

Harry Chin
Narrator,
with comments by his daughter, Sheila Chin Morris

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Interviewer

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SGF: Today we will be talking to Harry Chin about lots of things in his life. And what I'm going to do initially is read from some notes that I took last time that I met with Harry, and that was July 30, 2002. [pause] So what I have from last time is that Harry's father—and, you know, I didn't get his name. What is your father's name?

HC: My father's name?

SGF: Yes, what is your father's name?

HC: [Liang] Shiang Thui

SGF: And your father left his village, the village of Toishan, when you were eight or nine years old?

HC: Yes.

SGF: And did you have brothers and sisters, too, when your father left?

HC: Yes, I've got a brother, a brother over in Minneapolis. I don't hear from him for a long time. He's got a family, too. But he doesn't want to cooperate [with me] in a relationship. He wants to be left alone.

SGF: So was he already in Minneapolis when your father left, or was your brother young like you were.

HC: He's number two [son]. I'm number one [son]. And I have a sister over in Boston. When my sister was born, she never did see my dad. My dad was over in the United States already. She never did see my dad when she born.

SGF: Did she ever meet your dad?

HC: No, she never did see my dad. She's seen a picture now.

SGF: And that was it?

HC: One time I go over to Boston and I brought a picture of my dad and let her look at it.

SM: And Uncle Ying, dad, number three.

HC: After I go to the immigration office, before, I tell them I have a brother I liked to bring over here. I talked to my friend, Harold Kee. He worked in the Immigration office a long time. He translated for them. He and I are really good friends, good relationships. His wife knows my wife, they are really good friends together. So it happened I told him, Harold Kee, about my brother. And he said that yes, you can file for the paper over in the immigration office and they might bring him over here. After a couple of years, oh a year or two, I filed the paper and send it to him. Then he told him about bringing him over here. He was so happy about it. So after about five or six months...my brother heard from the immigration office over in China. The Americans have an Immigration Office over in China, somewhere in the town, not in the village, in Canton. With the information, my brother went over there and talked to them. I don't know how to talk to them about it. They believe he's my brother, so the paper and everything is good. So my brother sent me a letter, saying yes, the immigration office believed me. Then I buy the ticket for him to come over.

SM: How long did the process take? When did you first talk to Harold about it?

HC: The whole family came over—his wife, younger brother, younger daughter, the second oldest daughter, oldest son. If you're over eighteen, you can't come over yet. After my brother came over here, then he went to the immigration office and told them he had a son and a daughter he wanted to bring over here. It didn't take long.

SGF: And when was this?

SM: It was about 1986 when he arrived in Boston.

HC: Before I write, I told them that I will buy the plane tickets. They came over to Philadelphia. I have a second uncle, a younger uncle, they live over there. My older daughter [Susan], my first wife's daughter lived over there, too. My brother's family came over there, so they would have a place for them. After they came over, they stayed four or five days. I think, I told my sister that they couldn't find an apartment or a job over in Philadelphia. It's kind of hard to find an apartment or to get a job over in Philadelphia then. Maybe it would be better for them to come to Boston, better then. My sister said okay. My sister and her husband know quite a few people.

Well, they come over to Boston and they lived with my sister for four or five months. After they got the jobs, they found their own apartment about a half block away.

They got their own jobs, their own apartment with the second older son—they all live together. Kind of crowded. The second older son still stayed with my sister. They got a third floor place, he lived on the top floor. They occupied it pretty good. They got their own [place].

Later on, so they lived there for six or seven years now. Everybody makes a little bit of money. My brother's oldest son, he was already married and he already had one son and one daughter.

The second boy was not married yet, he got a job over in Boston. He met a girl, then he got married in Boston.

The older daughter, she went to school. She went to school for quite a while, she's pretty smart. She worked in an insurance office. She met a Chinese guy over in Boston. They wanted to get married. I got a picture of them in here someplace.

SGF: So now if we do a full circle—and we're going to go back to when you were in China.

HC: Me, in China?

SGF: Can I read what you told me last time, and then see if you want to add on to it?

HC: Okay.

SGF: Your father left China when you were eight or nine years old. He went to Cuba, and you told me he got a job at one of the sugar factories; and he helped carry sugar to the ships.

HC: Yes, a sugar factory.

SGF: And that your dad hid in a ship and he traveled to Florida.

HC: I think he lived in Cuba about two or three years. I figure it was something like that, because I am only eleven or twelve years old. And I heard about my dad coming over to the United States—he sneaked over to the United States. Years ago a lot of Chinese people did it like that, you know.

SGF: What did you mean by, "He sneaked over to the United States?" Oh, from Cuba to the United States?

HC: Because, the United States had better jobs than in Cuba. You get dollar for dollar, worth more in Chinese money. In American money, with one dollar you can get four or five dollars in Chinese money.

SGF: And you said when your dad was here, he would send money home?

HC: Oh yes, he sent some money home for my mother, about 100 bucks, American money. In Chinese money it was worth \$400-\$500—we could live for a whole year. We only need money for oil, salt and sugar. We don't have to buy vegetables. We got all kind of vegetables.

SGF: So your father sent money. And last time you told me there were about 100-150 people who lived in your village, and that each village in the district had their own specialties?

HC: I don't know how many houses, about thirty-five to forty houses in the villages. That's all...second high...great-great grandfather left to three sons, you know, three sons all live together in the village. That's all relationships in the village.

SGF: So three generations were together.

HC: Generations all live together—everyone. The younger ones call the older ones “uncle.”

SGF: It's all family.

HC: Yes, it's all family. They all help together, too, you know. But they live on their own. Everyone helped to build the house. They got their own farm and land. They raise rice, potatoes, peanuts, vegetables, sugar cane.

SGF: All sorts of things.

HC: Yes, in the village outside. Something for myself, I had a lot of fun when I was young.

Yes, I had some fun, too. When I was young, eight years old, I had a lot of fun playing with kids, catching fish—a lot of fun, when I young, but I know there was hard work, too.

SGF: Yes, you mentioned you had to help your mom a lot, because your dad was in the United States.

HC: Nobody helped her. She had three boys and one daughter. They really had to do hard work sometimes. Then she needed me to help do everything—go get the water for the vegetables in the garden, go to the fields and take care of the potatoes, cut a lot of grass [weeds]. We ate a lot of potatoes.

SM: Did anyone else live in the house with you [your family]?

HC: Oh, my grandmother. My grandfather married twice. He had another younger wife. Then he and the younger wife lived in one place [in the house], and my mother lived on the other side. We took care of one side of the house. He took care of the other side.

SGF: So he lived with the younger wife, and the older wife lived with you?

HC: Yes, my grandmother lived with us. So my grandfather lived with the young wife over there, on that side.

SM: And they had “Baby Uncle?”

HC: Yes, yes, Baby Uncle. They got two baby uncles. One died. He's really the younger one. You know how big he was when he was born? About three pounds—really, really small.

SM: We call this guy “Baby Uncle” because he’s younger than my dad, and he is my dad’s uncle.

SGF: I understand.

HC: He’s over in Philadelphia now. He lives pretty well now. He said he goes back to China [to visit].

[Harry is showing photographs.]

HC: Here’s his wife...that’s my younger brother...that’s his younger daughter, my brother’s younger daughter...that’s his wife...my brother’s younger daughter, she got in an accident, boy, it was really bad. She was only seventeen years old. She got in an accident on the highway...And that’s the older son, my brother’s older son...that’s my uncle’s younger son.

SGF: Sheila said this morning, that one of your grandfathers came to the United States before your father?

HC: Oh, I heard about it. I heard my grandfather come over to the United States. But years ago you could come to the United States, if you could do some kind of business, I don’t know.

SGF: Was he a merchant?

HC: Yes, like a grocery store business...as long as you have some money...as long as you have some kind of business, and you are on your own. And you don’t expect the United States government [to support you.] like social security. You got your own. If you broke the law, they would send you back. You honor everything, maybe you build your own business with somebody, like if you and I open a business, a partnership, like you make a little bit of money. And that’s why he came back and forth.

SGF: So your grandfather traveled back and forth?

HC: Yes, my grandfather.

SGF: Did you know where he lived in the United States?

HC: I heard he lived in New York, that’s what I heard. New York, they have a lot of Chinese people in New York, a lot of open stores and everything.

SM: What was your grandfather’s name?

HC: Liang Cheung Nin

SGF: But the family name is Liang?

HC: Yes. So that's why he came back to China. He found a young wife and got married, and he went back there. Now he's married and he got a girl, by that time, I don't know if I was born or not, maybe I was one or two years old, maybe I was a baby.

SM: You said that on one of his trips home, he had enough money to build that house [in the village].

HC: That was my grandfather who come back from the United State and built this house. Then we all lived in there. Boy, that...

SGF: How old is this house then?

SM: It was built before he was born. And he was born April 26, 1922.

HC: Because by that time I was six or seven years old, I remember years ago, seems like you missed your aunt, so sometime she gets married and the married girl had to go live in another village. The Moy village was ten or fifteen miles from our village. There were villages all over, the Moy family, the Liang family, the Chin family...that's all over the Canton, Toishan, you know.

SGF: All these families were clustered, but close together.

HC: Yes, across the highway, the Liang family. That's all relationships from generation to generation.

SGF: Was this kind of housing common? Was it common to build a brick home?

HC: Oh, they were all brick homes. The Chinese built all brick homes. They don't build from wood, because it rained too much. They hardly get any paint. You have to get the paint and paint it so the water doesn't get through. After a while, if you don't do anything, the water soaked into the wood, it rots easy. That's why they build like that. The roofs are all tile. In the center, they use something to cover it up from water like cement. Some cut up like a grass, dry up, chop it up, mix it up, [thatch] it's held together between the walls, the stone is not too big, they build up, in the center of the wall, it's got a hole in it. Some let it go—some use cement to cover the whole thing. Yes, they are really strong.

SGF: This matches the description of Moy Hee's house.

HC: They got something like a tile for the water to go through. Because one house is a little higher, another house is a little lower.

SGF: That was smart building. So let's talk about when you came to the United States, alright?

So you came to the United State about 1940, and you were eighteen years old? But when you came to the United States, you came as a Chin and not as a Liang? Right, as a paper son?

HC: Well, I came to the United States during World War II. I was really lucky myself. There were only two ships coming from Hong Kong and going to Seattle, Washington. They got to the Immigration Building. They have the Chinese people, some who came from Hong Kong to New York, some came from Hong Kong to San Francisco, like that. Depends on where your people are. Like if your father was in New York, then he would have to bring you to the New York Immigration Office. If your father was in San Francisco, then if you were from Hong Kong, you would join him in San Francisco. Like my dad was in Minneapolis, Minnesota and St. Paul, Minnesota. So I had to come from Seattle.

SGF: So this was a common route through Seattle.

HC: Yes, east to west.

SGF: So you said you were on the second to the last ship that left China during the war. And the ship traveled from Shanghai to Tokyo.

HC: Oh, from Hong Kong to Shanghai, and from Shanghai to Tokyo. Three other Japanese islands. After that we went to Hawaii. Then we went to Seattle, Washington.

When we arrived in Seattle, it was getting dark, in the “depot”. The sun went down about eight or nine o’clock. It was kind of dark. And the guards were there to take care of things.

SGF: So you actually arrived at the Seattle Immigration Center, where everyone had to go in.

HC: Like a chicken, “Come on, go into the cage.” And they get in the cages in the building. They had some beds, some on top of the other.

SGF: So, did they keep families together?

HC: You go inside, you were like a stranger. Some people there for four or five months. Some people were in immigration for a long time. Because they ask you a lot of questions and if the Immigration people didn’t believe you, then they have to investigate if you’re telling the truth.

SGF: So you would have to stay longer if they didn’t believe you?

HC: Yes, they keep you there and find out what’s going on.

SGF: So the Immigration Center must have had a lot of interpreters for the different people coming through.

HC: The Immigration Office had four or five translators who translated from Chinese.

SGF: Last time you said that they would ask you questions, and someone would be typing the answers. And then they would send your answers to the Immigration Center in St. Paul and compare the information. Then once they approved of you coming into the country, they sent

your paperwork to the Immigration Office in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and that is where your paper brother lived?

HC: Yes, they asked me where my brother lived? They ask if I had family or not, and all kinds of information. It depended on the Immigration Office. They would try to figure out if you were telling the truth any way they could. You know, they tried to make you tell the truth. They would compare what I said to my brother's answers to see if we said the same thing.

SGF: It was an unfair system a lot of time.

HC: Years ago, if some people had a lot of money; and, if you were young, you were treated better because a young person wasn't expected to remember everything. They excused them saying, "Oh, you're too young, you don't remember anything." If you were considered old enough, you didn't have any excuse. Then they expected certain information from you. If you were five or six years old, a lot of people came then. It was easier.

Years ago, it was so tricky.

SGF: But that was what people had to work with. That was how the system was set up.

HC: A lot of Chinese people came in, and if I opened a restaurant, I would need a lot of help—Chinese cooks, dishwashers, and everything. And if it became a big business, and I know someone in China, I can bring my relations—nephews, like that, to come in and help me. I could call the Immigration Office and tell them I need somebody. I can't find the right help here for my business, so I would like to bring some people from China. I can guarantee their room and board. I tell the Immigration people I can take care of everything.

SGF: So if you were a business owner, you would have to tell the government that you would provide all that was needed for anyone coming over.

HC: For some other people it was different. Like if I help you come over here, you were work for me maybe six months or a year. Maybe you don't like me, you know. Some young people are hard to get along with sometimes. You tell them what to do and they say, "Oh, go to hell, or something like that." So as the boss I might say, "If you don't like this job, go find your own job." A lot of it [situations] was like that. Some people don't care about it like that. Some young people are too lazy.

SGF: So what would happen? It costs money to bring someone over, right?

HC: Well, when one would come over and work for one year, pay back the money to the boss. Then he tries to go work for someone else. Like if I owed you money, maybe \$1,000 for bringing me over here, I had to work for you, to pay you back the money. If I get \$200 per month, then you'd take the \$100 I owe you and give me \$100 for my expenses.

Later on, I know some friends, some other big bosses; and they say, "Oh, you work for your uncle, I can pay you more, I pay you \$300." He needed a cook, too. He would pay me \$100

more, so I better hurry up and pay you back, what I owe you. Okay, I'm not going to work for you anymore. I don't owe you anymore.

SGF: Yes, that's pay to go.

HC: [Laughing] That was tricky sometimes.

SGF: It still happens today.

Now, when you came to the United States, your mother was still in China, and your brothers, and your sister?

HC: Oh my younger brother came [to the United States] first. He was younger, about six or seven years old about that time. Remember how I told you it was easier when you're younger to come in. Then it happened that my relations in St. Paul at the Port Arthur Café where my dad worked, they got papers [immigration papers] that fit my brother's age. My dad bought the papers from this other guy to bring my brother over. So he came over here and he had a chance to go to school.

SGF: What was your brother's name in St. Paul?

HC: Freddie Moy.

SM: All my life I wanted to know why his name was Moy and ours was Chin.

HC: He went into the army before, too. Huey Moy and George Moy were related. George Moy is my...[cousin].

SGF: Now, is George Moy the son of Maurice? Did you know a Maurice Moy?

HC: He's the nephew of the boss at the Port Arthur Café. George Moy's uncle was a partner at the Port Arthur Café. George Moy's dad was in partnership through Huey Moy. The three brothers own it. The older brother of the three brothers, and Huey Moy, and George's dad, my aunt's husband, he was a partner, too.

SGF: Do you remember what your aunt's husband's name was?

HC: Boy, I really forget. He was pretty smart. He went to school in Japan. He knew how to speak Japanese. He was really, really smart. His dad was still living over the Port Arthur Café. That's why he gave the money to his dad, to help him open the Port Arthur Café, then Huey Moy, and George Moy's dad, and the three brothers.

You know, sometimes brothers don't get along. That's why George Moy's dad opened a Port Arthur Café over on Hennepin and Lake Street on the corner there.

SGF: So he opened another Port Arthur Café.

HC: Then George Moy's dad finds an American girl and got married again, then he got the two boys. They helped him to take care of the business. Then my aunt's husband, got sick, and he went back to China with my aunt. Then the first thing, my aunt's husband, he got a little bit of money saved up and he gave some to my aunt to built a nice big house outside not very far from the village. Maybe about a mile away, they got big lots where people who have money can build there. They built a lot of really big buildings.

About that time, the house was almost done and ready to move in, then my aunt's husband died. Because he was sick, I used to go over there and see him. And the people they tried to give him some kind of "snake" medicine, some kind of Chinese medicine. They believed that maybe it would help him to get better. A lot of people believe in something like that over in China. Over in America, a lot of people believe in Chinese medicine.

SGF: So, can we go back to St. Paul with your story? So you arrived in St. Paul in October, 1940; and you worked at the Port Arthur for awhile? Did you learn to cook there?

HC: After a while, they had too much help. About that time I told my dad that I would go to Chicago where my grandfather's sister lived. There were two brothers that opened another restaurant in Chicago. So I call him my second uncle. And I told my dad maybe I would go over there and learn how to cook or something.

SGF: So you came to St. Paul, worked at Port Arthur for a while; and you said you worked ten or eleven hours a day; for a dollar or two dollars a day; and then you were told there was too much help; and then you decided to go to Chicago.

HC: Over in Chicago I worked a couple of months, I worked a couple of months. At that time in Chicago, the restaurant was on Ohio Street way up there. You had to take the bus, go about a quarter mile up to Clark Street, from Clark Street, take the bus and go all the way to Chinatown-Chicago. That was a long way. It took more than forty-five minutes. At that time, I would get up, go to work, and come home in the nighttime. It was a long day. At that time, it was too much to do it like that. I turned around and I told my second uncle—his name was Tom—he was the guy who owned the restaurant, and I told him maybe I'd better go back to St. Paul, try to go to school for a while. When I was over there, I didn't have a chance to go to school and speak English. When you work in a Chinese place, everyone speaks Chinese.

SGF: And when you came to the United States, you didn't speak any English?

HC: Oh, I speak a little bit—"Good morning, how are you?" I learn 'a-b-c-d,' I learned that before in China.

SGF: And you had your little dictionary?

SM: Here's your little dictionary, dad.

HC: Oh, I bought that years ago, and you find the language and you look in here to see how to say it, like “Good morning!”

SGF: That’s one of the few things I remember when I studied Mandarin. So when you came to St. Paul, you attended night school?

HC: Yes, when I come to St. Paul, I go back to the Port Arthur Café. And the boss doesn’t like it, but I say I’m here for a while. If you don’t have a dishwasher, I help wash dishes; if you don’t have a busboy, I help take the dishes to the kitchen.

SGF: So you came back and did whatever work was needed.

HC: Yes, then I trimmed celery. I trimmed maybe ten or twelve crates of celery almost every day.

SGF: What did people eat the most at that restaurant?

HC: It was a big restaurant.

SGF: What kind of food was served?

HC: Chinese.

SGF: Chinese, chow mein?

HC: They got American food, too. They served roast beef, ham, fried chicken. They got one American cook. The woman was an American cook. I used to help her. And I helped both sides. When the Chinese cook was busy, I helped that side; and when the American cook was busy I helped the other side. I helped either way, whatever I could.

SGF: So the restaurant tried to please both types of customers.

HC: When my brother and George Moy, they were still both younger than I am, and they both tried to go to school...

[Tape interruption]

Years ago, I helped make noodles. I learned how to make everything. I learned how to wait on tables, too. The people sit down and sometime the waitress is too busy, and they say, “Can you take my order?” they asked me. I say, “What do you want?” They say, “I just want some chicken chow mein, that’s all.” Then sometimes the women are in a hurry.

I’d say, “Okay, I’ll bring it out. I’ll bring the chicken chow mein and a cup of tea.” That’s all they wanted. By that time, I learned everything. I could do everything.

My dad said, “You’re young, you have to learn everything. You can’t do just one thing. Someone wants to hire you, maybe you like to cook. They don’t need a cook. But they want a dishwasher. You have to learn everything.

SGF: So your early years in St. Paul were during World War II. And what we talked about last time is that you had to register for the draft, but you were never called to actually serve in the war, but you did something that sounded really interesting from 1943 to 1945. You attended a school to learn how to re-fit aircraft? What was the name of this school?

SM: Northwest Airlines.

HC: Oh, during the war, I just went back to the Port Arthur Cafe to work for a while. Then I talked to some other people. They said, “Why don’t you try to go to work for Northwest Airlines and learn how to be a mechanic?” So I talked to myself, maybe I should go to the mechanic school over by Seven Corners [St. Paul]. I went to sheet metal school for two months. They gave me two pieces of metal, drill the hole, use the button, shoot the...you know, hold it [rivets] together. And you shoot the [rivet] gun and hold the metal together. And when you’re done, show the teacher. He looks at it and decides, “Yes, you do pretty good.” Every hole is same size, same thing. Sheet metal, countersink metal, all kinds of metal.

SGF: So what you were doing was taking new airplanes...and then...

HC: Then they think I passed, I went to school for two months, I think I’m passed now, like a graduation.

SGF: And this is a picture of the group?

HC: Yes, then I go down to the St. Paul airport. They sent me down there. I am called a sheet-metal mechanic—two guys worked together.

SGF: And then you put on different fuel tanks on the planes?

HC: I went down there. They paid pretty good, too.

SM: It says here in this letter dated 1945...

HC: I almost made more money than before. Over \$200-300 a month almost \$100 a week, working forty-four hours. Anyway, me and another guy worked together. The girls worked in the wire, a little bit lighter job. Some worked in the...oh, all kinds of jobs, for twenty hours...

SGF: To support the war effort and keep things going?

HC: They got a crew chief, that’s the crew chief, the night crew chief and the morning crew chief, it’s different. When you go to work, the crew chief would say, well—the inside the ship

you've got welding to do, everybody's got a different job. Sometimes we got a lot of work, sometimes we didn't. Sometimes there was nothing to do.

SGF: And then, Sheila showed me a pin this morning that you wore during the war, during World War II. This is a pin that has a letter "V" and there is the flag of the United States and the flag of China.

HC: When I worked in there—After the war is over there were no more jobs. Everybody quit and went back to different jobs. About that time, I had been laying low for a while, three or four months, then I went to work...

SGF: Then you said, in addition to being at Holman Field you also worked for the Canton Cafe, and that was owned by Harold and Donna Kee.

HC: I would just go over and helped there a little bit.

SGF: And you also worked at the Yep Laundry?

HC: Yes, I helped my friend and worked in the laundry. At that time I wasn't doing anything—I was just bouncing around. I helped the Canton when it was a busy time; I helped with the take-out orders.

SGF: And it was about this time that you met your wife?

HC: Yes, Sheila's mother and I, in the Canton Cafe.

SGF: And that was at 6th and Wabasha?

HC: Yes, 6th and Wabash, upstairs. She and Harold's Kee wife [Donna], she worked up there, too. That's why we went up there and we'd get something to eat and go around. By that time I was pretty lucky myself, I won myself some money and I bought myself a new car—a 1942 Buick.

SGF: You won a 1942 Buick?

HC: At that time, 1942 was like a new car. The government didn't make new cars anymore. Before the war...I bet a dollar for the lottery, the Chinese lottery. Some people take some lottery numbers and go over to the Chinese restaurants and everybody buys the tickets. It happened I bought a ticket, spent a dollar, so I got—like you play the lottery—I got eight numbers that "fit." Oh boy, that's the first watch I ever bought. It was a long time ago over in St. Paul. The lottery spent \$600 or 700 dollars...[I won \$600 or \$700.]

SGF: Really? That was a lot of money then.

HC: Yes, that time it was a really new car then. About that time, it was a lot of money.

SGF: Was it common for Chinese restaurants to have lotteries?

HC: Chinese restaurants? No, the people bring the number, the Chinese lottery, not the American lottery.

SGF: Right, right.

HC: The Chinese lottery, they were like rich people, they put their money all together. Some people go to one restaurant. There were about ten or twelve Chinese restaurants in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Then they go to the Chinese laundry, something like that, too. Everybody takes a chance and takes a ticket, you want a dollar, fifty cents, whatever you want to. It happened I went to the Canton Cafe, and met some guy coming around. I bought the lottery ticket, and it happened I won about \$1,000. With \$1,000, I only collect \$800, because he gets a twenty percent commission.

SGF: So who sold you the lottery ticket?

HC: Oh, he died a long time ago, a Chinese old guy.

SGF: But, was he a restaurant owner?

HC: No, he was just bouncing around, just an old guy bouncing around. He didn't do anything. Oh, years ago, there were two Chinese stores. In St. Paul, one on Wabasha and one on St. Peter, both sides. The people...The Chinese people sometimes gambled inside there, you know. The Chinese people that were cooks—they'd get through with work, and have no place to go, it's too early to sleep, so they go down to the store, sometimes they'd get to gambling a little bit.

SGF: Gambling, and wasn't it there that people who needed help translating from Chinese to English went? The stores really served a lot of different roles. Didn't they, for people, a kind of community gathering place?

HC: Oh, some were good, some talked good, some not very good. Like I didn't talk much when I came over here. I learned English just like I learn everything else, by myself.

They say, "Don't talk too much Chinese! Try to talk more English, if you can." If you say something wrong, you can always change and talk better.

[Laughter]

SGF: So you were encouraged to speak English.

HC: Yes, like I forced myself, but there's still a lot of English I don't know. If I don't know, I ask my daughter. Some things I understand, some things I don't.

SGF: I think you do just fine.

HC: Oh, fine now. I try to do my best!

SGF: Now, let me ask you about...so you met your wife, Laura?

HC: Yes

SGF: Laura Elizabeth Eubank, and then you bought a house.

HC: Yes, at that time I bought a house, an older house. My wife was pregnant, carrying Sheila, we tried to find an apartment. We couldn't find anything. They weren't building anything.

SGF: Oh, during the war there was a shortage of housing then?

HC: It happened there was a house over by Arcade and Wells Street, right on the corner there. There was an old couple living there. I bought that house for about \$5,000.

SGF: And you were able to buy the house because, according to my notes, you had started working at the Snelling Cafe, and your boss...

HC: Yes, about that time, they wanted \$500 down payment, something like that. It happened I went to work at the Snelling Cafe, and I talked to my boss. I haven't started working for him yet! And he was saying, "Come next week and you start working." You know, but it was this week I talked to him to say that I needed the \$500. I talked to the guy, his name was Dick St. Clair. He needed a Chinese cook to serve chow mein over there too—chow mein, fried rice, that kind of stuff. They had American cooks, over there, three or four American cooks over there, all in the same kitchen.

So I go ask Dick St. Clair, "I got a little trouble, I need help." And he said, "What kind of help do you need, Harry?" I just bought a house and they want \$500 down, and it happens, I don't even work for the guy yet. I suppose he needed me so bad that he lent me the \$500. He said, "What the heck, you don't even work for me yet, I'll give you \$500 and you won't run away."

SGF: So that was Mr. St. Clair?

HC: What?

SGF: Your boss was Mr. St. Clair who was so generous?

HC: Oh, he trusted me.

SGF: Yes, so how long did you work at the Snelling Cafe?

HC: Oh, worked for quite awhile. I think it was over ten years.

SGF: And then later you tried opening your own business?

HC: Yes, I was open for only about six months, maybe a year. I just tried it, you know. I'll try anything if I can. So I worked for Dick St. Clair about ten years; and he was pretty happy with me. Sometimes the American cook would get drunk, wouldn't show up, so I had to go help him serve American dishes, too, so I got two jobs, half American cook, half Chinese cook. Dick St. Clair was so happy about it.

SGF: Sure, you were able to cook so many different things.

HC: So he lent me \$500 bucks, I say, Dick St. Clair, you take out about \$50 per month. And he said, "Don't worry about it, Harry, you pay me back when you can."

SM: And when did Huey Moy buy the restaurant?

HC: Years ago, after that he bought it.

SM: Yes, and what year was that?

HC: What year? I don't remember what year. I don't pay much attention.

SM: And he called it the "House of Ming."

SGF: Yes, I can look in the city directories for that.

HC: About that time he bought it, but it wasn't very good. He owned the Port Arthur Cafe and he had no business. He tried to buy the Snelling Cafe. I worked for him for a little while.

SGF: What Sheila wrote me, was that when the Snelling Cafe became the House of Ming, you worked there for a little while.

HC: Yes, he changed it to the House of Ming. Yes, I worked there for four or five years more.

SGF: And you also worked part-time at a take-out restaurant started by Harold Kee?

HC: Yes.

SGF: About 1958, and that was called Kee's Chow Mein?

HC: Yes, I helped him a little bit, as much as I can. He didn't know much about cooking.

SGF: He didn't know much about cooking?

HC: Harold Kee opened...not very much cooking. After that I get through work at two o'clock, then I go to work at four o'clock in the morning. First I served breakfast, then I served lunch.

SGF: So these restaurants served breakfast, too?

HC: At two o'clock I went home...Huey Moy...That's why I got a chance to go work for Harold. I go home, lay down for a while, then I go drive over to Hillcrest and I help Harold at four o'clock. I worked from four to eight o'clock.

SGF: So your day started at four o'clock in the morning, and you worked until eight o'clock at night?

HC: At four o'clock, then I get everything settled, open, the people come in about five o'clock for breakfast, serve the bacon and eggs, ham and eggs, scrambled eggs, and oatmeal, French toast, all kinds, whatever they want.

SM: This is when he was still sending money to my grandmother [in China].

HC: Then after serving breakfast, then we start fixing lunch, cook soup, roast beef, roast pork or chicken, fixing the stew, for lunch. After lunch, another cook would come to help. George Moy came at twelve o'clock and worked to closing. Then I had a chance to go home and go work at Hillcrest [Kee's Chow Mein].

SM: And we all helped [at Hillcrest] Donna Kee [Harold's wife], my mom.

HC: Sheila helped. She had to take orders, too.

SM: I was twelve years old and Harold's daughter, Melody, and I waited on customers. I was scared to death. They all came in at four o'clock and they all wanted to eat.

HC: At that time, we sold the house on Wells Street. We bought the new house in Roseville at County C and North Snelling. It was a three-bedroom house. Sheila and Roger, my son, and my wife lived there. That was a really nice house. It had just a four and a half percent [mortgage] interest. Before, the GI mortgage was cheaper. Years ago the GI mortgage was really cheaper, you know what I mean? A GI lived there, the man and wife lived there for two or three months and he had to move. Then he had to sell the house. The real estate man came to see me and told me about this house, and we came and took a look at it right away. And we liked it, and we say, "Okay!"

SGF: So you were a cook for your whole life? And you also went to work at the Nankin in Minneapolis?

HC: Yes. Well, I had the first wife, the older wife. It happened that my older daughter brought her over here. I told her, "I can't live with two wives. I have another wife." She said, "I don't care." She got a job at the Nankin. She got a job with another woman, pretty friendly, working the dining room, helping the waitresses, getting the water. When they [the customers] were all done, they picked up the dishes like the busboys. It's a pretty good job. I know some friends that have a house on Lake Street and they had an extra room for her. She lived together with them.

SGF: So before you left China, am I understanding, you had a wife in China?

HC: Well, at that time, when you are young, you have to do what your mother and father tell you to do. You can't talk back to them. They tell you what to do. At that time, my dad sent \$400 dollars—\$2,000 Chinese money. It did a lot of good things, that's why my mother and grandmother were so happy about it. To see their older grandson get married. Chinese people sometimes marry young.

SGF: I know that.

HC: So my mother was kind of sick, couldn't go to the river or carry water for cooking stuff. So my grandmother said, "You are going to the United States pretty soon. If you go there, there won't be anyone to help your mother. You must get married to a lady who will help with the cooking and washing, go get the water, to help your mother. So I got married, and my older daughter was one month old when I left them in China [to go to the United States.] And I feel pretty guilty myself. Well, nothing you can do, you can't stay home, you got to work, no work, and you have a chance to go to the US and have a chance to make money, support the kids.

During the war, I was so worried about it. If you got money, you couldn't send the money to China. So my first wife and daughter, they take care of themselves pretty good. So later on, it was no use living in the village. They decided to go to Hong Kong, get a job over there. My older daughter went to school. My wife got a job, and they get along pretty good. Years ago Hong Kong was a little bit easier. Now there are too many people. If you are forty years old, they don't let you work no more.

SGF: So that must have been difficult living during the war and not knowing what was going on in China.

HC: I really worried. Nothing you can do but worry. Maybe the Japanese killed them. Maybe they starved to death. I don't know, what the heck. I don't know. I didn't know anything for three or four years.

SGF: So you didn't hear from your family for several years because of everything that was going on in China.

HC: That's why when I got a chance to marry, I started a family here. Well, I don't know. People and life sometimes, it's so hard to know [what to do]. Right or wrong, it's hard to say, hard to suggest.

SGF: Have to do what you feel is right.

HC: You do what you can. We're only human, you know.

SGF: That's right.

HC: You can only do so much with two hands. Sometimes I wish I had more than two hands.

SGF: So when there was so much going in China with the war, and now all this...

HC: I thought sometimes, maybe I could get a little bit of money, and I could go back to see them when the war's over. Then the darned communists take over and it was like a dog eating a dog. You can't do anything. So Chiang Kai-Shek went back to Taiwan. I thought, 'Let them have it. I've started over here. I have a lot of land in China, you know, but I'll let them have it.'

SGF: So did you hear from your family later on in the 1940s or 1950s?

HC: I don't know when. After the war was over some friend of mine went back to Hong Kong, I forgot his name. He said your first wife and kid are still living in Hong Kong. She's going to school. I was kind of happy myself. I tried to send a few dollars to them. I told her [first wife] about the situation here. She said, "I don't care." She said, "Do what you want to do."

SGF: So you found about your first wife through a friend visiting Hong Kong.

HC: So my older daughter was told that I was in the United States. At that time she knew a boy who was in school in Hong Kong. She loved that boy very much. And my other wife told my daughter that another guy came from the United States, and if you marry him, you will have a chance to go to the US to see your dad. So my other wife told her like that. She made her change her mind like that. My wife forced her to marry that guy from the United States. But she didn't love him. It made her feel really bad. That's why sometimes my daughter gets mad, really gives me hell. She said that she really loved that boy in Hong Kong. I was supposed to marry him, but my mother made me marry...Nothing you can do.

SGF: Sometimes life gets really complicated.

HC: It's kind of hard to decide, one way or another. You are looking for your future. You love a guy, maybe he doesn't have anything. You see a guy working in a bank, I don't know, maybe he is young and handsome, but maybe he's kind of skinny, I don't know. My daughter blames me. I said, "I didn't force you to marry anyone. You don't know if the sun will shine tomorrow. Maybe if you married that guy, maybe he wouldn't have anything."

SGF: I have a couple of more questions for you, okay? So last time we talked, Sheila told me about in the 1960s, during the Kennedy administration. If you were a paper son, you could reclaim you family name and be re-naturalized?

HC: Oh, yes. The immigration office gave a chance to all the Chinese people notified.

SM: Dad, did you get a letter? How did you first know that they knew about this?

HC: They got news to the Chinese people that made everything the truth no more trouble or anything like that. That's why I talked to Harold Kee. If I changed back to Liang, my daughter and son already born in the United States, and they have already got the name and birth certificate. I thought it was too much trouble to change it. The man in the immigration office, the guy said he said you can have two names—Mr. Chin and Mr. Liang are the same guy. He said you can do like that.

SM: I wish you had.

HC: It's a free country. You can have six names if you want.

SGF: Did a lot of Chinese-Americans keep their paper names or did they take their family name?

HC: Well, a lot of people born here, they have their own family name. Like I say, it's a free country. Everybody did what they wanted to.

SGF: Did you have to go to any kind of classes, or was it mainly paperwork that you had to do?

HC: It wasn't very much paperwork.

SGF: So it was a simple process?

HC: I know the guy from the immigration office. He knew all the paperwork. He knew me, he knew Harold Kee. He came over to Kee's. He knew I worked in there. He asked me, "Do you want the Chin name or do you want to change back to Liang? That's okay. I'll go back to the office and fix up everything for you. You don't have to do anything." So he got that done altogether.

SGF: And this is the first time your family learned about this?

HC: That's why I changed everything through [to indicate] my relationship with my real brothers and sister. I got a sister living in Boston; and I still had a brother [Ying] living in China. I had to tell them what his name was and how many kids he has. That's how my brother had a chance to come over here. I got another brother that's already here, Mr. Moy, Mr. Fred Moy. And I got the younger brother still over in China. I liked to bring him over here. That's why he had this chance to come over here, because everything [I said] is true now.

SGF: Was your family surprised that your real name was Liang?

HC: Who?

SM: Us!

SGF: Sheila?

HC: Oh! Surprised or not, it had to be the truth. You can't...sooner or later, you have to tell the truth, like it or not.

SGF: I have one more question, and then if there's anything more you want to say...China was going through all these different things with Communism, and then in the late 1970s, President Nixon re-established ties with China. And opened up trade with China, and I was wondering was

that important to Chinese-Americans that once again China was open for travel and communication?

SM: Dad, do you remember when Nixon went to visit Mao Tse-Tung?

HC: Oh, I don't pay much attention to Nixon, I knew Nixon went to China, but I didn't pay much attention to the reason.

SM: Yes, we were in your apartment. I remember coming over with you. And we watched it [on television]. I think even George [Moy] was visiting that day with us. We watched it on TV because it was the first time that any American visited Communist China.

HC: That time Nixon went to China, I watched the television and saw him go to China, I don't know why he went to China, that time I didn't pay much attention. That kind of news— When you're working such long hours, it was hard to understand what's going on. Like right now, the whole world's like that, United States or other countries, you can't care about anything, because there's nothing you can do. The young generation, you can't tell them do anything. They do it their own way.

SGF: You brought some family members over? Was it after 1979?

HC: My family?

SGF: Your brother.

HC: I think they come over, oh, that's a long time ago. I can't remember what year.

SGF: In 1986, and that's kind of where we started this conversation was when your brother came and moved to Boston.

HC: Yes, well I forgot what year they came over, but they came over to Philadelphia first. In Philadelphia you couldn't find a job, couldn't find a place to live, so I told my sister about all that stuff, and she said to come over to Boston, maybe finding a job will be easier. So they decided to move over to Boston. My sister got a building with a third floor. My sister only lived on two floors. They got one floor that's empty, so they lived there for a while.

SGF: So you have family out east, in Boston and Philadelphia, and you still have family in China?

SM: No.

SGF: No? Everybody's here?

HC: No more in China.

SM: Do you remember how you felt when Uncle Ying finally got here?

[When Harry was asked about Uncle Ying, he answered telling about his younger uncle who is called "Baby Uncle." He is Harry's grandfather's youngest son born of the second wife.]

HC: Oh, he just, I don't know, I don't know. He tried to go back to see the old house again. Some things belong to them and they wanted to look at the house again. Then some friends told him the ceiling was leaking water. So it looked real decent. So he wanted to go back and take care of it. The house belongs to all the generations [our children and their children]. He didn't want it to be torn down or anything.

SGF: So the house still remains there?

HC: Yes, you might want to look at it. You couldn't live in there, not by yourself anyway.

Maybe for the last time, like when you go on vacation and see something old, an antique, you know, to just look at—something that belonged to them. I couldn't sell it. I couldn't do anything. It doesn't do any good to sell it. I have money. I don't want to sell it.

SGF: So who keeps the house up in China?

HC: If it leaked, we try to fix it up, so it looks decent.

SGF: And so you moved to Waseca a year ago?

HC: I tried to call him and find out how he's doing. He went back to China to see what it looks like. I try to call him on Sunday sometime, nothing much important, but he told me, he calls me when he went there with some friend who lived in the village. He can't live in there.

SM: Are you talking about Yip?

HC: What? Yip? No, I'm talking about Little Uncle.

SM: Oh, Baby Uncle!

HC: Yes, Baby Uncle went back there with some relations from the same village. They go [back] together. They have company to go together, that's easier.

SM: My dad's the oldest.

HC: Like me, I don't like to go anyplace by myself. If Sheila comes with me, okay then I have someone to talk to. When you're getting old, something like that, you know.

SGF: Is there anything else you want to get on this tape of your life?

HC: You got enough?

SGF: I think we've got some good things on here.

HC: Well, I lived in Minneapolis for long time, too lazy to move. You moved some place, it's the same thing. Too hard to move around and when you move around you lose half the furniture and all that stuff. So I know I have to move someplace. So I like to move close to Sheila again. And I tell Sheila to find an apartment like mine in Waseca. That's pretty nice over there [where he lives in Waseca]. It's so quiet, so decent.

SGF: And you have a nice view.

HC: Everybody's nice. I get around pretty good. Everybody say hello. They want me to have coffee once in a while.

SM: You're the hardest working person I've ever known in my life.

HC: That what I do, I work hard all my life working over fifty-five years already. I still try to do the best I can to keep myself occupied. I don't want to sit down too long.

SGF: That's what I have for today. So I will bring this to a close.

SM: I just remembered the sense of relief my dad had once Uncle Ying [and his family] were here [in the United States]. He had fulfilled his family responsibility, finally.

SGF: Oh, I see.

HC: I moved down here, I'm real happy about it. I'm close to Sheila, and she helped me as much as she can. I couldn't depend on my son. He lived by himself over in Lake Elmo, too. Just like to be happy go lucky. He just lived too far away.

My daughter over in Philadelphia, she has nothing to do right now. She got a whole building she bought, and lives there with her husband. They live together but they don't cook together. They have five children, they all married except one, the younger daughter. She used to live in an apartment with another girl. When the other girl got married, she couldn't afford to live by herself, so she moved back in her mother's apartment—my oldest daughter. She got a new building. They rent the downstairs to an insurance company. They get about \$1100 or \$1200 a month.

SGF: Well, you're in a good city.

HC: Yes, she [my daughter] lives pretty good.

She used to have an old building on 11th Street, about a quarter mile west on this side. Years ago they bought this building, all empty. They bought just four walls in the city. So they moved in there, spend about \$20,000 and fixed it up. They fixed up all the rooms upstairs and downstairs. I've got a room I share with my first wife.

When she still lived with me in Minneapolis, we both went to work at the Nankin. It happened one day she coughed up something in her mouth, some blood. It scared me. I took her to the doctor. The doctor said she have some kind of cancer. So at that time I don't know what I should do, so I told my older daughter, I say maybe we should move back with them over there to Philadelphia. So I move with her over there.

After six or seven months, something like that, we go see some doctors, back and forth. I couldn't get a chance to relax or anything. Then one day the doctor said, it was too late now, you couldn't operate now. She passed away. So she's buried over there in the cemetery [in Philadelphia].

After she was buried, I stayed with my older daughter for a week or something, so I got lonesome. Like you drop everything, and I told my older daughter [Susan] I better move back to Minneapolis. I know a lot of people over there. I was happier. While I lived with my daughter, she didn't talk much. She's busy taking care of her grandchildren, taking care of her kids. She got her own headaches. So I moved back to Minneapolis, go back to work at the Nankin. Then everybody was so happy to see me back.

SGF: I bet they were.

HC: I'm so happy. I'm working at the Nankin all these years. After awhile I was sixty-five years old. I tried to retire. My boss didn't want me to go.

SGF: Because you were such a good worker.

HC: Yes, everybody loves me. No one wanted me to go. So I said maybe I come back and work part-time. I worked part-time for a while. Then the city bought the Nankin. And tore the whole block down, and everybody had to quit working. The head cook, Mr. Wong, he bought a little restaurant over by Lyndale [Avenue], the Red Dragon.

SGF: So you retired, but you still worked part-time at the Nankin, and you worked part-time at the Red Dragon.

HC: Then he [Mr. Wong] said, "You come down and help me." At that time I was seventy years old. I worked five years for him. He gave me cash money. I don't have to pay any tax on it. He gave me \$50 a week. I got \$400 a month, all the extra I put in the bank.

SGF: Right, right.

HC: And saved the money.

SGF: So you worked right up until you were seventy-five years old.

SM: And then he got pneumonia one winter [and that put an end to working part-time.]

Why don't you cook for us now?

HC: Oh, I got everything ready.

SGF: Okay, and thank you.

HC: One half hour, and if you guys are hungry!

Minnesota Chinese Oral History Project
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