Summary:

Hobert Joe, born in China, moved to the United States with his family as a child. After going to Houston to attend school at Rice University, Mr. Joe's parents followed shortly after, opening a number of grocery stores in the area. The discussion highlights Mr. Joe's experiences with primary education in China and college in the United States, as well as the attitudes he passed on to his children about education. Other topics covered include Mr. Joe's political involvement, his attitudes toward the Chinese in Houston, as well as his attachment to the Chinese culture in general.

Note:

This transcription contains an especially high number of areas that were unable to be transcribed due to microphone problems apparent on the audio file.

Key:

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<td>Daisy Chan Gee</td>
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Audio file part 1:

HJ: Ok, now you can- you can go ahead and start talking

[inaudible-adjusting microphone]

DG: This interview with Hobert Joe for the Houston Center for the Humanities and Public Policy.

HJ: I can control it [adjusting microphone]
DG: The reason I put it high is because I have to talk from here. Mr. Joe, how long have you lived in Houston?

HJ: I've been here since 1947, which is 33 years.

DG: Where did you live before you came to Houston?

HJ: Dallas, Texas.

DG: What did you do in Dallas, Texas?

HJ: Go to school.

DG: Where were you born?

HJ: Canton (?), China.

DG: When did your family come to the United States?

HJ: My daddy been here since - [adjusting microphone] My daddy been here since 1919. My mother came in 1949.

DG: [inaudible] ...1919?

HJ: [inaudible 2 words] He was in Mississippi.

DG: Why did he go to Mississippi?

HJ: I guess maybe because his relatives in Mississippi.

DG: What did they do in Mississippi?

HJ: They run a small grocery store in a small town.

DG: What town was that?

HJ: That town, call it Dartsville (?), Mississippi.

DG: Why did he come to Houston? Did he come to Houston?

HJ: The reason he came to Houston because I was here at that time. He was in an army. After he got out he went to Los Angeles. Got into the grocery business there and after I got to Houston and I sent for him here.

DG: [inaudible] you sent for him?
DG: The father was doing some kind of business when he first came to Houston?

HJ: When he came here, together we opened a little small grocery store.

DG: Where was your grocery store located?

HJ: It's in Fifth Ward.

DG: Do you remember what street?

HJ: The address is 1002 Gregg Street.

DG: How long did you all stay at that location?

HJ: Oh we stayed there I guess until 1959-1958 or '59.

DG: Then what did your family do? What did your father do after that?

HJ: He retired.

DG: And then?

HJ: I continued in the business. We opened 2 more stores. In 1960 we were relocated on Larkin Street. 5103 Larkin.

DG: What was the name of the store?

HJ: Larkin's Supermarket.

DG: And the other location was where?

HJ: We had one -had a store still in Fifth Ward and that location is on Sarah Street. 45 N. on Liberty. Liberty Road.

DG: What is the name of that store?

HJ: Selective Food Market.

DG: How many employees did you have at each of the stores?

HJ: At that time, we possibly have 5, 6 at each location.

DG: Do you have a store open?
HJ: Yea. There was- why we still located on Gregg Street.

DG: Your mother came direct from China to Houston?

HJ: That’s right.

DG: Who else came with you to Houston? Came to Houston with your father and mother?

HJ: Nobody else came with them.

DG: Will you tell me why your family stayed in Houston?

HJ: Well I guess because it’s growing city and they feel like they can make a living here.

DG: [inaudible question]

HJ: Yeah. You mean right now?

DG: At that time.

HJ: At that time? Oh yeah. I got a lot of cousin. Had a lot of- you know. Distant relative.

DG: Will you name a few please?

HJ: Well, people like Davey Joe, Harry Joe, and their family, and they are about my third or fourth cousin.

DG: At that time did you stay with your relatives or did you rent a place to stay?

HJ: [inaudible]...had to go to school. I was stay at Rice at that time. My daddy was staying behind at the store.

DG: What year did you get into Rice?


DG: Your daddy did what now?

HJ: Lived behind the store.

DG: What were your first impressions of Houston when you first arrived?
HJ: Well, really, being from Dallas – that’s a really big city and Houston, at that time, really seems to me as an overgrown country town.

DG: Anything else what it was like to you- is that all? Do you know how many Chinese lived here at that time?

HJ: At that time, in 1947, I imagine less than a 1,000.

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

HJ: Not that I recall.

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

HJ: I didn’t look for any job because my main purpose in Houston was going to school and after that my dad and I got into the grocery business, so I really didn’t look for a job.

DG: When did you decide to go to Rice? What prompted you to...

HJ: That’s- when I first got to Dallas in 19-

DG: I mean when you had come to Houston your dad opened a grocery store, okay? When he came over here were you already at Rice or-

HJ: Right... I was here first in Houston. I came down here for the sole purpose go to Rice from Dallas and after I got here I sent for my daddy. So I decided to go to Rice before my family ever got here. The sole purpose- the sole reason I went to Rice because for my younger days, when I was going to high school in Dallas, is known to me that Rice is one of the best universities in the south. And I wanna go- I wanna pick up engineering. I understand that was one of the best engineering school. One of the few in the country.

DG: Your father [inaudible several words] attend school during the day-time – the night-time, is that it?

HJ: Right. I opened the store with him before I go to school. After, get out of class, go right back to the store and work.

DG: Approximately how many hours do you think were put into the store at that time?

HJ: I probably put in about 40, 50 hours a week.

DG: Are there many Chinese groceries at that time?
HJ: [inaudible several words] From 1949 until about 1955, the number of Chinese grocery stores grow from maybe 30, 40 all the way to 200.

DG: Were there many Chinese restaurants at that time?

HJ: At that time, the restaurant business was kinda in just [inaudible 1 or 2 words]. Very very few at that time.

DG: Can you name [inaudible several words]

HJ: It's gonna be pretty hard for me to name all of them.

DG: You know some of them.

HJ: What you- do you need the name? The...

DG: The business!

HJ: The business?

DG: Like yours and...

HJ: Well we have Kelly [inaudible 1 word] Market. We got G&G Food Market. We got-we had Cheng Long. We got Sun Yik. These are all the grocery store. We got Davey Food Market and we had Shady Acre Food Market and we just [inaudible 2 or 3 words] and the rest of the business, you have Ding Hao. You had [inaudible]

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

HJ: If there was anybody working for American companies, would be very very few. But I do know that at that time I think Mr. Wallace Gee was working for a television company, selling television. And also during that period there were- there was American- there were Chinese Wholesale House-

DG: Working for an American company!

HJ: No.

DG: How did you get to and from work?

HJ: By car. By car.

DG: You said you’d come in 1947 and your family came in 1949. Can you name some family that came from the ‘50s to the ‘60s that you know of?
HJ: Well, I know quite a few came during that time. If you ask me to name them you're gonna be pretty tough. And if you give me 10 or 15 minutes-

DG: Okay, you name some of them.

HJ: Okay. You take David Joe’s family and you take Sherman Toy, those people. You take Henry Lee’s family and...

DG: How about between the years ‘60s and ‘70s?

HJ: Well, by that time- get around in the 1960s and ‘70s, there so many people moving in here that it’s pretty hard for anybody keep track of it.

DG: And who did you marry?

HJ: Aster Jeu.

DG: Where were you married and when?

HJ: Right here in Houston. We married 27 years ago.

DG: Is she Chinese?

HJ: She is.

DG: How many children do you have?

HJ: We have 3. 2 boys and a girl.

DG: And where were they born?

HJ: They were born right here in Houston.

DG: What are their names?

HJ: The oldest one, Gregory Joe, who is 23 years old. The second is Ronnie Joe who is 21 and our girl’s 17, Stephanie Joe.

DG: Tell me something about their education.

HJ: Well they went to public school in Spring Branch School District and they graduated with the honor, each one of them and they went to Rice. The two oldest one- one graduated from Rice, one going there now, the little one, the girl, gonna start in September.
DG: What are they studying?

HJ: Alright. Gregory is got a master in electrical engineering and Ronnie, he gonna study business administration and Stephanie gonna study music.

DG: Mr. Gregory [inaudible 1 or 2 words] degree. What is he doing now?

HJ: He’s looking for a TIW on California.

DG: Where was your wife born?

HJ: Arkansas.

DG: Did your parents come from China?

HJ: Yes they did.

DG: Are they still living?

HJ: They still living.

DG: And where are they now?

HJ: They right here in Houston.

DG: Do you remember anything about your grandparents?

HJ: Very little. In fact, I can’t recall anything. I remember my grandma. My grandpa died before I was born.

DG: Do you know your grandparents’ names?

HJ: Oh yeah, I know their names.

DG: What are your grandfather’s name?

HJ: Jeu Doi Chep

DG: And your grandmother’s name?

HJ: Now, I don’t know grandma’s name. [laughter] Nobody does in Chinese custom.

DG: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

HJ: I got two sisters.
DG: What are their names?

HJ: The oldest one, Baek Wen, the second one, Leu Wen.

DG: Are they all still living?

HJ: They living. Right here in Houston.

DG: What are their occupations?

HJ: Okay, the oldest one, together with her husband, own a grocery store and the younger one, along with her husband, working for a supermarket.

DG: You said you were [inaudible 1 or 2 words] in Dallas [inaudible several words] in Mississippi, so did you go to school in Mississippi also?

HJ: No, we couldn't go.

DG: Why?

HJ: The reason we couldn't go was because if we wanna go to school in Mississippi, a public school in Mississippi, we have to go to a colored school, so we decided not to go to school there.

DG: Was that the reason you went to Dallas to go to school?

HJ: That's right.

DG: How many years of school did you go?

HJ: In Dallas?

DG: Yes.

HJ: I had one year's school in Dallas.

DG: Where did you go to elementary school then?

HJ: I never did go to elementary school here. I had one year's high school. One year's. Eighth grade. I went to Rice from there.

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

HJ: My father probably got about 4 years formal education. My momma probably didn't have any.
DG: Why didn’t she have any education?

HJ: Because at that time in China the custom is that woman don’t need to go to school.

DG: Did your grandparents have any education?

HJ: I doubt it.

DG: What do you remember about your school days?

HJ: I can’t remember anything from my school days. [laughter]

DG: You just mentioned some.

HJ: Oh, all I know is that when I was a little boy, I went to school in China, went to grade school in China.

DG: That’s why I asked you-

HJ: Yeah, okay. We played around a lot. We do little study. Okay, in China the education system is completely different. You go to school from 6 o’clock in the morning until 9 o’clock at night, and you get little time off for breakfast, lunch, and supper.

DG: How do you feel about the quality of education in Texas?

HJ: When I first came to the state of Texas, and I had 7 years of education in China and what I learned in 7 years at that time, that’s what got me into Rice. You can take the comparison from there. But however, in the last 10 or 15 years, I think the education in the state of Texas have improved a heck of a lot, because right now if I want to know anything at all I go ask my children, and that’s the difference. In the last- I would say in the last 30 years, the education in the state of Texas has improved two-fold.

DG: Was your education opportunity as good as your children?

HJ: My was. Yes.

DG: Better than your children?

HJ: No I don’t think it was better than my children, just as good.

DG: Was your children’s better?
HJ: Oh yeah. They better. Their environment’s different, because they learning from the day they were born from TV. They learn more in the first- before they go to school, than we learn in 5 years in school.

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

HJ: Mmm. Yes, I would say yes, because they need to get back to basics. And the high school- the public high school in Houston and surrounding area, they put too much emphasis on getting a job after get out. They really need to teach- the real education get back to basics.

DG: Like reading, writing, and arithmetic?

HJ: That’s right.

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

HJ: Oh yeah. All the time.

DG: Did you encourage them to enter a profession of their own?

HJ: Certainly.

[20:00]

DG: What is your religious preference?

HJ: I don’t have any, but I do support the Chinese Baptist Church. My wife is Methodist.

DG: Does your parents have any religious preference?

HJ: No.

DG: How about your children? Do they have any preference?

HJ: Well, my younger daughter just joined the Chinese Baptist Church, about 3 months ago.

DG: Do you ever go to church?

HJ: Oh yeah.

DG: Are you a member of a church?

HJ: I’m not.
DG: Do you contribute financially to a church.

HJ: Sometimes, yes. We support the Chinese Baptist Church.

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

HJ: I think the Chinese Baptist Church, isn’t it? I believe, because I have no contact with the rest of them.

DG: Do you think China-born members of the Chinese Baptist Church still maintain some old customs into the religion they now belong?

HJ: I think they do. Yes. But I think it’s good. I think it’s good. That’s one place they can meet and talk about old times and try to preserve some of the old Chinese tradition, which we need so badly in this country.

DG: Are you a United States citizen?

HJ: Yes ma’am.

DG: Do you vote?

HJ: Yes ma’am. [laughter]

DG: Did you vote in the last city election?

HJ: Yes ma’am.

DG: Did you vote in the state election?

HJ: Yes ma’am.

DG: Presidential election?

HJ: Mhmm.

DG: Do you go to political meetings?

HJ: Very very often.

DG: How often?

HJ: Political- well, let’s say that I do a lot of politic in the city of Houston, in the state and Washington D.C.
DG: How about party meetings?

HJ: I don’t care much about belong to any political party, because when you-I feel like when anybody go to vote, they should vote for a person not a party.

DG: Have you ever run for public office?

HJ: No ma’am.

DG: Would you why not many Chinese run for public office?

HJ: I think the reason for that- there are many. Number one reason, because the Chinese, the environment that they live in, they really don’t have the time. And secondly they really don’t have the background. And thirdly most of the Chinese people really doesn’t know the political procedure or the political philosophy in United States.

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

HJ: Yeah, we definitely should. We should encourage everybody that want to do-want to run in political office, we should- and we should support them.

DG: Do you speak any other language besides English?

HJ: Chinese.

DG: What dialect do you speak?

HJ: Cantonese.

DG: Do you know any other dialect?

HJ: No ma’am.

DG: What language does your parents speak?

HJ: Chinese.

DG: Cantonese also?

HJ: Cantonese, right.

DG: How about your children?

HJ: They speak English pure.
DG: Did you attend any school to learn other languages?
HJ: No ma’am.
DG: How about Chinese?
HJ: Oh yeah, you know, that’s part of the education that...
DG: Do you read and write Chinese?
HJ: Yeah.
DG: Very fluently or...?
HJ: No, I forgot most of them now.
DG: Did your parents put any emphasis on speaking the Chinese language?
HJ: They tried, but didn’t do any good. [laughter]
DG: How did you learn English?
HJ: School, I guess.
DG: Did you have any problems learning English?
HJ: No, I had no problem.
DG: What do you do in your leisure time?
HJ: Oh I don’t have too much leisure time. When I do have any I will go to a ball game and engage in any kind of sport, swimming, and whatever sporting event happen to be in the city.
DG: Do you attend any classes now?
HJ: No ma’am.
DG: Do you have any hobbies?
HJ: No ma’am.
DG: Do you socialize with your neighbors?
HJ: Yes we do.
DG: How? Do you talk or do you entertain them or what?

HJ: Well, we do entertaining, they entertaining us. And we really socialize with our neighbor and our- we have a lot of friend.

DG: Do you socialize with your working associates?

HJ: Oh yeah. Definitely.

DG: What do you do with them?

HJ: [inaudible several words] socializing with your neighbor, with your friend.

DG: Do you socialize with your relatives?

HJ: Oh yeah.

DG: What do you do with them?

HJ: What? Just like- just like- treat them just like a friend. How do you socialize with your friend and that’s how you socialize with your relative. Yeah, we socialize with our neighbor. We socialize with our relative. We do just like any American people. We talk about current event. We talk about the economy. We talking about dancing, sport, and anything that anybody else talk about.

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

HJ: Yes, we do.

DG: How often do you have meetings?

HJ: Oh some of them weekly, some of them monthly, some of them quarterly.

DG: How many of those do you belong to?

HJ: I imagine I belong to about 7, 8 of them.

DG: Can you name some of them?

HJ: We belong to the Houstonion Club. We belong to the [inaudible name] Club. We belong to the Retail Grocery Organization and...I’m also belong to the Shriner and quite a few more.

DG: Do you belong to any Chinese clubs or organizations?
HJ: Chinese American Citizens Alliance.

DG: And what else? Is that the only one?


DG: Do you know who was instrumental in forming the CACA or Joe Family Association?

HJ: The one to really start the CACA is few of us like Mr. Albert Gee and myself, and Dr. Chen [inaudible]. The Joe family was here when I got to Houston.

DG: You don't know who [inaudible]?

HJ: No, I don't know who started that.

DG: Are you active in business now?

HJ: Oh yes.

[inaudible]

HJ: We own a corporation, which is own 4 supermarket. Continental Finer Food, that range anywhere from 12,500 ft² to 30,000 ft².

DG: Could you name a couple location where they are?


DG: Do you ever go to Chinatown?

HJ: Really, I didn't know we have a Chinatown in Houston.

DG: You don't ever go?

HJ: Oh yeah, I go. What you call it Chinatown, it's couple, three blocks. [laughter]

DG: How often do you go?

HJ: Well, we always have to go around New Year's time when we get invited to all the Chinese dinner, New Year's celebration. And then- that period of time, we'll probably go there once a week on Sunday. And other than that I go there seldom. Very seldom I go there, maybe once in a couple, three months.

DG: What was the occasion then? At that time you go.
HJ: I probably go buy some Chinese food.

DG: Do you ever go to the Chinese theater?

HJ: No, I haven’t been there.

DG: Are you interested in Chinese Opera?

HJ: Yeah I interested in them, but I can’t quite understand them because they talk Mandarin.

DG: Are you interested in Chinese art?

HJ: What form of Chinese art?

DG: Chinese art. Any kind- any form.

HJ: You know, you talk about art, you know, there’s lot of different forms of art. Do I enjoy looking at Chinese pictures? Yes.

DG: Are you interested in any other Chinese culture?

HJ: Thank you [to someone else]

DG: Are you interested in any other Chinese culture?

HJ: Oh yes.

DG: Name it.

HJ: Well when you talk about Chinese culture, I’m presumed you’re talking about Chinese language, you talk about Chinese history, Chinese background, Chinese tradition. Oh yeah. I grew up with them, so naturally I’m interested in them.

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

HJ: I hate to say it, but I believe you’re right.

DG: They’ve lost some, right?

HJ: They have lost some. Yeah.

[31:35]
Audio File Part 2:

DG: Do you think they ought to uphold the Chinese customs?

HJ: Yes, they definitely should.

DG: Which ones?

HJ: Such as family union, respect the other, and - and [inaudible] Okay.

DG: Have you traveled back to China?

HJ: Not Chinese Mainland. We been to Hong Kong.

DG: When did you go?

HJ: We went 1977.

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

HJ: At this time, no.

DG: Would you like your children to visit China?

HJ: I believe I would. They have been. They have been to Taiwan.

DG: I mean Mainland China.

HJ: No, I believe that when the time come- when the right time come, I think they should go.

DG: Why?

HJ: You know the old saying, you know, “you learn from traveling.” And then, you do learn a lot. You do learn some Chinese tradition if you go to China.

DG: Do you have any relatives in China?

HJ: No.

DG: Most people don’t, but do you have any contacts in China?

HJ: I don’t.

DG: Do you read any Chinese newspaper?
HJ: Very seldom.

DG: Do you maintain any Chinese tradition or custom?

HJ: I guess we all do in a small way.

DG: What?

HJ: I can't tell you that right now. [laughter]

DG: Do you celebrate any Chinese holidays?

HJ: Do I observe any Chinese holiday? Only Chinese New Year.

DG: Does your children maintain any Chinese custom or tradition?

HJ: Very little.

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

HJ: I imagine quite a few of them. [laughter]

DG: Can you name them?

HJ: No I can't. I really can't.

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

HJ: That I can't tell you Daisy. I really can't.

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

HJ: What you talking about? All the refugees from Vietnam and they are Chinese-they are originally Chinese, we look at it between 25 to 30,000 Chinese people.

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

HJ: Never that way to me. To me, I'm just like anybody else, because we never- I personally never run into any problem that way I have to recognize we as ethnic group. I can go anywhere I want and then- in fact, that's one of the things in Houston that we don't see anywhere else. We always go anywhere we wanna go. Maybe because we, as the Chinese people, we always put our best foot forward. Whatever we do we gotta be number 1, so that way we earn the respect of the people, so you never have any problem- I never have any problem with being a Chinese.
DG: Do you think the Chinese are closely knit?

HJ: Yeah, I believe you still can classify that, but I believe they slowly getting away from it. I think Chinese people slowly getting away from it.

DG: Are they more closely knit than other minority groups or less?

HJ: Yes, I believe they are at this time, but another group, just as closely knit, are Italian people. They just as close as Chinese people from my observation anyway.

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

HJ: Oh yeah. We seeing it now.

DG: Explain.

HJ: Okay...I would say that 90% of the people, Chinese population in Houston, still naturally we owe our religion to the United States, but from the background, they still kinda feel like they sympathize with the- with the Republic of China in Taiwan and about 10% are slowly moving over to People’s Republic of China. I would say that’s the only political division we have.

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

HJ: Oh yeah. We seeing it now.

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

HJ: I guess it’s family union.

DG: How were you disciplined when you were young?

HJ: Very strongly. [laughter]

DG: How?

HJ: Well, I really can’t tell you how, but we were taught what’s right and wrong and we were taught that respect the elder and we were taught that don’t ever get in trouble, but if you get in troubles, we get a spanking. I think we need that in this country. That’s what’s wrong with the United States today. The discipline is not there. The family discipline is not there.

DG: Have child-rearing techniques changed since your parent’s time?
HJ: Oh definitely. Most of these young Chinese now, you know, use the method here in the United States. They all [inaudible 2 or 3 words] right? So it’s completely changed.

DG: How did you discipline your children?

HJ: Same way I was disciplined. Very strongly.

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

HJ: I guess swimming and play ball.

DG: What were your favorites games?

HJ: My favorite game?

DG: When you were a child.

HJ: Any kind of sport. Basketball was my favorite game.

DG: When you were a child?

HJ: Basketball. Yeah.

DG: Did you play with any kind of toys?

HJ: We didn't have any toys to play with when I was growing up. We couldn’t afford them.

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

HJ: Oh yes.

DG: How and why?

HJ: Well, because the environment we live in today. When I was growing up, we didn’t have anything and we didn't have anything to play with. And now, my children, I guess because I didn’t have anything that I should have, so consequently we have tended to give whatever we didn’t have, give it to the children. And that’s the difference.

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

HJ: Yeah, I have. And I think that the family size are getting smaller now, in the United States. Anyway.
DG: What kind of problems do you think Chinese coming to Houston now can expect to encounter?

HJ: I don’t see any problem. If any Chinese wanna come to Houston, if they conduct themselves in the right manner, and they can blend right in the mainstream.

DG: What kinds of new problems do you think the Boat People could expect to encounter?

HJ: I don’t think they’ll encounter sh- they will encounter any problem other than the language problem and once they learn the language, they can do like we did when we come to this country. Just work hard and try to improve themself.

DG: What do you think [inaudible several words] large population of Chinese in the Houston area?

HJ: The main reason is, I think, is the economic conditions in Houston. It’s been real good. The Chinese people all over the world, where they can make a good living, that’s where they go.

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

HJ: No [laughter]

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

HJ: No, there’s a lot of them. But I think one thing though about when you asked me what you- what other thing that you should ask about on the interview. I think if you want to find out all about Chinese people, [inaudible several words] Lee [inaudible several words] Bill Wu. Again [inaudible several words] and Henry Gee. Henry L. Gee [inaudible]

DG: Thank you very much Mr. Joe

[11:20]