

IMMIGRANT VOICES

Gim Suey Chong: Our Quiet Man

by Raymond Douglas Chong with Michael George Chong

HOYPING



Gim Suey Chong with Grandfather in Hoyping.

Our father, Gim Suey Chong, was our quiet man. He was a 4th generation sojourner to Gold Mountain, America. He and his forefathers were from Yung Lew Gong, Village of the Dragon, in the heart of Hoyping near the magnificent Pearl River Delta of Kwangtung Province of China, southwest of Hong Kong. Gim was born in the 9th gray brick house on the 6th narrow alley on December 26, 1922, Year of the Dog, to father, Moi Chung, and mother, Cun Chuen Wong. He lived and studied in the poor farm village. Moi Chung was a 3rd generation sojourner who had arrived in San Francisco through Angel Island Immigration Station in 1912 as a student. In 1923, after Gim's birth, he left China for Boston. Gim's grandfather, Hoy Lun Chung was a 2nd generation sojourner and also the Village chief. He was an entrepreneur and had gambling hall and opium den in Boston Chinatown. Bein Yiu Chung, his great grandfather, the 1st

generation sojourner, was the pioneer at Gold Mountain. In 1865, he arrived in San Francisco to help build the Transcontinental Railroad. Gim lived in the ancient village founded in 1466, with its ancestral hall for school and recreation and its Diaolou, Castle in the Sky, as sentinel. With other boys, he roamed the river glen of rice fields and banana groves at the foot of Mount of the Eight Immortals near Hill of the Flying Swan, ancestral tombs.

IMMIGRATION



Immigration photo of Gim Suey Chong.

In 1932, the Year of the Monkey, at the age of nine, Gim embarked on his intrepid immigration to Gold Mountain, America. Because of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, a cruel racist federal law, Gim assumed the persona as a paper son, of his uncle Hung Quock Chong. On March 25, 1932, Gim and his uncle left the seaport of Hong Kong, aboard the R.M.S. *Empress of Asia*, riding in the steerage class. On April 13, 1932, he arrived at the seaport of Vancouver, Canada. There, he boarded the *Imperial Limited* train for a transcontinental travel through majestic Rockies, golden prairies, magnificent Saint Lawrence River, to the Atlantic coast of Canada. At the seaport of Yarmouth in Nova Scotia, he boarded the S.S. *Yarmouth* to Boston, Massachusetts. On April 20, 1932, he arrived at the seaport of Boston. Gim was intensely interrogated while in detention at the East Boston Immigration Station. On April 25, 1932, he was officially admitted to America, as a son of a citizen.

CENTRAL SQUARE



Imperial Restaurant at Central Square.

At the Central Square of Cambridge, near Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, Gim began his life in America. At the Imperial Restaurant, Moi Chung, his father, was partner and manager of this first-class Chop Suey joint for American and Chinese customers. He and his father lived in the backroom of the Imperial Restaurant. Their harsh world was a bachelor community, men without wives, boys with mothers, where racial discrimination was rampant. Gim attended Webster School with very few Chinese. Life was always tough during the height of the Great Depression. Finally, in 1936, Gim and Moi Chung left Boston from South Station. After a long train trip, they arrived at busy Union Station in Los Angeles, for better opportunities in California, The Golden State.

LITTLE TOKYO



Chinese Club of Belmont High School.

Gim Suey Chong and his father settled in Little Tokyo, the heart of the vibrant Nikkei community of the Southland near City Hall in Downtown. It was a bustling neighborhood of restaurants, stores, and markets during the heyday of Little Tokyo. They stayed at the Nikko Low Chinese Restaurant on East First Street, owned by a cousin from Hoyping. Moi Chung worked as a waiter while Gim did odd jobs like picking up trash from the streets. On February 7, 1938, he entered Belmont High School, with its diverse student body. Every school day, he took a Yellow Car (streetcar) to and from Belmont High School. With Yook Toy Jeung, his best friend, they curiously roamed the quaint streets of Little Tokyo, Downtown, and Chinatown. On January 30, 1941, Gim graduated from Belmont High School.

CHINA CLIPPER



Crew of China Clipper at Treasure Island Station.

After Gim Suey Chong was certified as a qualified aircraft mechanic at Curtiss-Wright Technical Institute in Glendale, Pan American Airways System hired him as a mechanic's helper. In 1943, during World War II, his all-Chinese crew diligently maintained the China Clipper, the world famous flying boat and other seaplanes, for service to and from Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. They performed crucial maintenance at Treasure Island Station on the San Francisco Bay, east of San Francisco. Lee Leong was their crew chief. Gim lived in San Francisco Chinatown, the vibrant enclave of shops, bazaars, and restaurants. In 1944, he was called to duty to serve at the Honolulu Station in Pearl City in Honolulu. He later worked at Mills Field Municipal Airport, south of San Francisco in 1945.

KUBLA KHAN



Gim Suey Chong with fellow waiters at Kubla Khan.

In 1946, Gim Suey Chong invested his savings as a junior partner of the Kubla Khan Theater Restaurant in San Francisco Chinatown, with Eddie Pond, who came from Hong Kong. The time was the zenith of The Golden Age of Chinese Nightclubs. The Kubla Khan grandly stood at the Gateway of Chinatown, at the crossroads of Grant Avenue and Bush Street. At the cabaret, American and Chinese patrons were dined and entertained every evening. They feast on sumptuous American and Chinese dishes at their white linen tables. They intimately danced on glossy wood floor to the swing music of the Latin band of Bill Oetke and his Rumberos. As emcee, Eddie Pond, The Chinese Demon of the Maraccos, with his troupe, entertained the patrons with a dazzling program, "A Night in Chinatown". The crowd was enthralled by exotic entertainers of singing, dancing, acrobatic, and strip-teasing. Amidst the lively action, Gim quietly served as waiter. Moi Chung worked as bartender. For Gim, the Kubla Khan was a major high point of his life, as he grew confident as a sharp dresser in this eclectic place.

CHINATOWN



East Gate of Chinatown.

After the sad demise of the Kubla Khan in 1950, Gim Suey Chong returned to Los Angeles. He and Moi Chung resided in Chinatown at College Hotel on Broadway, during the heydays of Chinatown. Amidst an exotic cluster of Cantonese restaurants, shops, and markets, West Gate, Central Plaza, and East Gate dominated the panorama. From 1950 to 1978, Gim worked for Lockheed-California Company, as a quality assurance inspector of military aircrafts in Burbank. During the Cold War period, it was known as the Golden Age of Aviation in the San Fernando Valley. He worked on swing shift for extra money during the weekdays. From 1950 to 1974, he also worked as a waiter during weekends at the Far East Café in Little Tokyo. This premier bistro was known for its delicate and bright China-Meshi dishes, a Japanese version of Chop Suey. The Nikkei community had their parties at the mezzanine loft, overlooking the curtained cherry wood booths. For Gim, he warmly bonded with his cousins from Hoyping, in a unique brotherhood at the Far East Cafe.

FAMILY



Raymond and Michael with Gim Suey Chong.

In 1954, Gim Suey Chong was introduced to Miss Seen Hoy Tong, from Santa Barbara, by a matchmaker. He took her and her parents and siblings to the Far East Café, where they dined in booth #2. On January 14, 1955, Gim happily married Seen in Los Angeles. In 1956, Gim was proud father of two sons, Raymond Douglas Chong, and Michael George Chong. He was a silent parent, who said a few words and showed a few touches of affection. But he clearly showed sacrificial love by his discreet gifts. Because of his dark secret as a paper son, always in constant fear, Gim never shared stories about his life in China and America. For the Chong boys, their insular world revolved around Chinatown, Little Tokyo, and Downtown. They restlessly roamed Elysian Valley, their neighborhood, along the Los Angeles River. Every day, Gim toiled at Lockheed or at Far East Café. Vacations were very rare except for brief sprees in Santa Barbara on the Gold Coast to visit Tong relatives. After 34 years of sorrowful estrangement, on February 14, 1966, Gim, with Moi Chung, eagerly reunited with Cun Chuen Wong, his mother, at Los Angeles International Airport. He set up a bungalow for his parents in the neighborhood. During the last years of their lives, Gim visited them almost daily. During his final years, he proudly watched Raymond and Michael graduated from universities. As a sojourner from Hoyping, he had achieved his American Dream in Gold Mountain. On December 2, 1979, Year of the Ram, Gim Suey Chong, Our Quiet Man, died in Los Angeles, the City of Angels.

