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### Chinese Laundries in Massachusetts: An Oral History Project

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# Chinese Laundries in Massachusetts

*An Oral History Project*



 紐英崙華人歷史協會  
Chinese Historical Society  
of New England  
Established in 1992 | [chsne.org](http://chsne.org)

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*Cover photos: irons, courtesy of Chinese Historical Society of New  
England; laundry packages, used with permission from Alamy.*

## About the Chinese Laundries in Massachusetts Oral History Project

The Institute for Asian American Studies (IAAS), in partnership with the Chinese Historical Society of New England, interviewed Chinese Americans who owned, or whose parents owned, a laundry in Massachusetts.

From the 1870s to the 1960s, a large proportion of the Chinese American population in the U.S. relied on laundry work to make a living. Shut out from many other forms of employment, Chinese Americans found that self-employment in laundry work was one of the few options for survival.

Chinese laundries in the Boston area date back over 140 years ago to the mid-1870s. By 1880, there were already over 100 Chinese laundry workers listed in Boston in the U.S. census. Laundries were certainly not limited to Boston—by 1900, there were about 3,000 Chinese in Massachusetts and nearly 90% were laundry workers. Laundries remained an essential part of Chinese American life in the Northeast for decades. The laundries were often located in urban areas near their customer base—people living in apartment buildings and/or working professionals, particularly men, who needed their shirts starched and pressed.

Up until the 1920s, and into the 1930s, most Chinese-owned laundries in Massachusetts were one-man operations, sometimes with a partner or two. After this time, when more Chinese women were immigrating, Chinese laundries were run by families. Generally, the whole family was put to work in the business.

We are grateful to the interviewees for sharing their experiences so that they may be preserved and used to educate future generations. We talked to ten individuals who owned or whose parents (or relatives) owned laundries in Massachusetts and one who owned a laundry in New York, but moved to Massachusetts later. The interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2015 and transcribed by Shauna Lo. All permissions for transcripts and documents are on file at the Institute for Asian American Studies.

For more information about the project, contact: Shauna Lo at [Shauna.Lo@umb.edu](mailto:Shauna.Lo@umb.edu) or (617) 287-5655.

## **ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES**

### **University of Massachusetts Boston**

The Institute for Asian American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston conducts community-based research on Asian American issues, provides resources to Asian American communities in Massachusetts, and expands opportunities on campus for the study of Asian American experiences.

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## **ABOUT THE CHINESE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW ENGLAND**

The Chinese Historical Society of New England (CHSNE) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit entity incorporated in Massachusetts in 1992. It is the first educational organization dedicated solely to documenting, preserving, and promoting the history and legacy of Chinese immigration in New England.

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# Chinese Laundries in Massachusetts Oral History Project

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## Thomas Chin

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*The following interview was conducted with Thomas Chin (TC) by Shauna Lo (SL) on November 22, 2008 at the home of Tom Chin. Tom's parents owned Edwin Chin Laundry at 34 Main Street in Charlestown. The photo above is from 2012.*

SL: Shall we start with a little bit of your family's immigration history? Who were the first in your family to come to the U.S.?

TC: Well, if we're talking about my immediate family, my father was the first one to come to the United States. He came in 1918 via San Francisco.

SL: Why did your father come to Boston?

TC: My father started in San Francisco because there were relatives there and he came to Boston because there were likewise relatives in Boston. When he got to Boston he attended elementary school. In fact, he went to school for about 3+ years. He went to the Harvard School in Charlestown. His relatives had a laundry and this is the laundry that my father eventually took over. And while he was working in the laundry, he attended school and it seems that after a bit over three years he graduated in June 1922 when he was promoted to grade eight. My father was a bit unusual at that time in that he attended school and he was able to—I guess because of his prior schooling in China—he was able to undergo the discipline needed in order to study English and the other subjects and be able to continue and perfect the reading, writing, and speaking aspects of English. And of course after he completed his schooling in 1922, he continued in the laundry. I can't tell you too much about which relatives had the laundry but there are some stories that my grandfather was in the laundry at times and my father's brother—my oldest uncle—was also there at times.

SL: I realized I forgot to ask how old your father was when he came to the U.S.

TC: He was 15.



SL: So when he went to school... do you know what grade he went into?

TC: From the school records I was able to find, in 1919 he was in a special class and the next year he went into grade four and the year after that he was in grade six and then he was in grade seven.

SL: And this was in Boston proper?

TC: Charlestown. Initially when he was in the special English class he was at the Quincy school in Boston. And I guess what they found after he attended that school for about 20 weeks was that he could transfer to one of the Charlestown schools which would have been more convenient for him [since he was] working and going to school at the same time.

SL: How was he able to come to the country?

TC: He actually came as the son of a diplomat.

SL: Oh, really?

TC: He came as the son of a Ning Yung official. Ning Yung was one of the Chinese Six Companies.<sup>1</sup> At that time during the early 1900s, the officials of the Chinese Six Companies were considered to be diplomats. So, he came as the son of one of the Ning Yung officials that were stationed in San Francisco.

And this sort of presented problems to him because since he had come as the son of a diplomat. You know, we looked for his certificate of identity and we found that they could not issue one to him. And they did issue him an identity card but it wasn't the official certificate of identity that the immigration people used. So if my father wanted to go back to China, there was a possibility that they might not let him re-enter.

SL: Did he not leave the country again because of that?

TC: Well, there's a possibility that he might have in order to return to China to get married and so on, but as it turned out he did not get married for another, oh, about dozen odd years, and that's when his wife came to the U.S.

SL: How was his wife able to come?

TC: My mother came to the U.S. in 1932 and she came as the daughter of a citizen. And as with traditional Chinese marriages, this was an arranged marriage and I'm told that my father got married back in the home village by proxy. A rooster sat in as the groom! That's the subject of a lot of humor, but understand that that was a common tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> Ning Yung is an association based upon region of origin in China. Chinese Six Companies was an umbrella organization comprised of the six major regional associations.

SL: So let's try to focus on the laundry. You said it was in Charlestown. Do you have the address?

TC: Yes, the laundry was at 34 Main Street in Charlestown. It was a traditional Chinese laundry with a section in front for customers to enter and leave their laundry and pick up their laundry and on both sides there were ironing tables. The ironing tables were the traditional type of ironing tables. There was on top, heavy canvas cloth which constituted the ironing surface and underneath were old blankets which would help to absorb the steam and moisture and would provide a nice smooth surface to iron. You know, somewhat similar to the ironing boards we use at home now wherein you've got a soft surface underneath which would absorb the steam and moisture and a smooth cloth surface on top to provide a platform for clothes to be ironed. The irons that I remember were electric irons. We did see some of the old irons that were heated by the potbellied stoves but they were not used during the time that I remember, when I was growing up in the late 30s, early 40s.

There were shelves along the wall of the laundry where the finished laundry was wrapped in brown paper, tied with string, and stacked on the shelves along with a ticket which identified the person who left the laundry. There were generally a couple of big laundry baskets which were used to put the dirty laundry which in our case was sent out every night to be washed at a wet wash. The laundry got picked up generally around 8:00 p.m. or so and was returned in the early morning around 1 or 2:00 a.m. We lived upstairs over the laundry and around 1 or 2:00 in the morning, we would hear this big thud which was the laundry basket hitting the floor. The wet wash guy would take that basket which was a good size basket, probably about three feet by four feet in width and probably about three feet high, put it on his back, bring it in the shop and just drop it off his back onto the floor.

We also had in the laundry a drying room. The drying room was a room that was totally enclosed, had a couple of doors and probably a window, and a potbellied stove and after the laundry came back from the wet wash it was sorted. Shirts that had to be starched were starched and then the laundry was hung on the wires along with clothespins if need be and the potbellied stove was stroked up and within a short period of time, the clothes got dried. As a result, the laundry was pretty humid, pretty hot and humid in the summer time. And during the winter time, the windows got all steamed up because of the humidity. And sometimes during the cold days of winter, there were probably a couple of coats of ice on the window, so you couldn't see out too well.

In terms of the laundry, there was a small gas burner for cooking purposes. Something else unique about the laundry was that the potbellied stove burned

coke. Coke is a form of coal wherein it's been processed. Coke did not have the coal dust that anthracite coal had so it was supposed to be less sooty, less dirty, so that the clothes which generally consisted of white goods, white shirts and the like, would not get stained. Getting the coal for the stove was always a bit of a chore. During my early years, that was one of my jobs, which was to go fill up the dozen coke barrels so that we could in turn replenish the coal for the potbellied stove. In fact, that potbellied stove served a number of purposes, not only was that used for the dry room for drying clothes, but in many cases that was the sole source of heat for the laundry. We didn't have central heating back in those days.

SL: How did you pick up the coke?

TC: That was in the basement in the coal bin. We had coal bins back then. so I would take the empty pails that were in the drying room and bring them all downstairs, fill them up with a shovel and then carry them up two at a time.

SL: Heavy, right?

TC: Well, initially, and then you got used to it after you did it a couple times. My father's laundry was not one that had the mechanical presses. It was done by hand. Except we had something called a mangle which was used to press the collars and the cuffs of shirts. Since people like nice hard collars and hard cuffs, this mangle put some pressure onto the starched collars and starched cuffs so that people would have nice, neat collars and cuffs on their shirts.

SL: I know you have several siblings. How many siblings do you have?

TC: I've got three sisters and five brothers. And all of them helped in the laundry. It was a family laundry.

SL: Good thing you had a lot of extra labor. So it was just your parents and the kids then? No other employees?

TC: Generally not. For a period of time when my two cousins came to the U.S., they helped out in the laundry until they went off on their own. And then my father died in 1948 and after my father passed away, there was a relative who helped along with my mother to run the laundry.

SL: So you would go to school and then come home and help. How many hours do you think you would work after school?

TC: Oh, probably on average a minimum of two hours. What we generally did as we started out was to sort the dirty clothes. When customers brought their laundry in, we would take their laundry and place it in the dirty laundry section of the laundry shop, and generally around 4 or 5:00 in the afternoon was the time to sort the laundry. Sorting the laundry involved looking at what the customers brought in, noting on the laundry slip what were the articles that were brought in,

marking the customer's laundry with their identification mark so that we could—when the laundry was finished—be able to determine which articles belonged to which customer and then after we sorted the laundry, we divvied up the laundry in terms of whites and darks, small articles such as socks and handkerchiefs were put into bags so that the whole bag got washed and the small articles did not get separated, and then everything was put into these big laundry baskets to go to the wet wash to be washed.

SL: So was, like, each sock marked?

TC: Not quite. If the customer had socks, we would have a needle with heavy thread and the customer's socks would be tied together with that needle and thread. Some laundries used big safety pins. But we were practical. We didn't know whether we needed big safety pins or small ones. Also, if you tied together socks as well as handkerchiefs with a needle—actually it wasn't thread, it was string—and you were a good tyer of knots, that batch would remain pretty much intact. Forgot about that!

SL: The wet wash that you used, was it Chinese owned?

TC: Many of them were. There were a number of them in Boston and they were pretty competitive... you know, quality was pretty important to make sure the laundry that was sent out came back clean. Knowing how concerned some customers are, we had to be particularly adept at how we sent out the laundry to be washed. For example, we happened to have a painter who, you know, got loads of paint on his clothes. We had to take his clothes and put those clothes into a separate container and let the wet wash know hey, these are to be washed separately, because if those dirty painter's clothes were to be washed with the dark clothes... the wet washers were not as good as the washing machines we have today that filter a lot of that crud out of there. You know if perchance we didn't take those precautions, we'd get back the darks dirtier than when they went out in some cases. Despite the fact it's been said that laundries did not require very much capital and did not require much skill to operate, there was still a certain amount of common sense that had to be followed because if customers got back laundry that was not clean, you didn't have them for customers anymore!

SL: What do you remember about the customers?

TC: Customers were unique. In my father's laundry we had a core group of customers who would come every single week generally. For the most part they would be weekly customers. Oh, we had some other customers who had loads of shirts and they would probably bring their laundry in every two weeks or so. In terms of things that were brought to the laundry, for the most part, the customers brought their shirts in, because shirts were things that... many people at that time

were dressed properly. Dressing properly required a shirt and tie and so on. In many cases, people took their underwear, and their socks and their handkerchiefs and things of that nature, you know, they may have done those themselves. But there were cases where people brought all of their laundry and those were the types of customers that we preferred because it takes a lot of work to do a shirt, especially when a shirt, you get, in the early days, ten cents for a shirt, when you probably got... I can't remember... let's say five cents for a pair of socks. So, two pair of socks don't equal the amount of time to do one shirt. Or let's say even if it were... four pairs of socks for a dime, instead of a dime for a shirt. [For] the socks all you did was get the socks—sometimes they were dirty and smelly [laughs], which was bad!—then you just tie them up and put 'em in the wash and when they came back, you had to straighten the sock out and that was it. It just doesn't take that much time. Whereas the shirt had to be sorted, had to be marked, had to be washed. When it came back you had to starch if a customer wanted starch. Generally it was, "I want starch," so the no-starching was on an exception basis. Everyone got starch except those that said, "no starch." And sometimes you had someone who said "I want heavy starch," so you had to know which ones were which. After the shirts were starched, you hung them up to dry, then after the shirts were dry, you moistened them again so that... you know, back in those days everything was cotton. No synthetics. So it required moisture and a heavy iron to make sure the shirts were nice and smooth. No wrinkles. The shirts in turn, after they were moistened, went through the mangle to do the collar and cuffs, and then they were put in a pile again so you could ultimately do the back and the front and fold it up and so on. A lot of work involved in a shirt.

Where were we? Oh, about customers. So if we had a customer who brought all of his laundry in, that was good. For the most part, the laundry catered to probably 99% men versus any women's laundry. From time to time we would get women's blouses and of course, the sheets and pillowcases and things of that nature, which were less common. I think shirts were probably 90+% of the business. Probably not that much, but pretty close to it, it seemed.

SL: You may not know this, but do you think the customers were more working class people, middle class, professionals?

TC: There were all kinds. It depended on the neighborhood you were in. Since my father was in Charlestown for a long period of time, we would have people from a distance of, oh, half a mile away bring their laundry. So, it was a mixture of people. We had the insurance agent who lived in Quincy, but his store was about a block away from my father's laundry. He would bring his laundry in. A funeral director, one of our few charge customers, would bring his shirts down. In fact, at one

time he was probably about a block away and then he moved up to Bunker Hill Street which is the other side of town. And in his case, we would very often, after he moved up to Bunker Hill Street, deliver his laundry to his house! I don't know how that came about but I guess... all I can seem to remember is he suddenly discovered he didn't have any shirts and he probably talked to my father and said "gee, could you drop them off? Have one of the kids drop them off!" And then it got to be a routine.

SL: But normally you wouldn't deliver.

TC: No, normally not.

SL: Maybe just for special customers?

TC: Right. So there were different classes of people. And as I said there was a core group of customers that came and generally they were from the neighborhood. They were happy about the services. But then on the other hand there were some customers that weren't happy. And of course they would probably be irritated and not come back. You see within about four blocks of my father's laundry were two other family-run laundries. There was one on Warren Street probably about two blocks away and run by, at one time, the Lee family and then about four blocks away on Austin Street was a laundry run by the Wong family. To my knowledge these were the only two other family-run Chinese laundries. The Wongs—that family was older—in fact, both the Lee and Wong families... the kids were older than my brothers and sisters.

SL: So if they didn't like yours, there was another one they could just go around the block to.

TC: Yes. Then down the street around Park St. was another one. There were six to eight laundries in Charlestown.

SL: Were all your customers White?

TC: For the most part. I don't think we had a single Black customer. Charlestown at that time was pretty much a White, Irish Catholic neighborhood.

SL: Why don't we move on to a bit about your social life. Well, first I should just ask: What did it feel like as a kid to have your parents own a laundry and having to participate in it.

TC: Well, we felt it to be pretty onerous, because our school friends were out there playing. They didn't have the type of chores that we had, they had much more freedom. We sort of—at least I felt—gee, I wish I had more time to do some of the things that these other kids were doing. Out there playing ball, hanging out, and so on.

But you know, times were tough back then in the late 30s, early 40s. Even in terms of let's say, food, it seemed that the only time that we had meat of any type was weekends when my parents bought a chicken, and we had chicken to eat. Of course I was from a large family and being from a large family we always looked forward to our birthday when Mother would give us the drumstick [laughs]! If you were from a small family... gee, you could have drumstick every week! My parents were pretty frugal.

You know, one of their thoughts was that at some point in time we would all go back to China. My mother had at least two big trunks—steamship trunks—that she would fill with things and those were the trunks that we were going to use to bring the whole family back to China. We had discussions and my mother and father always said, “well, we'll go back and if you want to come back to the U.S...,” ultimately you could do so. But you know, go back, learn Chinese, get steeped in the culture.... There was a certain amount of—how should I say it—a certain amount of feeling that the U.S. was not the best place in the world. ‘Course my parents had gone through the depression and they found that making a living was not the easiest thing for Chinese because of the limitation on job possibilities. In fact, my mother would often cite the fact that so-and-so was an MIT graduate and even he can't find a job in the White people's world. We didn't encounter much prejudice, but then again, my parents weren't activists like some of the people are today. They respected the customers, respected the neighborhood and tried to be good citizens. That's not to say that there wasn't some hostility tossed our way at times.

So I think that tempered by the social and economic situation that they encountered and knowing how things were back in China, they felt their kids probably should learn the language, learn Chinese, have a taste of what the Chinese environment was, and possibly have a choice as to whether to stay or to go back, go back to the U.S. and maybe return to China. I mean, that's typical of the *diaolou* that we saw in China wherein people sent money back and built these big buildings for when they would return to China. So I think that that type of mentality was widespread. It wasn't just restricted. That was just the way the times were. Chinese at the time—of course, also, depending on where you were, there were restrictions on buying real estate and plus the economic requirements to be able to buy real estate. There's the inability to become a citizen. You know, my father was one of the first ones to become naturalized when that opportunity came about in the early 1940s. So there was a lot of outward restrictions that would cause the feeling that hey, families should at some point in time return.

And of course, there were a number of families that did pack up and go back to China. You know, Simi Wong... his family went back to China. Amy Guen's

family— Billy and Frank Chin, Amy—they're siblings—they went back to China. But they went back because their mother passed away and their father sent them back so that his first wife would raise them. So there's a number of people who actually did take that step.

SL: How about you yourself as a child? How did you fit in in the neighborhood, in school, and so on?

TC: Well, what I did then is somewhat different from what people do today. At that time I wanted to become as Americanized as I could be. So I sort of avoided hanging out with Chinese. Of course there weren't Chinese in Charlestown to hang out with, but when I... so, living in the suburbs and not being in Chinatown, I really didn't have many Chinese friends. And if I had my choice, I probably would have tried to have American friends rather than Chinese friends. Somehow or other, if you associate more with Americans, you become more like them.

SL: And you felt that you were accepted?

TC: Yes, for the most part. For the most part, I felt accepted. Sometimes I encountered some people that I didn't know and they would go through the... you know, trying to speak Chinese, making fun of you and stuff like that. I'd try to ignore them rather than try and combat them knowing that, gee, those guys were bigger than I am [laughs]!

SL: So, how connected was your family with Chinatown and the Chinatown community?

TC: They were connected and not connected. We were connected in terms of... you know, we had what you call a *fong* wherein it was a social circle of close family relations from the same village area. This was a *fong* meaning a room—this was actually an apartment on Tyler Street where you had a few permanent residents—all male—and then if there were people from that social circle that came in from the suburbs and they needed a place to sleep overnight, they would stay there. And then it was a gathering place on weekends for family relations to come and hang out, leave their groceries that they picked up until they were ready to go back home. So there was that social circle and then there was also the Chin family association which had more distant clan members. But the *fong* was the place that my father generally went. And he would meet the other relatives, catch up on the news locally and the news back in China, and be able to pick up the Chinese groceries.

Sometimes, Sunday afternoon, the social circle that was there might go out to a restaurant to eat. At one time, one of the Chin relatives had a grocery store on Tyler Street. And that would be a gathering place, too. Folks would gather, meet,



wire money back to China, exchange whatever news they had, and so on.

SL: Did you go to Chinese school at all?

TC: Yes, we all went to Chinese school after English school, and Chinese school was a Monday through Friday plus Saturday morning occasion. And I went for five years. Generally you graduate after six years, and for some reason I graduated after five years.

SL: And what did you think of it?

TC: I thought of it as useful but I sort of resented it because it took up quite a bit of time. Besides not being able to do what my other friends were doing, plus having to work in the laundry plus being forced to go to Chinese school... I didn't really appreciate it, but I should have. It's good for you!

SL: When you're a kid, it's hard to appreciate it. But that's a pretty busy schedule.

TC: Oh yeah, and then you have to go from Charlestown to Boston and go back home again.

SL: Right. Let's see... you know, one thing that I'm interested in is it seems as though you and all your siblings went—did everyone go to college?

TC: Yes, all of us went.

SL: Was that something that your parents pushed you to do? How did that come about?

TC: Well, I think that my parents always stressed education. They felt that in order to... not be a laundryman [laughs], you had to have some skills. And the skills should be academic. I know my father was sort of leading me towards MIT to be an engineer because engineering is practical and you should always be able to get a job. You know the doors hadn't been opened to Chinese. You could go into a prestigious college like MIT. But I think in my siblings cases, I think the fact that I went to [Boston] Latin School sort of set the tone for all the others to attempt to go to Latin School and to go on to college. My oldest sister went to Girl's High School and she went to work pretty much right after high school and attended college on a part-time basis and got all her degrees part time. She had other interests and she was able to parlay those interests into a pretty successful career. She was able to fit education into her work activities.

SL: Were you the oldest?

TC: No, my sister was. I'm second.

SL: Did you end up going to MIT then?

TC: No. What happened was in middle school I ran into a teacher who felt that I

should go to Latin School. He was a great mentor and so I headed to Latin School and it seemed that the bulk of kids from Latin School went to Harvard. And somehow or other, I decided to go there.

SL: I know things were pretty different back then about the cost of college, but there were a lot of children in your family. Was it tough for your parents to finance that?

TC: Not really, because... let me just tell you, my first three years of college the tuition was the same each year—\$600 a year [laughs]. And in my last year, my senior year, it got jacked up to \$800. A third increase in one year, from six to eight hundred! But at that time, we were able to make during the summer a good part of our tuition by working a summer job.

SL: Really? That's the way it should be!

TC: Yup, that's the way it should be. Because I was working... I had to become a member of a union. I was a member of the Teamsters Union [Local] 25 working at the Whiting Milk Company summers. And we could work, if we wanted to, from the time school let out until the time school resumed because they needed help during the summertime so people could take their vacations. We were making like, \$55, \$60 a week so over the course of... let's say, three months, times four weeks, 12 weeks, \$50 a week—\$600. I mean, that's gross, but we could make at least half of our tuition at \$600. And then with some loans, hopefully with some scholarships... you could manage.

SL: Did you commute at that time?

TC: Oh yeah. Unfortunately.

SL: It's not that far...

TC: No, it's not that far, but you miss the college life, the college atmosphere... the ability to mingle and get along... and make friends with people, not just nationally, but internationally.

SL: So was there any question of your staying in the dorms?

TC: It was sort of out of the question, I think, because it would have been more money, plus the fact there was the laundry business. You know, my father had died a couple years before I went to college. Of course at that time, some of my younger siblings were ready to graduate to do more work at the laundry [laughs].

SL: Good thing there was a long line [of children]...

TC: Yes, rites of passage! Moving from sorting dirty socks to ironing shirts at the ironing table.

SL: When did the laundry stay open until?

TC: You mean, when did it close permanently?

SL: Yes. When did it close?

TC: My mother closed the laundry probably in the early... the mid-1970s. I forget when it was... It was about the time that we came back from Canada, about 1974, '75 or so. Of course at that time, the business had gone down quite a bit. Synthetics had come in and people were becoming a bit more casual. As I said, shirts were the mainstay of the laundry. At that time, my mother decided, gee, the kids have all gotten through their education... and she wasn't about to put in more time.

SL: Wasn't she about ready at that time to retire anyway?

TC: Yeah, she decided to retire and that gave her more time to do her social things. And she would go into Boston, go into Filene's Basement [laughs]. Stuff like that. Stuff that she never had the time to do. Enjoy herself for a while.

SL: Oh, I wanted to ask you, too, did the family ever go on any vacations?

TC: No.

SL: That was an easy one to answer.

TC: If we went on vacations, we went ourselves after we were older and had some financial resources to go on our own. We never went on vacations as a family.

SL: Day trips or anything?

TC: Well, if there were any day trips and the like, it would be to go into Chinatown to a banquet, or to go have a meal. I mean, there were some day trips arranged by the Chinatown organizations, such as during the summer. I think it was On Leong had trips to Canobie Lake. Some of us would go on those trips. Some of my brothers belonged to the church boy scout group and they would go on camping trips. The church also—the Episcopal church we belonged to—had summer camps and some of my siblings would during the summer time go to the summer camps. You know, things of that nature. But not full-fledged family vacations. We couldn't close the laundry.

We [my wife and I] were in San Francisco last week—week before last—and we went by the Golden Gate Bakery. You know, the one that sells *an tat* for a dollar a piece and there was a sign... they were closed! We were disappointed. They were closed!

SL: For vacation?

TC: Yup! Closed until November 22. We couldn't imagine a place like the Golden Gate Bakery being closed. Everyone is just dying for their *an tat* even though they're the most expensive around! A dollar a piece!

SL: Well, there are a lot of other places you can go.

TC: Yeah, but they're not as good. It's almost like the *an tat* in Macao, remember?<sup>2</sup>

SL: Yes. Do you want to take a break? We're almost finished. [Looks at list of questions.] I think that I didn't ask you about the traditions yet.

TC: We could go through that.

SL: Reflections—I think you already answered some but we could do that at the end if you have any final thoughts. Oh, and I didn't ask you... and you don't necessarily have to answer this... I didn't ask you about your dating experiences.

TC: No, no! We didn't do any dating until we were in college! As I said, I wanted to be more Westernized... I didn't do any dating until college.

SL: Did you date any non-Chinese?

TC: No, I didn't. I did not.

SL: So you didn't want to be that Americanized.

TC: No, but I think it would have been perhaps different if I had lived at college.

SL: Did you want to tell me about any Chinese traditions?

TC: Yeah, my mother and father were pretty traditional. Let's say, in terms of Chinese New Year's, they would have the incense and the chicken and so on. And they would both close out the new year and open the new year. This was one of the practices that I remember my father and mother observing right from the beginning. In fact, I remember that when they lit the incense, they would take a bar of yellow laundry soap and use it as the holder for the incense and that was their way of having incense holders. Something else that my mother seemed to believe in was Chinese herbal medicines. She would generally at least once a year take... she had this cooking apparatus that she used to put in the herbal medicines and cook this stuff. It was in this earthenware jar that she would have to tie the cover on with string and put it in a pot with boiling water and cook this for hours and hours and we would be forced to drink this. And then you had to be on a diet. You couldn't eat certain things for a couple of days otherwise the herbs would lose its efficacy. I don't know what it was, but she would have that stuff from time to time. So those were some of the cultural traditions that my mother... it was more my mother, I think, that did it than my father. 'Course, my father only

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<sup>2</sup> The interviewer traveled with the narrator to China on a group trip in 2006.

came to this country when he was 15. So I think it was primarily my mother that brought these with her.

SL: And what did you speak at home?

TC: During the early years we spoke Chinese.

SL: Toisanese?

TC: Yes, Toisanese. Yeah, we spoke Chinese. In fact, when I went to elementary school I had to go to speech class. They thought that my English speaking was not adequate, so I went to speech class for a couple years. You know, at that time, for special needs kids the only thing they had special was speech. They didn't have all this attention deficit, all that sort of stuff...

[Reads next question from sheet.] Was my family close to relatives in China or other countries? Let's say that my mother was. In terms of my father, my father had a couple of brothers. His older brother came to this country first. And he may have also been in the laundry business in Charlestown. Ultimately he went to Providence to the restaurant business. He was in this country. And my father had another living brother who came to this country and he came to this country in about... oh, 1929 or so. So for the most part, my father's relatives were in this country. And conversely, my mother—her father and her relatives except for two sisters were in China. The two sisters that she had—one went to the Philippines and one went to Cuba. And I remember from time to time, letters... correspondence between my aunt in the Philippines and the one in Cuba. So there was frequent correspondence... plus correspondence with the other relatives back in China. In fact, a couple of years ago when we went back to China, we ran into one of our cousins who remembered very vividly and very thankfully how my mother had sent money back to China to help them rebuild their house after a typhoon destroyed it. So there was some close correspondence.

SL: I'm just going to ask you for final reflections. If you had any more reflections, looking back. Actually, one thing I was going to ask you too—do you know what year the laundry opened?

TC: No. We're trying to do some research but we haven't completed it. We're just not sure when it opened, who started it, whether my grandfather was the one, or whether it was in existence already. What I tried to do was to get some city directories for periods of time to look up that neighborhood at the time, but I haven't been able to complete that study. I do know that it wasn't always at 34 Main Street. It was a couple of doors down at one time. I just haven't been able to get to look at the census. I found the census to be very very difficult to read. You got to know the region... be able to hone in on the census areas and hope that

they haven't changed from decade to decade. So I haven't taken the time... but, since I have you, I'll have you help me and be able to hone in on 34 Main Street in Charlestown and be able to find it. Also the handwriting on the census pages is awful.

SL: Yes, it's very difficult to read. Well, there might just be some city directories that you could look at. I know for a while they listed Chinese laundries separately, but I don't know when they started merging them. But you actually have an address, so you might be able to find it.

TC: That's what I had done. I had gone to the Kirstein Library [business branch of the Boston Public Library] and was there for half a day pulling through some directories. Just haven't gone back.

SL: So I guess that's pretty much it. Just looking back, do you think the laundry was able to provide a successful living for your family? There may not have been many other choices at the time.

TC: Yup, that's it. Well, as Jenny Chin Hansen said... when she said that she slept on the ironing surface at night... they were able to have a modest living. I guess that's what I can say, taking her words. At least we didn't have to sleep on top of the ironing boards. In fact, when you asked about my father's, my parents' social activities in Chinatown, when we went to the *fong*, what they used there for beds was they took horses—you know, the wooden horses that carpenters use—they used two horses and took boards and put old blankets for mattresses. So that's what they used for sleeping surfaces. And of course that was great because underneath they could store all their suitcases and other things that there was no room for.

And also in terms of, let's say, my mother's activities in Chinatown, during Chinese New Year's—the cultural practices—my mother would make all the Chinese pastries. And that was something that she delighted in doing. She also made the *dong* during the autumn festival. So things of that nature she did. She also adopted a number of American traditions. As the kids grew up, we would have things like mashed potatoes. She would make spaghetti. She always made baked beans [laughs]! So she adopted a number of American cooking. Even began to make apple pie. My uncle worked in a restaurant and she asked him “how do they make apple pie?” and he told her. She would roll out the pie crust and cut up the apples and she would make apple pie! And during Chinese New Year's she would make all this Chinese pastry and we would bring it into the *fong*. At that time we were the only family that belonged to the *fong*. So the folks there found it great that they were able to celebrate with real homemade [food].

So, yup, the laundry provided a modest living and my mother in particular felt good that there was some type of business that she could participate in in order to raise the family after my father passed away. And she had good customers and it was a successful living 'specially if the kids were able to grow up and get off on their own.

SL: So your mother ran the laundry by herself then for many years? She seems like quite a capable woman, raising so many children, and...

TC: Well, you have to give the women a lot of credit. In old Chinese society, women were sort of not the spokesperson for the family, yet within their own realm, they were pretty vociferous... and a lot of smarts there.

SL: OK, well, thank you very much!

TC: All right! I hope I've been able to make some good contributions.

## Thomas Chin

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Tom Chin's parents with daughter, Helen and son, Tom, 1935.



Tom Chin's father with 3 of his children: Helen, Tom, and Joe (held), John Harvard Mall Playground, Charlestown, circa 1945.



Tom Chin's mother with her 9 children in their Charlestown house, circa 1951.

Photos  
courtesy of  
Tom Chin.







## May Chin

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*The following interview was conducted with May Chin (MC) by Shauna Lo (SL) on November 28, 2008 at the home of May Chin. May's parents owned a laundry at 158 Warren Street in Roxbury. The photo above was taken in 2012.*

SL: Who was the first in your family to come to the U.S.?

MC: My father. And I just looked up that date and it was 1916. Around that time.

SL: [That was when he] came to Boston or the U.S.?

MC: Hard to remember because he had different stories at different times. The last story he told was that he landed in Oakland, worked there for a while and then he....

SL: [Laughs]... the last story that he told?

MC: My father had many stories. Then he worked his way across town—across the country—and he said that his father was here for a while. 'Cause he [May's father] said he had a laundry in Gloucester and we asked why Gloucester and he said it was his father was there. And we learned that his father—in other words my grandfather—had a laundry in New Hampshire and we're looking in to that (see *Postscript* at end of transcript). And there were some laundries that were recorded up there around the turn of the century. That's partially true but [laughs] so, he was in Gloucester, I think, and we're quite sure he was in New Hampshire but he often talked of Gloucester and then I'm not sure when he came to Roxbury. Whether it was soon after my mother [came]—it was decided my mother was coming to join him—or not, which was like, 12 years later.

SL: Do you think your father came to Boston because perhaps his father was here then?

MC: I don't know. I don't know.

SL: And do you know how he was able to enter the U.S.?

MC: Yes... paper son.

SL: And then how about your mother?

MC: Same thing. Paper.

SL: So did she come to marry your father?

MC: No, she was married already to my father. In China, and they had a son. And my father left behind both my mother and oldest brother. And because of the exclusion act, they were apart for 12 years. And then my mother came over as a single girl and she often told me that in order to pass the test, she wore braids so that she looked—it was probably close to eight years younger than she actually is. So it was often confusing when she first went to the hospital. And here I am as a seven or eight year old trying to interpret for them and I was trying to tell them her age and [she said] “be quiet, this is my age.” And I’d say “OK...” so, I don’t know. She came as a single person.

SL: Did you find your records at the archives?

MC: No, we haven’t started on our parents yet. There’s a whole group of papers that my father left and I’ve just started looking through them. Plus my father wrote a little synopsis, for each of us—my brothers and myself—with pictures and all this other stuff. They gave some dates but much more his philosophy of life than dates and history.

SL: Let’s see... I know you said you think your father worked his way across the U.S., but...

MC: Actually, he worked his way out from Toisan to Hong Kong and worked as a tailor for a while to earn enough to make his passage to the U.S. And in those days it was only by boat, so the trips were months long.

SL: Right. Do you have any idea what other jobs he might have done in the United States?

MC: I think what he did was he worked in farming in Oakland... in that area. and once he came to Gloucester and to New Hampshire, it was laundry.

SL: OK, so, you said your parents laundry was at 158 Warren, right?

MC: Mm hmm. Yes.

SL: Is this the name that you recall it being [shows her a list of names of laundries taken from the 1931 Directory]? They have it Fang Lee.

MC: No... [Laughs.] My father would routinely get the signs painted in the laundry. Outside the laundry, and one year it would be Fang Lee, another time it would be Fang Yee, another time it was George Yee... and another time he would use his real Chinese name, Lok Wor Yee. He liked different names.

SL: Do you know what year it opened?

MC: No, not a clue. If it was soon after the time that my mother arrived, I think it was probably in the early to mid 1920s. Late 20s. Late 20s. Yeah, the numbers don't work.

SL: And where did your family live?

MC: Right in the back of the laundry. Lived, ate, slept...

SL: And you had three siblings, right?

MC: Yup.

SL: I don't know if you know anything about his decision to open the laundry or coming up with the capital or anything like that?

MC: I know he bought the laundry. It had to have been existing because I know he talked about buying the laundry business. We rented the location in the building, but I know he talked about buying the business.

SL: Can you describe the physical layout of the laundry and some of the services, machinery, anything like that?

MC: It was strictly... he was proud of the fact that it was a hand laundry, and every machine, believe me, was hand. And it was much like Tom [her husband] described. You know, we had two ironing boards out front and then one ironing board out back. And then the register—the cash draw—was underneath one of those. And then there was sort of a door in the entryway and then the storage of the laundry packages was off to one side and then there was a half a wall that separated the eating area from the laundry area and then in between the back of the... it would be a lot easier to just draw it out.

SL: That would be great.

MC: [Drawing] The front door was here really and there was this entryway... See, this is an important location because this is the lady that was like a second mother to me that was right here. She had a gift shop here and then the church was right next door... and then right next to that was a printing press which was on the first floor but also missionary offices up here. And this is sort of the block. So there was an ironing board here. And as common for many Chinese laundries in that era was you always had a load of plants here. There was a big area always always with plants. And then the storage with shelving was all in back here. And then there was an ironing board.

SL: Do you know what the plants were for? Were they for a particular purpose?

MC: Just because they liked to see things living, and I think they felt the air would be better because of the [plants]. So that's why they kept it. And then there was

a gate here that allowed you to enter and then there was this big gas-fired roller, heated roller that probably weighed close to 50 to 70 pounds I bet, if not more, that you just pressed on to do collars and cuffs. So this was the rolling machine... and over here was where we used to pile the dirty laundry, believe it or not. And then here was the half wall. and this is where stuff used to be stacked up with a little—and there was always a fan to cool us off. And this is the wall that separated the eating area...

SL: So you mean about this high? [holds hand about three feet off the ground].

MC: No, a half that came across... [indicates horizontal direction not vertical].

SL: Oh, half this way [indicates horizontal].

MC: Right. So this is eating... and our refrigerator was here and I'll tell you a funny story. This was an icebox until I was in grade seven and I went out one day and said "I'm going to buy a refrigerator just like my friend has" and I told my mother I wanted \$25 [chuckles] and I went out and I bought a refrigerator. I convinced the man that my parents would pay the rest of the money when he delivered it [laughs]. And this is what I did!

SL: Did your mother know what the money was for?

MC: Yeah, I told her. She was ecstatic that I did it! 'Cause my father would never do that. My father was of the opinion that what was good for his generation was good for the next—you know, [what] past generations [had] was good for him and the rest of us. His mantra was "unless we had lived a tough life, we wouldn't know how to live in the present and appreciate what we have..." So this was the whole sleeping area, starting here. And I don't know if you remember from our trip to China... this is not to scale, obviously. But, you know how there was always a cloth curtain hanging here. When I went to China I almost flipped when I saw all these cloth curtains, just like we had here in the laundry. And this is basically where we slept was back here. There was a bed here and then these were all fold-up beds here but at least we had beds and didn't sleep on the ironing boards [chuckles].

When we complained about lack of space, our parents chided us and said we should be thankful to have a bed to sleep on, rather than having to sleep on the ironing boards, as other families did. And this was a bunk bed that came down as well. I still remember this. And where my two brothers slept, my other brother slept and I slept here with my mother. And my father slept somewhere over here 'cause there was a sofa bed here.

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<sup>1</sup> The interviewer traveled with the narrator to China on a group trip in 2006.

SL: Is that a different room or the same room?

MC: There was a wall here and there was a doorway here that actually closed. But interestingly, just beyond that, was the one bathroom, and then right here was a trap door, you know, one of those doors that's part of the floor that flips open that went downstairs to the drying room. So, you know, on hot days, the heat would just rise and it would be 110 downstairs and maybe 100 up here.

SL: Do you have any pictures?

MC: No, no. Isn't that awful? It's really sad in a way, but we hated it so we just...

SL: Didn't take pictures.

MC: No, no. What few pictures we had, my parents threw them away when they closed the laundry in the early 1960s. [Goes back to the drawing.] And then this was another ironing board.

SL: So, if there's a living area, is that mostly around the kitchen area?

MC: We basically hung out here or here [indicates the rear of the laundry: around the ironing board in the back next to the stove or in the area behind the wall of the eating area, where the sofa bed and desk were]. But this was our sort of isolation area where we could get away to be ourselves and my brother and I used to fight, all of us used to fight to get this ironing board to get our work done. Because this was the one place that had a good radio and you know, we had no TVs in those days and I have to tell you in looking through the stuff the other day (the box with my parents' memorabilia), I found an awesome giant 12" scissors. My mother would get so upset with us because we we'd get so entranced in the radio, the ballgame or whatever was on. She had these big long scissors and she'd come, she'd just cut the cord if we wouldn't listen to her or shut off the radio and start finishing our work. So this was our radio, our escape to the world. This is the back door, so that in the summer... We had a really nice yard back here. There was a little built-in settee and stuff, and then there was a big fence and being the tomboy that I was, I used to climb over all the time because my friend's house was here.

SL: What was it like having three brothers?

MC: I was spoiled. I was very spoiled. But by the same token, I had to do my share of the work because I was the youngest. Because they all ended up taking off, remember.

SL: So, over the years, what were your responsibilities?

ML: Just like Tom, we would graduate. As soon as we could hold an iron and push it, I was doing handkerchiefs, standing on a little wooden crate... you know, starch

used to come in a crate that was , I don't know, 24 by 12 or something deep—high—and I remember standing on that crate ironing handkerchiefs. And then you really made it if you could do shirtsleeves.

SL: Do you remember how old you were when you started ironing?

MC: I bet I was six or seven years old.

SL: Was it electric irons?

MC: Oh yes, they were electric. But still, the handles were bad. I don't know if you can still see, but I have a scar there. Cause the handles would get loose and you'd flip your wrist like this. Because I remember going around with a thick scab covered with a bandage for months. It was just awful to get it healed. But that was by far the worst burn that I've ever had in my life.

SL: Six is pretty young.

MC: Pretty young. But remember, I was a competitive kid, too. So that I wanted to do what my older siblings, my older brothers did. So if they climbed trees, I wanted to climb trees. If they ironed shirts, I wanted to iron shirts. If they were sorting dirty laundry, I wanted to do it.

SL: I don't know why! [laughs]

MC: [Laughs] Exactly.

SL: And you also sent the clothes out to a wet wash? And do you know if it was Chinese-owned?

MC: It was Chinese-owned but the delivery people were not Chinese. There were either Black or Caucasian.

SL: And you said you remember them bringing it back in the middle of the night?

MC: Clunk! You'd first hear the truck and that's when I would wake up and the next thing you know, you'd hear the door unlocking and you'd hear these baskets of heavy laundry being just thrown in.

SL: So did they have a key?

MC: Mm hmmm. Yes.

SL: So you had to trust them.

MC: Yup.

SL: Did you wake up every night then?

MC: Just about every night. I don't remember sleeping through the night at all.

SL: Do you remember anything in particular about the customers? Do you remember who the customers were?

MC: There was a huge range of customers all the way from single men to very well-off people because right near us—it was called the Warren Hotel, but it wasn't a hotel, it was a permanent residence where doctors and their offices and their homes were in the same area, all the way to people who worked for the government. They were the ones that had heavy starch put on their shirts and collars. And I remember upstairs there was a policeman and most of these customers would bring in everything. You know, their sheets, their towels, their shirts, their socks, their underwear, everything. And then we had those that would just bring in their shirts. And from the church there were quite a few customers too. So we had a huge range and there were a lot of people that would come and go and just come in to chat with us. I bet the customers had as much of an influence on our lives as anybody else did.

SL: How do you think?

MC: They would just come in and encourage us to be good students, ask us how we were doing scholastically and encourage us to work hard and tell us that we had a lot more options than the laundry... Just encourage us to be good kids, I guess, and to... not be fresh [laughs].

SL: So the customers were generally kind, supportive?

MC: They were, but there were kids that I still remember that were really, downright rude, you know, taunting.

SL: But more younger kids rather than say, adults.

MC: Yeah, they were kids and teenagers, usually. I mean I can still recite those awful things now.

SL: Same thing that they're saying today. Hasn't changed all that much.

MC: I bet. I bet it hasn't.

SL: So what was it like growing up in that neighborhood?

MC: We had a very tight neighborhood. We really did. We had a pretty integrated neighborhood too.

SL: Integrated, meaning?

MC: Caucasians, us as the only Asians, and a couple black families. And we used to take over one of the side streets. 'Cause one of the parents was a policeman and we just felt like we were OK and safe to do this. And when cars came by we'd stop our game, let the cars pass, then resume playing ball again. It was half ball. You know, I still remember playing. Like baseball with three bases only you hit with half a tennis ball so you wouldn't break anyone's window. It was fun. We did



a lot together. We did. We'd go in town, we'd go to museums together we were very close—close group of friends.

SL: So your friends were mixed?

MC: Yup.

SL: And then you said you were the only Asian family? But there were other laundries?

MC: Not that close. The other Asian families that we would get together with would be primarily limited to, you know, holidays or when one of them was sick—when one of the husbands like Harry's father was hospitalized and was at home. Actually, he had a brain tumor, so we would go visit them often and bring stuff. But other than that, we never really socialized—outside of Chinese holidays—with other Asian families, as we were all too busy with the family laundry or restaurants chores. Our other life besides the street life—because there was one group that went to school together and then there was the other social life in our church where a couple of us from the neighborhood went to church. But the other people at church in our age group came from West Roxbury, and Dorchester, and all different places. They weren't in the neighborhood as much, but I spent as much time with that social group and the young people's group as I did on the street. But as we got to be teenagers, that's when I started spending more time in Chinatown, at dances and socials and get togethers.

SL: So did the church play a large role in your life?

MC: Very large, because of Gussie. Gussie lived, well, not lived.... [Looking at drawing] Gussie had this small little gift shop that was next door, right here and she also worked in the missionary office and then across the street and up a little bit, was where she lived. So she would make it a habit of taking us on the weekend and letting us sleep overnight in her place—in her apartment—getting us out of the laundry. And she would bring us up to Franklin Park for a picnic, you know, with egg salad. I still remember—egg salad sandwiches and lemonade. And that was the other part of our social life. So I'd go to church in the morning. My mother would feed all of us and then we'd spend the afternoon with Gussie and then I'd go home again—and go to church in the evening—and then come home after that to the laundry.

SL: Gussie... is her first name?

MC: Gussie Pierce. She was an incredible woman. She really was. She's one of the women that grew up in a hellfire and brimstone kind of church. It was the Advent Christian church that was an offshoot of the Southern Baptists. Their teachings were very black and white, very moralistic. For example, you can't hold hands

with a boy until you're married, and you can't wear lipstick and you can't go to the movies. And I still remember her washing my mouth and my brother's mouth out with soap because we swore and cursed. And that was the worst thing you could do.

SL: Did she have a family or was she single?

MC: She was single. We were her children, essentially. So what she did was she would bring us down to her sister's farm in Scituate, Rhode Island and that's where we learned about Thanksgiving and Christmas. So we were sort of westernized that way, there. And one summer I remember—my father was very strict and my father wanted me in braids. None of this long swinging hair for his daughter. And I was going into seventh grade and I just said I'm not going to junior high school with my hair in braids. But he refused to let me have it cut. So I went down to the farm that summer—'cause in addition to the holidays, Thanksgiving, Christmas, we would spend like two weeks down on the farm you know helping with chores and farming and that type of thing but we would have a really good time on the farm 'cause we would go swimming and horseback riding and all kinds of stuff. And what happened was the two spinster aunts— actually, Gussie's nieces—took me aside and said you're not going to junior high school with braids and they cut my hair, gave me a permanent, and they actually drove me from Providence back up here and brought me in to see my father, "see what a grown-up daughter you have!" My father of course would never say a word in front of anybody else outside the family and he never said a word after that. My mother said, "See? Keep your mouth shut and it'll be fine."

SL: So in general, how did your parents feel about Gussie playing such a large role in your life?

MC: They saw her as a wonderful woman. They really did. She practiced what she preached. You know, she wasn't, say one thing and do another thing. She was a generous loving caring woman. She really was. And they saw that.

SL: So they didn't mind the, sort of, westernizing influence?

MC: They were very careful that I wasn't too westernized. That's why they didn't want me living with her and staying with her. None of us, other than on weekends. Although when I was probably a pre-teen, I went and I lived with her in her apartment... probably until I was in high school when we finally got our own apartment across the street. Because even my mother agreed with that because I had physically matured by that time and I needed privacy and that type of thing. My mother was quite a champion for women, let me tell you. For her era, she was really good. But she wanted to make sure that I kept my Chinese customs and that type of thing.

SL: So did you have to go to Chinese school then?

MC: [Nods]. But I only had to go for a couple of years. See, I didn't go until we all agreed that I was old enough to go on the train 'cause we had to go on the orange line [subway] and then go through the combat district [red light zone]. It wasn't the combat district, but it was pretty rough, you know, with taverns and things. I went with my brother for three years and that was it. He stopped and so I stopped cause I said I'm not going down there by myself.

SL: Do you know about how old you were at that point?

MC: I was probably about 11. But we had a routine 'cause we went every day after class—I mean, after regular school—and then on Saturdays as well. And on Saturdays, my brother and I would stop at my great uncle's where he lived on Oxford Place with a group of men who lived together because their families never came over. And he would go with us and bring us to a restaurant that was right at the corner of Beach and Oxford Street. And there he would buy us potatoes—a plate that had potatoes and pork chops that you could eat with a fork and a knife and I thought that was so wonderful! It was a ritual, and then after that we'd go to the chicken place and buy a live chicken. My mother refused to have anyone else kill and feather—or defeather—her chicken. So, we'd come home on the T [subway] with a squawking chicken.

SL: Oh, so she could do it [kill and feather the chicken] at home.

MC: Exactly. The train was elevated above street level in Roxbury around Dudley Street—it would just curve and twist around buildings—and sometimes the bag would tip over and you'd hear this chicken go “squawk squawk squawk!” And my brother and I would go, “Oh my God, who belongs to that bag!” And finally one of us would go over there and stand it upright.

SL: So, your mother would do that [kill and feather the chicken] at home, huh?

MC: And I'd have to help her.

SL: Oh, you did?

MC: Yes, and that's how I think I got over my fear of blood and anything else and got to really appreciate anatomy. Isn't that crazy? 'Cause the chicken was good. It was very good.

SL: Can you taste the difference between the chicken we eat now [and then]?

MC: Oh, absolutely. Between a fresh-killed chicken... To this day—it was her tradition too, because she eventually bought it in the market—but to this day, Chinese New Year's always we have to have a fresh-killed chicken. And it has to be a whole chicken with feet and a head. And people think I'm crazy but I still do it.

SL: Really?

MC: Yes. Oh, I don't kill the chicken, no. No, I have the store clerk dress the chicken.

SL: I've never seen a live chicken being killed or prepared.

MC: Oh, you haven't? Oh, I could describe it! You don't want to know [laughs]! My mother used to dress a live turkey, too. She did it with a turkey. I'll never forget that as long as I live. But you know, in those days you learn that you never let anything go to waste. So my mother would use the chicken's blood to make blood pudding. And if they had eggs inside, you would make sure that you saved those eggs and cooked them.

SL: So do you remember—this was maybe, what the 30s or 40s—do you remember life being very hard or your parents being very frugal?

MC: See, we didn't realize it. We had no idea because it was always work, work, work, and when we got the work done, then we could sort of relax together or we could go to the beach together on Sunday or something like that. And we didn't know any better because people were very good to us on the whole. My parents were very strict with us but we always had the balance of Gussie and the other customers and people in church spoiling us to death because we were the only Chinese family around.

SL: So when you say your parents were strict, could you give me some examples?

MC: Well, one of them was food. You know, it was always the same thing. I remember my parents saying early on, we couldn't afford this and we couldn't afford that. And I still remember splitting up one egg into four different portions because we couldn't have any more than one egg between us—all the kids—because we had to save money to go back to China. And a chicken would last all of us—all six of us—for a whole week. You know, she would parse it out just so that we'd have enough. And, you know, we'd have steak—you know, that would be the big deal—once a week.

Clothes, we would have—I used to get hand-me-downs from my brother. I knew no better until I was in grade five. 'Cause my Dad used to march us all down to Thom McAnn's and he'd have all four of us fitted and buy these men's oxfords—boy's oxfords—and I wouldn't know the difference. He made me a coat that had sheepskin in the lining and I thought, gee, that's great stuff. And then suddenly in grade five, I was thinking, I don't look like anyone else around here [chuckles]. And that's when girls started saying they want ruffles and all that stuff. But Gussie, you see—this is how I got exposed to the Western life—in her little gift

shop, she would always make sure I had a big birthday cake and had my friends over and birthday presents and all that stuff.

SL: Did your family celebrate birthdays?

MC: My mother always celebrated Chinese birthdays—not American birthdays—but Chinese birthdays and I remember on my birthday, I would always have some fresh chicken—the chicken leg. And in the morning I would have to have—she’d boil an egg and put some green onion in the middle of it and I’d have to swallow it whole. There was this saying of... *hong thiem dun*, something to do with the whole heart of an egg. And she’d tell me, “Don’t chew it!” I remember her saying, “Just swallow it!” “and you will do well in life” [chuckles]. My parents were very, very traditional and very superstitious. Chinese New Year’s time, for instance—it was a ritual—we would have to wash every corner of the house and literally scrub it. And then after we scrubbed it, we would wash ourselves and scrub ourselves and scrub my hair and then my mother would braid my hair in real tight braids so that I wouldn’t have to comb it for the next couple of days. That’s because you couldn’t comb hair, you couldn’t wash hair. We couldn’t sweep either, as combing, washing, or sweeping might get rid of the good fortune the new year rituals brought us. We couldn’t have the radio on during Chinese New Year’s in case there would be bad news coming over the radio. Same thing for newspapers. We couldn’t have any newspapers or magazines in the house for two weeks to keep out any bad news. He would actually allow us, give us money—my father would—to go to the store to buy comic books. ‘Course they were fierce comic books. My brother would get them. He wouldn’t know the difference, but we would sit and read comic books, and that’s how we occupied ourselves.

And he always followed the Chinese horoscope. At twelve midnight, we had to have *jai toy* [special vegetarian dish for new year’s], you know, *jai toy*? We had to have wet *jai toy*, ‘cause there’s dry *jai toy* and there’s wet *jai toy*—*shek jai toy*. So we’d have to have the wet *jai toy* at night after we closed the new year’s and even though we had gone to bed, we’d have to get up at midnight and have *shek jai toy* and then he would follow the *git sin* [Chinese almanac or horoscope]—he would be in the lead and then my brothers would be next and then my mother would be last. I would be last with my mother ‘cause I was the girl and she was the woman. But according to the *git sin* you had to go east—you had to follow whatever *git sin* said. Go east or west or north or south first and then follow this certain path. I can still remember doing that in the middle of the night thinking, “this is crazy. Any of my friends ever saw me, they’d have me institutionalized.” [Laughs.]

SL: So was New Year’s a time that you enjoyed or did it seem like a lot of things to do?

MC: Oh yeah, it was fun for a while and then it got to be very cumbersome. 'Cause by then we were in junior high and we had homework, and give me a break! And God forbid if any of our friends ever saw us doing this stuff. Because you didn't want to be different at that time.

SL: So, what kind of memories do you have of school at that time, going to school?

MC: I was the —my brother and I in elementary school—were the only Asians. There were blacks, there were a lot of Jewish kids, and some Irish kids I remember, and some German kids but I remember being the only Asian kid and I still remember being taunted. I still do. You know, with the imitation of brushing your teeth and... you didn't see that one?

SL: No, I don't know that one.

MC: They used to go like this [motions as if brushing teeth with finger] because apparently, if you read the old books, Chinese people didn't have toothbrushes and they often used salt. My father explained to me that they often used salt in China because they couldn't afford a toothbrush to clean their teeth.

SL: You mean, you just use your finger?

MC: With a cloth. And clean your teeth that way. So kids used to make fun of us like this.

SL: Really?!

MC: Yeah, I didn't know they knew about it even.

SL: Hmmm, isn't that strange. Well, there was a time before toothbrushes for everybody, when they probably did that, with a cloth or something.

MC: Yeah. And then the usual chinky chinky Chinaman stuff, you know. But I still remember that oftentimes parents would drop in to see the teachers and I still remember, my fifth grade teacher—I was still in braids at the time—and this kid, you know, when the teacher called a parent out of the room... Apparently there was a lot of buzzing going on and this kid just yanked my braids and starting making fun of me again and I guess when the teacher came back in she demanded to know what was all the hubbub and why weren't we studying. And everybody turned around and looked at me. So I stood up and told her exactly why. Of course, I broke out into tears. I still remember that like it was yesterday. And she gave us a huge lecture about racism. Mrs. Clifford. I'll never forget her as long as I live. It really made an incredible impression on me. And from that time on it seemed like I could not let things bother me that much.

SL: It can make a difference if the teacher takes some action.

You were mentioning that your family did go on some trips and things like that. I don't know if vacations...

MC: Never.

SL: Vacations didn't happen, but you did go on trips?

MC: But I still remember we'd go to the beach together. My mother wouldn't go in the water. She'd sit up on—we used to go to City Point all the time because that's where my father liked to go. In South Boston. And there was this bridge where you'd get a really nice breeze and there were benches on the bridge. And that's where my mother would sit in her Sunday dress and her straw hat. And we'd be swimming down below and eating our spam sandwiches. Because you still have to have nourishment when you're swimming! And here I was growing up to be a big butterball!

SL: What connections did your family have to Chinatown? You said you didn't socialize too much with other Chinese American families, but [perhaps with] your own relatives?

MC: Well, we'd often go to Chinatown with my Dad to do food shopping once a week. And the Yee's would go to the Yee market and the Chins would go to the Chin market and this one, Ong Hein Loong, was on Hudson Street. But I still remember going there with him and getting all kinds of nice things. Because in those days, that was where you got your roast pork as well as your crispy pork and fresh Chinese vegetables.

SL: Were you involved with the family association?

MC: Very much so. We were one of the few Chinese families so my mother often, just like Tom's mother, made the pastries at Chinese New Year's time and the August Moon time. But making Chinese pastries with a mother who was unfamiliar with American utensils taught us to make do with what you have and make the best of it. For example, a rolling pin was—and again, I knew no better—it was a bottle. And that's how we made these crispy things that we deep fry—I don't know, we called them *jow gai loong* and you can't even find them in the Chinese bakeries now. They were made with chicken fat instead of butter or Crisco. But they were great and you know, to cut the edges she went back to this print shop and had them make a piece of metal that was shaped like a half moon, and all you'd have to do is press down on it and it would cut it. It was an early lesson in adaptation. It really was funny.

SL: Was that her idea? Did other people do that too?

MC: You know, I don't know because I never helped make Chinese pastries outside our immediate family. Except the folks down the street who were also Yee's that had the laundry and his father had the brain tumor? I remember being so envious of them because they had an oven and they would make tollhouse cookies. It was a killer! And then I'd come back to my house thinking, something's wrong here. But when they cooked they would use more things, like a pizza cutter to finish their Chinese pastries, so they seemed much more modern. But we still got our work done. 'Cause it would be a production line between my brothers and myself and my mother.

SL: You said you didn't have an oven.

MC: So we'd either deep fry or steam things. Except, I could use the oven where Gussie was staying. There was sort of a common kitchen there for, like, four apartments. I could use that, and that's how I learned to bake and sort of experiment cooking American things there.

SL: Tollhouse cookies?

MC: No, I was crazy enough to try a cake the first time and I still remember it was like a ton of lead. In our day, starting in junior high school, we had to take cooking. We had cooking and sewing. So I was introduced to cooking Western style early on. I was making white sauce and macaroni—macaroni and cheese, which my mother did not like!

SL: So the Yee's who owned the laundry near you, were they related to you?

MC: No, not really. Only because they were Yee's, they were "cousins", you know, that we would visit often and help each other and talk about things. But they were also a large family—I think there were eight kids in that family. So that's why they had so much help. But I remember staying in touch with a lot of the kids that I went to Chinese school with just by going in to Chinatown once a week. You'd bump into people all the time because that was the only place you could buy Chinese things. And I don't know how I heard about the social events in Chinatown. Maybe it was from my brother.

SL: What kind of social events?

MC: Dances. That On Leung building that's right on the corner of Hudson and Kneeland? On the top floor a lot of us used to have dances and parties. We'd have birthday parties up there. We'd set it up to play games during the day time. And I used to go in there and we used to go bowling a lot, you know, right on Washington Street as a group. But I still remember even into my first year of nursing school I'd still go back with that group.



SL: And your parents let you go to dances and things like that?

MC: They never knew [laughs]. 'Cause remember by then, we had an apartment. So, after the dirty laundry was sorted, I could do whatever I wanted. But early on I decided—see, I figured things out pretty well on my own. When I was 14, my girlfriend and I decided we wanted our own money. So we went to city hall and got a working permit and we both applied for a job at New England Baptist hospital being a nurse's aide.

SL: Fourteen? Can you work that young now?

MC: No, not now. But in those days you could do it as long as you had a working permit and all you had to do was have your parents sign it. Of course, I just signed it. See, they saw that I was out making money and they thought that this was great cause they thought that I'd still work in the laundry as much as I did. And I didn't. Because the hospital, I would end up volunteering to work seven days a week. Following my mother's tradition, you know, the more you work the more money you make. So I would show her and I wouldn't keep it to spend. In those days I was still a very good daughter and gave all my earnings to my mother.

SL: So you would do that instead of working in the laundry and that was OK?

MC: I used to help out a bit, primarily sorting dirty clothes, or if they got really backed up on the ironing of shirts and stuff. Or fancy ironing. They used to have me do the fancy stuff like women's blouses and stuff like that. Then that's all. I'd give them limited help.

SL: About how old were you when you said you moved across the street into an apartment? Do you remember how old you were?

MC: I think I was 14, about 14. I think I was in grade nine probably.

SL: And you had a lot more space?

MC: Oh, a lot more.

SL: Did that make a big impression? Did you have your own room?

MC: Yes. Thank God! Even had a porch.

SL: Did you grow up speaking Chinese and what dialects?

MC: Toisanese. So much so that I couldn't speak English when I started kindergarten. 'Cause we would actually be disciplined with a bamboo stick if we spoke English at home. I still remember. We'd get hit right across the hand.

SL: And you were telling me that your parents were pretty traditional and we were talking about some of the traditions at New Year's. Is there anything else you wanted to mention about that? And I was also going to ask you about adopting

American cultural practices.

MC: The only other thing is remembering all the *hong bao* [red envelope with money] that would come our way. Because as we made the pastries and brought them in, then the *fong*—the association—would also have a Chinese banquet. And we would be one of the few families there so everybody poured all these *hong bao* onto us. And I still remember bringing mounds of them home and counting out all our money.

SL: You got to keep that money?

MC: No, not a cent. Never. We were marched right down to the bank and had to deposit it.

SL: But in your own account or the family's?

MC: Our own account. My Dad actually had us all open our own account.

SL: And how about American holidays and things like that. Did you celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas?

SL: Not Thanksgiving. It wasn't until real later that my mother caught on to the idea that maybe we should get a turkey cooked in Chinatown. But it was always with rice and Chinese vegetables and all that, but nevertheless it was a turkey in celebration of Thanksgiving. And at Christmas—it's hard to separate my life from the church because the church would always have Christmas, like, the Friday before the real Christmas. And Santa Claus would come and presents would be given out. And I think Gussie always made sure that we had a few extra presents. 'Cause we used to get more presents than all the other kids at church somehow or other. Then we would go down to Rhode Island with Gussie and get loads of presents too. You'd think we were all spoiled but we were not spoiled financially.

But starting probably around that same time, I always remember my father always having a Christmas tree. It was very important to him. Because they'd call it a *hoa wor see* and I don't know if you can translate that—*hoa* meaning a good tree, a lucky tree. And they would always keep it lit every bloody evening until Chinese New Year's. Well, some Chinese New Year's weren't until February and it'd be dry and brittle and you'd be scared to death the thing would go on fire. But he had to have it, and he would always prune it [laughs]. See, this is the living area, right? [Shows on the drawing.] Here's the living area and here's where the sofa bed was that he slept on. And then there was a bureau here and he always put it right on top of the bureau so that everybody would see it when they were coming into the laundry.

SL: So he would get that for Christmas and it would stay up until Chinese New Year. Hmm.

MC: And it was a ritual to keep it watered and make sure it was all right. He took good care of that tree!

SL: I wonder if that was a tradition he made up or where he got that from.

MC: I don't know how it started. 'Cause it certainly—I don't think it was true in China in the villages. I mean, no way. And how he made the connection and latched on to that Western idea, I have no idea.

SL: Did your parents go to church at all or practice Christianity?

MC: No. No. Because in the middle of all that stuff, my mother would set up, like, an altar with incense and they would burn the paper and all that stuff right near this eating area and have to pay homage to our ancestors and things like that.

SL: So, yourself, would you describe yourself as a Christian?

MC: Very much so. Oh yeah, I was baptized and all that stuff.

SL: And your brothers as well?

MC: Yup. Believe it or not, we used to go to Billy Graham rallies in the Boston Garden.

SL: Not with your parents.

MC: Oh no, with the church group. My parents really, as long as they knew who I was with, they really never restricted me. Because they thought church people were good people. Which they were, they were.

SL: How about going to college? What were the expectations?

MC: My brothers were encouraged to go to college and told they had to go to college. My oldest brother paved the way; he had a really hard time convincing my father he was going to go to college. 'Cause my father said he knew that people who graduated from Harvard were still back waiting on tables. So he felt it was a waste of time and money.

SL: Your father felt it was a waste of time, but your brother wanted to go?

MC: [Nods]. He kept insisting. So he went to Tufts. And he finished as soon as he could, within three years. And he promptly got a job in Virginia, far away from home and then he went from Virginia to Tennessee and he's never moved back to Boston. He comes back to visit, but not to live.

SL: And how about yourself?

MC: I couldn't go to college, according to my father. A girl marries away from home and the family gets no benefit (quote unquote). So, I could be a secretary, I could be a hairdresser, but I couldn't go anywhere, no college. And I said, I'm

going to nursing school 'cause I wanted to go to the Radcliffe program in nursing. No way. So, my mother again said—just like with my hair—she said, “Be quiet and we’ll figure out a way for you to go to school.” And what happened was I ended up going to Mass General, which had a three-year program and its graduates met academic criteria to take the RN licensure exam. I was talking to people at church that I really wanted to go into nursing. I was talking with Gussie, too and Gussie thought it would be great that I would be a nurse but she really had no understanding about academics or nursing programs at the time.

I still remember this one person at the church really impressed me. She was probably a couple years older than I am and she won the *Boston Globe* science fair. Why I remember these things I’ll never know. But it was all about air pollution from the chimney and I was chit chatting with her because she was going on to MIT and asked her how she made that decision. Her parents were all for her going to school and she just said to me, “May, if you want to be a nurse, what you want to do is find the best place and just go for it.” So, stupid as I was—you had to take a nursing pre-entry exam which was like the SATs, and I did that and I only applied to Mass General. And I still remember to this day going for an interview and the woman said—because they are very prim and proper over there—and she said, “My, you’ve put all your eggs in one basket, haven’t you?” [Laughs.] And I said, “Yes. If I can’t get in here, then I don’t really want to go anywhere. I’ll just reapply next year.” So I was one gutsy little lady and I got in, fortunately.

SL: And so, your father was all right with it then?

MC: We argued a lot about it because no daughter, especially his only daughter, was going to clean up the bottom of a strange man. ‘Cause that’s the way he viewed nursing. And of course, once he found out what nursing was all about after being a patient, I could do no wrong after that.

SL: Isn’t that interesting!

MC: ‘Cause I guess he didn’t have very good experiences with nurses in China, I’m sure. Because they didn’t do, I guess, as much and even in my day compared to today, nurses weren’t doing that much. Nursing’s come a long way.

SL: So, how about dating? Were you allowed to date? Did you do it on the sly?

MC: You know, we just—much like the kids do today, they sort of traveled in packs and when you had, like, proms and things, we’d pair off, and other than that, we knew we were all heading to school so we never really paired off. There were very few of us that paired off. It was in nursing school that I started dating. And I dated Blacks, Whites, Asians... and my mother never knew. She never knew. But given my upbringing, I was very uncomfortable when I was dating non-Asians. But I had

to try it! And of course, my classmates were egging me on. Because when you went to nursing school in those days, you lived there.

SL: Oh, you did?

MC: Oh, right on the grounds. Ate, lived, and slept there. 'Cause what would happen is, we would go to class all day and sometimes in our third year—last six months of our second year and all of our third year—we would work most nights and then attend class all day so it was a grind. You couldn't have done it otherwise. And we did six days a week.

SL: How many years was that?

MC: It was three full years round the clock. But it was an incredible bonding [experience]. I recently had my 50th reunion and it was incredible how much we had to say to each other. It was just an instant rapport and it's the same thing when you meet another MGH grad or Mass General grad it's sort of instant rapport. We've moved to Canada and to Pennsylvania and I've worked in different places and it's fun connecting with people who had the same experiences.

SL: If you're still going to the reunions, it must mean a lot to you.

MC: Oh, yeah. Two-thirds of our class showed up. And a fair number of them have died, so....

SL: Oh, no. So, what finally happened to the laundry? When did it finally close? Did your parents retire and just close it? Was there ever any question whether the children were going to take over?

MC: I think it finally hit home to my father after my oldest brother went to college and was able to get a paying job as a chemical engineer that he decided "I guess going to college is OK." Business slowly tapered off and it was really—the less affluent were moving into Roxbury and didn't use the laundry as much because they didn't have dress clothes and that type of thing. So their business was going off and they were getting old. My mother had—and this is where my arthritis comes from—both my parents had very bad arthritis. So I think I was married, so it was probably the mid or early 60s that the laundry closed and I was shocked that my parents just suddenly did this.

SL: It surprised you?

MC: Yeah, but they had one instance where I guess someone tried to hold them up and I guess that really scared the living daylights out of them. And you know, my parents were getting older and staying in the laundry—because by then we had an apartment and they didn't like closing up and going out in the streets at night, so sometimes they'd stay in the laundry and the laundry was too cold.

There were a lot of things against keeping it. But even then after they retired, my mother would go to Brookline and help her cousins iron shirts in their laundry. I'm sure this was to be helpful as well as keep her occupied and give her a chance to socialize.

SL: Did they stay in the apartment in Roxbury?

MC: They did. Not that same apartment, no, we got them an apartment over on Huntington Avenue where there was a whole cluster of Chinese families at the time.

SL: You know, I think I forgot to ask you how old your father was when he came to this country.

MC: You know, his notes said—that's why I said the dates and the times don't seem right. He, in his notes, said he came in 1916 and yet my parents tell me they were separated for 12 years because of the exclusion act. And I should do some math. See, I think my brother was born in 1926.

SL: He was born here?

MC: Yeah. There's some discrepancy there. But his notes said it was 1916 and he was 22 years old. But my parents were married very young. The marriage was arranged. What happened was my mother—as Marlon said, that Yee village married very close, but it was separated by this huge river so the woman could never go back to her family. But my mother—her family didn't want her, because her mother died shortly after she gave birth to my mother and leaving behind, I think, three siblings and her father was remarried and the new mother never took to my mother and they sent her off to the girl's house (nui ook) in the village to live, so she never had family life. In those days, you would get money for marrying off your daughter. So I think my mother was married when she was either 15 or 16. She was very young. And I've never had the chance to talk to my cousins in Arizona but that's where a lot of them are. She never was allowed to attend school and was illiterate. She couldn't read or write.

SL: So, she didn't get any schooling?

MC: None. Zip. Zero. But she was, I think, one of the most intelligent women that ever lived. She had many folk tales committed to memory; I really regret not recording those stories before she died. And I'll tell you she was a women's libber before her time. She used to tell me, "Get work that you can support yourself. Never be dependent on a man." That's where my independent streak comes from.

SL: Did your father have any schooling, do you know?

MC: He came, and much like Tom's father, went to elementary school here and

sort of got his early schooling at Mary Knoll Center in Chinatown and went for a little while to elementary school but I don't know where.

SL: You mean, at that age, in his 20s?

MC: Oh, they mixed them all together. And I think that was the humiliation of doing it that he didn't finish. He learned a lot through church. He wasn't a Christian, but he used to church hop. He went to the Christian Science church for a while and learned a lot there and then he went to an Episcopal church for a while and learned a lot there. And went to Baptist church down in Dudley Square for a while. He's too much.

SL: Do you know what he got out of that?

MC: Probably learning about English and learning how to converse. 'Cause he used to practice talking with customers. And my mother used to yell at him. You know with the roller, 'cause if you don't take it off just in time it'll scorch the collars and the cuffs. And he'd be talking and just leaving the roller on the shirt collar. And my mother would say, "You're going to burn it all! Pay attention to what you're doing!" So, I don't know. He never had any formal schooling beyond a couple of grades at elementary level and that was it.

SL: And he still thought his sons should get a college degree?

MC: There was no question about excelling. See, our parents were like any of our parents in that generation—always withheld any sort of encouragement or [say] what a wonderful job you've done. You'd be told, "You can do better! You got an A-, you could do better! You got a 98, you can do better!" So it was that type of environment and even I got that. So, it was important as a girl even to always do well no matter what you try. So that was always drummed home.

SL: So, just to the last portion [of the list of questions]—if you had any final reflections. Would you say that the laundry was successful. Did it provide a satisfactory living for the family? How do you think your parents' experience was?

MC: Well, I know that my parents always said they would never be doing a laundry if it wasn't for the Exclusion Act and really the lack of education and opportunity that was available to them. 'Cause they didn't want to do a restaurant. You know, they felt that a restaurant would tie them down a full seven days a week whereas a laundry, even though it was most seven days a week and many nights, they did have some free time. And it was something they felt they could control and wrap their hands around. You know, all the family could help with. I asked them why they did a laundry instead of a restaurant and that's what was always spoken about.

And I know my mother always felt that she could always have done better but there was no way to do it because of their limited education, limited English. But that we should be grateful that it was there for us to do. So it provided us with the bare necessities, kept a roof over our heads, and got us exposed to some really nice people, good people and we had fun with it. You know, we had a yard in the back in the summer to grow things and to grow flowers even. In the front we used to have huge snow banks where we'd to build tunnels in between.

SL: So you still found time to play and have fun.

MC: Because I was the youngest, remember.

SL: I see. You think your brothers would have different...

SL: No, my brother that's three years older than I am—he and I were the cutups of the family. 'Cause the two oldest had to pave the way for us. And I think we were smart enough early on to learn how to manipulate and get around—get our work done, but still do fun things. My brother Warren, who's three years older than I am, he went off and worked when he was 14, or 15, was working in restaurants and then he worked down at the fish pier. We all worked in addition to our regular laundry work and we all worked seven days a week—Warren and I did. The others did not. I guess they just never thought of doing it, but we did.

SL: Anything you want to add?

MC: I don't know, the other thing is I think in our day growing up there were so few Chinese around, you wanted to just meld in with the whole U.S. and be just like other quote Americans. I still remember for a long time I just denied my heritage totally. Because I was rebelling against my father in a way because my father used to always say that you know, "No matter what you do, you can change the color of your hair but you'll never be able to change the color of your skin or the shape of your eyes or the shape of your nose. So you better learn to respect your heritage." And he used to say that people would hold it against me that I was Chinese so I was out to prove to him that that wasn't true [chuckles]. But in my behavior I denied all my Chinese background and I'll never forget as long as I live this Brahmin patient from Beacon Hill at Mass General. She just said—and I was a senior in nursing school just finishing up—and she said to me, "You know what, why don't you let your cultural heritage show through," she said, "and be proud of it." I wasn't aware that it was that blatant and that was an incredible wake-up call for me. It really was, sort of to stop my rebellion.

That's about it... you know, and then, obviously there was encouragement to continue on to school and that's what I did because that was family influence as well as customers' influence from the laundry as well from nursing school we were



encouraged that learning was a life long process so I took them at their word. So every ten years I go back to school!

SL: You had said when I was here last time that Tom's family was much more assimilated [than yours]? What did you mean by that?

MC: Oh yes! I couldn't believe it when I first went to their house. You know, we always ate with chopsticks at our house, always had rice, always had salt fish and maybe some small little bit of protein, chicken or gee gnuk beng, you know the pork patty, and then vegetables that were not stir-fried usually just simmered in a little bit of water because stir frying was "bad for you." I go to Tom's house and his mother had made ham and baked beans, and I thought, "Oh my Lord!" So it was that type of thing.

And here she is, a woman, running a laundry with nine children and still cooking like this. Unbelievable! And none of the kids really cooked. They helped in preparing things but Tom couldn't cook when we first married. He knew how to shop because he always helped with the shopping. But not much for cooking 'cause his mother wanted to do the cooking. And then, another time, see, by then—no, when I first met him he was—when we first really started going out together, he was in graduate school and I was finishing off my bachelor's at the time and we used to go—by then I had converted to being an Episcopalian—from being an Advent Christian to an agnostic to an Episcopalian [laughs]—so we'd go back to his mother's for Sunday dinner and she'd have corned beef and cabbage.

And they spoke Chinese with her, but she understood all their English so that it could be a one-sided conversation whereas in my family it had to be always a two-sided Chinese conversation. And the Chinese holidays—it was just a matter of a meal. They didn't have the rituals that we had to go through and my father was very serious about that, and my mother was too. And when my mother was sick... I would still remember, you know, how you light the paper fires when you pay homage to your ancestors but apparently you do that when people have been sick to step over the threshold. And I still remember my mother had to have a hysterectomy because you she was bleeding quite a bit, and I think I was in third grade and seeing her come through the door and her legs were about this big around—and this is into the laundry—and she waited there and I was wondering, "Why is she waiting?" And my father lit this thing in the basin and she had to step over it and here she just had a hysterectomy and I thought, "Oh my God" and she stepped over it and didn't get burned, but I remember screaming that she was going to get burned.

So that's how much more traditional—they didn't have the superstitions and Helen went to college, and May was going to college—not college, she went to

nursing school—but the younger sister Eleanor was going to college [these are Tom’s siblings]. She just wasn’t superstitious like my parents were. She had none of the superstitions around Chinese New Year’s that my parents did—none of it. It was just close the new year and that would be it. You know you had to close the new year in the Chin’s household whereas we had to close the new year, then have the *jai toy* at midnight and then couldn’t really do much for two weeks, and then open the new year and that was constant regardless of how old I was. Whereas in the Chin’s, you’d just close the new year.

And at Christmas time and at Thanksgiving, there’d be a turkey with all kinds of American fixings. Mashed potatoes. Mashed potatoes! She’d get out her Sunbeam mix master and make mashed potatoes. I’m thinking, “God!” And making corned beef and cabbage. But you know, Charlestown was very Irish.

SL: So, you were saying that Roxbury—or I’ve heard this—at that time was very Jewish?

MC: Very Jewish. Very Jewish. I remember during school, two-thirds of the school wouldn’t be present during Jewish holidays. We’d have a holiday ourselves. Because that was true all the way through school. Because I went not to the local junior high school on Seaver Street but to Blue Hill Avenue up that way that I would have to go to junior high school. I couldn’t go to Latin school because my father wouldn’t let me do it because I wasn’t going to college, right, so what was the sense in going to Latin school. So he wouldn’t sign any papers.

So I went to what is now Martin Luther King Jr. High School right near Debbie’s Dong’s grandmother’s laundry. And then high school, since it was part of the same district, I went up to the Jeremiah Burke High School which was all girls at the time. And there was only one other Chinese family there too. See, each school only had one or two. We were a rare bird. And this other family that I went with in high school—she interestingly followed her parents’ advice and went the technical route so she was studying in the clerical section but I still was continuing on with the collegiate program. I remember going over her house one time or a couple of times for dinner and visiting with them and seeing how modern her parents were. Because they had lobster and we couldn’t have lobster at our house because it was bad for you. But here’s Tom’s mother and Anne’s mother cooking up lobster and cooking up shrimp, yet all we could have was steamed fish!

SL: Why did they think lobster and shrimp were bad for you?

MC: It would upset your ying-yang balance. My parents were great believers in that stuff. So that in the Spring as well as in the Fall we always had to have these herbs that were cooked and steamed and because I used to have headaches and a lot of eye problems when I was young—I still do. Not headaches, but I still have

eye problems. But my mother would always cook up certain things to get me ready, you know, my ying-yang in balance for the next season. But, you know, Anne's parents didn't do that. [My parents] claimed that lobster and shrimp would upset that balance and therefore we couldn't have it. We could only have it once a year and maybe if we went to the restaurant. But that was about it.

And my father always said that living in the back of the laundry was fine, and if it was fine for him, it had to be fine for us. But here was Tom's family and Anne's family with a separate house with a real living room and all that stuff. And Anne's family actually had a car and that was real progressive in those days. Tom's family didn't get a car until Tom bought a car. You know we didn't even have a phone until I was in grade nine, I think. Nine or ten.

SL: How could you live without a phone?

MC: I used to go down to the drugstore. Again, my father would not modernize at all.

SL: If you're running a business, you think he would need a phone.

MC: He didn't care.... When he objected to my wearing ruffley, lacey things, Gussie would make them for me. See, there was always someone compensating for his craziness. And when I would try and argue—you know they were wicked physical disciplinarians, too—I would get the bamboo stick on my legs and bum.

SL: So being a girl didn't exempt you from that.

MC: Oh no, not at all. I used to go running to Gussie and she used to have some solution that would get the sting out of it. 'Cause she was right next door. And I had poked a hole in the wall between her gift shop and the laundry, and we'd pass notes back and forth or yell back and forth. Oh God, some of the things that we did. Kids are really resourceful. They learn to adjust to make things comfortable for them.

SL: Thank you.

### *Postscript*

May learned more about her family history and sent this information:

“As the oldest son, my brother, Bill, was given “very important papers” by our father over 30 years ago. Some were stuffed into paper bags and others were in the back of a family notebook. Bill did not sort or read these papers until our conversation this past summer. He found my parents’ original immigration ID cards used on their separate voyages to the U.S. as well as my father’s naturalization application. Given this information we were able to establish and confirm many unanswered questions about the date of immigration and places both our parents passed through before settling in Boston.

My father arrived in November 1916, passing through Angel Island. The interrogation took place with his paper father and two paper brothers. The interrogator obviously was trying to corroborate their stories, as the three paper brothers arrived two months apart. My father was the oldest paper brother and the last to immigrate.

The naturalization application confirmed that my father went from San Francisco to Gloucester, MA then to Keene, NH. A recent conversation with my cousin (my father’s great grandnephew who lived in my father’s house in the village) related that my father’s grandfather came to the U.S. as part of a work crew who put down the railroad tracks cross country and ended up in New Hampshire. When my father’s father came to the U.S., as part of a work crew, his father (my father’s grandfather) returned to Toisan. My father arrived and joined his father who was working in the one listed laundry in Keene, NH in 1916–1918. His father returned to Toisan and my father proceeded to Gloucester, MA to work in a laundry until 1926 when my mother arrived.

My mother arrived as the paper daughter of a U.S. citizen. Her ship docked at Vancouver, Canada. We assume that she took the train across Canada, somehow making her way to Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. We have reviewed the passenger list of the SS Prince George, which left the port Yarmouth and arrived in Boston, MA in November 1927. Interestingly, she was the only Asian listed on the passenger list. The staff at the National Archives office in Waltham related that when a passenger’s name is the only name on one page, it indicates the passenger was detained. Unfortunately, her file was “borrowed” in the mid 1950s and cannot be located.

It is truly a miracle that any Chinese went through the immigration process and experience and emerged mentally and physically intact! What a testament to the fortitude, determination, and strength of character to the Chinese immigrants of the early 1900s. We are forever grateful to our parents for their commitment to have their family in the U.S. and for their backbreaking work to see that we had the necessities to be healthy and gave us the guidance to become productive Chinese Americans.”

## May Chin

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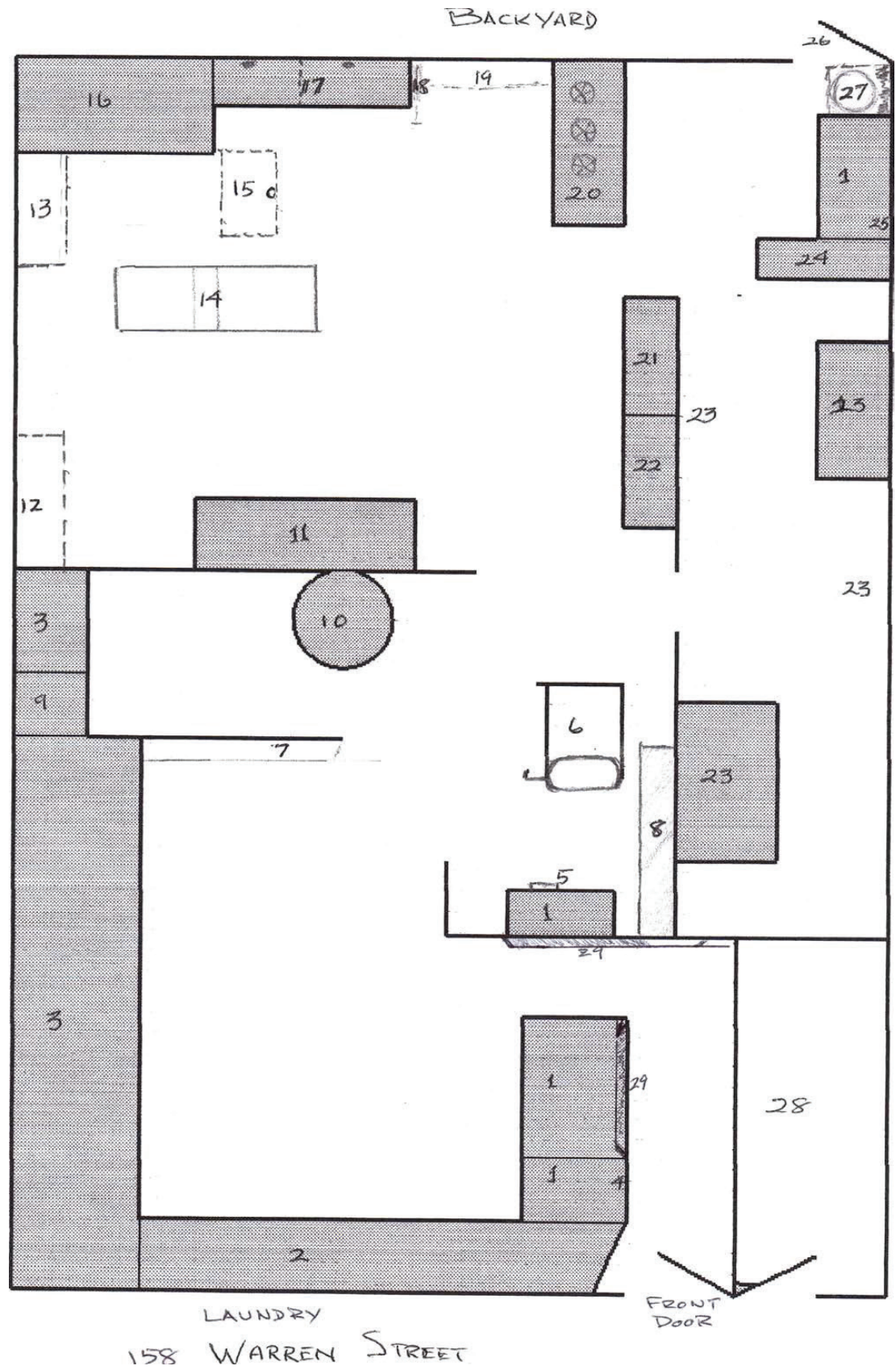
May Chin held by her mother in front of the laundry, 1937.



May Chin's father, her brother Bill, and her mother in the backyard behind the laundry, 1948.

Photos  
courtesy of  
May Chin.

Sketch of Fang Yee Laundry



**Legend for Sketch of Fang Yee Laundry (1940s)  
158 Warren Street  
Roxbury, MA**

1. Ironing Table
2. Plants
3. Floor to ceiling shelves for clean laundry packages
4. Brown paper & Spool of string to wrap & tie clean laundry package
5. Cash drawer
6. Hand-operated 80 pound steel roller/presser for shirt collars, cuffs, & button holes
7. Table for shirts waiting to be finished, after collars/cuffs pressed.
8. Dirty laundry waiting to be marked and sorted.
9. Icebox/refrigerator
10. Eating/homework/reading table
11. Sofa bed
12. Storage for 2 fold up beds
13. Storage for Laundry Supplies
14. Study desk w/ 2 leaves
15. Trap Door leading to Drying Room and coal bins in the basement
16. Bathroom
17. Double soapstone sink
18. Hand Wringer to remove excess water from hand washed laundry
19. Storage for pot, pans etc
20. Gas Stove: 3 burner
21. Cabinet w/ Cutting Board
22. Bureau
23. Bed
24. Sewing machine operated by foot pedal
25. Radio
26. Back door
27. Storage: rice bin, salted dried fish, dried tangerine peel, Smithfield Ham, etc
28. Gussie's Gift Shop
29. Counter where customers are served

*By May Chin for the Chinese Laundries in Massachusetts Oral History Project.*





## Johnny Mah

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*The following interview was conducted with Suey Hung (Johnny) Mah (JM) by Shauna Lo (SL) on April 1, 2009 at the home of Anna Woo. Johnny Mah lived and worked in the Charlie Chin Laundry at 66 Main Street in Peabody (owned by his uncle and aunt) and later owned Johnny's Laundry at 108 Common Street in Lynn.*

Family members present at the interview:

Marshall Mah: Johnny's son

Gep Chin: Johnny's cousin

Toy Har Chin: Johnny's cousin

Anna Woo: Daughter of Johnny's cousin, Yin Din Chin, brother of Gep and Toy Har Chin.

SL: We'll just start with a little bit of your family immigration history. Who was the first in your family to come to the United States that you know of?

JM: It's me. Oh wait a minute. That's my grandfather.

SL: Can you tell me a little bit about why he came or when? Do you know any details?

JM: He was coming here looking for... make a living. Trying to support the family.

SL: Do you know what year that was?

JM: No. That must be around the 30s—around there.

SL: Do you know did he come directly to Boston?

JM: No, he was in Canada.

SL: Do you know why he came to Boston?

JM: Easier to make a living. Better chance.

SL: Did he bring his family over?

JM: No, by himself. He came over because his father sponsor him.

SL: So, he came by himself. Did he eventually return to China?

JM: He came over here, work in Newburyport at the laundry there.

SL: And then, how about yourself. When did you come?

JM: Myself... 1939. Late 1939. The hope is to try to make a living in America. Much easier to make a living.

SL: Was your father here then?

JM: No.

SL: So your grandfather helped you to come?

JM: Yes, and his father, his mother [Gep's parents] are the ones sponsor us.

SL: Where did they live when they first came here?

JM: Main Street, Peabody. Sixty-six. Right in the laundry.

SL: So who first opened the laundry?

JM: That's Gep's father. Chin Ming-tai. Ming-tai Chin. Charlie Chin.

Marshall: That was the American name.

[Johnny expresses concern about not answering all the questions on the list.]

SL: You should just feel free to talk freely. It doesn't have to be answering my specific questions. Whatever you remember. It's just to help trigger some of your memories. OK, so how was it that you got into the laundry business?

JM: That's the only job you can get when you come to America—the Chinese people. That's all they have is the laundry.

Gep: He had a job in my parents' laundry. That's how he started. He learned the business there.

Toy Har: You know the connection between him and our family?

SL: I'm trying to figure it out.

Toy Har: We're first cousins. His [Johnny's] father was my mother's brother.

SL: And how old were you when you came to the country?

JM: About sixteen.

SL: So you went to live with....

JM: I live in his [Gep's] parents' laundry on 66 Main Street, Peabody.

SL: But you eventually started your own laundry.

JM: After a while... his father had a laundry in Marblehead and he figured that

I am good enough to do it myself. He had somebody else taking care of that laundry. So he think that I'm good enough to take over. So he sent me over there to take over. And after some time, I double, triple up the business. I was just a kid. And the war was on and it was too busy to handle, so they told my grandfather in Newburyport to close that one down, to come down here to give me a hand. So after a while, when I get some help and take some more customers and build up, get too busy and I had to put a sign on the window, "No new customer." Can't get no help in those days. Everybody out in the service. So, then I get drafted in the service. My grandfather cannot handle it, had to close it down.

SL: How about the laundry in Lynn?

JM: The laundry in Lynn—after I get out of the service, I had to do something. I brought my wife over. So I bought that laundry. I bought that laundry very cheap.

SL: Did you buy it from someone that you knew?

JM: I bought it from somebody that I didn't know who it was but I just bought it so I have a place to go, have something to do. So, I had my wife. [It was] before he [Marshall] was born.

SL: So, there didn't seem to be any other options for you coming home [from the war]?

JM: Well, let me continue. After I bought the laundry, I move in. There was not much business. He [Marshall] was born the following Sunday. And so I start building up the business. The business grew fast when I move in there. So I was doing OK. I met some real estate guy—drop by and talk to me all the time. He says, "I got restaurant. Maybe you're interested." So he took me out for a ride to look at the different restaurants. So I take a look at this one here, the one on Lynnfield Street. The guy shut down. And so I said, "Gee, maybe it's a good idea," and so on and so on. But I need money and I didn't have much money on hand. So I talked to his father—my uncle—and he said, "You got good idea. Don't be afraid, I'll help you." Financially. He came up with some money. We formed a corporation. Whoever wants to join in, put some money in, get a share. That's how I started the restaurant. And after we opened up, the restaurant doing OK! Doing very good.

SL: So, how long did you own the laundry for then?

JM: A few months. After a few months, I sold it. We got too busy at the restaurant. My brother was taking care of it [the laundry] and he was scared. He can't handle it. So I had to sell it and he came in and joined me. He worked in the kitchen.

SL: Well, since I'm supposed to be focusing on the laundry part of it.... Maybe

I can ask you what it was like working in their parents' laundry. What do you remember about that?

JM: OK, when I first came over, working in the laundry, he teach me how to do this, how to do that. We put in a lot of hours. The people bring in the laundry, so we have to check them out, write it all down, sent it out to the laundry to wash it, then they bring it back in the afternoon. Then we have to sort them all out, starch it and everything, dry it up. Whatever was necessary to be done. So I iron it up, fold it up, wrap it up, and bundle. So they usually come and pick it up on Saturdays. It was a lot of work and we had to work very very late at night.

Marshall: He's talking about a large commercial laundry to do the wash. It came back wet.

JM: They do the washing and we do the rest over there. So, we had to make sure to get the laundry ready by Saturday because everybody come in to pick up the laundry. Like on Friday, his mother stand up—lot of work to be done—work all night. I stand up, work until 3:00 in the morning and try to keep up with her and she felt bad. She said, "Why don't you go and lay down for a little while?" Three o'clock in the morning, we had to open up the bed, alongside the sink. Just lay down, that's where I sleep. Sleep for about an hour and a half. After 5:00 the daylight start showing so I have to get up to get all the laundry done so the people [can] come in to pick up the laundry. That's the hours that we have to work. Long long hours. Day in day out like that.

SL: Did their family [Gep and Toy Har's family] live in the back of the laundry?

JM: Yep. One room.

SL: The living quarters or the whole thing?

JM: No... let's see.... See, this is the laundry, like that. The laundry is long, long, like this.

SL: Want a piece of paper? Could you draw me a picture?

[Family discusses how long Johnny owned his laundry in Lynn.]

JM: [Drawing] This is the door. This is the front. This is the laundry. The people walk in here. We have the shelves here. Ironing over here. This room here, we hanged the clothes to dry. And the sink's here. This is the bedroom for them—for the kids—for my aunt's family. Just one bedroom. This is the sink here. When I was working with them, every night I open up the bed to sleep alongside the sink. They have a bedroom in back here. This is the kitchen here.

SL: So, there's 4 sections, then?

Toy Har: It was divided into four sections. It was actually one big room.

SL: So how many people were living here?

JM: Five people. In one bedroom.

SL: And you had a cot here.

JM: My bed was here, but I'd fold it up every day. Only at night it gets opened up.

[Marshall talks to his father trying to figure out the year he sold his laundry. He was born in the laundry in 1948, and some of his younger siblings were born there as well. It is clarified that his father owned the laundry for a few years at least until 1955. There was no profit from the restaurant in the first couple years and the only profit came from the laundry.]

JM: That's right, I didn't get paid. There was too much mortgage. So, I had to work for nothing. I make sure my employees get paid.

Marshall: Am I right?

JM: Yeah. That's right, too. That's why I brought him!

[Discussion is refocused on the laundry in Peabody that Johnny worked in when he first came to America.]

JM: Working in the laundry—you know when I first come in—good thing I'm lucky that I got a job. A lot of people coming over didn't get anything. Those days—seven dollars a week. On the seven dollars a week, you know what I had to do? I have six of us kids—four sisters and one brother—in China and my father, my mother. My father had no job. My mother was working on a farm—grow her own stuff, feed the family. And my grandmother was still living. From that seven dollars, I saved it all up—I send it home. Save up to \$50, send it home. Kept the whole family alive.

Then one 4th July week, working in there, I see the kids walking by with their ice cream cone. I'm standing there my mouth watering. And her [Toy Har's] mother said, "Why don't you go buy one next door?" I said, "OK." So I went over there. Only a nickel for an ice cream cone. I walk up there and half the way there to the ice cream counter, I thought of my baby sister. When I left her she was only eight months old. I said, "I ate already, but she is home, no food." I walk out of there—I didn't spend the nickel for the ice cream cone. Her mother keep on teasing me. I go through that... I saved that. I save the seven dollars, saved the whole family. That's a big family.

SL: Where are you from in China?

JM: Canton, and the village is Toisan.

SL: You have pretty vivid memories of living in China?

JM: Yeah.

SL: Your family was farming?

JM: There was not enough. They depend on my mother. All my sisters, my brother—they all babies. My mother was the only one working on the farm grow her own stuff—potato, peanuts, rice. Not enough rice for the whole family. She saved the rice for us kids. She eat the potato. I remember, when I spent a nickel, it broke my heart. You know, I'm the oldest one. So I save it up, sent it to them to stay alive. When the Japanese take over China, they cut off the supply line. At that time, I was at war. I was at Lille, right in the foxhole. And I'm thinking, haven't heard from them for a long time. The bombs keep going boom boom boom all over me. I don't know next minute I'm going to be alive or not.

You know, I broke down crying so many times, and my parents home—no food, no nothing. Cut off the supply line, I think they all gone. So, until they drop the atomic bomb in Toyko—then her father sent me a letter right away, tell me they are still alive. So her father was holding some money for me. Every time I get paid, I send it to her father take care of it for me, put it in the bank for me. So he sent some money home right away—kept them all alive.

SL: Did you go back to visit them? Or did any over your family come to this country?

JM: I go back to visit them right after I get out of the war. My grandfather want to take me back there. That's how I got married over there. Then I came back with my wife. Then I had to get papers done over here, bring them over.

SL: So, were you able to bring your whole family over?

JM: Yup. They were all here. That's the life, going through all that. Those days—pretty hard, pretty tough.

SL: Do you want to tell me a bit about what you felt like when you first came to this country? Were you able to go to school?

JM: My mind is come over here, get a job to make some money to support the family. That was number one. So I got a job working. I just don't get no time to go to school. Then after a while I found out about night school. I went for a few weeks and learned a little bit. When Gep was only a baby, he go to grammar school, I learned from him. Like, C-A-T, CAT. Write it down. While I'm working, C-A-T, CAT, C-A-T, CAT. That's how I learned.

SL: So you were able to learn...

JM: That's how I learned [spelling]. Talking [I learned] by talking to people.

Marshall: And you learned some from music.

JM: Oh, when I was in the laundry business, all we have is a radio. Turn the radio on, and I learned some English from the radio. Cowboy songs—I went out there and buy a little book for 10 cents. I open it up while I'm ironing. While this guy is singing, I look at the words on the paper. I start singing myself!

SL: Did you wait on the customers that came in to the laundry?

JM: Oh yeah.

SL: Can you tell me a little bit about the customers? Who were they?

JM: I don't remember their names!

SL: No, I mean, what kind of people were they? What did they do for a living? What kind of laundry did they bring in?

JM: Shirts, underwear, socks, everything. During that time, it was war time—they don't have time to do their own laundry. Everybody put it in a bag, come in to give it to me. We have a slip—two numbers—one on top, one on bottom. Tear it up in half, give the customer half, put one in the bag. Then at night, we open up each bag, count what we get, write it down on the slip and so on. Then put a knot in the big bag, the laundry man come in in the morning, pick it up, take it away to wash it, wash it, bring it back in the afternoon. We start working on it.

SL: So, the customers, were they families or single men?

JM: Families. Husband and wife, they working.

TC: They were white, right?

JM: Yeah, they were all white.

SL: Were there any other Chinese families or people in Lynn?

JM: Yeah, there were quite a lot. A lot of Chinese in Lynn—those days.

SL: Did you know the other families?

JM: Yeah. Most of them not families. Most of them just single people. They not allowed to have their family come over in those days. Only single guys come over here try to support their family.

SL: Did you go into Chinatown very often?

JM: Sundays. My uncle takes me Sunday, every Sunday.

SL: So you have one day off from the laundry?

JM: Yup. After we finish the work in the daytime we still have to do cleaning. You know, sweep the house, wash the floor, do whatever necessary. Then if we have time, we take a trip to Chinatown for a little while.

SL: What did you do there?



JM: Oh, just follow their father.

SL: What did they do?

JM: Oh, just sitting down, they talking, go to the store, pick up a little vegetable, that's it.

SL: Was there somewhere where you hung out?

JM: Mostly in the store. Go down in the cellar. In Chinatown they didn't have big store like they have today. Just like somebody's cellar, basement. They have mahjong and things like that. Gambling places. I don't gamble. Their father not gamble neither. He doesn't gamble. They go, they talk, that's it.

[Toy Har mentions she remembers going to a fong, a room in Chinatown rented by members of the Chin clan. She mentions that her father participated in the fong. She and Johnny agree that Mr. Chin helped conduct the fong business, such as keeping track of dues from members. The association (of mostly single men) helped newcomers to the country, and helped them if they needed a place to stay.]

SL: I'd like to ask you, when you opened up your own laundry—that was several years later—had the business changed from when you were working in your aunt and uncle's laundry?

JM: Yes.

SL: How had it changed?

JM: When I was working for her father at the time, do it by hand—ironing clothes by hand. When I had the business over here, I bought machines. Use a big press machine, push a button, and so on. That kind of difference.

SL: You can use it for shirts?

JM: Yeah, shirts, pants, everything.

SL: Did you use electric irons when you [first started?]

JM: No, no. [Family laughs]

Toy Har: No, are you kidding? It was solid iron that you put on a pot-bellied stove and heated it up. And you ironed until the iron got cold!

JM: Explain to her that. Let's see, if we have an ironing table over here.... The flat iron is solid iron. We lean it on the side of the stove, burning coal. Leave it there, about a dozen of them. Go around. Grab one, make sure you check it so it's not burning the clothes—you can feel it. Then after you finish ironing for a little while, and it cool off, you go back there, change to next one, go around, running back and forth, back and forth, like that.

SL: And then for water, you had to moisten the clothes...

JM: With a little can. Use a mouth blower. After a while we get the electric iron.

Anna: But it wasn't a steam iron, though.

Marshall: No, steam irons—wasn't that like in the 1960s? [Laughs.]

JM: When we had the machine, we still had to touch it up. With an electric iron.

SL: Did anything else change from the old laundry to the next one?

JM: Not much.

Anna: But you didn't have those big vats in the back to wash the laundry. When my grandfather had the laundry, he washed some of the clothes in there. I remember that. In like, a big barrel.

JM: Oh, he used to do his own. He did have one, do his own. He did try one, but in the end...

Anna: So much work, huh?

JM: It is. It's a lot of work.

SL: The wet wash you used, was that owned by Chinese?

JM: No. White people.

SL: Do you want to tell me about how you ended up selling your laundry and getting into the restaurant business?

JM: When I had the laundry, I used to know a lot of guys that come in and they stand there and talk to me. And so this guy's a real estate guy, and on the weekend, he took me out to ride around the city, show me different places. And the restaurant, he said, "Maybe it's a good idea. Look at this one here." [This one] was closed and he went around the back and had the landlord open up to look at it.

The people who owned it had it only about four weeks. It closed. It was a pizza place—pizza and ice cream—you know, a teenager hang out? So he said, "You want me to find out how much they want, how they're going to do so-and-so?" So he went over there and talked to the landlord. [He said], "Hey you don't need to bother with him." But he was a big time operator. I don't want to get in trouble. He's a gambler—bookie. So, I had to get hold of him. I give him \$1000. So he write down [that he] sold it to me so I'm safe. You know what I mean? They can shoot you, they can do anything those kind of people. He had a pizza machine and all kinds of equipment that's still there. So, I give him a \$1000—forget it. So we start to set it up. And with your father, we found a few people interested, get some idea about what to do and so on. So we get together, the one who wants to get in they chip in being a partner.

So, finally we start opening up and they want me to be the manager. I'm the only one in Lynn and I know the city pretty well. I'm a veteran and all the city politicians—they treat me pretty good. They help me. So we never run into any problems. So we opened up peacefully. I invite the mayor, councilor, and all those licensing boards and so on to the party. So, if I need any help, they all try to help me. As soon as we open up you see the line all the way down the street. For a long time, we had lines every day. Lunch hour, we used to have GE [General Electric]. They call up ahead of time—they want their food on the table. So, we do that. So, every day, the people who didn't put their order in, they have to line up way down the street.

SL: So the restaurant was very successful.

JM: Forty-four years. Opened in 1954.

SL: You mean you just closed it?

JM: We sold it.

[Family adds details. They sold the restaurant in 1997. It was originally called Tai Hong. Then after they sold it, it was opened under the name Kong Wah. Then it was sold again and is now called Jade Pacifica.]

SL: And you preferred the restaurant business over the laundry business?

JM: Yeah, no question about that. You meet a lot of nice people.

SL: Is it less work, or better work?

JM: I'm just in the front. I dress up, just sit in the front.

[Family discusses whether the hours are longer or not at the laundry.]

JM: I work a lot of hours. People walk in, they look for me, I want to be there.

[Johnny and Marshall say sometimes the hours were late, also, particularly on weekends.]

JM: You know the Bruins? The hockey players? They were around all the time. I used to have—movie stars go in there! Lot of dancers. Movie stars, they come in there!

[Marshall chimes in with names of customers such as Johnny McKenzie, Joseph Cotton, Nancy Kerrigan, Walter Brennan.]

JM: Joseph Cotton always have egg foo yung, and a butt, and a beer.

Anna: How many years after they opened they got a liquor license? That was a big change.

Marshall: Probably around 1965, '66 you got the liquor license. 'Cause I was still in high school.

JM: I had the city hall—every Tuesday they have a city meeting—the council meeting—and after they finish the meeting they always would up in my place. They always come down and sitting down there. All those newspaper people—they all hang around there.

SL: So, it was a famous restaurant.

JM: It was pretty popular! All the big shots hang around there.

Anna: Every Chinese New Year's they'd have a big celebration and invite everybody in the city—the politicians.

Marshall: Those were the good old days.

[Family discusses why restaurant business is better than laundry business. It was also hard work, but rewarding.]

JM: When I was in the laundry in Marblehead and I got drafted in the service, the school teacher collected money—they come down and give it to me to buy cigarettes. I don't even smoke! The kids! Chip in money for me to say good-bye.

[Family discusses the list of Chinese-owned laundries in Peabody and Lynn.]

SL: What did you think about this area when you first came here?

JM: I had no idea. Their father and mother give me a place to sleep. That's my home!

SL: Did you find the neighborhood to be friendly?

JM: I couldn't speak English in those days. The kids those days, kind of a little mean. They usually make fun of the Chinese. They either write things on the window or come by the store, "Hey ching ching Chinaman."

SL: They wrote things on the laundry window?

JM: Yeah they do lot of times. The kids. I found out afterward the parents—the father—teach the kids those things! So, the kids go over there, "Ching ching Chinaman!" and go like that [motions brushing teeth with finger.]

SL: What is that?

JM: Brush your teeth. I heard that the claim is that Chinese people eat rats. That's how they make fun of the Chinese in those days. They used to come around a lot. Every day you see kids go by. I use to chase them, grab them. See, after the war, and a lot of Chinese have been in the service and everything like that, the people recognize Chinese as not bad. Then they cut it down. Today? No. Like myself, I

always stand up, see. When the people [put] down Chinese in any way, I stand up, say, “come here.” I give them lecture. You know? They give me a talk, shake hands afterwards. “This is uncalled for.”

SL: So things changed a lot after the war.

JM: Yeah, changed a lot. See that’s why we have to take care of ourselves. Everywhere I go, I stand up, I respect people, let them respect me. So no matter where I go in the city, they’re pretty nice to me.

SL: Thank you very much.





## Gep and Toy Har Chin

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*The following interview was conducted with Gep Chin (GC) and Toy Har Chin (TC) by Shauna Lo (SL) on April 1, 2009 at the home of Anna Woo.*

*Gep and Toy Har's parents owned the Charlie Chin laundry which was located first at 66 Main Street in Peabody and then moved across the street to 51 Main Street. Gep and Toy Har are brother and sister.*

SL: Who was the first in your family to come to the United States?

TC: Our paternal grandfather was here first.

SL: Do you know any of the details—what year he came or what brought him to the Boston area? Did he come through San Francisco or straight to Boston?

TC: He's more before my time. I don't know how much you remember [asks Gep].

GC: All I know is he came when my father was 26. It must have been in the 1920s or earlier—would be my grandfather's emigration period. We have no papers to tell us when. This is the storytelling from our parents.<sup>1</sup>

TC: Our grandfather came and I don't know if he was in any other cities, but he settled in Peabody and opened up the laundry. That was the Charlie Chin laundry. He worked there for—I don't know how long he worked there.

SL: He came by himself?

GC: Yeah. He was a bachelor here.

TC: He had a family that was in China and he came to make his fortune.

GC: He came to America to make money at the "Gold Mountain."

TC: And then he, at some point, I guess he needed help and that's when he brought my father over and my father worked in the laundry. I think there was

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<sup>1</sup> Toy Har later looked at some documents she had and found that her father arrived in the Boston area in 1922. His father (Toy's paternal grandfather) preceded him in coming to the U.S. (date unknown) and started the Charlie Chin laundry at 66 Main Street in Peabody.



another man worked in the laundry too. It seems I remember hearing there was someone else. But anyway, my father came over and took over the laundry when my grandfather went back. So I never knew my grandfather. Do you remember?

GC: I really can't remember. I have the feeling that I was a little kid when he was there but my recollections are dim from that period.

TC: Well, you know when I think about it, I'm not sure he was here when you were born and the reason why I say that is I remember when I was taking care of Ma and Pa, when they were sick; they were telling me that his father had come over and then my father wanted to have his family here because he figured he was alone and the advice that he was given from people in Chinatown—the Chin Association, the small clan association of Chins—they were all saying “No, no, you can't bring your wife here because Chinese women are not treated well here.” Immigration problems and all that... and his father also thought it was a bad idea.

But anyway, my father's father went back to China and in the meantime I guess his first wife had died. He got the second wife and my mother of course was living in the family home and there was some friction there—in-law friction and all that kind of stuff—and my father decided well, he wanted to bring her over because she was having problems there and he was lonely here, so despite all the advice he had been given about bringing a woman over here, he decided to go ahead anyway and when my mother came over, that's when you [Gep] were born and the rest of us were born. My older brother was born in China—he was still back there.<sup>2</sup>

GC: Yeah, that grandfather—I remember he was about sixty when he went back and got remarried and sired three more sons.

TC: That was because he didn't have sons of his own. My father was one of these children who were so-called purchased or adopted. In those days they bought children, bought and sold children. He was one of those children because my grandfather's first wife, she did not have any children and wanted children, so she took my father in and that's how he got into that family. So we grew up all in Peabody and all were born in the laundry.

SL: Do you know how your family was able to get into the country? Did they have to buy papers?

TC: They bought papers.

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<sup>2</sup> After the interview, Toy sent these corrections and comments: “My grandfather ended his sojourn in America in the mid-to-late 1920s, returned to his village in China and started a new family with his third wife. It was his second wife who had passed away at the time, not his first wife as I had mentioned in the interview. His first wife died much earlier.

Our older brother came later to America to help out in the laundry, learn the business, and start his own laundry.”

GC: Oh yeah, they came over on false papers.<sup>3</sup>

TC: They actually—my mother came over and when she got to Boston, she married my father in Boston. You know, they went through a second marriage, to make it legal. But she was actually married back there to my father.

GC: Her paper name was Law Lee.

TC: Yeah, she was Lee Fong Bo.<sup>4</sup>

SL: But your father was not born in this country, so he wouldn't be able to bring a wife. Did he say he was born here?

TC: I don't know, but my mother came over on false papers.

SL: There are some cases of paper daughters.

TC: I think very few women were here at that time.

SL: OK, so you told me where the laundry was located. You said it was first at 66 Main Street.

TC: That's when Johnny [Mah] was working in the laundry.

SL: And that was the Charlie Chin laundry.

GC: How many years was it in operation you think?

TC: From the time grandfather had it to the time that we left it—we must have left there...

GC: Well, Pa was 65 when he left it. He essentially retired from the laundry when he was 65.

TC: No, he couldn't have been. 'Cause Ma was always saying she was 70 when she retired.

GC: That was her real age. Another thing that was funny, they declared themselves many years younger than their real ages on the papers. That was another problem.

TC: That was because when you were buying papers you had to take on the identity of whoever it is. In real life Ma was 70 or 71 when she retired. She always said that. She always claimed she was a year older than Pa.

SL: So you think the laundry opened in the 20s?

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<sup>3</sup> Toy Har added later that she recalled her father saying that he was a U.S. citizen. She found a document indicating that her grandfather was born in San Francisco and that his birth records had been destroyed in a fire. So, her father—even though he was born in China—claimed to be a citizen on the basis that he was the offspring of a U.S. citizen.

<sup>4</sup> Toy Har added that later her mother used her married surname, and called herself Fong Bo Chin. Lee was her paper surname. Her actual maiden name was Mah.

TC: Yeah, sometime in the 20s, and somewhere in the middle 40s or early 40s we moved from 66 Main Street across the street. But it's the same laundry, we just moved.

SL: Do you know why?

TC: I think they wanted a bigger place. Because once we moved we bought those machines—those pressers.

GC: Yeah, because there was a friend in Salem who had machines then and he says you can do more business with those machines and it's faster.

TC: And that laundry that Johnny described was very small.

GC: Yeah, there was no room for the machines. We moved across the street to 51 and built an extension into the back so they could install a regular commercial washing machine and a spinner. So it was a concrete addition—you know, a foundation—and a little house covering it.

TC: That extension, that's what Anna was talking about—this big drum...

GC: You know, a horizontal drum that you normally see in movies?

SL: I'm not familiar with them.

TC: It's like a big oil tanker—the ones that deliver gasoline to the gasoline station? Well, take three-quarters of that, maybe half of one of those tankers—the drum was like that. It was huge. That was the commercial washing machine.

GC: You haven't been in a large commercial laundry?

SL: No.

TC: That was one of the improvements that my father made.

GC: A huge investment for him at the time. But it made up—he didn't have to send out his laundry to the wet wash and have it come back. He did everything himself. He washed it, he did the starching, and the spin dry and all that stuff. The whole operation was all in that one store when we moved to 51 Main Street.

SL: Let's just go back to the old one first. I know we had looked at this picture before [pulls out the diagram that Johnny drew earlier], but maybe just see if this seems to be accurate and if you had any other memories or there was anything you wanted to add.

[Gep and Toy Har look at the picture and agree with what Johnny drew.]

SL: Did you say you were born in the laundry?

GC: Yeah, we were born in the laundry.

TC: All of us. All three of us.

GC: The last three.

TC: My sister, too.

SL: And you had an older brother that didn't come.

TC: He didn't come until later.

SL: And you have a younger sister?

GC: She's in between us.

TC: But we did have one piece of machinery in that laundry. It was a gas hand roller for the collars and cuffs. It was gas fired. It had a bed that went under this roller—

GC: Like a hand printing press except the drum had a gas-fired tube to heat the drum. Well you had to do the collar separately to make it stiff because it was starched and you needed a heavy press. They straighten the collar out and put it under the roller and roll it out. It was done by hand. There's a hand crank on the side to roll the bed in. Once the collar's dry, it comes out nice and flat—very professional looking. And then they'd straighten out the sleeves, they put it in, they roll that flat.

GC: The length of the drum was probably 24 inches and the diameter may have been six or eight inches.

TC: Do you know how I remember that so vividly? It was because Ma had me on her back in a... you know, what they carried the babies in? The flame had somehow caught fire outside and the thing flared up. And I was on my mother's back and I can remember that fire.

GC: Yeah, blowback fire, I guess it's called.

TC: It was dangerous!

GC: Was it part of her lighting procedure or it just blew back?

TC: I can't remember, I think it was blowback. I think she was in the process of rolling the thing and all of a sudden the thing flared up.

GC: There must have been a leak there somewhere. Because connected to the gas line over to this cylinder in the center was a rubber hose and I suspect that rubber boot that they put at the end may have cracked and started leaking and the flame burst out, I guess.

TC: It's amazing how even when you're very young an event like that sticks in your head.

SL: What year did your parents have the laundry until?

TC: In the sixties.

GC: Until they retired. I think they were the legal age—65 or 66 years of age. In their false paper, not their real age.

TC: Yeah, because that's when they started Social Security.

SL: And that was in the 1960s or they were in their sixties?

TC: Both.

SL: In your family, do you remember who was responsible for what duties around the laundry? And I know that must have changed as you got older.

GC: Oh, we all worked in the laundry. We all worked in the laundry to help out. After high school, we came back and pitched in. I learned to operate the presses. I did the finishing operation of a shirt. The press doesn't get everything. There are still little areas that you have to use an electric iron to finish up on. And you fold it neatly and put a blue band around it—make it official.

SL: But when you were younger...

GC: This was what, I was doing that when I was in the eighth grade?

TC: I don't know but I was 10. I started very young. As long as you can reach that ironing table, we were put to work.

GC: It was a hand crafted ironing table, probably about this big. You can actually spread the shirt out and iron the whole width of the shirt—well, the back.

SL: Do you remember your first tasks when you were little?

TC: I started doing sorting. I did everything.

GC: When the customers came in, it was in a bag or shirts were wrapped up in a shirt or tied together with the sleeves.

TC: And I did all the turning the collars. You know, doing the sewing when they wanted to extend the life of a shirt. People would want their collars turned, so I would be doing those too.

SL: What do you mean, 'turning' the collars?

GC: Well, the collar wears, right?

TC: See where the collar—there's a seam here? What you'll do is you'll take this outer part and flip it over so that the underside which is not worn becomes the top side.

SL: Oh really?

TC: Yeah, and they do the cuffs, too. French cuffs—the ones that required cuff links.

SL: Oh, we just throw it away now!

GC: But I was doing that when I was very young. As soon as I could work the machine. Talk about child labor!

GC: That was it. We didn't get paid. That was the other thing.

SL: Apparently Johnny got paid.

TC: Yeah, but we didn't when we were very young, but then when I started high school I think I got paid—what, it was like, ten dollars a week.

GC: That was allowance for us.

TC: I didn't get it unless I worked.

GC: Because we had to buy our lunch in high school.

SL: So were all four siblings there at this time?

TC: Three of us. The older one...

GC: He had his own laundry.

TC: Yeah, when he came over he had his own laundry, but also he wasn't here for a while. He was serving in the Army and after his discharge, he opened his own laundry. We were the three of us for a long time.

GC: We did that throughout high school. Once we got out of high school, went to college, then we did at the laundry was smaller. Well, she lived at school. I came home. I commuted to Northeastern.

TC: I went to BU and I lived in the dorms, but my junior and senior year when they opened the restaurant [that Johnny and his partners owned], I would come home weekends to work in the restaurant as cashier. You know, you had to work. No getting around it.

SL: Do you want to talk a little about what it was like growing up as Chinese Americans?

GC: I didn't think of myself as anything unusual.

TC: I didn't either.

GC: The kids in the neighborhood accepted us. Like any other kid. We played with them. Well, I knew I was different in appearance, but that's about it. We learned to talk English— you know, we didn't have an accent.

TC: Well in those days the other thing is that in Peabody there were no other Chinese kids. We were the only Chinese kids.

GC: And there were no Blacks.

TC: And there were no Blacks. We lived in a very diverse neighborhood. There was Jewish, Greek, Irish, French Canadian, Italian. I mean there was a mix. And

because you're the only ones that are different, after a while you're just accepted as one of them. So, we had no problem as kids. Although in the early years I remember when I was very little, like Johnny said, before the war, people used to make fun of the Chinese but after a while that stopped. They didn't do that anymore.

SL: Did you have to work when you came home from school?

TC: Oh yeah.

GC: We had the work ethic, that's for sure.

TC: Yeah, and after supper you had to do your studying.

GC: That's our study time, right after supper. We worked on the kitchen table.

SL: When you moved across the street, you had a larger place. Do you want to draw a picture?

GC: It was a storefront, the machines, then an eating area and then in the very back was the addition to the building.

TC: It was a much longer building, and then we had an extension here that was built. The entrance was like this. This was part of a three-storefront building. We had the last storefront, the end unit.

GC: Well, the middle door—the one between the middle storefront and our storefront—was to the hall upstairs, wasn't it?

TC: And there was a restaurant, the Honey Bee Restaurant, on the other end... But this was the front door. There was an ironing table. This is where customers came in. There was another ironing table like this. No, wait, there's one in the middle here.

GC: There's one in the window area. There's three ironing tables.

TC: And the shelves were all along here like this. The cat window was here, remember?

GC: We had a special window! We had a cat who wanted to go out to do his duty so I built a screen—using chicken wire and window screen and down in the lower corner I had a little entrance that was like six inches by eight inches and we covered it with a little cloth. And the cat would push out and go out. If he wants to come in—well, we would have the window raised....

SL: Whose idea was it to have a cat?

GC: I don't know. I think it was my mother.

TC: We kind of took it in. I think it was a stray.

GC: I think we called him Small Fry.

TC: Yeah.

GC: We had an interesting growing-up. We had experiences—I don't know—because we worked, we grew up differently.

SL: How did you feel growing up when your parents owned a laundry? Did you feel differently than your peers?

GC: Nothing...well, most of them worked for large companies, you know, office workers. There were some whose parents owned stores. A lot of them were from immigrant families—the Greeks. You know, some of their parents had stores, you know, businesses. See, Peabody was an industrial city. They processed leather, tanning leather. It was a stinky city when the wind was bad. But, that was the industry. It was called the leather city of Massachusetts, processing leather for the shoe industry down in Brockton and elsewhere. In Lynn, they had a shoe factory, I think.

TC: [Still drawing]. What would you call this? It's not a dryer.

GC: A spinner. Extractor I think was the name of it. But you spin the laundry at a high speed. You filled the laundry in, turn it on, engaged the belt. It was belt-driven. So it's a wide belt, around four inches. I remember I had to fix it you know, when it pulled apart. You had to splice in another piece in there to get it back. So he bought a little stapler, crimping machine because that's how the belts are put together. And when you put the ends together, it forms a little tunnel underneath and you had to put a thin narrow piece of gut that was made for this type of work. And you cut a piece long enough and you slide it through. They didn't have plastic then, it was made out of animal gut. Anyway, I got very good at repairing those leather belts. So there's a big two-horsepower motor at one end, it was belted to the top, there was a huge axle at the top and it drove the running rod axle there and it had a big drums and it rolled belts down to there and belts over here...

TC: All right. [Finishes the drawing and shows it to Gep.]

SL: Show me where the living area is.

TC: Before I get there, I just want to say, see this area with the machines? Before we got the machines, this whole area was a drying room with a stove in it. This is the modernized laundry [in drawing]. So just beyond the presses is where we ate our dinners. There was a round table here. And two beds with the head boards back-to-back and then there was a small room—really a small room, just enough for the toilet.

SL: How about showering or bathing?



TC: You didn't [shower]. What you did was you had a big tub—a metal tub, like you see in the Westerns? That's what we had and what you did was heat the water... Now there was some kind of a heater here to heat the water going into the washing machine—sometimes you boil the water or get it out of this thing—and we'd go to the drying room, and just close the doors and sit in the tub and wash. And that was life back in those days.

GC: And then later we rented an apartment in the next building over.

TC: Yeah, we rented an apartment when we got older and of course that had a regular bathroom with a tub and sink.

GC: There was a side door to that apartment. It was very convenient.

TC: That's the back door here. You had to step down because it was a cement floor.

GC: It was all poured. It was a poured concrete floor, slanted down.

TC: Because of the washing machine. It was all designed to take the water away.

GC: Special drainage...

[Discussion about using the washing machine. At some point they went back to sending out the clothes to a commercial wet wash.]

GC: Well, the business started going downhill. It's like any business. There's a fantastic period where you had to work late at night and then as time went on—because polyester shirts came into play—there was less and less—you know, the wash and wear type thing came in.

SL: I have a question about the spinner. Isn't the laundry still wet when it comes out? Do you hang the clothes to dry?

TC: When you use the pressers, the laundry had to be damp anyway. And the heat of the pressers pretty much dries it out too.

GC: But the water was really whipped out of there.

SL: What about socks or something like that? I don't think you put those through the presser, right?

TC: No you don't put those through the pressers. We didn't do that many socks. We did have some, but...

GC: No. We had some bachelor business, but most times is just professional people who want their shirts starched—and their collars and the front and the cuffs.

SL: Your customers were more professionals, then?

GC: Doctors, business people—in the city.

SL: How did the working class folks do their laundry?

GC: Have no idea.

SL: Maybe they did them themselves.

TC: I think when we were back in the old laundry, I think a lot of people were still hand washing. And they only bring in the shirts, basically.

GC: That's the harder part to get it looking good.

SL: This part is about your family life. What did you do for leisure activities? Did you ever take any trips, vacations?

TC: What leisure? [Laughs.] We essentially worked constantly.

GC: We never went on vacation.

TC: Never. We never went on vacation.

GC: We might have went on a high school field trip near the end of the year. We've been to Canobie Lake, I remember. And Nantasket Beach?

TC: Yeah. We went to Provincetown once—the school did. I didn't even get to Boston. You went to Boston more than I did because I was the youngest daughter and I was just kept home all the time. So my world was really very small.

SL: The laundry would close one day?

GC: Sundays only.

SL: And you worked part of the day on Sunday?

TC: If there was extra laundry to be done, you'd worked. And then you'd clean house.

GC: Usually Sunday is a day off for everybody.

TC: But it wasn't leisure as such. You had things to do. The men would go to Boston.

GC: To shop! To Chinatown to get the Chinese vegetables, meat. I remember they didn't go to a supermarket to buy things.

TC: Yeah, they didn't have supermarkets, it was only small grocery stores.

GC: Yeah, small grocery stores.

SL: I think you had mentioned there was a family association. Do you remember if your parents went there?

GC: Just my father. Because he was a treasurer, right?

TC: Or a secretary or something. He used to write and keep notes and stuff like that.

GC: He maintained a bachelor's apartment in Chinatown for the bachelors that were there. For people from the village.

TC: I think it's a way of helping out newcomers. Or the old folks.

SL: How about traditions? Did you grow up speaking Chinese or English or mixed?

GC: Well, our dialect. My parents' dialect. It's always Chinese when we were growing up. When we were in the house we would be speaking Chinese to our parents. But when we were outside, we were speaking English. We were bilingual once we started grammar school.

SL: What dialect?

GC: Taisanese, I guess. Or Toisanese.

SL: Did you go to Chinese school?

GC: No. There was Chinese school operating in Chinatown, but that was a long trip for us. So, it was never considered.

TC: I grew up very American—my thinking, my outlook my perspective. I have to say I'm more American than Chinese. But I also know the Chinese traditions because my parents kept up the Chinese traditions. So I know what those are, but as far as my thinking goes, I'm not Chinese at all. It's just the way I grew up—my surroundings, school, and friends. You just pick that up. Your family kind of fades into the background after a while. You speak less and less Chinese. After my parents died, I practically speak no Chinese except to my sister-in-law and then it's become a struggle because you've lost so much of it.

SL: What sort of cultural traditions did your parents follow?

TC: They celebrated New Year's, you know, all the things, Moon Festival kind of stuff. They were into all those traditions—the special foods. I mean, they always prepared all that stuff. It wasn't until he was—I don't know how old you were—that we first started celebrating Christmas. We actually got a Christmas tree. If he didn't make a fuss about it, we never would have had one.

GC: That's right. We finally had a Christmas tree and after that started, we always had a Christmas tree.

TC: And the same with the turkey at Thanksgiving.

GC: We exchanged presents.

TC: Yeah. We picked up a lot of the American traditions, but it wasn't until we were older. It's not like we had that as little toddlers.

SL: And you said there were no other Chinese American families...

GC: Not in Peabody.

SL: So, dating and things like that?

TC: I didn't date in high school at all. It wasn't until I got to college that I said, "Oh! Chinese men!"

SL: They exist.

TC: Yeah, they exist!

SL: OK, so you both went to college. Were your parents educated?

TC: No, well, my father had the equivalent of an American elementary school education in China—about eight years—and my mother went to school for only a month in China before she got married and stopped. But they knew that education is what gets you out of doing menial labor. They knew that. And you had to do your homework.

SL: So they encouraged you to work hard and go to college.

TC: Yeah. I mean, they were from the old school Chinese but as far as I was concerned and my sister—they wanted us to have an education. They told us that it was a privilege and you should always respect education. So they didn't deny us...

GC: They didn't really push us either, but we made our own decisions.

TC: Yeah, and my father backed us. If we wanted to go school, he was willing to pay for it.

GC: So how we were thinking... like, she says, "I'm planning to go to this college," they didn't harp on it or anything. Once we expressed ourselves: "We're going to continue our education," they...

TC: They were all for it.

SL: And you'd said one of you commuted?

GC: I commuted.

TC: I lived in the dorms.

GC: I think Toy Lin [their sister] lived in the dorms.

TC: No, she commuted.

SL: Was there any debate over whether you were going to commute or go live in the dorms?

TC: I just said I'd like to and they said OK.

GC: I had the car. And it turns out there were other kids from Peabody that were going to Northeastern going into engineering. So I guess I picked up three students and we had four going in all the time and coming back. Twenty-five cents per trip. I collected twenty-five cents per trip. It paid for the gas.

SL: So your family had a car to get into Boston?

GC: Well, I was the driver. My father paid for the car and I was the driver. I would take him to Boston Chinatown on Sundays to shop and I had the use of the car all the other times.

SL: Do you know if your parents were close to relatives in China?

TC: My father always wrote and sent money. He always sent money back to his father. And they kept in touch.

SL: And looking back, do you think the laundry was successful and provided a good living for your family?

GC: Oh yeah.

TC: I'd say it provided a living but I'm sure if there were other choices for an occupation they might have selected something different. But that's the only thing that was around. But it did provide us with a living. We weren't wealthy but neither were we poor. We were like everybody else.

GC: We had clothing, food.

TC: I mean all the kids and their families were like us—about the same economic stratosphere.

GC: Yeah, a lot of our friends' parents were from other countries.

TC: Yeah, in Peabody there were a lot of immigrant families.

GC: I would say that Peabody was an immigrant city.

TC: Even now there are a lot of ethnic groups here.

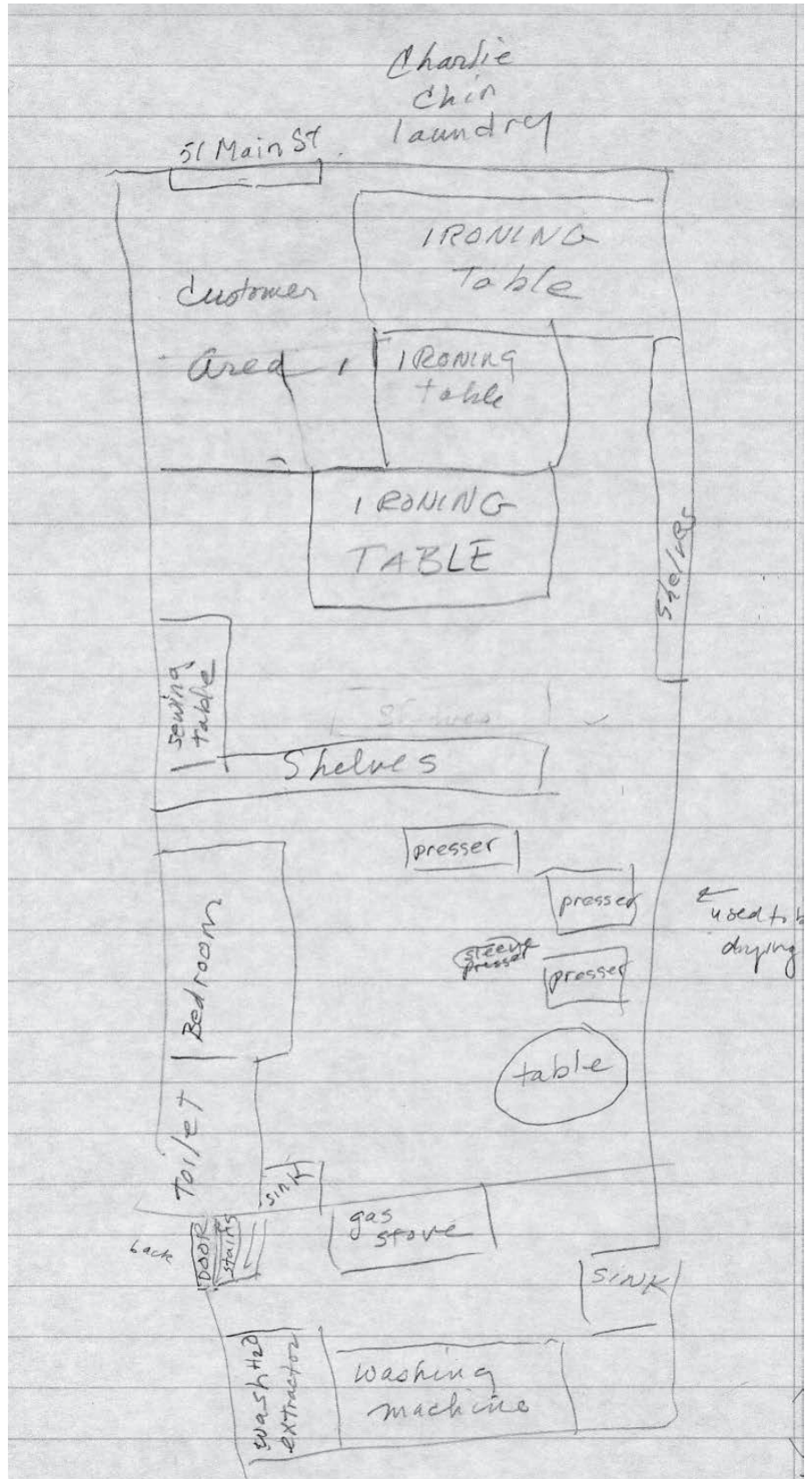
SL: Any final thoughts you wanted to add?

TC: I think, you know, I see all these immigrant people coming into the country—illegal and legal—and they start out, from what I can see, doing pretty much what we did. A lot of them just opened stores and worked hard, they bring their families over and form groups and all this, and then they assimilate. And I don't think it's changed much since the time that my parents came over.

## Gep and Toy Har Chin

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[Toy Har made some further comments after the recorder was turned off. She said that she and her siblings were “quite different” than kids whose parents owned laundries in Boston. The kids who lived in Boston spoke better Chinese, knew more about Chinese culture, and attended Chinese school. They, the Chin kids, grew up away from Chinatown and had no friends in Chinatown. She said they were “completely assimilated into American culture.” It was their parents who lived between two cultures, while they, the children, were assimilated.]



Sketch of Charlie Chin Laundry at 51 Main Street, Peabody by Gep and Toy Har Chin.









## Richard Chin

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*This interview was conducted with Richard Chin (RC) by Shauna Lo (SL) on September 9, 2009 at the Brockton Superior Courthouse in Judge Chin's office. Richard Chin's parents owned Jimmy's Laundry at 814 Main Street in Brockton. Photo was taken by Shauna Lo in 2009.*

SL: Why don't we start with a little bit about your family's immigration history? Who was the first in your family to come to the U.S.?

RC: My grandfather. My father's father came to Brockton. He was the first to come. I'm not sure when he came, but he worked in a laundry here in Brockton. And then my father was living in China with my grandmother and when she died—when he was 12 years old—he came to Brockton to live with my grandfather. And then in 1949, my father returned to China and married my mother and they came here to Brockton and I was born in 1950.

SL: And was there any trouble getting your mother into the country?

RC: There wasn't at that time.

SL: Because the Exclusion Act was lifted by then.

RC: Right.

SL: So your grandfather had a laundry in Brockton. That one might be on the 1931 listing.<sup>1</sup>

RC: That might be on there. I'm not sure when he got here. Probably it was on Main Street.

SL: Well, there's one on Main Street. But Szeto is not the right name.

RC: [Looking at the list of laundries] Yeah, I knew the people on West Elm Street. No, I'm not sure. It doesn't look like it's on there.

SL: Do you know why your grandfather came to Brockton?

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<sup>1</sup> *The 1931 Chinese Directory of New England*, published by the Hop Yuen Company, Boston, May 1931.

RC: I think that he had a relative here. I think that's why he settled in Brockton—because he had a relative here. I think that's who he worked with in the laundry business. I think it was relatives. I don't know why he came, but it's probably like most of the men at that time: the Gold Mountain.

SL: Do you have any idea how he was able to come into the country?

RC: I was told that he stowed away on a boat and came in through New York.

SL: Really... Let's go on to the section about the laundry. What was the address?

C: 814 Main Street. That building is no longer in existence. It was torn down shortly after they shut the business down.

SL: And they called it Jimmy's Laundry?

RC: Yes, my father's name was James.

SL: What years was it in operation?

RC: I believe they shut down in 2000 or 2001.

SL: And it began around 1950?

RC: Right. Right around then.

SL: And you were saying you lived nearby.

RC: We lived on Warren Avenue, right across from this courthouse.

SL: So just a few blocks away.

RC: Right.

SL: Do you know anything about your father's decision to open a laundry?

RC: My father had worked in a laundry since he got here. That was the family business. And once he got married they decided to start a laundry. I don't think there was any decision about starting any other type of business. I think once he got married he needed to start his own business.

SL: And he was familiar with the work already.

RC: Right.

SL: Can you describe the physical layout of the laundry?

RC: Yes, it was very simple. There was a counter in front, and on the side were shelves to put the wrapped packages of shirts and behind it were racks and behind that was the machinery. And to the front of that was where all the pressing took place and in the rear of the laundry was where the laundry was actually washed. And in the middle there was a little area where you could eat and watch television.

SL: So, this is in a period where there were already machines. So the hand laundry is gone by this point.

RC: From what I remember. I do remember my parents saying there were companies that would not sell machinery to Chinese families. But from what I remember, they always did have some type of machinery.

SL: So, they did the wash themselves.

RC: Right. There were laundries where they sent the washing out.

SL: So they did all the steps right in the laundry.

RC: Right.

SL: Can you tell me some of your experiences as a child being in the laundry? I assume you had some sort of responsibilities there.

RC: We were always there. I have memories of always being there as a child. I remember in the early days of television waiting until 4 o'clock for television to come on. I was in the laundry at the time. I started out taking the wet shirts and sorting them out, piling them up out to be pressed and that's probably what every young child did in the laundry. And as I got older I learned to press the shirts and wrap shirts. My mother was the only one that knew how to fold the shirts.

SL: You have siblings?

RC: I have a sister. She is two years younger than me.

SL: So she had her own duties in the laundry? Or do you remember her just playing?

RC: She was younger so I had the major duties.

SL: How about the hours? You said you always remember being there....

RC: I remember they would always drop us off at school which was around 7:30 in the morning and they would often be there until 9 at night. I remember sometimes falling asleep when I was really little and being carried in to the house by my father. So it was usually pretty late. There was a stove where my mother cooked dinner every night.

SL: In the laundry?

RC: Right.

SL: So you pretty much stayed there until they were finished for the day and you would all go home together?

RC: Right.

SL: What do you remember about the customers? What kind of people came to the laundry?

RC: That was a working class neighborhood and it was mainly working people and they did have some professionals. I think later on as other laundries closed, they did a lot more work for professional people. There were less laundries later on.

SL: So working class folks, what kind of clothes would they bring in? Would it be more like clothes for church?

RC: Yeah. They always had shirts. No one likes to iron shirts. There was also work clothes, uniforms, you know, policeman, firemen, nurses, I remember the nurses hats had to be starched and ironed.

SL: What do you remember about your family's relationships to the customers?

RC: They were always very good relationships. They had a lot of customers that had patronized them for many years. Many became friends. I think it was the type of business that leant itself to developing a relationship with the customer. They had time to talk, and I think my mother and father enjoyed that. You know while they were working they were able to socialize with some people. So they had some very good relationships with many of the customers.

SL: What kind of neighborhood was the laundry in then? What kind of ethnic background where the residents?

RC: It was an Irish and Swedish neighborhood. More toward the south it was primarily Swedish. There were a lot of Swedish markets. They were actually located between two neighborhood barrooms.

SL: Did you get any unsavory people staggering by?

RC: Once in a while you'd have someone wander in and you'd find someone laying out in the back when you came to work. But often on Friday nights when I was a child—at that time they were all male-only establishments and some women would come in and ask me to get their husbands out for them.

SL: Any more thoughts about your parents and how they saw the business? I mean, they had long hours...

RC: I think they always saw it as an opportunity. My mother left China just before the communists came and a lot of her relatives were in China and she was able to support her family through the laundry. I think they were very grateful that they had a business that they could work at.

SL: A little bit about yourself and growing up as a Chinese American in this area... You said there were several other Chinese American families?

RC: There were other families but there were very few children in schools. We knew pretty much all of the Chinese kids in the city. And we socialized with them—there weren't many in school at the time. And I think ethnically it wasn't a diverse city at that time. Any minority students in school stood out. Even African American—there weren't that many.

SL: So what was that like for you?

RC: I think in the early years you ran into prejudice, you ran into kids that would tease you. You had to learn to stand up for yourself and fight back. But, you know, once people knew you, I think it was different. I didn't see it that much in high school.

SL: So you socialized with a mixed group of kids?

RC: I socialized with Chinese kids on weekends when we would visit Chinese families who'd go to Boston. The rest of the time the only people I socialized with were Caucasian kids.

SL: Looking back, this question is a little nosy, but there's a question [on my list] about dating... just if you dated Caucasian or Chinese American women.

RC: It would be mostly Caucasian. Never really dated any Chinese girls and my wife is Caucasian. And whenever my parents wondered why, I always told them if they wanted me to date Chinese girls they probably should have moved to Chinatown. You know, 'cause I didn't know any.

SL: Did you stay local to attend college?

RC: I went to Boston University from 1967-1971 and I went to Boston College Law School— graduated in 1974.

SL: I think you were saying that most of the kids that you knew whose parents owned laundries ended up going to college and I was wondering why that would be. A lot of the parents didn't necessarily come from well-educated families. In your case, were your parents college-educated?

RC: No, no. I think my father never finished high school and my mother, I think she went to high school. I don't think she finished college, but she was a teacher in China. But I think all of the families I knew... I think the reason they were here and working as hard as they were was to give their children an opportunity. I always heard about college and all of my parents' friends—that's all I ever heard. You had to go to college. It wasn't an option not to go to college. That was part of why they were working as hard as they were. So, I think it would have been unusual if they had a child that didn't go to college.

SL: I think I forgot to ask you where your parents were from in China.

RC: They were from Guangdong, near Hong Kong.

SL: So your parents emphasized education, for as long as you can remember.

RC: Absolutely, absolutely.

SL: How about your decision to become a lawyer? How did they feel about that?

RC: I probably became a lawyer because I wasn't smart enough to be a doctor.

SL: [Laughs.]

RC: Because everyone was talking about their kids becoming doctors, but I never... I was good in science and math but my interest was more in law and I think a lot of that had to do with going to BU in the '60s. That was the time of a lot of social change—Vietnam War and war on poverty and that sort of thing.

SL: So there was some kind of civil rights or social justice agenda in your mind?

RC: Yeah. After law school, I became a legal services lawyer. I represented poor people in civil cases.

SL: OK, how about leisure activities for your family? What did you do when you were not working and how many days off did they have?

RC: Just Sunday. And Saturday nights sometimes we'd go to a friend's house for dinner, and the adults would play mahjong. And Sundays would be to go to Chinatown and go to the family association, and Chinese school.

SL: That was on Sundays?

RC: Right. Shopping, and Chinese school.

SL: Did your family ever take any trips or vacations?

RC: Not many, because of the nature of the business. You couldn't shut down that long. I remember we'd go to New York on occasion, but not very far. Not out of the country.

SL: Did your family socialize with some of the other Chinese American families in Brockton?

RC: Yeah, yeah. We knew the other Chinese families. There was a family in Rockland we were close to and in summers we'd go to amusement parks or state parks where we'd have swimming and things like that. We did a lot of things with other Chinese families.

SL: In terms of connections to Chinatown, you said your parents were involved with the family association. Do you have any more specifics about the activities they participated in?

RC: It was pretty much going there to shop and to eat. Because you have one

day—that's not a whole lot of time. Do the shopping, you meet someone for dinner and then that's it. Then it's back to Brockton and go back to work.

SL: A little about the Chinese traditions or cultural practices... first of all did you grow up speaking Chinese?

RC: Yes, I spoke Chinese as a child and I still remember some. And we had a lot of, you know, we did the usual family things—New Year's. They taught me about Chinese culture.

SL: What dialect did you speak?

RC: Toisanese.

SL: Did they become fluent in English?

RC: Pretty much. They were grateful. My mother went to night school to learn English. My father had gone to school here so he knew English. They were pretty fluent in English.

SL: Can you describe any more Chinese cultural traditions that you practiced?

RC: Well, there's not much in terms of religion, so there were not a lot of holidays except for New Year's. I recall Chinese funerals—traditional funerals—that sort of thing. But, it's mainly time that was spent as family and with other Chinese families.

SL: How about American holidays or Christian holidays?

RC: Oh we celebrated American holidays.

SL: Like Christmas?

RC: Yeah, we celebrated all of those.

SL: Did your family stay close to relatives in China and do you remember hearing about that as a child?

RC: Oh yeah, my mother and father supported my mother's sisters and I recall them sending money. I recall the famine in China when they had to send over money for food. We sent clothes over, and in 1985 my mother brought 13 of her relatives over. Her four sisters and their families. They all settled here in Brockton—they lived with them originally—and my cousins graduated from high school here and went on to college and some of them brought other relatives and in-laws over. It's ongoing.

SL: So you have quite a clan here now.

RC: Right, but my mother—basically, my mother supported them for all those years and then brought them over and got them started here.

SL: Did you ever take any trips over to China to visit them?



RC: No, I've never been to China. All my relatives are here. My family had a bad experience with the Communists because my grandfather was a merchant and when the Communists came, many of them were tortured. My grandmother died over there. So I grew up never really wanting to go there. Probably an unrealistic fear of China.

SL: OK, so the final section is just on the final reflections. How do you think growing up in a family that owned a laundry affected you and your life decisions? Your educational and career choices?

RC: I feel really fortunate that my parents owned that laundry because it gave me an opportunity to grow up with them and also to learn the value of hard work. Also I saw a lot of what they went through in terms of difficulties in running a business and dealing with racial prejudice and I think I learned a great deal from growing up in the laundry. It gave them a lot of economic opportunities, I think, that weren't available to other Chinese Americans that come to this country. The values that I learned affected my whole life.

SL: So you would call the laundry successful and providing a good living?

RC: It was successful in the sense that it was profitable. They didn't get rich, but I think as you can see, they worked hard for their money. It wasn't easy work and it wasn't work that a lot of people wanted to do, washing other people's dirty clothes, but it was something that they were very proud of because it was a business that they built up and it was honest work and it gave them an opportunity to provide for their family—both us and their extended family. And that was something they were very proud of. I think my mother was always very proud of what she did for her family. And they're all very appreciative of her for what she did for them. So it's the story of one laundry, but this laundry provided an opportunity for a number of people. I think they were very fortunate to be in that situation.

SL: They closed the laundry down finally in 2000 or 2001. Did I see something... did they convert it to a dry cleaning business?

RC: No, they took in dry cleaning and sent it out.

SL: Oh, I see. What finally led them to decide to close down the laundry?

RC: I think old age and the age of the building. The building was falling down. They didn't own the building.

SL: So were they passed the usual retirement age?

RC: I think they were in their 70s.

SL: I would love to have a copy of this article and these photos.

RC: I can send you copies.

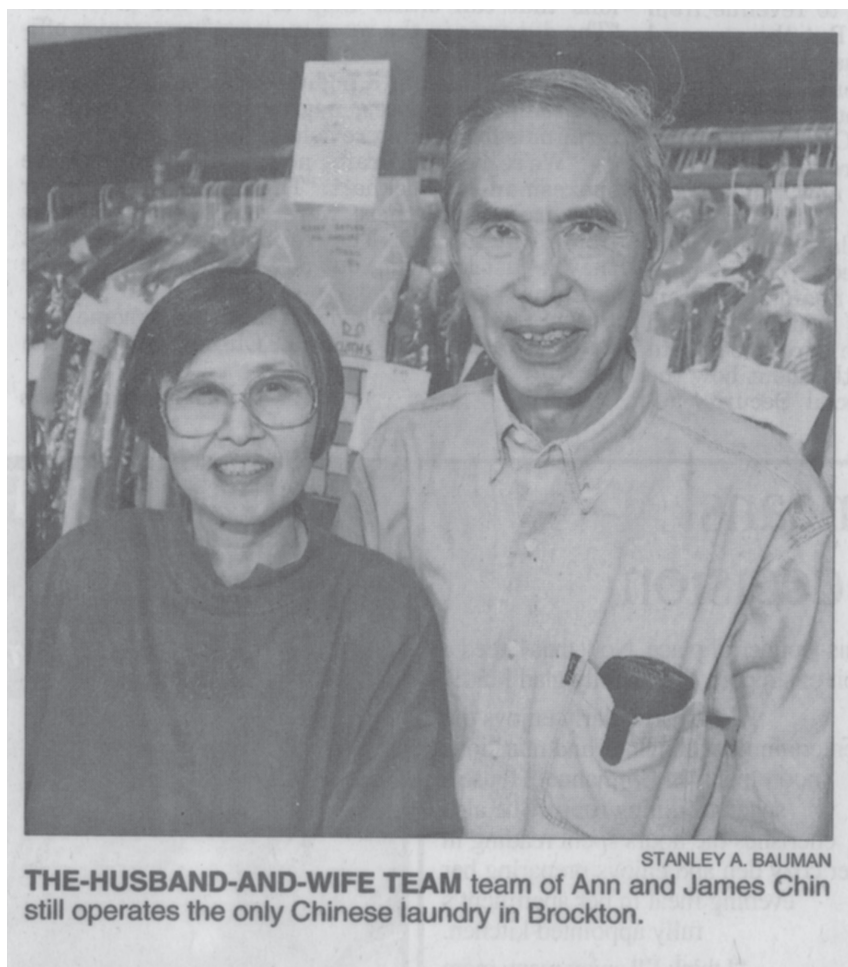
[We continued to talk about Richard's positive experience in childhood and his success in life, and he attributed much of his positive attitude to his mother.]

RC: My mother was quite a woman. She grew up in a wealthy family in China. Before the Communists came, she went to school. People brought her to school. They had servants and when she got married, she didn't know how to boil water. I think it takes some character to know that that's all taken away from you and you got to come over here and do people's laundry. I mean, she used to have people—I guess, when they were kids—people used to come in and wash their feet at night. She came here and started out on the bottom and it never broke her spirit. It was always positive.

I've always grown up with that positive type of attitude—even if there was prejudice or whatever, it was dealt with in a pretty positive way. I think that's why I've had the experience that I did. You know, there was prejudice but I learned to deal with it. All my friends were Caucasian and I think I was accepted in the community. You know, in my sophomore and junior year, I was class president in Brockton High School. So, you know, it wasn't that type of prejudice. It was like occasionally guys giving you a hard time. You either fight 'em or run away. But a lot of it was my mother's positive attitude. She always was happy that they were able to run a business. They were always proud that they did honest work. Even back then I remember when the [other] laundries closed up, my father said, "I'm not going to work in a restaurant. This is my business, I've never worked for anybody, and I'm going to stay here." And they stuck it out. Everybody else went out of business and they ended up having a pretty good business.

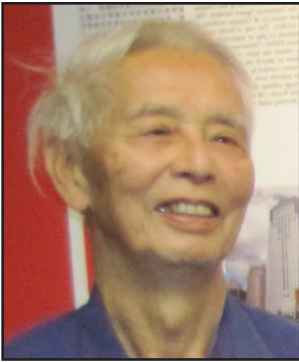
My mother did a lot to try to know people [in the community] and build a relationship with them. Part of that was learning English. My mother wasn't old fashioned. She wanted us to be successful so she knew that it wasn't about just running the laundry. She had to train us to be ready to live in this society. I think a lot of parents wanted to shelter their kids and raise them as Chinese and keep the traditions, but my parents never thought that way. My mother always wanted us to be Americanized.

The Brockton newspaper, the *Enterprise*, featured Richard's parents in 1999 shortly before they retired. (Story by Jack Coleman, date unknown.) Courtesy of Richard Chin.









## Tunney Lee

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*The following interview was conducted with Tunney Lee (TL) by Shauna Lo (SL) on October 21, 2009 in Tunney's office at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Tunney spoke about the lives of three relatives who owned laundries, two in East Boston, and one in Barre, Vermont, and about recollections of laundrymen in Chinatown when he was a child. Photo above taken by Shauna Lo in 2013.*

SL: Can you tell me a quick family history?

TL: In 1882, my great grandfather was recruited to work on the Northern Pacific Railroad from Toisan. After finishing the railroad he settled in Tacoma, Washington but was driven out when they cleared all the Chinese out of Tacoma. At that point it gets a little murky but he might have gone to California to work in a town called Colusa. At some point he went back to China, got married, and had my grandfather.

SL: So he came in right before the Exclusion Act.

TL: I think just before. Then he [Tunney's great grandfather] came to Boston in 1892 and as far as we can tell from the papers, worked in a laundry in Bridgewater. How he came back [we're not sure] because [according to] the papers he never left. See, the way to get around the Exclusion Act was to claim citizenship. Later that became a big thing after the San Francisco fire destroyed the records. Before that the way to do it was to claim that the person coming was born in the U.S. So, my grandfather—he's 16 or so—comes across Canada from Montreal and in 1903 gets arrested at the border, in Rouse's Point, New York. He's in jail for—oh, a month or so. Then there's a trial in which my great grandfather comes from Boston with a lawyer and says, "That's my son. He was born in Colusa, California," and there's some cursory thing and the judge declares him a citizen. I think that was a very big thing in Massachusetts and the Northeast. At any rate, my grandfather was admitted in 1903.

SL: But you don't know how your great grandfather got back in.

TL: No. He claims he never left. He claims he married and had a son and the son went back [to China] with his mother, and then his son came back in 1903. So that was the way my grandfather got in and how he established citizenship. So, he goes to Bridgewater and works in the laundry with my great grandfather and somebody named Lee Toy. In 1909, my grandfather goes back to China—he's now marriageable age. He gets married, stays a couple years, and has a son. So he comes back—now 1911—by himself. Leaves my grandmother and my father in China.

In 1922, my father, who was now 13 or 14, comes with my grandmother and my paper uncle. He lands in Boston, goes to school, goes back to China in 1929, and gets married—and also goes to school. He was lucky he didn't have to work. [When he was in Boston] he went to Latin School, in fact, which I found astounding that he came with no English and in like six years he had made his way to Latin School. I just could never figure that out. A lot smarter than me! But he never finished. So he went back to China, and went to Lingnan missionary school, and went to Suchow Law School in China. And in the meantime he had four children: me and my three sisters. In 1938, with the Japanese just about to invade, we came to the U.S. My sisters and my mother were left behind. I lived with my grandparents. And that's it. That's my family history.

SL: So when you came to live here, where did you live and how old where you then?

TL: I was seven. We lived in Oxford Place. And my grandfather was at the grocery store at 54 Beach Street. It's the Ho Yuen Bakery, now.

SL: How long did you live in Chinatown?

TL: Well, we moved to Hudson Street after the war, into the “suburbs”—south of Kneeland Street. We had central heating and hot water, and it was very nice. We had light and air! So I lived in Chinatown until I graduated from high school in 1949. Then I went off to school and never came back to live in Chinatown.

SL: OK, so that's the quick bio. So you lived in Chinatown until you went to college.

TL: Until I went off to college.

SL: So, did your family remain in Chinatown?

TL: No, actually, my grandfather died in 1948. My father was living in Washington DC at the time. It had been just me and my grandmother. Then he moved her

down to Washington. Actually, I lived with an uncle during my last year in high school.

SL: Had your mother come yet?

TL: No, she didn't come until the 1970s.

SL: And your sisters?

TL: In the 1980s.

SL: Really. So, you lived a quite different life than your siblings.

TL: Oh yeah.

SL: So, as I told you, a lot of the people that I've interviewed so far who ran laundries were part of families. So I wanted to ask you about your memories and your experiences with laundries that were run by single men, which you told me was the majority at that time.

TL: I don't know. By the 1930s... Well, I just have no statistics on it whatsoever. But, it just may be that the survivors are the ones with families. Because the single men disappear without a trace. I mean, I look at these names [on a list of laundry owners] and I wonder what happened to all these people. Some went back to China, some wound up in Chinatowns—you know, when I was growing up, there was always old men who obviously retired, and they would be in *fongs*<sup>1</sup>... And like my family's grocery store—if you were related to any of the proprietors, like the Lees or the Chins, you could always have a meal. Because they would cook twice a day. Because in 1938 the Depression was still on. There would always be a dozen guys—

SL: At the grocery store?!

TL: —eating in the store. Like, there was only three or four people working in the grocery store, but if you were an old Lee or Chin who was related...

SL: Really?!

TL: Oh yeah. I think that happened all over Chinatown. There was kind of a way during the Depression that Chinatown just kind of pulled together. I mean, I don't want to glorify it because a lot of people suffered very badly, but whatever little could be done was done. So that's why I say that my grandfather's grocery store as far as I know in those days never made any money.

SL: It functioned almost as a little family association.

TL: Yeah, I saw that. Because people would hang out; there would always be a pot of tea. And the most unsanitary thing, there'd be a little bowl of water with

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<sup>1</sup> Associations based on lineage.



teacups in it. I think back to those days and I think, “Oh my God.”

SL: What is it?

TL: The cups would be in a little basin with water. It's like, put more diseases on it! I mean, it's no wonder people got sick. Anyway, people would be able to eat. It's all networking... by village. And the grocery stores were all very family oriented. The Wongs would go to Sun Sun. My grocery store was a bunch of Lees and a bunch of Chins. And it would also serve as a kind of community center. And there was also credit. People, you know, laundrymen would come on Sunday, get their groceries, and there was a big book. People paid when they could. You know, Sunday, of course was the big day.

So, personally I knew two laundries very well and both were run by cousins. One was a single man. Both were in East Boston. One was in the basement on London Street and he was a cousin of my grandmother's. And he ran the laundry by himself, he had a family in China and he came in every Sunday to see us.

SL: At the grocery store?

TL: No, he would come to the house. My grandmother had bound feet. She spoke no English. There was no telephone. It was expected if you came Sunday, you would come see her. And people would come up. Anyway, he was in a half basement. Still there, that house—I went by the other day. It's no longer a laundry, obviously. But it was half a flight down, and you come in and there's a big glass window, and a red laundry sign. The laundry signs were always red and it could be painted on the window or a sign or both, and sometimes it had a name, sometimes it didn't. So there was an industry of people who made these signs. Just as there was a whole industry of laundry tickets. You know, Shanghai Printing made the laundry tickets.

So, you come in and there's a little reception area. It wasn't very big. His place was very small. You come in and there's a counter, the shelves, there's an ironing board and then there's a partition and his bedroom was right there. It wasn't completely blocked off. Behind that there was the wet area, the sink, his stove and a place where he ate. And I think pressing machines. And behind that must have been the toilet and then out the backyard.

He would spend most of his time ironing and deal with the customers as they would come in. There was two kinds of customers. Some got the laundry tickets, but there were steady customers and they didn't get a ticket. They just got a designation. Now there's a whole culture of that which I only know a little bit about. You know, the markings on the shirt? If you didn't know somebody, you would just use the number, the laundry ticket number. If you knew somebody, you would

write a little notation and I could recognize some of [the words]... “redhead”; “big nose”... And of course the American customers were just delighted that they were regulars, and had no laundry ticket. See there were a lot of people who were just nasty. You know they said, I lost my ticket, you owe me three shirts. I mean, there was a lot of that going on. That’s where “no tickee, no laundry” comes out of. But he had his regular customers with a little handwritten note. Some I didn’t know, but there was “stinky”...

Anyway, he was a very amiable guy. Very bright. He couldn’t read English, but he read Chinese, so he read the paper. He was always up on world affairs. What did I know, I was eight years old. But he would talk to me about the war, about Chamberlain. I remember very distinctly. When he came in on Sundays—he was a very elegant guy. He had a nice hat, and suit, and often he would go to the... well, there’s no way to bathe. That was a big thing.

SL: In his apartment? Oh, in the laundry.

TL: In his laundry. He couldn’t bathe. You could wash yourself but there’s no shower or anything like that. So, on Sundays, there were a couple places, but one—because I went with him a couple times because we had no place to bathe.

SL: Really? In either apartment?

TL: No, later there was. Hudson Street had a bathtub. But, [at] Oxford Place you had to heat water on a burner and then you had a little tub. So, sometimes he would take me and he would rent a shower stall. It was on Washington Street, in the basement. I think I found it—I went through the directories one time to look for it. But they were very common, not just for Chinese. But on Sundays it was full of Chinese. You know, laundrymen would come in and have the luxury of hot water and nice towels.... So, he’d come in, get spruced up, and come round to visit and see friends.

SL: I hadn’t heard of that. I haven’t read that anywhere.

TL: The other day, Bill Chin told me that in Chinatown on Beach Street there was a laundry and in the back there were, like, three bathtubs that you could rent. You could pay and get a towel. Same kind of deal. I mean, there were bathhouses which were built by the city because almost nobody had—there was one where the library was. It was a city building where there was a public bath, but most Chinese didn’t use that because it was used by the Syrians and it wasn’t very welcoming. I think after the Syrians left people used it. By that time I had left Chinatown.

SL: Wait, so how many bath houses are we talking about?

TL: Two different kinds. One kind is the public bath house built by the city which were in municipal buildings and those were for the residents. That one was on the

corner of Tyler and Oak, I think. It's where the library was. The laundrymen would use the commercial bathhouses on Sunday mornings.

SL: Where did you go for that one?

TL: That was on Washington Street, near Chinatown. Washington and Essex Streets. Yeah, that was one of the treats I had.

SL: And then you were saying the Syrians used the public one?

TL: Yeah, they were the dominant residents.

SL: Oh, I see. So, for the public bathhouse, you pay a little?

TL: Yeah, a little. Very little.

So, anyway, the other thing was that they would go to the movies because the movie theater district was right there. And I don't think he ever took me to a movie but other, younger cousins that came in from Providence and they would take me to the movies. It was a big treat. We'd go to the cheap movies, but a couple of the younger guys would go to the first run movies. But Sunday was the day. And some would come on Saturday night and stay over in the village fong. They would put out extra cots. The old men lived in during the week but sometimes laundrymen would come in on Saturday night and spend the night in Chinatown.

SL: Was there enough room?

TL: It would be packed. It would be wall to wall beds. And they all paid a little bit for the upkeep and usually the old guys who lived there kept it up during the week. That was a whole phenomenon. And they would pick up their mail, usually at the fong because most of them didn't use the address of the laundry. Also, I guess people who were illiterate probably found somebody to write letters.

Restaurants were not a big thing. Because people didn't have all that much money. There were a few restaurants that catered to the Chinese but most people... but not many people could afford to eat out during the Depression. People really didn't have a lot of money so eating in a restaurant was a big deal. Maybe for a banquet. So anyway, for the single guys, that was the way it was. Oh, and the thing I would do is take things from the grocery store to bring to him in East Boston. You know, I would bring up a couple bags of groceries. And he would do our shirts!

SL: It seems like you spent a lot of time with him.

TL: Saturdays. I don't think every weekend. But yes, I saw him a lot. I mean, I saw him on Sundays and some Saturdays. And I would visit both families. I would bring—my guess is it was surplus groceries. My grandfather would pack up one

bag for each of them. It was only about a quarter of a mile from one laundry to the other one. The other was a family laundry. But I would stop at one and then go to the other.

SL: And how old were you at this time?

TL: When I was riding the subways by myself. Probably 12.

SL: So your cousin, did he wash the laundry himself or did he send it out?

TL: No, I think he sent all his stuff out. He was by himself. He spent most of his time ironing. That's why the shirts stick in my mind. And once in a while I would help him. But I was very bad help. He taught me how to iron a shirt. I remember, it wasn't really ironing. The stuff was already ironed—the flat part. I would have to do the buttons and around the collar and then learn how to fold it. He could do—I think he told me he could do 12 an hour. And that was after it was partly ironed. It took me about 10 or 15 minutes to do one. I remember him asking me once, "You like this work?" I says, "No!" He says, "You doing OK in school?" I says, "Yeah." He says, "OK. Just remember, if you don't do well in school, this is what you're going to be doing!"

SL: So what was your impression of him and his life at the time?

TL: Oh, absolutely lonely. Even at that age, I could... I mean, there was no recreation. He was a reader, so he had books—Chinese books. You know, he was married and had kids already. I know that years later, after he retired—after the war—he brought his sons over. You know, what impressed me was that he was separated from them for decades. He supported them. And as soon as the war was over, he brought them over. And then, his wife... OK, this was many years later—he's now retired, he's living in elderly housing in the South End in Villa Victoria in a studio apartment. And I used to go visit him there because we went to the cemetery every year. And one year his wife came. It must have been the sweetest thing I ever saw in my life. I mean, they're sitting there and I can't even imagine it. I mean, they must have been separated for 30, 40 years! I don't know what happened... "No," he said, "She doesn't like it here." I think she went with her sons or something. I mean, they were strangers. I couldn't even conceive of it.

SL: Did she come to live or just to visit?

TL: I think she came to live in the U.S., but to visit him. Because I think by then his sons had formed families. Anyway, he lived to be over 100 years old.

SL: Really?

TL: Yeah. Anyway, he told me when he went to elderly housing: "Best place I ever lived in." He was up in, like, the eighth story overlooking the South End. And he

had running water, heat. Oh, it was cold in that place, I remember that. I'd go in the winter and it was damp.

SL: In his laundry?

TL: Yeah, in the laundry. It was always damp in there because it was in the half basement and it never got warm, as I remember. So he was very happy. So, that was him. Now the family—it was the same situation except they were on the ground floor, I think in a wooden house. And they had plants. They were a big thing. Everybody had plants in the window.

SL: Do you know why that was?

TL: You know, having Chinese plants and things that would grow... You see it in a lot of old photographs, the counter, the shelves. I remember [the laundry] went back, and the first room was where you sorted the laundry and did ironing and had the sewing machines. Behind that was the washing and a little open space—it was all one story—and a place with the kitchen and two bedrooms because there were like, two boys and four girls. I wrote a story about that once. I stayed over a couple times. I can't even imagine it today. Because there was no room! I think we were all in one bed! So how many boys... three boys with one my age and three or four girls, including one retarded girl.

In Chinatown, people were really ashamed [of retarded children]... They were always kept hidden. Very sad. The father was older—a Lee, obviously—and the mother was an amazing woman. The kids went to East Boston High School and the older son—by the time I knew him—had gone into the army and became an officer and he had a career in the military. I think one other brother went into mining engineering and as far as I know he stayed out West and became an engineer. The sisters almost all stayed in Boston and they lived on St. Botolph Street after the laundry. They went to school, became secretaries—you know, they became white collar workers. I knew them all after they finally closed the laundry down. I think the father passed away. They were all doing well enough to move into a house on St. Botolph Street.

SL: Do you think I might be able to interview any of the sisters?

TL: I lost touch with them. I think one or two of them got married... You know, you were always conflicted with the retarded kid... There was always one sister whose life was destroyed—you know, became the caretaker and never got married.

SL: Now this family was related to you how?

TL: They were Lees. Probably the same village or the next one. Lim Lun who was the bachelor was more distant, in fact, he was related to my grandmother. So he

was a Lim. I could never figure out how I was related to him. But she was very close to him.

SL: Yeah, I'm interested in the sisters. You said before that one of the sisters got sacrificed and maybe didn't get to go to college.

TL: Yeah, it happened more than once. I know at least two families in Chinatown that had a retarded kid and there was always one sister that had to take care of her.

SL: Yeah, because one of the questions I have is: Were all the laundries successful? And did all the children go to college and become professionals? A lot of the people I've talked to have that experience.

TL: Yeah, because those are the ones that survived and they talk to you. We don't know about the ones who died. I mean, I know they survived in the sense that they could move out of the laundry and they all got their education. It's impossible to know how to track down the failures.

SL: That's the problem.

TL: You got to know that there have to be failures. But we just don't know and we can't tell from the data.

SL: So, back to the cousin who was living on his own... So, he made enough to survive. Did you have any sense if it was just surviving? Did he make a decent living? Did he have extra money? He would send it home probably.

TL: Yeah, I mean, he ate. He had a nice suit. He had some entertainment, he had enough to buy books, enough to take a bath. And he had enough money saved to bring his kids over. I think the laundry business, if you were frugal, you could at that point of economic development in China, you could do it. But obviously a lot of people didn't survive. Some died of old age, I guess.

SL: Let me ask you just a couple more questions.

TL: OK. Oh, I want to tell you about the laundry in Vermont. That's my paper uncle.

SL: Was he a relative then?

TL: Yes, he was a relative. He was a very close paper uncle. He acted like a real uncle. I used to go in the summers. He ran a laundry in Barre, Vermont, which is a granite town. And he ran it for many years there. I mean, he died up there. And I think the reason he was up in Vermont was that he was an avid hunter and fisherman. He was a real outdoorsman. It breaks the stereotype of Chinese laundrymen. And I would stay with him in his laundry. I think he finally wound up owning the house in which his laundry was. So his laundry was on one side and I

think a beauty parlor was on the other. And it's the same thing. Except in his case, he washed all the clothes.

SL: He did?

TL: He had machines. By 1938 he had washing machines, and a wringer and stuff. And he lived upstairs. It was a small town and as far as I could tell, people really liked him. He was a very easy going guy. I think he actually became the president of the Rod and Gun club in Barre. He had hunting dogs he kept in the back. The town itself was very industrial but he had a really little cottage on a pond. He was the first person I knew who had an automobile. Because he would drive down from Vermont once a month or so to buy his groceries and also to visit my grandmother and the family. But he had to have an automobile. There was no other way to travel. Well, there was, but he did well enough. He bought his house and a nice automobile. He had children in China and a wife, but he married a local girl.

SL: You mean at an older age?

TL: Probably 40. And she was a really nice woman. You know she lived with him before they got married. She was part Native American I mean, she was as white as... but the local kids said, "Eva is an Indian." But I think that's partly why it wasn't [an issue]. I think she went to work for him and they eventually... she really was very much part of the family. They had one son. He actually brought his sons from his first marriage over after the war, too. You know, Chinese never neglect the old ties. I think they came to Vermont, but they went off [somewhere]. He was so unusual. Eventually, I think he closed down the laundry and opened a restaurant. So he adapted, but then he died in the 1950s. I tried to track down his son. But that's the other laundry I know well.

SL: I've wondered what happened to Chinese living in more remote areas.

TL: Well, Barre was about as remote as you can get. I think he thought he was the only Chinese in the state of Vermont at one point. Because he knew all the Chinese. I think there were, like, five.

SL: Well, this ties in well with one of my final questions about maintaining Chinese traditions and adopting western traditions. Like your cousin who was living alone in East Boston...

TL: No, he was Chinese through and through. He did like comics. Funny things you remember. There was this cartoon character called Henry that didn't speak. Maybe that's what appealed to him. He could figure out the story [without having to read English].

So, with just the three cases... You got a single guy who's got no reason to [assimilate]... he knows enough English to run his laundry. That's it. The family group,

obviously the kids go to high school and they become integrated into American society. I don't know what happened to all of them. The eldest son who had a military career actually married a Japanese woman. The girls married Chinese. So there's different [outcomes]. In fact, I was at a friend's eightieth birthday with a bunch of her grandchildren, and they're white. My grandchildren are essentially not Chinese. The intermarriage rate for Chinese Americans is high. They are just becoming [assimilated]. There is no way for them to stay Chinese even if they wanted to. And then my uncle Chao—

SL: This is the one in Vermont?

TL: Yeah. He was still not accepted enough to do anything but run his laundry and restaurant. But in all other respects he wanted to be a Vermont hunter and fisherman.

SL: What about in terms of observing Chinese holidays?

TL: Oh yeah, he'd come down for Ching Ming. I took photographs at most of the Ching Mings, so I have photographs going back to the 1950s. So, he would come down and in fact he brought his son. But how can you grow up in Vermont and not become [assimilated]?

SL: Any final thoughts?

TL: No, that's all.

SL: Thank you.

TL: Oh you're welcome.







## Jean Eng

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*The following interview was conducted with Jean Eng (JE) by Shauna Lo (SL) on October 30, 2009 at the Chinese Historical Society of New England (CHSNE) office. Although Mrs. Eng and her husband owned Eng's Hand Laundry in Poughkeepsie, New York, her story is included in our collection since Mrs. Eng lives in Massachusetts now, and her daughter, Nancy Eng, was the Executive Director of CHSNE at the time. It was a great opportunity to include them in the project. Photo above taken by Shauna Lo in 2009.*

Also participating:

Nancy Eng, daughter

Gay Eng, daughter

SL: So who was the first in your family to come to the United States?

JE: I think....

Nancy: It was your grandfather's father?

JE: Yes.

SL: So, great grandfather? Do you know what year that was?

JE: No, not really. I think he went back to China maybe before I born or something like that.

Nancy: So he was here and then he went back to China.

SL: Wait, great- or just grandfather?

Nancy: Great grandfather.

SL: OK. That's a long history. And then how about your husband's family? Do you know how long they had been in the United States?

JE: Oh, he came here like when he 15, 16 years old.

Nancy: But he had a half-brother here. So that's how he was able to immigrate. And they had a laundry and he worked at his laundry. So he came first. And his half-brother was buried in New York, in Queens.

SL: So was that in Poughkeepsie?

Nancy: That laundry was in New York, so, before he met my mother. He was a teenager I guess when he came.

SL: OK. And do you know how your husband was able to enter the country? Do you know what year that was?

Nancy: I was going to bring all those things from home but I forgot them. Because we have that on the immigration papers.

SL: OK. You could look it up.

JE: He came here before Second World War.

Nancy: [To mother] 1931?

SL: The 1930s?

Nancy: Yeah, because I have a piece of paper from the ship he was on. The ship was called Cleveland, I remember, and I think it was 1931 but I can verify that for you.

SL: OK. Do you know how he was able to come into the country?

Nancy: In terms of the legality of it?

SL: Yes.

Nancy: So he had this half brother and I think they came illegally, but they had the same name as the passport brothers or families. Because as we were growing up we knew about these groups of people who were his passport brothers and they had the same name so we never had to change our names like some people did in the 1960s.

SL: I see. I don't think you could bring a brother into the country. You had to be...

Nancy: No, they were paper sons. They were the "sons" of somebody.

SL: How about yourself? What year did you come here?

JE: I came here in 1947. During the Second World War, their father went through the...

SL: Was he in the service?

JE: Yeah. He was in the service for couple years.

Nancy: Yes. He worked in the laundry and then he joined the army and he went to Europe. He came back and he went to China to find a wife to bring back.

SL: So, what was it like for you to come here? Did you know that you would be going to Poughkeepsie then?

JE: No. We came by boat.

SL: You came to the West Coast?

JE: San Francisco.

Nancy: You should tell her about the whole trip on the boat because that was kind of interesting.

SL: Did something happen on the boat?

JE: You know, lots of women came by themselves. They seasick.

SL: Did you come by yourself or with your husband?

JE: No, we came together.

SL: So you were seasick?

Nancy: Yes.

JE: Little bit, not too bad.

Nancy: So, my father went back to China and he—How much money did he bring back? \$6,000?

JE: No, I think he had only \$3,000.

Nancy: \$3,000. But it was a lot of money back in those days.

SL: Yes.

Nancy: So, he was there for six months and they got married, and then he spent all of his money because you know, he give it away.

And then they took the boat and she said everybody got seasick and they couldn't eat anything. Like, it was inedible for her. One day, they were cooking something and everybody said there was some Chinese food that day. So they all went running to see what it was. They said it was *lap cheung* which is Chinese sausage... but it wasn't.

JE: Turned out to be hot dog! Everybody don't like it.

Nancy: So it was a big disappointment after kind of starving for days.

SL: I see. And then did you take the train across the country? To New York? And then did you go to Poughkeepsie then?

JE: No, we went to New York City.

Nancy: But when they arrived in San Francisco—you know, he had spent all of his money, so he had no money. And when they were there, he had to wire somebody

to send them money so they could take the train.

JE: Borrow some money.

Nancy: He had to borrow some money the second day he arrived to the U.S. [laughs]. So I think about the impact on her, thinking she married to some rich guy in the U.S.

SL: Well, he gave all his money away.

JE: [Laughs.] Yeah, give some away and spend some.

Nancy: And then they lived in New York City for a couple of weeks.

SL: Then did you move to Poughkeepsie?

JE: Yes.

SL: So why did you decide to move to Poughkeepsie?

JE: We were looking for laundry and then somebody said “Oh, Poughkeepsie had a laundry for sale.” That’s why we came to Poughkeepsie.

SL: Because your husband knew the business already.

JE: Yes, before he work in a laundry.

SL: So you bought a laundry in Poughkeepsie. That’s why you went there. So what did you think when you first came, about working in a laundry?

JE: Oh, I don’t speak English that much. Few words. And I don’t know how to work in a laundry!

Nancy: They’d known about laundries but they had a totally different image of what a laundry was. Tell us about what you thought a laundry was before you actually started working in one.

JE: See, in China, people think laundry [owned by Chinese in America] is a clothing store. They came here, turn out to be washing clothes.

SL: When did you understand that you were going to be washing the clothes and not selling them? Was that before you came or after?

JE: After I came here.

Nancy: It was too late!

JE: Everybody thinks it’s clothing stores!

Nancy: And when she met her grandfather, she anticipated him to be also wealthy. She discovered he was not.

SL: Did he go back to China?

Nancy: No, he was here. He never went back. He died here, too.

SL: Oh! And that was in New York City?

JE: Yeah, at that time, he was in New York City. He already about 60-some years old. So, he only worked a couple days.

Nancy: He was semi-retired. But she [her mother] was very close to his wife when she was in China. She really kind of raised her and they were very close. Even her food habits come from that grandmother. And then she did not meet her grandfather until she was an adult and married.

SL: Did your grandmother ever come to the country?

JE: No.

Nancy: They never saw each other again.

SL: Oh... So can you tell me what it was like working in the laundry? What was your weekly routine? Did you wash the clothes there? Did you iron the clothes? What did you actually do in the laundry?

JE: We didn't wash the clothes there. We send out the wash, they bring it back and then we iron.

SL: Where did you send the clothes to be washed? Somewhere close by?

JE: In Poughkeepsie.

SL: Were they owned by Chinese?

JE: No. Not own by Chinese.

SL: So the clothes would come back wet. And then what would you do?

JE: They come back not too wet, just half dry, half wet. Then we put the starch in the shirt and then hang up in a room to dry.

SL: And then you would iron them.

JE: Yeah.

SL: And did you have any machines to press the collars or...?

JE: Just the collar machine. Just roll the collar and cuff in there. And then iron the shirt by hand.

SL: Did the collars come off the shirt then?

JE: It's a priest collar. Just collar, no shirt. That kind.

SL: OK. And so that would go through the roll.

JE: Yeah.

SL: Did you have a machine to press the back of the shirt?

JE: No.

SL: So that was by hand. Did your husband also help with the ironing and pressing?

JE: Yeah. He do the iron most.

SL: So what did you do?

JE: I help out.

SL: And then you needed to learn how to fold them and wrap them, right?

JE: Yeah.

Nancy: We had helpers, too. They hired people, too, because they were very busy.

JE: I got four children! I got to take care of the children, right?

SL: Right.

JE: And the cooking, too! So we hire a couple people to help iron shirts.

Nancy: And they were not Chinese. They were Black, right?

JE: Mmm. Woman.

SL: Women? Black women?

Nancy: Yes. And sometimes they would give them food to take home to their families.

JE: Yeah. You know [they were] poor people... sometimes you got too much, you don't want to eat that much, [tell them to] take it home.

SL: What did the laundry look like inside?

JE: Inside? There's a picture here! [Points to the CHSNE newsletter that has a photo of their laundry.] You see this picture. The laundry, the packages and the shelf, looks like that.

SL: So how many rooms were there?

JE: The store is one room. Maybe not so wide, more narrow.

SL: Do you want to draw me a little picture?

Nancy: Let's get a piece of paper.

JE: And we sleep there, too, in the back. I don't know how to draw a picture.

Nancy: [Drawing] The entrance to the street was here. Big window here. There was a counter here. And there was a money drawer here underneath the counter. So you couldn't see it, and there was some mechanism in there to lock it. To open it you needed some special combination of keys that were attached to metal.

Gay: It's like a hand-made money drawer. Made out of wood.

Nancy: The packages were all here—the shelves for the packages.

JE: Yeah, these are the shelves.

Gay: We should have kept the money drawer!

Nancy: There was an ironing table there. Over here there were two ironing tables so they could have three people ironing simultaneously. And some people slept on the tables, like her [Gay].

SL: Really?

Gay: That was the old days. People used to sleep on the ironing tables.

Nancy: And then in the back, there was a whole set of rooms where we lived.

JE: The kitchen was here. Got a stove and a refrigerator.

Nancy: A couch here. But there were two rooms over here.

JE: We sleep in those two rooms.

Nancy: My father's clothes were here—that's what I remember—in this small room. And you could sleep here.

Gay: And the toilet. A toilet but no bathtub.

Nancy: There was a sink here. But the stove was over here.

JE: The refrigerator was here.

Nancy: So they slept here, our parents.

JE: Pullout couch.

Nancy: And she slept on a shelf in here, right? And there was a crib here that I slept in.

Gay: You didn't really sleep there!

SL: Wait a minute. Are you the youngest [to Nancy]?

Nancy: Yeah.

SL: And you're the next oldest [to Gay]. And there's two older siblings.

Nancy: Right. I guess they slept over here. Because there's no place else for them to sleep!

SL: What is over in this section?

Nancy: This is a very small room.

Gay: Somebody slept in that middle room. There was a bed in there. A bed that was folded up.

Nancy: Oh I don't know about that. All I remember is after my father died, all of his clothes were there and no one would ever touch them or move them or anything. I remember it being a sort of shrine to my father. And we used to do



our homework sitting at these ironing tables when no one was ironing. So, after school we would come and help iron and wait on customers but then we would sit here and do our homework.

SL: Did you have a table or eating area?

JE: In the kitchen.

SL: What did you do for baths then?

Nancy: There was a toilet here, and a sink here. There were two parts to the sink, a deep part and a shallow part.

JE: When they were little, they go in the deep part and take a bath.

Nancy: What about you? Did you go in the sink? The sink was really deep.

JE: Yeah, I go in. Not enough room to move!

SL: Did you have a tub or something?

JE & Nancy: No, no tub. Just put the towel in here and wash, like in China.

Nancy: See, I really didn't sleep here, but I spent more time here because I came here every day after school. Because when I was born, they bought a house. Then at night, we go to the house but just to sleep. But most of the time, during the day...

JE: We had a bathtub in the house.

SL: Oh! So what year was that you were able to buy the house?

JE: Same year she was born [Nancy].

Nancy: In 1957.

JE: That year we bought the house. Got four children! Need more room! That's why we bought the house.

SL: That's good.

JE: The house, you know, we borrow some money from the bank.

SL: But after school you would come...

JE: After school, come to the laundry, to eat, and do homework.

Nancy: So we had all our meals here—supper and everything.

SL: So the house was mostly for sleeping. Well, since I have two of the children here, did you have to work in the laundry?

Nancy: Yeah.

JE: Sometimes help out.

SL: A little bit?

Gay: We had to work from when we were four years old.

JE: Four years old! You were bigger.

Nancy: Or younger. As a newborn. Because my father brought me to the laundry as a baby and he would take care of me while he was working so she could get the other kids ready for school or take care of them. So I was working even earlier! [Laughter.] No, we used to wait on customers a lot and get the packages and the change and we would iron.

JE: Sometimes people came in and give you the ticket and you try to find the package.

Gay: And we had to stand up on these platforms to do the ironing.

Nancy: Because we were too short so we stood on a stool. So, I mostly ironed handkerchiefs because I wasn't a very sophisticated ironer. But my older brother and sister could iron shirts and boxers.

SL: You have to iron boxers?

Nancy: Yes, we spent our whole life ironing boxers [laughs]! And sorting people's really dirty socks. The boxers, yes, they were ironed and they had to be folded in a really complicated way. I couldn't do it, but my other sister could.

JE: You know, the laundry packages, every one had to be the same size.

SL: So you had all kind of clothes.

JE: Yeah, we had shirts and underpants, long pants sometimes, not too many... socks.

Nancy: And dresses, because a lot of people wore dresses. And priest collars. Remember the priest collars?

SL: Did you have to do sheets and things like that?

JE: Sheets? We not iron the sheets. We sent out to wash and fold the sheets. Sheets too big.

Nancy: And then we had a roll of paper here. A big giant roll and you would pull it down and cut it to the right size and wrap stuff. I still have that paper roll [laughs].

SL: So what were the customers like? Who were the customers? Who lived in the town?

JE: Oh, all kind of people.

Nancy: Yes. It was a range of politicians... the DA.

JE: Yeah, we got the court house in the city too.

Nancy: The district attorney used to come and bring his laundry.

Gay: And doctors used to come. There was like a high end where people wanted hand finishing on their shirts. And then there was a lower end where people didn't have their own washing machine.

SL: I see.

JE: At that time, no laundry mat, see?

SL: Right.

JE: Now people go to the laundry mat, before don't have laundry mat. That's why people bring their clothes to the laundry.

Nancy: But we had some characters come in. They would come and sit and schmooze with my father for hours.

Gay: Like the local dishwasher at the Chinese restaurant would come over on his day off.

Nancy: For company, he would sit there and just talk to my father for hours on end. He was really poor and he sent all of his money back to China. He had no family.

Gay: And he never changed his clothes, so we thought he was really smelly.

Nancy: And there was some guy who was very strange who rode his bicycle all over. Like, he rode it to New York City which is 90 miles away. And he seemed like he didn't have a place to store his clothes so basically he stored his clothes at our laundry by bringing it in to be washed and then his packages of clothes would be on our shelves for a long time from various times he'd come in. And then he would come in and he'd be looking for some specific item so we would have to open all the packages so he could get whatever pants that he needed to take out to wear. And then we put them all away for the next time.

SL: You would do that for customers?

Nancy: [Laughs.] Yeah. He was kind of eccentric.

SL: Sounds like it. He probably didn't have a regular place to live or something.

Nancy: It sounded like it. And the idea of riding a bike to New York City in those days. Like people do this for fun or fundraisers [now], but people didn't do that in the 1960s [laughs]. So later on after she closed the laundry, she worked at Dunkin Donuts and she had the same customers who come in! They were the same people and they recognized her and they would sit down to chat and have donuts. Some of them were the same people, I couldn't believe it!

JE: Some. Not everyone, but some people know me from the laundry.

Nancy: There definitely was overlap, which is a little bizarre when you think about it.

Gay: These people had no place to go.

Nancy: Yeah, like it was a social thing and a lot of them didn't have families, so they didn't have anyone to do their wash, so they had to bring it somewhere or they lived in a little apartment by themselves. So, there were those kinds of people, like when she was saying, the lower end kind of people.

SL: How big was Poughkeepsie? Is it a city?

JE: That's a city. In the beginning it was, what, 40,000 people, but later on some people move out the city. You know, they built some new houses outside the city then some people get money and buy a house outside and move out of the city. I think now they say only 28 [thousand].

Nancy: Well, the city went through urban renewal.

JE: That's right, urban renewal. They bought that building, the laundry. That's why I moved out of the laundry.

Nancy: Because the building was torn down and a garage was built on top of it. It was kind of like Hudson Street [in Boston's Chinatown].

SL: So, let me ask you: what was the name of the laundry? Oh, it's in the photo [in the CHSNE newsletter]. Eng's Hand Laundry.

JE: Yeah. That's our first car [referring to car in the photo]. We bought a used car.

Nancy: And that's the car she learned to drive in.

SL: Ah! And so the laundry was open until what year then?

JE: I think open until 1976. That's when I closed the laundry because of urban renewal.

SL: The 1970s. So that's a long time.

Nancy: But they had been threatening to tear down that laundry for many years.

SL: Oh. And then did you move to Massachusetts then?

JE: No, not yet. We still got the house in Poughkeepsie. I stayed there. The children moved out of Poughkeepsie to go to college.

SL: And you said that your husband passed away while you owned the laundry?

JE: Yeah. I still work in the laundry for about ten years.

SL: So, in the 1960s?

JE: Yes, from 1966 to 1976.

SL: What was it like working there then? You had to run the whole laundry?

JE: Yes. Before we ironed more shirts. Later, by myself, not so much.

SL: Did you still have people working for you then?

JE: No, not anymore. The business got slower, people move out of the city.

Nancy: I was there more at the end of the laundry, so I was amazed that there was enough business [before] to sustain having hired help because there certainly wasn't during the time I was there.

Gay: I think at the end, she wasn't really making any money.

Nancy: And we were hoping it would be bought so we could close it and she wouldn't have to do this. So, in some ways, it wasn't such a bad thing.

SL: So, what years was the laundry the busiest?

JE: I think, when they built the parking lot across the street.

Gay and Nancy: When did they build the parking lot??!!

Nancy: I thought the parking lot was always there!

JE: No! When Gay was born, at that time they built the parking lot.

Nancy: So, the 1950s.

JE: They knocked down some buildings, and some houses. Also there was another laundry across the street, bigger than ours. Not Chinese—American people run the laundry.

Nancy: There was a competitor across the street?

JE: Yeah. There was a fire that burned down that laundry, and later the city built a parking lot there.

Nancy: [Asks mother] When you talked about hanging the clothes to dry them, where did you hang them?

JE: In the small room there.

SL: That's what was in the small room.

Nancy: Here?

JE: That was before you were born.

Nancy: So that was the drying room?

JE: Yeah, we had a wire, hang the clothes there. Before you were born. Later we don't use the drying room anymore. You sleep there. We bought a dryer.

SL: Did you ever have your own washing machines?

JE: No. I never bought the washing machine. We just had a couple dryers.

SL: Were there many other Chinese in Poughkeepsie?

JE: Not too many. Two more laundry in Poughkeepsie. Three all together, in the

beginning. One was Wong, down Main Street. The other was owned by an old man. I think he closed a long time ago. Before you were born.

Nancy: And there were two Chinese restaurants. We were friends with all of them.

JE: Later, there was a big IBM in Poughkeepsie, some Chinese people working there.

Nancy: They were all from Taiwan. And they spoke Mandarin. So they were very different, class-wise, education-wise.

SL: Professionals?

JE: Yeah, you know, went to college in China or Taiwan. Or here. All have their own house.

SL: So what was it like living in Poughkeepsie then? Did you find people to be friendly when you first moved there?

JE: Yeah, some are friendly.

Nancy: She had a friend who was her best friend who was White, and she basically became our surrogate grandmother and she would come over every Wednesday and bring us ice cream or candy, and we would go on vacation with her later, after my father died. And this woman had a long term companion, boyfriend, who Gay is named after. His name was Mr. Gay. So basically this White couple befriended our family. He was a customer initially, I guess. And she became her friend.

Gay: Well, he was the local bookie and he came to spy on the bookie next to us by bringing his laundry to our store.

Nancy: So, our landlord had a store next to ours that was a candy/magazine store but he was a bookie behind the scenes. He used to run gambling in the basement of the building. So sometimes we would hang around in the alley way and we would play there and play in the yard and sometimes they would go in the basement and they would yell at us because we were interfering with their illegal gambling. And they would have raids sometimes and the police would come. So all this was going on around us [laughs]!

SL: My goodness. So you didn't own the building.

JE: No, we didn't own the building.

Nancy: No, we rented.

SL: So you had one or two days off?

JE: One day off. Sunday.

SL: Did you also work Saturday most of the day?

JE: Yeah.

SL: Did customers come on Saturday to pick up their clothes?

JE: Yeah.

SL: So what did you do on Sundays?

Nancy: We went to New York.

JE: We went to New York every few weeks to buy some Chinese food.

SL: And you had some relatives there? Your grandfather?

JE: My grandfather died after Nancy was born.

Nancy: He used to come visit us and bring us things from the bakery like baos.

SL: So it was an hour and a half from New York City?

JE: Like two hours.

Nancy: We could drive or take the train.

SL: Did the whole family go?

JE: Yeah. Go shopping. See some friends, too.

Nancy: They had this circle of friends that were related to them.

JE: Not close cousins. Yes, we used to see them.

Nancy: And they used to go to 26 Mott Street.

SL: What was there?

Nancy: Well, there was a picture.

Gay: They used to share an apartment.

Nancy: In the first couple of years they were here, before we were born, they used to go to New York and they shared an apartment with these other families. She said they would go down and stay overnight in this apartment and they would cook together and basically have a party.

JE: Sunday. Before, there were not so many people. Later on everybody had children and there was not enough room. We stopped going. On Sunday we get together there, cook some food, eat there.

Nancy: But that 26 Mott Street is still there. There's a store there. I think people still pick up their mail there. And I think my father when he went off to the war, stored his stuff there and had his mail sent there. I actually walked into that store recently and took a picture in front of it and I saw mail slots, so I think people are still doing that. It's like an address you can use.

JE: Send the mail there. On Sunday you can go there and pick the mail up.

Nancy: It's like when you don't really have a place to live, you use that as your address.

SL: Did you go to a family association?

JE: Yeah, we went there a few times. The Eng family association.

Nancy: But she's a Chin.

SL: OK, just a few more questions. Did you take any family trips or vacations? Or was it hard to close down the laundry?

Gay: We never went on vacation. We used to take these long drives on Sunday and we'd look at all the other Chinese laundries and restaurants in upstate New York.

JE: We went on vacation one time. With your father.

Nancy: We drove to Niagara Falls.

JE: Later on, I close one week every year. Take a few days off.

SL: Oh, good. And I was going to ask you about what kind of Chinese traditions you kept up after you came here. You speak Toisanese?

JE: Toisan, yes.

SL: Did you keep some of the holidays and traditions? Did you also adopt some of the American holidays?

JE: I think mostly, you know, you close the store on American holidays. Like, Christmas and New Year's.

SL: Yes, that makes sense.

Gay: I think my father was more Americanized because he came here sooner. He celebrated a lot of American holidays.

SL: Christmas and Thanksgiving?

Nancy: Yes. And Easter. They joined a church, a Congregational church. We used to put the Christmas tree in this window in the laundry.

SL: Did you make turkey for Thanksgiving? Did you have an oven in the laundry?

Gay: Yes, but we only used it on Thanksgiving.

Nancy: The rest of the time she stored her pots and pans inside of it.

JE: Only used the top of the stove for cooking.

SL: So you weren't able to follow any Chinese holidays, like New Year, because you had to work.

JE: We had to work on Chinese New Year.



SL: Did you think about how you wanted to raise your children? To be American or Chinese?

JE: When they were little, they speak some Chinese. When they big, they go to school, then speak English. That's why they don't know too much Chinese!

Nancy: My older brother and sister didn't know any English when they went to school. So they learned it when they went to kindergarten. And they came home and taught it to us. So we knew English before we started school.

SL: Did you teach them other things about being Chinese or you didn't worry about it?

JE: Can't really.

SL: Since you're living in America, there wasn't too much you could do.

JE: Yeah. I tried to learn English from my older two children. I tried to get citizenship papers. I learned it from them.

Nancy: What year did you get your citizenship?

JE: When you were two, I guess.

Nancy: And you got your license at the same time.

JE: I learned how to drive at that time, too.

SL: How old were you when you came here?

JE: Eighteen.

SL: Did you go to school in China until you were eighteen?

JE: To sixteen.

Nancy: When did you start school?

JE: School, I think, start... not at six years old, later than that. Here they start school at six years old, but in China....

Nancy: So you went to school for ten years?

JE: No, I went to school, like, about six years.

Nancy: She was the first woman to marry into the Eng family who had gone to school. She was the first literate woman in the family. Which I didn't learn about until after we went back to China and I heard all these stories about her.

JE: The women didn't know how to read or write. I was the only one in the Eng family.

Nancy: And then everybody in her village told me that she was really smart and she was always number one in her class in grade school.

SL: Did you have sisters and brothers?

JE: I got one sister and two brothers.

SL: And did your sister go to school also?

JE: Yeah. My mother went to school, too.

SL: She did?

JE: Yeah. She know how to write.

SL: That's good for her generation. Did you stay close with your family in China after you moved here?

JE: Only send a little money, for Chinese New Year. We don't have money really.

SL: Did any of your other relatives come to the United States?

JE: Yeah, one of my brothers—whole family came over.

SL: Are they in the New York area?

JE: First he came to Poughkeepsie, live with me. In 1984. Him and his wife and two children.

SL: Just one more question: looking back at the time you worked in the laundry, how do you think about it now?

JE: Beginning, not that good really. I don't speak English. I had to learn how to iron shirts! Later on, get used to it, it's OK.

SL: Anything other thoughts about owning and running the laundry?

JE: No, I don't think so.

SL: So, what did your children end up doing? Did they all go to college?

JE: Oh yeah, all four of them went to college.

SL: Was that something you encouraged them to do? Or is that something they wanted to do?

JE: I think they wanted to, too. They were all smart, won the scholarship to college. I don't have money to pay for college, but they went on scholarship. All four of them!

SL: Sounds like your family has been very successful.

JE: Doing OK.

SL: Thank you very much.

After the interview, Nancy wrote to me that she found out a few more things from her mother: “I told her that she never mentioned that her mother was educated and then she said that her father was not only educated, he was a school-teacher! She said her grandfather was advised not to bring her father over to the U.S. because he had a better job in China as a schoolteacher instead of being a laundry person or waiter in the U.S.!”

On her parent’s marriage, Nancy wrote: “A series of women were paraded in front of my father and he chose my mother based upon her height and his perception that she was tall enough to iron in a Chinese laundry. My father was probably considered a good catch because he would take his bride to America where they would get rich. That is why it is so significant that when they arrived by boat in San Francisco, my mother realized that he had used up all his money in China and needed to wire a friend in New York to send them railroad fare to cross the country. So much for marrying a rich man from the U.S.!”

Jean Eng with daughters  
Gay and Nancy, 2009.



## Jean Eng

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Photos courtesy  
of Nancy Eng,  
except far left by  
Shauna Lo.

Jean Eng with her  
daughters, Nancy (left)  
and Gay (right) inside  
of Eng's Hand Laundry,  
1960.

Jean Eng with  
daughter, Jane, in the  
family car in front of  
the laundry, 1959.







## Donna Chin

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*The following interview was conducted with Donna Chin (DC) by Shauna Lo (SL) and Nancy Eng (NE) on July 13, 2012 at the home of Donna Chin. Donna Chin and her husband owned the Toy Sun Laundry at 22A College Avenue in Somerville. Photo above taken by Shauna Lo, 2012.*

Also participating: Donna Fong, Donna Chin's daughter

SL: We'll start with you or your family's immigration history. Were you the first of your family to come to the United States?

DC: My family? My own family? Yeah, I'm the first one.

SL: What year was that?

DC: 1948.

SL: It was difficult to immigrate to the United States at that time. How were you able to come?

DC: It really isn't that hard. It's the physical examination in Canton Hospital is the one that stumped me for over a year before I come. If after the petition goes out—if everything goes smooth I would have come earlier. Because my husband has the laundry here. If he stays too long... if I can't come, he has to come back alone. Because otherwise he come back, there's no laundry. He has somebody else helping him do that.

NE: So he came here first.

DC: No, so he waited, we came together. But he came seven years here before, before go back and get married. He was working in the restaurant with his uncle.

SL: How was he able to bring you?

DC: Oh there was lot of matchmakers around. When American boy come back. If you were in the right ages there were a lot of people looking for you.

NE: So this was in Toisan?

DC: Yeah. Actually met in Canton. Guangzhou.

SL: And your husband, was he born in the United States?

DC: No, his father sent him here. In those days a lot of people bought papers. You know, paper son?

SL: Yeah.

Donna F: So you said Dad worked in a restaurant before he went back. You mean laundry?

DC: Yeah, laundry.

Donna F: He worked in a laundry in Ball Square [Somerville] for someone else. He slept and worked in the laundry. So his bed was by the machines, like a lot of people first start. That's why I was asking Mom how did he get the other laundry in Davis Square.

SL: Do you know when your husband first came to the United States?

DC: Yes, came to United States. Those days, everybody had to go through immigration, stay there for awhile and get everything straight out before they let you in.

Donna F: Yes, Angel Island, in 1941, I believe.

SL: So the laundry that he worked in Ball Square, was that [owned by] a relative?

DC: Yeah, uncle.

Donna F: Was that a paper uncle or a real uncle?

DC: A real uncle. Because he just new, coming and you work hard to pay back the debt and everything. So they worked long hours.

SL: So how did he eventually open his own laundry?

DC: After a while, he wanted to do something on his own, and he know somebody, a partner. Davis Square. In the beginning it was a partner. After both get the wife over, then he [the partner] go start working in Brookline. The partner separated and he open a store in Brookline. Later on he bought a house there.

NE: Where in Brookline, do you know?

DC: No, I don't know where. I go there, but I didn't pay attention where. After the partner died, his wife tell me to go over help her.

Donna F: Probably it was around Coolidge Corner. Yeah, because I remember that house being not far from Harvard Street.

DC: Yeah, big house, I think 8 rooms in the floor. 3 floors. So they rent out the others.

SL: I have this list of all the Chinese-owned laundries, but this is 1931 so it's a little before the time [we are talking about].

Donna F: [Our laundry was on] 22A College Avenue.

SL: Yeah, I looked but there was nothing listed.

Donna F: And he called it Toy Sun Laundry. He had a little sun on his window.

NE: Were you able to find any photos?

Donna F: Not yet, but I know they're there. I know there's at least a couple.

DC: Yeah, those photos in the box. I have no patience [to look]. Her father keeps it and like to put photo in the book and everything. I never touch those things. In the beginning they take my picture, I say don't take it. I don't even bother to take pictures. [Laughs].

SL: So do you know what year the Toy Sun opened?

DC: I think the year before I came. Because everything got set up and then my husband have a cousin to take his place, work in there. So they have to go out collect the shirts, use a station wagon—the square ones. So you fold the back seat down, load the laundry in there. It small business, not like the big ones. Cambridge has a big one. Three storefront and they hire somebody to collect with a truck. So the one my husband do is small but still a few people can work in there.

SL: What was it like for you when you first came? Did you live in the laundry?

DC: No, no, I never live in the laundry.

SL: OK, good.

DC: Come over live near relative, rent an apartment. Rent two places before I bought my house in Somerville.

SL: So you lived in Somerville for a long time.

DC: Long time, yes.

SL: Was your apartment close to the laundry? Could you walk over?

DC: Yes, can walk over.

Donna F: It was 1956 when they bought the house.

DC: So, she can get things straight! I get mixed up!

Donna F: Yeah, the first two places we lived in were in Cambridge.



DC: Yeah, Cambridge, but the laundry was in Somerville.

Donna F: The houses that we were first in, the house that my brother and I were born in was a rented apartment which used to be a black ghetto area of Cambridge.

SL: Central Square?

DC: Yeah, Chinese owned it. Knew us. Four-room single. All together owned four room—two each. Then he add the kitchen so two family live in the single four-room house. And one bathroom upstairs. Just one bathroom for both families. We have three kids and they have three kids.

Donna F: And no heat.

DC: No heat. But the kitchen has heat [from the stove]. But the bedroom has no heat. So cold in the nighttime. Wear the *mien nap* [Chinese padded silk jacket] all the time. And my son had to put one of my old one to use for a sleeping bag and cover everything, hand and everything, tie the sleeve. Because when you change diaper, until you finish, the legs black and blue! And the windows, the house is old, they never tight. So in the winter time, freeze. And can't see outside until after March.

Donna F: It was all frosted.

SL: Was that against the law?

Donna F: Back then it wasn't.

DC: Oh, I think those days, nobody followed the law. Especially Chinese and you can't speak English.

Until I had three children with the first one in school... just heard people say my husband does not agree for me to go to school. That's what his thinking is: you know count up to 100 is enough. If you take care of kids [you don't need to know English]. If you have a laundry, you know 100, then you can [make] change.

NE: Did you want to go to school?

DC: I wanted, but I never get the chance to. Later, find out that Mary Knoll Sister on Tyler Street—a lot of lady go there. It's young mothers. So he let me go there once a week, Sunday. That's how I start my English. Then later on, one sister so good—after somebody else take over, nobody like it [the English class]—she can speak Mandarin, Cantonese and she knows writing. So she teach us.

SL: How old were you when you came to the United States then?

DC: 20.

SL: So you had some schooling in China?

DC: Not much. I grow up in the war. I got two brothers.

Donna F: Brothers get school.

DC: Girls not important, they're somebody else's. My mother always told me, you're somebody else's.

SL: What did your parent do for a living?

DC: My father usually work in the city hall. He's educated, but not my Mom. He been in Beijing for school. But during the war time he was in the army and do the accounting, take care of the money and pay the bill.

Donna F: Accounts receivable and payable.

DC: And take care of the payroll. So we follow him, go all over the place. I grow up everywhere. Because the order come out from the government. If Japanese know you are there, they come bomb you. So they keep moving. If they hear any news, they hurry up and move.

NE: So what are all the different places that you moved to?

DC: Hunan, Hangzhou, Shanghai, Fujian... Good thing I pick up [languages] easy. I speak all the dialect wherever I go. I be interpreter for my mom.

Donna F: My dad is Toisanese. He could not speak Cantonese. So she switched to Toisanese. So we all grew up with Toisanese. No Cantonese. Because my dad couldn't speak it.

DC: He speak some, but better [if he does] not speak! Sometimes I don't understand.

NE: Did you learn how to write and read Chinese?

DC: Yeah. Mostly read. I educate myself both, Chinese and English. I look at the dictionary a lot and learn from there.

NE: So you can read the newspaper.

DC: Yeah, newspaper and magazine. But I don't write often. No practice—I have no relative back there.

NE: No one to write to.

DC: No one to write to, yeah.

SL: Do you want to describe what the laundry looked like inside and what your duties were there?

DC: My duties were to help do the repairing. Tailor work.

Donna F: Self-taught.

DC: He doesn't believe me at first. I said, "I do while I learning." I tried to be careful, just one time cut it wrong, but I repaired it.

NE: So you didn't do any ironing?

DC: Some. Mostly I do the tailoring. When I have extra time, I do the pressing. I do the cooking, everything. Except sort out the clothes. I can't do that!

SL: So the clothes were sent out to wash?

Donna F: Yes, sent out.

SL: Do you remember where you sent them?

DC: That I don't know.

Donna F: Charlestown Wet Wash. We were unusual. Our laundry was wholesale and retail. A lot of other places that we delivered to were just retail. They don't do any of the work themselves. Because our laundry had machines as well as the ironing. A lot of the other laundries just had ironing, for touch up. That house we lived in, I remember growing up with the other family. His was just strictly retail. They didn't do any pressing. So all his shirts would be delivered, it was already all bundled, ready for him to package for his customers and that was it. We did both. We did it for those laundries as well as for our own.

SL: So it sounds like a big operation.

Donna F: Yes, it was a bigger operation.

NE: So you had employees.

DC: Yeah, the smaller ones just collect business from the customer and send out to wash and send to us to press. Sometimes iron too.

NE: How big was the laundry? How many rooms?

DC: Just one big room, open room. The machines in one corner and the front is for customers to come in to the counter, and across the machine here I do my cooking. Every day we eat there. And all the kids come home. And after school they come to the laundry.

SL: So when were your children born? How many children?

DC: Four. All born here.

Donna F: I'll draw you the laundry.

NE: Oh good. What years were they born?

Donna F: '49, '50, '53, and '60. Boy was first.

NE: And what is your brother's name?

Donna F: David.

NE: And he was born in '49?

Donna F: Right.

NE: And who was next?

Donna F: Me.

NE: And then Mary was next?

DC: Mary the third one.

NE: And who's the fourth one?

DC: Linda.

SL: So, maybe I should ask you, Donna, what you had to do when you were young in the laundry.

Donna F: We did a lot. Everyone had to help. As soon as someone was old enough.

DC: Until after high school, part time work before you go to school. And Mary, I tell her to go to the market, do cashier. She says, "I don't like that kind of job." So you don't like, you do it, you get the experience. Some day you do a better job you know how they are doing. So she finally went in, she said "it's good to get some experience. What is the food, I don't even know, ask the customer." See, I said, anything you do you get some experience.

Donna F: But after a while, same thing, she had to take over because once I went off to college—I was in college unless it was my school vacation—and then in the summers. But once I had a job I couldn't work so of course Mary had to take over too so she was working while she was going to school as well. So we all—as soon as you had vacation and stuff, you were always in the laundry.

NE: But you worked after school too right?

Donna F: Right, also all through high school you didn't attend football games or any of that, you were always in the laundry. You work your way up from back presser to front presser.

SL: So, what are the two different jobs?

Donna F: So, there's a front presser.... This is the laundry layout [shows a sketch she has been drawing of the laundry] and there were three ironing tables in a row. This is the front door, people come in and this is the counter and there's things under the counter for you to do and there's racks here and this is where she did her sewing, later on it was where her sewing machine was. But the machines are here. And these are the front machines and these are the back machines. And the front machines do the collars and cuffs on this machine. So you put a basket of laundry here. The second machine does the front of the shirt.

The two back machines do the back of the shirt and the two sides of the shirt and then the sleeves—because it's an upright machine that has two things where you throw the sleeves on. So the sleeves are pressed from the inside out. And the back ones are easier because it's really a smaller machine and there isn't anything to do whereas the front machine you have to actually dress this machine because it has a little neck here. And then it has a strap to hold the front of the shirt down because the front of the shirt is open so you have to hold it with a strap before you press it. So you actually have to put your hand and arm all the way in the machine and pull it up. So if you are not tall enough, you will get burned. Whereas here you can just flip the shirt on and if you're not tall enough it floats onto the machine so it's not so bad. And when you're doing the front machine you have to have enough strength because you actually have to pull the collars and the cuffs straight before you put them on for pressing.

DC: The all-cotton is tough.

Donna F: Yeah, so you really have to yank them. So that's where I got my muscles. [Laughing.] I was very strong! So that's the front machine. The front machine is the head, which means you have to count. You have to know where the bundles are and when to stop—when the next bundle comes. Whereas the [person working at the] back machine doesn't have to pay attention. That's why she was saying she doesn't have to pay attention.

DC: You just hook the two sleeves down, use the hand chop in the middle, nice and tight, and press.

Donna F: So there's really not a lot to do in the back. It's less labor intensive. You don't have to really think about it. And here you actually have to pick up the shirt and dress the machine. So you have to put your hand between the hot pad and the hot metal top of it that comes down—the ironing part that comes down. So you have to be tall enough and you have to have the arm strength. My aunt would do the back machine because she was shorter and her arms were not as long. So for her to reach in the back, she could burn herself. Whereas I could do it because I was tall enough. So after, it goes on to the racks and then they do the ironing.

And this was the wringer. When the laundry comes back my dad would put everything in the wringer and re-wring it to make sure it was dry enough to press. Or if he did starching—if he had to starch something he would starch it in the sink and then put it in the wringer. Some people wanted extra starch.

NE: And these are the counters where you did the ironing?

Donna F: Right, and then there were shelves above it where all the finished products would be in packages. And then the windows. The windows stuck out so we

had things in the windows. We would always have Christmas decorations. We would have a tree every year.

NE: And where did you cook?

Donna F: Here [points to the sketch]. So this is the table, the sink. There's a small stove next to it, then the refrigerator. So the table fit right in here. A small table that you'd pull out and everyone would sit around it. All the employees and everything would come out. And when we were eating, there's a curtain that you would pull out.

SL: So how many employees did you have?

DC: The most is four.

SL: Were they all Chinese?

Donna F: Yes. Except for Mama. Mama was Greek.

SL: Mama?

Donna F: Old Mama.

DC: Old Mama always do this machine. So she's been decades working for my husband. She [lives] right close to the store. Sometimes it's snowing, you can't get to the store? Call Mama, she go over there.

Donna F: That's one of the reasons my Dad bought in Somerville. Because he had to be close to the store and bought a house right on the main road. So she could get out because you're basically all the time working.

SL: What kind of hours did you keep in the laundry?

DC: [In the] beginning, at least 20. Because I hardly see him. I sound asleep.

SL: 20 hours a day?

DC: Yeah! Daytime I don't see him because I haven't wake up yet, he's gone. After I sound asleep, he come home.

SL: That's not enough sleep.

Donna F: But that's what they did.

DC: The least is 18 hours.

Donna F: Pretty much 5 am to midnight. And Saturday and Sunday. He didn't stop working on Sundays half a day until I was probably in middle school. Middle school before he started coming home in the afternoon earlier to do *yu chie* [riding in car]. So he would work all Sunday morning, too and he would come home for lunch and then we would be able to go out. You know, he would take us riding and stuff. But that wasn't until I was like 10 or 11 years old.

DC: I think later.

Donna F: Wasn't until much later before he started to back off.

DC: Sunday just go back to clean the machine and change the water.

NE: Would you come into Chinatown on Sunday?

Donna F: Yeah. I remember when we were younger, seeing a couple of movies before they tore it down for the expressway.

DC: Gotta shop for Chinese food.

SL: Did you just shop once a week? Was that enough to keep you going for the whole week?

DC: Yeah. Once a week. Sunday.

SL: Did you do anything else in Chinatown or mostly just shop, and go to movies?

DC: Only shopping until Mary was 4 or 5 before I start in Mary Knoll Sister. Just start from alphabet. Start from alphabet! If I have some kind of education background before, I would learn very fast.

SL: Well, the alphabet is different...

Donna F: Yeah, but once you learn it, you can self-study.

DC: Learn it, self study, easier than Chinese.

SL: Yeah. So did you have any time to practice [English]?

DC: Yeah, at home, take care of the kids, get them all sleep at once. Usually I make them all sleep at once, just like the army. Everybody sleep.

SL: Then you have a little time to yourself?

DC: Yeah, once they sleep I can do anything.

NE: Did you all sleep in one room?

Donna F: The girls did. Once we had a house in Somerville, he had a separate room. My brother had a separate room.

SL: And how about cooking? How did you learn to cook?

DC: You don't have to learn! You grow up in China, 6 years old you start cooking! So that's why, Linda, the youngest, she doesn't like to go to laundry, make lunch herself, I prepare everything. She's in the first grade, she start making her lunch. Come home and then go to school. Because I put something in the pilot light, wrapped in aluminum and from the freezer—refrigerator, and by the time she come home just hot enough to heat. And give her the key.

Donna F: 'Cause she's a lot younger. When we were growing up, we would just

go to the laundry to eat lunch from school because school didn't serve lunch. It was not until the middle school, you know, 7th grade, before you could eat lunch at school. So all the way through 6th grade you had to go home to eat. So we would just run down to the laundry to have lunch. Quick, and then run back to school. But when she [Linda] was growing up she didn't want to go down to the laundry to eat lunch. So Mom would leave her lunch. My Mom used to make us chicken sandwiches all the time. I didn't eat school lunches. We all had chicken sandwiches so I think my little sister said at one point, can I have anything but chicken?!

DC: She's the only one complain.

Donna F: When we grew up, that's what you [are given to] eat, that's what you eat.

DC: Actually, it's better for you. That's the best kind of meat.

Donna F: Every morning she would steam the chicken and chop it up and everything, put mayonnaise, make us a sandwich and off we went to school with the sandwich.

SL: A lot of work for you.

DC: No.

Donna F: We had full breakfasts in the morning, oatmeal or eggs. Come home from school she'd have steamed egg or something for us to have for a snack.

SL: That's very nice!

DC: For me, take care of kids, that's one thing I like. If they not throw big tantrum. I enjoy little kids.

SL: That's nice. We just got a box of cereal.

DC: No, they never ate cereal I don't think.

Donna F: No, we never had cereal.

NE: Did you have oatmeal?

Donna F: Yeah, we had oatmeal. Yeah, but she would do it special. She made oatmeal and put egg in it. So it's more substantial. So that's the way I make my oatmeal. My kids love it. They only like it with the egg in it.

DC: Tastes better. And good nutrition.

Donna F: So we didn't have American meals and stuff until I went off to college. Didn't even encounter that kind of stuff until we went off to college. It was always rice. You know, growing up, sometimes when we were older, you leave to go to New York for a day trip on a Sunday, and she'd have a full meal—rice and



vegetables. That's what you ate before you left to go to New York. And she'd pack up a thing for lunch. So, that's how we grew up.

SL: Isn't that wonderful.

DC: Yeah, I do things—actually don't have to force me. Customer sometimes when my husband's not there, they ask me, "Do your husband make you work like that? Did he ever take you to the restaurant?" He take me, I don't want to go! [Laughs.] It's easier, it's cheaper in house because a Chinese lady—how we were brought up—everything try to be the best for the family. Not like here, some lady selfish, say "I want this, I want that," and, if not, divorce. But we work very hard for the family. If you have to. So they ask me. Sometimes I have the kid on my back too. They thought I wouldn't be working that hard [unless] my husband force me. So when he's not there, they ask me.

Donna F: They want to see if she's abused.

DC: Yeah, the old days... the kids—it's a hassle to take a bunch of kids out. He wants to go out, I don't.

SL: Did you go out sometimes?

DC: Yeah, sometimes. But not as often as if I like[d] to go out.

NE: So where did you go when you went out?

DC: Chinatown.

Donna F: Chinatown. And *Cha li ho bien*. Charles River. Later on when we were older we would go there for picnics.

SL: Was there any place good around Somerville [to go]?

DC: Yeah, Powderhouse Park. They have something there, climb the rocks.

Donna F: Yeah, for us kids. We used to think it was huge. Go back there and look at it, "oh my god, that's so little!"

DC: They run around and they climb the rocks there.

Donna F: And you could sled there in the winter. But going with the family and stuff, my Dad loved to drive. So when we were older—picnics on the Charles. We'd go up to Stoneham—there was Buttricks, the ice cream store.

SL: I remember Buttricks. But a different one.

Donna F: Yeah, we'd drive there on the side roads and get ice cream. And get eaten by mosquitoes. And I remember later on when we were older being brought to the movies—the drive-in. Because Dad would be done with work and he'd take us to a drive-in.

DC: They'd sleep in the back.

Donna F: Having the laundry was nice—since my Dad had to do deliveries, we always had a station wagon. We went to beach... You could stretch out in back.

NE: Did you learn how to drive?

DC: Yeah, I did. [Before] I had a bad concussion. In Somerville—the old house—fell all the way downstairs headfirst. I got bad concussion. The dizziness last me for decades. Now still a little tail of it once in a while. When I feel dizzy, I get scared.

NE: What year was that?

DC: 1956, I fell.

Donna F: Pretty much right after we moved in.

DC: Yeah, that year.

NE: Did you get your driver's license before that?

DC: Yeah, I was driving already, but after I fell I was scared to even sit in the car. Otherwise, they would go Chinese school if I didn't have the accident. I would have driven them. She liked Chinese school.

SL: Could you get in on public transportation?

Donna F: We did, but at that time, the concussion was so bad, she couldn't go out, sometimes she was dizzy.

DC: For a couple of years I was in bed a lot. [Even] after a couple years, I can't talk to people standing up. Sit down. If talk too much I feel like I slide down under the table—tired. If I lean on something, I can talk to people on the street. If there's a light pole or something. Otherwise, "Hi! Bye!" And going into the market sometimes I load up on groceries I feel so unsteady, can't wait anymore in the long line. I put everything back and just get out of there. Because that accident really give me a hard time.

NE: So your husband is not alive.

Donna F: No.

NE: When did he die?

DC: '85.

NE: How old was he when he died?

DC: 62. Because not in Social Security yet.

NE: Oh, he missed his Social Security. That's too bad. Did he die suddenly?

Donna F: No, it was cancer. It was over 8 years.

NE: That's too bad.

SL: How was your experience living and working in Somerville? You had regular customers?

DC: Yeah, customers, that part kinda' good, you get conversation with them some-times. Some customers very nice.

SL: So you felt comfortable... I don't know if there were other Chinese Americans living in Somerville. Did it feel comfortable?

Donna F: There were none.

DC: It kind of isolated feel. Kind of isolated.

Donna F: I mean there were good times and bad times, you know, like anywhere else you have good people and people who were ignorant.

DC: But we have a car, they are lucky, they grow up with some Chinese kids. Like my landlady is Chinese, so they grow up together. The kids very close in ages. My three older ones and her three kids—she only had three, but later on I had four—so three and three always play together. Because we don't save enough money for a down payment so you can't buy a house. Not like the people in the army—they get better treatment. But my husband didn't go to the army. So we wait until we save enough down payment then we bought a house. Otherwise with the four-room single house with the cousin, live three years. The landlord in Cambridge has three floors. We have top floor so we live there five years.

SL: Do you remember her name?

DC: Yeah, her English name is Claire. Claire Chin.

Donna F: Philip and Claire Chin. He owned a laundry in Harvard Square.

DC: That's why we know them. Otherwise we don't know them. Because my husband collect their shirt to come back to press.

NE: Are they still alive?

Donna F: Yup. Yeah, they live in Arlington.

DC: We both learned [English] in Mary Knoll Sisters. That's why I get to learn. If I by myself, my husband still not let me go. Because we both want to go. So the two husbands take turn to drive us, drop us off, bring us back. And the kids—leave them there—another Mary Knoll Sister take care of the kids. That's why we can go.

NE: Was that your main social activity then, to come in to Chinatown and go to Mary Knoll's and learn English?

DC: Yeah.

SL: I'd like to know if you ever closed the laundry.

DC: No, until later, until he is sick, then we close. When he get cancer we take less customers.

Donna F: He sold it to the wash—Winn Cleaners—who did our wash. So Winn Cleaners is there now. They took it over.

NE: So it's still there.

Donna F: It's still there. I wonder if it's still Bob. I don't know if it's the same owner or not. It used to be... later on, a restaurant had the corner store next to us and right after him was the funeral parlor who we were friends with—they were always very, very nice to us. And the back to this laundry is a very narrow alley, just fits some garbage cans and the station wagon just barely fits. And then there's a huge driveway that abuts the garage for the funeral parlor. So the hearses and things were all in the back. I don't know what it is now. I'm sure it's all changed. And there was a variety store on the end—it was a bakery next to us later for a while too until I think she got sick. She had a really nice bakery. She gave us all the leftovers when she couldn't sell them. It was great. That's when I was a lot older. I think I was already in college.

SL: So what year did you sell the laundry then?

Donna F: 1982. 1981?

DC: When Dad sick. Before he died, we sold it. I can't do it by myself.

NE: What kind of cancer did he have?

DC: Lymphoma.

SL: So you kept it a long time, into the 1980s.

Donna F: Yeah, and it was just starting to be lucrative. Just. And my Dad sold it for so little it was ridiculous. Because by then he wasn't even thinking.

NE: Do you have any idea what he sold it for?

Donna F: Yeah, something like \$4,000.

DC: Probably less than that. At the most, a couple thousand. I said, how can you do things like that?

Donna F: He didn't even count the retail that was up in the racks that people didn't pick up yet.

DC: I said nobody do that, you should talk it over. "You lucky somebody buy it," that's what he thinks. Because other laundries are not like our laundry. Other laundries small, not much business, they all close out.

Donna F: Yeah, and they don't have machines or anything. Ours was a big shop, comparatively.

NE: Was there anything in the basement?

Donna F: Yeah, all the machinery. When you go down to the basement, it's all the machinery and all the boilers that keep the machines going. So there's a lot of boilers down there because the machines are all oil fed. So there's oil tanks and boilers.

DC: Very smelly down there. So strong. Insecticides. To make sure no cockroaches get into people's bundles. Then they don't come back, you know? So everyone comes to squirt it.

Donna F: So my Dad was down there a lot.

DC: I can't stay down there 10 minutes, but he has to do it all the time.

SL: So, the laundry gets very hot?

Donna F: Oh yeah, really hot in the summertime. Well over 110 degrees.

DC: It broke the thermometer.

Donna F: Yeah, it just burst the top. The machines are all very very hot.

DC: But good thing we have cross ventilation. We put three fans near the back door to pull the air.

SL: So eventually you got air conditioning, right?

Donna F: No, no air conditioning.

DC: How can you do that? You can't put one to cool enough if you shut the door.

Donna F: I take the heat very well, but my sister looked like she was going to die.

DC: Look like a tomato.

NE: So the [machines were run on] oil? Were they coal when you first moved in?

DC: I don't know. Maybe they convert.

Later on when I buy the electric frying pan, I don't cook there anymore, I cook here, let the door down. Use that with the electric frying pan, and use lots of paper.... It's so easy, save me so lot of time. Don't have that much washing, just the dishes and the pots. It splash all over the papers, just fold it up and dump it. So handy, temperature control.

Donna F: All the employees loved her cooking.

NE: Oh, you had to cook for them, too.

DC: Oh yeah, you have to. You have to feed them. The Chinese—if there's no meal they don't want to come.

Donna F: They ate all their meals there.

DC: My husband want to...

Donna F: ...treat them well. Yeah, because they talk among themselves and they knew that they were treated very well. They loved my Dad because my Dad was fair.

DC: And get along with the kids Sometimes when we go out they have no place to go if they don't go gamble, bring them along too. Go to New York for *nim cha* [*dim sum*], brought them there and the police said my husband drive too fast. "You have your whole family in the back, all your kids!" They look like his kids. They all young boys.

NE: So you did go to New York to go to Chinatown?

DC: Yeah, here before, you don't find anything. New York you go dim sum. More things and also roast duck. Here you can't buy a good duck. Go there, after dim sum, buy a duck and come back same day.

DC: We take those guys to go to the beach too.

NE: What beach did you go to?

Donna F: Revere Beach! And Nantasket.

DC: Because our car is station wagon, can hold a lot of people.

Donna F: Everyone would pile in. Because anyone could sit in the back because you just fold down the seat.

DC: Before. Now you can't do that—whole load of kids in the back.

Donna F: We'd have two other families of kids with us. Because we were the only one with the car [station wagon].

Donna F: As soon as we were old enough to get a license, we had a license. My Dad taught us to drive when we were 15, so we could deliver. I did the most delivering. I was around more because my brother ending up going to private school.

NE: So how did your brother end up going to private school?

Donna F: Because he was smart and some of the teachers said he was really smart and could get a scholarship.

DC: [They said] "this boy have to go to private school, stay in Somerville, what a waste!" The teachers convinced my husband.

NE: Where did everybody go to college?

Donna F: My brother went to Harvard, my sister went to Tufts, my youngest sister went to Stanford. I went to BU.

SL: All went to good schools. You must be very proud.

DC: I consider lucky. I don't have to yell at them to do homework either. They all good students. I know some Chinese mothers, their kids just don't want to do homework. They just don't use their brain. Very small numbers they add it wrong. "You do it wrong!" Knock their heads.

Donna F: Our parents were always pretty encouraging of whatever we wanted to do. More modern. At least my mom was more modern. My Dad was a little old fashioned, but he definitely knew the worth of education. Actually, I didn't want to go off to college, but he was pretty insistent. So I only applied to one school figuring if I didn't get in I wouldn't have to go!

SL: But then you got in.

Donna F: Yeah, I got in.

SL: So I think, just sort of looking back on your life, do you feel that the laundry was able to provide you a good living?

DC: Yeah, consider, you compare to other people, it's pretty good. Some bad ones, you just can't believe would be that bad. Husband go to gamble or go to Chinatown just hanging around. So every day you work in the laundry and sleep in the laundry. That lady—my friend's sister—she hung herself. So a lot of people, if it's a small laundry they live in the laundry, but I was lucky and I never live in the laundry.

Donna F: Although I was envious—'cause we went to Chinese school for one year—of all the kids who lived in Chinatown. Because obviously there was nobody in Somerville.

NE: Just one year? Kwong Kow school?

Donna F: Yeah.

DC: Yeah, when they went to school in Somerville they the only Chinese there. They're mostly Catholic people.

Donna F: There were a few people here and there who were very nice but you did endure a lot of racial slurs, a lot of chasing, you know the usual stuff that kids do. But I had a couple of good, best friends.

SL: I think Somerville used to be kind of tough back then.

Donna F: Yeah, very tough. Especially on the east side. We were on the west side luckily, but yeah, the east side was very tough. I'm glad we didn't live on the east side, although I did have a few nice schoolmates from the east side. Where we were wasn't too bad. Powderhouse was rather wealthy. That's where all the big houses were. That was very lucrative during Halloween.

SL: So I'm curious to know in terms of cultural traditions, did you maintain some Chinese traditions?

Donna F: She's very modern.

DC: I never take anything. How can you follow—one year you move three places. Like my mother, Toisanese. I don't know the people there, the Toisanese, so I can't get into my brain. So I believe those things just extra. Go to Jiangsi province, Guangxi. Very superstitious, not see the doctor. Not many boys can grow up there. I think the girls tougher. Boys, everybody named "Chiang," the name 'long. They thought, name them like that, then they can last. Every girl named "to get a brother." Just waiting for a boy!

Donna F: So she's very modern. She doesn't follow superstitions. My cousin would come to our house to wash her hair over New Year's since her mom didn't allow her.

SL: And you did Halloween...

Donna F: We did everything. We did all the American [holidays]. My Dad loved the holidays.

DC: Partly, I go too many places. Another part is my father's influence. My father doesn't believe superstitions. And the ancestor pictures to worship and sometimes when they go, the papers, rip rip rip—my mom's scared! My mom's superstitious. He always said, everybody takes the chicken to worship and they don't know how to enjoy themselves! The chicken's fresh, and they don't eat it. In Jiangsi, Gongsi, fifteen days before they eat the chicken. But good thing it's cold there, don't need the refrigerator. Otherwise the chicken spoils. And they also steam the rice, the whole tank, steam for days. Every day when eat, steam over. And wash their hair on certain days. We wash any time, any day.

NE: Did you ever go back to China to visit?

DC: Yeah, a few times. First time, '83. Go before Dad died. He's old fashioned. His parents are very important. The important thing you want to go back to look at their grave.

SL: One more question: when you sold the laundry, did you retire at that point?

DC: I go Filene's and work. He sick of course he have to retire.

NE: How long did you work for Filene's?

DC: I don't remember. Many years, maybe 10 or 15 years you get a discount for life, and I didn't reach that. I get no benefit.

NE: So you took the subway?



DC: No already live in her house by then [in Belmont].

Donna F: When my dad became very sick, they moved into my house. That's when my youngest daughter was born.

DC: Work in Filene's, although my husband is sick, he still can drive. He drop me off, pick me up. In Belmont Center.

NE: So what was your job at Filene's?

DC: I just help in the children's department. Stock, clerical, bills, file papers.

Donna F: Can you imagine a laundry person being stock? Everything was just so. They always knew when she did it.

DC: People say, "Donna's here today."

[Discussion of Donna Fong's brother-in-law who grew up in a laundry in Charlestown.]

Donna F: So when we were doing deliveries we would deliver all over: Charlestown, Everett, Malden, Revere. I mean, because I rode with my Dad [at first] and then eventually I did it all by myself so that it would free my Dad to do other things in the laundry and he didn't have to do deliveries. So he would help me load and when I got to where it is, I could unload. I was just unloading all the time so I could unload those big baskets with all the shirts in them all by myself. That's where those muscles came in! It was good, because I got to drive a lot. I did get stopped a couple of times, looking underaged, but other than that, you know, it was fun. Parts of it were a lot of fun.

DC: Actually the laundry with kids—it is good because they get to see other people in the laundry, the customers—sometimes get bundles for them, sometimes people talk to them. Her older daughter loves there. Watch what you guys do. She wants to learn.

Donna F: It was too bad that my Dad died when he did because I would have loved to bring up my daughter in the laundry. She was only two but she was already up on the counters, counting, looking up the stuff, and she could already recognize the alphabet. And she's curious. It would have been a good life for her to grow up there.

DC: She learned her numbers very early. She talks early—8 months.

Donna F: Her playpen was right there. While we were working, she was right there. She could see the customers coming in, she could see us working, we're talking. And then when we had a break we would play with her, and go through the little books with her. So that's how she picks up the stuff.

NE: So even after college, after you got married, you would come back and work.

Donna F: Oh yeah.

DC: That's why playpens in here. She got the kids already, come to help and bring the kids in. Never have babysit.

NE: That was nice about the laundry. Your parents could keep an eye on you. You were always together.

SL: Did you change things in the later years?

Donna F: No, it stayed the same. The only thing we added was dry cleaning. That's why it started to become lucrative. The dry cleaning brought in money.

SL: But that gets sent out right?

Donna F: Right, it's sent out, and it comes and we just have to package it. But that was what was lucrative. The regular cleaning is not that lucrative.

DC: And also, [my] being a tailor repairing, make clothes and also altering.

Donna F: We all learned how to sew because of her.

SL: So you just taught yourself.

DC: Yeah.

Donna F: She was completely self-taught.

DC: In China when you get the material to do clothes—during the war time, you just change every day, wash it every day. You grow up like that. Not like here you have a whole closetful, a whole drawerful. Even you make it, you make one set of clothes—wear for years. Like here, brand new—“Hey, I don't like it,” throw away, go get new one. Those are the old days during the war—you get enough food to eat, enough clothes, you're lucky.

NE: Did you practice any kind of religion or go to any church?

Donna F: The kids did. We went to a Baptist church in Somerville.

NE: How did that start?

Donna F: Um, neighbors. Neighbors' children. Everyone's Catholic and we said, “Forget that.” There was a family on our street that was Baptist and they went to the Baptist church in Somerville and that's how we joined in the beginning. I actually got baptized.

DC: I don't believe those things.

Donna F: And my husband got baptized as a Catholic so they could play basketball. Because you had to join the church in order to play basketball. But no, neither of us are [religious]. After junior year in high school, I stopped going.

Part of the reason why we went was this reverend who was fantastic. And two preachers who were very charismatic and really nice. They had a lot of youth activities and things. Then after they left and someone else came in, the guy was dry as toast. Really wasn't interesting. But I had a really good friend I met through the church.

SL: [To Donna Chin] I didn't get your maiden name.

DC: Wong Hoi Ching.

SL: Thank you very much.



Donna Chin and her husband in the Toy Sun Laundry, 1960s. Photos courtesy of Donna Fong.





## Carl Fong

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*The following interview was conducted with Carl C. Fong (CF) by Shauna Lo (SL) and Nancy Eng (NE) on December 5, 2012 at the home of Mr. Fong. Carl C. Fong's parents owned Fong Wet Wash near the intersection of Main and Bunker Hill Streets in Charlestown during the late 1940s or early 1950s. Photo above taken by Shauna Lo, 2012.*

CF: Fire away.

SL: I usually start with your family's immigration history. Do you know who the first person in your family was to come to the United States and how and when?

CF: I think my father first came to the country early enough to be in the first World War, which was probably 1910... something like that. And I never listened to what he did [laughs]. I mean when they tell you the old stories, you should have paid attention, but... I think he first came to this country through 'Frisco—because as a kid I remember him always writing letters to people from San Francisco—through New Orleans up to New York and back here. So that must have been the trail that he went. 'Cause, we're Fongs and I think he always said that there were predominantly Fongs on the West Coast—mostly Stockton, CA which is in the northern part on 'Frisco, I think. Because there are not many Fongs on this side—on the Boston side. So, most of the Fongs are on the West Coast. So, from what I recollect he was in World War I 'cause I remember a picture of him in a uniform. And then I remember he worked for a while doing odd [jobs] and then he saved up enough up to go back to China and bring my mother over.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carl's brother, James, read the transcript and had this to add: "Father's birth papers indicate he was born about 1900. I, too, remember the military photo. I believe it was not the U.S. army, it was the Chinese Nationalist army before he left China. He definitely spent his first U.S. time in San Francisco. He told me amusing stories about his first jobs such as bus boy in a San Francisco hospital. He spoke little English and a friendly nurse who gave him advice about doing the job. He said he had a job operating an elevator, and lost it because he couldn't get the car to stop even with the floor."

NE: What year did he go back?

CF: Just before I was born, which was in '38. I think he must have went sometime in the late 30's, or mid-30s, because I think he wanted to get out [of China] before the Japanese were coming. 'Cause that was what everybody was trying to do. As with everybody in those days, everybody's papers were not their real papers. You know, you bought somebody's papers then you came over here and then eventually you got your pink card—nowadays they're your green cards.

SL: Was that how your father was able to come into the country?

CF: Yeah, he bought somebody's papers. He had so many aliases I couldn't keep up with them! He had one for life insurance, and one for social security, and I remember every year he had to sign up for an alien card and really, like four to six names! I never knew why, but as you get older, you figure it out.

NE: So what was the main name he used?

CF: I think he used Chin a lot. I think he bought Chin papers and he was really a Fong. And to get my mother over—I forget what name he used—but she was a Yee. So the real family names are Fong and Yee.

SL: Do you know why your father came to Boston, or how he ended up in Boston?

CF: Just kept looking for work!<sup>2</sup>

SL: Did he know anyone here?

CF: Yes. In those days, you wouldn't go to Milwaukee because there are no Chinese people in Milwaukee. Why would you go there if there were only two or three? So, naturally you gravitate to the bigger cities where the bigger populations where you had a better chance of finding work. He didn't say it, but I could see that's how it worked out.

NE: So they were from Toisan?

CF: Yeah. I haven't been to China yet. I would like to go once my wife retires and make it a trip. I wouldn't go to the villages, because I wouldn't know anybody there. But one of my brothers—number 4—he was in the service and when he had an opportunity to go—when he had rest time—he went to Hong Kong and chased down my grandmother. He went down with this little address down this little alley and he found my grandmother! He had this little slip of paper, and he didn't know how to get around Hong Kong, but he found the apartment! This little apartment with ten people living in it! Eventually they immigrated to New York.

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<sup>2</sup> Carl's brother, James later added: "I believe he had to work his way in stages across the U.S. He took trains and stopped at various cities to work and get enough money to continue east. For example, he told me he worked at a laundry in Cleveland, Ohio on Euclid Ave."

Four of my brothers were in the service at the same time. Numbers 2, 3, 4 and 5. When you get a family of six, like us, everybody was pretty close in years. I think my mother had six boys in 12 years. So there's not much difference age-wise between me and James [the youngest]. I'll be 75 next year, and James is 63. After I was born... I think you start recollecting things when you're probably at the age of 3 or 4? Some kids can remember 2. If I was born in April 1938 and the war started in 1941, I remember I was living in a laundry on Huntington Ave. across from the Y, down by Northeastern [University]. And I distinctly remember at the corner of Huntington Ave. and Mass. Ave. an underpass that wasn't done yet. And I kept that memory in my mind and one day I went down to see the plaque on the bridge and I said, "Yup, it says, built in 1942." So it wasn't something I dreamt up!

SL: Do you know how your father got into the laundry business?

CF: He was working in restaurants and somebody offered him a laundry at 315 Huntington Ave. and in those days everybody who had a laundry, the family lived in the back. The laundry part was probably only 25% of the floor space. The rest in the back was the living area, maybe a third. I think it was called Fong Laundry.

NE: Is the building still there?

CF: Yup.

SL: So it was already a laundry before your father bought it? We have a list of Chinese laundries in New England in 1931 and I wonder if the address is on that list.

NE: We also have directories from 1949 and 1952.

CF: I would say the laundries all petered out by the time I finished high school which was '55. I think by '55 there were very few laundries left. So my recollection of laundries probably starts from when I was 12 years old—1950. Probably 1948 to 1955 would be my laundry years.

I forget how many years we were at Huntington Ave. It was just your typical laundry—took laundry in. And we slept and ate in the back. And a couple of years after that, we moved down the street to Gainsborough Street. There the laundry got bigger. It was bigger, more modern with presses for the shirts and stuff like that. I think it was called Back Bay Laundry.

NE: Do you know what number?

CF: Uh... I know exactly where it is!

NE: Is the building still there?

CF: I think it's still a laundry. A dry cleaner. If you're coming from Huntington Ave., you take the right down Gainsborough, and it's half a block just before the



little alleyway. I still walk those neighborhoods, just for the hell of it. We had that laundry... probably going into the late 40s. Then from that laundry—my father employed some of the local help to do some pressing, and stuff like that—he made enough money from that to buy a house on St. Stephen Street, right behind Symphony Hall.

NE: The helpers you had....?

CF: Some of them were black ladies from the neighborhood and I remember some ridiculous price they were getting, like 7 cents to press a shirt. So the faster they did stuff, the more money they made.

By the late 40s, my father had a gambling habit, so he had a reversal of fortune.

NE: Where did he go gambling, Chinatown?

CF: Yup. Somehow after the laundry/dry cleaner—‘cause I call it dry cleaner—we moved to Charlestown. I think there were only two families in Charlestown that were Chinese at the time.

NE: The Chins?

CF: The Chins were at the other end of town. We were at the Somerville end. The Chins had a big laundry. We never interacted with them ‘cause we stole hubcaps and they went to college! [Laughs.] When we get to Charlestown, that was when my father bought this big laundry where you don’t do laundry. You go pick up at night from all the little places. He had a truck, had a driver, had a helper and you had these big washing machines the size of this table and they’re round. Have you seen some of these? They’re the industrial ones, you’ve probably seen them in schools.

NE: What was the address of the one in Charlestown?

CF: It was just off Main Street. We were probably in the 200s, 300s, the other end from the Chins.

SL: So they didn’t send their wash to you?

CF: No, they used another one. It was run by some Chinese guy based in Malden. The way the laundry works is that you start out when darkness sets in. You take the truck and go to the locales of these towns. The Chinese laundries probably close at 7 o’clock, so you’d be around there at 7, 8, 9 o’clock—starting—to pick up the laundry either in the big canvas bags (depending on the size of the laundry) or those big rolling canvas ones that you see in hotels that people push down [the hall]. And then you sort of plan your route because you were going to, like, 20 to 30 laundries a night to pick up stuff. You would pick up the laundry and bring

'em back. My father and mother, and some helpers too—us!—they would wash 'em and you would deliver them back by early morning.<sup>3</sup>

SL: So you worked all night.

CF: Yah. So after you delivered them, the laundry you picked them up from has to finish them because we delivered it wet. They still have to dry them, iron them, package them. And I remember the difficulties of keeping each laundry's separate from the other customers. And colors... colors would run. Colors were running more in those days! And so there was a lot of technical things. The big washing machines had compartments, too. But that didn't stop the running! So, it was famous for mixing up and losing laundry because you were trying to separate other people's dark stuff from other people's dark stuff. So you had all these things you had to compartmentalize and then put them back together. I remember it was a lot of work for a little money. 'Cause I was probably 10 to 12 when they started doing that and by the time I was 12, I was riding around in the truck helping pick up, and doing stuff like that. Because the people driving the truck weren't family and they couldn't speak Chinese, so they couldn't interact much with the clients, because the clients couldn't speak that much English. So, I was sort of like, the foreman or whatever. That's why I have an innate knowledge of the city, the suburb and its streets. I used to say, "I'm better than a cab driver, I know these streets."

NE: And later did you drive?

CF: I did drive a few shifts, but I also had to keep going to school, too. When we lived on Huntington and Gainsborough, I was too young to do too much work in the laundry and they had help and they didn't have the washing machines, so I did well in school. But once we moved to Charlestown, and these odd hours... and Charlestown wasn't very friendly to Chinese. I remember they always had gang [rivalries] between Charlestown and Everett and Somerville and they would always pick on me until it came time to recruit another fighter. Then I was with them. "OK, grab a bat..." They just needed another hand to go fight! But they stopped picking on me. Being Chinese living in Charlestown... I tell that to my golfing buddies now and they say, "you lived in Charlestown?!!"

NE: So how long did you live in Charlestown?

CF: Probably 3 or 4 years.

NE: So you moved around a lot. Did you go to high school there?

CF: No, I started out in junior high there and went to high school at Boston Tech.

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<sup>3</sup> Carl later told me that he had a huge ring of keys to the laundries so they could let themselves in in the middle of the night to drop off the washed laundry.

By the time I got to high school, my father's bad habit had [caused] us to lose the laundry in Charlestown. So by the time I started going to high school, we were moving to Hudson Street which was in the early to mid '50s. '53, '54, something like that.

NE: So close to when they were tearing it down?

CF: Yeah, we put in a couple of good years.... In those days it wasn't as Chinese as it is now. The South Cove area—we had Jewish people, we had Lebanese people... We had a fun bunch of people! We had black people, we had Egyptian people... this was really a melting pot.

NE: The kind of gambling that people were doing, what kind was it?

CF: Dominoes. And pai giu, and mah jong. Mah jong may seem like an innocent enough game, but if you play for enough dollars per point, it really racks up. And the gambling places... I found a lot of people that I picked up laundry from—the clients. Because they save all their money all year, and on New Year's they go. So these guys are scrimping, working 100 hours a week, come New Year's, they're down there with a couple of hundred dollars, gambling. In those days, that was a lot of money.

And while you're picking up their laundry—I remember their weekly bill would be like \$5, and I remember the highest bill was like \$50. That was the biggest laundry in West Roxbury. There was a Yee laundry in West Roxbury. 55 Centre Street. That was pretty far to go, but for a big customer, we'd go. Most of the inner city where we collected laundry was the North End. There were probably about four laundries in the North End alone that we collected from.

And then where Charles River Park is was the West End. That was like the North End. Lots of nice people, little streets. Between those two entities—and Beacon Hill—there were a lot of laundries. And Roxbury, and Mattapan. Didn't go into Cambridge much. Somerville was where Donna's mother<sup>4</sup> was: 721 Broadway. And there was another one at 99 Broadway, and another on Church St...

NE: How long did you live on Hudson Street?

CF: Probably six years? I'm not sure. We lived on the even numbers side, I think, which they took first.<sup>5</sup> Because there was Albany street behind us where all the freight trains were housed there. We could bike at night down Albany Street, race and stuff like that. Then when they started taking the even numbered side of the

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<sup>4</sup> Carl is referring to Donna Fong's mother; Donna Fong is his sister-in-law.

<sup>5</sup> Part of Hudson St. was demolished for highway construction.

street, everybody was in a quandary, because now you had to go look for affordable housing again. And it was getting very hard to find.

NE: What number were you?

CF: We were 112. Luckily, my father found something on the odd numbered side, across the street, at 123.

SL: So, was losing the laundry in Charlestown devastating for the family?

CF: I think my brothers were a little too young to realize what was happening. Because when we were in Charlestown, in the big laundry, we all lived in the back. There was a lot of room back there. Eventually my father did buy a house in Charlestown before we moved [to Chinatown] but his habit caught up to him again.

NE: So your mother must not have been very happy!

CF: Well, she had enough to worry about with six boys! And I remember in the laundry... if I'm 10 or 12, everybody else is younger than me, and my mother is trying to keep track of all these little kids amongst this industrial environment. When you're doing laundry, you had buckets and buckets of soap and toxic stuff—lye. But to do commercial laundry, you had to have those [substances]. And I'm sure some of my brothers [were getting into trouble].

SL: So, how late did you stay up doing the deliveries?

CF: I probably stayed up until 1:00, 2:00 in the morning, and then school would start. I would miss a lot of school. Sometimes there would be mix-ups getting the right laundry [to the right customers]. I remember—and this got to be expensive—by then the truck drivers—you know, they only work the night hours and by daytime they're gone. And I find myself riding in a cab trying to deliver laundry. That made it very expensive! 'Cause I couldn't drive the truck, I was too young. And you're trying to keep the customers happy.

SL: So your father left that up to you?

CF: Yeah, 'cause he still had to coordinate things in the laundry.

SL: What kind of hours did he keep in the laundry?

CF: He didn't really have to start working until 9:00 at night after you picked up the first load of laundry. So he had all day and part of the evening to do whatever he wanted to do.

SL: That's weird hours, huh?

CF: Yeah, it's weird hours! And when I started going to high school, we were probably out of the laundry business by then, 'cause my father lost everything. That's

why we were on Hudson St. renting from friends. By then my father was working as a waiter at various places which I imagine was hard to do after owning a big laundry.

SL: So you lost the house as well?

CF: Yeah. But I think the laundry experience set you up to do a lot of other things in life if you have to do it at that particular age, from 12 to 15 or 16... I'll say it: I thought it was fun! To give all that responsibility to a kid. And I remember every week after school I would have to make the same trip that the truck did during the pick up to collect the money from the laundries. And I would utilize the T to get to the North End, West End, Cambridge... take the T all over and collect money. And I was coming home at the end of the day with a bag full of money. With lots and lots of money! A brown bag full of money! And I felt bad when some of the guys I was collecting only like, \$5 from, said, "Gee, I'm sorry, you came all this way and I don't have it this week." There were quite a few people like that. You know, it was only \$5 or \$10 and they didn't have it that week.

SL: Was there ever a problem collecting money that was owed to you?

CF: No, they'd say come back in a couple of days or something like that. I remember the guys with the smaller bills had more trouble paying than the guys with the higher bills. 'Cause maybe they weren't businessmen. Or maybe they went to gamble too, I don't know! But I remember thinking, like, "Gee, you don't have \$5?" I would say that a lot of the laundry guys were single, older men.

SL: Even at that time?

CF: Yeah, even at the time. Very few I remember seeing a wife or children in the back. A lot of them were just single older guys in bad health.

SL: How did your family do after you moved to Chinatown?

CF: It was very good for the family because that's where the rest of my brothers made their friendships because now we were among Chinese people. And you're hanging around the neighborhood, playing ball, and going to school with everybody.

SL: So it was nice for the boys.

CF: Yeah. There's a strange thing when you're the oldest brother of many younger brothers, which is that so many people know you but you don't know them because your brothers made all these friends and they all know who you are, but you don't know them!

SL: So how long did you stay living on Hudson Street?

CF: Must be into the '60s by then. Around 8 to 10 years, and then when they finally took the other side, we went to St. Botolph Street. Again, you had to know somebody who owns the building.

NE: Where were you going to school by then?

CF: I went to Boston Tech which was where the Prudential Center is. That was before the Prudential Center. It was a trade school. I liked Boston Tech because it was a very diverse school. You had to be at a certain level to get in to Boston Tech. You had to be at the upper part of your classes.

SL: You were able to get in despite missing all that school?

CF: [Laughing] Yes!

NE: What kind of work did you do after?

CF: Well, after that I went to Wentworth for two years and got my an associate's degree in electrical engineering. I went to work in a couple engineering companies and I decided I didn't like engineering that much and I went to art school. I became a technical illustrator and that was more fun.

SL: So, how much did your parents emphasize education for you and your siblings?

CF: Yeah, they said, "you got to go to school, you got to go to school." And even though I was working, I went to school. I was pretty sure I didn't want to go to a four year college 'cause I would probably be bored. I was pretty sure I didn't like liberal arts as much. If you went to a trade or vocational school, you would probably do more along the engineering lines. My parents stressed education for all my brothers, too. My second brother went to Northeastern and BU [Boston University]. He never finished but he went into the service. He had problems in the service and we think he passed away from agent orange. 'Cause he always had these nightmares.

Number 3, Barry, he finished BU. He took liberal arts, and when he finished BU, he got into finance in the Boston area. He did that for a year or two, but he wanted to do something else with his life. All his friends were going to 'Frisco and never came back. One day we were going to 'Vegas on a gambling junket set up by one of the guys in Chinatown. He went out to 'Vegas with us and never came back. He just kept going. He wound up in 'Frisco managing pension funds for a union. But it was high pressure and he retired at an early age.

Number 4 is my brother, Eddie. He went to Brighton High and specialized in auto mechanics. He hung around for a year or two and then he and some of his friends joined the service. Barry was on the ground in Vietnam. Eddie was on a troop ship

circling Vietnam, ready to be deployed. He's the one who went to Hong Kong to chase down my grandmother.

Number 5 is Georgie, he finished high school and stayed in the restaurant game as most of his friends did. He made an effort to start up a restaurant and wasn't successful, so he is now in New Hampshire and works for the Catholic college up there, in Manchester. St. Anselm? He's banquet manager up there and ready to retire. He said that was the best job he ever got. For the first time he was working for a *lo fan*<sup>6</sup>—you get vacation, benefits, 40-hour week! That brings us to James who is retired now. He was a financial guy, too. He got his undergrad [degree] at Northeastern<sup>7</sup>, I think, and then he went to Stanford for his graduate [degree]. He really liked Stanford until he found out that one of the benefactors was the guy that took advantage of all the Chinese during the railroad.

SL: Yeah, Leland Stanford.

CF: Yeah, he liked Stanford until he found out that! [Laughs.]

NE: So, did he get a business degree?

CF: Yeah, he got his master's out there.<sup>8</sup> He came back and worked at DEC, Digital Equipment Corporation, doing finances. So that's mostly it! I gave you some laundry and some personal [history]!

NE: Did your mother ever work outside the house after you moved to Chinatown?

CF: Yeah, after we got to Hudson St. and the boys were self-sufficient, she worked as a seamstress. She went to town and took some of the stuff home. She had a sewing machine at home. She liked doing that, it got her out to meet more people. By the time she was a seamstress, she met a lot of ladies in town whose sons were friends of my brothers', so they had that in common.

NE: So it was of nice they moved to Chinatown after being kind of isolated in Charlestown.

CF: Yeah. Like my brother who lives in Belmont—his kids have no chance of interacting with [Chinese] people in a neighborhood scenario. The only time they see [Chinese] is probably when they go to college. I really liked being social, hanging out, and I liked the melting pot [in Chinatown] before the expressway. We all played together—Jews, Lebanese....

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<sup>6</sup> A non-Chinese person (usually a white person).

<sup>7</sup> James added: "When I graduated from Northeastern, Father and Mother got to attend the graduation ceremony at Boston Garden. I think they enjoyed seeing me get the diploma even more than I did."

<sup>8</sup> James clarified that he received a master's degree in economics from Stanford University and later a master's degree in business from Boston University.

NE: What is your wife's name?

CF: I married an Italian girl. Her name is AJ for short.

NE: How did you meet her?

CF: At work.

NE: So, she's still working.

CF: Yeah. After she retires maybe we'll take a trip to China.

NE: How did your parents react to your getting married?

CF: Well, this is my second wife, my first wife was German American. I put in seven years in that one. You got to understand, in my age group when we were growing up, there was not that many young Asian women around. The pickins' were slim!

SL: When you were growing up, did you speak Chinese at home?

CF: Yeah. My mother used to always say, if you don't speak [Chinese] around the dinner table, you're not eating. I remember going to high school and junior high... you get out of school at 2:30 or 3:00, and then you go start Chinese school at 4:00. You go back into town on Oxford Street—Chinese school was on Oxford Street. Upstairs from Sun Sun [market]. That was where the big hall was before the Merchant's Building. I remember there was a funeral home there, and you had all these weeping ladies dressed in black doing this one week mourning because people had a long way to come. The Chinese school was upstairs. And that was a little hard, doing American school to 2:30, 3:00 then coming to do Chinese school 'cause you're pretty tired by then and it's a quick switch. And the switch to learning Chinese in the school... I don't remember it as Toisan, I think it was Cantonese. I never made it out of the fourth grade. [Laughs.] Same with a lot of my friends! That's why it's hard for me to speak conversational Chinese because I lack [vocabulary]. I can say, "What did you do today," "What did you buy," but if I want to get into a geopolitical discussion, I'm lost!

I appreciate the laundry experience... I think it builds you up to be a little more self-assured and it does make you meet other people. I was sad to see the laundries go because I always thought, "What happened to all those old guys?" They didn't have much money to start with. And I get a little sad when I walk around downtown... I always point out, "that used to be a laundry", "that used to be a laundry" and wondered where did those guys go? Or where did their families go? But I understand some of the families were pretty successful because the kids went to college. There are some success stories coming out of the laundries because some people did make a good business, and made enough to send their



kids to college. They scrimped and saved and did without, and I hope their kids understand that! [They] don't have any tuition bills! Although I remember when I went to Wentworth it was only \$750 a year. Unbelievable! You can't buy books for that anymore. Now it's \$50,000 a year and you're being taught by assistants! [Laughs.]

SL: Well, thank you, it was great talking to you.







## James Dong

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*The following interview was conducted with James Dong (JD) by Shauna Lo (SL) on August 20, 2014 at the home of Mr. Dong's daughter, Deborah, in Brookline, MA. James Dong's parents owned a laundry at 336 Blue Hill Avenue in Roxbury, MA from the 1930s to the 1960s. Photo above taken by Shauna Lo, 2014.*

Also participating: Deborah Dong [Debbie], James' daughter

SL: I'd like to start with some family background. Who was the first in your family to come to the United States?

JD: I'm not 100% sure, but my father was here and his brother was here—who came first, I don't know.

SL: Did they come straight to Boston? Do you know anything about how they got here?

JD: Well, my father was actually in California, OK? I do know he said he was there when they had the earthquake. In all fairness, I don't know whether he was, but I know that he had spoken of it. My father always said he came from China and was in California at the time of the earthquake which was 19— whenever it was...

SL: 1906. So they were definitely in America by 1906.

JD: Yes. And my mother—my father met my mother through an arrangement through a family friend or something like that by the Dong Family Association in Seattle. My mother actually was adopted by a family in China, and again, I don't know much of the history beyond that. But I do know that they got married, and Pop used to work for On Leong<sup>1</sup> and my understanding was that his job was like an enforcer! But the thing that he mentioned to me was: the day he got married he stopped everything and became a family man. I think he went to Cleveland

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<sup>1</sup> On Leong was an aid association that was also involved with organized crime.

and had a laundry there for a while, and then went to Buffalo, New York and ran a restaurant for a while. And then [he got married in Seattle and] they came to Boston and worked for his brother... and then the brother went to New York and he took over the laundry. This was back in 1932 or something like that, just before Davey was born. And that's the history that I have of them. It's somewhat hazy, though.

SL: They had moved around a few times.

JD: Yes. I think they came to Boston because my uncle was in Boston at that time and he had the laundry.

SL: Do you know how your mother was able to come into the country?

JD: She was adopted, and the father was here. It was a pretty wealthy family.

SL: They lived here?

JD: In Seattle.

SL: Oh, interesting.

Debbie: She was adopted by the Chin family and the father worked for—perhaps it was—the Canadian Pacific Railroad. As I understand it, he was an intermediary for the railroad company and for the Chinese who were coming to the Seattle area. And then he sent for his family to come to the U.S., as a merchant in 1918.

JD: And my mother's sister—that would be Aunt Betty.

Debbie: [Searching through a stack of photos:] Here's my grandmother's naturalization [certificate]. So she was born somewhere in China, in the Guangdong area.

SL: So was your father's family also from the Guangdong area?

JD: Yes, but I don't know the name of the village.

Debbie: We went there. I'll look it up. I believe it's South Sea village in Toisan.

JD: [Holding up a photo]: There's the laundry back there.... and my older brother. That's 336 Blue Hill Avenue. And that's me in the middle.

SL: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

JD: Three brothers. Two have passed away. My mother had my older brother, David; me; and my younger brother, Eddie within a three or four year period, and ten years later—Stephen!

SL: So what are your earliest memories of the laundry? You lived upstairs, is that correct?

JD: Let me show you. [He has made a diagram of the laundry.] One quarter of it—this area here—was a candy store. That's why if you look at my teeth, they're all

fillings. For a penny you used to get a whole bunch of stuff! Anyway, the door here would go to the candy store... the door here would go to the laundry. This here was a little partition where the window was and my mother would put myself and Eddie in it as a playpen. And people used to walk by the window, and they would see us and play with us and that's how we got to know May McCarthy and a few other people. They came in the store and sort of behaved like a Jewish godmother or something like that. I mention Jewish because this whole Blue Hill Avenue at that time was a Jewish neighborhood. And I would go to school on a Jewish holiday and the only people that would be there would be me, my brother and maybe one of two Italian kids, and that's it. The whole school was empty! Because it was a 95% Jewish neighborhood. We were raised basically in a Jewish environment. I knew more about Jewish culture than I knew about Chinese culture.

Anyway, you go in and there's a counter here and the ironing tables. You have three of them and then in the back would be a sink, a refrigerator, and this area here, this was where the bedrooms were. Initially we didn't live upstairs. We lived in this one quarter here. After then after that when the upstairs became available, we went up there and we had the whole back of the apartment. The front was a corsetiere—what do you call it?—a woman who sold brassieres and corsets. We were in the back and we had two bedrooms. There'd be Mom, Pop, and the youngest brother in one bedroom; Stephen had his crib. The other three brothers would be in the other bedroom. And never, ever—the whole time that we were there—did we think we were poor. I mean, that's the way it was.

Over here [downstairs] was the dining area. We had two or three workers. My mother would feed everyone over here. Sometimes we had a big pot and everybody would be eating.

SL: Were the workers Chinese?

JD: No, they were Caucasian.<sup>2</sup> They were like part of the family, OK?

SL: Men or women?

JD: All men. [To daughter] Remember Louis Levine? He went to my wedding.

Debbie: I remember the name. I know we have pictures of him in the album. But I don't remember meeting him.

SL: Why don't you tell me the names of your brothers, so I have them.

JD: OK, David, the oldest one. And then me, the second one, and then Edward, and then Stephen. Stephen is a doctor today. Well, actually he's retired now.

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<sup>2</sup> Later James added that one of their workers was black.

Debbie: So, David was born in '32, you [James] were born in '34, I believe Uncle Eddie was born in '35, and Stephen was born in '49.

JD: Stephen and Prince Charles were the same year.

SL: '49? Then that's 14 years difference!

JD: OK, 10, 14, whatever. I knew it was a big difference.

SL: So, your mother would cook for everyone?

JD: Oh yeah. She worked in the laundry, too, but mostly she'd be cooking and things like that.

SL: How old were you when you started having to work [in the laundry]? Do you remember?

JD: OK, I can remember.... I would say, 10 or 11 years old. Oh, I forgot to put the pressing machines [in the diagram]. The first machine you would take the shirt when it was damp and you would do the collar and the cuffs. The second machine would do the front. And the third machine would do the back. And the fourth would do the sleeves. So it's a four-machine process, but you have two people doing it: one in the front, one in the back. Or one could do the whole thing.

SL: So there's four machines or two?

JD: Two, actually three. You need the one that does the sleeves. It's like a chimney stack and you put the sleeves on it. So, as a kid I used to do those things. My older brother and I used to sometimes have a contest to see who's faster. You know, you're supposed to leave the press down for 3 or 4 seconds so it would dry. Well he'd be trying to go too fast, and I'd be trying to catch up and go faster than him and so much by the time we'd finish, everything had to be done over again because it wasn't done properly. Instead of waiting 3 or 4 seconds, my brother only waited only 2 seconds. I guess we were kind of young when we were doing that.

Debbie: I remember you said that grandpa was really upset when you did that.

JD: Yeah, very upset. Because basically you have to do it all over again. But you know, from the time the merchandise gets checked in, they have to be separated, and somehow my father knew where everything should go and what belonged to whom. I think based on the laundry marks to identify the items. And then they would be sent out to be washed.

SL: Do you write something on the clothes?

JD: On the clothes. On the collar itself. When I say laundry mark it identifies the laundry to the person. So at the end, when everything's finished you [sort by laundry mark] for packaging. Then when the thing is wrapped up, the matching

laundry ticket would be put on—it would have the laundry mark on the ticket itself, as well as the ticket number of the person coming in. My father, as I recall, always—not always—but a lot of the customers coming in, he knew them just by the mark, he wouldn't need the ticket. So that's how the laundry mark works. Say a person comes into the laundry, say he had shirts, sheets, pants, underwear—I would say, 75% were shirts. It's not like today. A shirt, you can wear it everyday—you wash it and wear it again. In those days, you can't wear it unless you iron it. So the laundry was a good business in those days. So, every item that comes in, the first thing you do is my mother and my father would sit down, take the laundry, look at it. If there's a new shirt they would put the same laundry mark on the new shirt. They identify everything by the laundry mark. The laundry mark is the key.

SL: Is there a place where the dirty laundry goes?

JD: All the dirty laundry would be thrown under the ironing tables. Then when they take them out, they would go through everything on top of them, and throw them into the basket to be sent out to be washed.

SL: Do you know where the clothes went to be washed?

JD: No, I don't know. Some wholesale washer. But after they came back, a lot of the time we would still have to go through the process of wringing them out so they would be more dry to be pressed.

SL: There's a machine that spins it?

JD: Yeah, like a spinner, OK?

SL: Did you have the machines as far back as you remember?

JD: My father was one of the first ones to get these machines. That's why he was doing a lot of wholesale work. If you don't have the machines you have to do everything with the hand iron. He was one of the first ones to get [them]. We're talking about the early 1930s. Basically it works by steam. You put [the shirt] on it, hit a button, the thing would come down, hit a button it would go up. A lot of time the helpers—I was watching them—sometimes were having trouble getting the shirt on it properly and their hand or body was over the machine and the meantime this thing would be going down like that, and I kind of worried it might hit them. But it never happened.

SL: Did you ever get burned or hurt?

JD: No, never.

SL: How about ironing? Did you also iron?

JD: Oh yeah, I ironed. You don't forget. I can still iron a shirt pretty well, but my wife does all the ironing now. I wear wash-and-wear [laughs].



SL: And what kind of irons did you have?

JD: We had both. We had the old ones where you had to plug it and unplug it. I don't think there was a thermostat. And the newer ones would have a thermostat. No steam, or anything like that. If you wanted steam, you had like, a hand sprayer.

SL: Can you describe the older kind of iron?

JD: You have to unplug it, and when it cools off, you plug it back in. When it starts to get too hot, you have to unplug it.

SL: How do you know when it's getting too hot?

JD: Well, that comes from experience. But I never used those, I always used the ones with the thermostat. The other helpers and my father and my mother would be using [the older kind of irons]. [Refers to diagram:] My mother would be at this table... my father here... this one was never usually used that much. But we had two tables back here. One helper here... two at the machine, pressing. So, full time workers—five people not including the kids. But then later on, Davey and I would run the machine and we could cut down on one worker.

SL: Now who delivered the laundry to the customers?

JD: The customers come in and pick up their laundry. But the other one is the wholesale business. We had to have all the laundry done and we would bring 'em to... #409, which was run by my cousin, and a few other laundries—on Humboldt Avenue, on Warren Street, and on Geneva Avenue. My father used to do these wholesale and we would have a wagon. You know, we would put all the laundry in it—it wasn't delivered by car, it was delivered by a wagon. I would—and Davey—drag the wagon and go from one [place to another]... but it was a long time ago, I can't recall.

Debbie: You mean, like, a kid's wagon?

JD: Yeah, like a kid's wagon! We used it for delivery of the wholesale.

SL: Did your family own a car also?

JD: Oh yeah, afterwards we got a car. But I don't think we ever used it for the purpose of business, it more for social.

SL: Do you remember anything about the customers? Maybe you didn't speak with them.

JD: Not too much. My father knew a lot of the customers. I don't think my father was social with them, but he knew people—would recognize them.

SL: Your father went by the name Frank?

JD: Mmm hmmm. Now, sometime after 1960, there was at that time a Chinese

restaurant in Brookline called China City and it was opened up by three friends or whatever. Anyway, they couldn't get along with one another and one of them wanted to sell out. Apparently, in Chinatown they have these brokers and they came down to the laundry and asked my father if he was interested in investing in the restaurant and going to work over there. So my father decided, yeah, it would be a good idea. So he became a laundry man and a restaurant man. Six o'clock in the morning to get up and open the laundry, and say about 1:00 he would leave the laundry, and work until 2 or 3 in the morning at the restaurant. So he was working like 19, 20 hours a day, six days a week.

SL: That's awful. How did he do it?

JD: When I was young, I didn't think much of it. He was not what you would call a well-educated person. I don't think he went to high school, I don't think he went to college. But he was pretty smart and he worked very hard. So it made me respect the fact that you had to do a lot of work and that's the way life is sometimes. And he never complained.

While I was in college, my father was working at the restaurant. And I'd be there on weekends when they'd close and I would get the car and all the helpers and I'd have to drive everybody home. That meant going into Chinatown and letting everybody off. From Cleveland Circle to Chinatown and from there back to Roxbury, all in 30 minutes, because, you know.... I was a young guy! [Laughs.]

SL: Let me ask about when you were young... did you have time to play? Did you play with the neighbors?

JD: Well, as a kid, I used to play in the backyard. My father and I used to play catch a lot. In the back there was like an alleyway, maybe 70, 80 feet, just enough for baseball.... Davey was always the pitcher and I was always the catcher. We would throw the ball back and forth. And there was a small basketball board on the back over there and we played. Basically we played baseball with all the kids in the neighborhood. My brother was always the better player. You know when you pick sides? Davey would be number one or number two or even doing the picking. I would be there at the tail end! [Laughs.] We used to play not too far from home, you know, around the corner.

Like I said, we were the only Asian people there, Davey and I, and the rest would be Caucasian—Jewish, I guess. I had one black friend but he was more... Well, if this is Blue Hill Ave [draws a diagram], all my friends lived on this side. Across the street, I never really socialized with them, except for this one black fellow. But [that was] mostly always in school. For us to go to school, we had to walk about 4 or 5 blocks and go to the all-boys school.

Socially, I never really dated when I was a kid. Not until I got to college. Maybe 'cause, first of all, there were no Asians, and at the time... to me when I was in the service, I dated Chinese girls and I went out with a Caucasian girl once—went to a dance or something like that—but I felt very awkward. The atmosphere's completely different now, but at that time—I'm not sure what I felt, a guilty feeling? Or an awkward feeling. But I didn't really socialize with non-Asian girls.

SL: Did you go to Chinese school?

JD: Oh yah, I went to Chinese school. My father [sent] myself, my older brother and my younger brother to Chinese school in Oxford Street in Chinatown. And the thing I remember was that I went for 7, 8 years and I finished in the third grade. We went to Chinese school after we finished with regular school. We would go home, get something to eat or something like that, then get on a bus and go to Chinatown and go to Chinese school which was about 4:00 to 7:00, something like that. And sometimes Davey and I would go down, and instead of going to school, we would check the movie theatre. There was one movie theater that always showed cartoons and stuff like that. So we'd miss a lot of classes.

And one time, the teacher sent me home—she would not let me back in school unless I got a note from my father saying everything was OK. Well, I got one of the helpers to sign it!

So we went to Chinese school. My father was really disgusted that we didn't speak Chinese that well and he said, "You're going to learn Chinese," and he [planned to send] me and my older brother to China to learn. So we went and got our passports and we were ready to go. It was 1949. And the Korean War broke out, just about a week before we were to go. So, we didn't go. So my life would have completely be... who knows!

Debbie: It's a good thing you didn't leave earlier.

JD: You may not be around!

Debbie: That's right!

SL: Would you have been able to go to China in 1949?

JD: Well, everything was all set up. But the Korean War broke out. The Chinese were fighting and everything got changed. A game changer.

SL: Did you speak Chinese at home?

JD: No, I always joked it was the other way around. Our parents became more Americanized because we spoke English all the time at home.

SL: So you spoke English with your parents?

JD: I would say 75% English. And what Chinese I have is very lacking nowadays. I recall after growing up and I met Daisy [his wife] and I would say, “Daisy and I speak two languages: English and COBOL,” which is a computer language, because when she spoke Chinese, she spoke Mandarin and Shanghainese and I spoke Cantonese so there’s no match. Except English and COBOL. Or Fortran. [Laughs.]

My wife is pretty proficient with Chinese. I’m at the bottom—on a scale of 1 to 10, I’m a 1 or something like that, and she might be a 9.

SL: Your parents both spoke English pretty well. How did they learn?

JD: Well, they must have learned when they were young. My father, as I said—I don’t know his history or how he was raised. I know that he was in San Francisco, but I have no idea where his schooling was or anything like that. I have no idea about my grandparents.

Debbie: Well, your father’s father supposedly worked on the railroad. But went back to China to get married.

JD: Yeah, he went back to China by age 55 or 60 and then got married and had 4 [children]. He was a late bloomer. But I have a very vague history of them.

[Looking at photos of the laundry] Another thing I remember about the laundry was a little box over here with a phone. It was shared by the candy store man and my father. In this corner here, there was a little booth, and you open a little door and put the phone in. If it rings, you open the door, then push the phone back.

Debbie: Is that how you got your candy?

JD: Oh! [For] candy I just open the door and go next door with a penny. At that time, a penny would get you more—3 or 4 things that you could hold in your hand.

SL: What kind was your favorite?

JD: Oh, anything with hard ball or something like that.

Debbie: Also, there was a pool hall down the street, wasn’t there?

JD: Oh yeah, around the corner... let’s see [looks at a map on the computer]... OK. Right over here was a pool hall. It was run by... everyone used to call him a “commie.” He was a socialist and he was very, very adamant about it. That didn’t mean nothing to me! I just went there to play pool. My mother really didn’t want me to go in there and play pool. And I used to play for money and everything like that. Anyway, the laundry is here, and the back is the porch and from the second floor you can see the pool hall entrance. So, one day I was walking out, ready to go to the pool hall, and my mother was on the second floor and she screamed from there. I heard her! [Laughs]

SL: How old were you then?

JD: Oh, probably ten or twelve.

SL: Ten or twelve? They would let you in?

JD: Oh yeah. A pool hall?

SL: Oh, so there's no alcohol there?

JD: No, no, no. Strictly pool.

SL: Oh, OK.

JD: A guy named Rubin, I think. You know how when you play pool, you have to have a pool rack, right? This guy would take all the balls, roll 'em up, put his hand like that, and they'd be perfect. He didn't need a rack.

So, as a kid, I spent a lot of time there. If I wasn't at home, I would be at the pool hall. Or bowling. And I always thought I was good until I grew up and then I saw other guys playing.

SL: You must be pretty good.

JD: I have a table at home, but I don't use it anymore. I played when I was in the army, though.

SL: What were your parents like? Do you remember them as being strict? Or, just busy?

JD: Like I said, to my knowledge they never went to parties or went out with anyone. Never go out for dinner or anything like that. Typically, you know, just inside the house. My mother and father were very hardworking. All the time they were doing something.

SL: Did you go on any family trips?

JD: No... the one enjoyment that I recall that my father had was he would take Wednesday afternoon as a day off. And if it was summer time we would always go to Wollaston Beach to dig clams. And we would come home with about a bushel of clams! And we would have clam chowder, clam burger. Anything clam, my mother made it. So that was what my father considered enjoyment time.

[Looking at photos of the family.] After 1960 I remember the neighborhood in Blue Hill Avenue was changing, getting a little more violent. When my father had the restaurant, he was the treasurer, OK? So he would be responsible for the money. Every night we would come home with the money and the next day he would go to the bank. So we would come home every night two or three o'clock after driving to Chinatown. So I would drop him off right in front of the laundry and then I would go park the car and walk back home. It got to a point that it

was more dangerous doing things like that. So we thought we would move out, to Brookline. That's when we closed the laundry.

SL: Did you sell it?

JD: No, just closed it.

Debbie: Did you own the building or rent it?

JD: We rented it. It was owned by Cable. Cable had a rubber company that made raincoats and things like that. So, we would pay them rent. They owned the whole building. My father knew them quite well—was friendly with them.

SL: What's the name of the company?

JD: Cabel or Cable, I don't know. We're talking about the 1940s.

Debbie: There is a laundry there now though.

SL: That's interesting. Did you see who runs it?

Debbie: No, we were just driving into town, passed by it, and there's a big sign that says it's a laundry. It looks pretty spiffy. I was hoping I could see it on google maps but it's not quite clear.

JD: [Looking at street view on google maps] Yeah, look over here. This is the laundry and this whole empty [area] that used to be like these apartment over here. This whole area really changed. This park here used to be all store fronts. They tore everything down.

OK, here's where the laundry was. Up there in the back, that's where our bedroom was. On the second floor.

SL: It looks like more than two floors.

JD: Yeah, there's a third floor. I have no idea who lived up there. Back then we had a screen porch. We used to keep our live chickens there. When we have to eat chicken, we take the chicken in. The chickens were freshly killed. So when you go on to our porch, you go in and it's all screened in. There's a whole bunch of chickens. That's the way it was in those days.

SL: I wanted to ask you a bit about if you kept the Chinese traditions or adopted more American traditions? Did you eat Chinese or American food or a mix?

JD: Nah, I don't think we were much on tradition. I don't recall that we did anything for Chinese holidays.

SL: Chinese New Year's?

JD: Chinese New Year? I don't think so. We were not what you'd call a very religious family. I recall when I was a kid, I was outside and some woman took me

back to the laundry and said I should go to a church. So my father said OK. The following Sunday—the church was about three blocks away, a Catholic church—I walked in and they had all that ceremony and stuff like that. I said, I don't like this at all! I mean I'm a Baptist [now] and I did go to church afterwards. But at that time, I never thought seriously about it. I know that my parents never pushed us to do anything of that nature.

SL: How about going to Chinatown?

JD: Oh, yeah, my father would go to Chinatown on Sundays or something like that. I recall he talked with some people—I'm not sure what kind of business. Sometimes we needed help in the restaurant. I know #9 Hudson Street we used to go in there and there would be like a broker; they would know people who [needed] work. I recall, maybe, #5 Hudson Street, you go up there.... I would not call it an opium den, but it was something very similar to that because I recall people lying down and smoking, something like that. Obviously because I was up there, my father was with me and he knew some people over there. But I didn't think anything of it.

SL: Did you have other family in the area?

JD: Well, I had my cousin—my father's brother's son, Bing, who today is 101 years old. His wife is about 94. He had a laundry on Geneva Avenue. Name of the father's brother is Poy. Poy Dong. That's one, and at 409 Blue Hill Avenue, I think he was a cousin too. I don't know what the relation is. Like, Jack. I have a cousin called Jack, but he was adopted, not a blood relative. Jack Don. I always thought he took the "g" off to make it Americanized. He had a laundry in Mattapan. My father sort of raised him, like a mentor. But Jack would take about 10 minutes to iron a shirt because he was so meticulous. We would do it in one or two. And my father used to get mad at him. Jack was my closest cousin, except for Bing, but he was in New York at that time. All my relatives were basically cousins as far as I was concerned. And all in laundry.

Debbie: Bing, his first cousin, was in the laundry business for a while.

JD: Right and then they went to New York. He had a farm. Stayed there about three or four years. I think in the 1960s. Hightstown in New Jersey. I recall we went over there, spent three or four days there, stayed overnight. I recall two things. There was another cousin staying with him, and he had chopsticks. Remember that movie where the Chinese would take chopsticks and grab a fly?

Debbie: Oh, the Karate Kid movies.

JD: Yeah. He actually did that! He was an older fellow. And the other thing I remember is that Bing liked to go hunting. He had a rifle and out back he would

show me how to use it. There was this bird on a telephone line wire, maybe 100, 150 feet away. So, I took a shot at it and I hit it! After that I felt so bad that I wouldn't touch a gun again.

SL: So, I understand you went to college. Did all your siblings go to college?

JD: All of us went to college. My older brother, myself, and Eddie. We all went to BU at the same time basically. At that time, college is not like it is today—you can probably get tuition for \$600, \$700 a year. And I recall we had to go to China City and some of what we earned would go towards college. But obviously Pop was paying for a lot of the college money. I never worried about the finances, OK? I had no idea where the money was kept, or what kind of banking account. Just like today, your mom [addressing his daughter] takes care of everything. [Laughter.] I have no idea!

But my father wanted to make sure we all went to college. We all went to Boston University. I went to business school, business administration. My kid brother, Stephen was the brain of the family. I recall when we were taking him to start at Boston Latin [High School]. In order to go to Boston Latin you have to have pretty good grades. I recall taking him to be registered and how proud he was.

SL: Was there any question whether you would all go to college or not?

JD: No.... I'm just guessing that that was my father's goal—to make sure we get an education.

SL: So, it was important to your father?

JD: Yes. It was basically understood we would go to college. I had to choose between two colleges: Boston University or Northeastern. Northeastern at that time was a co-op—you would work and go to college. But I decided to go to Boston University. And every morning my brother would drive the car down to Boston University. At that time, my older brother—he was driving the car—he would go next to the Student Union where there used to be a coffee shop and get breakfast. He was able to park the car there all day. We never took the subway to college, always drove. Because he had a place to park!

SL: You all lived at home?

JD: All lived at home. He was the first to get married. In my mind, when I think about him getting married: Wow! We got more room in the bedroom!

SL: At that time your parents still had the laundry and you were working in the restaurant.

JD: We still had the laundry and we were working in the restaurant at the time we were going to college. I worked in the restaurant on weekends. After I graduated I



worked in the restaurant for two years. And then after that, I recall I was walking downtown, next to New England Life. I walked in and made some inquiries about a job. And at that time they were giving interviews and testing for jobs. And I just happened to walk in at the time they were giving a test. So I took the test and I did fairly well, and I got a job to work there. Which meant either that or China City. So, now I had a day time job as a programmer at New England Mutual Life. It was nineteen sixty.....? At that time the Prudential Tower was being built 'cause there was pounding on the payment. 1965 or something like that.

SL: But you weren't trained in computer programming.

JD: Well, the way it worked was when I was in the restaurant I was walking around talking with the customers. And I talked with one customer, and he told me what he was doing and things like that. He said he was a programmer. I had no idea what a programmer was! It was only at that time I started thinking about it. In college, nothing that I took related to programming. I recall when I was in the service—after college I went for two years in the army—I was stationed down at Walter Reed army hospital in Washington D.C and I had a desk job. I was a payroll specialist. Every day I would go into my area, and to my left there was this IBM computer room. At that time they had those cards. You hear the cards going all day. Two years, I walked by it every day—I never walked into that room!

SL: Did you learn programming on the job then?

JD: No, more like just reading about it.

Debbie: I found some more pictures that I think are the front of the laundry.

JD: Yes, this is the laundry. You can see the door going in. And this is the candy store here.

SL: [Looking at photos] Who is this?

JD: My younger brother, Stephen.

Debbie: He went to Harvard and became a doctor. And that's also Stephen in the laundry window area that my Dad mentioned.

SL: Oh! And did I see a picture of your parents?

JD: Oh yeah, right here. This would be Franklin Park. We used to go to Franklin Park a lot.

SL: Is there a family picture, with the children?

JD: It's not like today. I have a granddaughter now. I have about 2000 pictures of my granddaughter!

Debbie: I got a batch of photos from grandma years ago. And that's my grandmother [pointing to a photo].

SL: Who's that [pointing to a cat sitting at the kitchen table]?

Debbie: I don't know whose cat that was. They always had a cat in the laundry.

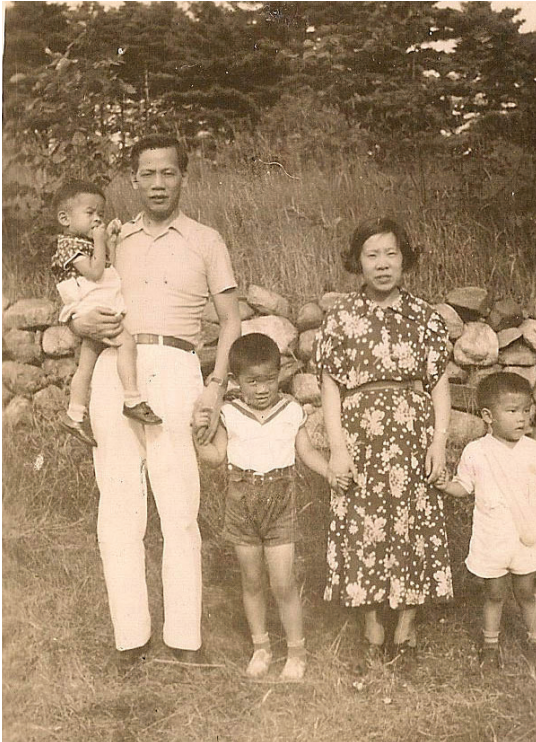
JD: We had several dogs, a cat... a rabbit. We had a storage area and the rabbit used to hang here, and one day I was trying to feed it and I stuck my hand underneath and it bit my finger! I had a little scar from that. Probably thought it was a carrot!

SL: I'd like to ask you a final question: looking back now on how you grew up, do you have some reflections or thoughts about it? How do you think about it now?

JD: Like I said before, at no time... we had three kids in one bedroom and the bedroom was really no bigger than... your kitchen [referring to his daughter's small kitchen]. But at no time did it ever occur to me... but by today's standards, people would have someone from the department of [social services] in. But that's the way it was. We had a good childhood. We worked... I don't think we socialized or went out as much, but at that time, it was fine with us. And we were raised right. I know all my brothers and myself—we respect people. My father never said “don't do this, don't do that,” but just set by his own example, and my mother, too. In retrospect, I think we were raised pretty well, concerning what [we] had. It just didn't occur to me to have the respect and the love that I have now [for them] that I should have had at that time. I thought nothing of it. Now when I reflect, it's a little bit different, but I still think we had a very good life. That's all I can say.

SL: Thank you very much.

## James Dong



The Dong family on an outing, perhaps at Franklin Park, circa 1936. Left to right: Edward (age 1), Frank (about 40 years old), David (age 4), Susan (age 26), and James (age 2).



James and his father across the street from the laundry, 1961.

Photos courtesy of Deborah Dong.



James Dong inside his parents' laundry in the 1950s. His mother, Susan is in the background. He is dressed for his second job at a Chinese restaurant.



An engagement celebration for James and his wife held in the back of the laundry, 11-23-1961.



