

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

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Interviewee: Ken Lee

Interviewer: Clarissa Cox

Date/Time of Interview: March 14, 2011 at 2:00 PM

Transcribed by: Clarissa Cox

Edited by: Priscilla Li (5/27/2017)

Audio Track Time: 1:01:00.4

Background:

Ken Lee was born in Seoul, Korea in 1933. He was the first son of six children, all of whom were born in Korea. Following the Korean War, he came to Oregon State University to get his degree in chemical engineering. When studying for his PhD at Carnegie Mellon, he met his future wife, Bobby. He then got a job working at the Bellaire labs for Shell and moved to Houston in 1973. He has two daughters who both still reside in the Houston area, one who is an accountant and another who is a music teacher.

Setting:

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

The interview was conducted in Dr. Lee's kitchen. The interview took about one hour to complete. He provided a historical context for his motivations for movement and joked throughout the interview. His wife, Bobby, occasionally helped answer questions for the interview, at one time sitting down at the table for several minutes.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

CC	Clarissa Cox
KL	Ken Lee
B	Bobby
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

**CC:** Oral History Interview of Ken Lee at his home in Houston, Texas on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2011. This interview was conducted by Clarissa Cox for the Houston Asian American Archive at Rice University's Woodson Research Center.

**CC:** So, I guess, to start, can you just tell me a little bit about yourself?

**KL:** Um, my name is Ken Lee, and uh I'm 77 years old. I just turned 77 years old. I've been around for a while. And uh I'm from Korea. I came here in 1955. It was like [inaudible].

**CC:** Yeah, what was your childhood like?

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**KL:** It was, uh—My father was a dentist, and uh so we had a pretty good living until 1950 when the North Korean army invaded across the third, third, 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Before it was one countr—one race. There was no—It used to really bother me when they used to say North Koreans and South Koreans, but I guess it doesn't bother me anymore. Nothing really bothers me too much.

**CC:** [laughs]

**KL:** Uh, anyways, so—that's when I came, and the reason, is obviously, is the Korean War. I came in 1955, but the, the event that caused me to come to the United States started in 1950 in June 25<sup>th</sup> when they crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel and invaded. Just brute invasion.

**CC:** Um, did you fight in the war? I noticed that in the questionnaire you didn't put down—between 1950 and 1952—you—

**KL:** That's that most hard year of my life—our, the country as a whole—therefore, millions—our family too. It's just survival mode.

**CC:** Yeah.

**KL:** You know, when you look at uh look at people that are suffering in the Middle East, I can identify with that, and I feel like I know what they are going through. So it was a tough time.

**CC:** Yeah.

**KL:** You don't know where your next meal is coming from. So that's- And I wanted to study to become a univ- uh uh at college, college uh. I wanted to become an engineer or scientist from very early on and obviously the United States, even now, but at that time was really the only place—the place to come if you wanted to study science and engineering. So I got on a plane in September, '55, and I landed in Corvallis, Oregon where Oregon State University is. They used to be called Oregon State College. It was pretty big, about 9000 students.

**CC:** Did you have a student visa?

**KL:** Yeah.

**CC:** Okay, and was it like—did the plane take you straight there?

**KL:** No, no, no.

**CC:** [laughs] No?

**KL:** We landed in San Francisco- Well, we stopped in Guam and Hawaii.

**CC:** Mm-hm. Okay.

**KL:** They didn't have jets in those days.

**CC:** [laughs] Yeah.

**KL:** It was a propeller-driven four-engine job. And uh we stopped—I, I spent one night in Hawaii. And I did Waikiki Beach in my three-piece suit. [**Both:** [laughs]] I was out of place, but I didn't know. So, uh, I just had a cursory look at Waikiki Beach. People are all, you know, in various poses of relaxation. And then we—I got on a plane again and landed in San Francisco International Airport, and one big impression I had was some Korean acquaintance of ours- my father- my parent's acquaintances, happened to be living in San Francisco. So they came out to the airport to the airport to pick me up and another boy that was travelling with me, and I forgot- I guess that was I-5 or something, for the first time I saw a superhighway.

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**CC:** Oh.

**KL:** And I was just scared—they were driving at sixty miles per hour, bumper-to-bumper, and I thought, ‘That’s crazy.’ **Both:** [laughs] You know because I came from a country, especially at that time, hardly any cars, so that was a big impression of America I had. Cars packed like a carpet, and you know, they’re all moving at sixty miles per hour, and I thought, ‘How can this be?’ [laughs]

**CC:** [laughs]

**KL:** And so that’s how I came to the United States, and then you asked me how I got to Corvallis. There was a South—uh Southern Pacific Railroad connecting San Francisco and Portland and it goes all the way up to Canada, and that was really a—I guess supposed to be the tail end of the railroad era, and it was very clean and comfortable. A matter of fact, each seat had a white linen for your headrest. You know, and uh they had a nice dining car and the Sky Lounge Car. It’s like, coming from war-torn Korea, it’s like, ‘Is this for real?’ [laughs]

**CC:** Did you travel um to Corvallis with your friend or did you go by yourself?

**KL:** No, he went to some other college, I forgot. Some other college in the Midwest, I was by myself.

**CC:** Okay.

**KL:** But there was my mother’s friend, one of my mother’s American classmates- my aunt’s, she started at Kansas State in uh whatever that was—it’s not Lawrence—Kansas State—it’s Manhattan? And uh anyway, so one of the ladies that was the friend of my aunt met me at the station and uh I just followed her—followed behind her and I got settled down in the dormitory. It was ’55- Fall of ’55, and uh that’s where I got started.

**CC:** Did you have a roommate?

**KL:** Yeah, a matter of fact, an American guy. I forgot what his name was, but he was—he and I got along just fine. I think at that time, it was completely different than now. I was—there were very few foreign students, especially from Korea, so I was a novelty. They all really wanted to talk to me, and very nice.

**CC:** Yeah?

**KL:** I think that’s very nice, too, but it’s a very different situation.

**CC:** What was the school like, like the university, compared with your educational experience in Korea beforehand?

**KL:** Well, it was just like a quantum jump because, in the first place, whatever educational system we had, by the time I went to—I went to a couple of universities between ’52 and ’53—no between ’52 and ’55 and that’s when I came here. There was—it was just so run down and equipments weren’t there and professors were scarce, so I just- I, I was registered as an engineering student but I don’t know if I learned anything and that was one of the- another motivation, for saying ‘I don’t want to waste my time doing nothing. So uh I better, if you’re going to become a professional, you’ve got to go to college.’

**CC:** Mm-hm.

**KL:** And even then it was true, and so I, I, I guess I was a student first, but strong motivation was because of the Korean War. I got displaced. But then that’s not just me- the whole generation. Like Egypt or someplace, one of the problems they have is that people don’t have jobs, so you’re a twenty, young, very young man or woman and you have nothing to do. You can twiddle your thumbs for only so many days, and you either go stir crazy or you get a revolution. [laughs]

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**CC:** [laughs] Did you have any siblings?

**KL:** Oh, yeah, I had uh I have four- five bro—No. [shouts] Do I have five brothers or four brothers?

**CC:** [laughs]

**B:** Huh?

**KL:** I have four brothers.

**B:** You had—It was four boys and four girls—I mean, girl.

**KL:** One girl—No, two girls.

**B:** Two girls.

**KL:** There were six in the family, four and two.

**CC:** Wow.

**KL:** And I was the oldest.

**CC:** Oh, okay.

**KL:** And uh—except for one boy, which was one younger than- immediately after me, they are all here in the United States. They are moderately- They're all very successful, depending on how you measure it, but certainly, from being a refugee in a—a strange place. We went to live in Busan for two years because Seoul was a battlefield, and you can't live in a battlefield too well. So uh—yeah that's—They are all here. One, he's a male, he went to Wisconsin. And uh he worked as an economist at uh World Bank, and he's retired to Bethesda, Maryland. That's the—And uh he's the sec—he's the third. The second brother is in Seoul, he's an M.D. And uh third is deceased, he had leukemia. So he deceased in New York. He was married, but he had two kids when he died. And, uh, who else is—The fir-, first female lives in Portland, Oregon. Of course, we are all retired now, but she—she was married to a real estate person, you know the selling houses and stuff. And they are doing very nice. Uh Young-hee...Moon-hee, she's the youngest girl, and uh sh-, she lives in L.A. And she was divorced, and she's doing okay except she's probably least comfortable in her lifestyle. That's it.

**CC:** All right. Um did you—when you were in college, did you ever plan to go back to Korea, or did you plan—

**KL:** Oh, yeah.

**CC:** Yes?

**KL:** That was, that was the thing. I had a good intention of studying here and then getting my degrees and go back home. And I got my PhD in '62 at Carnegie Mellon. Is that where your father went?

**CC:** Uh, no he went to Illinois. [**KL:** Illinois?]

**KL:** Illinois. I was thinking about going to Illinois, too, but somehow I ended up at Carnegie Tech. Anyway, when I graduated I wrote my home- among others, my father- and his recommendation was a strong 'No.' 'We don't have any jobs. We don't have any industry that can use PhDs, so you better wait for a few years,' or whatever. So I ended up here because at that time, either I go back to Korea or I've got to do something useful with my degree and I ended up at Shell development. At Bellaire. did your father work at Bellaire or West Harbor?

**CC:** I'm not sure, maybe Bellaire—I'm not—I don't remember.

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**KL:** Where did you all used to live?

**CC:** We lived in Memorial.

**KL:** Okay, so it could be either way.

**CC:** Yeah.

**KL:** I think your father went to work for West Harbor if I remember right.

**CC:** Probably, yeah.

**KL:** And he—he and I had a—Well, he interviewed at Bellaire too. It's normal procedure to interview at both labs. Bellaire is more what we call upstream research, exploration and production, and West Harbor is downstream, refinery and chemicals and more traditional chemical engineering. So, uh- But he—he—when he came to Houston, he interviewed both labs and he was at Bellaire, and somebody called me- I was in- not a committee, a formal committee- but I was in the selection group. And somebody told me that your father needed a ride, and I live very close to your father's fa—father-in-law.

**CC:** Mm-hm.

**KL:** 'So would you please give him a ride?' and because I knew where West Harbor was, so I said, 'Oh, I'll be glad to.' So we went to your grandfather's place and dropped him off at his place. After that, the connection got broke. I gave him a ride. That was uh previous exposure. And I knew your great—I knew your grandfather quite well.

**CC:** Yeah.

**KL:** Not buddy-buddies, but we worked in the same place and he was a geologist or—

**CC:** Yeah.

**KL:** —paleontologist or something.

**CC:** A geologist.

**KL:** He looks at old rocks and looks at the bugs and—

**CC:** [laughs]

**KL:** But then that's how you find oil, I guess. So he and I were in a very pleasant relationship. We didn't go out and drink beer or something together, but we were good colleagues.

**CC:** Yeah.

**KL:** And your grandfather...likes to talk.

**CC:** [laughs] Yeah.

**KL:** And he knows a lot of stuff, so I learned a lot from him.

**CC:** What made you want to come specifically to Houston? Did you apply to other places?

**KL:** Yeah, and, uh—Well, for—for one thing it was money.

**CC:** Mmm.

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**KL:** It was pretty good salary, and the Shell, even at that time, was a very reputable company. I would have preferred to go to Emeryville, California—California—Shell, but they sent me down here. And—

**CC:** Oh, okay.

**KL:**—I can't specify why they sent me here.

**CC:** Oh, so when you applied to Shell, they just told you where to go?

**KL:** Yeah.

**CC:** Okay.

**KL:** Well, they had some need in the chemistry department that I thought I would fit with my educational background, so uh that's how I came down here. I had some reservations about living in the South. So I—At that time I was just married to my wife, and Kathy was one or three years old. Uh, I've lost my train of thought.

**CC:** [laughs]

**KL:** What was I saying?

**CC:** Uh, you were talking about, um, your reservations about living in the South.

**KL:** Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. And, uh, then they invited me to Houston then Houston really looked very, very desirable, you know. Coming from Pittsburg, which is coal town. There are a lot of buildings that are just black because of coal. It was soot, and of course, Houston is—Of course, they didn't invite me in August, they don't interview people in August. Too hot. So there's no crazy person—There will be no people who—I think their odds are better if you go in February like right now. And, uh, they didn't hide anything, but they didn't tell me how hot it would come to be. But anyway, it's—It was very nice and very bright. Buildings looked all new, and so uh and suburbs are really nice so I said okay. The people are very nice. One, one thing that I remember that still remains in my mind is when you go to a restaurant, when you check out on the way home, before you can get out of door, the waitress will shout, 'Y'all hurry back!'

**CC:** [laughs]

**KL:** That was kind of impression I gained. Very friendly people. 'Y'all hurry back.' And- But we enjoy being in Houston. One of those things, I rationalized when I first came to Houston that 'Well, I won't stay here for five years, at the top.' You know, but I ended up staying here for- I came down here in '62, so—Golly, it's almost—What? This is 2011, so forty years?

**CC:** Almost fifty.

**KL:** Fifty, fifty years.

**CC:** [laughs] What part of Houston did y'all first come to live in?

**KL:** Well, we lived in a small apartment on, uh, off Bellaire. Right behind the Bellaire lab, and then aft— shortly after that, I don't know, one year or two years, we- they had a new housing projects in Sharpstown. And so we heard favorable things about Sharpstown for new homebuyers, so we bought a house in Sharpstown. That's where we lived until I volunteered to go on a field assignment, and they sent me to uh Midland, Texas, which was somewhat a surprise. But it's a field assignment. It turned out to be a very nice assignment, and we lived there until '73. So I lived there for five, six years and then came back here one day. The corporations have a- It goes up and down, and one time they had all these branch offices, distributed system and then something bad happens or somebody has a bright idea at the top and they all call, call the people back in. They were doing the same thing except located in a central area, and that's what happened to me and a lot of people too. In '73,

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they did away with engineering office in uh Midland and Colorado, so we came back to Houston. And that's when we bought this house, and we've stayed here ever since so—and that was—We came back here in '73-... By that time, Kathy was already going to, my older daughter, was going to- was in elementary school in second grade, and Becky was born. She was born in Midland, but we moved. She doesn't remember Midland since she was very young, but then she used to sit up on the stairway over there and say, 'Becky, isn't this very nice?' and everything, 'A new house.' 'Yeah, but I want to go home,' she has that distant look. 'I want to go home,' and she did that for a few days but she didn't say that. They all went to school in this area. My older daughter graduated from Spring High School, which is now Westfield. I think they merged or something. Westfield High School. My younger daughter went to Westfield, and my older daughter went to UNT and she's a CPA now. She's a momma by now. She's—I've got two grandsons from her. And Becky's married, and she's a music major, and uh...she don't have any children yet, but we'll see.

**CC:** [laughs] Um, if you don't mind talking about it, I was wondering how you met your wife?

**KL:** Well, she chased me hard, so I got caught. [laughs]

**CC:** [laughs]

**KL:** Oh, I'm just kidding, I hope she doesn't hear me.

**CC:** [laughs]

**KL:** We met, we met at the campus. She went to the University of Pittsburg, and I went to Carnegie Tech, and their campuses are very close. So we, we went out on a group, kind of, blind date, and uh I gave her a call, 'Would you like to go out with me again?' And she said yes. So one thing led to another. [laughs] We got married, and after about a year of dating.

**CC:** All right. Um. I don't know, when you were um—when your children were growing up, did you try to teach them any Korean culture?

**KL:** No, I failed on that. I, I, I tried- I shouldn't say try. Obviously, I talk about Korean culture a lot, and uh but you know, my situation—wife being a Native American and speaking English and, what you call it, Face Time? A lot more Face Time was with their mother than me. I see them in the evenings and on the weekends, so uh I think our situation was kind of unique in the sense that mother figure is Native American. So they—I don't know what kind of things that they had to make- resolve between American side and Korean side. They, they like a lot of Korean food and they speak a few sentences of Korean, but they are American kids.

**CC:** Yeah. [laughs]

**KL:** They are just American kids. But then, it's not very unique. I look at my colleagues that have grown up children. I think they have a little bit of uh Korean-ness, if you want to call it that, but 99% of the time, they are Americans. For example, they say, 'Korea is my dad's country.' So they don't have any identification with Korea.

**CC:** Yeah. So what has your workspace been like? Like in your interaction with your colleagues. Can you talk about that for a bit?

**KL:** My colleagues?

**CC:** Er, yeah—I guess, um, what it's like to work at Shell and what your colleagues are like.

**KL:** Oh, they are all SOBs, but—

**CC:** [laughs]

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**KL:** —some of them are better than others. Uh no, I'm just kidding. Uh I don't know. I think at that time, I did—I was living in my own world.

**CC:** Yeah?

**KL:** More than later. Later on I realized more interpersonal dynamics are—how that works, but at that time, I didn't have a very close colleagues but we got along fine.

**CC:** Yeah.

**KL:** And uh and after I came back from Midland, I was given the job of supervisor for a fairly large section. It's a very kind of unique section in that seven or eight PhDs in the same section, and I—

**CC:** [laughs]

**KL:** And so most of them are prima donnas. We had about five or six technicians who ran the experiments for projects that, like a CO2 pro—injection project and a few others. Thermal, chemical. We had, we had a lot of fun but also very stressful at times. Well, I can't say that I had any bad experience, but I can't say that I was so close to somebody and we formed a secret society or something.

**CC:** [laughs]

**KL:** That's not it either, so I was kind of blah.

**CC:** Mm-hm. Have you ever gone back to Korea?

**KL:** Once.

**CC:** Once?

**KL:** In '73, my father was having a heart attack or something—he had a heart attack—he had a heart attack, so I thought I would go see him before something bad happens.

**CC:** Mm-hm.

**KL:** And he survived it. And we called- He came over later, much later, and lived in Los Angeles, where my sis—younger sister lived. But they had their own apartment, so apartment, and they, our father lived to be 90 and my mother died in '83, or something, '84. So both times, I had to—obviously, I had to go to LA and take care of the situation.

**CC:** ...Did you back to Korea by yourself?

**KL:** Yeah.

**CC:** Okay.

**KL:** She did not go.

**CC:** Oh. [laughs] What was that like for you, was it very different- I mean, it must have been really different from when you went.

**KL:** Yeah, I guess '73 and '55 is almost ten—almost twenty years—seventeen years or whatever, and uh at that time, Korea was still not very industrialized. There were some things that were happening that looked very promising like uh people are living in a more modern house and the transportation system was improved. But it was still a very backward country. And uh, but there was a president by the name of Park, Park Chung-hee, he is an ex- general that took over the political power by a—I don't think it's—it's a bloodless, bloodless coup. So he

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was—some people don't like him because he was obviously a dictator, and uh- But you know, he did a lot of good things. I have a different view than a lot of other people. For example, he had a- He was in command of a large Korean army with American supplied engineering equipment, dirt movers and trucks and stuff. So he scratched his head, I guess, and said uh, 'Why don't we put these people to work, and let's build the roads—highways.' It's a commonsensical thing, but you know a lot of politicians don't think that way. So that was a star on his- a feather on his hat as far as I'm concerned.

**CC:** Um, when did you become an American citizen?

**KL:** That was when I was in Midland, so that must have been '68.

**CC:** Okay.

**KL:** '68 or '69. '68.

**CC:** What was that like? What was that process like for that?

**KL:** That was very anti-climactical 'cause Midland is very sparsely populated- West Texas is a very sparsely populated area, and uh I had one witness, a colleague of mine. We drove down to uh, what the hell was the place, a little—Bobby!

**B:** Yeah?

**KL:** Where did I go to get my citizenship? Do you remember the name of that town? That's where the-

**B:** Wait a minute, Ken, I can't hear you. You've got a wall between me and you. I can't hear anything.

**KL:** That's where—

**B:** What?

**KL:** What was it Colombia- or

**B:** What?

**KL:** Where I got my citizenship.

**B:** You went to Odessa, as far as I know.

**KL:** No, it's further south than Odessa. Anyway, it's one of those-

**B:** As far as I know, it was—I thought you went to the courthouse in Odessa.

**KL:** No. I know where I went and it's not-

**B:** I don't because I didn't go with you. You went with, who? Pastor Wingard and Harold Conrad, didn't you?

**KL:** No, not Pastor Wingard. I think Conrad and I went down.

**B:** Oh, okay. I don't know; I didn't go with you.

**KL:** Okay.

**B:** [laughs]

**KL:** Anyways, one of those small, West Texas towns, and uh I was the only one that was getting their

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citizenship. So I got—I swore my allegiance and severed all my—

**B:** Yeah, that was in, when, '69?

**KL:** '69 or '68.

**B:** No, we didn't go down there until July of '68, so it must have been '69.

**KL:** '69, okay.

**B:** And that was when I had had that surgery.

**KL:** Okay.

**B:** So I did not go.

**KL:** Okay, anyway, that's when I got my citizenship, and it was, was an anticlimax because it was just me and my buddy and- The courthouse was not very ornate, it's like elementary schoolhouse.

**CC:** Oh.

**KL:** All these wooden oak chairs and very sparse. It's not a nice building, but it was not modern building.

**B:** [laughs] Well, if you've ever been to West Texas- You've been to West Texas? Oh okay. You know what we're talking about.

**CC:** Mm.

**KL:** I don't know what the name of the town was.

**B:** It was like [inaudible] or was it Andrews. No.

**KL:** No. It's further south. Anyways, it's—

**B:** [inaudible]

**KL:** —someplace there. Anyway.

**CC:** ...[laughs] Why did you decide to get your citizenship then and not before?

**KL:** Mm...I guess by that time I knew that it's going to be a long stay in the United States, you know, and uh before that I had always thought about going back. And finally I said, 'Well, this is, I'm, I'm going to be in the United States for a long time,' and it's been a long time.

**B:** We were only going to come to Texas for, what two years? [laughs] And we were only supposed to move back this time for three to five, and that was in '73. So we're still here. [laughs] Same house.

**CC:** Where else did you—where else did y'all want to live?

**KL:** Before we came here it was Pittsburg. We lived in Midland, Texas. We lived there for about five years, and that time it seems-

**B:** We came here in '62 and, well, Kathy was born in Midland—in Pittsburg, and he came but they wouldn't let me travel because I had a c-section and a young baby. So he came down by himself for a month or so.

**KL:** Yeah, and-

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**B:** Then we came, Kathy and I came at the end of March-

**KL:** —shortly afterwards.

**B:** Yeah, you were here about a month- six weeks by himself. And then we lived in an apartment over by Sharpstown. We were one of the original families in Sharpstown, way back when. Across from what's now Houston Baptist it had just opened. Then we were here until '68, then we came back, we went to Midland and came back in '73, and we've been here ever since. [laughs] But we were supposed to—they told us we were only going to be here three to five years or something like that. [laughs]

**KL:** Oh, they didn't say that, but-

**B:** Yeah, well that's what [inaudible]—

**KL:** —they hinted.

**CC:** Oh. So you thought you might be re-assigned somewhere else?

**KL:** That's always a possibility.

**CC:** Okay.

**B:** Yeah, well, see we almost went to California.

**KL:** Yeah, the funny this is that after they decided- the higher-ups decided to consolidate the offices—that's why we lived in all—in Houston for all those years.

**CC:** Mm-hm.

**KL:** I had assignments in Illinois, Michigan, California—

**B:** You went to Bakersfield.

**KL:** You know, so I would live in two or three different places. Three different places other than home office, but at that point- during my career, that was- We can operate as efficiently as if we were at a centralized location, as if we had offices. So that's the trend now, I think.

[pause]

**CC:** So even though you haven't gone back to Korea regularly, have you been keeping up with everything that's been going on there?

**KL:** Oh, yes, yes.

**CC:** Yes?

**KL:** Because of all my brothers and sisters.

**B:** Actually, the whole family's here except for your one brother.

**KL:** Yeah, I told her... Anyhow, that's kind of—I don't know that I can travel to Korea or not. The physical- Physically that's—we are kind of brittle. [laughs]

**CC:** But, um, I guess—so the way you kept up with what was going on with Korea was mainly by communicating with your family?

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**KL:** Yeah, and um, I subscribed—I still do—subscribe to Korean newspaper published in Houston, and of course there are Internet sites that are operated by Korean government or some other outfit. So I get enough information.

**CC:** Have you involved with any, um, Korean organizations in Houston?

**KL:** [laughs]

**B:** [laughs] Yeah!

**KL:** Long time ago, but at that time, in 1962, when I arrived here, I searched hard for fellow Koreans, and we gathered up about twelve families. They were mostly don—they were mostly students and their wives. I don't know exactly how many, but it was a thousand, a few thousand people. And we organized a Korean American Association or something in Houston, and we used to get together and have a picnic at, what is it, Memorial Park?

**B:** Memorial Hermann. We had—we used to meet, what, about once a month or so in different places. In fact, the first meeting was held in our two-bedroom apartment. [laughs]

**KL:** And, uh, it's still going on.

**CC:** Yeah.

**KL:** But now, I, I hardly go there. It's too—I'm not all that emotionally attached as I was before.

**B:** Well, we were in the middle of things then. We lived down—are you familiar with, uh, Bellaire-Stella Link area?

**CC:** Mm-hm.

**B:** You know where Mark Twain Elementary is?

**CC:** Yeah.

**B:** Or Pershing. Now I think it's a park, but at that time there were apartments between the two. And we lived in one of those apartment complexes and so we were very close to Rice and UH. [inaudible] So now we're out here, and they meet clear over in South—

**KL:** Yeah, that has a lot to do with it.

**B:** I mean, you know, and at that time that when we moved out here—

**KL:** There are very few Koreans, even now, in this area.

**B:** There's more now than there were, but—

**KL:** —but I don't know them.

**B:** No. We don't. Yeah.

**KL:** People that came when I came were mostly students. Now people are more diverse.

**CC:** So do you feel like a distinction between the different generations of immigrants?

**KL:** Well, I don't know if I can say that for sure, but let me just say, for, for myself, I don't feel any—as much attachment to the newer group of people as my older people.

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**CC:** Mm-hm.

**KL:** But- I just don't—I guess I got detached someplace somehow.

**CC:** Mm-hm...So I guess, um, when did you retire or when did you decide to retire?

**KL:** I didn't decide, they asked me to retire.

**CC:** Oh.

**KL:** That's the brutal truth.

**B:** [laughs] Yeah.

**KL:** I retired in '91, and I was 59.

**B:** He had, well, you would have had thirty years.

**KL:** I—

**B:** He had thirty years.

**KL:** But they made a—at that time it was like a lot more gentlemanly and generous. They offered, not a golden handshake but maybe a bronze handshake. Uh they made it worthwhile to retire, so I'm among the few. I'm still getting a pension for life.

**CC:** Oh, cool.

**KL:** So it was a good move for me. We went—after I retired, we went on trips.

**B:** Oh, we used to go all around the country and travel.

[pause]

**KL:** And they, they—I have most all the benefits I used to get, so that was a very generous retirement. Now, I don't know how young people when they retire are going to...cope.

**CC:** So what have you done since then or-?

**KL:** You don't know?

**CC:** [laughs]

**B:** [laughs]

**KL:** You heard us joke—I don't know if you've heard the joke, but um, retirement means twice as much husband and half, half the income.

**CC:** [laughs]

**KL:** I haven't done anything spectacular.

**CC:** Yeah.

**KL:** Just lived life, and I like it.

**CC:** Yeah?

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**B:** Well, when you first retired, Kathy's two boys were young at the time, and they—Jonathan was, what, six months old and [inaudible] he spent a lot of time with his grandsons. [laughs]

**KL:** I was, in a way, glad that I didn't have to put up with all the things that you need to put up with when you have different relationships. I said, 'Oh, this is good.'

**CC:** Um so do your daughters still live close to you?

**KL:** Yeah. Kathy, the older one, lives in Memorial area and younger one lives in Cypress area to the west of us. They've all been saying to move out there, but all things considered, we decided to stay here.

**CC:** Mm-hm. Do you feel as though you are teaching any more Korean culture to your grandsons compared to what you did to your daughters?

**KL:** No, no, no.

**B:** He did for a while. They both eat- both love Korean—oriental foods. They both use chopsticks.

**CC:** [laughs]

**B:** You know, every once in a while they will say, 'How did you learn to eat?' and Brian says, 'My grandpa taught me.' [laughs] And so, yeah, you've have some influence on them.

**KL:** Oh, yeah, but that—

**B:** But now, one's in college and the other's in high school, so you don't see grandkids.

**KL:** At least, speaking for Jonathan, he has a very proud- He's very proud of the fact that I'm a Korean. And I think it's—well, of course the first one, we have a more intense relationship. I spent a lot of time after I retired basically babysitting Jonathan because my- Kathy was starting a new career after graduation, and you know, I don't—I hate to see Jonathan being raised by different people. It's a necessity now, but I just—we used to go out every day—almost every day and spend time with him so maybe there was an extra bonding.

**B:** They used to spend the weekends with us up until, what, they were nine or ten. They'd be out here with us. In fact, they called us the 'G&G Resort,' Granny and Grandpa. [laughs]

**CC:** Um, how have your views of America and Americans changed since you first came here?

**KL:** Oh, that's a big question.

**CC:** Yeah, it is. [laughs]

**B:** That's your part. You need any more family history I'm here.

**CC:** All right. [laughs]

**B:** That's your part.

**KL:** Thank you.

**B:** Oh, I can't talk for you.

**CC:** [laughs]

**KL:** Huh?

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**B:** I can't speak for you! [laughs]

**KL:** Well, you did plenty.

**CC:** [laughs]

**KL:** So, uh, what was the question?

**CC:** Um, how have your views of America and Americans changed?

**KL:** Oh, yeah, I guess more realistic.

**CC:** Mm-hm.

**KL:** And changed because America has changed, so I look back with a lot of fondness at the America that I saw in the '50s and '60s. Especially in the '50s. Now, we've got a lot of social problems and another that has happened to us is...we are spending more than we produce. China has a lot of our indebtedness, and the way the government is spending money, it's not going to get any better. I'm very—not alarmed, in a way. Red flags going up anything. I'm more concerned about where we're going to go from here. Especially for my children and grandchildren.

**CC:** Um, how- Um...what were your expectations of America when you first came here? Did you just want to learn?

**KL:** Expectations of America was like, very high, and the reason I like the '50s and '60s—my experience life—my first ten years, twenty years is that it seems like, you know, they say that the trains run on time. Everything seemed to click. Just small things. Things click. It works. Coming from a society that stopped working and it's just like, wow, we can be- society can work like this. And now, I'm a little bit more realist- quite a bit more realistic. Things do work, but—

**CC:** [laughs]

**KL:** I can list things.

**CC:** Do you have any- What sort of organizations are you involved with or have been involved with?

**KL:** I'm not involved with any organizations now. Uh, I used to be active in civic organizations. I had a job of deed restrictions director, to go to people and 'you can't do this' or 'you can't do that.' It was very tiring, but I did it and I think someone has to do that job to keep the subdivision halfway decent. And I was the president of Korean American Association, but uh that was a long time ago. I'm not- I, I, I, I wasn't very active professional societies although I am a member of a few professional societies, but I didn't hold any office. And in West Texas I was in a lapidary club. [inaudible] say this right. It was making things out of rock and grind it like in the [inaudible] or other faceted things. That was very enjoyable.

**CC:** Does your family meet up at all? Again, like your um your siblings and you?

**KL:** Oh yeah, as much as we can, but the geographic- geographically we're spread out all over the country. There's a major, last time—of course, my, my uh sister, oldest sister, has five girls. They were all married now and they have kids that I have met, but uh wedding is one occasion where a lot of people come together and after that we might go to Galveston or someplace like that or nice places in other cities. And that's basically a family reunion. But we didn't, we didn't have a family reunion as such.

**CC:** Okay.

**KL:** It's almost impossible to organize five families with each family member being four or five. You've got to

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get twenty or so people together to plan it. It's like almost impossible, so with the weddings—fortunately, there have been very few funerals- that's the kind of occasion where the family will all get together.

**CC:** Um, I was also curious, your name that your parents gave you, probably, wasn't Ken Lee.

**KL:** It was Kyu-seong [이규성]

**CC:** Kyu-seong?

**KL:** Yeah.

**CC:** Okay.

[pause]

**KL:** That was—my father gave it to me. It was bright star or something.

**CC:** Oh.

**KL:** You know, they have some poetic—and I don't even know if I'm a star, let alone a bright star.

**CC:** [laughs] Um, and when did you decide to change it?

**KL:** When I got uh citizenship.

**CC:** Oh, okay.

**KL:** They said uh—that's not a good reason. I probably wanted to change it for some time, but there was not a triggering- something triggering thing was—when you change the citize—when you apply for citizenship, you have one chance of changing your name. Free. You know, just, so I said, okay. I didn't give it much thought, but I tell you, one of the reasons to change your name is that the name is hard to pronounce. It's like Obama Barack.

**CC:** Mm-hm.

**KL:** You know, I mean, it doesn't change a person, but you have to overcome a lot of extra baggage, you know. So I changed it.

**CC:** Um, I guess, my final question is um what sort of legacy do you think you would like to leave behind with your family, or is there anything you'd like to leave behind? [laughs] I know, it's a big question.

**KL:** Yeah. Uh I'm not, I'm not big on legacy, so—you know, I haven't even thought about it.

**CC:** Yeah.

**KL:** I just want them to—I want the United States to be- to get back on the track. It's not my legacy certainly, but it's what I hope. And uh having been a good father. I like to think I've been a good father. That's good enough for me.

**CC:** Great. Anything else you would like to add?

**KL:** No, I don't think so.

**CC:** Okay. Great. Thank you so much.