Oy Huie Anderson
Narrator,
with comments by Liani Lee and Shawna Lee

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Interviewer

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SGF: Today is Wednesday, February 26, 2003. This is Sherri Gebert-Fuller at the Minnesota History Center, and I am interviewing Oy Huie Anderson about many things today. We're going to start with your childhood. What do you remember from the youngest age on about Minneapolis, your family?

OHA: Well, the earliest I remember would probably be my dad, because he died when I was, oh, I'd say about six years old. The only thing I really remember is that he was very tall, and I suppose to all six-year-olds everybody's tall, but he was tall, and sitting on his lap and asking him for some money. He gave me a dime and asked me what I was going to do with it. That's kind of what I remember.

Then I remember his funeral in 1939. I was born in 1932, so I would be about six years old, six and a half. His funeral was held at Westminster Presbyterian Church in downtown Minneapolis in the chapel. I don't remember how many people were there, but I imagine there were a lot of Chinese there.

SGF: Was your family attending the language classes there at that time?

OHA: We were part of the Chinese Sunday school that they had at the Westminster Church. My mother and myself and my brother and my sister, we were all there attending the church and Sunday school. I don't think my dad came.

But at the funeral, the only people I really remember at the funeral was Mrs. Hong, who's the mother of this family that we grew up next door to, the Hong family. She was kind of looking after us little ones. My mother was, of course, overcome with grief, and I think my older brothers were maybe kind of helping her. So Mrs. Hong was kind of looking after myself and my brother Johnnie and my sister Mae. But mostly Johnnie and me, I think, because Mae was a few years older. I remember she said to me in Chinese, she said, "Go up there and say goodbye to your father."

LL: Very young age to lose your father.

SGF: How did he die?

OHA: He was in the hospital. I remember going to see him at the hospital, at St. Barnabas. I think it was a combination of heart problems, and then in the end probably pneumonia while he was in the hospital.

SGF: When had your father come to the United States?

OHA: From what I've heard, he came before the 1900s. He had come as a young man. I understand my grandfather was here and worked on the railroad in the 1850s and then went back to China. I suppose maybe that encouraged my dad to come at that time. He went back to China in 1910 and married my mother, and they had my oldest brother at that time. He was born in 1911.

Then my dad came back to America by himself, and five years later, in 1915 or 1916, he went back to China again to visit, and my second brother was born, Phillip. And then again, my dad came back to America by himself, and then this time it wasn't until 1927 that he went back to China, and at that time he brought my mother and my brother Phillip back with him to America, after which my sister was born a month after my mother got here, in May of 1928, and then my third brother in 1931 and then myself in 1932. Then, of course, my dad died in 1939.

SGF: What type of work was your father involved in?

OHA: All I can remember is that he had this little Chinese import store selling dry groceries. I think I faintly remember that he was involved with a restaurant business, probably in partnership with some other Chinese men, and I don't recall who they were. Of course, my two older brothers are gone now, and they would be the ones who would remember. After he died, then my mother and my older brothers were involved with kind of keeping the store running a little bit here and there.

SGF: When your father died, what kind of support did your mom receive from the Chinese community? Were there any services or did the church help, or did she have to rely on people like Mrs. Hong?

OHA: Evidently my father had left a small sum of money, but without a will. And of course, my mother didn't have access to his accounts. She could just maybe barely sign her name, otherwise she did not know English. And because there was no will, I think the bank was appointed as trustee.

Now, there was no other assistance, no welfare, no Social Security, it was just whatever my father had left us, and that money was divided amongst my brother Phillip and my mother and the three of us kids, I think, according to the state law at that time, which I understand is—whatever my mother received, I think probably one-third, and then Phil and probably the rest of us received an equal portion, supposedly. But somehow or another, my brother John received twice as much as what my sister and I did, because the Chinese favored boys. And because my oldest brother, the one that was born in 1911, he didn't come over with the rest of the family, he came in 1935, several years later, as a paper son with somebody else's papers, so he was not

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included in the distribution of the money. So my mother, from her share, gave him the portion that he should have received. This is what I found out after I got older. You know, at the time I was very young.

But I remember that checks came from the bank every month for $25 each for myself and my sister, and $50 for my brother Johnnie. Then, of course, my brother Phil was older, so he got his money outright. I believe the money may have run out three or four years later, because all of us, as we reached the age of twelve or thirteen, we all started working.

SGF: Twelve and thirteen?

OHA: Yes. At least part-time.

SGF: Let me go back to the brother who came over as a paper son.

OHA: Yes.

SGF: Was there a family in Minneapolis that provided him with—how did he get his papers? Let me ask that.

OHA: I would assume that my father purchased the papers from this other family, which is how things were done. As far as the family that my father purchased the papers from, I never knew any of that family. I don't know that they were even located in Minneapolis.

SGF: That's what I was curious about.

OHA: I know that we were told from the time we were very young, "Don't ever tell anybody that he's your brother."

LL: I remember you telling me that when I was growing up, too, "Don't tell anybody he's your uncle."

SGF: Oh, really, that late?

OHA: Maybe when you were very young, but whenever that Forgiveness Act (Confession Program) was passed, that's when my brother acknowledged his true identity and assumed his name as part of our family. I don't remember what year that was, but it was—

SGF: I want to say late 1950s.

OHA: Late 1950s? That's quite possible. So my two daughters were very young then and I might have said that. Then after that it was okay to acknowledge him.

SGF: It was quite a system. So how did your mom manage? She had some money coming in. You told me a story about paying the rent and money was tight.

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OHA: Well, we lived—our store was located down on Third Avenue downtown Minneapolis, 715 Third Avenue South, it was between Seventh and Eighth Street, and there were apartments above the store location, the businesses, like flats. So we lived upstairs from the store. Our rent, I remember, was $25 a month, but the problem was that we did not have any hot water and sometimes we didn't have heat. It was steam heat, radiators. Because the furnace that furnished the heat and hot water was located in the basement underneath one of the stores. And the fellow that was tending it lived there, and he was an alcoholic, and sometimes he just wasn't awake enough or knowledgeable enough to take care of his job. Sometimes I remember that my brother Johnnie, or probably Phil, too, had to go down there and feed the furnace with coal. It was fueled by coal.

SGF: Now, the area you lived in, would you consider that was a Chinese community, or when you were young did a lot of Chinese Americans lived in the same area in Minneapolis?

OHA: Well, it was, I suppose, considered kind of a center, such as it was. There were very few Chinese businesses located there. There were just maybe two or three other businesses that I recall. The other Chinese that were in the cities, they were like restaurant people or laundry, hand-laundry people. And the few families that were there, there were only the Hongs that lived next door to us for a time, and then they moved out and we were the only family that was still left there. But the others bought houses in more of the residential areas of the city.

SGF: This was in the thirties?

OHA: Well, the Hongs probably moved out in the early 1940s, I believe. I don't recall. I will guess it was probably about the time that we were almost junior high school age, because I remember their first house was near the junior high school, and then when the kids started going to high school, their kids, they moved over to the high school neighborhood. They went to—well, we all went to Phillips Junior High in Minneapolis. Our family attended Central, but where they had moved to, they were in the Washburn area of Minneapolis.

SGF: Before I ask you about your first job, are there any specific memories you have about grade school or junior high?

OHA: No, not really. I remember when I first started kindergarten. When we were young, my dad insisted that we all speak Chinese at home. No English allowed. Well, that was all right for a while, but then when my brother and sister, Mae and Johnnie, started school, well, they started picking up on English and then it was a little bit difficult to keep us speaking Chinese.

But I still had not started kindergarten yet, and when I did, I didn't really know English. And I remember—and my mother dressed me in these little bib corduroy overalls, and we were standing—you know, in kindergarten you kind of lined up to go to the bathroom and that. Well, the teacher put me in the boys' line because I had one of those haircuts, those what do you call, Dutch boy haircuts.

SGF: Right.

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OHA: I knew I didn't belong there, but I didn't know how to tell her that I shouldn't be there.

SGF: So what did you do?

OHA: I don't recall. It must have resolved itself somehow or other. But I do remember that incident. As a matter of fact, my mother kept me in that haircut until sixth grade, until I finished sixth grade. Then I asserted my independence; I would not let her cut my hair any longer after that. And from then on, I let my hair grow all through junior high school. For three years I didn't cut my hair.

SGF: So, sixth grade, then that was close to the time when you said you and your brothers and sisters all got part-time jobs.

OHA: Well, it was a little bit after that for me. I was ten years old when I finished grade school.

SGF: You were ten years old?

OHA: Well, I had skipped a couple grades during that time. So when I finished junior high, I was thirteen, so I think it was like my last year in junior high that I started working.

SGF: So what did you do?

OHA: I think my first job was a summer job as a cashier in a Chinese restaurant, cashier and chow mein girl, chow mein takeout girl. I worked for this restaurant that was run by Frank Moy. He used to have a restaurant on Broadway prior to that. Anyway, this was during the summer, so I worked nine hours a day, six days a week, and they paid me $18 a week. I saved my money that summer, and I bought myself a winter coat with a zip-out lining, something I always wanted, and a nurse's watch with a luminous dial and a sweep second hand, which is something else I always wanted.

SGF: Why a nurse's watch?

OHA: It was just something that I just wanted. I always wanted. I knew my mother couldn't afford to buy it for me, so I had to buy it myself.

SGF: Now, what did your mother do once your father died? She was still raising children. Did she have to work outside the home?

OHA: She never worked outside the home. Actually, this so-called store that we had was kind of a front for some gambling in the back room. The procedure was that on weekends all these—at the time in Minneapolis there were just a handful of families, the rest were all single men, either working as cooks in the restaurants or running a hand laundry. On Sundays they would congregate into this so-called Chinatown area for social reasons, visit, and also for gambling. So the procedure was that the businesses that were located in that area would take turns on Sundays hosting this gambling session, which runs all day Sunday and probably through the night into the wee hours of the morning on Monday.

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SGF: So when you say the local businesses, do you mean they contributed—what did they contribute?

OHA: The space.

SGF: The space. Okay. So the space for this gathering of men for social reasons.

OHA: Right. Also they usually cooked a pretty decent meal for them to eat on that day when they were there, because they would stay there all day.

Then my brother and I, I remember that my brother and I, we were kind of wise, I think, in the ways of some of this, what was going on, and we would make sure that we were down there to greet all these men as they come downtown for the day and maybe, perhaps, if they left early enough we would be there to say goodbye to them, and called each of them by name. They would say, "Oh, what nice, polite children you have," to my mother, and then if they were generous, they would give us a little tip. Especially if they won in gambling, they would give us a little bigger tip. You know, nickels, dimes, sometimes quarters. They were especially generous around Chinese New Year. That's when my brother and I made sure that we were down there to greet them. That's how we made our money.

But anyway, this one Chinese New Year, I remember that we counted our loot and it was tremendous. It came to $66. I remember that figure. That was a lot of money. I don't recall if that was between the two of us or individually, you know, I don't recall that much.

SGF: Now, so every Sunday this social event occurred. Were there people in the community who coordinated the activities—what happened? When you say gambling occurred, what was the process, or did someone run the day? Do you know what I'm trying to say?

OHA: Mainly I think they played, I think, Pai Gow. Pai Gow. They play that out in Las Vegas now. I think that's what they played. But I remember they had this big round table in the back, and of course that's what they ate off, too, in between the session. I suppose there was a house rake for the game somehow or another, so that's how the house makes a little money, and then in return, like I say, they supply the space and the dealer, which was my oldest brother. I think he usually would run the game. He also did the cooking; he would cook up the food for the men. It was all men.

SGF: Did each business have—

OHA: This back room? Yes.

SGF: —this back room? Okay.

OHA: As far as I remember, yes.

SGF: Did each business then supply a dealer and cook for each Sunday?

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OHA: Oh, yes, it was in their own establishment. Usually, probably one of the family or a relative.

SGF: Everything I've read says that the stores like that were so important for people because it was one of the few places they could gather and socialize and just catch up on things.

OHA: A social center, yes, for the men. Mostly for the men.

SGF: Right. Because there still weren't that many women, was there, until after World War II?

OHA: The handful of family that were there, our social event was going to the Chinese Sunday school. That's where our mothers would visit with each other, catch up on the news and everything. Because, like I say, our family, by that time, were the only ones that were still left downtown, and so the others had moved out a ways and we didn't have a chance, really, to visit with each other hardly at all. So that was their social gathering, was at the church.

SGF: Then at the church you gathered every Sunday and there were a variety of classes, right?

OHA: For different ages.

SGF: For different ages.

OHA: This was at three o'clock in the afternoon. They had activities planned for us, like the holidays they would have a special turkey dinner for us. That's the only time we probably ever ate turkey, because otherwise we would eat rice at home all the time. Then in the summertime they would have a picnic for us, potato salad, the usual American-type picnic. At Christmastime they would have a party and Santa Claus, and they would give us Christmas presents, each of us.

SGF: Jane donated this wonderful little collection of papers where they hand-wrote-out the lists of who was going to get what presents.

OHA: Oh, really. I've never seen a list like that.

SGF: You should come in sometime. It's a small folder, but it's really wonderful. A tie, a truck, a book.

OHA: I remember in regards to the gift from the Sunday school, I don't know how old I was, I would guess maybe seven, eight, but I had never had a doll all during that time. Then one Christmas the Sunday school gave me a doll for Christmas, and it's one of these curly-haired blonde dolls with eyes that blink. It came in a box that was shaped like a shoebox. And I was so enamored of that gift, I didn't play with the doll. I would take it out every once in a while and look at it and maybe touch it a little bit and finger it, then I would cover it up and put it back again. It was just like new.

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After I was grown up and everything, then my niece was born, my first niece, and as she got a little bit older, I gave it to her to play, and in no time flat it was destroyed. [Laughter] After I cared for it all those years. I felt a little pang when I saw the doll the next time.

SGF: I bet you did.

OHA: But I remember that very vividly, that doll from Sunday school. It was really nice.

SGF: Do you have pretty good memories about Westminster?

OHA: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

SGF: It seems like they provided just wonderful services.

OHA: Yes, they did.

LL: Was Ms. Wilson there from the very beginning?

OHA: No, she didn't come until in the mid-1940s, but I don't know the exact year. Did she tell you?

SGF: Yes, but I can't remember now.

OHA: I think I was about twelve, perhaps. Maybe, 1944, 1945, 1946, somewhere around there. Before that, my class, our teacher's name was Audrey Webb, and she was getting married and leaving, and then that's the time when Miss Jane Wilson took over our class. She had this deep southern accent, which we had never heard before.

LL: I remember that.

OHA: Very deep.

SGF: She always tells the story of how the class giggled when she started talking.

OHA: Of course. Of course.

SGF: Did you attend classes there through high school?

OHA: I'm guessing that we probably did until high school, sometime during the high school years. Then at some point, I think also they decided to drop the afternoon classes. I don't remember when that was, and just had regular Sunday school with the rest of the congregation.

SGF: Now, I want to make sure I don't forget two things before we go on. One is your dad's funeral, and maybe that fits in later, and then your work at the Nankin.

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OHA: Okay. Well, with my dad's funeral, his intention when he came to America was always that he would make his fortune here and return to China and retire. So when he died, I was told that he still wanted to be buried in China where we had a family plot or grave, where he would be looked after and everything. When he died, there was war in China, Japan and China, during that time, so we weren't able to do anything about it, so he was kept in a vault at Lakewood Cemetery, above the ground.

After World War II, my two older brothers took a trip back to China. My older brother, the one that was the paper son, he was already married and had a son when he came over, and he had not seen them from 1935 until this time after World War II, so he was going back for a visit. My second brother, Phillip, who came over when he was about eleven years old, came with my mother in 1928, my mother wanted him—he had served in World War II in the army and so he was a veteran, and because of this service he applied for citizenship and received his citizenship. So my mother wanted him to go back to China and get a bride, so the two brothers were going back to China. And I guess there was some thought that my mother wanted my brother Johnnie, who at that time was fifteen years old—no, let's see, fifteen or sixteen—wanted him to go back to China and get a bride. And of course, my brother said, "No way." So that was the end of that.

So the two brothers, my two brothers, went back to China, and they took my father's body, casket, back to China with them. I don't know how close they got to the village, to our own village, but they found a suitable place where we had relatives, and he was buried there.

Well, after the burial, a while later, I'm not sure exactly how long afterwards, we were informed—my oldest brother kept in contact with his family in China, you know, through correspondence.

SGF: What village?

OHA: This is in the Toishan area. The name of our village was Oong Won Tune. Like I say, I don't know if this cemetery or graveyard was located right at that village or not far from there. But some years afterwards the Communists did take over that area. They wanted the land for farming, so they informed all the relatives to come and remove the bodies of their ancestors so they could have the land. So my relatives then moved the body to another cemetery further away, and that was fine, and we buried him.

Well, then not that long ago, maybe ten, fifteen years ago, by this time my oldest brother's family had come to America and they were living in Chicago. So my nephew, his son that was born in China before my big brother came, my nephew and his wife, they were planning on going back to China for a visit and they were going to visit the grave and decorate it and do other things to it. So they had written to our relatives there that they were coming, and the relatives went to check on the grave to make sure everything was okay, and they wrote back and said that "It's not there anymore." The cemetery, the graveyard, was not there anymore, and in tracking it, they found that the Communists had taken over that land also, and this time they did not notify relatives. What they did was, they dug up each of the bodies, cremated the bodies, and put them into separate urns with their identity on each urn and left them with the monastery located in that general area.

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So my nephew and his wife in Chicago, when they heard about this, informed us and asked us what we wanted to do with the ashes of my father who had died thirty, forty years before.

In the meantime, my mother had died in 1966. She had also, when we asked her about burial and that, she said, "Well, of course, I'll be buried next to—," her husband. Where else would she be? We thought of the impracticality of that, and we asked her, we talked to her a little bit about it, and then we told her that "Well, your children are all here. There will be nobody left in China to look after your grave." Then she decided that that was right, that's true, so she assented to be buried here in America, at Lakewood.

When she died, we purchased several plots all in one area of the Chinese section of the Lakewood Cemetery for our future use.

So when my nephew and his wife asked us what we wanted to do with the ashes, we talked among ourselves and said, "Bring him back here and we'll bury him next to our mother at Lakewood." So they did that. They shipped his ashes back, and we had another reburial ceremony. I recall there was almost fifty years since he had died, so he traveled a lot of miles before his final burial.

SGF: A lot of journeys.

OHA: Yes.

SGF: It's a great story.

[Tape interruption]

OHA: —did a lot of things together. You know, I was kind of a tomboy, and I just kind of followed him around. But most of the time he was real good to me. Sometimes he'd hit me or something, but my mother always favored him, so she'd tell me, "Don't bother your brother." But anyway, he's always been generous. When he started working—and we both loved baseball, and there was the Minneapolis Millers, the Triple-A farm team at that time, at Nicollet ballpark, and we would listen to the ballgame every day after school, and when we had a chance, we would go to the ballgame. My brother, Johnnie, who was probably about thirteen, fourteen years old, he would take me with him to the ballgame. He started working at Nankin at age thirteen so he had some money… He would buy these box seats, the first row right behind first base. At that time the home team was on the first-base side. Now they're on the third-base side. But he would buy these box seats, and there would be the two of us, you know, these young kids, and we'd sit there and chew bubblegum during these doubleheaders on Sundays, all during a whole doubleheader.

Well, one time I think I chewed the bubblegum for so long that my jaw was so tired and the taste of it was so awful, that I think I swore off gum. I never chewed gum after that. I must have been about fourteen years old, I'm guessing, fourteen.

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That's my brother, you know, if he was going to take me to a ballgame, he'd get the best seats.

SGF: What other kinds of things did you do?

OHA: Well, I'd follow him around. We'd go shoot marbles or play bat and ball with his buddies, his friends. We didn't have a yard where we lived, it was just a parking lot, and we'd go over, sometimes we used to go over to where we went to grade school on Sixth Street and there were a few houses there. That was kind of a ghetto, you know, a very poor section. There were some houses there, their yards were probably mostly dirt, but it was a yard. Whatever, we just kind of played.

I remember that there was a company on Fourth Avenue, a block behind our house, a paper company. They printed calendars and other things. They printed pads, made notebooks, you know, different—just whatever, made of paper. He and I—there again, I don't know how old we were, eight, nine, ten, and we just ran around downtown like—you know, we knew downtown like the back of our hand. So we used to go up there, it was upstairs, and we'd go up there and we'd visit with the workers there.

SGF: Do you remember what the name of the business was?

OHA: Leslie Paper Company on Fourth Avenue, I think it was between Seventh and Sixth Street. It was just like a block and a half away. The men there really were so nice to us. They'd visit with us, chat with us. They were probably on their lunch break or whatever. We'd sit there. We didn't know any better; we'd just sit there and talk to them. Then when they punch out holes for notebooks and things, they would bring these bags full of holes that were punched out. We used to bring them home, and my mother would say, "What are you bringing that home for? We don't have room for all that." [Laughter]

Then every once in a while they would cut trimmings off these paper pads in stacks and then they'd put the rubber backing on the edges. We'd have all these odd-shaped tablets we would bring home. There again, my mother would scold us for bringing all this stuff home. But we had a nice time with those men there. They were very nice, very nice to us kids.

SGF: What do you remember about downtown Minneapolis, if you knew it like the back of your hand? Did you have favorite hangouts?

OHA: Well, there's an Old Dutch potato chip factory down near Washington Avenue, which was sort of 'The Bowery' of Minneapolis. Anyway, in the back they would throw out all these burnt chips, potato chips that weren't suitable for packing. We'd go down there and we'd find some in the rubbish and eat them. [Laughs]

SGF: Like any good kid would.

OHA: Well, sure. Of course, the theaters down there—there was a Bijou Theater located on Washington Avenue just north of Hennepin. It was a nickel a show and they changed shows daily. My brother and I would go down there and see the movies down there all the time for a

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nickel apiece. Then there were, of course, other movie theaters as you come up on Hennepin Avenue close to more of the business district. We used to go to those, too.

My mother and I used to walk downtown and go to the Palace Theater located on 5th and Hennepin. This was during the summer, and because it was air conditioned, that's the only place we could go to find relief. So on a Sunday afternoon or Saturday afternoon we'd walk down there and go to the movies. They used to give away like dishes and soap, things at that time.

SGF: At the movies?

OHA: Yes.

SGF: I wasn't aware of that.

OHA: Oh, they're a real collector's item now, these dishes and things.

SGF: I'm curious, did the dishes promote any kind of business or was it just like you would get in a box of soap?

OHA: It would be like the kind you would get in a box of soap.

SGF: Now, you graduated valedictorian, right?

OHA: Yes, from Central High School. I was sixteen years old and I was very young and naïve. Actually, I associated with maybe some other Chinese kids that were mostly eighteen, university kids. That crowd was a little bit older and I was probably the youngest of that crowd. In school I associated with mostly the lower grades, because they were closer to my age. So it was kind of, I don't know, a strange situation, I would say.

SGF: I didn't realize you were sixteen.

OHA: I was very young.

SGF: That then, am I right, is when you were working at Nankin?

OHA: Yes. After high school graduation I started at Nankin. My brother had been there for quite a few years already. He started when he was thirteen. Actually, I was probably the only one who did not work during the school year. I only worked during summers, whereas my brother Johnnie and my sister Mae both worked part-time during the school year, in addition to working summers. But I did work in the school cafeteria all through junior high and high school, and that paid for my lunch and things like that.

SGF: Serving food, making food?

OHA: No, cashier. I was always interested in money. [Laughter]

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SGF: So you worked at Nankin for a while.

OHA: For several years, yes.

SGF: Tell me a little more about—you attended classes, social events, at Westminster, but then the newsletters that I see from the Chinese American Club, your name is in them all over. Do you remember much about Chinese American Club?

OHA: I do, but I don't really recall my name being all over.

SGF: Well, it is in the newsletter. Maybe what you were doing in school and babysitting and you were secretary or something.

OHA: I never babysat. Never in my whole life.

SGF: Okay. My mistake.

LL: Until we came along.

OHA: Then I had to. No, I remember the Chinese American Club. What I remember of it was that it was on the second floor of the Nankin Restaurant, Nankin Cafe. Walter James, who owned the building and owned the restaurant, made that second floor available for our Chinese community use, and it was a large room with tables and chairs so we could have parties there. We had dances there. There was a jukebox there.

Then in another section of that second floor he also had rooms for some of his cooks who were single men, older, that did not have families to be with, so they slept there while they worked at his restaurant. In fact, that second floor clubroom was where my brother Johnnie and his wife, Carol—when they got married they had the reception there. He offered the use of that. Of course, we still didn't have any money.

I remember Walter. I was working there at the time, and my brother was working there, but because he was getting married and the reception was going to be there, he came up to me down at the restaurant—I was working as the chow mein takeout, I think, and he came to me and told me that I should take care of the reception for my brother, order the cake and do whatever is necessary. Then he took out this roll of bills and started peeling off some bills for me, and he said, "And then I want you to pay for a reception with this money. If you need more, let me know."

SGF: Very generous man, right?

OHA: He was a very generous, kind-hearted man, very. I used to think at the time that he was probably the only Chinese businessman who had thoughts of philanthropy, you know, that he was willing to do nice things and good things. He donated to churches. He was involved with Chicago Chinatown, also. I think he donated a lot to the Chinese Center down there, also. I think he had a restaurant down there at one time.

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SGF: So as far as, say, socializing, so there was the Westminster Church classes and the Sunday events at different businesses for gambling, socializing, Chinese New Year celebrations, I would assume, at various businesses?

OHA: Mostly involving dinners. The different clubs, there were the Tongs.

SGF: Right. That's what I was going to ask.

OHA: Mainly, the Hip Sing and the On Leong. When I was old enough to know about them and everything, they were just fraternal social organizations. There again, they had gatherings for the Chinese men to come down there and socialize on weekends. On the special occasions, the families would all be invited for special dinners, and they would make sure that their dates would not conflict with each other. Like over Chinese New Year, which is celebrated for several weeks, they would make sure the dates would not conflict.

There was also family associations, too—the Wong Club, which also had these dinners. I think there was a Moy Club that was active. It had to be families that had a large population in the Twin Cities. Since population wasn't that great altogether, you know, there were just a few families that had the ability to have an organized club.

LL: I remember the Hip Sing and I remember going down there. Was the other club—

OHA: The On Leong.

LL: The On Leong, was that still around?

OHA: Oh, yes. That was down on Fourth Avenue and close to Washington, I believe.

LL: Where was the Hip Sing?

OHA: Down on Glenwood Avenue North. At one time it was next door to us on Third Avenue; they were in the apartment next door to us. I think they moved there from Fourth Avenue and 3rd Street. Of course, my oldest brother was always—our family was the Hip Sing family. At that time the families would identify with one or the other.

SGF: How did someone make that choice?

OHA: Through a family. I mean my father, I imagine.

SGF: Okay. So he always associated himself with Hip Sing?

OHA: Yes. I don't know if that originated in China or not. I don't know. But my oldest brother, I remember, of course, you know, he was born and raised in China, he got married in China, so he was an adult when he came here, so he was more involved with these Chinese-type events. I

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remember at the Hip Sing that he was always involved as an official or some kind, or caretaker or cook. He cooked for the Hip Sing festivities, dinners and that, quite often, for many years.

SGF: Was that involvement in the Hip Sing different from the Sunday gatherings for gambling?

OHA: Not necessarily. I don't recall exactly how it went, but I'm sure that that occurred. Maybe it was after the Chinese stores were gone and maybe then the Hip Sings, the Tongs.

SGF: So it was part of socializing.

OHA: Yes. They had to have someplace to gather.

SGF: Exactly. No, I'm not making any judgment.

OHA: No. No.

SGF: So there were a number of options for the members of the Chinese community to gather on a day-to-day basis. I'm assuming, then, Chinese Americans integrated with whatever other activities were going on and felt at home in Minneapolis-St. Paul, or do you think they felt isolated, based on your experience?

OHA: It's kind of hard to say. Based on my experience, during the school hours, yes, I had a lot of friends in the school, and like I say, I usually associated with the younger grades because they were closer to my age. But outside of the school, because we lived so far away from the school, we weren't really in the neighborhood. I wasn't really involved with that many after-school activities, a few, but it was like at least two miles or more away, and we either walked or took a streetcar.

I think I was involved with some girls' athletic club activities one night a week. No, one afternoon after school, and then after that you came home. But it was difficult because we were not in the neighborhood. The same thing for junior high school. Phillips Junior High was, like I say, at least another two miles away in a different direction, so we weren't really right there. One of the nice things, we were close enough to the school so we could walk back and forth.

SGF: I don't know how much you want to talk about your life after high school and living in the Twin Cities. That's up to you. Then something else I want to talk about is the comment you made when we first started, which was, your brother was Chinese.

OHA: Oh, it was just kind of one of those little stories I like to tell sometimes when people ask me about my family. I say, well, actually, I have three brothers. One's Chinese, one's half-and-half, and one's American. Well, they look at me, because they could tell by looking at me that I'm full-blooded Chinese, and they have this puzzled look on their face, and then I would explain. I said, "Well, my oldest brother was born and raised and got married and had a child in China before he came, so he's 100 percent Chinese. My second brother was born in China and went to school, came over here when he was about eleven or twelve years old and went to school here also, and so he's kind of half-and-half. And then my third brother was born and raised here,

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and he's probably 98 percent American." 95 percent? But anyway, he's American. So that's why I have three brothers that are—that explains it.

SGF: I'm going to stop this for a second.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

All right. I'd like to return to talking about your mother. You have some family photographs with images of the family in China in traditional dress, attire, and then you have some later images of the family, I'm assuming, in the United States in what we might call American clothing. What was it like for your mother? She spent many years in China while your father was in the United States, so what was that like for her?

OHA: Well, she lived in the village, and she was middle-aged when she came over, really, I would say. You know, 1928, she was thirty-eight years old, and then she had three of us kids after that, after she was thirty-eight. I was born in 1932, so she was forty-two years old when I was born. So, being tied down with three little kids right after she comes to a strange country, not knowing the language, I imagine was very difficult for her.

SGF: What kind of family did she come from in China?

OHA: She was born into a very poor, poor farm family. She told me this after I was older. She said that when she was born—her parents told her that when she was born they were so disappointed that she was only a girl, that it was just another mouth to feed for them, and they told her that they had considered selling her to another family as a maidservant of some kind. Then they told her that later on they were so happy that they kept her because she was such a good worker.

SGF: Was she the only girl in the family?

OHA: I don't know. I think she had a brother. I remember her talking about a brother at one time. Then I imagine she was fairly lucky to marry into my dad's family, that I think had a little bit more money, because he went to school, he was educated. My oldest brother, who was born in China, was sent to school and was educated, and my brother Phil also went to school when he was there. So I imagine they must have had a little bit of money. Maybe that came from my grandfather, who was here and worked on the railroad.

SGF: There you go. Well, if your father returned to China two or three times, that was an expensive trip in itself.

OHA: Well, I think they can save a lot of money when they want to. They can be very conservative as far as spending money. But I have to say this, I think my father probably was a gambler, maybe more than anything else. So it may be that he won enough, you know, for a trip home, because I can't imagine he would have earned enough for these trips by selling a few groceries, dry groceries, here and there. I think the restaurant business, the restaurant they had, I don't think it lasted very long. Of course, a lot of this happened during the Depression, too. I

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remember one time somebody else told me, not anybody from my family, but another family friend told me that my dad at one time in gambling had won over $10,000, and this was back in the Depression days. A lot of money.

SGF: That's amazing. So that much money was—

OHA: Changed hands, yes. Lots of money.

SGF: In these stores?

OHA: Yes.

SGF: In the backs of the stores.

OHA: Then he stayed and gambled some more and he lost most of it back that same night. So he maybe had maybe a thousand or two left, and he was so mad at himself he went out in the back, lit a match and burnt the rest up. [Laughter] That's what this family friend told me. He's the only one who ever told me that.

SGF: As a reminder?

LL: Louie?

OHA: No.

LL: Because he used to tell me, he says, "Your grandfather was so lucky in gambling."

OHA: Louie told you that?

LL: Yes.

OHA: When did you talk to Louie?

LL: One time. He said, "Your grandfather was so lucky."

OHA: A good gambler. These games that they have in the back room, I imagine there must be some other side games, you know, where the stakes are as big as you want it to be. Just like when you play poker here, you can play penny ante or you can play nickel, dime, or you can play for hundreds of dollars.

SGF: True.

OHA: So in this case, this was probably for thousands of dollars. I don't know. But you can see that right now at the casinos.

SGF: Absolutely.

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OHA: You see the high-stake area, you see all these Asian faces in there, and they're not millionaires. They're restaurant workers, you know, whatever, they're just average workers, but they go in there and play high-stakes. I don't understand that. I mean, I like to gamble, but I'm not a high-stake gambler.

SGF: Oh, no. I'm too tight with my money. I couldn't do that.

OHA: But I do enjoy gambling.

LL: Can I ask you a question about Popo living in China? Did she live with my grandfather's family?

OHA: Yes. Back in the village, from what I understand, this house or this building, I think it was made of brick of some kind, it must have been like a twin bungalow or whatever term, there were two families living in there. It was like you cut it in half, and one side was my father's family and descendents and whatever, and on the other side was my fourth uncle, which would be—my father was a second son, my fourth uncle would be the fourth son, his family descendents lived in the other side of this building. Then I think they had a common kitchen and maybe an eating area, perhaps, common. Maybe they took turns, I don't know. But I know my brother Phil mentioned one time about this housing. Then there was also room for the pigs and the chickens to get out of the rain or whatever.

SGF: In the building, right?

OHA: In the building, yes.

LL: Did she live with her in-laws at all, Popo?

OHA: Of course.

LL: They were still alive there for a while.

OHA: I believe so. I believe so. I know that she mentioned—it would be my grandmother, I think. I don't remember her mentioning my grandfather, but I think she mentioned my grandmother. She was there for a while.

LL: Did she say whether or not she was treated well by him?

OHA: I don't recall. But I think my oldest brother's wife, she remembers. They're the ones that are in Chicago now. She was telling me that when she married, and this was just before my mother came, when she married my oldest brother, she went as a bride into that building, that house. Being a bride, a new bride and whatever, she was not to be outgoing or in public or be seen. Then before my dad came back to America with my mother and my second brother, he made it known that he wanted her to come out so he could see her, and he ordered her to come out and show her face, so he could see her before he left for America. So that's the only time she

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saw my father. She just told me that last year when I went to visit them in Chicago. She's ninety-two years old now, so when I do go down there to visit every once in a while, I just kind of ask her questions about the old days and I listen to some of her stories. She's interesting.

SGF: Maybe we could record her. Those are important stories.

OHA: But it was kind of interesting. One time when I was visiting in Chicago, my sister-in-law wanted to play mah-jong, and she invited this other lady, who's a Huie, to play mah-jong, and when she came, well, then we were introduced and she said that she remembered my mother. This was maybe in the 1980s or so when I met this lady in Chicago. She said she remembered my mother and she was a little girl at the time, back in the village, and that my mother was always so kind and so good, and nobody had a bad word to say about her. It made me real good to hear that from her. But she said she was just a little girl, but she remembered that my mother married into the family.

SGF: Have you ever been back to the village?

OHA: No, I haven't.

SGF: And your brothers have when they went to—

OHA: I don't know if my brothers made it back to the village when they went, because there were still Communists and there was still some war going on at the time, so I don't know how close they got to the village. They went to Hong Kong, and maybe they tried to or not, I'm not sure.

SGF: Do you have time for a few more questions?

OHA: Certainly.

SGF: All right. I'm just going to look at the tape here.

Your daughter asked an interesting question which I'd like to follow up on. When you were in high school, or after high school, since you graduated when you were sixteen, were there any restrictions on who you could date? Did the individual have to be Chinese?

OHA: Well, I have to go back a few years earlier than that because of my sister, who was four years older than me. She was a little bit more aggressive and more outgoing. I was always jealous of her. [Laughs] But she was always more popular. But anyway, when she finished high school, or I suppose when she started dating, she dated Caucasian, she dated Japanese, she dated Chinese. Whoever she felt like dating, she did. My mother used to scold her about it many, many times. Every time she went out with a non-Chinese, she used to scold her, until finally she became resigned to the fact that she wasn't able to do anything about it.

Also when my sister graduated from high school, she was determined and—well, let's just say she was determined enough that she did go to the University and graduated, worked her way

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through on her own. She lived in a sorority house, did all these things that she wanted to do. And when she told my mother that she was going to go to the University for education, my mother tried to talk her out of it, to tell her it was a waste of money for a girl to go to school; she should just look for a husband, get married and have children.

SGF: What year was this?

OHA: That was probably 1945, thereabouts, because I think it was about 1946 when she graduated from high school. But she went to the university and she got a degree, and in 1950 or so, she joined the Air Force. Here's this Chinese-American girl joining the Air Force. She went down to Texas to officers' candidate school. Because she had a college degree, she went in as a candidate for officers' training, and she finished that and she became a second lieutenant.

SGF: Really? And so she was in the—I'm going to stop this tape.

[Tape interruption]

Okay. So, on the last tape we were learning about your sister, who sounded like she was ready to go out in the world and conquer it.

OHA: She was a radical.

SGF: She was a radical. So she joined the air force.

OHA: She was an officer and she met a sergeant, and, of course, they weren't allowed to date because no—and she married him. [Laughs] That was kind of interesting, because she didn't tell us. The only way I found out was, at the time I was on a bowling team at downtown Minneapolis and on my team were two WAC sergeants who were stationed in Minneapolis, recruiting, and they said, "Hey, I see your sister got married." It was in the service newspaper about their marriage. And that's how I found out about it.

LL: Popo didn't know?

OHA: No. No.

SGF: What was your mother's name?

OHA: Well, her official name was Huie Yuen Shee Yuen is her maiden name and Shee just means really like "Mrs." or a married woman. I never knew her given name until I was an adult, you know, way later. Her Chinese name was Phuong Gom, and I thought Phuong was—I don't know Chinese that well, and I thought Phuong was a honeybee, and Gom I know is gold. But somebody told me Phuong is a phoenix. So her name was like golden phoenix, sort of.

SGF: Popo is?

OHA: Grandmother on Mother's side.

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LL: She lived with us when I was growing up, so I was very close to her.

OHA: Yes. I started working when Liani started—well, I was working part-time until she started grade school and then I went to full-time days, and then my mother was home to look after Liani and Karen, when they got home from school.

SGF: Yes. That's very nice. Nice to have that relationship, too.

OHA: Until you were about what? 1966, you were eleven years old.

LL: She passed away, and that just broke my heart because she'd been there all along.

SGF: So we haven't answered the dating question yet. So your sister broke the mold.

OHA: Right. So my mother was pretty resigned to whoever we wanted to date, and there was no hassle. I dated Caucasian, I dated Chinese, I dated Japanese. I didn't discriminate against the Chinese. Well, sometimes people do.

SGF: Really?

OHA: Sometimes Chinese people do.

SGF: I guess I haven't thought of it that way. Discriminate because you think it meant that you were more American or less Chinese by dating someone who wasn't Chinese?

OHA: I don't know. I don't know what they think.

SGF: I'm just theorizing here.

OHA: We were asked to talk to our nephew one time about his dating choices, by his mother. [Laughs] We told him, "It's fine if you want to date Caucasian or whatever, but at least don't discriminate against Chinese."

LL: Who? Les?

OHA: He said, "Chinese girl, nah." [Laughs]

SGF: In growing up, do you feel, as a girl, you were treated differently? You said your brothers were favored, which I've heard from many families, but I'm just—

OHA: Well, there wasn't a whole lot of favoring to be done. I know occasionally when my brother and I would get into it, a scrap of some kind or other, my mother would tell me to leave my brother alone. But other than that, and the fact that the money that was mailed each month, the checks, he got twice as much as we did, but that supposedly was for our support, you know, whatever.

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In fact, my sister and I were talking about this not too long ago and we said my poor mother, she scrimped and saved, tried to not spend any money if she could help it, and the money that was given to us each month she'd try and save as much of it as she could and put it back into our own saving account. Then as soon as we were old enough, whatever was there, each of us went and spent the money on a car. And we thought afterwards, oh, you know, our poor mother, how she scrimped and saved.

SGF: But now you appreciate it.

OHA: Oh, of course. But of course, we were working, too, at that time, and we also contributed to it. After my brother left for the service, I was the only one home with my mother. The money was gone then, so I was working and supporting her when I was sixteen.

SGF: When you were sixteen. And how many years then were you at the Nankin?

OHA: Oh, three or four years.

SGF: Do you have anything you want to say?

OHA: Well, as far as like the Nankin and Walter James, I want to tell a story about how kind-hearted he was and generous. When I graduated from high school, I did receive a scholarship from the *Reader's Digest*. At that time they used to give scholarships to every valedictorian in the Twin Cities high schools. So being valedictorian, I did receive a scholarship for $250, and as a result, I did go to the University of Minnesota for one whole year, because that money paid for tuition and books for a whole year, $250. Then the following year I was on my own. I was still working like thirty hours a week at least, during this time I was going to school, and maybe probably more during the summer.

Then the following year I started the fall quarter, and I was still working the thirty-some hours, and I wasn't sure what I wanted to study, and then I dropped out, because I didn't want to waste any more money and effort if I didn't know what I wanted to major in. But all through high school I was kind of geared towards college, because the courses I took in high school were math, science. They were not the business courses. So when I dropped out, I was still working at the Nankin, and Walter James found out that I had dropped out of the U and he came and talked to me and he said, "What is the problem? You're dropping out? Is it because of money?" He said, "If it's because of money, I'll pay the tuition for you, because really you should go on to school and get an education."

I told him, "No, it really isn't that. It's because I'm not sure what I want to study."

Then he said, "Well, how about if you—." At the time, the Minneapolis Business School, I think, was in his building, located in his building. So he said, "Why don't you go to the business school upstairs. They'll give you a good background for a decent job. You could work here whenever your hours permit, you'll take your meals here. It would cost you very little outside of the—and I'll pay the tuition. It would make it easier for you."

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I still didn't know what I wanted to do, so again, I turned him down. I was so young. [Laughs] I was, what, seventeen? Let's see. Yes, I was seventeen. And here I made this life-altering decision not to continue college.

SGF: Walter James supported lots and lots of young adults, didn't he, through college, or provided them with jobs?

OHA: Well, I don't know that he actually ever paid for college for anybody. I mean, he offered it to me. I don't know if he offered it to other people. But it was well known that anybody, any Chinese students that wanted to go to college and wanted to work, they could always get a job at the Nankin and work whatever hours they needed to fit their school schedule, no problem. That was known. There were a lot of Chinese students who worked at the Nankin.

SGF: Did you ever meet students from China who worked at the Nankin?

OHA: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

SGF: What was that like?

OHA: Oh, they were very nice. I didn't really think of them as very different. I guess they didn't—I was neutral, you know.

SGF: Right. Did they participate if, say, there was a special event or dinner? Were the students invited to such things?

OHA: I believe so, yes. I think so.

SGF: It sounds like it was quite a place for people to gather and to just enjoy themselves.

OHA: Eventually, I think, probably in the later years the Chinese American Club probably moved towards the campus, or maybe there was a separate organization there that was on campus. It was mostly the foreign students who made up most of the membership there. But we were all still welcome, although I just never really attended that many activities over there.

SGF: Anything else you want to say today?

LL: One question. I have a memory of Walter James and something about a train car and what seemed like open land or something. To me, it was like a farm, but I don't know.

OHA: It was. He had some property out at Howard Lake and he had a house there, and on that land he also had purchased a Pullman car and set it out there on his land there, permanently, for guests, for sleeping quarters, extra accommodations. There was kind of like a farm. I think he had farmland there that he probably rented out to other people to farm. Also, some of the single Chinese cooks also had—I don't know if they went out there quite a bit, because Nankin was always closed on Sundays. So there was room for them to go out there and do whatever they

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wanted to do. There was fishing available. He had a boat for them to use. They'd go fishing. One of them I remember raised pigeons out there. The head chef at Nankin used to raise pigeons out at the farm there. Moy Foon. But there was kind of a close-knit—in fact, the Nankin family, the people that worked at the Nankin, they were all kind of a close-knit family.

SGF: How many people worked there, again? Wasn't it quite a few?

OHA: There were quite a few. It was a large restaurant. There were the waiters and waitresses, bartenders, busboys, the chefs, the cooks, the pantry help. A lot of people. There were a lot of Caucasians working there. Filipinos. It was a nice restaurant.

SGF: So with a business like that, I'm curious about the evolution of the Hip Sing and On Leong and family associations. Do you think certain things replaced those groups, or was the Nankin just a special place where it was close-knit?

OHA: The Nankin, I think, probably catered more to younger people, social activities, whereas I think those tongs were more toward families or the single men, the older single men, bachelors, or the ones whose families were in China, they were here by themselves. I think that might be kind of the difference, a different mixture.

SGF: Sure.

OHA: I never really was involved that much with the Hip Sing and those activities except to go to a Chinese meal, dinner once in a while.

SGF: Or get your tips by the door.

OHA: Oh, that was when I was very young.

SGF: I know. [Laughter] Anything else?

OHA: I can't think of anything else.

SGF: Then we'll call it a day, and thank you. With this I should note your name, again, is?

LL: Liani Lee, Oy's daughter. And?

SL: I am Shawna Lee.

SGF: Shawna Lee, Oy's—

SL: Oy's granddaughter.

SGF: Oy's granddaughter. Okay. Thank you.

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