Lucy Joe Lee, who was the first Chinese baby born in Houston, talks about her experiences growing up and living in the city. Initially in the restaurant business and then switching over to grocery business after her dad’s passing, Ms. Lee continually helped with the family business until she got married and had two daughters. Now she enjoys hobbies like sewing and ceramics, as well as socializing with people in general. Other topics covered in the interview include her childhood, such as struggles in school, attitudes toward child-rearing as well as her perception of the Chinese American community in Houston.

Audio file part 1:

DG: 77074. How long have you lived in Houston?

LL: All my life. I was born and raised in Houston.

DG: When did your family come to Houston?

LL: My daddy was born in San Francisco, California. My mother came to the United States in September the 20- September 17th, 1923. They migrate to Houston finally in 19- around 1924. I was born the following year, September 17th, 1924. I was supposed to be the first Chinese baby born in Houston, because at that time they had never seen oriental woman before, which my mother was the first. And never seen a baby before, which I was the first. I was supposedly the first, and they had me at the carnival for 10 cents a look. Mother said that they even looked at me and said “well, that’s funny. She don’t have a tail. Said the only different we could see about her is that she had little slanted eyes and her skin a little bit different than ours” and I
remember my mother say she got real upset but then- then on top of that, they didn’t give her all her money. And I have twin brothers. They were the first Chinese twins born in Houston. And my daddy and mom were the first Chinese Christians. Let’ see, the twins were born, let’s see, they should be 1933 or ’34. I can’t remember what year. It’s one of those years. [cough] Let’s see...

DG: Any more brothers and sisters?

LL: I have 1 other sister and 4 other brothers. My oldest brother, he's 64 or '5 now and he was born in China. I have one other brother, June. He was born in Houston. My sister Lily was born in Houston. I have 1 little brother. He was born in Houston and of course the twins. There was 5 boys and 2 of us girls. We all are Baptist, except my daddy. My daddy was Catholic. And daddy and momma don’t speak very good English but they can get by. They were in business in Houston for a few years. And my mother is very well educated in Chinese but of course in English she’s not very well educated. She’s considered pretty well educated in oriental background. And usually mother goes to church and daddy works all the time and we go to church ourselves so not much there for background for...

DG: What kind of business was your father in?

LL: My father was in the restaurant business for years. Finally after he passed, we got into the grocery business.

DG: Do you remember what the name of the restaurant was?

LL: Uuhh. The restaurant was named Tingying’s Café. That was located at that time Oden and Clark Street. Right now it’s known as Lyon’s Avenue and Jensen Drive. It was- I remember half of it was served for the colored people and the other half was for the white people. And I remember working there when I was a little bitty kid myself as young as 9 years old.

DG: What is the name of your grocery store then?

LL: It’s King’s Supermarket.

DG: Where was it located?

LL: It was located across the street. Let see- [inaudible several words] King and Brother’s Supermarket, the first one, and the second one right now, and it still is in progress, it’s on Liberty Road.

DG: Do you remember how many Chinese families at that time?
LL: Oh gosh, no. There wasn’t very many at that time but we never did get around to associating. We always had been working one place or another so we never did have time to get around except to go to church.

DG: What year was that?

LL: Oh let’s see... I can’t even remember, so far back.

DG: What church do you all go to?

LL: We go to the Chinese Baptist Church. We first meet at the First Baptist Church that’s located in Hampton and Lamar. And then finally, finally it’s located on Hamilton. And now we have our own church on Rogen(?) Street. Is that Rogen? The first church was located on Lamar. At the basement of the First Baptist Church of Houston. The second, we have our own church there on Hamilton. Then now there are churches on Rogen.

DG: What would you say Chinese that come to Houston have any kind of problems since-

LL: Oh gosh yes. We all had a little problem. First of all there’s a language barrier. Second there’s a racial problem we all had. We don’t fit into anything, except for the church people. They loved us anyway, like we were, and like we are, but we had a little problem. It’s hard for us to get a job. We can’t get a job nowhere, unless [inaudible 2 or 3 words] in charge of us, own our own business, loves it, but [inaudible 2 or 3 words] big as it is, and I understand most of the Chinese people that were first settled here in Houston have started real small in businesses and became quite successful in their field now.

DG: Were there any other job opportunities other than running the grocery store or restaurant?

LL: There was no job opportunities in any way.

DG: After you graduated from high school, you don’t work for the grocery store anymore. Did you have a job of your own?

LL: I never did graduate from high school. I never did have that opportunity. Never had the opportunity to ’cus we never did have the money, but I did work in a grocery store for a little while for other people, for other Chinese people.

DG: Were there any Chinese working for American firms?

LL: I can’t remember if there is. I can’t remember at that time.

DG: Do you remember what the population is around 1930?
LL: No, I sure don’t.

DG: ‘35?

LL: No, I can’t remember. I know there’s thousands and thousands now, but I can’t remember the population then.

DG: At present, where do you work?

LL: Well right now I’m working for Dunkin Donuts Company on Longpoint. I just work part-time there.

DG: How do you get to your work?

LL: Oh I drive a van. I use a van in my- I have a small business too. You know.

DG: Do you remember anything about your first job at somebody else’s grocery?

LL: Well my first job was at this grocery store run by Mr. Wong. You know it’s real nice. I like it. I enjoy it.

DG: When did you get married?

LL: I got married August 17, 1941.

DG: Who did you marry?

LL: Yang W. Lee

DG: When?

LL: When did I marry?

DG: Yes.

LL: In 1941. August 17th, 1941.

DG: Where?

LL: In Houston, Texas.

DG: Is he a Chinese?

LL: He’s Chinese.
DG: How many children do you have?
LL: I have 2 girls.
DG: Where were they born?
LL: They were born in Fort Bend County and the other one was born in San Antonio.
DG: Could you tell me something about their education?
LL: Well both of them are high school graduates right now and one of them not quite graduated from college and the other one's fixin' to still go to college yet.
DG: What are their occupations now?
LL: Well, the oldest girl right now, she is- her husband is managing a real estate company.
DG: What is the name of the-
LL: Win Co. (?). Win Co. Company. And my baby daughter, she is working for her right now and going to school at the same time.
DG: Where was your husband born?
LL: He was born in China.
DG: Do you know what city?
LL: No I sure don't.
DG: Where do your parents come from?
LL: My father's from Fricso (?). My mother came from China.
DG: What is the name of your father?
LL: My father? Joe R. Sham.
DG: Your mother?
LL: My mother is the Ng. Fung Ng. F-u-n-g Ng.
DG: Are they still living?
LL: No, they have been- my mother’s dead one year this month. My daddy’s been dead...let’s see...a few months before my twin brother was born.

DG: Do you remember your grandparents?

LL: No, I never have seen either one of them.

DG: You don’t know their names, do you?

LL: No, I sure don’t.

DG: Your brothers and sisters. Their names?

LL: Do I know my brothers’ and sisters’ names?

DG: No, your brothers’ and sisters’ names.

LL: Oh, my brothers and sisters starting from the oldest?

DG: Whatever-

LL: The oldest one is JM King. The second is me. The third is June Sham. The fourth is Lily Joe Bara (?). Gumet(?) Joe Sham. Mun(?) Fu and Mun(?) Bak Joe Sham.

DG: They’re all still living, right?

LL: All still living.

DG: Where are they now?

LL: Well the oldest one, JM King, he’s in Louisiana now. My sister Lily’s in Dallas and the rest of them here is in Houston.

DG: Why did your family stay in Houston?

LL: Well, I guess since mom and dad settled down here, well, my brothers and sisters decided to stay too, you know, except my sister got married and she moved to Dallas with her husband and my oldest brother figured he could make a better living somewhere else like for instance Louisiana.

DG: Were you educated in Houston?

LL: I was.

DG: How many years of...
LL: Formal education?

DG: Right.

LL: I had 9 years of formal education.

DG: Did your parents have any formal education?

LL: My parents were very well educated. Not in the United States. My daddy is very well educated in the United States. My mother in China. She was educated in China.

DG: What do you remember about your schooling?

LL: Oh gosh.

DG: In Houston.

LL: Well, I had a real rough time in school. I remember going to school some time after daddy died. Well, then. It was really hard on me, yeah. So we still had that restaurant on Jensen Drive and Lyon’s Avenue then. We tried to make a go of it, but [inaudible 3 or 4 words] was only 14. That was my oldest brother and it’s really hard. I had to walk to school every day by myself and I only about 5 or 6 years old then. I had to walk to school all the time, because mother didn’t drive then. She just recently learned how to drive. You know, not recently, I mean in the last 30 or 40 years.

DG: Do you have any opinions about your educational opportunities as compared to your children’s?

LL: Well, I guess I could have finished school if I really and truly wanted to, but at that time, I prefer to get married.

DG: What are your feelings about how the education in Houston?

LL: Now? What are my feelings about it now?

DG: The quality.

LL: Well, I really don’t have too much of an opinion on that and I think they could do better. I really do. I think they could do better.

DG: What improvements do you think they need?

LL: I think they need to be stricter on the children.
DG: Do you think the Chinese in Houston feel the same way you do about education in Houston?

LL: Some of them probably do.

DG: What is your religious preference?

LL: I’m a Baptist.

DG: Did your parents have the same religion as you do?

LL: My mother. My daddy’s Catholic.

DG: How about your children?

LL: My children are Baptist.

DG: Do you go to church regularly?

LL: Not very regularly, I’m ashamed to say. [laughter]

DG: Are you a member of the church?

LL: I’m a member of the Chinese Baptist Church.

DG: Do you contribute financially to the church?

LL: Some.

DG: Are you actively involved in the church?

LL: Not right now I’m not. I used to be.

DG: What is your attitude towards your family...religion?

LL: Well, at that time, like I said, I was so young, I didn’t know any difference, you know, really and truly. Except my daddy’s always counting his beads. I call it counting his beads and mother she’s a really hard-shelled Baptist.

DG: Do your ancestors influence your religion now?

LL: No, afraid not. Really and truly the only ancestors I can remember are my mom and dad.

DG: Do you think the Chinese here in Houston share your belief in religion?
LL: I can't say. I don’t know for sure.

DG: What church do you think the majority of Chinese in the area belong to?

LL: The Baptist.

DG: Do you think they brought any of their previous beliefs or customs into the religion they now belong?

LL: They- I don’t know about bringing their customs, and their beliefs, and their religion, but they do bring a lot of culture back. You know, cultures and things. I think that’s real nice. Really.

DG: Do you vote?

LL: Yes I do.

DG: Did you vote in the last city election?

LL: No, in the last one I didn't.

DG: Did you vote in the last state election?

LL: That one I didn’t either.

DG: Did you vote in the last presidential election?

LL: Yes.

DG: Do you go to political meetings?

LL: No.

DG: Have you ever run for office?

LL: No.

DG: Do you speak other language besides Chinese and English?

LL: One other. Not very fluently. Spanish.

DG: Does your parents speak other languages?

LL: Just a little bit of English and of course, Chinese.
DG: How about your grandparents?

LL: I don’t know about them.

DG: Do your children speak other language besides English?

LL: They speak a little Chinese. They understand it really, more than they speak it.

DG: How do you feel about that they don’t speak Chinese?


DG: Do you think they miss something if they don’t speak Chinese?


DG: Did you attend any special school for languages?

LL: No.

DG: Did your parents emphasize on Chinese, learning Chinese?

LL: Have my parents ever wanted us to learn Chinese? Oh definitely! I remember mother used to carry a little Chinese book, you know. Run Dog Run or Jump Jack Jump or something like that. She carried it around, try to make us sit down and study and we never did and now I wish- she said “some day you’re gonna wish-” and sure enough, I’m wishing that I had [inaudible 2 words].

DG: How did you learn English?

LL: Well, I was born into it. [laughter]

DG: So you didn’t have any difficulties-

LL: No I didn’t have any difficulties at all.

DG: What do you do in your leisure time?

LL: In my leisure time? I do ceramics. I do ceramics. I like to work out in the yard and I love people. I really dearly love people and I do sewing. I like to sew. And right now I’m volunteering to teach a class on ceramics at the nursing home off of Belaby’s (?). I’m gonna teach a class there one day out of the week...in ceramics.

DG: How did you get into ceramics?
LL: Well I have a beautiful sister-in-law that I- she always doing little things for me and she needed some chopstick holders. And I knew this women that knew ceramics so I asked her to make me little chopstick holders and I draw a design for it. So before she could make it, she passed away and somebody said “well why don’t you learn to do it yourself?” so I did learn it and I’m fascinated by the hobby. So many things I can do for it.

DG: Do you attend any kind of classes to improve yourself?

LL: No, I’m planning on it though.

DG: Are you a member of any kind of clubs?

LL: Uh, no I’m not.

DG: Who do you see most often socially?

LL: Socially? My brothers and sometimes my nephews.

DG: What do you do with them?

LL: Oh generally just work around the house and things and maybe go to some outings or things, you know.

DG: Do you meeting with neighbors?

LL: I see them occasionally. And talk. We talk. We have a lot in common like our house, our yard, sewing, and the children. Things like that.

DG: Do you meet with your working associates?

LL: Only at work so far.

DG: Who lives in your home now?

LL: Just me, 3 dogs, and a cat.

DG: In the past who lived-

LL: My mother.

DG: Your daughters too?

LL: Oh, before they was grown and moved away? Oh yeah. It was natural, you know.

DG: Do you belong to any Chinese clubs?
LL: No.

DG: Do you belong to community clubs that are not all Chinese?
LL: No.
DG: Why not?
LL: Well I never have thought of it to tell the truth. No reason, really.
DG: Do you belong to any Chinese organization?
LL: No. I’m planning on it. I think they’re planning on forming an Asian-American club here soon, you know. That includes the Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, and...what else now...oh, those Orientals, Asians.
DG: You’re not active in any Chinese groups here.
LL: No.
DG: Do you ever go to Chinatown?
LL: Yes.
DG: How often is that?
LL: Oh maybe once a month, if that much.
DG: For what occasion do you go to Chinatown?
LL: Usually to buy some oriental import goods.
DG: Do you ever go to the Chinese Theater?
LL: Never.

[20:00]
DG: Are you interested in Chinese opera?
LL: Some I am.
DG: Would you go to a Chinese opera?
LL: Never have. In Fricso(?), when I went there, I went several times.
DG: Are you interested in Chinese art?

LL: Yes.

DG: Are you interested in any other Chinese things?

LL: Well, quite a few things, specifically what would you say...I love the arts. I would love to know more about it. I don’t know how I could go about learning about it, but I would love to know more about it.

DG: Do you know of any gaps in the Chinese culture in Houston?

LL: Mmm, what would you- could you define that more clearly? About the gaps?

DG: Like what is lacking, you know.

LL: What is really lacking?

DG: Mhmm.

LL: Well, I understand they're friendly to different people but they're not friendly to their own, am I right? That’ what I can understand. It seems like we can never get together to do any one thing together, you know.

DG: What is needed to improve-

LL: A better understanding of one another. We need a better understanding of one another. Someone have to bring it together.

DG: Have you been to China?

LL: Never. I've been to Hong Kong twice.

DG: When was that?

LL: Let’ see...that was the year- I think it was- second time was 1977 and maybe 1972 or '3. I can’t remember exactly now.

DG: Why did you go?

LL: Well, the first time I went was because my daughter married a Hong Kong boy and she was expecting a baby and I wanted to be there when the baby was born. And the second time I went, it was with my sister-in-law and she went back to see her parents and I just wanted to go with her.
DG: In the future do you plan to go to China for a visit?

LL: I would love to if I think I would feel safe, but as it is now I don’t think I would feel safe.

DG: Would you like your other daughter to visit China also?

LL: If she cares to, yes.

DG: Why?

LL: Why? I would like for her to see what our people are doing, you know. I’d like to help them if we can.

DG: Do you have any contacts in China? Communications and so forth.

LL: No, no communication whatsoever, because for one thing, I don’t write Chinese and they don’t write English, and there are some distant relatives only and I really don’t know them if I see them now. They’re some of my mother’s people and some of my dad’s people and most of them now are- not most of them, but all those that I know, are over here, you know.

DG: The relatives in China, where are they now?

LL: Oh gosh. It’s so small provinces. I can’t remember what the provinces are now.

DG: Do you ever get newspaper from China? magazines?

LL: No. No.

DG: Do you maintain any Chinese tradition or custom in your home?

LL: Well, what you mean by that exactly?

DG: Chinese traditions or customs.

LL: Well, you mean like for instance waiting on the mens first and stuff like that? Well something like that, it’s really born in me, you know, respecting my elders and things like that. Yes. If you call that Chinese tradition. I certainly do in respecting my elders and the mens in my family. I sure do.

DG: Do you celebrate any holidays? Chinese holidays?

LL: Not particularly.

DG: Does your children maintain any customs or-
LL: That, I couldn’t tell you for sure.

DG: Do you think you have abandoned some Chinese customs?

LL: I’m sorry to say, I’m sure I have.

DG: Do you think this is true of other Chinese in the Houston area?

LL: Oh yes, positive.

DG: Are you aware of any customs that your Chinese friends may observe that you don’t?

LL: Well I understand some of the older people still has [inaudible 1 word], you know. You burn incense and all that, some of the older ones.

DG: How many Chinese do you think live in Houston now?

LL: Oh god. I couldn’t come close to it, within thousands.

DG: How do you view the Chinese as an ethnic group in Houston? Are they closely-knit?

LL: Well, I think they’re trying to be. I’ll put it that way.

DG: As compared to the other ethnic groups.

LL: The other ethnic groups are very very close and I think the Chinese need to be closer, be as close or closer.

DG: How do you think the Houston Chinese view themselves as a group?

LL: Same as I do.

DG: Compared to other groups.

LL: Uhuh. I believe they feel the same way I do.

DG: Do you perceive any political division in the Houston Chinese community?

LL: Well, could you define that more clearly?

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

LL: Probably no more than any other ethnic group.
DG: Do you see any changes in political support among these divisions with the U.S. opening relations with China?

LL: I can’t tell.

DG: What social values do you think remain most important from Chinese tradition to you?

LL: Which is- which I consider the most important?

DG: Chinese tradition.

LL: Oh gosh, I don’t know.

DG: What social values do you think remain most important-

LL: Yes, I do know what social val- what I think is real big issue. We always, as a Chinese people, have taken care of our old, our ills(?) and our sick. I can’t understand why some of them put their old people away in homes and things. I can’t understand that. Even if you were distant kin and things, we always try to take care of them, but they not doing that now. In the last 10 or 12 years, I understand they put all the old peoples away and things like that.

DG: Now I’m gonna ask you something about family history and childhood and...

LL: Okay.

DG: What do you think you were disciplined- how do you think you were discipline?

LL: Well I got whacked many a time [laughter] for not behaving.

DG: Why?

LL: Well for disobeying my mother or not doing anything she tells me to do or mostly- sometimes back-talking.

DG: Do you perceive any changes in perceptions about child-rearing-

LL: Then and now? Oh gosh yes. The people’s not raising their kids like we were. In fact, children get away with a lot more than we ever did. They let their kids do anything they want to any time and to anyone. We weren’t allowed to do that. We were allowed to be seen and not heard.

DG: How did you discipline your children?
LL: I allowed them to be seen and not heard.

DG: Why?

LL: Why? Because a child- I believe a child should be in a child’s place. I know they should be happy and all of that but I believe when two grown-ups are talking or discussing something I don’t think it’s a child place to say “what are you all talking about and how come you ain’t talking to me?” I think a child should wait it’s turn and they should give a child their turn too, but they’re not doing that now. They really aren’t. They say “well baby come first regardless of whoever else talks” and I believe a child should need to learn, you know, that it should wait it’s turn too.

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

LL: As a child? Leisure time? I tried to sew. I remember trying to learn how to sew and I always go out in the yard and I used to play in the mud. Used to catch little bugs and things and look at them and investigate them. We didn’t have too much toys to play with. Never did.

DG: What kinds of toys did you play with as a child?

LL: Well, when I can remember, before dad died, we did have toys, school-bought toys. After that we made our own like for instance we take a bottle and take the hemp rope and screw the top on the hemp rope and that’s the ball of hair. Never did have no arms and legs of course. It’s hair, we can comb it and curl it and all and the boys always play with sticks and they ride them as horses and things. Maybe they build them little boats and stuff, I remember. My twin brother built a boat out of a tin. Could ride in the water and they sunk with it, I remember that.

DG: What were your favorites then?

LL: Favorites then? Ooo I loved to go out in the ditches and catch crawfish.

DG: [inaudible]

LL: Oh it’s that little bottle doll. I loved that little bottle doll. It’s a little ol’ bottle- sometimes we go out in the alley and we find a bottle with a cap to it and we’ll get some hemp rope and then put it on the cap. Tighten it down and we’ll comb it out and curl it, waves and everything else.

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

LL: Oh gosh yes. They have toys you wouldn’t believe. They have bicycles and tricycle, and they have swimming pool. They don’t have to play in a ditch like we did with water. They get slides and things like that, and we never had nothing like that.
We had a doll. They had dolls and caps and everything too but we never did have to [inaudible 1 word] their hair.

DG: Have you perceived any changes in family size in the Chinese community?

LL: Mhmm. The older Chinese people have all the kids they can have, but the younger ones now are limiting themselves now. They limit themselves to maybe 2 or 3 at the most and they stop at that.

DG: In other words they are practicing child- 

LL: Birth control.

[31:14]

Audio file part 2:

DG: Looking back to your own experiences adjusting to life in Houston...what problems do you think Chinese now coming to Houston can expect to encounter?

LL: Well the only thing I know they would counter right now is finding homes, that’s all. What they can afford. Otherwise I don’t think there’s really much of a problem if they’re not afraid to work.

DG: What special problem do you think perhaps the Boat People could expect to encounter?

LL: The language barrier will be one thing. Second thing would be our custom here in Houston, not only of the Chinese custom but mainly with the other Houstonians. They’ll have to learn what they’re customs are first.

DG: What different problems would they experience if any?

LL: Oh they’re gonna experience plenty. They’re gonna experience, you know, how to get along with their neighbors for one thing, how far to go with anything, you know, because a lot of people don’t understand, you know, that they have different ways of feelings than we do, you know, and they have to learn, but the majority will get along real well. I’m sure they will.

DG: Do you think there’s a problem of Chinese assimilating with Americans?

LL: Do I think they would have problems associating?

DG: No. Do you think we have problems- the Chinese have problems assimilating with Americans?
LL: Well I don't think so.

DG: Has the flow of a lot of Chinese to Houston influenced the American attitude towards the Chinese?

LL: Well, I guess there's some good and some bad in all of that, but I know that the people in the United States now are beginning to go oriental in a lot of ways, more ways than I ever realized they would, like for instance, even the clothes and things are getting oriental styles, you know. And they go to these restaurants and eat oriental food. They even know more about it than I do.

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

LL: Well not particularly, unless there's something that- you know.

DG: Do you know any other respected Chinese in Houston you think we may want to get on tape for our oral history study?

LL: Well, let's see...Do they have to be in Houston? Do they have to be in Houston? Oh goodness. There's so many of them here that could be interviewed, but right now I couldn't come up with a name. Perhaps later on I could.

DG: Do you have any documents we may want to use for our oral history project?

LL: Well, like for instance, pictures and things? I have pictures, but documents I wouldn't know where they located. I lost a lot of papers since I moved and misplaced them. I don't know what I did with them.

DG: May we borrow it to make copies-

LL: You certainly may.

DG: -for our oral history project?

LL: You certainly may.

DG: Before I close, I would like to ask you, would you name some outstanding contributions the Chinese Americans in Houston has contributed to society?

LL: Oh yes. A lot of us has became teachers, became lawyers, top salesmen. Yes, I really do.

DG: Mhmm. Thank you very much. I appreciate your cooperation.

LL: You're welcome.
DG: Thank you.