Interviewee: Harry Gee  
Interviewers: Maddy Bullard and Dae Shin Ju  
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Background:

Harry Gee, Jr. is the owner and founder of his own law offices, Harry Gee Jr. and Associates, here in Houston. His firm specializes in immigration law, although they have ample experience in several other areas. Mr. Gee was born in China, but grew up in the U.S., and has lived in Houston for most of his life. He attended public school in Houston and went on to Rice University, where he studied economics and business. Throughout his childhood and teenage years, Mr. Gee worked at his father’s restaurant along with his mother and siblings. Mr. Gee then moved on to Austin, Texas where he attended University of Texas Law School, and finished his degree in 29 months—much less time than the usual 36 that most law students require to obtain a degree. Mr. Gee worked in Austin at the Attorney General’s Office, enjoying much success as a young attorney, but later decided that he wanted to return to Houston to be closer to family. He founded his law offices when he moved back, and has been working there ever since.

Mr. Gee’s family is well-known in Houston; the first generation of Gees brought several restaurateurs and other entrepreneurs who broke into the business community, while several of the second generation have achieved high status as successful professionals. The Gees are very involved in the Houston community—as Mr. Gee mentions, not only in the Asian and Chinese communities, but in the broader Houston community—and give back through such organizations as the Gee Family Association, among numerous others.

Setting:

The focus of the interview is on areas of labor and capital, through discussion of childhood, family, education, and career experiences. Mr. Gee’s interview centered around his education and experiences in the workforce as an immigration attorney and at the Attorney General’s office. He also discussed his family connections and childhood growing up in Houston.

The interview took place in Mr. Gee’s home, in the Memorial Park area of Houston. The interview lasted about an hour and forty-five minutes, throughout which Mr. Gee gave focused, but detailed answers to the questions posed. Not only did he provide useful information during the course of the interview, but Mr. Gee and his sister have also collected a variety of documents from their family’s past which will hopefully become a part of the archive in the future.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

| MB     | Maddy Bullard |
MB: I’m Maddy Bullard.

DJ: This is Dae Shin Ju

MB: And we’re here on June 15th, 2012 in the home of Harry Gee to interview him for the Houston Asian American Archive oral history project. Uh, so Mr. Gee, to start off, um, could you please, uh, describe a little bit about your, your childhood and your cultural up—upbringing?

HG: Well, as best we remember, uh, let’s see, we grew up in Houston, Texas. Um, let’s see, I think that I arrived here at 1941 and during the course of our going through documents here we found a document from the American President Lines alien receipt, tax receipt that was issued in February of, apparently the President Coolidge sailed on February the 22nd of 1941, and it was issued in my mother’s name coming here to America. And so there after is when we arrived here in the United States in about April of 1941. So I was surprised to find this particular document amongst her materials that, uh, that she had left. And uh I was just showing to you the picture of the village in China where apparently I was born. I was under the mistaken impression that I was born in a hospital until I went back there with my mother in 1989 and she explained to me that the—in this room, in this house is where you were born by a midwife—and uh it was quite a revelation cause you know my sisters were born in a hospital here in Houston and so I just naturally assumed that I was born in a hospital only to find out that needless to say in China they did not have all of those resources at that time and the midwife was the one who delivered. And so, uh, which is a rather interesting story. It turns out that my mother had told me that—uh, my mother was the eldest of seven sisters and for a Chinese family, seven sisters is not a good, uh, omen, and the—she, when she was getting married, ultimately she was introduced to my father by a matchmaker and uh grandmother on my father's side was not overwhelmed with her because she comes from a family of seven sisters. So their concern is that there would not be a male heir to carry on the family name and she said it. Sadly, grandma treated her very poorly until I arrived. And after she was able to deliver a boy, she’s a man—she went up to the esteem of grandma significantly thereafter, and so the cultural background and heritage is such that, you know, uh the prize is for the male heirs as opposed to the female but uh it was good because I have two sisters and I tell my mother had they arrived first, her life would have been still pretty tough and pretty difficult I think under that set of circumstances. But uh since I arrived first, uh, you know she was very thankful for that circumstance or situation. So, um, but she brought me to Houston, Texas in 1941 so I was at age two and a half and don’t have much recollection of the passage over but, uh, she was telling us the story that when she was on the boat that some of the people seen that I was a young child very graciously bought me an ice cream cone. But she had never had this—she came from rural China—and so she never had that before and so
she had to taste it. And when she tasted it she said, ‘Ugh! It’s terrible.’ Because it’s cold, uh, it is sweet, these are things—it was creamy—these are things that her diet had not seen before; everything in China was boiled, everything was had to be boiled to be purified and, and in terms of it like hot tea and whatever and that, uh, you know salt was certainly a much more desired taste than sweetness and then not having become accustomed to cream the digestive tracts were not as well attuned to handling that particular matter. And so she said, you know, she couldn’t understand why people enjoyed ice cream. But uh needless to say, yeah, we subsequently got her to change her taste buds and begin to appreciate that particular part of it. But that was one of the experiences that she shared with me, uh, that I was not aware of until we had arrived here in Houston, Texas and so…

Interestingly enough, my mother, uh, I, I, and I tell this to people and they get to be a bit mystified. My father is older than my grandfather and [laughs] when we tell them that particular part of it then how that can be? Well the situation is that my father is older than my mother’s father and so my maternal grandparents. So it turns out that I sort of kid my wife but uh when my father was getting old in life he had a young lady to take care of him. Uh, when we get old, who’s going to take care of whom? You know so in our old age and dotage, who’s going to be the one taking care of the other but, uh, at that time, he, she was taking care of him and good, you know. I didn’t make that realization until we had return back to China with my mother in 1989 and, uh, she had to go pay respects to her parents and this was the first time since we left in 1941—almost 50 years before she goes back to China—and she goes to the grave site and then in a very emotional scene there she’s tearing up and crying and apologizing for not having come and paying respects earlier. But she said that at the time she had a dilemma that she had her husband who was sick and ill at that particular point and when they were sick and ill and she wanted to go back to China, she couldn’t because she had to stay with her husband. And she had to make that decision as to whether staying with her husband or to go back to China under those set of circumstances and so, uh, yeah, it was quite a moving situation, in terms of it.

And uh, you know, I guess that sometimes these episodes are very much of a learning episode because here in the United States the, uh, Chinese, Cantonese when they go to a funeral, they say Hang San—I don’t know if you know Cantonese language or not but Hang San means walking the mountain; San is the word for mountain and no one sees a mountain in Houston. I never could understand what is it when we go to a funeral and they are talking about walking the mountain in, in terms of it and so it took the trip to go back to China for me to understand what that circumstance was. It turns out that in China all of the arable land is utilized for planting rice fields, and food and utilized as much as possible. The area they cannot utilize for planting purposes is the hills and the mountains and so that’s where they use for the cemeteries. They take the cemeteries and the bodies they going up the side of the mountain and then they, you know, enter the people in and bury them in the side of the mountain and so the Hang San was finally explained to me in the course of that particular episode. But it was a learning process.

Uh, growing up uh obviously it was with a, uh, Chinese was my native language, I only spoke Chinese until I was age five or six going to school and then of course started transferring it to English at that particular point of time. And uh Chinese was language at home, it was a dialect of Cantonese, which is one of the dialects in China and, uh, went to HISD. Grew up, uh, but my father had a restaurant business and, because he had changes of the restaurant business—sold one business and bought another and operated different businesses, we moved on several occasions and so grew up and went to three different uh elementary schools, each of them for two years and then subsequently went to middle school and then high school here in town. And then went to Rice University undergraduate and the University of Texas. So that’s a very short capsule of the life.

MB: Um, what were your family dynamics like growing up?
HG: Family dynamics. Uh, well, needless to say, um, my father uh typical was the decision maker in the family but actually my mother realized how to utilize him and persuade him to do things that she ultimately wanted and achieved and she got her goals and objectives taken care of. Uh, it was a pretty close-knit circumstance I think that uh, what the family that works together, stays together. Turns out that my dad had a restaurant, uh, and we worked at the restaurant. And so uh while I was in middle school uh I guess 13 years of age, had the first opportunity to start working during summers and then uh would start working when I was in high school. Ultimately I went to San Jacinto High School which is in the central part of the city and the reason I had I could have gone to possibly two other high schools that were in the western part of the city but since San Jacinto was in the closer proximity to the restaurant I went to high school there and then went to work at the restaurant after, after school. And so, uh, yeah we were just accustomed to being involved in working and same thing when I was going at Rice that I worked full time at father’s restaurant during that particular interim. And only when I went to law school that we didn’t, didn’t have a full time job working.

DJ: So why did your parents decide to settle in Houston?

HG: Um, my father was living in Houston. Uh he had, uh, actually when he immigrated to the United States, originally he was in California then subsequently apparently he went to Detroit and to, uh, New Orleans. And I think that, uh, in the 1930s, uh, I think that there was a period of time when there was a gas fine just like right now gas price is very, very heavy around the country there was a discovery in Pampa, Texas and so apparently he went up to Pampa and Amarillo and uh was there for a short period of time but that played on out and subsequently, uh, I guess in the course of his travel—I’m assuming here—we never had a chance to talk with him in his travels from New Orleans to Pampa he passed through Lake Charles in Houston and he subsequently ended up opening restaurants and businesses in Houston and in Lake Charles. And so he had a restaurant operation in each of those locales. He, um, got a letter from my cousin Wallace Gee who was back in China at the time and uh Wallace when he sent him a letter indicated that my grandmother, his mother, was very ill. And so in the 1930s he made arrangements to go back to China and to visit with her and in going back to visit with her I mean you would buy boat, you had to plan you know six months in advance and all the other arrangements and then subsequently in China you were gonna stay for another six months so it becomes a year excursion uh to make the trip, but he did make the trip uh being a dutiful son and when we went back there he found that one of the reasons that his mother was so ill is that her only son was footloose and fancy-free in America and he was single; he had two sisters both of them were married and they had children. And here he had no children, no family and so grandma immediately introduced him to, uh, the matchmaker who then introduced to my mother and, uh, he agreed to the marriage and so subsequently uh because she couldn’t get the appropriate—after the marriage—she couldn’t get the appropriate visas to come to America, he ended up returning back to the business and then it took her three years to get her visa cleared to come to America and so when she got her visa, I in the meantime was born in China and was two years, just over two years—two and a half years old when we came here to the United States so…uh, yeah, it was about a three, three and a half year period that she had to wait in order to come to join her husband. But it was because my dad had a restaurant, had businesses here in Houston that we came to Houston.

DJ: So do you remember which year, what year your dad came to America?

HG: We don’t have anything specific, you know, actually I should go back and check his immigration records but um I would imagine it was probably in the 1910s. I mean I would think that—that he seemed to always recall that when he came over here uh and he worked at the restaurant they had to put, uh, a carton at the, at the, um, sink in order for him to wash the dishes and so he had to stand over a carton to, in order to go ahead and do that so I think he was about 12 or 13 years of age. It would have been in the 1910s—it probably would have been
the time period.

DJ: So he came over with, uh, his family?

HG: Uh, no he didn’t. He—there was a Chinese Exclusion Law that was passed in the 1800s and Chinese could not immigrate to the United States but we had a nonimmigrant classification for treaty investors and apparently, uh, he came under the treaty investor classification, so as a child of a treaty investor coming here to the United States. And so that’s—that’s how he came.

DJ: So he came by himself?

HG: No, I think that, uh, his, uh, relative came with him. They came together.

DJ: Okay.

MB: What was the name of your father’s restaurant in Houston?

HG: Well, the one that I’m aware of is um China Star that was on the Main Street, 6009 Main Street, Chinese Village that was on Telephone Road—I don’t know this precise address on Telephone Road. Uh, there was a China Clipper and apparently was on, um, Milam or, you know, uh Street and then there was, um, Sun Deluxe which is on Chartres and then um somebody said that old China Café on Main Street but I, that was before my time and I’ve never seen any other information on that regard so he’s been involved in a number of different restaurants in town.

MB: Um, what area of Houston did you live in growing up?

HG: Well, uh, originally we lived in southeast Houston along what is now the Gulf Freeway. At the time we were there, it was Telephone Road and, uh, it, uh, the freeway was not yet built. Uh the freeway didn’t get started until the late 1940s, early 1950s but, uh, yeah, we lived in that location or area and went to Henderson Elementary School and then uh my father bought a house on Crawford Street and, uh, that’s near St. Joseph Hospital and that was closer to Downtown. And so we moved there and lived there for a couple of years and then, uh, from there moved out to West Dallas, 2712 West Dallas and those were in my high school year so have middle school and high school years and so have a much better recollection of growing up at that location.

I didn’t realize that, uh, Chinese were not permitted to right, buy property everywhere in town. I mean there were only certain locations and so we did not live in uh really a residential enclave as such as we do now. At that time, most of the houses, pla—locations that live were semi-commercial so and so, uh, small businesses are up other, other activities I remember right across the street from us on West Dallas was a bar and, uh, there was a construction I mean uh some minor office supply company had offices right next door to the particular location and so there was a lot of commercial buildings and activities. And on Crawford Street there were number of old buildings on the street but the across the street was the hospital and, uh, all of the other periphery businesses that were supportive of the hospital. And so, uh, but they were not residential neighborhood as such. There were in a semi-commercial area.

MB: So did other families live near to you or not?

HG: Not that many I mean, that’s that’s, you know, that’s uh you know that’s the point. Uh, you know, there really weren’t any close kinship with other family members in, in, in terms of, uh, now when we were in West Dallas there were some. We went to school there we got to know some of the people that lived in about four-
five blocks away. And so they were in close proximity and we got to know some of the people along that line but, uh, pretty much we stayed isolated. The Chinese had their own uh clans and groups and activities because they’re always working so hard they really didn’t have that much spare time and activities and we didn’t, you know, I—we didn’t grow up going to the baseball games or you know going in sporting activities or doing things that our children have had the opportunity to, to be involved with or to, to support the schools. I mean I don’t know I went to a Parent Teachers Association meeting in the course of all of the years of my, uh, growing up or going through school. So….

DJ: So do you remember the ethnic composition of your neighborhood?

HG: Uh, it was all Caucasians [laughs]. I mean, [clears his throat] it was uh—Houston was segregated at that time—at that time and, uh, so you know essentially a Caucasian neighborhood but, uh, Jewish people lived in, in a relatively close proximity uh middle-income people uh so uh yeah I mean there weren’t many people who sent their kids to private schools or anything—all public school people.

MB: So what were your experiences in high school like?

HG: Well, um, I didn’t make this realization as such but, uh, during school I probably—I was able to apparently get into some activities—bowling, I played basketball, uh you know, we worked, we uh—oh, we had a professor, a teacher that was an ice-skating aficionado and so we had a chance to do a little bit of that but, uh, yeah. We had a car about time from our work opportunities to go ahead and do that but you know we didn’t have opportunity to spend times on activities like debate, or traveling with debate teams or doing things of this nature. We worked at the restaurant over the weekends and, uh, so you know we were working on a full time basis uh in terms of—to my surprise I ended up putting in 40 hours a week at the restaurant while going through high school so that was not an unusual circumstance, I mean. Yeah, we were working um at the restaurant we got to do anything that needed to be done—we waited on tables, we um bus tables, we ended up working as a cook or cook’s helper. And it got to a point where you know we hated almond cookies because you had to roll thousand, hundreds and thousands of them to bake cookies during the course of, um, weekend for desserts during the course of the various meals so, uh, yeah it was uh—it was tedium. It was just something that was somewhat boring and, you know, you just had to keep doing the same thing over and over again.

MB: Did you get paid for that work?

HG: Yeah we did. We got paid, uh, a nominal sum of money. So, uh, yeah, I think I remember um when I finally was able to buy my car let me see I guess it was, uh, the summer while we were in high school that we saved up enough money to be able to get a car and, uh, had to negotiate with the banker to get the interest rate. He, he was surprised that uh we had the audacity to discuss interest rates with him.

DJ: How much was the car?

HG: How much was the car? Gosh, it was probably about $1200, $12-1400. Uh, yeah, it’s a quite an inflation in, in the cost of cars and vehicles since, since that time.

DJ: Was it a new car?

HG: Yeah, it was a new car. Yeah, it was a Chevrolet uh in the 1950s though.

MB: Did your family’s, um, socioeconomic status change once you, your family had moved from China to the United States?
HG: Well, uh obviously in consideration of what the people in China were having, the answer is yes. I mean, I was uh, we were—there was plenty of food, I mean, there was a uh relative clean living circumstances, albeit Houston before air-conditioning was very humid and, I mean, there were nights which it was so humid that it was more comfortable to sleep on the floor than it was in a bed. I mean in the bed you know the mattress would have no air circulating and we were small enough to sleep on the floor—and it was much more comfortable at that particular point but, uh, the you know yeah my father had worked pretty diligenty and, uh, restaurant business and was successful in that regard and so he was able to provide for us that, uh. Uh now it really took my mother’s saving ability to save to go ahead and make sure that uh opportunities would be accorded but, you know, and they went through some pretty tough times. The economic situations in the 50s were very harsh—I mean after the war was over uh the economies all begin to tank and, uh, you know people didn’t have as much money and resources as they did during the course of the war and therefore, you know, there’s a lot less eating out and you know things of that nature and so the restaurant businesses were very competitive at that particular point so, yeah, they had some—they worked hard. And you know I was—when I stop to think about it, it used to be we would get lunch and it was meat, two vegetables, a salad and soup, a dessert, a drink—75 cents [laughs]. And so uh that was amazing.

MB: What sort of clientele did the restaurant attract?

HG: Well, that’s a good question, though. Uh, I didn’t make this realization but, uh, really one would have thought it’s a Chinese restaurant they would serve Chinese food and they did serve Chinese food. It’s just that it was very bland Chinese foods and it was adapted to the American taste and so, uh, really, the restaurant served inexpensive American food—chicken fried steak, fried chicken, fried shrimp uh you know, Houstonians at that time the only cuisine that they understood was fried and so, uh, it, it’s changed significantly in the interim. I think that, uh, you know the taste buds and the quality of the cuisines as such that uh you are getting really authentic Chinese food. And part of it is because that the cooks in the restaurants were not really trained chefs or cooks. Frequently they were seamen who jump ship and who were here illegally.

And that was the jobs that they could get and you know they did have some skill sets so the part of it is hard work and they became cooks. You know the people here didn’t understand what the real Chinese food tastes like anyways so they couldn’t gauge whether they did good job or bad job in the preparation of it. And so, uh, the key is do they cook chicken fried steak or is the fried shrimp, you know, fried well and, and tasty and what not. So it was more an inexpensive, uh, American food that was primarily there. During the lunches they would have you know meatloaf and, uh, chicken pot pie or things of this particular nature that just, uh, you know women would just standard American fare.

DJ: Do you remember how much waiters and waitresses got paid?

HG: You know my recollection in back of my mind is $18 a week, and, uh you know, now $18 a week, uh, sometimes they had uh tips to go with it as well. But, um, uh yeah [laughs].

DJ: That was in the 1940s?

HG: This is uh well in 1950s, [DJ: 50s.] so it was 50s before I started working at the restaurant and so, yeah, it’s uh it’s hard, well, I know that some of the dishwashers you know all they made was twenty dollars a week and, uh, had to live on it. That’s uh but you know a car only cost $1200, I mean, you know, that would be an indication of the inflation that we’ve seen since, since that time.
MB: Had any of members of your extended family settled in Houston around that time?

HG: Any members of the extended…Well, I think that, the, our—because of our father operated a restaurant that a number of our Gee family came to Houston because, well, actually several. There were several other Gee family members who came here and went into grocery business and so between the grocery business and the restaurant business they were able to help other cousins and relatives coming from China to get business worked and, and, and, and opportunity so, uh, yeah, I mean, uh the immigration flow pattern frequently has been that people go where their relatives are because they have job opportunities and connections they have people who are interested in their welfare and are supportive of them so, uh, I don’t doubt but, I mean, well, our cousin Albert came and later on when into the restaurant business, uh, cousin Wallace came did a little bit of restaurant business but when off into real estate and, uh, you know, so, uh, yeah, um, numbers of the family members… Cousin Gordon came and later on went into restaurant business and, uh, meat business and various other activities and so, uh, yeah, members of the extended family would come here, you know.

DJ: So did you support each other [HG: Well uh.] in terms of like helping to settle and….

HG: Oh, yeah. I mean the adjustment to facilitate and introduce them to other members of the community and to solve problems with them when they had problems or issues or difficulties they would frequently come to my father and ask for his advice and he happened to be President of the On Leong Chinese Merchants Association and so they would help, uh, you know, people in getting their businesses started and help them solve problems in that regard. Cousin Albert at one time was thought of being quote ‘Mayor of Chinatown’ here in Houston because, you know, he had, uh, people who would call up on him to help in solving problems and what not. But he started out as the manager of my father’s restaurant on Telephone Road and he operated and gained the experience through that, uh, work, uh, opportunity and later on established his own business as such.

He became very well renowned in Houston. It was Albert Gee’s Polynesian restaurant and Ding Hao that had more of a reach to the professional and upper uh echelons of the community. And, you know, when we start looking back at some of the papers, he got to know the, um, people at the newspaper so they would get, uh, publicity in the newspaper frequently and so, uh, because of that involvement he, he was much better known with, uh, the professional uh community.

MB: Can you describe, um, your naturalization process since you were born in China?

HG: Yeah. Um, when I reached age 18, I made application for naturalization and, uh, interestingly enough, I never understood all of the paperwork. Now that I’ve become a professional, uh, there had to be a transition from non-immigrant treaty investor classification to an immigrant category and whether it was done, uh, through registry or whether it was done through, uh, suspension of deportation—I’ll have to check some records to find out but, uh, I was a permanent resident when I was at— I think my first year at Rice. September, uh, I reached age 18 and I filed and submitted my application and then during that, that year, uh, the naturalization examination, the officer was a German officer and he gave one of the toughest history, or government exams we’ve ever taken. But fortunately I’d studied it comprehensively in high school and then at Rice and what not, and so we were able to pass that particular examination and then, uh, qualified and gained my U.S. citizenship at that time.

MB: What sorts of questions were on the test?

HG: Oh gosh this is, uh, I just, I just remember that they were much harder and they’re much more difficult than what we had seen in some of our history examination. You know, I must give credit; he knew his stuff.
And you know he was a, a, you know, we sat in on other people’s examinations and what not and the examiners were not near as rigid and harsh but, you know, there was a completely different attitude; uh, there’s not much immigration to America up until uh during the course of the 40s and the 50s. Uh, because of the World Wars and the turmoil around the world you know people were just were not moving much from one location to the other in terms of it. So the immigration was just the minimal, but the…it’s expanded significantly since the 1960s.

**MB:** Would you say that your family in particular was affected at all by the World War II?

**HG:** Affected by World War II? Well, let’s see, yes and no. I mean just like anybody else I mean it turns out that the…I think my father was too old to go in the military so he wasn’t drafted but our cousins were. They, the one that was the manager of my dad’s restaurant ended up having to go, uh, it turns out that, uh, he worked as the welder at the shipyards, so he was doing that particular work he wasn't drafted in the military itself. But others of our cousins were drafted and went into the military and served, uh, in Europe or in Asia and in, in terms of it, uh, for, for a large part, the effect of it was the business opportunities were diminished because people didn’t have the monies, and resources and opportunities to get, you know, they didn’t—gasoline was rationed, tires were rationed, and everything was rationed in at that point of time and so there was not the free enterprise opportunities that one has at the present time.

**MB:** Um, could you describe a little bit more about the Gee family’s growth and presence in Houston over time?

**HG:** Um, well I guess what we find out is that if we go into the, the three families that probably really initiated the growth was my father, uh, Harry Gee, Sr. and then there’s Wan Tu Chu and Wan Tu Chu. Chu is a Mandarin pronunciation of the word Gee and so I didn’t realize that, uh, it’s the same character. But it’s pronounced differently. If you’ll take the, the character right in the middle of the pillow and how do you pronounce it?

**DJ:** Oh my, my uh my name is Dae Shin Ju, and I’m actually Korean.

**HG:** Oh, okay.

**DJ:** And this is how I spell my last name in Chinese character.

**HG:** Oh, okay. Well see that’s the same…

**DJ:** This means red, right?

**HG:** Okay that’s the royal red, that’s correct. [laughs] So, we may be distant cousins, you know, [All: [laughs]] you know in, in that terms of it. But Paul Chu at the University of Houston. He has the same character, it’s the same character that we have in terms of it. And I go back to China and found out that the Ming Dynasty the emperor was that was, uh, his character. He was, you know, so I kept telling these friends you better treat me with greater deference I could be the lineage of the emperor of China and he said, ‘Harry you’re probably the product of the twentieth concubine’ [All: [laughs]]. Yeah, but, but Paul put it in perspective. Paul said that, ‘Hey Harry, twentieth concubine was very important; he had a thousand.’

No uh, my father came, I think and other people followed him, uh, came in from Arkansas part of the family they worked at my dad’s restaurant they saved some money then they went and opened up their businesses. They opened up grocery stores or other restaurants and, you know, other businesses that they prospered so they would get introductions and, you know, help, uh, people get started we’d introduce them to bankers or introduce
them because, yeah, they had good experience with our parents in terms of doing business, uh, that enabled them to have a line of credit and capability of doing business and getting access to resources that other people could not get. Uh, Mr. Chu and uh his brother, uh both of them went into grocery business and they were very actively involved with the grocery business. They in turn helped our cousins that went into grocery business and get each of those starts as well. And so at that time the major chains have not come to Houston to this extent, and so local grocery stores were very important, I mean, literally there would be a grocery store every two blocks. Part of it is uh in certain segments of the community, primarily the black communities, they didn’t have the money and resources to have a car and so when they went to grocery store they had to carry whatever groceries that take it home. And therefore walking more than two blocks with groceries was really a burden. And so what would happen is they would, you know, so the Chinese grocers prospered in many of the black areas. There would be, I mean, at one time there were about 300 Chinese grocery stores located in the black areas and then when they had the civil rights riots then things changed because, the, uh they didn’t feel comfortable there for their personal safety and so many of them sold those particular businesses and got out of there. And you know, in other parts of the country they sold it to Korean grocery people, uh, in Houston, ultimately a lot of them sold them to Vietnamese, Pakistanis and the other immigrant waves that come in would be the ones that would frequently buy those particular businesses.

But, um, our—my father formed the Gee Family Association and with the Gee Family Association they got an opportunity to bring all of the cousins together on a regular basis, on an annual basis at least that we also sponsor a picnic and then by having a picnic there’s another event which the younger pe—the younger families could get together and through that they would invite the dignitaries in the communities and represent various segments of the community in terms of it, and so at one time, yeah, I think that the people at the city hall downtown were probably more familiar with the Gee Family as a institution here than other communities, other parts of the uh Chinese families, but, um, yeah, we try to maintain some of those traditions with the New Year’s celebration and, um, the family get-togethers and those activities but, um, so the Gee Family—there’s a national organization they have headquarters out in San Francisco and then, uh, you know they’re the ones that ultimately helped create school and we raised the money and resources around the country to build a school and, so, one of the classrooms is named after my father and so with the appropriate financial contributions they would go ahead and give the naming rights to some of the particular facilities, but it was, uh, nice way and means to help our cousins back in China.

DJ: Do you know the number of Gee family members in the States?

HG: No, I don’t. You know what, uh, there, what is interesting is that they don’t all spell the names exactly the same—there’s a spelling with C-H-E-E and there’s spelling J-E-E and there’s G-E-E and there’s C-H-U, [laughs] and so all of those are all variations of the Gee Family and you know what we’ve probably have not done a real extensive, uh, background in, in, in terms of it.

Now uh, the other situation is that, uh, because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, uh some of the people coming to America ended up buying other people’s papers and they came as somebody else and so not everybody who has the Gee name is a Gee and not all of the Gees are into the Gee name. And so it’s, it’s, it is complicated in that regard. So yeah, um, there has been but we have not, you know, compiled a comprehensive, uh, listing of all the Gee family members. Now we also find that there are some members of the black community that are also, their last name is Gee but they are not Chinese and so we’re finding it. Now we did have one Caucasian. He was a federal judge and he spelled his name Gee and we got to find out he has French derivation. It was Gui but because the French apparently pronounce Gui as ‘Gi,’ uh, that, you know, they subsequently began to spell it G-E-E because when they Anglicize it, it was too complicated for Americans, British Americans to pronounce G-U-I.
DJ: So were you exposed to Chinese culture growing up?

HG: Well, to uh to whatever extent my parents had it. Now, my mother only had two years of formal education and my father had six and so he came to Chi—came to America at a very young and tender age and so because my mother was in the rural area and she had to work she didn’t get much education at all and so she worked enough to gain enough vocabulary to help start reading in Chinese newspapers and, you know, she always tried to share as much of it but she never we never we never had we never became, uh, able to read in Chinese and if you can’t read in a language you can’t maintain it or expand it. So, yeah, after a while it atrophies. I mean if you don’t use it, it disappears. Uh we did not get any, but we got two years of formal training and in the summer, and it turns out we go to Chinese school for three months during the summer. And then uh when we back the next year the teacher said, ‘Ah! You’ve forgotten everything the last nine months’ and there we’re put, we’re back in the first grade again for the second year and so.

DJ: So your mom did—needed to learn how to speak English when she came here?

HG: Yeah she did not, uh, she could understand English but she didn’t speak it, articulate it very well. You know her, her line was primarily Chinese, but you know she, she could speak it to get along with people who have worked because you know it was the same comments and statements over and over again, but she was not erudite. She was not able to read or English and she did not have capability of a great vocabulary in English. But she made sure we studied like heck [laughs]. That we all, you know, uh, did the studies and, and, made sure that, uh, yeah, that we would pursue it to the fullest.

DJ: Did she work at the restaurant?

HG: She did. Yeah she worked at the restaurant as well so.

MB: Um do you feel, uh, connected to the Chinese culture today?

HG: Not to the extent that I could or should. I think that uh I was telling some of the people that to a large extent um I, well I began to realize some of that deficiency when I read James Michener’s Hawaii and Michener did when he was talking about Chinese population going to Hawaii he did a great job with research and I didn’t realize that, you know, my Chinese name is Gee Bak Chil and the cousins that have, in the same generation are Gee Chu Boo, Gee Chu Oong, Gee Chu Qui, and Chu is the family generation name, Gee is the family name Chu is the—but mine, Gee Bok Chu so why is my Chu in the third place opposed to the second place? And so I had to ask my father after reading the book that did they mess it up, and then he explained that when he went back to

1 Note from Mr. Harry Gee regarding spellings (Date: August 13, 2012): ‘As you know, the Chinese names and words were generally spelled in English from the sounds understood by the English language official requesting the information for the first time. My Chinese name in English phonetics is Gee Bok Chu. My generation name is Chu as was the second Chinese word in the names of my cousins. Albert Gee, the husband of Jane Gee was Gee Chu Boo (I am not sure that this is how his name was spelled) Wallace Gee, the father of Robert Gee, was Gee Chu Oong and Gordon Gee is Gee Chu Qui. I cannot vouch for their spellings as I have never seen their official documents.’ official requesting the information for the first time. My Chinese name in English phonetics is Gee Bok Chu. My generation name is Chu as was the second Chinese word in the names of my cousins. Albert Gee, the husband of Jane Gee was Gee Chu Boo (I am not sure that this is how his name was spelled) Wallace Gee, the father of Robert Gee, was Gee Chu Oong and Gordon Gee is Gee Chu Qui. I cannot
vouch for their spellings as I have never seen their official documents.’

China that they use a poem that each generation with a certain letter a certain, Chiu was my generation, but I— he married so late in life that I was the last of that generation, I was the 100th Chiu. Bak is the word for one hundred. And so he’s the one, he’s the last of the Mohicans. He’s the one hundredth, you know, I never realized the significance of them until I read James Michener’s *Hawaii* and so, um, you know being in America and being—and having grown up here much of the values are what are coming from American society. But, uh, yeah, there certain cultural circumstances, you know, the Asians you know you don’t speak until you’re spoken to, you know, it’s less of a gregarious approach in life and so, because of that, we find that, yeah, it is still is inculcated in a lot of things we do. So we were taught to you don’t extol your virtues. You do a good job and, you know, keep your nose down and work at it, and recognition will come. And in real life it may, it may not come.

**DJ:** So should we move on to his education? So could you describe your experience at Rice?

**HG:** Well it was, uh, it was a busy period, I—you know. It was rather interesting in terms of, you know, I had the opportunity to get engaged with at that time they call it freshmen hazing, you know, and, uh, they, we were all divided into sections so we had a chance to get to know a number of other classmates they would divide the people in the dormitories into various sections and those who—we lived off campus and so they got the people living off-campus together in various groups or sections as well. And so, uh, to some extent that’s where we started building some of the relationships and I think that most of the relationships were probably be built by people who lived together in the same dorms and, you know, room together and so I missed that opportunity. I didn't have that chance to, uh, become so engaged with, uh, classmates. So when I graduated from Rice, and what I’ve seen from our kids, they’ve had much more participatory engagement in sports and other activities at Rice than I did. And because I went to work at the restaurant after, after school, and so, I did not have the opportunity to interact quite as much in all of those particular areas of activity. But, uh, yeah, it was, um, it was a quick four years. I mean it was amazing how quickly the time flew past.

**DJ:** You said you worked full-time while you were…?

**HG:** I did.

**DJ:** How did you balance between work and study?

**HG:** You know I—we learned to multi-task. I mean, you know, we—we never sat and watched television, uh, by just sitting back on a couch. When we were watching television we were folding clothes, we’re doing some other task or responsibility that we had to get addressed. I mean, doing our homework at that time or doing something else, but we were always multi-tasking in, in, in various activities and so, uh, I didn’t make that realization either until, yeah, we went up to school in Austin. When I went to school up in Austin, then I did not have to work, I just went straight to law school. But I went straight through. I, I didn’t take a break so I finished law school in 29 months. Normally, it’s a three-and-a-half-year curriculum and in order to do but we did it an year less than-, more than a year less than that but that’s because we went to school during the summer and it was, it was a tougher, tougher grind.

**DJ:** When did you decide to go into law?

**HG:** Well you know I was—slated to be—I studied engineering at Rice, I started out studying engineering at Rice it turns out I had a had a great difficulty, time with calculus and could not comprehend some of those theoretical concepts and, uh, if you’re gonna be an engineer you better understand the math and be able to understand that particular part of it and so, uh, like they were saying the when we went in we’re told that, ‘You
look right, you look left, and next year one of you won’t be there.’ And, uh, that was quite a revelation because when Rice was tuition free—when we went there it was tuition free; that was one of the means they controlled their budget they had a small class for a small group. And uh they flunked out approximately one-third of their freshmen class. And so, uh, that diminished the number of people who would ultimately graduate, and they were able to sustain themselves. But after the second year, uh, I made the reali—I wasn’t having great fun. I was studying with this friend of ours and, uh, when we studied it appeared I thought I knew it as well as he did. I, you know, we discussed these matters and, and of course, in discussion, but after we took the exam albeit the numbers would look the same they’re were in reverse; he’d make a 97 and I’d make a 79 and so I began to realize he was heck a lot of smarter than I was and so he later became the dean of the chemical engineering department at Rice and he got his Ph.D. and what not but I, um, I’d always sort of followed my father’s career and we got involved with community and with that community involvement had a concern to making sure that, uh, the people in the community would be well treated and get a fair break in whatever they may be doing and I felt that the legal career would give me the opportunity to go ahead and do that. And now that we specialize in immigration law, it gives us a great satisfaction of being able to help people solve problems and deal with governmental bureaucracies or intransigents that will enable them to get problems solved and give them benefits that mind otherwise would not get so, uh, yeah. And it’s been nice because we’ve had the opportunity to travel; we’ve always enjoyed traveling and so, uh, what of the things is that yeah the nature of our work takes us around the world to Cairo, Egypt, or to Tokyo, Japan, or Edinburgh, England or Bonn, Germany you know uh Shenzhen, China or you know Beijing so it is interesting and to New Orleans, [laughs] to, uh, little Victoria, Texas to something of that nature so, yeah, we get to help people from all over.

DJ: Do you remember the application process to law school?

HG: The application process. Let's see. I think that we had to sit for LSAT, LSAT examination. And, uh, yeah, because... I remember when we went to Rice, it was when they first initiated SATs. I mean, before that time it was your, your school record, and you know, your school record, but then they said that well, some schools may not be equal of other schools, and so they made us take SAT scores, and, uh, but um, yeah. Uh, uh we had to pass a—an LSAT examination, and uh, fortunately was accepted, by the University of Texas.

MB: Um, if I could backtrack a little bit, you mentioned earlier, um, the Civil Rights Movement.

HG: Right.

MB: I was just wondering, um, maybe what effect that had while you were in middle school or high school, on your...

HG: You know, it, it, it—it's rather interesting, in terms of it, uh... We were so busy involved in school that we didn't, were not engaged in much of the Civil Rights. And it really, it began, I think, to the largest extent probably in the sixties, uh, late fifties and sixties, so I was really in college at the time that, uh, much of the movement, uh, really, uh, raised its uh, profile and-in terms of it. I didn't realize it, you know... My father could not buy a home in certain locations. Some, we had friends of ours that wanted to buy a home out in Memorial here, and they couldn't. They wouldn't sell to, to Chinese, in terms of it. And, albeit, um... we... There would be a... There were some segments of the community that would differentiate. Hey, you're not the same color as we are, you're not the same skin as we are, in terms of it. But I, I think that because we had a strong family unit, and we had a life and an engagement of its own, we didn't need it.

[Laughs] And so, the fact that we're not members of the country club or that we're not, uh, able to do this or that, was not important because we had our own activities that we were happy with, those particular... So, you know,
I think that not having the opportunity to do some of these particular situations obviously would deprive us, I mean, yeah. I mean, I think it's pretty a—you know, now that I've been able to get involved in the practice of law and we, we know of situations where people are given jobs because of who they know. Well, it's always better to know the people who are going to make those decisions, than it is to have friends that are down, that can't make those decisions. And so I think that, you know, discrimination or those factors, they—unfortunately, as long as there are human beings I'm fearful that there's always going to be this differentiating factor: Hey, they're not the same as we, and we will do things differently in terms of it, and that they will seek to give advantages to people of like mind. I think when they say 'birds of a feather flock together' there's some validity to that. I mean, people have that tendency, in terms of, you know, so the question becomes, how can you build the relationship that's going to be over-compassing the fact that you have different color skin, or that you're a different race, or you, you know you have these differences in terms of it, and sometimes it's activities that you work together, it's passions that you become engaged with.

I didn't realize it, when I went to school at Rice, that Rice had not accepted any blacks, uh, I'm not aware that there were any Hispanics there. And you know, so, why did they permit Chinese to go there? I mean, they, Rice accepted some Chinese back in the 1930s, so, one of a... So, uh, in, in, we—we find out in South Africa, Japanese are considered white, but Chinese are considered black. [laughs] And, you know, uh, when—well, part of it was that Japan was a powerful country, and because it was a powerful country, the South Africans apparently had to respect them as a military force or otherwise, and at that time, China was very weak, and was not very, you know, respected in that regard, so, I don't know, it... it did have some impact because, yes, there were certain activities in which there was a differentiation between 'them' and 'us,' as such. Uh, but, um, you know, because we had our own activities, uh, it, uh, it didn't particularly bother us to that extent. I mean, we still had a chance to, to prosper, and to—to go ahead and, and be engaged in terms of it. But, uh, so the Civil Rights Movement, it was in the sixties, it, uh, it really became much more engaged in the broader community and I remember one of our friends had come over from Taiwan, and while she was visiting a—a friend graciously took her out and was taking her to Foley's downtown, which was a major department store. She got thirsty and she goes to the fountain and the fountain says White and Colored. Being Chinese and colored, she went to the 'colored' fountain. Then her friend pulls her off to the side and says, you know, uh, 'Eugenie, you shouldn't go to the colored fountain, you know, that's for another group of people, that's for the black people.' You know, and she realized that she had pulled a faux pas, and so she says, 'Oh, I wanted to see what color the water was!' [laughs] And so... but uh...yeah it was insidious, it was here, it was not, but it was not quite as blatant as, you know, people as the KKK would be doing, they did not have those activities on a full-time basis. And part of it I think is because Houston was a port city, uh, the people here had been in the cotton business and the rice business, and they dealt with people around the world. Uh, the other thing is that it was energy, and energy, the oil business was international in terms of it, and so those industries brought interaction between the Houstonians and other people, and so they were much more receptive, I think, in terms of it. But, uh... yeah. Uh, to a large extent, we were spared because we were able to go to public schools.

Now, the Chinese in Mississippi could not go to public schools. In Mississippi, they were relegated to the black schools, and so they would—they were impacted, because ultimately, because their kids couldn't get what they thought was the right education, they started sitting the kids out. And it became Mississippi's loss, because they would lose some of their best and brightest young people. So, you know, it uh, but Mississippi apparently wants it that way. I mean, they want that certain society, that certain circumstance. So uh, but yeah in Houston we were able to go to public schools. And so, we were able to go to public schools we had the chance to get full access.
MB: So, uh, when you went to law school at University of Texas…

HG: Yeah. Right.

MB: That was the first time you left Houston.

HG: Right.

MB: So how did you decide to go to UT?

HG: Well, it— it was the best law school that I knew about, that I could afford, in terms of it. Because being a Texas resident, I mean the tuition was—you know, when I stop to think about what I paid for my education and what I, what we paid for our children’s education [laughs] I mean, it's... there's no comparison. I mean, at Rice, it was tuition-free, at University of Texas I think we paid fifty dollars a semester. So, every semester there we went to school…[laughs] you know, we paid fifty dollars. And so, uh, uh when our children went to Rice...and you got a fifty-thousand-dollar bill, and then you know, they go to law school, one goes to uh, University of Virginia, and the other goes to Stanford, I mean you know, the tuitions that we paid there were significantly higher than, I mean. One year at any of those institutions covered our entire, uh, educational process many times over. But uh... It was part of—we did not have the understanding of what the implications of educational institutions might have upon career opportunities. We were just looking for a, a fairly—well, in my mind, yeah, I didn't know the workforce and the opportunities that were involved and I didn't do a very good research job of finding out about those situations and so, uh, yeah. I went to work with the Attorney General's office, when I was trying to get back to Houston, none of the firms in Houston had hired any minorities. They had not hired any blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Jews, or women! So they—it was a white, Anglo-Saxon male population only. So I guess, you know, uh the Civil Rights situation, if anything, had an impact on my ability to go ahead and, and you know, rejoin the workforce here in Houston. Now, you know, I, when I graduated from law school I worked with the Attorney General's office, and uh, got a position there, but—and, I think I probably knew certain areas of the law better than uh, the other attorneys, but I did not—the big law firms were not yet hiring of any of the minorities. And so, that opportunity was not accorded. So we carved our own niche, created an area that we could specialize in.

DJ: And that's immigration law?

HG: That's right.

MB: So did you pay for law school with money that you had saved previously?

HG: Yes. I mean, it was our, you know, our own savings and support from our parents. You know, so...

MB: Um, were there any other Asian students who graduated in your class at UT?

HG: Not in law school. I can't remember, uh, there were not very many Asian lawyers. I think that there was one that went to San Antonio, uh, the two other Chinese lawyers in Houston had gone to South Texas, so uh, you know, uh... I may not have been the first Asian but I was amongst the first dozen of Asians that probably graduated from UT law school. So, and it was interesting, when I went to the, work with the Attorney General's Office I'd go to east Texas and the, you know, into the courthouse and—’What are you doing here? Are you in the right place?’ You know, ‘Oh! You're an attorney? Oh, you're an attorney representing the state of Texas!’ You know, so it was really a revelation, in terms of it, because they never saw Asian professionals before. And then, find out that Asian professionals are representing the state of Texas. You know, that was a revelation to them as well.
DJ: And, uh, were your parents supportive of you going into law?

HG: Oh...[laughs] I remember my dad, when my father said, ‘You graduated from Rice, and now you're going to go back to law school? When are you going to start working?’ [laughs] So, you know, I think that they realized that, uh, you know, professionally that, uh, it would be, it's going to take some time, in terms of doing it. But, uh yeah, I think that, uh, they were concerned that uh, there would be a career opportunity. And I had not realized that you know, what, what that part of it was about. But part of it is because our exposure to the law—we didn't know about the big law firms or the big, uh, situations and so, uh, yeah, had not done our homework as to how to entree some of those particular situations.

DJ: Do you think they expected you to carry out the family business at all?

HG: Uh, you know, I don't think that—no, I don't think that that was a, a—an expectation, because I think that they reali—the restaurant business...has its ups and downs. Restaurants don't generally stay a long period of time. They have a life span, and [clicks tongue] they're over, I mean, you know, uh, the ones that have a long life span have to remodel and redo things periodically to make things different. I mean, it's, it's an interesting circumstance. People have a tendency to, number one, try new things. Of course they want to try something, what's the latest, in terms of it, and uh... If they get a bad experience, they remember the bad experience more frequently than the good experiences. And so, you know, the expectations are we're going to have a good experience, and tho—therefore, uh, you know, so I think that, uh, it, it's a complete different circumstance now from what it was then. I think that people have learned and, and made certain transitions.

MB: Um, could you talk a little bit about how you came across the job opportunity at the Gen—Attorney General's office?

HG: Uh, we had a cousin, who was engaged, involved in politics, I didn't realize it at the time, uh, he had, uh...We had a [laughs, shows document] This was an invitation to go to meet President Kennedy, when President Kennedy was traveling in Texas. It turns out that, uh, this cousin of ours became involved with politics locally, who then in-apparently introduced him to people on the statewide basis, and one of them was Waggoner Carr, was the Attorney General. He was running for Attorney General, in terms of it. And so, you know, our organization, the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, supported him, and when he won the election and went into office, he graciously offered a job to me, if I passed the bar exam. So when I got through, in, in January, we finished up in January, we sat for the bar exam, so, bar results are coming out in May. And these friends of mine called up from Houston and said, ‘Harry! The bar results are out! And your name is not listed amongst the people who passed.' The Houston Chronicle used to run a, an article, and they would list all of the people who passed the bar exam. And he says, ‘Your name is not listed,' and I'm thinking, ‘Oh my God, after all this involvement, and, uh, you know, if I, I've got this job, if I... So I went down to the clerk's office with great trepidation, checked in and said, ‘My name's Harry Gee, I need to see what my score was.' And they said, ‘Oh, Mr. Gee, you made an 83,' which is passing the exam well. And then I found out, you know, why was my name not listed in the group here in Houston? Well at that time, I was in Austin, going to school and living there, and since I was going to work there, I stayed there after school. And so I gave an Austin address. So when-they didn't-they only sent the people's names that had gave a Houston address, and since I didn't give a Houston address, it didn't get listed in that group. But fortunately, [laughs] come May, after I graduated from school, I was able to start working with the Attorney General's office in 1963. So, it was a very interesting, uh, number of years. I mean, of course, one of the things that happened was, while we were there, is that, uh, President Kennedy got assassinated. We were supposed to go to this reception that evening, uh, my cousin had paid a hundred dollars for this ticket [indicates ticket on table], and he couldn't get to Austin so he sent it to me, and I was supposed to go, and I didn't realize that, uh... [reading from ticket] ‘President Kennedy and Vice President Lyndon Johnson, Texas Welcome Dinner.' I never got my Texas Welcome Dinner. [Laughs]

DJ: Could you describe, um, your duties at the job?
HG: Um, it started out with the, uh, taxation division, uh, we represented the State Comptroller of Public Accounts and we collected franchise taxes for them.

And uh, I think we did a great job for them. It turns out that they were collecting maybe a couple hundred thousand dollars in delinquent taxes and when I undertook the representation we got the collections over a million dollars, and one of the things that the people were really elated about was the Attorney General got a portion of that money back to run his office, and so the more we—we collected, you know, the, the better it was for the, for the Attorney General's office, they got a, a bigger budget. It turns out that, uh, when they had the, uh, National Association of Attorney Generals they graciously invited me to go participate in that particular function, and so, you know, it was a bunch of wining and dining of the various Attorney Generals from across the country. But um, uh, we, I also ended up working, representing the bonds insurance banking division, we represented the Savings and Loan Commissioner, and the Insurance Commissioners, and then we also went and worked with the highway and the condemnation areas. And so, uh, it was a broad exposure of various activities in, in terms of it. And we did litigation, and were in court there, representing the commissioners on various matters and got some pretty good results, uh, surprising to our clients, I mean to our boss, I mean we, we came back with, uh, success in a lawsuit that, that they had lost literally six cases before on the same issue, and, but we came up with a new idea, and the judge ruled in our favor. So, uh, it was rather interesting. But, uh, it was a good time for a young attorney to gain some knowledge and experience, and that really helped me in my future career.

MB: How many other attorneys worked in that office?

HG: Oh, I would imagine at that time that we were there…I think they got pictures. [laughs] I have to find the pictures, but, uh, I, I’d say probably about a hundred, a hundred attorneys, uh, in all the divisions, uh, you know there were probably about six divisions, and all of them have about sixteen, twenty attorneys in each division.

DJ: Do you recall how much you made?

HG: Did I recall how much I made…Uh, I think it was probably about all of six thousand dollars. I think, six or eight thousand dollars I think was the amount that we earned when we, uh, when we first started.

MB: Were most of the other attorneys, uh, young, fresh out of law school like you?

HG: Well, uh, they have your senior attorneys, that have lots of experience, uh, those who essentially were uh, 20, 30, 40 years’ experience in terms of it, uh, then they would have some middle, uh, people moving from other careers into that, and then beginning attorneys, and I was at that, the bottom of the ladder: the beginning attorneys. So…

MB: So, you talked about, um, how in Houston, uh, mostly all of the lawyers were white, Anglo-Saxon-­

HG: Right.

MB: Did you ever feel discriminated against during your time in Austin?

HG: No [laughs] you know, it’s always interesting, uh, when you’re representing the state, you know, uh, the…uh, I … I don’t know that there was any opportunity for the people to essentially discriminate. I mean, I think it would have been….I mean, race did not come into play in arguing whether the Savings and Loan Commissioner exceeded his authority or not. It all became legal. It became legal issues and legal problems, in terms of it. Uh, where it did come into play is when I went to east Texas and I had to represent, you know, the
state of Texas, and you’d go into locations in which they had never interacted with minority or Chinese or Asians or, uh, you know. And, you, you know—’What are you doing here?’ I mean, you know…it was, it wasn’t the collegiality that might be accorded to somebody that was more like them in terms of it. And so you know I think that uh, because they had never encountered that, they didn’t know how to address or, or to, to you know, to solve that.

DJ: Um, why did you leave the Attorney General’s office?

HG: Well, uh, I was living and working in Austin. I really wanted to get back to Houston, because family was here, and, uh, so, uh, it was essentially when I wanted to come back to Houston, I then contacted the various law firms here in town, and found that you know, that was not the way that they recruited for lawyers, in terms of it.

And, to my surprise, you know, although I had written to about 30 law firms, I didn’t hear back from any of them. And so, uh we…I hung up my shingle. I, you know, started, rented an office space, turns out that I rented space with an existing law firm, and one of the lawyers that was in the next office to me, now is the federal judge David Hittner. So, we had the experience to get to know him during the course of that particular time period. But, uh, yeah, it’s a matter of getting the private practice started. And later, uh, another attorney from the Attorney General’s office came back to Houston and we joined forces and office together, uh, and so, we officed together with other people, with our own practices, and built the practice from there.

MB: Did you have any mentors who helped you as you were starting your own practice?

HG: You know, uh, I didn’t know what lawyers did other than watching TV and, uh, my father had a lawyer that had represented him in some actions and activities, and albeit they were gracious family friends, you know, I never got the understanding of what lawyers really did. Uh, I guess that, yeah, the mentors were the people that were my bosses at the Attorney General’s office, and uh, some of them, uh, some of the senior lawyers there, we would have a chance to visit with them and talk with them about various questions and problems that we had in terms of how to handle it, and so I would guess that yeah… But, I’ve always thought that we’re smart enough to figure out these particular matters, and have not always found it necessary to get mentors. Now, getting mentors makes things—you shortcut things, you can get to things much faster, because you’ve got the opportunity to gain the other—utilize the other person’s experience and competencies and knowledges in that regard. And so, but uh…[laughs] Yeah. Uh I had never sought to do that extensively. Uh, we’ve opened the law books and worked our way through each of those particular matters, and so, to a large extent yeah, we’ve had to fight our own way through.

DJ: So, could you describe the growth of your firm?

HG: Well, uh…Part of it is, is you’ve got to generate a certain amount of income, and I think that, uh, uh the, uh, we’ve been very fortunate, and we’ve used the concept of representing our clients well, to let them in turn extol our virtues, and so by doing that, whenever we get a referral from a previous client that it’s been very, very solid, that we’re likely to get that person as a new client. Uh, I mean, we got a call from Florida recently, where we had helped somebody, uh, become a U.S. citizen very expeditiously so that he could compete in the Mr. America contest, we got him his citizenship, he competed, and he won the Mr. America contest. And these people, 20 years later, remember our name because he was telling them how great we were, and then they called us and hired us to do some other work for them. And so, uh, the, we did, we were fortunate of being at some, somewhat of the right place at the right time, the law changed in 1965 we became more engaged in immigration law in about ‘66, ‘67 and so with the change of law there was opportunities that were not there previously. And
so…We also had an approach of, I felt that we needed to know more than the opposition, and we had, we had to be smarter than they. And so, uh, we, many of the people in the legal areas would be reliant upon the immigration officials in, you know, dispensing what they thought to be justice and fairness, and, uh, we, we couldn’t get them to be very cooperative or considerate of our viewpoint until we beat them in court. And when we beat them in court, then we began to get a little bit more respect. And it turns out, that the officials began to say, ‘Well, Mr. Gee, what do you think about this?’ and, you know, so they would at least begin to communicate with us and discuss matters, and I think that they had a higher degree of respect. Now, part of it is that, uh, some of the people that were working at the immigration service, I think that, uh, we treated them with some degree of respect ourselves, and it later turned out that when they retired from the immigration service they came to work for us.

So, they joined the other side as it were, in terms of it, and I think they appreciated it when we became friends with, with them and sadly, that friend passed away, but his wife is still alive and we’ve, you know, continued a relationship with them. And so, we’ve always tried to respect the people on the other side. Now, the court case that we won in court, the attorney that represented the government, when he left the government, he came and worked with us. I mean, we joined forces together, he officed with us, and so we, you know, we embarked, uh, on some opportunities together. So, uh, I think it served us well to not only well, uh, to understand that legal matters that even though your opposite sides and you’re fighting, you can do it with a degree of mutual respect and, in terms of it, and so we’ve always used that particular philosophical bent and it’s stood us well. We’ve developed good relations with the people who’ve been on the other side as well. But, uh, the key is that to represent your client you need to out…. Sometimes you have to outwork the opposition. You have to prepare, you have to understand, you’ve got to…you’ve got to figure out options and opportunities and you know, making sure that, yes, you will have the fullest number of opportunities to succeed. But, the more options that you can put on the table, the more likely you’re going to find a resolution that everybody can live with. And, you know, if you don’t, if you only hemmed in and you only have one way to go, then you sometimes have to duke it out because that’s the only one way to get it. But if you can find multiple options, uh, and we’ve done that on some litigation that we’ve had with the government, and we’ve gotten results that worked out to the point that the government was happy, our client was happy, the AN was happy, I mean, everybody walked away very happy in terms of, of going ahead and doing it. And so being able to strategize and figure out, you know, each of those situations is very key and crucial.

DJ: Could you describe your area of expertise?

HG: Well…I think that, you know, it’s the immigration law as such. And I think that uh, the analysis of the issues and the determination of options and courses of action that can ultimately resolve the particular problem. And sometimes it’s a matter of fighting with the agency, it’s taking appeal to the higher level, or it’s a matter of going to court and winning in a court proceeding. Um, all of those are resolutions that we have been able to effectuate. You know, just as an example, we have a case where a young man, he’s lived with a woman, he’s from Mexico, woman’s a U.S. citizen, and then, after about five or six years, they’re breaking up, and he wants to get his green card, his permanent residency and status. But the wife, in the course of the proceedings, gives to the immigration service a handwritten statement, and the handwritten statement says ‘The only reason I married you was to get my green card.’ And, because the government doesn’t, they don’t look good…they’re not happy with people who are trying to, quote, ‘cheat the government’ in terms of it. And so I asked him, did he write it? Yes, he wrote it. [laughs] Well, did you mean it? No, didn’t mean it. Well then, why the heck did you write it, if you didn’t mean it? But the government has it, and in their mind, they’re not going to give him his green card. And, you know, I undertake the representation, and I was telling this friend you know, I think I’m going to
represent this person. He says, ‘Forget it, Harry. You’re not going to win this case, there’s no way you’re going to win that thing.’ But, you know, when I asked him why he wrote it, he told me, and...I believed him. And so...basically his story was that during the course of the marriage, there was a child born. Well, that’s a very happy occasion. His mother comes up from Mexico and they’re cradling the baby and they say, ‘Son. Uh...that’s not your baby.’ His friends from Mexico come up and say, ‘Hey, José, that’s not your child.’ Now he’s embarrassed, because he’s been cuckolded. And if, you know, for a Mexican male Hispanic machismo is a cultural value that’s most important to them, is self-being. And so, uh when I heard the story, I said, ‘Well, you’re going to have to do a DNA testing, and if you do a DNA testing and we prove that it is your child I hope that the family will love it, but if we prove that it’s not your child, then I have a reason to give to the government why you wrote this particular statement.’

And when we did the DNA testing it came back 99.999% that it was not his child. And so, I went to the immigration official and said, ‘Hey, here’s why he did it. Take a look at the totality of the evidence, don’t just focus upon that one written statement. They’ve had a life together for six years, uh, you know, all of the other things that we’ve evidenced here.’ And I told him he needed to get somebody who understood machismo. And I said, ‘you need a Hispanic male officer.’ And that’s how you...we go into the interview room; he got fifty percent—he got a Hispanic female officer. So I presented the particular position for her, and when I got through she said, ‘Mr. Gee, I agree with you. I’m going to approve this case.’ And so he was just elated, flying out of the room. Well, it turns out that typical immigration service three weeks later, a month later, nothing. Didn’t hear anything. Went knocking on the door, ‘Where’s Officer Rodriguez?’ She’s been transferred. They’ve got a new officer, and the new officer says, ‘Mr. Gee, I cannot approve this case. This is just, you know, I’ve got the statement that he’s trying to cheat the government and not—that’s what I’m going to believe.’ And so...I said, well, if you know, if you look at the totality...but if you do that, we’re ready to appeal it because we’ve got the evidence in the file that we can persuade a judge to rule—overrule you in terms of going ahead and doing it.

Well it turns out that the Immigration Service has a requirement that when somebody denies a case they’ve got to get their supervisor to okay it. And the supervisor had dealt with us and we had beaten them a number of different times on other proceedings, and so they told her to rethink her decision. And when she re-thought her decision, she approved it. So you know, he ended up getting his status in spite of it. We got the problem solved on an administrative level. We got it solved on the lowest level, and that saved our client just a heck of a lot of legal cost and expense of going through court proceedings and other things, but— figuring out the strategy as to how to be able to solve the particular problem, you know...every case is different, as to what the issue and the problems may be, and at which point the resolution may be needed.

MB: Um, what ethnicities do you most commonly represent in your work?

HG: Interestingly enough, our largest clientele is British. Uh, yeah, it’s people who are involved in the oil patch, in the oil industry. Now, um, you know, uh we’ve got a certain amount of clientele from Mexico, because they’ve got deportation and other problems and issues, but, uh, professional people most of them are British. Now, the Chinese are coming up, we’re getting more Chinese clients, but not uh near as many as the Brits.

MB: Have you noticed any changes in the, uh, composition of your clientele over time?

HG: Um, well...yeah. Uh...Previously we used to represent Gulf Oil, and a number of the engineering companies. And when we represented them, many of our clientele were highly educated. They were engineers with Master’s and Ph.D. degrees and whatever. Uh, now we’ve begun to get more clientele in the offshore, uh, drilling industry. The offshore drilling industry, the work is done out at sea, it’s done, a different approach, uh, the people that do that particular work may not be as highly educated. So, you know, in that context, we would be seeing that, uh, you know, there is a difference in the educational background of some of the people that, uh,
that we’ve been undertaking the representation. So, yeah, uh, professionals, but, you know, we have a number of companies that we still handle their upper-echelon personnel and people, they’re highly experienced, they’ve been working in the industry twenty, thirty years, forty years, in terms of it. And so, uh, but because of the nature of our clientele, we’ve seen an evolution in that regard.

**MB:** Um, how many people, how many employees do you have?

**HG:** We’ve got nine attorneys, and I think our staff is probably just under 30.

**MB:** Has that grown over time?

**HG:** Oh, yeah. [Laughs] I mean, I was it at the very beginning, you know, uh, eventually I hired a secretary to come in and work after she had done her work, she’d come in the evening and work a couple hours from, uh, she’d get off at 4:30 or something, come work ‘til 6:30 with us. You know, uh…we’d bring her in twice a week and, you know, then, uh, as we generated more work, we began to expand the personnel and resources that were supportive of us. But uh, yeah. It’s, uh, it’s changed.

**DJ:** As a—as an employer, what sort of qualities do you look for?

**HG:** Well, hopefully the people have a, an interest and a passion. You know, uh, if, when they’re coming to work, uh, they don’t find it interesting, uh, they don’t find it passionate, uh, sometimes it becomes a drudgery. And so, if it’s a drudgery, they’re not likely to do a good job, in terms of it. And so, uh, fortunately, we’ve been able to find some, some good people, and uh, we’ve had some—at one time, we found that on the legal assistants’ side of it we’re getting a lot of people with Master’s degrees in library sciences. They were very meticulous. And so, this was—you needed people that were handling details well, and so uh those were…uh, on the attorney side, people who have enough smarts to be able to figure out different alternative answers and problems, and, uh, are concerned, they’re concerned about their clients. You know, uh, without that concern, uh, what we find out is that sometimes the situations…they just don’t have the energy and the engagement to be involved comprehensively.

**MB:** Do you think that, um, growing up, uh, as a member of an established family in Houston affected your decision to strike out on your own?

**HG:** Well…I think, you know, part of having struck out on my own is because I couldn’t get a position with a, a major firm. If I’d been with a major firm, you know, the likelihood is that I probably would have continued on in that particular circumstance, but, uh, that’s what life dealt us. I mean, you know, uh, there was not that opportunity. And so since there was not that opportunity, um…You know, part of it is that I think that many of the Asians do have an entrepreneurial spirit. And the idea is that, hey, you know, we can earn more working for ourselves than working for somebody else. And that might very well have prevailed, and of course my father having been an entrepreneur and businessperson all during his life, I mean, yeah, we’re relatively accustomed to some of those particular aspects of it. So, yeah, I would think that, you know, there is a likelihood that we might have done it even if we had started out—you know, we started out with government. If I had wanted to stay with government indefinitely—but I could see that there were certain levels that you’re going to get to, and that’s it.

**DJ:** How did you balance uh between work and family?

**HG:** You know, I don’t know that I did a very good job of it. My wife is the one who really helped, she was always insistent that we take our vacation, and we take our vacation as a family. And so, you know, that time
with the family was absolutely precious to her and to us, and so uh, you know, I think that typically I had always sought to do the activities around certain legal conventions or conferences, or seminars, and she adapted to that particular situation. You know, we did have interesting locations. We had conferences in Bermuda; Toronto, Canada; I mean, Vancouver. So you know, but, uh yeah…I mean, she would dovetail that into our family activities and whatnot—I think she deserves the credit for really taking great care of our kids, and making sure that the family—she made sure that we had dinner together. I mean, that was something that, we all get busy, but we came down to dinner, she’d have dinner prepared, and we’d all sit down to dinner together. So I think that built, built some of the camaraderie and…amongst us so that, uh, yeah. I think our kids interact with each other well, are very supportive of each other, and you know, we see other families that are somewhat dysfunctional, and that…siblings don’t get along, and you know, we’re pleased to see that our siblings get along real well.

DJ: Did, did Mrs. Gee work as well?

HG: Yeah, she worked at our office, uh, part time. Prior to that, when we first were married, she had her own job, in terms of it. But eventually, she left those jobs and came and worked in the office as the opportunity arose. But, uh, yeah. We…nepotism is not a problem in our office! [laughs]

MB: What year did you get married?


DJ: How did you influence—did you influence your kids to go into law?

HG: You know, I don’t know that I did it consciously. We may have done it unconsciously; I think that our kids apparently have enough fortitude that they make the decisions on their own. Our daughter…was, our eldest daughter was convinced that she was going to go someplace else to go to school, and then, uh, her brother persuaded her to go to Rice, and then when it came time to go to law school she had a scholarship, partial scholarship at Duke Law School, which, I thought was a good school, and she said no, she’s going to go to Virginia. And pay the full tab. And so, it’s a…I, I don’t know that I influenced them as such. Uh, you know, I think that maybe it’s because, uh, I enjoy what we’re doing in terms of it, uh, but, uh, they didn’t come ask a bunch of questions, which law school should I go to or what, you know, which of these circumstances, they, they did what they did. And so, uh, I think that they wanted to show their own independence. And so… But two of them became attorneys, and the other later on, took a Master’s degree in education from Stanford. So…

DJ: And is—is it your son working at your law firm?

HG: That’s correct.

DJ: How is it like to work with your son at the same firm?

HG: Well, obviously, there’s a degree of pride in the fact that, yeah, he has selected to go into the immigration law field in terms of it. There are sometimes moments of frustration, [laughs], uh, you know, all of these relationships or all these circumstances have their ups and downs, you know just uh, but uh, yeah. I think that, uh, we want them to have full, ample opportunities to pursue their passions to the extent that they want.

MB: Um, what neighborhoods of Houston have you lived in with your family?

HG: Well, uh, let’s see. In Telephone Road, it was the, sort of the southeast side, and I don’t—it was mostly commercial. So I don’t know that it was, quote, a ‘neighborhood’ as such. On Crawford Street, it was not a residential neighborhood, it was a semi-commercial in, with the proximity of the hospital. Uh, West Dallas, uh,
had some residences on the other side of the street, uh, in terms of it, but once again, it was somewhat commercial, they had a bar across the street from us [laughs] they had a supply company… and so uh, you know, when—After graduating from, after coming back and starting my career, when we married we stayed in an apartment project off of uh, on the uh, west side, and then subsequently we bought our house out in Briar Grove Park. And so we lived in Briar Grove Park and from there moved here. So those were the jumps that we had.

DJ: Could you describe your daily routine at work?

HG: Daily routine, well, normally, we try to get in about, uh, 9:00, and uh we will be uh, reviewing the emails, of the, uh, various, uh, clients and communications to see what is emergent, see which cases or things have come to the forefront that need immediate attention. Uh, after we, uh, review that particular part of it, we’ll review the uh correspondence and the telephone messages and calls, make sure, uh, on certain days we’ll have meetings with the attorneys to review their cases and their, uh find out what problems or try to put out fires if we have, uh, one of our clients calling saying, hey, my employee can’t get into the county, or the Consul official has rejected the visa or whatever the problem may be. We will interview prospective new clients, uh, I do that evaluation of determining what options and opportunities may be available for them, and then, uh, subsequently, enable them to, uh, go ahead and make a determination as to, A: Do they want to retain our services, make other arrangements, or addressing what the problems may be. Uh, in the past, we used to go to interviews, at the Immigration Service. Now that’s relegated to some of our younger associates, for them to do the traveling and to be involved along that line. Uh, we used to also go to the U.S. Consulates overseas and visit with the clients in helping them, you know, process the various applications there to work out details.

Uh, I’m a member of a number of organizations that, uh, through that participation probably helps us open doors of opportunities, people get to know us and are familiar, one of them being the Greater Houston Partnership, the Houston Technology Center, Center for Houston’s Future, uh, just a number of various organizations, and uh, so this, uh, Thursday, we went to lunch at the Houston Engineers Society with the Asian Chamber of Commerce to make a scholarship, we made a donation of a thousand dollars to them and they awarded it to one of the Asian students that were going, getting ready to go to college. And so, uh, in the evening sometimes we’ll go to various activities, uh, that may be involved in uh, opening doors of opportunity for us to get to know clients and, uh, to get to know, uh, various people. So it’s, uh, [laughs] it’s a diverse area of activity.

MB: Can you talk a little bit about your involvement in the community organizations?

HG: Well, uh, yeah, I think it’s always important to be willing to give back and I think that that’s one of the things that our parents have shared with us, in terms of it, so they’re, my father was much, often engaged with uh, the Chinese uh, Merchant’s Association, the Gee Family Association, and activities, but most of them were within our community. I began to get involved in the broader community. Now, part of it is that we never did the volunteer work. What happens is that the Asians, frequently you need to go entice them, or encourage them to come join you and to get involved. We had a friend of ours that we’d gotten to know at First City National Bank, and they in turn had asked me to be involved in the Friends of the Houston Public Library. Now, you know, I’d been involved with uh, the Chinese Professional Club, the Gee Family Association, and a number—the Chinese American Citizens Alliance and served as President of all these—Houston Taipei Society, and most all of these were Asian-oriented. But when we got involved with the, uh Houston Public Library it was not minority involvement but a broader community and a broader engagement. And then subsequently, uh, served as President of that organization and implemented certain programs that have raised for them a lot of monies and resources in terms of it. And so um yeah…been invited to also be involved with the University of Texas Health Science, uh, with, uh, University of Houston, uh Greater Houston Partnership, gotten to know a number
of the people that very actively engaged in that, in those various communities, and as we did, they in turn invited us to participate in other organizations and groups there. The mayor asked us to serve on a number of committees to help do some evaluations as to Imagine Houston, things of this particular nature, and so there have been programs that, uh, benefit the broad segment of our community, and, uh yeah, we’ve volunteered and been engaged and, and involved with a number of those particular organizations and activities. But I guess, more recent…uh, we’ve been involved in the establishment of scholarships at the University of Texas, uh, Law School, the University of Texas Health Science Center, University of Houston, University of Houston Downtown, uh, at uh, Rice University, and uh, the uh, Chinese Professional Club, and so, Gee Family Association, all of these we’ve established and endowed scholarships for young people. We think that it’s important that the young people be given a full opportunity to blossom, and we don’t want them to be held back purely on financial circumstances. Anything that we can help, give them another opportunity or an occasion, I think that that’s beneficial to the broader community as such. So yeah, we’ve been very blessed, and so we’ve been trying to, you know, use some of those blessings for other people.

DJ: And yet, also support uh students back in China?

HG: And [laughs] well, building the school certainly has been one of the things. We have not sent resources or much for scholarship purposes, but that, that would be something probably in the future.

DJ: So the, the school, the school is, is it like a private school or a public school?

HG: Well, uh, it’s serving all of the people in our village, and in, I understand that they have children coming from other villages in that proximity. So uh, I, I never have…when I went back with my mother, we stayed in a motel, and I didn’t realize that—because we were back there visiting with her relatives, we were up ‘til 3 o’clock in the morning, I mean we just—the evening did not come to an end, it just kept going on and on.

We finally get to bed at 3 o’clock and then at 6 o’clock and behold, we hear this—I thought the television set had come on. When I finally got up enough, what is that noise that’s going out there? It turns out that we were right next door to a public school. The public school—at daybreak was…as the students were arriving, was playing Chairman Mao’s sayings, blasting them out, so that everybody was getting, you know, inculcated with all of these propaganda, and so, man, I…it was just amazing. We didn’t get any sleep that night at all.

DJ: Okay…do you have any more questions?

MB: Um, I just wanted to ask one last thing. Um, how do you self-identify? Like as Chinese-American, Asian American or just American, or anything else?

HG: Well, you know, I think I’m proud of the Chinese heritage, and I think that, uh, being Chinese-American—I think that ‘Asian American’ is something relatively new, in terms of it, I think that most of the activities that we’ve uh, you know, so…Now, I don’t know that my children would identify themselves that way, because I think since their mother is German, and you know, uh, that they may have a self-identification a bit different in that regard.

MB: Well thank you so much for your time.

HG: Okay…I didn’t know…

[The recorder is turned off, the interview ends]