants or groceries at that time since they’re not too many?

OJ: No, I can’t really. I recall one [inaudible 1 word] Food Market. The other one was a [inaudible 1 word] store, [inaudible 1 word] Supermarket, which was here. Those are the ones I can remember.

DG: How about restaurants?

OJ: Restaurants, there was [inaudible 1 word] Hao. There was a China Star and I think there was a [inaudible 1 word] Toy Restaurant here also. Those are the ones I can remember.

DG: Do you know of any Chinese person working for an American firm at that time?


DG: Did you work in your grocery store?
OJ: Yes. After school.

DG: What school did you go to?


DG: What year did you start Lanier Junior High School?
OJ: Lanier is 1946 I think.

DG: What high school did you go to?

OJ: I went to Lamar Senior High School.

DG: What year did you graduate?

OJ: 1951.

DG: Did you go to college also?

OJ: I went to U of H. Mostly part-time. I never did go full time, because at that time I was more or less running the grocery store for my parents, and in 1960 –I guess it was about 1957 is when I took over the grocery from my father. So I was going to school and working at the same time.

DG: When did you quit the grocery business?

OJ: I sold the grocery in 1965.

DG: What did you parents do then?

OJ: My parents were retired at that time.

DG: Then you just keep going to school and doing [inaudible 1 or 2 words]?

OJ: No. After I sold the grocery business, I went and started an electrical distributing business. [inaudible 1 word] on the supermarkets, hardware stores, and electrical supply users.

DG: Where was your electrical business located?

OJ: It was at 1348 North Shepherd Drive. Here in Houston.

DG: How long were you by yourself in that electrical business?
OJ: I had that business until 1973, when I bought Robinson Electrical Supply Company, and I just closed down the [inaudible word] Distributing Company, which was the name of the business, and just merged everything into Robinson Electrical Supply Company and I had that business since then until now.

DG: How many employees do you have now?

OJ: I have 18 employees.

DG: Is that the first electrical supply company the Chinese have?

OJ: As far as I know it is. There were a couple of Chinese who worked as salesmen for some electrical distributing companies. My brother-in-law, Albert Lee, he worked for J & Johnston at one time and he- actually, Albert and I started the Great (?) Distributing Company since he had a little knowledge of the business.

DG: Now he’s not with you anymore?

OJ: Albert was with me for about a year and a half and decided to go into other things.

DG: [inaudible comment]. Can you name some families that came – you said you came in ’45

OJ: 1945

DG: ’45 to ’50 that you know of? Chinese families.

OJ: That’s very hard. I can’t- off-hand I can’t think of anybody around that time, because, like I said, I was very young at that time.

DG: What about 1950’s to ’60s? Any new Chinese families came in?

OJ: ’50s to ’60s...I recall a cousin of ours came in from Memphis, Tennessee, and he lived there.

DG: What is his name, can I ask?

OJ: His name is – he’s passed away now. Kei Jeu! And his wife Mary and their family and I know Jill Man (?) came possibly around that time also, from Arkansas. He moved from McGehee, Arkansas to Houston.

DG: How about between the ’60s and ’70s? You know of Chinese move-in?

OJ: Can’t really think of anyone.
DG: ‘70s to now.

OJ: [inaudible comment]

DG: Too many to remember, right?

OJ: Well there’s quite a few and it’s hard to remember which ones came in when.

DG: Who did you marry?

OJ: I married Mary Chua (?)

DG: Where were you married and when?

OJ: We were married in Houston at River Oaks Baptist Church, October the 16th, 1965.

DG: Was she Chinese?

OJ: I’m sorry, it was 1966.

DG: Ok. Is she a Chinese?

OJ: Yes, she is Chinese descent. She is from Manila, Philippines.

DG: How many children do you have?

OJ: We have 2 children. 2 girls. Marian (?) and Stephanie.

DG: Where were they born?

OJ: They were both born here in Houston at Methodist Hospital.

DG: Tell me something about their education. Are they still-

OJ: They went to preschool at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, which had a day-
school and after the third grade, they went to River Oaks Elementary, which- they
are still there now. They are in the vanguard program at River Oaks Elementary.

DG: Do you remember anything about your grandparents?

OJ: My grandparents? No, I don’t.

DG: Do you know their name?

OJ: No, I don’t.
DG: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

OJ: Yes. I have 2 brothers and 4 sisters.

DG: What are their names?

OJ: Sing is the next oldest brother. Dott is the oldest brother. The girls, the oldest is Laina [inaudible last name], Mrs. [inaudible first name] Ng, Mrs. Albert Lee, and Mrs. Georgia Ng.

DG: Are they all in Houston?

OJ: Yeah. They’re all in Houston now. Yes.

DG: What are their occupation?

OJ: Say is associated with me in the business, which he has a share in the business. Dott is in real-estate, in insurance business, in investment business. Laina worked for Southwestern Bell Telephone. Giew (?) is a housewife. Mrs. Albert Lee is also a housewife. Mrs. Georgia Ng and her husband have the airline (?) skating rink.

DG: Do you know how many years of education your parents have?

OJ: Probably a couple of years at most.

DG: Is that your father or your mother.

OJ: Both father and mother.

DG: Do you think your grandparents have any education?

OJ: I doubt it.

DG: What do you remember about your school days? Any events that you were outstanding or anything special...?

OJ: Nothing really outstanding or special. It seems like most of the Chinese people in my age group went to school, then after school they went home to the family business and worked in the business. We really didn’t spend too much time with extracurricular activities.

DG: How do you feel about the quality of education in Texas and in Houston?
OJ: I think it's pretty good. I'm very impressed with the vanguard program that they're having now, which is probably the thing that I'm most close to and know something about.

DG: Did you go to school in Arkansas some?

OJ: Yes. Went to elementary school in Arkansas.

DG: What is the difference between Houston and Arkansas school system? Is it better? Houston is better or Arkansas is better?

OJ: I think it's better. The Arkansas school system- actually, elementary, junior high, and high were all in one school. It was a very small city. The schools are much larger here. I feel that the education here is very good.

DG: Better than Arkansas?

OJ: I think so.

DG: Would you say your education opportunities are as good as your children’s?

OJ: Seems like the education today is quite different than it was when I was going to school. Seems like they learn a lot of things in elementary and junior high that we didn’t learn until high school or college. Some courses, they give basics in chemistry and math that we didn’t receive until high school and later years.

DG: Do you think the schools in Houston still need improvement?

OJ: There can always be improvement.

DG: What kind of improvement?

OJ: Well, I think part of the problem is teachers’ salaries. That a lot of the people who might’ve gone into teaching will go elsewhere. So if they could possibly improve the system, increase the salaries, they could get better teachers.

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

OJ: Yes, I do.

DG: Would you encourage them- to enter a profession when the time comes?

OJ: I won’t push them one way or another. I will give them advice and let them make their own decisions.

DG: [inaudible 1 to 3 words] encourage them?
OJ: Yes.

DG: What is your religious preference?

OJ: Baptist.

DG: Is your religion same as your parents’?

OJ: Father was Methodist and mother was Baptist.

DG: Does your children follow your religious preference?

OJ: Yes.

DG: Do you go to church regularly?

OJ: Yes.

DG: Are you a member?

OJ: Yes.

DG: Do you contribute financially to your church?

OJ: Yes, I do.

DG: Are you actively involved in church activities?

OJ: Somewhat, yes.

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

OJ: I really don’t know what the membership of the Houston Chinese Church is, but I probably, Houston- I mean Chinese Baptist Church has the largest membership.

DG: Do you think China-born members of the Baptist Church still maintain some custom that they bring into the religion they now belong to?

OJ: I think they probably do carry some of it, although probably not too much.

[20:30]

DG: Do you vote?

OJ: Yes, I do.
DG: Did you vote in the last city election?
OJ: Yes.

DG: The state election?
OJ: Yes.

DG: And the presidential election?
OJ: Yes.

DG: Do you go to political meetings?
OJ: No.

DG: Do you go to party meetings?
OJ: No.

DG: Have you ever run for public office?
OJ: No I haven’t.

DG: Would you tell me why not many Chinese run for public office?
OJ: I don’t...probably because most the Chinese are not like most Americans, who really like to run for public office, but the trend is that there are more and more people now who are going out to seek public offices.

DG: Would you encourage any prominent, qualified, capable Chinese to run for some kind of public office?
OJ: Yes, I would.

DG: Do you speak any other language besides English?
OJ: A little Cantonese.

DG: What language does your parents speak?
OJ: Cantonese.

DG: Do they speak English?
OJ: A little.

DG: Does your children speak Chinese?

OJ: Very little.

DG: Did you attend any school to learn other language?

OJ: Not really. I think here in junior high I had six weeks of Spanish.

DG: Did your parents put any emphasis on speaking the Chinese language when you were young?

OJ: They really didn't push us in any direction.

DG: How did you learn English? At home?

OJ: Mainly at school.

DG: Did you know English before you went to school?

OJ: Yes.

DG: You did. Did you have any problem learning English?

OJ: No.

DG: [inaudible comment]. What do you do in your leisure time?

OJ: I like to fish. I used to bowl quite a bit, but I don't seem to have time for that anymore.

DG: Do you attend any classes now?

OJ: No, I do not.

DG: Do you have any hobbies?

OJ: Hobbies? Probably a little wood-working. Other than that, not any real hobbies.

DG: Do you socialize with your neighbors?

OJ: Not really.

DG: Do you socialize with your working association?
OJ: Yes I do.

DG: What do you do with them?

OJ: Occasionally we go out after work. We have an annual Christmas party and quite often after work we sit around the office and discuss different things.

DG: Do you socialize with your relatives?

OJ: Yes.

DG: At that time what do y'all do? Same thing as you do with your working associates or something different?

OJ: With the family?

DG: Yes. Relatives.

OJ: With the relatives, it's usually some time of get-together or some- maybe birthday or mother's day or father's day or some holidays that we have, more or less, a family get-together.

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

OJ: No.

DG: Why not?

OJ: I really don't have that much interest in that end and I guess probably because of the hours spent working. After work, I usually take care of whatever needs to be taken care of at home and do other errands.

DG: Do you belong to any Chinese clubs or organizations?


DG: Any other ones?

OJ: I belong to some associations that are associated with my business.

DG: That would be [inaudible 2 or 3 words], right?

OJ: Yes, it would be, but I'm not really active in those organizations although I am a member of them.
DG: Do you know who was instrumental in forming your Lu Guan Zheng Zhu (?) Association?

OJ: It was probably Bill Wu, Bill Fan, Bob Lu, Jimmy Chu...I can’t think of the others right now.

DG: Do you ever go to Chinatown?

OJ: Yes.

DG: How often?

OJ: About once a week.

DG: For what occasions do you go to Chinatown?

OJ: Usually we go there to eat or go there to buy Chinese groceries.

DG: Do you ever go to the Chinese theater?

OJ: No, I've never been there.

DG: Are you interested in Chinese opera?

OJ: No.

DG: Are you interested in Chinese art?

OJ: Yes, a little bit.

DG: What type of Chinese art do you care for?

OJ: Well I'm not that involved with it, but I do enjoy seeing Chinese art.

DG: Are you interested in any other Chinese culture?

OJ: Not really. Not as such- I don’t really...get involved with it that much.

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

OJ: Yes, I think they have.

DG: Do you know which one they have lost? Or can you think of one they've lost?
OJ: Well, it’s probably like most of the different nationalities. The new generation is so different from the previous generations. Language is one thing that they don’t follow-up. My generation is probably bad enough, but I think this generation is probably worse.

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

OJ: Yes, I think they should. I wish now that I had learned Chinese, which at that time, I didn’t have that much opportunity, but there are opportunities now, and a lot of people are not taking advantage of it.

DG: Have you traveled to Mainland China?

OJ: I haven’t been to Red China. I’ve been to Hong Kong and several areas in that part of the world.

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

OJ: I would like to go eventually, but I would like to wait until their accommodations are improved.

DG: Would you let your children visit China?

OJ: Yes, I would.

DG: Why?

OJ: To see how the people live there and just to see China itself.

DG: Do you have any relatives in China?

OJ: No I do not. My wife has a sister there.

DG: Does she correspond with them?

OJ: Yes she does.

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

OJ: No.

[31:10]

Audio File Part 2:
OJ: All of the different families have their Chinese New Year's celebrations here. I think probably, as in most Chinese families, the children have more respect for people and their parents than some of the other nationalities.

DG: Does your children maintain any Chinese traditions themselves?

OJ: Not really. They join in the Chinese New Year's celebration, but other than that, I don't think they really know that much about the Chinese customs.

DG: Are there any Chinese customs that you've abandoned that your parents strictly observed?

OJ: Not that I know of.

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

OJ: I don't really know, because I don't know what some of these maybe Chinese customs that they observe that I don't, so I don't really know of any.

DG: How many Chinese would you guess live in Houston now?

OJ: I would guess probably maybe 15,000 and that's [inaudible 1 word] a guess.

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

OJ: Well I guess we're looked upon as an ethnic group. Yes.

DG: Do you think the Chinese are closely knit? More than other minorities or less than other minorities?

OJ: I think some of the- like the Jewish people are probably more closely knit than the Chinese. A lot of the Chinese are very individual and that's the reason a lot of the- we don't have large associations as some other groups might have.

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

OJ: There seems to be a little division among the Taiwan group and the Hong Kong group. They seem to go in separate directions.

DG: Do you see any changes in political support among these divisions for the United States opening relations with China?

OJ: I don't really think there would be that much division in that group, because of the relations. At first there probably was some reaction from the Taiwan group but- there probably is a little, but I think eventually that will subside.
DG: What Chinese tradition or custom is most important to you?

OJ: I don't know if it's a Chinese tradition or not, but it's respect for the parents and the older people.

DG: How were you disciplined by your parents when you were young?

OJ: I had my share of smackings.

DG: Would you consider them-

OJ: But- but my father was very strict.

DG: Have child-rearing techniques changed since your parent's time?

OJ: There seems to be some different. I try to be fairly strict with my children, but not overly strict.

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

OJ: I guess probably played- I do remember playing some marbles and playing ball.

DG: What were your favorite games then? At that time.

OJ: Probably softball.

DG: What kind of toys did you play with as a child if any?

OJ: [laughter] That was a long time ago. I recall a- well, if you would call a tricycle a toy. Compared to today, there weren't many toys.

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

OJ: Yes, there seems to be so many things for them to do that I did not- that I was not able to do as a child. There's so many more opportunities. My children take piano lessons. They have taken swimming lessons. They have taken ice skating lessons. They went to Chinese School one summer. But there are so many toys and games available to children today that just were not available when I was a child.

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

OJ: Yes, it seems like the families are much smaller now. Seems like the average is 2 now.

DG: Would you think it will be a problem for the Chinese to come to Houston now?
OJ: No, I don’t think so. I feel that anyone who is wanting to succeed, they can succeed, if they’re willing to work.

DG: What different or new problem do you think the Boat People could expect to encounter?

OJ: I think the biggest problem they will encounter is their language. They are not able to speak English, so there- that part is a very big problem, and there seems to be a problem now among the Vietnamese group and the- we read it in the newspapers- about the stripping. They go out and don’t realize that some of the people here have fished in areas for years and they feel like these people are coming in and invading their areas.

DG: Is there anything you would like to add to this interview?

OJ: Not re- the only thing I can think of is- and which I just answered a minute ago- is whether or not there will be any problems for Chinese coming into the area. I would like to see the Chinese become more involved in other fields and we are heading into that direction now. There are a lot of people in fields today that we didn’t have years ago.

DG: Could you please name some fields that you’re talking about? What would a Chinese do-

OJ: Well I would like to see some Chinese get into manufacturing business. I don’t know of any here in this area that are in manufacturing business. I think that area is very wide open, because there is a lot of businesses that are needed in this area, and probably with some research then there could be some businesses where Chinese could succeed. I’m now contemplating buying a manufacturing company myself.

DG: What kind of manufacturing?

OJ: It’s a metal fabricating manufacturing that manufactures electrical and closures. It’s related to my [inaudible 1 word] business.

DG: Would you suggest any other prominent, respected Chinese in Houston we should get to make on tape for our oral history study.

OJ: I really don’t know who you’re contemplating interviewing, so I really don’t know. I [inaudible 1 or 2 words] there a lot of people in medicine that should be interviewed. Dr. [inaudible name], I’m sure you’ll interview her.

DG: I’ve got her on my list.
OJ: You have her on your list. I could probably come up with some names, but I can’t right now. I couldn’t think of any. Katherine is the one who's been here for quite some time so everyone knows her. She is one of the pioneers in her field probably.

DG: That’s [inaudible 1 word] I volunteer. Thank you very much Mr. Jeu.

OJ: You're welcome.

[11:30]