

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

Interviewee: MR. SHELTON GEE
Interviewers: ANNE CHAO
Date/Time of Interview: Saturday, November 17, 2012 at 11:30 am
Transcribed by: ASIYA KAZI
Edited by: PRISCILLA LI (5/31/2017)
Audio Track Time: 1:11:31

Background:

Shelton Gee is a successful businessman who owned many grocery stores and retired at the age of 50.

Setting:

The interview was conducted at Golden Palace Restaurant, 8520 Bellaire Boulevard, Houston, TX 77036.

Interviewers:

Dr. Anne Chao graduated from Wellesley College and received her Master's and Doctoral degrees from Rice University, where she currently teaches as an adjunct lecturer in the History Department, focusing on the field of Modern Chinese History. She is the manager of the Houston Asian American Archive, as well as Adjunct Lecturer in the Humanities at Rice.

Interview Transcript:

Key

AC	Anne Chao
SG	Shelton Gee
RG	Rogene Gee Calvert
JGC (his cousin)	Judy Gee Chong
HG (Shelton's wife who did not participate in the interview)	Helen Gee
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

AC: Well, good afternoon and thank you so much for allowing me to interview you. Um I'm sitting here today, Saturday, November 17th; I'm here with Shelton and Shelton's wife (Helen, and his cousin) and uh Judy. So I guess I'd like to start by explaining that at Rice University we have the Houston Asian American Archive where we want to make oral history um interviews of the Asian American immigrants to Houston, so we can collect all of your stories and create a history because right now, we don't have a history of Asian Americans in Houston. Um so maybe, Shelton would you like to start and tell me uh what businesses you were in and how long you been in Houston?

SG: Well, actually my life has been very simple and I come to the U.S. uh about 1950 and uh I was 16 at the time so hardly anybody—know anybody here, doesn't speak the language, it was pretty hard for me. Uh at the same time, my dad lived in San Francisco and brought me here to Houston and I worked in the store from very beginning and even though I didn't speak but there's a lot of things you can do at the store. So at the time I went to school uh just to try to learn English. So for me and also I was living with my dad behind the store and it was very, very tiny. [AC and RC speaking in the background] So uh you know uh and during the daytime I went to school.

AC: What school did you go to?

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

SG: I went to uh—at first I went to this so call uh uh in Washington Street, I don't remember the name now, it's been so long. It's just a bunch of us from China just to learn English, nothing else. The Dow School in Washington uh Washington Avenue area.

RC: Who sponsored it?

SG: Just a HISD school. It's all the foreigners come there and we have about a group of 8-10 people that go attend classes, just to learn English.

RC: Wow. That's really good.

SG: So my first year there I said, 'Gee, I turn around, it's all the Chinese guy that come from the same area where I come from.' They all talk in Chinese, you know, so I thought how am I going to learn English if I keep talking to the people who come with me from the old homeland. So I decided after one year and then I go to uh junior high school, which is the north side, it's called Marshall Junior High School.

AC: Marshall Junior. Okay.

SG: Yeah. So I started there in 9th grade, after that and it used to be a three-year high school.

AC: Yeah.

SG: So in 10th grade I go to Jefferson Davis—Jefferson Davis High School, it's also in the north side. So I graduated from there in three year and by the time I did that I was already 22. I mean yeah, 20. Excuse me, 20. I was 20 and everybody else was 18.

AC: Right.

SG: So I decided that given my English background, it uh—that's very appealing to college, like uh you know wanna get an Engineering degree. So the first day the counselor said 'Oh, you got to work on your English first, before... , maybe put you in a mathematic major and then work from there to Engineering.' So at the time, you know I said, 'Oh this is going to be really hard, when people start one now, I have to start three or four hours and play catch up. So I decided that I go work for a little bit. So after that, that's back in '52, my mother and my sister come over. So. And uh we all lived in the store for the time being, for maybe a year or so before we moved to a house. But anyway, for me, when I finished at high school and uh I was working a little bit and decided to go to college, but at the time, you know, so I would come home and my dad asked me 'what are you going to do with yourself?' at that time, so, 'you going to be a teacher?' I said, 'why not.' So the Chinese respect a teacher. I mean, you make a good living but you never get ahead, that's the old saying, that's not the truth for today at all. You know, so. But uh it's a little discouraging what my dad said so I said, 'Okay, I'm just going to work in store for while and I was being drafted about a couple year later so. So I spent a couple years, two year in the service.

AC: What years were those, do you remember, when were you drafted, what years?

SG: What year? That was back in 70, '77, '78. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, 1957 to '58.

RC: That was the Korean, Korean War, '78?

SG: Uhhh. That's, that's after Korean War, before Cuban uh crisis...

RC: It was when Elvis was in the Army.

SG: Yeah, right. I was uh stationed almost with Elvis up there, in Arkansas, yep.

JGC: That's why I remember. Elvis was drafted at the same time.

SG: So, yeah. That was the same time that uh we were training in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. So after that, you know, so I got out and I still wanted to go to college, see. But the thing is, it's so happened that my sister broke her neck. You know. Remember Rogene, uh in the hospital a long time. The store needs people to work so I said, 'Okay' you know, and my mother had to work in the store too. So I said, 'Okay, I'll work in the store.' So,

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

gradually, you know, so ... stay away for long, and I just ...I don't think it's going to work for me...so I'm just like, uh, maybe one day take over my dad's business with her father together, they're partners.

AC: Oh, so Judy's father was partner with your father?

SG: Uh-huh, [**AC:** Oh I see.] that was back before the war.

AC: I see.

SG: Yeah. They were always together.

AC: Before, before World War II?

SG: Before World War II...yeah, uh-huh.

AC: That was 1940...

SG: That. Yeah. That's long before that. My dad uh arrived here back in 1935.

AC: Oh your dad came to America in 1935 but to San Francisco or to [**SG:** Yeah from-] Houston?

SG: San Francisco but my dad had been in the States for a long time. He was a teenager when he come over.

AC: From China?

SG: From China, yeah.

AC: And he arrived in San Francisco [**SG:** Arrive in San Francisco...] in 1935?

SG: Yeah and then he went to school in uh Fresno. Yeah. So after, uh uh been to Seattle, New York, worked in the restaurant business and he saved the money and he go back to China, got married and a year after that I was born. See. [**AC:** I see.] So he come back to the States. It used to be just the family in China and the, the breadwinner come over here and send money back so...

AC: Right, right.

SG: So that time uh my dad went back to China and then brought...after the second war, that was 1947, I believe, yeah. And then for one year and then I come next year.

AC: But your dad...did your dad bring you or he came back first and then you came?

SG: Oh. He come back first and [**AC:** And then you came later.] then I got a visa, I come later. See: in the old immigration laws, if I don't get back there, I may—if I don't land in the U.S. territory I won't be able to come in at all before I was 16.

AC: I see, I see.

SG: Yeah. So, it used to be, used to be that under the uh grandson of the citizen.

AC: I see.

SG: That's right. [**AC:** Right. Yeah] So that's how my dad got to, to U.S., I mean get to Houston from...after he got home, got married and then he come to San Francisco and uh his school friend Leeland Gee, remember?

RC: Yes. [inaudible-1 word]

SG: Uh-huh, right. And uh they would go to school in Fresno but he know that, my dad come back from China so he looked him [up] in the association, in the Gee association in San Francisco and said, 'what are you going do, where are you going to go' and he said, 'why don't you come to Houston?'

AC: Oh, so the people in the Gee Association in San Francisco suggested that your father come to Houston.

SG: Oh no, this Mr. Leeland...

AC: Oh, Mr. Leeland.

SG: He was already here with CY Chu [**AC:** Oh he was already here? Right.] and Wanto Chu and them. So, so...

AC: Oh okay. So Leeland was a friend of CY Chu and Wanto Chu?

SG: Uh uh I think Mr. Leeland he is somewhat related to them.

AC: Ohhh, and so he was already here?

SG: Yeah, he was already here.

AC: He want—he asked your father to come.

SG: Right, right, and then my father said, 'Oh I'm not by myself I have my brother here.' So that's, that's [inaudible 2 words]

AC: Oh, those brothers came together?

SG: Right, uh huh.

AC: Ohhhh. And what are you father and your uncle's names?

SG: My uncle's name is Wing Hon Gee.

AC: Okay.

SG: Wing Hon Gee.

AC: Okay, you may have to write it for me. Yeah.

SG: I'll spell it... W-I-N... W-I-N-G, yeah.

AC: Wing? Oh, oh W-I-N-G?

SG: Uh-huh.

AC: And then Hon.

SG: H-O-N.

AC: Uh-huh.

SG: And then G-E-E.

AC: This is Judy's dad?

SG: That's, that's—yeah that's her dad, [**AC:** Okay.] and my dad is Wing Choy Gee.

AC: Okay, C-H-O-Y.

SG: Yeah. C-H-O-Y.

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

AC: Gee. Okay, that's Shelton's name. Okay I think I have you on the, I think I have you on the family tree I've made. Okay.

SG: He was just...brought my dad over.

AC: Oh. So they're not related. The two brothers are related, but they're not related to CY Chu?

SG: No, no, no, we're not related to them at all.

JGC: Nobody was.

AC: But, but Leeland, Leeland was. Leeland's related to CY and Wanto. [**SG:** Leeland, he-]

SG:—probably somewhat related to them, I don't know how. [inaudible 2+ words]

RC: You know we say we're related if we all came from the same village. [**SG:** Yeah, yeah.] Like Raymond and my family is tighter because we came from the same villages, they came from a different village.

AC: Ohhhh, okay.

SG: Because few people, at that time in Houston, there was most of the Gee's and the Jeu's, which is the same last name as Chou, and the Lim's. So they more or less get together and just like a big family; [**AC:** Right, right.] so all the Gee's with Mr. Wanto Chu and CY Chu start the grocery store. I think they have about six or seven of them, [**AC:** Wow.] they're all together.

RC: Now, was your dad's store part of [**SG:** Part of the group.] the 'Yick,' so you heard of the 'Yick' stores.

AC: Yes- the 'Yick'—Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SG: The 'Yick' stores. See I start the Sun Yick.

AC: You're Sun Yick. Okay, I have actually I didn't bring a diagram, I have a diagram of Sun Yick. Okay, wonderful.

RC: What were they called, Sun Yick?

SG: Sun Yick.

JGC: My dad also had, before that, Jun Yick with uh uh [**RC:** Bill.] Henry.

RC: Oh Henry who was Raymond's brother. A Gee.

AC: Oh yes. Okay. Hen- Raymond's brother and your dad had Jun Yick. Okay, okay.

JGC: He knew some other people there but my father, we used to go visit Henry so he, he, he was telling me the connection.

AC: Ohhhh okay.

RC: Do you have any idea what year that was?

JGC: Mm-mmm.

SG: See when they first come over, none of them owned business. Just come here to work.

AC: They worked in Mr. Chu's grocery store...CY Chu...

SG: Mr. CY Chu and he then owns that store so that all the people that come in just work for him. And then gradually all the Gee's you know gradually so that get any share with and then work from there uh eventually

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

they take over the store. So whenever you build up your stock and so forth. [AC: Yeah, yeah.]

AC: So you dad, your dad worked for Mr. Chu first and then eventually bought the uh bought Sun Yick from Mr. Chu.

SG: Yeah. Sun Yick is the store, he worked at with other people, uh uh gradually they owned more and more share [AC: Yeah.] and that's the system Mr. CY Chu worked for. [AC: I see, I see.] The rest of the people...

AC: Do you have the Chinese name for Sun Yick? [SG: Sun Yick.] [RC: Chinese character.] Is there a Chinese character?

SG: Chinese name. I never use the Chinese name.

AC: Oh okay.

SG: We don't have the Chinese name.

AC: But it must mean something.

SG: Yeah, Sun Yik means [inaudible 2 Chinese words]

RC: Does it mean something?

JGC: I thought Sun means new.

AC: Oh *xin*?

SG: Sun means new, yeah...

JGC: Okay. But I don't know what the Yick means.

SG: Yick means uh well something like profit or something.

AC: Profit.

SG: Yeah. Yick means something, something more favor to you.

AC: Okay.

JGC: I remember when I was learning—when I went to Chinese school, and I was learning Chinese I remember that Sun meant 'new' because that was one of the words we were...

[crosstalk 14:14]

[SG explains to JGC meaning of Yick in Cantonese 14:16]

RC: What other Yick's where there? What other stores? Sun?

AC: I should have brought the diagram.

[crosstalk 14:25]

SG: There's Yang Yick.

RC: Oh Yang Yick.

AC: Yeah, I'm not sure. I got it all from the Gee Family Association book. In your Gee family's—

RC: Oh! Judy and I worked on that.

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

AC: Well it's a very—it's my Bible; I go through everything.

JGC: It took a long time [laughs] to put that together. We'll never do it again.

AC: Oh. It's a good source.

RC: It's a start. I think you're going to add a lot of it.

AC: Uh. Yeah but my paper is 40 pages, so your book is much thicker.

SG: So that's how we settled down in Houston...

AC: I see. And since you worked in the store, you took over your dad's business?

SG: Yeah, back in 1969 and I was already married. I went to Hong Kong and got married. You know after service, after my service in 19—uh uh—59 and I worked at the store, I tried to go to college but I didn't go to college and my sister got hurt and then I worked at the store and I said, 'Dad, you know now that the store doesn't, I mean ... my mother went back to work so the store can do without me so I decided, well you know I might want to take a trip. Chinese have all family from China, they want their son to get married. So, you know in their 20's or the latest is 30, [**AC:** Right, right.] so they want, they want me to go back to China to get married. So, what I did was went to Chi- went to San Francisco—when I arrive San Francisco, I changed my mind... I was too young, I don't want to get married yet. So, when you're young, there's a lot of activities in San Francisco...

RC: Were y'all matched?

SG: Yeah.

RC: Were you matched?

JGC: He met somebody over there that introduced them.

SG: So I thought well, I'm young, I got to, you know, enjoy your life before I settle down. So what happened I spent two years in San Francisco and uh I went to school for computer, the wiring, you remember, one time the key punching?

RC: Programming...oh yeah.

[crosstalk 16:30]

SG: I learned the wiring. But when I got through with that and said yeah, this thing is a 24-hour day. You have to go by ship. So I said, 'Well if I start working I'm not to have a chance to go. To go back to to Hong Kong just for a trip.' Not—marry or not but I tried to get to enjoy the trip before I settled down. So, that's what happened. I went to Hong Kong, I met her. She's the friend of my old schoolmate, way back uh when I was 13 in China. [**AC:** In China? Ohhh.] So it happened, it's my school friend's sister. So we got married and come back and tried to stay in San Francisco but she didn't agree with the weather, all foggy, you know cold. So she got headache every morning so we come back home. So that's how we end come to here.

JGC: I did better in San Francisco than I did in Houston.

SG: So that's how we—how I come back to Houston and settled down. So eventually, '69, my dad went to see a doctor and he said you have a heart problem. And on the way he come home, take off his apron, and he said 'I quit,' that's it...

AC: That's it and you had to take over.

SG: At that time, my daughter's already about four years already—yeah about four years old. Uh-huh. So, so I took over my dad's part.

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

AC: And this would be Sun Yick. But you just took over Sun Yick?

SG: Yeah, take over with my partner.

JGC: With my father.

SG: With her father. They're partners.

AC: Right, right.

SG: So I took over my dad's part and then come in 1971 and uh it was hard to find people to work you know, had that scary time.. He was getting ready to retire. He said, 'Oh, I'm not going to do it no more, so I'm going to let you look for people, let you do the worrying, you know it's all I can help you out.' So I said, 'that's fine' so I took over her dad's part and then his—her father, my uncle and her mother still come to store and help me out. So. He helped me get the merchandise and whatever. So, so that's how I took over.

RC: How long did that happen—last, where her dad uh uh helped you?

SG: Oh, about, matter of fact he helped me quite a few years. Back in about 70, 70, '75, '74, your dad had a problem with the kidney or something. Remember?

JGC: Kidney?

SG: Kidney or...

JGC: I'm trying to remember what year he had lung surgery.

SG: Yeah, lung surgery.

JGC: Yeah, he had lung cancer.

RC: So that's when he turned it over to you.

[crosstalk 19:46]

SG: That's back in '73 or '74 [**RC:** Somewhere around there.]... and he would even come help me until quite a few years before, maybe another couple of years. So, uh by 1984 when uh all the Vietnamese people coming looking for business, so uh you know, you're at the store and people get robbed and all that stuff. So my elderly mother at home, she just couldn't stand it, she would just walk around the house and don't know what happened, so she changed the—for to sell it, my mother suggest, 'Well, maybe you ought to sell the store.' [**AC:** I see.] So I was only 50 years old, so what am I going to do? You know, so all my life is in grocery store. I don't know any other field. [**AC:** Right, right, right.] So I said, well just sell it and if you have a chance and then decide to look for something, maybe a 9 to 5 job, even if it's a janitor or something, you certainly can find something. Uh so at that time I said, well the Vietnam people kept on, so that—more or less, robbing you so bad the business is so bad. [**AC:** Wow.] So you get good prices, so okay, I sold. So that's uh that's my uh business career.

RC: And you never found something else?

SG: Well, I didn't really want to find something until maybe I took a couple years off or something. [**RC:** Yeah.] [**AC:** Do something else? Relax?] So I did, remember Jimmy Gee, remember Jimmy Gee?

RC: Jimmy Gee...

SG: Edward, Edward's brother. Alfred (?) Let's see [**RC:** No.]...no, no not Edward.

JGC: Jester is Jimmy—Jester is Edward's brother.

SG: Jimmy. Oh, oh, oh. The brother is Edward. He's uh... just live in [inaudible 1 word] too. Remember [inaudible 1 word]?

JGC: Toy? (?)

SG: No, not Toy (?).

[crosstalk 21:54]

SG: It's uh one of the elderly...Edward...

JGC: Well, I don't know. I don't know.

[crosstalk 22:10]

AC: Um so.

SG: So...it's uh Edward Gee, I guess you don't remember. He was working at Jumbo, do you remember Jumbo?

RC: Yeah I remember Jumbo.

[crosstalk 22:29]

SG: He worked in Jumbo and he said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I'm not doing anything.' And he said, 'why don't you come down and learn this, uh, you know, maybe manage around the cash register' and all that, that's what he was doing, he said, we need somebody to help.

[crosstalk 22:47]

RC: Yeah I remember you went to Jumbo for a while but I don't remember when. [**SG:** Four days.]

SG: Four days, I said, whoa, everything is different. It's not like a pop and mom store.

[crosstalk 23:01]

SG: You have to, you have to remember all these codes for the vegetables.

RC: Jumbo was one of the first warehouse type stores; it was, you know, it was new.

JGC: Owned by Chinese.

SG: From, from uh Sacramento.

AC: Oh, Sacramento, okay.

SG: It was a big store.

RC: It was an American store—they didn't speak Chinese or Asian?

[crosstalk 23:25]

SG: It's an American store.

RC: So you worked in Jumbo for a little while.

SG: Four days...four day, four day, I just couldn't keep up with the technology, you know? With all the remembering the code, it was just too hard for me. And then besides, the younger kids, they work more faster than you do, you can't compete with that.

[crosstalk 24:13]

AC: So, um where was your store? Where was Sun Yick, where was it located?

[crosstalk 24:26]

SG: Oh that was uh...No, no wait a minute...

[crosstalk 24:28]

JGC: I was too young to remember that address...

SG: It's on uh called the fifth ward...

[crosstalk 24:40]

JG: 3316 Lyons Ave.

SG: Lyons Ave.

AC: 3316 Lyons Ave. Okay. Isn't that where CY Chu's store was too?

SG: Pardon?

AC: Was CY Chu's store also on Lyon's Avenue?

SG: No...there got so many stores, they were lots, all over. Mostly on the 3rd ward, [**AC:** Oh 3rd ward.] I think they had about maybe five or six stores.

AC: So, is your Sun Yick also in the African American neighborhood?

SG: Yeah, yeah, uh huh. Uh...

AC: And it was dangerous later on?

SG: Yeah. It was dangerous.

AC: It wasn't dangerous in the beginning.

SG: Not at that time, that time it was good.

[crosstalk 25:23]

SG: [inaudible 2+ words] put in the door. Nobody bothered...that time was good. People are very um very good to us. And so that's the store on Lyons Ave., in 1950, let's see, in 1955 and uh the owner of the property, they own the property, they want the store back, so the lease is up. So we moved to, to—out there to Cashmere Gardens, Trinity Gardens, Trinity Gardens, Lockwood...that store is still uh still running...

RC: Who owns it?

[crosstalk 26:10]

SG: It's uh—I rent it. Uh-huh yeah.

RC: And that's been the transformation of...

JGC: From Vietnamese to Middle East.

RC: Right. Many of us sold our stores to the Vietnamese when the Vietnamese started coming in the '80's. Like, like he said, it was hard turning down a good deal. [**AC:** Yeah.] And our dads were all you know aging and also were retiring.

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

JGC: And we weren't taking over.

RC: The second generation wasn't taking over. So then, what we have found is that the Vietnamese have sold it to the Middle Eastern [**AC:** Wow.] because a lot of them are in the convenient stores and all that. So.

AC: The Middle Eastern were in convenient stores and then transitioned to grocery stores...

RC: And South Asians... Yeah Middle Eastern and South Asians...

JGC: They upgraded from convenient to grocery store because it's probably less dangerous for them.

AC: Uh that's right.

RC: That's right.

AC: So, did you have employees working for you when you owned Sun Yick?

SG: Yeah, I did. There's uh we had people, it used to be they deliver. It was all in the neighborhood. Yeah.

AC: I see. Can I ask how much did you pay them, by the hour,

SG: By the hour?

AC: How much was it per hour?

SG: I don't remember the minimum. At that time it was maybe a couple dollar or \$3.00 or something like that.

AC: Long time ago.

[crosstalk 27:38]

RC: We paid salary but maybe based on hourly wage but you know those that were like butchers...

SG: Yeah, they got more. [inaudible 1 word]

RC:—cashiers, or delivery boys, or people we just paid by the hour.

AC: I see...

SG: But I think when it comes to '70 or something then they stopped uh the minimum hour. Even the Chinese store, you have grown so much wiser and all that.

RC: Seventy-what? Seventy-what? Hours a week?

SG: Yeah, hour wages.

JGC: In the seventies, the hourly wages.

SG: Yeah, in the seventies.

RC: Oh I'm sorry. Yeah.

SG: Maybe back in '75 or '76, I don't remember and they you know the law said that you have to pay minimum. If you know you have business over a certain amount a year or something.

AC: And can I ask, um how much money you made every month in the grocery business?

SG: Mmm. Well, in our own business uh you have to report, to the Internal Revenue. I mean. The bookkeeper

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

keep up your books. So yeah. But uh as far as the amount of money, it varies. I mean, you might have a month of better business than the others. You know it's uh I think for me, in business, not count a day or a month, in a, in a year. Annually...

AC: And how much did you make per year?

SG: Oh, I, I, I really don't...that time, because uh even though uh, like we don't...even, the, the, the uh owner we learn as a family. We don't pay every month. We got a book there, and then say, you... like the two brother runs it...If I need some money, I'd say, 'Gee, I need ...send some more money' and whatever you need again, you do that again...So end up a year or something...So whoever do more make it up for the other, see.

AC: Were you able to use the money you earned from the grocery store to go into real estate or-?

SG: Yeah, right, you go into real estate or go into stock market or whatever you choose.

AC: I see, I see. That's good. I was asking Gordon Gee and Gordon said maybe, I may misremembering but he said maybe \$50,000 is what you needed to start a grocery store in the old days.

SG: Well it varies, see how big the store is. So yeah.

AC: But for a small store...

SG: Different size store, different capital, I mean different amount. But uh it's so nice that Mr. Levitt, that most of the people start with the Grocery Supply...

[crosstalk 30:36]

AC: Yeah I heard grocery store-

SG: But in our case it's not, in our case we don't work for them, that's a judge...Judge yeah Judge Robert. That's where we get the money.

JGC: I didn't know that dad and, and your father borrowed money and they paid it back very quickly.

SG: Uh-huh. He didn't want it. We would pay ahead of time and he would say, 'No, no, you pay me on time.'

RC: That's very interesting because Chinese yeah they don't like to borrow.

SG: Judge Robert is uh back then...

JGC: Yeah I didn't know his name I just knew that they had borrowed.

SG: I forgot his first name...

[crosstalk 31:18]

SG: Judge Robert, he is a very good...he's one of the—a good attorney in Houston...

AC: Why would he be bor—but why was he in the lending money business? Was he in the business of lending money?

SG: Yeah, lending people as a business. Yeah, uh-huh.

[crosstalk 31:32]

JGC: He was an attorney...

SG: Because uh. No, he didn't do that kind of business—it's not business, it's just personal loans.

AC: Just a personal loan.

RC: Why do you think he was so generous?

SG: To us? I don't know...somehow that uh uh...somehow, he trust the brothers, he trust the brothers.

AC: So he lent money to the brothers to start, to start Sun Yick? [**SG:** Right, yeah.] And then the brothers paid back.

SG: Yeah...when we moved, he loaned us money to build the store, to start the store...

AC: Oh. From the one on Lyons to Lockwood. [**SG:** The one in Lockwood. Yeah.] And what was the address in Lockwood?

SG: 6729 Lockwood.

JGC: That's indelible in his memory.

AC: What year, what year was the move?

SG: What?

[crosstalk at 32: 19]

AC: When did you from Lyon to Lockwood?

SG: 1955.

AC: Oh, so 1955 was Lyons to Lockwood.

SG: Yeah moved to Lockwood.

AC: And how long was the store on Lyons? How many years was the store opened?

SG: On Lyons, oh that I know. I know my dad started there in 1935, so that probably—year before that—many, many years before that.

AC: Before that?

SG: Yeah. Mr. Wanto Chu, he be coming in the... he was a teacher in San Antonio and he come to Houston back in the late 20's or something...

AC: Yeah. 1926, I think he came to Houston from San Antonio.

SG: Yeah, otherwise I don't know.

JGC: I don't know when my father joined your father because...

SG: That's in 1935.

JGC: No...he wasn't.

SG: The store?

JGC: Yeah.

SG: Oh, he worked in a different store...

JGC: He worked in a different store and then he...

SG: After, after the war...

JGC: Because he went to California during the war.

SG: Yeah, your dad went to California to avoid the draft. Yeah.

JGC: No, he just moved to California [**SG:** To farm.] and he worked on the farms.

SG: Yeah, he worked on the farms. So you can uh exempt from the farm workers. So people go out there to do farm work and then...

JGC: Oh, exempt from serving in the military.

SG: Yeah, military, to avoid the military.

JGC: 'Cause May and Herbert went to California with them, I wasn't born yet.

RC: Oh, okay, but they were born here?

JGC: Yeah, they were born here in Houston.

SG: So, so when—after the war your dad come back and then took over part of it to uh run the store when my dad go back to China, that's in 19- uh that's in 1947.

AC: Who is—who's older? Your dad or Judy's father?

RC: Your dad was older.

SG: Yeah, my dad was older.

AC: By how many years?

SG: Oh by, probably about 10 years.

AC: Oh that much older?

JG: Yeah big difference.

SG: Big difference. Yeah

AC: Ohhh, okay, okay.

JGC: Wasn't there a sister in between?

SG: No, the sister's younger. Your dad 1913, my dad is uh '05, 1905. My dad was born in 1905.

AC: Your dad Wing Choy was born in 1905 and...

SG: And that is 1913...

RC: You know Judy's brother was Herbert Gee. That is the judge for which the courthouse is named.

AC: Oh Herbert Gee. I did not know that, okay.

SG: Judge Robert that loaned them the money that build the store...

RC: This Robert guy...

SG: Buy the house...

RC: Is his first name Robert or is his last name?

SG: Huh?

JGC: His last name...

SG: I think last name...Judge something Robert.

RC: 'Cause Levitt, I know, was very generous. Very supportive of the Grocery Supply.

AC: Yeah. I know Gordon—he kept on saying that Grocery Supply really helped.

RC: They really did. They trusted our—

SG: We didn't go that route because Judge Robert uh financed all that, you know each one of them buy a, buy a real house. [**AC:** Right.] All borrowed money from uh Judge Robert.

JGC: Maybe he was an attorney at the time.

AC: Maybe, maybe. How much money did they borrow, do you know? Like thousands, tens of thousands?

SG: I don't exactly know. I don't exactly know. It's all mostly uh their father do the uh you know accounting. He actually, my father just there but her father mostly run the store.

JGC: Operational manager...

AC: Right. He dealt with the outside. I see. That's wonderful.

SG: He's younger and he know more, a little more English. So, so he always spoke to—

AC: How many children do you have?

SG: I have two.

AC: And what are they doing?

SG: Uh my daughter lives in California, in San Carlos.

AC: San Carlos?

SG: San Carlos, California.

AC: Okay.

RC: Graphics Designer...

AC: Oh graphics designer...

RC: Right?

SG: Huh?

RC: Graphics designer.

SG: Yeah, she's a graphics designer. And then uh my son, Andrew, who lives in Sugar Land.

AC: Oh. And what does he do?

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

SG: He's uh an engineer.

AC: Engineer. Okay, okay. So do you regret not ever going to college? Do you regret that?

SG: No in a way, but again, if I do maybe even I be an engineer and might work at NASA somewhere but I won't be able to retire at 50.

RC: Oh no.

AC: That's true—you would have to work harder.

SG: Yeah, I sold my store before 50 and never did go back to work.

AC: Do you enjoy retirement?

SG: Very much so.

AC: What did you do, what do you do?

SG: I just travel a bit and you know take a cruise and have family in San Francisco. We always spend a whole month in there. And [AC: Retirement is good.] uh my sister lived in New York, I'd go visit her and uh uh when we travel to, to Hong Kong and Taiwan, we'd meet this couple from Canada and the two daughters, at the time, were five and seven and we sort of got hit, we really liked each other so they become our goddaughters.

AC: How nice, how nice!

SG: They become our goddaughters.

AC: All this came because you retired.

RC: Well, and you got good at the stock market; didn't you do the stock market?

SG: Well...that's speculate.

RC: Day trading...

SG: Well, I did at one time but come to think of it, you know, and that's, that's in a way not worth it, because the stock market hit [inaudible 2+ words]. It literally disrupt your work [RC: Yeah, it's addictive I'm sure.], so I quit. You know, in the long term, I just invest in long term. How do you get by fifty, you know. [AC: Yeah, you can only do that—] So for life, for me, I live a simple life, very, very simple. So at the time I got money to put up for my kids to go to college, all my house is paid for, I don't owe anything so I said, hey you know simple life, it doesn't need to be much, but only for insurance, how high the insurance is. So...

AC: Where do you live right now, your house, where do you live?

SG: In Meyerland.

AC: In Meyerland. Okay, okay, that's great.

RC: They've had a multi-generational home for a long time. His mom has lived with him forever [SG: Yeah uh-huh.] [AC: Wow.]. And he raised his kids there.

SG: Yeah. My mother lived with me for all this time. Uh my dad passed away in 1971; she was a widow for forty years, and she just passed away last year at the age of 96.

AC: That's a long life! Wonderful!

SG: So yeah. And then besides, just healthy. Never needed anything.

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

RC: Well you took very good care of her.

SG: Very refreshing for us because we didn't have to take care of her. One night she was watching...

JGC: She had a sister up in Connecticut up until the last couple years of her life.

AC: Wow.

RC: The only thing was her hearing but other than that...she gardened, she gardened and walked.

SG: She sews; she was a good seamstress. She plant flowers; she love to plant flowers. [**AC:** That's fabulous.] Garden with all kinds of vegetables. Yeah. Just hard working all her life. She worked in the store and it's you know, it's tremendous. She just never stopped. Uh never stopped. She worked six, seven days a week, she would come home, she'd clean the house and even mow the lawn sometimes, just everything. And she is healthy and the night before she was watching the Rockets game, she kind of dozed off a little bit and after that she'd say 'Who won, who won?' I'd said, 'The Rockets won.' She loved to watch basketball when Yao Ming was here. Yeah. So she went to sleep and never did get up. She went to sleep and never did get up.

AC: Wow, that's a blessing. Well, we'll let you eat and maybe I can ask Judy some questions. Thank you.

SG: My stories are very simple.

AC: No, there's so many more questions, but I'll let Judy talk so you can eat. Please eat—have something to eat. So Judy, maybe you want to tell us about your dad, what you remember growing up and your own experiences.

JGC: Um first of all my father, my uncle, my mother's oldest brother went to school together in China, so he already knew my father but it wasn't through him that the marriage was arranged. Um it was—my Grandfather had arranged their marriage and uh he knew that my uncle went to school with my father so he was—he asked my uncle to accompany my mother to Houston for them to get married.

AC: So the Grandfather is the father's father or the mother's father?

JGC: My—the mother's father.

AC: Okay, he arranged the marriage.

JGC: Right. Right. So um um I was told that they were the first Chinese couple to actually get married in Houston but I don't know. So, so she traveled to California and, although my mother was born in California, she was actually raised in China because at that time they could go back and forth between U.S. and China easily.

AC: What is—what was your mom's name?

JGC: Oh, she's still living. It's Lois—Lois Wong.

AC: Lois...

JGC: Lois Wong...W-O-N-G.

AC: And she could go back and forth those days.

JGC: Yeah, yeah my father—my grandfather was a U.S. citizen and so because of that, she came from a really large family, there were like 11—at least 11, 12 kids in their family and they could go back and forth all the time.

AC: Okay. Is she from the same village as your dad?

JGC: No, she was born in California. But she lived in a village, I don't know which one but she lived in one you know 'cause they would go back and stay for several years. They would just go back and forth.

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

RC: How did your grandfather become a citizen? I'm just curious how he became a citizen back then.

JGC: I don't really know. I just know that he was a citizen; I don't think he was born here.

AC: Was he a merchant? I mean, what was his occupation?

JGC: He was actually a journalist.

AC: Okay, so he's college educated.

JGC: Yeah, yeah that's why his trips would be to China quite a bit because of his, his journalism, what he would do.

RC: That's very unusual.

AC: So he didn't have a grocery store? Your grandfather he was a journalist.

JGC: No, no—grocery store. But they the time I came along he was retired and everything so...I just know from what my aunts and uncles have said. Uh he was one of the big supporters of ...what's it called gua—

RC: Chiang Kai-shek?

JGC: Yeah

AC: Kuomintang. Kuomintang.

JGC: He was a big supporter of Chiang Kai-shek, Kuomintang.

AC: Your grandfather?

JGC: My grandfather.

RC: Was he active in the government?

JGC: I don't know.

RC: But he was a journalist so he probably would have been, yeah.

JGC: Yeah and he actually used to raise money for them; so that's just—my uncle was telling me that stuff.

AC: Because the Kuomintang goes to overseas to raise a lot.

JGC: Mm-hm. And that's what he would do.

SG: I know he had some connections with the government in [AC: In China.] U.S...

AC: Um I think Sun Yat-sen would be the person at the time because given the timeline; your grandfather supported Sun Yat-sen.

JGC: He did, yeah. So um and so that's why he was traveling to China a lot. So he would take the family and sometimes they would just stay and he'd come back. Anyway, she was raised in China, she went to school in China and, and I think she went to school through like the 11th grade and then came back to the U.S. and married my father; she came back to marry my father.

AC: Okay and your father was already...

JGC: He was already in Houston.

AC: And already partner with Shelton's dad?

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

JGC: Well that was 1939; I think he was still working for CY Chu. He was in one of the Yick stores; I think he was in Jun Yick at that time.

RC: And he was probably in the same group with my father, and several others, Young Yick, that were single at the time and trained under CY Chu.

JGC: It was, it was kind of like a group ownership. [laughs]

RC: Or apprenticeship probably.

JGC: Yeah. And then eventually a lot of them would go out and open their own stores and that's when my father left to go in with his father.

AC: Right. Wow, So without CY Chu there wouldn't be a lot of Gee family members here.

RC: That's how we feel.

JGC: Yeah. That's, that's right.

AC: Why did he do that? He just it because he wanted to help people or was he...

JGC: I have no idea.

RC: We knew him but...what do you think the Chu brothers were, willing to train and help others to-

SG: I think that that you know Mr. Chu was a teacher.

RC: Yes, he was a teacher.

JGC: He was college educated. He went to Rice. Didn't he go to Rice?

RC: I don't know about Rice but I know he came from San Antonio.

JGC: Okay, I thought he went to Rice.

AC: No, I think he went to Berkeley but not the Berkeley we know, it's the Berkeley College in California.

SG: I think. He just you know he I mean like uh [inaudible 3+ words] come from that village (?), so more or less he wanted to get the Chinese to start something in you know in business. But in order to do that you have to you know work your way up.

RC: So have you had a chance to talk with uh Calvin yet? He's the only surviving of the CY Chu [**JGC:** Of the CY Chu.] side.

AC: Oh no, yeah, yeah, yeah...

RC: We'll have to get you to talk with Calvin, his dad is CY Chu. And Wanchu's wife is still alive and...

JGC: She's very sick.

RC: Very sick...and her English isn't all that great. And then uh several adult children. Who would be the best, do you think?

JGC: I know Wellesley.

RC: Wellesley that's what I was going to say. Norma is pretty talkative though.

JGC: Very talkative.

RC: So Norma might be, Norma is the second daughter. Yeah.

JGC: I think Wellesley would probably be...

RC: You think Wellesley or Norma? Maybe the two of them.

JGC: So he came here—my mom came here to marry my father and then my uh—almost immediately my sister was born. [laughs] And then two years later my brother was born and the war broke out so my father—my mother's family all lives in California. So he went back to San Francisco uh to my mother's family and then he uh went to work on the farm. Uh in fact, he said he grew asparagus. [laughs]

AC: Oh okay, in California.

JGC: Yeah. So he did that plus he worked in the restaurants as a cook. That's how he learned to cook. And so, after the war was over they came back to Houston and actually went back in the grocery store business. Again, CY Chu was training all of the Gee relatives on how to run a business because they you know they didn't come from a background to do that. So he was more or less the training all these uh cousins how to run business and as I was saying, they would run a group store and when they uh were well enough trained they went out and opened their own store, either with another member of that group or by themselves. So he's really the basis of all the, all the grocery stores that our families, we all had something in common because all our families own grocery stores.

AC: And they were all trained by Mr. Chu?

JGC: Yes, and so uh we would pay our homage to Mr. and Mrs. Chu. At least once a year, they would always come to our house for like Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners and stuff like that. So—so I mean it wasn't—they kept a close connection. I remember growing up; we always went to visit them. You remember where Rosedale is and that area...

RC: Yep, that's where they lived. The Wanchu's lived right there at the corner of Rosedale and Lodged or something like that.

JGC: CY Chu didn't live that far from them.

AC: What was your impression of them, were they very nice people?

JGC: Stern...[laughs]

RC: We were young children.

JGC: Yeah, we were young children, running around and they...

RC: And Mrs. CY Chu was very smart woman [**JGC:** Yes.] and a modern woman. I guess she was well educated, I don't know her background but she spoke English well. So you know she-

JGC: She never had an accent.

RC: She was different from most others.

JGC: She was like the godmother of everybody. [laughs] She was the, she was the stern one. Mr. CY Chu, he seemed very, uh he was very quiet and congenial and you know, that's how I always remember Mrs. Chu as being very stern. [laughs]

RC: The outgoing one.

SG: She was very talkative.

JGC: She was very talkative and she would teach you manners. [laughs] I mean, you know, when I was growing up that's how I remember her. [laughs] So.

SG: In the beginning I was single and uh they were the only family here.

RC: That's right.

JGC: It was a family orientation.

SG: So whenever there was a social gathering or some tradition, holiday or something, they all went to their house.

JGC: She was I mean she was very nice...

AC: Yeah, they were very nice, but just stern.

JGC: Yeah. And maybe just that way to children.

RC: Yeah, I was just going to say we were young.

SG: You know, they had a family down here and the rest of us were single and we had nowhere to go. In my rest days, before we come here we always go to the On Leong Association, you know, so once—as soon as you get off from the store, you go to the market and buy the stuff for them and then people just cook there.

RC: Cook it up and play mahjong and eat together.

AC: Mahjong?

RC: Mahjong.

SG: [inaudible 3+ words] I don't have the [inaudible 2+ words]

RC: I know! That's the other thing that keeps him young.

AC: Mahjong?

RC: They play mahjong.

JGC: It keeps their mind going, especially the way they play.

[crosstalk at 51:34]

RC: Well, I'm going to leave because I have another appointment...I'm sorry to eat and run, I feel bad. What kind of deadline are you on?

AC: Well my paper is due December 8th. The paper has to be done at a certain time but it's only delivered on the 8th at the conference. But I can continue write—writing about it. So we can—if the deadline- if you can't get it, we can do it later.

RC: Are you touch with Calvin? Do you talk to Calvin? Does he still owe—own a store?

SG: No.

RC: He's retired.

SG: He's retired.

RC: But he's still married to Debbie right?

JGC: No, that's Harris that's married to Debbie.

RC: Oh, Harris...who is he married to?

JGC: She's a Chinese name.

RC: Calvin's wife.

JGC: Geng (?).

RC: Geng (?). Okay. So you don't know him that well to call him?

SG: I don't know his number.

RC: Okay, okay, I'll try to find it. And the other one was Norma or Wellesley. Okay.

AC: Thank you so much, wonderful to see you. Happy Thanksgiving!

SG: Allow me to pay.

AC: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no next time.

SG: Really...

AC: No, no, no, no, no... Judy, can you stay for a few minutes—for like 10 minutes or so?

JGC: Sure.

AC: Can I take a picture of you? Let me take a picture of you.

SG: Sure, sure.

AC: Because I can put it in the library.

[Crosstalk 53:24] [AC takes picture]

AC: What is your name?

HG: So Kam.

SG: S-O.

HG and SG: S-O.

AC: Uh-huh.

HG and SG: K-A-M.

AC: N or M?

SG: K-A-M.

AC: M. So Kam.

SG: Her English name is Helen.

AC: Helen, okay, Gee.

SG: She mostly use—people know her by the name of Helen but on paper...

RC: But her legal name is So Kam.

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

AC: So Kam. Okay, thank you so much it was very nice meeting you. Judy, can I take a picture of you?

JGC: Oh okay, do you want me to stand up?

AC: No, I'll just take a picture of you. So, continue the story.

JGC: Yeah. When my father came back from California they lived uh in a garage apartment, it was either owned by Wanto Chu or CW Chu, one of the two brothers, until they, they uh bought a house. So um I was born in '46 so they came back, my sister was born in '40, 1940 and my brother 1942, so then they came back and I was born in '46 and by then he was already in a store, I don't know, I, I, I think it was Sun Yick, but I don't know for sure. Yeah. I just know that Jun Yick had about four or five people in it, and so Raymond's brother was one of them and I think Rogene's father was one of them and then uh there were a couple that Rogene and I hang out with and their, their father was in one of them. So when my father and um...I just remember mostly my father being in business with my uncle and Shelton and uh uh and his family weren't here yet but I remember Shelton came in and then much later you know his mother and my cousin Lilian came in, Lilian was about three years old and Lilian is two years younger than me.

AC: And Lilian is Shelton's sister?

JGC: Uh huh, so there's a big age gap.

AC: Right, right.

JGC: And we had family that worked in the store, my mother's uh two brothers worked in the store besides Shelton and Shelton, they were close in age. And then um they had other cousins, cousins that worked in the store.

AC: Were they all with the last name of Gee?

JGC: Uh legally, their last names were Gee. Two of them, two of them went by the last name of Wong but they were really Gee's.

AC: Okay. [laughs]

JGC: They were the only ones that didn't have Gee in their last name though, in the store. They all went to uh Jeff Davis High School. My uncles and Shelton all went to Jeff Davis High School.

AC: So they worked in the store at night. They went to school and came back from school and worked in the store.

JGC: Right and they lived in the upstairs from the store.

AC: And the stores were the Lyons and Lockwood.

JGC: Lyons Avenue. Not Lockwood, Lyons Avenue. So they—I didn't know why we left Lyons Avenue until he told you but I remember we built the store on Lockwood, I was like 10 years old, we built the store on Lockwood and uh moved in.

AC: Was it a big store?

JGC: Yeah, yeah. [**AC:** It was big.] Because most of our friends had real small stores 'cause it was just run by one family and their children worked in the store, so they were small stores. Our store was big enough for two families and actually Rogene's father, had uh the last store they had was the like the size of our store, a little bit smaller but you know it was bigger than mom and pop stores.

AC: Okay. And you sold wine and liquor, right?

JGC: We sold wine and beer. Yeah I remember. And all of us worked in the store, my brother and sister and

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

plus Shelton worked in the store and Lilian also worked in the store. And Lilian and I were too young to sell the wine and beer so whenever a customer would come to buy it, we'd have to have somebody else punch it and then we finished out the rest of the groceries.

AC: In the old days they came to you with a list and they didn't go into the aisles...

JGC: Oh no, they did.

AC: They did? Oh.

JGC: They shopped there. That's why we had to have a big enough store 'cause they—we actually had grocery baskets for them to go up and down the aisles.

AC: That's a big store.

JGC: Yeah, it was, it was a big store.

AC: Because I think, it was Gordon that said, in the old days they gave you a list and you went and picked out all the items for them because they couldn't go into the list—into the aisles, but that must be a small store.

JGC: Yeah, those are the really small stores that had very narrow aisles and stuff. Uh no, our store was a big store; it was considered a big store. Um.

AC: And uh. So you had employees who were not related but they were cousins, right? But did you at one point, uh like have Hispanics or African Americans?

JGC: Well on Lyons all of our employees were relatives but on Lockwood, besides the family working, we had workers that were from the neighborhood and they were all, all African American and they were you know ranged in age because the driver who delivered groceries was, I thought he was the elderly man, he was probably in his 40's, but I thought he was the elderly man. [laughs]

AC: So were you paid when you were working?

JGC: No.

AC: Not at all?

JGC: No, at the end of the year we got a bonus [laughs] but we weren't paid while we worked. Yeah. If we needed spending money we would just ask them for some money and they would give it to us. We were paid, we were working out of the goodness of our heart and because we were family. [Both laughs] But I always put that on my resume that I worked at a grocery store. [**AC:** That you worked in the grocery store. Resume building.] So I didn't tell how much I was paid, I always put that in my resume and that got me my early jobs because there were jobs working in stores, like, when my husband was in the Army I would work in the PX and so that got me my jobs in the PX.

AC: Yeah, yeah that's good. What kind of jobs did you do in the grocery store? Anything your parents asked you to?

JGC: Well. Yeah, anything they asked us to do. From the time we were really little we couldn't read yet but we could stack the cans and just—we had to just make sure the labels showed the front of the labels. You can see pictures, so that's what we did, we stacked the lower shelves because we couldn't reach the top shelves. So those were our first jobs and then we would also sweep up at the end of the day and, and as we got older we did more things. My brother was a butcher um and Shelton was a butcher and my sister and uh Lilian and I ran the cash registers and uh Lilian and I still, we were young enough that we still had our duties to restock the shelves. So we did a variety of things. And then uh-

AC: Did your mom work in the store? Was she also cooking and helping clean up?

JGC: No, no, she was working in the store. So, see. All the cash registers were covered because it was Shelton's

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

mother and my mother and my sister and Lilian and I. Then my sister moved to California so then it was one less person but uh uh Shelton's father also ran the cash register so there were enough people to cover the cash register. My father worked in the meat market, also as a butcher. But, as Shelton said, my father, my father actually had formal education and Shelton's father did not. He stayed in the village practically his whole life when my father was sent to, uh what they call, middle school, in, in Canton. So my father uh was the operational person of the business 'cause he had more education. He's the one who did all the ordering and dealt with all the legal and taxes and things like that. So um as my cousin and I got older, we would close out the registers at the end of the day and just um put it all together for my father and he would put it all in the safe and once a month he would get it all the daily receipts information and give it to the bookkeeper to handle. So. We really didn't know anything.

AC: Right, right, right. Okay. So, so they didn't—so your father, did he invest his money elsewhere while he was working at the grocery store?

JGC: Not really, I think he invested in some property but um I think he ended up selling all that property. He didn't like invest in stock markets because they didn't believe in stuff like that. The most investment that he did was the CD's.

AC: Oh CD's, oh okay. But he believes in that?

JGC: Yeah.

AC: That's good. Gordon Gee branched out, he was a butcher and then he went to work for a meat company and then he ran his own meat company and then eventually he went into real estate or oil or something like that.

JGC: I just remember him owning restaurants because his kids and I were friends and I would pick up his daughter to take her to a party or something for the restaurant.

AC: So did you father go into the restaurant business?

JGC: Mm-mm. No.

AC: He didn't want to?

JGC: He didn't want to, he said those hours were even worse than grocery store hours. [**AC:** Right, right, right.] And uh well he worked in a restaurant in California so [**AC:** He knows what it's all about.] he didn't want to go into the restaurant business. I think he said at one time his father was in the laundry business so he didn't want to do that either. [**AC:** Right, right.] So he fell into the grocery business because of the training he received.

AC: And when did he retire? Or did he retire?

JGC: Let's see. He was in semi-retirement after he had his lung cancer and they removed one of his lungs, and so he went into semi-retirement but he was still helping out Shelton. And-

AC: Because Shelton's dad retired, right?

JGC: He had passed away, yeah. He had passed away so my father was helping him out. Um let's see, my father died when he was like about 88, 89, and I'm trying to remember, um he died in 2000. So I think he was, he was probably helping Shelton out until about probably '96.

AC: Okay, okay. Wow, that's a long time. So he didn't really retire because he was still in the business.

JGC: Yeah, he was still going in there and helping out.

AC: He still owned part of the share of the business though, right?

JGC: Yeah. Well, of the—not of the business but of the property.

AC: Oh, the land on which the business stands?

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

JGC: Yes.

AC: Yeah, because Shelton said he took over, right, he took over the grocery store. He must have bought your dad out.

JGC: Yeah, uh-huh. Yeah. Yeah. And so, he just owned the property that the store was on.

AC: Okay. And then—so you never wanted to go into the grocery store business?

JGC: No, well, he wanted us all to go to college to do something else, so he never really intended for us to take over the business and we grew up working in that store, even, even when I was in college I still had to come—go to the store to work. And even after I was married he still said he needed help so I had to go in on the weekends to help. [**AC:** Wow, to help.] So even after I was working a regular job and married, I still I had to go in on weekends and help and so did my brother Herbert. He was, he was working a lot and he had to go in on weekends and help.

AC: So, then uh so Harry Gee, Senior owned restaurants.

JGC: Right, right.

AC: And then Albert Gee owned restaurants.

JGC: Right.

AC: So did you all socialize together?

JGC: Oh yeah, we um—at least once a year all the Gee's got together but then we would, we would just as a community get together, and 'cause I mean that's how I became friends with all their children because we're still friends now. [laughs] We remembered from when we were young. We would get together because those were the only people we knew.

AC: Did you socialize in churches like the...CACA or how did you all socialize?

JGC: Um okay. Social life was mostly centered around church friends.

AC: Chinese Baptist Church?

JGC: Right, Chinese Baptist. And our school friends didn't quite understand you know our situation because they had their friends all week long and we only saw ours on the weekend.

AC: Oh, okay, because you were working after school, you couldn't see your friends.

JGC: Right, everybody was working. So nobody saw each other and so we—so all of our parties, growing up as a teenager, all of our parties wouldn't start until 10 o'clock.

AC: Ah okay, until when the stores close.

JGC: Yeah and on Saturday, they would start until after 10 o'clock because we had to wait until the stores were closed because we all had to work in them. [**AC:** Right, right, right, right. Yeah.] But they were always well chaperoned—it's not like we just got together. [laughs]

AC: So the adults came with you to the party?

JGC: Actually, Jane Gee—

AC: Uh-huh.

JGC:—she was one of the adults that chaperoned our parties.

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

AC: Oh, oh okay. [laughs]

JGC: So, so uh.

AC: And so were the parties—the parties were at churches?

JGC: Some of them were at On Leong because the upstairs On Leong had kind of like a hall that uh we would arrange to...

AC: So you would have dances and stuff.

JGC: Yeah, there. And then some of them were at, at homes and whoever was the parent at that home was our chaperone. So.

AC: Did you feel any discrimination at school at all because of the fact that you were Chinese or that you had different hours from others, was that a problem?

JGC: I didn't feel discrimination I just felt we were different because we had different lifestyles and all of our friends, you know, we couldn't, we couldn't hang out with them during the week. We were just in such a different situation that we knew that our school friends would not understand—would not understand it. We were always looking forward to the weekend because then we were going to see our friends.

AC: Right, with people like you.

JGC: Yes, yeah.

AC: Um did you grow up when there was still like colored water fountains?

JGC: Oh yes, in fact when I was really little, I had—Weingarten's was the main grocery store chain and uh and we lived on Shotwell, Lyons Avenue and Shotwell.

AC: Shotwell. It's like 'shot' and 'well'?

JGC: Uh-huh. It's Denver Harbor.

AC: It's what?

JGC: Denver Harbor. [**AC:** Denver Harbor. Okay.] Yeah and so my mother and I would walk over to Weingarten's sometimes and pick up things and I noticed after I could read, I noticed that there was a sign that would say 'whites' and 'colors' and I didn't understand what it meant 'cause I.

AC: 'Cause you didn't feel that at school?

JGC: I asked my mother, 'well, which one am I?' You know, because I wanted to get a drink and I didn't know which one.

AC: Okay, okay. Wow, but then that's something, it wasn't a very prominent part of your life, right, [**JGC:** No, no it wasn't.] it was just something that happened.

JGC: Yeah and what stood out to me was when I was like in junior high, because we used to go to California every summer and spend a month, 'cause you know, visiting with my mother's side of the family.

[01:10:00]

And when I was in junior high I started noticing discrimination against Chinese when I was in California. So I, so I was commenting, I don't know why y'all like to live here because we don't—we're not discriminated again where I live. So, I would—that's when I felt the discrimination is when I was in California, not in Houston.

AC: But that's why Martha Wong's dad brought her here to study because here,; Chinese can go to school with

whites. Which Mississippi, you couldn't.

JGC: Yeah, because my husband, not his age, but his uncle's age couldn't attend school with whites, so they had to bring in a private teacher.

AC: And this was in California?

JGC: That was in Mississippi. My husband is from Mississippi. And I know—A lot of my friends from Mississippi, they were my age, when they moved to Houston, they moved here so that they could go to school with whites because they couldn't go to school with whites in Mississippi.

AC: Wow, that's fascinating.

JGC: So I never really felt discrimination here. [**AC:** Which is wonderful.] Yeah so um I just—I knew there were certain things that we weren't allowed to do but I, I didn't think of it as discrimination.

AC: That's wonderful. Well, I think you probably need to leave, and I have to go too as well.