

LUCK WING
Oxford, MS

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Date: August 26, 2010
Location: Residence of Luck Wing- Oxford, MS
Interviewer: Jung Min (Kevin) Kim, Swarthmore College
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 1 hour, 3 minutes
Project: Chinese Grocer in the Arkansas/Mississippi Deltas

[Begin Luck Wing Interview]

00:00:01

Kevin Kim: This is Kevin Kim with the Southern Foodways Alliance. And today is Thursday, August 26, 2010. I'm here in Oxford, Mississippi at the home of Mr. Luck Wing. Mr. Wing, can you please state your name and date of birth for the record, please?

00:00:17

Luck Wing: My name is Luck Wing. I was born July 29, 1929.

00:00:23

KK: So Mr. Wing, could you please tell me where you were born?

00:00:27

LW: In Jonestown, Mississippi.

00:00:33

KK: Okay; so to start us--is it--so to start I was wondering if you could talk a bit--so to start we're going to talk a bit about your family and personal history. Can you tell me a bit about your parents and how they came to Mississippi?

00:00:48

LW: My parents, I'm still doing research on it; I thought he came in 1921. But someone in the archives in Washington found a manifest where he had come earlier and I'm really

not sure exactly what date he first came to the United States.

00:01:07

KK: And do you know how he came to the United States? Did he come through San Francisco or New York or--?

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LW: He came through--he came through Seattle. The one--the time he told us about it but each time we tried to kind of talk to him about it he kind of paired us off and being young children and everything if he didn't kind of--he didn't look like he was telling us everything about how he did it. But the only thing he said; he came through Seattle and came through Paducah, Kentucky in a laundry--worked in a laundry for a while and then usually changed the subject and we got to talk about something else.

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But it's sort of our own fault that we didn't really push him to find out more about how he came over and everything.

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KK: And do you know what part of China your father came from?

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LW: Yes; he came from Guangdong Province, just like most of the Chinese in the Delta here came from the same area.

00:02:02

KK: And so you said he first came through Seattle and then went to Paducah, Kentucky to do--to help run a laundry. Do you know if there was any family connection in Paducah?

00:02:14

LW: Well you know I found out that a lot of the Chinese in the Delta came through Paducah, but you know what. I hate to tell you all--tell you that I don't know my own history because I'm just now finding out more 'cause he only told us he came in with my two oldest brothers at the time. That's the first--I thought that was the first time he came. Then I found out he came in 1921 or something to return to the United States so he was over here before. And I never could have--you know put it together yet.

00:02:49

KK: So from Paducah, what--do you know what drove him down to Mississippi?

00:02:54

LW: He--he must have had some friends here that--but he never talked about that though. And I think he was in business with someone; that's the reason he was able to go back to China that it was 1921 I think. And so when he came back to come to the United States that it was on the manifest that he was returning to Jonestown, Mississippi. So evidently he was already there. And that part we don't--we don't know about; I don't know about yet.

00:03:24

KK: And do you know anything about your mother and--and how your father met your mother?

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LW: Well they were--of course they were married in China and he had like I said, when--when he came over the first time, my two oldest brothers came with him. So he was--he had--he evidently had been to the United States a couple times before--that--before I knew that he came, which I thought was the first time. He had been here probably two times before.

00:03:56

KK: Well--

00:03:59

LW: I can't fill you in but I'm just now finding out some of these other things, so--. I'm trying to do a little more research myself on it.

00:04:06

KK: Hmm; so going back, you were telling me that you grew up in a grocery store. Do you remember the name of the grocery store and whereabouts it was located?

00:04:17

LW: The name of the Store is Wings Cash Store. It's located in Jonestown. It was a little

small town that I was born in. In fact, other than my two--two oldest brothers, we all were born in Jonestown. I had one sister and--and three of us boys that was born in Jonestown.

00:04:40

KK: And so you said Jonestown was sort of a small--was it a farming town?

00:04:46

LW: Oh yeah; we--we only had about 600 people at the time.

00:04:52

KK: So going back to Jonestown, can you sort of describe--could you describe a bit about the store and how big it was and--and what you remember your father selling there?

00:05:06

LW: Since I was small I thought it was a big size store; of course it probably wasn't. But it was larger than most Chinese stores in the Delta and we were--being a small town like that you know you--you had more or less a monopoly on groceries anyway 'cause we had one of the largest stores in the town.

00:05:26

KK: And do you remember what they sold in the store--dry goods and--?

00:05:33

LW: Mostly groceries; mostly groceries. Had a little--very little dry goods but groceries was our main item.

00:05:38

KK: And so you remember the sort of clientele that would come in? Do you remember some of the customers and can you tell--can you remember a bit about them?

00:05:48

LW: Yeah; I would say we had probably a--probably a 50/50 mix 'cause we had--we had a white trade and we had mostly a white trade in town in fact. You know I don't know how it happened that way 'cause my dad--of course I was the youngest of the family and of course daddy was in the grocery business there at the time. I was born in 1929, so--so we had a store in Jonestown probably for 50--60 years or more when my second brother--oldest brother ran the store for years. And he--of course when he died then we closed the store up.

00:06:27

KK: Hmm; so you said that the Chinese sort of had a monopoly on grocery stores. Why do you think that is?

00:06:37

LW: Well I don't know; I think they gave better service, better service, better price you know and we--we didn't feel the discrimination that a lot of Chinese in the Delta had. We were sort of fortunate because we were the only Chinese family there. And if you notice, if

you get--if you're a minority, as long as you are still a minority, say one family you don't have any trouble or anything. But when the two or three families move in you know the other people begin to get you know a little jittery thinking about well they can plan to take over or something. But being the only Chinese family we--we experienced very little prejudice.

00:07:13

Of course we had it; I'm not trying to fool myself. I know we would--you know people said things about us, but they still do it every day now but it's not as much.

00:07:21

KK: So when your parents--so when your father came to open this store in Jonestown, did he have any partners or did he do it himself?

00:07:35

LW: As far as I knew he was by himself but at one time he did have a partner because I notice if--back during this manifest we see when he came over, he came to Jonestown, so he was in business with someone. And that part I just--I'm out you know--.

00:07:53

KK: So--so going back to the grocery store did you--did you and your family live in the back of the grocery store or did you have a separate house?

00:08:04

LW: Both; at one time we lived back at the house--store and then we had--bought a

house. I don't know; when I was very small, but you know back then in the grocery something else, we delivered. You know the people would call up and we had--we did--in town we knew all the customers and everybody--white customers. Most of the time the blacks we didn't have--we didn't deliver to them, not because we wouldn't but most of the time they came up and bought their own things. But most of the white families would call in orders and say even for lunch or for lunch and supper, they'd call in and we'd get on our bicycle. That's the way I grew up in grocery--delivering groceries. We got on our bicycles and delivered groceries. The three youngest of us more or less grocery--was delivery boys.

00:08:53

KK: Hmm; so--so growing in the back of this store could you describe that period of time? Can you go back and remember sort of what the--what that part of the store you looked like, you know your living quarters?

00:09:10

LW: No; I was quite small. As far as I could, I think--maybe I was two or three years-old when we moved into the house. I knew that we did live in the back of the store at one time though.

00:09:23

KK: And was the house near the store that you moved into?

00:09:26

LW: Well the whole town was only 600 people but naturally it had to be close by; I would say within a block, but maybe three minutes walking time or something like that.

00:09:35

KK: Hmm; so I'm wondering when--you said--you said that your parents closed down the grocery store?

00:09:48

LW: No; my--my brother did. My parents--my father retired when he was about 50 I guess and he let my--my second oldest brother run the store.

00:10:00

KK: And--and so when--when did he retire?

00:10:05

LW: When my dad retired--what year? Good question, I was--before I was in college even so he was in his 50s. You know most Chinese thought about it all the time; they had children to help--so they could help them in the latter life, latter stage of life, and so he got out when--when my brother got out of the Service. He more or less turned the store over to him, and he raised his family in it.

00:10:31

KK: So--so in retirement did your father do anything? Was he--did he still come to the store or did he--did he sort of leave the store completely?

00:10:40

LW: No; he would come occasionally but I mean he didn't have anything to do with it. He stayed home and piddled around the house; he just--he really did. He just piddled. He would build different things and I think he really enjoyed retirement and he was smart to retire as early as he did.

00:10:55

KK: Hmm; so you were telling me about your brothers taking over. Was that always the plan for your father, you know for your father to move--to pass down the store to your brothers?

00:11:18

LW: Evidently it was. Now I had an older brother that was not from--he had a store in Webb, which is a town about 60 miles of Jonestown. And then but my other brother went to--had a grocery store. I had--all my brothers had grocery stores in--right in the Delta. And then my--the brother next to me moved to California. And then my brother next to him, he was in the grocery business for a while and he got into the insurance business which was unusual you know.

00:11:52

KK: So going back to your childhood in--in Jonestown you said you were the only Chinese family right?

00:12:00

LW: At that period and then later on a couple families did move in. But we grew up-- when I was growing up, I can only recall that we were the only Chinese family.

00:12:13

KK: But did your father interact with any other Chinese in the area?

00:12:17

LW: Oh yes; nearly every Sunday they would have different--go to different towns and have parties. I don't know Raymond may have--you know told you the same about it. I don't know but that's what would happen. We would--in fact, I--as--as young children, we--you know we didn't do a lot of like so-called cousins and of course we called everybody uncles and aunts. And that was--that took me a long time to find out that they was not really uncles and aunts. We all--you know how we called everybody uncles and aunts and I couldn't understand. If you're called aunt that means you were the brother--. I asked my father. Oh no; we just--you know real close kin though, maybe four and fifth cousins and they're considered real close.

00:12:57

KK: So going back to that time could you sort of describe the kitchen table and--and what your mother would cook in the kitchen, I guess starting from you know did your mother cook predominantly Chinese food?

00:13:15

LW: Yes; but we usually in the morning we had a traditional American breakfast--eggs and ham and bacon with it. But we'd always have lunch--of course we called it dinner and supper. We would--we would have a Chinese meal and we'd always have rice you know typical Chinese food.

00:13:34

KK: Uh-hm; do you remember if your--if your mother had a wok in the back of the kitchen there?

00:13:39

LW: Oh yes; she cooked regular Chinese you know. She would--and then on Sundays after we had grown we would go back to the home place in Jonestown because my mother and daddy they would expect us there every Sunday. And of course we'd have big meals over there. That's after we got grown but during the period while I was growing up is when we went from town to town to have different parties and different--at different relatives and friends you know.

00:14:06

KK: Hmm; so you said you had a predominantly American breakfast. Did your mother--when she cooked breakfast was it--do you think it was--she was consciously making an American breakfast or was it because it was just sort of easy to do?

00:14:25

LW: That's right; I think it's easy. I think you hit the nail on the head.

00:14:29

KK: So I'm wondering if you also remember if you guys had a garden or anything like that for example, for I guess Chinese vegetables and things like that.

00:14:41

LW: Yes; they had a garden every year. In fact, you asked me what my dad did. That's what he did a lot; just raised vegetables--you know Chinese vegetables and things. And then we had friends in the--I don't--in Coahoma, Mississippi which is a little town of maybe 200 or 100 but he had a Chinese garden. He'd--he was sort of a relative of ours and we'd go--he would ship Chinese vegetables to Chicago quite often because the train ran right into the little town of Coahoma.

00:15:09

And I remember as a child going down there and watching him pack greens and the freshwater chestnuts. He's--he had--he ran really a Chinese garden with his--maybe his--one of his younger relatives was going to take it over, but it was different. The man that started it he really worked it like--like the Chinese peasants would I guess. But he'd go out every day and work it. And he had the--had a market for his vegetables. He'd ship out when it comes in season; I guess he'd make two or three shipments a week to Chicago and to California, wherever he shipped the stuff--quite amazing.

00:15:48

KK: And this was in Coahoma, Mississippi?

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LW: Coahoma and he had--he got--later on he even built a big greenhouse. He was going modern and it had fans and I remember that. But his first--first Chinese garden was just--it was just like I would picture a Chinese garden in China, his irrigation system and everything else--very crude. He would put on boots and go down and pick the things himself. He really worked.

00:16:12

KK: And who was this; do you remember his name?

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LW: We--his nickname--we called him Ho-Bo but his name was--golly, you know we called him uncle; Gu Gu Yeh was his Chinese name. And so but our Chinese name--young kids we always called him Ho-Bo, just 'cause he worked--you know stayed up to the train station all the time, but--but he was a quite interesting--quite interesting fellow. He was--it--it's a shame that nobody picked it up but the raising Chinese vegetables in the Delta, if somebody with the expertise like he had could have got the thing started, he probably would have done real well. Someone could have done real well with it.

00:16:56

KK: So did he send any--do you remember if your parents bought any vegetables from him as well or--or--or did he ship all of it out?

00:17:03

LW: No; he didn't ship--in fact, we never had buy vegetables. *[Laughs]* He always furnished us vegetables, you know. That's a good thing. And then people in the Delta drive--say from Greenville would come up to buy vegetables from him 'cause they knew they were fresh and everything. He'd pick--this is--it was quite amazing. I look back now and at the time I didn't think too much about it 'cause I just grew up with it, but now I look back and I say yo know that was quite unique.

00:17:27

KK: Do you remember what kinds of vegetables that your parents grew in the back yard?

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LW: Oh it was long bean foo qua that's the staple and the dong gua you know the big melon, the watermelon but those were the three staple items that--. But you know nearly everyone had a garden. And you--when the stuff comes in it gets so much--the Chinese in that are swapped quite--quite often. And then something was more exotic we'd go to--to Coahoma to see our uncle and he would give us freshwater chestnuts and things like that he would grow you know.

00:17:57

KK: Hmm; and do you remember where your mother got the ingredients that she couldn't grow herself like--you know things like soy sauce and other pantry items?

00:18:09

LW: Yeah; we ordered--we ordered most of that stuff from San Francisco. And I think Joe Gow Nue Raymond probably--Joe Gow Nue down in Greenville, he had--he sold a lot of Chinese goods and a lot of people in the Delta would ride--ride to Greenville and buy canned goods from him 'cause he got a bigger variety that we could order a little at a time from San Francisco 'cause the freight would be so much.

00:18:33

KK: Hmm; so going back to the kitchen, did you ever see your mother trying to learn how to cook American food?

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LW: You know I really never thought about it. I guess she did cook some American food, but you know my brother that ran the store, he--he loved to cook. And he would cook a lot--he would make pies and cakes and he's quite a--quite a guy--cook. In fact he's quite a guy anyway. He was--what I thought, he was my hero really. You looked up to him 'cause he's so much older. I looked at him as not only as a brother--even like a young father.

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KK: So how many siblings did you have in total?

00:19:12

LW: We had five brothers and two sisters--two girls, two daughters.

00:19:19

KK: And so you said the older two took over the store after your father?

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LW: No; my second son--my second brother, number two son took over the store. My oldest brother went back to China and picked up a--picked up [*Laughs*]-reunited with his wife and children and brought them back and then he opened a store on his own.

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KK: And--and you said that was in Webb?

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LW: Yeah; he ended up in Webb. He had a store in Friars Point for a while, too. He had a store in Friars Point and he went to China and he let my brother next to me have the store while he went to China. When he came back from China he--he came back to open a store in Webb.

00:19:57

KK: And so your I guess--your second oldest brother also married a woman in China?

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LW: Yes; and as a matter of fact she had a 90th birthday this past week. That's where--I Frieda up there, too.

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KK: So growing up did your parents ever try to teach you any traditional Chinese customs? Did you celebrate any traditional Chinese holidays?

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LW: Yes; before I forget it I'll show you this. I still have a picture of my brother's wedding in 1938. I just ran across it in--I thought maybe they might want pictures for her birthday to show but they already had the thing anyway. And excuse me; what was the question [*Laughs*]?

00:20:44

KK: Oh yeah; I was going to ask you if your parents--some of the traditional customs and holidays that you would--that your parents tried to teach--teach the kids?

00:20:53

LW: Yeah; they tried to teach it and we picked up quite a bit of it you know, even like different--what they do is different weddings and different--different customs. We--I was aware of quite a few of them, but we didn't practice it too much. But at least he--my father did make us aware of it. In fact, you know since he retired, we had a lot of time to spend with him. We'd go on Sundays and we would just--all the family would get together and usually after lunch--or after dinner or something we'd sit around and talk and we would pick at daddy and try to pick at--. But he was quite a guy; he would always have a terrific sense of humor. Whenever we'd get too close to what he didn't want us to know about, he kind of paired us off and kind of pushed it a different direction you know--either telling a joke or telling a story about something else.

00:21:39

KK: Hmm; so did your family celebrate any traditional Chinese holidays like Chinese New Year or--or do you remember if your parents--if your mother cooked anything special for Chinese New Year?

00:21:53

LW: I'm sure they did and usually the time I--I kind of thing most of the time when we had Chinese New Year's we had people over or we would be--go somewhere to--it's not just only the family. You know we'd have other families to celebrate it.

00:22:09

KK: So--so some of the other Chinese families that you would visit where--where were they?

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LW: The closest for our age of children was in West--in Helen, Arkansas. In fact, the--the--Martha, which--she was down here this past week to go to my sister-in-law's birthday party, and we would--they had children about our age. So after school every summer we'd look forward to it and stay maybe two weeks with them or three weeks and then they would come over ours and stay. And so we didn't--that was our closest Chinese friends--like relatives I guess I would say.

00:22:51

KK: So growing up do you remember--well some of your sort of local friends did you invite--did you ever invite them to your house and to the grocery store?

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LW: Yeah; we--you know I--I--I think we grew up more or less a typical Chinese family than most people since we was the only Chinese there in town, so all our friends were Caucasian or you know whoever. There's very little prejudice. We had prejudice; like I said don't get me wrong, I know we did but we were in the situation where since we were the only kids and the town was so small everybody got to play--we'd shoot marbles and we played rubber gun fights. We did everything typical most Chinese and most Americans--Caucasian kids would do. I would say we grew up more American--more Caucasian that we did Chinese.

00:23:47

KK: Hmm; so you're saying that there was some prejudice. When did you start to sort of see that growing up and how did you see that?

00:24:01

LW: What was the question?

00:24:02

KK: So--so you're saying that you're aware of you know some prejudice, although it wasn't as bad as other people. When did you start realizing that there was a bit of prejudice around your family?

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LW: You know I can't--I really don't remember exactly but sometime you know they call you--come and call you chink or something. But you know the strange thing, they do it, we'd get into a fight--fist fight you know and get through and everybody is friends. It's quite--not real often but you know maybe two or three times a year but after it gets too--you know having your scrap and everything we were all friends. We played--we played football together; we play all kinds of sports together and shot--shot marbles. I remember we used to have a big marbles game. We'd go to their homes and the town was so small it was almost like you'd think about Mayberry or something. But Mayberry was a big city compared to Jonestown.

00:24:58

These young kids would go to different people's houses. They'd come to our houses. We'd go to their homes and play and when it come supertime, they would--the parents--parents really would yell to the--say so and so it's time for supper. People would hear them and they would keep--just like it--that was the form of communication. You could hear somebody say you better come home and somebody would say Bill, your mama is calling you; you better go home or something. That's the way it was.

00:25:25

But I--I'd say I think it was unusual the way I grew up. I don't know if that was true of you know other families in--in the Delta. But I--I consider, I was very fortunate 'cause we had a good really--really good friends. In fact we're still in touch; the few that are still living we're still sort of in touch with them.

00:25:43

KK: So--so going back you--you said your brothers also opened grocery stores. Did you get to visit any of them when you, you know when you're around?

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LW: Oh yeah; we see them all the time. You know like I say we come over into my father's house in Jonestown and we'd meet nearly--nearly every Sunday.

00:26:03

KK: And could you--do you remember how big your brothers' grocery stores were? There is one in Webb and where was the other one?

00:26:10

LW: Well the one in Sledge and then--then my brother had one in Crenshaw before he moved to California. But they were--for considering the size town they were in they--they had pretty good sized stores you know, I'd say one of the biggest stores--grocery--big stores in town--each town that they were in.

00:26:28

KK: Do you remember the names of the stores?

00:26:32

LW: Most of them had Wing's--Wing's Grocery or Something--had the name Wing in the food market or something.

00:26:39

KK: So do you think--how do you think your brothers came to know the grocery store business? Do you think your fathers you know sat them down and told them about it or--?

00:26:49

LW: It was easy to get into it because of that, you know my father being in it because he knew--he knew the connection with the wholesalers and everything. So it was an all natural thing to do at the time.

00:27:02

KK: So the wholesalers and suppliers that your father knew did they ever give him a hard time or--or anything like that because he was Chinese or were they really friendly to him?

00:27:18

LW: Well they were extra friendly because at that time the Chinese had a reputation of they were very honest and so I think anybody--any--if you was Chinese you could get credit. And they were very good. I know a lot of time we--my mother and father they had hard times in the store because you--as I was small I could hear them talk about it and they--the wholesaler would extend them credit you know for a little extra time and stuff like that.

00:27:42

KK: Uh-hm; and so how do you think your brothers and well I--and I guess your father came up with the capital to start these grocery stores?

00:27:50

LW: Beats me. **[Laughs]** But they--they're very frugal; you know whatever they started with you know it's quite a different--. That--that generation and our generation now, they--like I said my father would turn in the grave at what my children does in spending their money the way my father would hold and squeeze his dollar.

00:28:09

KK: So did your father expect you to go into the grocery store business as well?

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LW: No; he really didn't want us to go into it. So you see like you know that's one good thing I always like about Chinese; they always want their children to be better than they were. I--I would mention something about my children and one of the professors at Ole Miss teases me. He said well he out-ranks me. I said well good; that's what I want him to do you know. But he thought--he was laughing; he thought--he thought it was funny.

[Laughs]

00:28:38

But I think that's the way we--we raised our children so they can be better than we were.

00:28:44

KK: So--so I guess your parents never--so I guess your father never thought he'd give the store to--to you then?

00:28:52

LW: Oh no; my father was pushing us to go to college. My sister went to college and that was in 1940 which was very unusual for a Chinese girl to finish college. And of course I finished here at Ole Miss in 1950 and I was the only Chinese here at the time. And I would say I had--I had a very good experience. I wasn't a good student but I had a lot of fun you know. *[Laughs]*

00:29:13

KK: So your sister where did she go to college then?

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LW: She went to Blue Mountain. It's a Baptist--it's still in existence. At that time it was an all girls' school; now it's co-ed.

00:29:23

KK: Hmm; so I guess we should talk a bit about your personal history. So you went to school in Jonestown. Did you go to public school or what was your schooling like in Jonestown?

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LW: Yes; we all went public school--went first grade through twelve and that's right.

We grew up with our friends. We--I mean we went to school every grade right--you know just--just from grade one to grade twelve. And some of them we went all the way through it the same time you know.

00:29:47

KK: So I guess being the only Chinese family because I was--I heard stories from Frieda Quon about how some of her friends had to go to special Chinese schools. Was that your experience or what kind of--did you go to the white schools when the schools were still segregated or how was your schooling like?

00:30:07

LW: No; we--we wasn't--we had--we went to school when it was segregated. We went to white schools. But my wife went to Greenville; see, she's from Greenville and she went to the Chinese school and she would tell me the experience she had. Of course I couldn't at the time, I couldn't relate but now--now I understand.

00:30:25

KK: So after high school you went to Ole Miss?

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LW: Right; right and of course you know my dad pushed the education. He really didn't want any of us to be in the grocery business but it was easy. That's the sort of the easy way out. And he--he just made--he made up my mind that I was going to college.

[Laughs]

00:30:46

KK: And you were saying you were one of the only Chinese men at Ole Miss at that time?

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LW: Yes; that's right--the first--the first one that came in.

00:30:55

KK: Hmm; and what year was that?

00:30:57

LW: Pardon?

00:30:57

KK: What year was that?

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LW: I graduated in 1950; came in '46.

00:31:03

KK: So what did your brothers think about you going to college and not going into the grocery store business? Did they every say anything about that or did they--were they proud of you or--?

00:31:15

LW: I think they were very proud of me. They helped me a lot, especially my--my second brother, you know my number two--my dad's number two son, the one that more or less had the store in Jonestown. That was our--that was my home anyway, so he--he really did help us a lot.

00:31:33

KK: So going to sort of the end of the grocery store for business for your family, after your father retired and gave it to--

00:31:46

LW: John. John was his--was my brother's name, John Wing and he--he stayed in Jonestown for I'd say 50 or 60 years in the business.

00:31:58

KK: Oh so he stayed; he had the grocery store for that long?

00:32:00

LW: Oh yeah. Oh yeah; he raised his family there and he had two boys and two girls.

00:32:07

KK: Did he ever plan to pass that store down to his--to his son or--?

00:32:15

LW: No; he pushed him to go to college.

00:32:17

KK: And so I guess after he retired the store was sold or what happened to the store after he retired?

00:32:23

LW: About--well he really died while he was running the store and then we sold it.

00:32:27

KK: And the other two brothers, you were saying one left for California?

00:32:32

LW: Right, right; he--he left--he ran the grocery store for about oh, 10 years here and then his wife has family out in California so they all moved out there.

00:32:44

KK: What part of California do you remember?

00:32:46

LW: In LA; he's got--he had five sons. In fact his--his son came back, too, the youngest boy came back. He's--we used to laugh about it. He had five boys and of course my--my son has four--four daughters, five--five girls.

00:33:01

KK: Big family [*Laughs*].

00:33:02

LW: Oh yeah; we've--I've got 13 grandchildren.

00:33:06

KK: Oh wow; and so there was the other brother that went off to be an insurance salesman is that right?

00:33:13

LW: Yes; he stayed--he stayed in Sledge in fact. He ran--he did--sold insurance. In fact that's what my--my oldest son, he graduated in Pharmacy but he's more or less in Financial Planning, which is really insurance and stuff like that too.

00:33:26

KK: So I guess--so for the most part--oh, and your sister, did she come back to Mississippi or did she--?

00:33:33

LW: She's in Little Rock.

00:33:34

KK: She's in Little Rock?

00:33:35

LW: She married--she married the--a boy that lived in Little Rock from Arkansas, so

they've lived in Little Rock from--until she died really.

00:33:45

KK: So I'm wondering if after your time at Ole Miss, did you stay in Mississippi?

00:33:56

LW: No; I went to Louisiana for I guess six--seven months and then I was drafted in the Service. And then I stayed in the Service; I was sent to Germany. I was fortunate enough--because at that time they--they drafted you and we was--we had--I was just fortunate enough to get re-commissioned while I was in Germany. And so after a year or so of that I came back and got married and my wife went back with me for the last year or so. I had a very good--I was very fortunate. You know all my life I've been--you know my middle name is Luck. I used to say they named me right because I really felt lucky all my life. But we had a good tour of duty over there and my wife enjoyed it. It was like it had been our honeymoon. In fact, we took our honeymoon at--we drove from the top of Italy's Boot all the way to the back--to--down to Sicily and drove back up 'cause we had a--had a car over there. It was--it was a nice duty.

00:34:52

And then we came--I came back and I went back to work in Louisiana for about four or five months. Then my dad kept saying you--you know it's strange how the Chinese want their children right around you all the time. He said if you're going to be down there you might as well be across--in Germany again. I want you to move closer to home, so that--that was the deal.

00:35:13

KK: And how did you--how did you meet your wife?

00:35:16

LW: Well some people--we used to have parties all the time. You know young kids would get together and have their own parties. And that's the way we met. I knew her for about five years before we got married. I didn't realize it was that long until I'd been reading--. You know it's strange; she--she kept every letter I had ever written. I didn't know that and my son found them up--upstairs one day. And then my daughter found out; she said mama I'm going to read--read the letter. She said no; you're not either. *[Laughs]* Anyway I found them. I got them in--in--and I put them in chronological order. I didn't save all her letters. I wished I had so I could put them together, so but--but I knew what I wrote her but I didn't know what she wrote me back each time.

00:35:55

KK: Hmm; and you said she was from Greenville. Do you know if her parents had a grocery store as well?

00:36:01

LW: Oh yeah; yeah she--they had a grocery store, yeah. And she--my wife went to Business School in Missouri.

00:36:09

KK: So at Ole Miss, you got your degree in Pharmacy right?

00:36:14

LW: Right; right.

00:36:16

KK: And then after that you--did you go into the Pharmacy business?

00:36:21

LW: Yeah; I had--I worked for about a year or so and then I bought my own business and had my own business about 45 years in fact, a really small mom and pop store, but I really enjoyed it because I knew everybody and knew everything about them, too. You know it's--it's not like it is now. Just--it was so much more personal then.

00:36:41

KK: And where was this pharmacy located?

00:36:42

LW: This was in Sledge; it's a town of about 600. It's--it's amazing the people there said how do you make a living at it? And I wondered myself you know. [*Laughs*]

00:36:51

KK: And did the community have any problems with you being Chinese? I mean did they see a Chinese Pharmacist as being weird?

00:37:00

LW: No; I didn't have any problem at all. In fact I think they really welcomed me. Somebody--you know usually in a small town like that everybody knows everybody you know.

00:37:11

KK: So you didn't have any problems like getting the building for example?

00:37:14

LW: Oh no, no; you know I was married there for 12 years, so it--in fact, I started to--like I said, my--my childhood was so atypical because I had served on different School Boards and like you asked me did I go to public school, I served on the County School Board. I served on a Private School Board. I served on the School Board at Northwest Junior College, so I've been on--in education--. And you're talking about the being prejudice, I was--like I said I'm sure there's been a lot of people that have said things behind my back. But--but at Ole Miss you know back in the 1950s you know I had a Caucasian roommate and we stayed friends 'til he died. In fact I stay in touch with his wife now. She lives in Mobile and we used to visit each other just all the time. And it's--like I said it was sort of atypical. It wasn't--the friends I had and--and being in Pharmacy at one time, I only--had the only drugstore in Mississippi--Chinese drugstore in Mississippi. And I was President--and not to boast on this, but I felt really good because they were Pharmacists; I was President of the Mississippi State Pharmaceutical Association. And then I served on the Pharmacy--I served as the President of the Pharmacy Alumni Association here at Ole Miss and on this Board for about eight or nine years.

00:38:39

So I didn't--I didn't feel the prejudice. I'm probably sure there's a lot of people that had. I don't know why but I got along--. You know one thing I--I--the good Lord didn't give me a lot of brains but he did give me a little talent to get along with people. That was my best--best asset I think I had. It wasn't that I was smart at all. **[Laughs]**

00:39:01

KK: I think you also--didn't you also say you served as Mayor of Sledge as well?

00:39:06

LW: Yeah; well I was--well three different times, four times--four years at a time, because every time I'd get out I'd say now this is it. I'm through with it. And you know it--you get nobody else to do it. It's really--that was--it's just more or less a duty. It was just a small town. It wasn't--it--you know people make a big deal out of being Mayor but being Mayor was really--nobody else wanted it. Who's going--who's going to want to do--do a job like--? You know well you just say did it pay much? I said it paid \$600 a month but once a year. You didn't get that did you? **[Laughs]** Six hundred dollars a month once a year, so it's \$50 a month.

00:39:43

KK: Wow; hmm. Hmm; wow. Do you remember if there were any other--I think you mentioned that there was another Chinese American Mayor in Louise, Mississippi; were there any other Chinese Mayors?

00:39:56

LW: My brother was--my brother was in Jonestown. In fact he was a Chinese Mayor before I was and we were both serving at the same time. But that--it--you know these little small towns, it's different. It--they just make a big deal out of it 'cause you're the Mayor, but really it's--it really was like a--a club, you know more--more like a civic club more--more than being Mayor. You--you took care of--. You know really the first time, I did run the first time, I wanted to be it because--because we had an outdated sewer system and everything and the water system. And I--I thought maybe we could get a grant and we did. We was--we was fortunate to get a grant to--to establish the new sewer system and the water system. But after that--after the other--other time I said okay, I'm through after the first time. And then somebody else did it and nobody else wants to do the thing. You know it wasn't--I was such a good guy it was--just sort of just fell in your lap through default. [*Laughs*]

00:40:55

KK: Well I was thinking before we talked about Sledge about some of the parties that you went to. Were these--because I heard the name Lucky 11 Dances. Do you--did you know anything about that? Raymond was telling me about that. Were those the parties that you were telling me about?

00:41:10

LW: Well that was part--that was our rivalry and that's boys from Mississippi State. They had theirs and of course I--I went to Ole Miss you know but we got--they had parties--. We was all friends; it's sort of a friendly rivalry more or less. And Raymond

was a--I was the first generation and these--these people--Raymond was probably just-- even though he's just three or four years younger, you--at that time if you were 18 and somebody 14 years old, they felt--you know you felt like you a whole lot older than they were even though now it's not that much difference.

00:41:40

But when we started our parties, my cousin in Helena and the people in Rosedale they were--we had more or less started back then. They--they were--Raymond and that group came right under us; they were about four or five years right you know younger. And so it's a little different; they--they began to form their own.

00:42:05

KK: So Raymond was telling me that there were more Chinese Americans at Mississippi State than there were at Ole Miss. Is that a--when you know as an alumni did you see more Chinese Americans go to--more Chinese Delta(ns) go to Mississippi State than Ole Miss or--?

00:42:27

LW: At that time probably in my era more of them went to Mississippi State. But later on you'd be surprised, so--so many--nearly every--everybody, I won't say everybody; it was a big bunch of Chinese Americans that came to Ole Miss for Pharmacy School. I guess--I told--my nephew, he told me has five Pharmacists in his family you know related in his family either sisters, brothers, and cousins that came to Pharmacy School here. But it's a big bunch that went to Pharmacy School here.

00:43:02

KK: Hmm; and going back to those parties I'm wondering do you remember what kind of food they served there. Did they serve American food or Chinese food or both?

00:43:10

LW: Mostly Chinese--I mean mostly American food 'cause the way we started, everyone that owned the grocery--came to the grocery store, we would hit up these people that say sold potato chips. We'd say we--the kids, we're going to have a party. We want you to give us--help us out and give us some potato chips and cases of Coca Cola and things. And then--and from that it evolved parties that later on that they--they were more sophisticated, but we just started from scratch, you know just got together, maybe five or six people would get together and say let's have a party. You know and we had hit up on these distributors that would--sell groceries to our fathers in the different grocery stores.

00:43:46

KK: Hmm; so in addition to your sort of you know parties for the younger people do you remember if any of the older, for example your parents' generation, if they had any parties or if they had any get-togethers say for like Chinese New Year's or anything like that?

00:44:07

LW: They'd get together nearly every week. When I was a kid I'd say from--I'll say six years on up to almost a teenager, they used to have parties every week in the different--

different towns. Okay; we'd say we're going to have a party in Jonestown this week. Next week we're going to Webb or Drew or somewhere. But they planned--and in those days the men would play Mah Jong and the--another one, Chinese Dominoes, they--I could hear them cussing in Chinese all the time. And the women would sit in the corner bitching about how bad their husbands treated them and stuff like that [*Laughs*].

00:44:40

But I really--they--they had--it was--that was their social life, and most of the time they had it in the grocery store itself. They'd move all the counters back. You could see pictures--I saw pictures now on the internet they put on the--some of the--since they've been doing these stories and they was a big time; stay up all night sometimes. I would go--they would stay up all night. The kids would stay up and play. We'd stay up--I know several times we--we'd be up to see the sunrise. We played different games you know in our age group, my cousins and things and we had a big time. But that was the social life especially for my parents.

00:45:20

KK: Did they form any specific organization--like formal organizations or was it all sort of casual and loose?

00:45:25

LW: For our--for our group down here they was casual and loose. But they did have formal--they had groups in--I know in Memphis they called it--I forgot the name of them, but I don't think it was a tong exactly but just sort of--they called it an association. And they had about four--four different families in it.

00:45:47

KK: Hmm; so there weren't any formal tongs here in Mississippi that you remember?

00:45:51

LW: Not that I know of. We used to laugh about it. When we was in the--as kids you know we used to play with our white friends and said you all guys get to tough we'll call the tongs on you. That's just sort of a local joke.

00:46:03

KK: For those who don't know what a tong is could you sort of briefly explain what that is?

00:46:10

LW: I don't know too much what it is; I know what I hear people to say it is, like just--I think it's just a group of families getting together, almost like the mafia, but they--I wouldn't say they--they were in, you know illegal trade or anything like that but they did this for just strength you know just--.

00:46:31

KK: So I'm--so after spending--did you say you spent 45 years in Sledge?

00:46:40

LW: Forty-five, forty-eight; let's see I came in '55 and I quit in '98. That's 40--what--43.

00:46:51

KK: So what brought you to leave Sledge and come to Oxford?

00:46:55

LW: Oh I've always wanted to retire in Oxford. You know we'd--we'd come to all the ballgames and everything from Sledge. That's the reason I was very active in the alumni activities for a long time here. And we'd come over here; everything that would happen in Ole Miss we'd come over anyway. And we was--we had--we knew a lot of people--people in Oxford anyway. People would say you know if you're going to move to Oxford, do you know anybody? I'd say I really know more people in Oxford than I do in Sledge 'cause it's a bigger town. So it was--the transition was very easy 'cause--'cause I play a lot of--still play a little tennis and I used to come over here to play tennis with a lot of people, a lot of my friends anyway you know.

00:47:33

KK: So now I kind of want to ask you a bit about your Southern identity. Would you consider yourself to be Southern? You've never left Mississippi, right?

00:47:48

LW: You bet; yeah, Deep--Deep South [*Laughs*]. I'm really a Southerner with the accent and everything else you can hear it.

00:47:57

KK: And for example has your brother in California ever talked to you into trying to move out and leave Mississippi?

00:48:06

LW: No; it's the other way around. We tried to talk him into coming back. *[Laughs]*
And I think he would like to come back but his wife would never come back.

00:48:12

KK: So in your travels have you ever encountered people--how would you say that other Chinese outside of the South see the Chinese community here in Mississippi?

00:48:28

LW: I think it's--it's just like the--not on the Chinese think about Chinese in Mississippi, the Caucasians look down their nose at the Caucasians in Mississippi. If you're from Mississippi you know you'd think of--they think of you a redneck and everything else. But I think it's the same feeling. Well how do you feel? You--you're from *[Laughs]*--you more or less can feel like an outsider; how do you think about the Chinese in Mississippi?

00:48:56

KK: Well I mean I think this is you know most people when I tell them that I'm doing this project they--they first say that they're--they first ask me if there are any Chinese in Mississippi and so--

00:49:09

LW: Yeah.

00:49:11

KK: --and so it is a dwindling population right? You see more and more people leaving?

00:49:19

LW: Well it's sort of stable now. It certainly has been a lot that have left. But you know getting back--you know what I'm--what started all this Chinese and American stuff, Merv Block who was the Associated Press, he came down here and did the first interview that I know of. This is even before James Lowen and all and he wrote me up and it hit that Associated Press. And they went all around the world. It--it's amazing. I heard from people that I went to school with, that I was in the Service with that--it was really amazing. And I still--we still--I've got a lot of the clippings from different newspapers. It was quite--it's quite interesting where it all started. I think it started from that really.

00:50:02

KK: Hmm; so--so you're--so you're saying that the Chinese population here in the Delta is pretty stable now that the people of--so the people who have left--have left. Do you--have you met any of the newer immigrants and can you tell me a bit about the newer Chinese that are coming into the South?

00:50:20

LW: You know I--I really--well even like Chat Sue, he's--he's an immigrant and his friend--geez; he worked for me in the Pharmacy--anyway he came to Clarksdale but he

stayed--he went to West Memphis. So it's still I consider close to Mississippi, but that's quite a few people that came over later on. And some of them have left. Chet said the smart ones left Mississippi, which very--irritated the hell out of me. When he said--he said, the smart ones left--he said the smart Chinese left Mississippi; well I stayed, so he's saying I was stupid. And I told him--I told him; he didn't answer me yet, because I had never met the guy but still I didn't like--I didn't appreciate the remark.

00:51:06

KK: Because the reason I ask that is I was talking to Joe Dan yesterday and Joe Dan said that a lot of the newer Chinese are not from Canton and they don't speak Cantonese and they--they--a lot of them are Mandarin speakers. And I'm wondering if you see that around here in Mississippi as well.

00:51:23

LW: I think it's more prevailing in Arkansas. I think most--most of these are--that--that came over later came in with the Chinese groceries and everything else. And so they had friends--relatives that brought them over. And it--I think it's where they started anyway; you know the one group of Chinese get here and then they bring their relatives in and set them up in business. So it maybe happened that maybe a group came from another area and they got friends you know and started the same way.

00:51:52

KK: Do you know if your--if your father decided to bring any of his brothers or sisters to the US?

00:52:02

LW: I don't know much about my father's family but he brought relatives over here I know that.

00:52:07

KK: And did they end up in Mississippi as well?

00:52:10

LW: Yes; in the grocery business, yeah.

00:52:12

KK: So what do you think of the state of the Chinese grocery store today? A lot of them have closed you know since your generation? Do you--are you optimistic about the Chinese grocery store, you know the local neighborhood grocery store, particularly in light of these big competitors like supermarkets and what not? Or do you think that they'll find a way to survive?

00:52:37

LW: I think it's on the way out. I think maybe say 10 years--another generation there will be very few Chinese grocery stores in Mississippi. You know most of the grocers-- Chinese grocers' children are not in the grocery business. Very few of them have passed down--passed it down.

00:52:54

KK: Another thing that I found out was a lot of the grocery store owners were first sojourners that they came here and they were planning on going back. Did your father ever tell you about that? Did he ever have plans to move back to China or did he--when did he realize that he was going to stay here in Mississippi?

00:53:18

LW: I don't know; he didn't realize, but we have--he still has a home in China in which I've been wanting to go back to the village to see. And we have pictures of the home. And this friend of ours that's a distant relative, he lives in the same village, and he goes back to China. He said your father's house, the--the backyard is sort of catty-cornered to my father's--to our house in this little village. And he tells us about it. We've been trying to get--get a group up to go back to the village--to visit the village and the house is still standing. It's a little three story stucco house in the--. I don't know if I have a picture; I know my brothers and sisters had pictures of it.

00:53:56

KK: And what was the name of the village, do you remember?

00:53:59

LW: Gong Hui

00:54:03

KK: And so he always had that. Did he ever--do you remember ever visiting--did your

parents ever go back and forth to China or do they ever travel back I guess?

00:54:13

LW: My father after--after I was born he never did go back but my oldest brother did. He went back and he brought his wife and a daughter--they had a daughter and a son--no, just daughter; his son came on his own. Yeah; that's my oldest brother. But we had been--I only went--we went back to China in April just--just like a--like a tourist deal. It didn't get--and I didn't get a chance to go back to the village, but I really want to go to the village.

00:54:43

KK: So I guess your father never got to see China after he retired or you know after he came here after you were born?

00:54:50

LW: No; he didn't go back. But he kept--you know he kept corresponding with all the relatives back then.

00:54:59

KK: Well I just have a--I guess a few more--couple more questions and then we can wrap it up.

00:55:10

LW: You're talking about how these--your children don't follow your footsteps. It's just

like we--I didn't follow my parents' footsteps. However I did have two children--two children that was--that graduated Pharmacy School but they never was in Pharmacy. Well my daughter worked in--well she went to Med School and she worked in the summer as--in the Pharmacy you know just to supplement the income. But you always want them to do something better.

00:55:35

KK: Did you ever try to teach any of your children certain Chinese customs or traditions, you know for example did you have a Chinese wedding for--did any of your kids have Chinese weddings or anything like that?

00:55:49

LW: Yeah; they--they was sort of typical. Let's see; my oldest brother--my oldest sort of had a Chinese wedding and of course he's divorced. And--but my second son married a Caucasian. My third son is in Pontotoc but he had sort of a Chinese wedding in--in Greenville. And then my daughter married a Caucasian.

00:56:14

KK: Hmm; do you know--do you perhaps--do you perhaps celebrate anything special--do anything special for Chinese New Year's or anything like that?

00:56:25

LW: I don't know, no; but there's a lot of Chinese around here that does. In fact, I got a friend of town, my cousin in town that goes to Clarksdale and they celebrate--it's a group

of Chinese over there that--that adhere more to the Chinese questions than I ever--. Like I've always--I'm here out here out by myself more or less you know.

00:56:44

KK: Well we're just about going to wrap up this interview. But before we go this is a question that I ask a lot of my--a lot of the participants is if they--do you have a favorite Southern dish?

00:57:05

LW: I like them all really [*Laughs*]. You know I just found out Mama Jo's she's a black lady, I just found out she used to cook at the University. I go up there once in a while to really eat a Southern--. She cooks pig feet and neck bones and things like that you know. And I--I just happened to find out, some--one of my friends, who was Caucasian said you ever eat Mama Jo's? She has a rotel spaghetti that's really good. I said I've heard of her but I've never been. It's just about a half--just a mile up the road but--. I enjoy Southern food. We've--I've eat chitterlings and my--my son and my third son he loves--he'll eat--he would eat anything that don't eat him that's what he says. If it doesn't eat him he'll eat--he will eat it. [*Laughs*]

00:57:49

KK: And along those lines, do you have a particular dish, do you have a particular Chinese dish that you like to eat?

00:57:57

LW: Not anything particular; I--you know I'm pretty easy to please. I like--I like a lot of Chinese dishes. I like the mixture of it of Chinese food and Southern food--really Southern food, just--.

00:58:09

KK: So have you ever seen when those two things combined? I was you know--do you ever see like Chinese Southern food; have you ever seen that?

00:58:17

LW: Yeah; we--in fact in our family we used to cook neck bones and black beans all the time, so that's sort of a--a mixture you know. And it's several things like that we've sort of combined the Chinese--. We--we cook turkey; my sister-in-law used to cook it and she'd cook it Chinese style. And then the chicken you do--you know if you do different foods you sort of cook, but it's the best of two worlds what I would say.

00:58:42

KK: Just what does a Chinese-style turkey look like?

00:58:45

LW: Well they stuff it; they used to stuff it with oyster stuffing inside and they would only cook it--you know there's lot of people that cook a turkey all night long but my sister-in-law would cook it three or four hours and it's great. It wouldn't be--it wouldn't be overdone like the turkey. And they use a different rub on it, a different sauce on the outside of it. They--they would baste it different.

00:59:06

KK: Hmm.

00:59:06

LW: But I think now that may be just in our family. I can't say every Chinese family has their own way of combining the two.

00:59:15

KK: Because a lot of times during my interviews people would say that--that their parents since they couldn't get Chinese ingredients would mix it together. They would take American ingredients and make it Chinese. Do you remember if your mother did anything like that?

00:59:33

LW: No; I would think a lot of times it would be the other way around.

00:59:36

KK: What do you mean by that?

00:59:37

LW: That she'd--I--you said she'll take an American dish and make it--change to Chinese. I would think a lot of times they would take a Chinese dish and sometimes more or less turn it to American. It goes both ways; you know I won't say it goes just one way

either way. But both--sometimes they just sort of--usually you watch these cooking schools, they start experimenting and throwing this in and they put a little Chinese--. Well I started cooking a lot of stuff with the hoisin sauce. I tell you I've got this friend here; I'll tell you the Mayor in Louise, Hoover, he makes the Hoover Sauce. Have you heard about it? He--I've got two bottles here.

01:00:16

KK: I--I have heard of the Hoover Sauce.

01:00:19

LW: Yeah; he was telling me he sells some in Oxford. I'll send you three bottles. I saw him at one of the parties and he sent me three bottles. I haven't even tried it yet but evidently he does well--real well with it.

01:00:30

KK: Yeah; could you--so can you tell us a bit about Hoover? I think he's down in Louise, Mississippi right?

01:00:36

LW: Right; he's--I think he's from--I don't think he's born over here. I think he came over from China. But then he married a family of a big family of--out of Rueville, the Gees, very prominent family. All the kids went to college and he was--he came over as a citizen merchant but he sent all his kids--they all got--all of them went to college. And then he married the girl--he married; I believe she was the only--I think Frieda was the

only daughter. Her name was Frieda, too. But anyway he had two sons. But he--I knew him 'cause he--we used to play tennis a lot. We used to go to different tournaments and I'd run up on him and we got to be good friends. And he's quite a guy; he's--

01:01:26

KK: Yes; he makes the Hoover Sauce and it's like a Chinese barbecue sort of combination right?

01:01:31

LW: Yeah; can you cut that off a minute and I'll go get you a bottle of it.

01:01:35

KK: So we're back and in front of me is a bottle of Hoover Sauce from Louise, Mississippi and Mr. Wing was telling me a bit about you know mixing Chinese and American food. And this sauce he showed me is that perfect example, right. And you were telling me how it was like a perfect example of Chinese and American coming together.

01:01:57

LW: Yes; he was telling you how to you know a lot of chicken wings are being sold now and hot wings but this is how to marinate your wings, chicken wings with this Hoover Sauce.

01:02:08

KK: Yeah; and the Hoover Sauce in front of me is--has things like soy sauce and different spices and yeah, it's--it looks like an interesting sauce.

01:02:20

LW: Yeah; I thought it was very interesting. It--it shows the diversity of Chinese now. The grocery stores you know and they kind of spin off in different things. Just like Raymond; you know Raymond is--he was in--he was on television--they had television programs on in the morning I'm thinking.

01:02:39

KK: Well before we go I'd first like to thank you very much for inviting me to your house and allowing me to interview you and get your story. And if there's anything you'd like to add before we go?

01:02:52

LW: No; it--I thought you was going to do the all asking. [*Laughs*] No; I--very interesting. I enjoyed talking to you.

01:03:02

KK: Well I very much enjoyed talking to you as well Mr. Wing and thanks again.

01:03:06

LW: Okay.

01:03:06

[End Luck Wing Interview]