

University of California
Berkeley, California

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

DORIS SHOONG LEE:
**CARRYING ON THE FAMILY LEGACY
OF CHINESE AMERICAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND PHILANTHROPY**

Interview Conducted by
Elizabeth A. Castle, Ph. D, in 2006

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Doris Shoong Lee, dated May 12, 2006. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. No part of the manuscript may be quoted for publication without the written permission of the Director of The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to the Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley, 94720-6000, and should include identification of the specific passages to be quoted, anticipated use of the passages, and identification of the user.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

“Doris Shoong Lee: Carrying on the Family Legacy of Chinese American Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy” conducted by Elizabeth Castle, 2006, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2005.



Doris Shoong Lee and Theodore B. Lee at their San Francisco home, 2001

Table of Contents

Interview History	x
Shoong Lee's Early Years	1
Description of family	1
Emigration of Father and Early Years	2
Entering During the Chinese Exclusion Act	2
Learning to Speak English	3
First Store in Vallejo	4
Racial Discrimination	4
Purchasing House in Oakland	5
Shoong Lee's Early Memories	5
Typical Houses in Chinatown	6
Shoong Lee's Parents Meet	6
Mother's Background	7
Early Years of Parents' Marriage	7
Moving to Oakland	8
Religion and Attending Catholic School	8
Father's Expectations of Daughters	9
Sister's Desire for Father's Praise	9
Expectations for Brother	10
Chinese-American Identity	10
Career Expectations Girl versus Boy	10
Julia Morgan House in Oakland	11
Father's Business Ventures During Vacations	12

Store Managers and Loyalty	12
Descriptions of Vacations to Long Beach	14
Meals and Household Staff	14
Learning to Speak Chinese	14
Brother's Lack of Work Ethic	15
Chinese Classes in Cantonese	17
Father's Work Schedule and Interest in Real Estate and the Stock Market	18
Mother's Daily Schedule and Her Sisters	18
The Chauffeur and Learning to Drive	19
Shoong Lee's High School	21
The Family Cook	22
Preparing Noodles and Other Dishes	23
Types of Meals and Listening to the Philharmonic	23
Piano Lessons	24
Finishing High School Early	24
Friends and Being Joe Shoong's Daughters	25
Chinatown and the Community Center	25
The Tutor Who Asked Shoong Lee to Marry Him	27
Dating	27
Going to Berkeley	29
Family Trips	29
People Who Worked in the Household	30
Relationship with Mother	32
Life at Berkeley and Beginning of the Joe Shoong Scholarship	32

Adding to the Fund for the Donor Wall	32
Experiences at Berkeley	33
Family Travels to China for a Year	34
Lingnan University	35
Activities and Dating at the University	35
Father Returns to His Village	37
War Breaks Out and Difficulties Returning to the United States	38
Father's Beginnings and Business Philosophy	40
Dollar Store Concept	40
Father's Business Philosophy and Business Organization	40
Father's Racial Philosophy	43
Father's Political Beliefs	44
The Company's Managers	45
Shoong Lee's Grandmother and the Practice of Binding Feet	45
Shoong Home in Adam's Point	47
Entertaining Notables	48
Description of the Dollar Store	48
Father's Adventures in the Stock Market	49
Locations of the Dollar Stores	50
Shoong Lee Accompanying Her Father	51
Father's Discipline Philosophy	52
Father's Conflict with Labor Union	52
Others' Viewpoint of Father	53
Other Memories of Father	54

Chinese Language Schools and Empowering Education	55
Father's Attitude toward Gender Roles	57
Flight from China at the Beginning of Sino-Japanese War	58
Sister to Barnard and Shoong Lee to Stanford	59
Marriage to Richard Tam	59
Early Marriage and Move to New York	60
Birth of Child; Move to Oakland; Relationship with Mother	62
In-laws Move In	63
Attitude of Americans Toward Chinese During War	63
Conflict within Family	64
Shoong Lee as a Cook	65
Shoong Lee's Housekeeper	66
Shoong Lee's Son Richard and Daughters Judy and Lisa	66
Shoong Lee's Trust from Her Family	67
Death of Shoong Lee's Mother	68
Stillborn Birth and Impact of Lisa's Cerebral Palsy	69
Lisa	70
Divorce from Richard	71
Judy and her Family	71
Richard's Experiences Working for The Dollar Stores	73
Changes in the Dollar Stores	73
Father's Decline and Turning Over the Dollar Stores	74
Shoong Lee Begins Working with Dollar Stores Management	74
Father's Division of Assets	75

The Joe Shoong Foundation	75
Father's Illness and Passing	76
Changes in Managing the Business	77
Relationship with Brother after Father's Death	79
Brother's Marital History	80
Foundation Passes to Brother	80
Ted Lee Sets Up Situation so Milton Shoong Runs Dollar Stores	81
Brother's Marriages, Continued	82
Dollar Stores Begin to Fail	82
Milton Shoong's Daughters	83
Dollar Stores Close	84
Doris Shoong Meets Ted Lee	84
Reviewing Brother's Running of the Dollar Stores	86
Shoong Lee's Relationship with Brother and Sister and Stores	87
Starting the Urban Land Company	88
Descriptions of Trusts	90
Ted Lee's Acumen in Real Estate	90
Living in Las Vegas and California	91
Gaming and Key Employee	91
Interest in Art and Symphony; the Museum Society; Asian Art Museum	92
Asian Art Museum	94
Shoong Lee As Chair	95
Other Civic Activities	96
Doris and Ted Lee's Philanthropy	97

Joe Shoong Professorship for International Business	97
The Joe Shoong Legacy	98
Photographs	99—114

Interview History

The idea to conduct an oral history with Doris Shoong Lee emerged during the process of conducting the oral history interview with her husband and business partner, Theodore B. Lee. While spending time with the Lees' at their home in Las Vegas, Nevada we discussed the historical importance of her father Joe Shoong as the founder of the National Dollar Stores. While her father has received brief mention in general histories of Chinese America for his remarkable business achievements, there exists little information about the social forces that shaped his life. The planned interview would help illuminate these details.

With this in mind, the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) at the University of California, Berkeley, invited Shoong Lee to share her memories of her father, and her experience growing up as the daughter of a remarkable entrepreneur and founder of the National Dollar Stores.

In keeping with her highly efficient manner, we completed the interview over the course of two days in March 2006 in her office at 611 Washington Street. The tapes were transcribed and lightly edited at ROHO. Shoong Lee made very few changes, maintaining the conversational tone of the interview. In preparing the final version, a table of contents and index were added. The Regional Oral History Office, a division of The Bancroft Library, was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. Tapes of the interviews are also available for listening in The Bancroft Library. The Regional Oral History Office is under the direction of Richard Cândida Smith, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Elizabeth A. Castle, Ph.D.
Regional Oral History Office
Berkeley, California
June 2006

Interview 1: March 1, 2006

Audio File #

Beth Castle: Today is March 1, 2006, and we are here beginning our first interview session with Doris Shoong Lee in her San Francisco office at 611 Washington Street. As we begin today, Doris, could you tell me when and where you were born?

0:00:17.1

Shoong Lee's Early Years

Doris Shoong Lee: I was born in San Francisco. When? The date?

Castle: Yes.

Shoong Lee: December 20, 1919.

Castle: Really?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: Wonderful. I'm December nineteenth. I don't often find many around my time. You were born in San Francisco. Was it your family home?

Shoong Lee: Yes. The family lived in San Francisco until I was about school age, and that's when the family moved to Oakland.

0:00:52.2

Description of family

Castle: Tell me, when you were born, did you have any other siblings at the time? Were you the oldest? The youngest? How did you fit in?

Shoong Lee: I'm a middle child. I have a sister who was a year-and-a-half older than I, and a brother who was about two-and-a-half, three years younger.

Castle: What are their names?

Shoong Lee: My sister's name is Betty; my brother's Milton. They are both gone.

Castle: Could you tell me your parents' names? Where were they each born?

Shoong Lee: My father's name was Joe Shoong, and he was born in China in a little village outside of present Guangdong. My mother's name was Rose Elizabeth Soohoo. She was born in San Francisco.

0:01:52.0

Emigration of Father and Early Years

Castle: One of the most important stories for a lot of families that come from a history, a Chinese-American history in San Francisco, in particular, is how, for example, your father came to this country. Could you tell me, as you remember it, the story of his arrival here and what that entailed?

Shoong Lee: He was about eighteen or nineteen years old. He came from his village where his job had been to gather the eggs from his village and take them to the next larger village for sale. He decided there wasn't much future for him doing that, and so he decided to emigrate. He came over here with no language, no money, no relatives. The only people that he knew were a few people who had come from his village earlier and had settled in Vallejo and had a little store there. So that's where he went when he landed.

Castle: Did he ever share with you any stories about what it was like? The journey? How did he get here, for example? What was the journey like? Where he came into immigration?

0:03:26.5

Shoong Lee: No, he never did. All I know is that he joined that group in that little store in Vallejo, and before too many years he was the leader of the group. Then, he changed the name to China Toggery. Later when he became the leader of the group, as I said, they decided, he decided they should move to San Francisco. So they did, and they moved to Market Street. The address was 929 Market Street. Then he called it, changed the name to the Dollar Store.

Castle: Let's trace back a few things before we arrive at the birth of the Dollar Store because it is such a significant event in terms of business history. It's pretty remarkable that he is nineteen when he makes the journey here?

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: Again I think it is always terribly powerful when someone—we think of traveling today with such ease, but to go with no English language skills.

0:04:51.1

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: And such a great unknown in coming here.

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Entering During the Chinese Exclusion Act

Castle: What is very different from most personal histories or larger immigration histories, is he not coming in during the Chinese Exclusion Act?

Shoong Lee: Yes, I think the only way he could come in was as a merchant.

Castle: So how did he set himself up as a merchant? You said that his position was to carry eggs between villages? Was that—

Shoong Lee: That would mean that one of the persons in the group in Vallejo must have vouched for him as a merchant to come in, and that they would vouch for him. I don't know exactly what that would have entailed, but it allowed him to come in under that category.

0:05:55.1

Castle: Right. You read in the histories what it took to try and enter the country as a family member.

Shoong Lee: That was very difficult. It was only the person who came in as a merchant himself who was able to emigrate. Wives were not allowed at that time, nor children.

Castle: Do you have a sense of whether, when he arrived do this, he knew when he was going to return? Was he coming here with the intention of—

Shoong Lee: I think that he pretty well knew that he was not going to go back for a number of years. Unfortunately, I don't really have much history of the time between when he was in his twenties and when he was in his thirties by the time he met my mother. Because I think once he met my mother and they got married and formed a family, my knowledge is a lot more detailed.

0:07:15.5

Castle: We don't always think about asking—we don't ask our parents these questions.

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: So he comes over as a merchant and is able to gain admittance into the United States through that clause in the Chinese Exclusion Act. That certainly did not make it easy. This is in Vallejo because he has village connections.

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: You talk about his moving up in the group. He must have demonstrated a keen business sense.

Learning to Speak English

Shoong Lee: He must have. He was probably the youngest one of the group. But he also learned to speak English with no accent, which was rather remarkable too. He always spoke as if he were an educated man, but he really did not have that much formal education. He was self-taught.

Castle: That is really impressive. I wonder what motivated him to learn English, to set those kinds of goals for himself. He must have known right away that that was what was going to aid his business.

Shoong Lee: Yes. Yes.

Castle: Did he ever make any comments as to how, for example, speaking English with no accent—

Shoong Lee: No. We just, the family just took it for granted.

0:08:53.8

First Store in Vallejo

Castle: The first store in Vallejo, could you tell me the name again? Do you have a sense of what they sold there, and what they did?

Shoong Lee: It was called the China Toggery as far as I know and I can remember. In those days they called those things dry goods. They don't call them that any more. But I think it was the same sort of merchandise that they ended up selling when they came to San Francisco. That would be clothes for men, women, children, household items like sheets and towels, and some kitchen equipment. Small things like that. No major appliances or anything like that.

Castle: What year was this that he came to this country and joined this group of merchants?

Shoong Lee: I think it was the early twentieth century.

0:10:04.9

Castle: I had seen a date of 1903.

Shoong Lee: Something like that.

Castle: Just the turn of the century.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Racial Discrimination

Castle: Do you recall your father sharing any stories with you about what that early life was like when he first got here or any challenges he faced as a businessman, particularly due to his Chinese background.

Shoong Lee: No, actually he talked very little about himself. As we were growing up, with children you don't usually ask your parents those things because at that time you just take everything for granted. It isn't until you're quite a bit older that you think about history, the history of the family.

Castle: I often wonder also if individuals like your father likely faced a lot of challenges which is the nice way of saying racial discrimination.

Shoong Lee: Yes, that's right.

Castle: It's not always the way of some men certainly within certain cultures also to share a lot about those experiences. You kind of maybe—

Shoong Lee: Hold them inside. That's right.

0:11:34.0

Castle: Would you say that you have a sense that your father was—it's kind of stoic was the word?

Purchasing House in Oakland

Shoong Lee: Yes. I'd say he was stoic. I remember that in order to buy a house in Oakland at that time, it had to be through a friend who then would resell to him because there were restrictions on even buying a house as an Asian.

Castle: So did he have a white friend?

Shoong Lee: Yes, that's right, who would buy from someone and then sell it.

Castle: How old were you when you moved to Oakland?

Shoong Lee: Oh, about five.

Castle: So, 1924.

0:12:24.5

Shoong Lee: Yes. In the middle nineteen twenties.

Shoong Lee's Early Memories

Castle: This is a difficult question to answer sometimes but, what are your earliest memories of your father? As a child?

Shoong Lee: I really don't remember very much from the days when we must have lived in San Francisco. I don't even know where we lived. The only recollection that I have of the days before we moved to Oakland was a visit to my grandmother's house and that was on Powell Street. I can almost tell which house it was on Powell Street. I remember what the house looked like, going up the stairs, and seeing my maternal grandmother. I just remember that one visit to that house.

Castle: What was the house like?

0:13:39.4

Shoong Lee: It was a flat, I think you called it. It was all on one floor. It was on the second level. The layout of the house was very similar to a lot of houses in Chinatown, in that you go up a steep flight of stairs and everything is along this one corridor. The kitchen was always in the back. Then there was the dining room, and as you go towards the front and whatever number of bedrooms there were. Very traditionally furnished with Chinese furniture. I remember that, and that's all I remember about San Francisco until I was about five.

Castle: Well, that's a lot to remember, to reach back that far for anybody, whatever age they have a hard time remembering back to being that young. So the memory is probably very tactile: you're seeing, you're coming up the steps—was the house in Chinatown?

Shoong Lee: Yes, it's on Powell Street and I can almost point out the house. I remember it.

Typical Houses in Chinatown

Castle: So you say it was typical of flats in Chinatown. What kinds of things signify a typical flat then? If some one were to ask you, what was housing like? What was life like in Chinatown? What would you describe to them?

0:15:19.2

Shoong Lee: Well, if you look at row houses in Chinatown going up and down maybe Washington and Jackson Street above the commercial area, you'll see a lot that are similar to what I just described. They were, I guess you would call them, middle class. Comfortable, and that's about all I can say about them, really.

Castle: But they did have traditional Chinese furniture?

Shoong Lee: Yes, people seem to use that kind of furniture at the time.

Castle: What would make something traditionally Chinese?

Shoong Lee: You can see some of the furniture in museums now. That is the style that was popular then, and you still see it in some like family associations here in San Francisco now and even in some of the restaurants. Hard straight-backed chairs. The style is classic. The dining table and chairs are very much the same as they were then. Even the beds and nightstand are quite traditional and still in use.

0:16:59.1

Shoong Lee's Parents Meet

Castle: You are born into the house in San Francisco. What do you know about the story of how your parents met?

Shoong Lee: I don't really know much about it except that she was in her middle twenties when they got married. She was twenty-six, and he was thirty-nine. So he had already

been in this country almost twenty years. He was by that time a merchant who was successful enough so that a few years later when my sister and I were born, it was time to move to the Bay area, he was able to get us a very nice house in Oakland that I grew up in.

Castle: So families did not arrange anything. Do you know if they just met each other in the course of life?

Mother's Background

Shoong Lee: No, I don't know how they met because my mother was one of a family of about six children, but my father certainly had no one to speak for him. I don't really know how they met. My mother went through high school here in San Francisco, at Girls' High which no longer exists. At that time, that was about as far as girls went with their education. Her father worked, I think, for Immigration as a translator. That's about all I know about what he did.

0:18:52.8

Castle: So your mother had a high school education. It's just interesting, the stories about how people might come together because as you said earlier, so many men came to the country and then had no families. That's a long time to not have any support network.

Shoong Lee; That's right.

Castle: Do you know if your father had any friends that were really a part of his life when you were born?

Shoong Lee: He had some relatives by that time who lived in the Bay area. He had cousins, people that we called uncle, which would have been the same generation as he was.

Castle: That were not necessarily blood uncles but—they may have been?

0:19:50.3

Shoong Lee: The surname was Joe which is my dad's surname so—extended family I guess you'd call it.

Early Years of Parents' Marriage

Castle: So they meet and get married. How long after they married was your older sister born?

Shoong Lee: I guess within a year or two. They started having a family right away.

Castle: Do you know if your mother worked before—

Shoong Lee: No. She never worked.

Castle: While he's in San Francisco, what is your father doing with business at this time? You say, he started off in Vallejo. Had he opened a store in San Francisco?

Shoong Lee: I think by the time my dad and mom were married, I think, yes. I can't be positively sure of that. But I'm pretty sure there was the store in San Francisco by that time.

Moving to Oakland

Castle: You've talked about his having acquired enough money that he was able to buy you a comfortable home when you moved to Oakland. Even though he had the money, even money did not have enough power to bypass the racial discrimination involved. Did he ever say anything about how he felt about that experience?

Shoong Lee: No.

Castle: I wonder if as a businessman he just did what was practical?

Shoong Lee: He did what he had to do to get results that he wanted.

Castle: What precipitated the move to Oakland? Do you know why you moved to the East Bay?

Shoong Lee: They thought that it was a better place to raise a family, that they could have a bigger house with a garden, and that the school situation was better in Oakland. We ended up going to a Catholic school.

Castle: Before that had you been attending church, or do you know what church they belonged to or what religion they were engaged with?

0:22:12.5

Shoong Lee: No. I don't think the family was really a church-going family. I heard my mother say she was a Methodist, but I don't remember her going to church.

Religion and Attending Catholic School

Castle: But you ended up in Catholic school?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: Do you know why that choice was made?

Shoong Lee: My mother felt that the nuns gave children, girls particularly, a good education.

Castle: She went to the Girls' School here and—

Shoong Lee: That was not a Catholic school.

Castle: It does bring up another question I'd like to ask about your parents and you father in particular. Obviously with his success one might assume that he had a certain amount of discipline. I wondered what he was like as a parent in terms of expressing affection and anger. How do you remember him as a father?

Father's Expectations of Daughters

Shoong Lee: He was judicious. (laughs softly) He expected us to do well. When we did well, it was expected. I think that as far as I was concerned that was fine. For my sister, she needed more. She needed him to say how well she had done. Scholastically, she did very, very well. But he was not given to giving praise. He just didn't. That was all right with me, but it bothered her.

Castle: Why do you think this was? You had the ability to watch your sister and react to how she was frustrated with the experience. I wonder if that contributes to your ability not to be bothered by the lack of praise. Do you think it's in your nature?

Shoong Lee: I don't know if you would call it knowing yourself or self-confidence or whatever. I know what I can do, and if I can do it well, I think I know that, too. I don't have to be told. Maybe my sister was not as self-confident.

0:25:05.2

Castle: It's interesting because I wonder where people get a strong sense of self. As far as you can remember about yourself, you've had a certain level of confidence in your abilities?

Sister's Desire for Father's Praise

Shoong Lee: And if I didn't come out as the top person in the class, it was all right with me, as long as I was in the top quartile. But with her, she came out on top several times. In our Catholic school, the girl who came out on top got the gold award. There was only one, but you got the silver if you were above a certain average. I always got the silver, but she's the one that got the gold. You would think that she'd be happy enough knowing that she was the best in the class. She needed to hear it from Dad, and she never heard it.

Castle: Did that create resentment for her over a long period of time?

Shoong Lee: I think it did. It added to her frustrations. I think she ended up a rather unhappy person. It was just too bad.

0:26:14.8

Castle: It was expected that you do well in school?

Shoong Lee: Yes. For my sister and for me, too. My brother didn't have to perform up to a certain level on anything as a child, which was too bad also because it then meant that he did not have any discipline. They just didn't make him perform up to any level. He wasn't expected.

Expectations for Brother

Castle: Do you think because of his position as a boy?

Shoong Lee: Yes. As a boy. as the only boy in the family, and the youngest. They spoiled him.

Castle: It sounds as if that may have been that would come back later to be a really negative consequence.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Chinese-American Identity

Castle: In the twenties and thirties when you were growing up, you are crossing some culture lines. You are a young woman from a Chinese—at that time they didn't use *Chinese American* the way people say today. Do you remember?

Shoong Lee: Yes, they did.

0:27:50.9

Castle: They did? So there was a real sense of identify from both places?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Career Expectations Girl versus Boy

Castle: As a young woman what did you feel was open or available to you growing up. Were you encouraged to think about a career? Were you encouraged to think about family? What kind of parameters were put on your expectations?

Shoong Lee: I don't think we were encouraged to think about a career, really at all. I can remember my dad saying to me as I was growing up maybe and in high school, college, "It's too bad you weren't a boy, because you should have been a lawyer."

Castle: How did you respond to that? What did that make you feel?

Shoong Lee: Well, it made me feel that he thought I was smart. I had no ambition for a career at that point.

Castle: So being male or female didn't really affect what you would have been striving for. Maybe there would have been pressure placed on you if you had been male?

0:29:06.0

Shoong Lee: If I had been a boy, yes.

Castle: Do you have any regrets or thoughts about that kind of positioning? Did you ever wish you were a boy, or had been born a boy?

Shoong Lee: No. It was a different world.

Castle: It just made sense in the context of the times?

Shoong Lee: Yes. I think so.

Castle: So now as people look back from a more contemporary position, and think, "Oh. What a horrible thing to hear!" In your mind, it was a compliment of your father's saying how smart you were? To a degree?

Shoong Lee: To a degree, yes.

Julia Morgan House in Oakland

Castle: So, what are your earliest memories of Oakland? What was your house like? Where did you live?

Shoong Lee: It was a very nice house. It wasn't until years later that I knew that it had been designed by a very famous woman architect by the name of Julia Morgan. It wasn't until it was designated as a—what do they call it, architectural treasure or something so that you can't change the outside—that I knew that. Isn't that funny?

Castle: That's pretty remarkable. At that time, she had been designing houses all around.

Shoong Lee: Yes. She did the Women's City Club up in Berkeley, and lots of other houses.

0:30:45.8

Castle: Do you know if your father knew?

Shoong Lee: Probably not.

Castle: He just liked the house?

Shoong Lee: Um-huh.

Castle: What did it look like? What are your memories of it?

Shoong Lee: I remember it had a great big dining room which my mother in later years made even bigger by extending it into the garden. We had a nice little breakfast room

where we ate most of our meals, and a big kitchen that was big enough for preparing parties of twenty or thirty with a very good cook. A big living room with a grand piano. Upstairs there were about four or five bedrooms and a den where my sister and I studied every night. It was a very comfortable house.

Castle: What neighborhood was this in? Where was it located in Oakland?

0:31:54.4

Shoong Lee: It's by Lake Merritt on a street called Bellevue Avenue. It was very close to where we ended up going to school. The Catholic school as I have mentioned was called Our Lady of Lourdes. That's where all three of us went through eighth grade.

Father's Business Ventures During Vacations

Castle: At this time, you are a young person. You are not really going to know it at the time, but your father has achieved a certain amount of wealth and status as a businessman. Do you have any idea, in the context of the times, how well he was doing at the time? What he was doing business-wise?

Shoong Lee: Well, we knew that he was opening more and more stores as the years went by. Some of our vacations were to go and visit these stores. For instance, for several years our vacations were in southern California in Long Beach. The hotel was called, I think, The Virginian, or something like that. When we would go down there and stay for a couple of weeks, we would take family car trips to adjacent cities, and oftentimes it was to visit stores. Then we would maybe have dinner at the manager's house because the manager and his wife most always lived in the house that was provided by the company. Also, the single men who worked in the store lived there too with the manager and his wife.

Store Managers and Loyalty

Castle: Really?

0:34:02.4

Shoong Lee: Yes. So, the manager's wife then cooked dinner for all of them. That was sort of expected.

Castle: That's a great segue into talking about your father's business practices. That doesn't sound like a common business practice.

Shoong Lee: No. I don't think it was. I think that almost all of his managers came from the village around where he came from. They came as merchants, and he vouched for them that they would have employment when they got here. As they went through the ranks, working their way up to be a manager, oftentimes they married local ladies. They lived in the company house, and when other young men came over, who were single, so they lived in house with the manager and his wife.

Castle: So your father would bring over individuals that he had community connections with from China? You mentioned that they worked their way up to being a manager. Or were they brought over as managers?

Shoong Lee: No. They came over as merchants. That's the only way they could come over. Then they had to learn the business before they became a manager. So they had to work their way up from being on the floor and taking care of various departments until they were knowledgeable enough to become a manager.

0:35:52.6

Castle: That sounds like a great business plan inasmuch would you say that the individuals coming over would have great loyalty to him.

Shoong Lee: Yes. They certainly did because a lot of them worked for him for all of their lives.

Castle: So you would have certain ambitions within the company, but I would imagine by the nature of how they came over and maybe certain cultural aspects that they weren't seeking to overtake your father or start a competitive business or all the things that often mark classic capitalist behavior today. What do you think of that statement?

Shoong Lee: I think it was at a much lower expectation level. I think that some of the managers became buyers. Then from there went up to what I would call top management, but that was only maybe two or three people under my dad. Actually none of them that I know of went out and started competing businesses.

Castle: Interesting.

Shoong Lee: Yes. It is interesting.

0:37:11.1

Castle: What do you think that your father did that encouraged such loyalty and hard working efforts amongst his employees?

Shoong Lee: He tried to provide them with a good living and security. As they had families and their families were growing up and wanted to go to college, if they couldn't afford it, my dad would help. He ended up putting some of the children of his managers through school.

Castle: That's remarkable.

Shoong Lee: As a matter of fact, when I was in Hawaii recently, one gentleman came up to me and he thanked me. He said, "I want you to know that your dad put me through medical school." I was touched.

Castle: I was going to ask you how that made you feel. You just had no idea either? Someone comes up out of nowhere to say, "Your father made my future possible." That really represents a level of generosity that is not associated with—even

though your father amassed tremendous capital and wealth for your family, he still had very obvious commitments to those—I wonder if you viewed them in a family way?

0:38:54.6

Shoong Lee: I think that he thought of them all as part of his extended family. They could feel it.

Descriptions of Vacations to Long Beach

Castle: Did they feel like vacations that you went on, or did they feel like work trips with your dad? Or a little of both?

Shoong Lee: For us that was the way vacations were. (chuckles)

Castle: What did you enjoy about them? What did you not like?

Shoong Lee: We really liked Long Beach. I liked Long Beach. I remember it fondly. The hotel where we stayed was right on the beach, so we went into the ocean every day. Right next to this hotel was what they used to call The Pike. It was like a carnival. It had rides and fast food places where you get hamburgers and hot dogs and ice cream, that sort of thing. For kids that was terrific. We got to go there in the evening and have something before we went to bed. It was a treat.

0:40:13.8

Meals and Household Staff

Castle: That brings up some questions about how you lived at home. What kind of food did you eat in the house? What did your mother prepare?

Shoong Lee: We always had a cook. I don't remember my mother ever cooking a meal. We always had a cook, and we always had a maid, and we always had a chauffeur as far as I can remember. We had Chinese meals for dinner but western breakfasts and lunch if we were home on the weekends. But dinner was always Chinese food. One of the things that Dad always wanted us to do was be able to name every dish that was on the table at night, and to speak Chinese at the dinner table.

Learning to Speak Chinese

Castle: My question regarding language, were you bilingual, or what would you say is your level of fluency?

Shoong Lee: Well, we're bilingual, my sister and I. My dad wanted us to learn Chinese from the time we were in school. So we had tutors all the way through high school, my sister and I. The tutor came in five afternoons a week from four to six and Saturday mornings from ten to twelve.

Castle: That's a lot of time.

Shoong Lee: That's a lot of Chinese, and also then precluded our doing anything at school in the way of athletics. We weren't very athletic anyways, but it just took all of our time. Because after dinner it was time to do our homework, and that was all we could do.

Castle: How did you feel about that?

0:42:06.8

Shoong Lee: Well, that was what was expected of us, so that is what we did.

Castle: I just wondered if you had moments where you really wanted to join something at school, and it was a conflict because you had to do this every day.

Shoong Lee: We knew what the schedule was, so it was no need wishing for anything else.

Castle: It just wasn't going to happen.

Shoong Lee: It wasn't going to happen.

Castle: I just wondered if there was any dramatic family drama. You mentioned that your sister and you, in regards to this. Did your brother participate?

Shoong Lee: No. My brother never had to participate. I don't know why they didn't insist that he do something as well.

Castle: That's a really interesting contradiction.

Shoong Lee: Yes, it is.

Castle: Because you've mentioned already your father's statement about if you had been a boy, what your opportunities would have been. And yet it is your sister and you who are so highly regulated.

0:43:09.7

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: In terms of grooming you to be, maybe I wonder if it is grooming you to be good wives versus being good business people, whereas if your brother is likely the future of the company in that traditional setting, but he is not given the tools or not expected—

Shoong Lee: It is. It is very contradictory. I can't understand why they did that.

Brother's Lack of Work Ethic

Castle: Your father, with his own obvious sense of discipline in his own life, clearly had a significant work ethic. Right?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: There's always that challenge that you do well, but how are your sons going to learn when they have a certain level of comfort. Obviously you, or your brother, never knew what it was like to come over to a country, not know anybody and basically start off virtually in poverty. I wonder how your father felt about it.

0:44:19.6

Shoong Lee: It seems to me that he should have known by the time my brother was high school age that he was not achieving at least scholastically as he should have. But he did nothing. It was my mother, really, who spoiled by brother, did not even make him go to school if he said he did not feel well. He didn't have to have anything wrong with him not to feel well. If he didn't feel well, he didn't have to go to school that day.

Castle: Would you or your sister been able to pull that off?

Shoong Lee: We never tried. We would have been bored to be at home. (laughs)

Castle: It sounds as if you are classically good daughters.

Shoong Lee: I think we were. We were very docile, I think.

Castle: Yet, in some ways now, that does not seem at all your nature. Was that perhaps your outer façade, because clearly you are a person who has a very strong sense of self. Sometimes people do that. They have a strong sense of who they are, and they do what they need to do to get through whatever they are dealing with. That's a very feminine version of what you father might have done.

Shoong Lee: (laughs softly) Well that could well be, and I think that my sister and I could feel that there was some good for us in what we were doing. So, it was not contrary to anything that we would have wanted to do at that point in our lives. I think education was very important to us.

Castle: Did you ever feel the unfairness of the situation or feel frustrated that you can remember, growing up, about what your brother would get away with while you all had to work?

Shoong Lee: No. I don't think so. I think we couldn't understand why they were spoiling him that way, and it really felt that they were not doing what was best for him. It wasn't until he was well grown that he said to them, why didn't you make me do this, that, or the other thing? Why did you spoil me?

0:46:56.6

Castle: Interesting.

Shoong Lee: Isn't it?

Castle: What were their answers for that?

Shoong Lee: Can't tell you.

Castle: They couldn't tell him, or you can't—

Shoong Lee: I don't think they had an answer. Because we loved you, is not a very good answer.

Castle: I wonder if it is just tinged with regret for them?

Shoong Lee: I think it must have been, particularly for my father, because he tried a few times to see if my brother might fit into the business in various capacities. It did not work.

Castle: We'll talk about this in further sessions, but it does seem to lead to that almost inevitable future where without the discipline and without the skills it is not like your brother wanted to go off and be an artist and do something completely different. He just didn't do much of anything. (Both speak the word at the same time)

0:48:00.5

Castle: That is very different from being the next generation of a wealthy family who has the opportunity to go in a different direction. Not go into the business, but take advantage of that opportunity to be an artist, or be something that—

Shoong Lee: Anything.

Chinese Classes in Cantonese

Castle: Yeah. I hear you. I'm very interested—five days a week and Saturday you took Chinese classes. Then, what was your parents' level? Obviously your father was fluent. Just to clarify. Is this Mandarin?

Shoong Lee: No. At this time everyone in this area spoke Cantonese because most of the people in this area came from Guandong. That is the one province in China that speaks Cantonese. So San Francisco Chinatown was all Cantonese speaking. It's only been in the last maybe twenty, thirty years, since there has been a large influx of Chinese from other areas of China, that Mandarin is now spoken fairly commonly.

Castle: Interesting. Your mother, having been born and raised here—

Shoong Lee: Spoke Cantonese.

Castle: She did speak Cantonese because it was spoken in her home.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: In San Francisco.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: You were tutored, and you spoke Cantonese at the table.

Shoong Lee: Otherwise it was English.

Castle: It was a dinner table rule?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: As soon as you stood up from the dinner table, were you able to speak English again?

Shoong Lee: (laughing) That's right.

Castle: It sounds as if it was actually quite regulated, then.

Shoong Lee: He was trying to make sure that we could speak conversational Cantonese.
(laughing while speaking)

Father's Work Schedule and Interest in Real Estate and the Stock Market

Castle: It's really interesting because second generations often lose their language unless somebody is very disciplined about it. I'm projecting that he has a lot of discipline and order to his life. Was that the case and how did it manifest itself?

Shoong Lee: He went to business, to San Francisco. We lived in Oakland when the main offices, stores, were in San Francisco. He went to the office every day, all day, and came home at dinnertime which was like six or six thirty. He would leave nine, nine thirty in the morning. He was there all day for as long as I can remember. He became interested in real estate early on. He became interested in the stock market early on. Those were his two pleasures, passions, outside of the business.

0:51:34.1

Castle: So he recognized early on the two ways to really build wealth in this country.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: Which is the stock market and real estate. There was a driver who drove him over to San Francisco?

Shoong Lee: Yes, and would have to come back and then take us, well, he took us to school first, then took him to San Francisco, came back, picked us up from school. Brought us home, and then went back to San Francisco to pick him up, him and my mother up.

Mother's Daily Schedule and Her Sisters

Castle: What did your mother do during the day?

Shoong Lee: My mother often times, I'd say most of the time, would go over to San Francisco with him and spend the day with her sisters, because she had two sisters who lived in San Francisco.

Castle: What are their names?

0:52:20.9

Shoong Lee: Lily Wing and Grace Lim.

Castle: Grace Lim and Lily Wing. Were they older or younger than she?

Shoong Lee: Younger. She was the oldest of four sisters. Then she had two brothers who were also younger than she.

Castle: Because of your wealth at the time, she didn't have to spend the day at home, taking care of the home because you had people to do that? Do you know what she did with her sisters during the day?

Shoong Lee: Just visited. They had lunch, and just visited.

Castle: What were her sisters doing at the time? Did they have jobs?

Shoong Lee: In those days, ladies did not work.

Castle: Of a certain class.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: You had mentioned that her family was middle class.

Shoong Lee: Now, Lily's husband was a lawyer. He had his own insurance company. It was called C.C. Wing Insurance Company. He was successful.

Castle: So, they were both married?

Shoong Lee: Yes. My other Aunty Grace Lim, her husband was, his name was Lim Foong, F-o-o-n-g, and he worked for my dad. He rose to vice president and was up in top management in the company.

Castle: Would closer family have more of an opportunity to move up in the company?

Shoong Lee: He was the only one.

The Chauffeur and Learning to Drive

Castle: She would go spend the day with her sisters. Was your driver, your chauffeur, with you for a long time? Was it the same person?

Castle: He had chauffeurs who were with him for a long time. I remember the name of one who taught me to drive when I was thirteen. His name was Fred. He brought me over to San Francisco and put me on the hill and stopped half-way up the hill and said, "All right. Now you take it up, because if you learn to drive on a hill, and you can stop and you can go up, you will never be afraid of hills." So, I'm not afraid of hills. (Castle laughing) Those days you had a gearshift.

Castle: You were driving a manual car.

Shoong Lee: Right. So I can drive a manual shift car.

Castle: You did that at thirteen?

Shoong Lee: Right! And they gave me a car when I was fourteen because it was more convenient for the chauffeur not to have to come back to Oakland to pick us up from high school. (laughs) So I had a little Ford convertible. I would take my sister and me to school in the morning and home in the afternoon. That's about as far as I went.

Castle: At fourteen you did this?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: You didn't have a driver's license?

0:55:47.9

Shoong Lee: Oh, I did.

Castle: Could you get one at fourteen at that time?

Shoong Lee: If there was need. It was like if you were on a farm and you needed to drive somewhere, they had a category for fourteen to sixteen if there was a need.

Castle: So you were able to make the argument that you—

Shoong Lee: I was needed. (laughs)

Castle: That is kind of interesting because it is often hard to argue that the chauffeur can't get back. (both laugh) So it's necessary for you to drive. I would imagine that would instill some confidence in you personally. It made me nervous driving here this morning, but you were pretty confident then of your abilities.

Shoong Lee: I think he really did me a big favor to take me to a difficult situation and to give me the confidence that I could do it.

Castle: This might be obvious, but this is something that he had asked your father?

Shoong Lee: Oh, yes.

Castle: And your father thought it was a good idea. Did you know it was coming or were you just driving along, and suddenly you had to get in the car in the driver's seat and drive?

Shoong Lee: No,, I think it was decided that I should learn to drive, and when I was a good enough driver then I could have a car and my job would be to take my sister and me to school and bring us home.

Castle: So, what about your brother?

Shoong Lee: He was only ten or eleven at that time.

Castle: Was he going with you?

Shoong Lee's High School

0:57:17.2

Shoong Lee: No. This was a girls' high school.

Castle: Oh, I'm sorry.

Shoong Lee: It's called Holy Name Central High School, up in the Oakland hills. I think it is still going. As far as I know it is still there. Or maybe it isn't, I don't know.

Castle: Holy Name Central? I don't know. How many years older than your brother were you?

Shoong Lee: Three.

Castle: How did he get to school during that time when you in high school?

Shoong Lee: Well, let me think. He was still in grammar school, wasn't he?

Castle: For the first few years.

Shoong Lee: I don't know where he went.

Castle: I just wondered in terms of all the trips—

Shoong Lee: I think he must have gone to public school. But where? Oakland? No.

Audio Tape #2

The Family Cook

Castle: We spoke about a number of things and one of them was what home life was like regarding Chinese culture and language. What are the other things? You had a cook that cooked for you. Was that cook with you?

Shoong Lee: For many, many years, until he retired and went back to China. He taught me how to cook Chinese food.

0:00:27.9

Castle: What was his name?

Shoong Lee: Lee See. S-e-e. He had a room and bathroom down in the basement of the house. He lived with us, and every day he would go down to Oakland, to Chinatown, to buy whatever we needed for dinner. It was also his time to socialize with people in Chinatown. He really took very little time off, as I can remember. He was with us for twenty-some years.

Castle: Did he have family in the area?

0:01:20.9

Shoong Lee: No, he wife was in China.

Castle: Really? Did he come over here just to work in your house?

Shoong Lee: Yes. And he worked for us, for the family for twenty-some years. I guess he sent money back for his wife. I don't know that he had any children. He may have had a child, but he didn't see them for twenty-some years.

0:02:05.0

Castle: That whole time he was working for you, he never went home to visit?

Shoong Lee: No.

Castle: It's always interesting. This person lives in your house, and you are close with him in a way, but it is not as though he is family. How would you describe the relationship that you had with him?

Shoong Lee: He was my friend. I saw him after he went back to China. I would go to Hong Kong. He would come out to see me from the village, wherever he was. I kept up with him until he passed away.

Castle: What were your favorite dishes that he cooked?

0:02:48.3

Preparing Noodles and Other Dishes

Shoong Lee: I loved his noodles. He made wonderful noodles. He would make the noodles himself, and he said, "I won't teach you how to do this, Doris. I'll teach your husband." (chuckles)

Castle: Why did he say that?

Shoong Lee: Because he said it took too much strength to roll the dough out. He would start with a piece that was about the size of a large pancake. By the time he finished it would spread out over almost the whole tabletop. He said it took too much inner strength, as he called it. He cooked so many wonderful dishes. He could do chicken a dozen different ways. I loved the way he did roast squab, and the way he did squab was what we called it. It was delightful.

0:03:51.8

Castle: How was that cooked? Do you remember?

Shoong Lee: Oh, it required a lot of preparation, maybe a dozen different ingredients. Each one had to be chopped very fine, minced. Then, stir-fry it in the right order. He was terrific.

Castle: Did he teach you that one?

Shoong Lee: Yes, some of it.

Castle: How old were you when you started learning how to cook some of the things from him?

Shoong Lee: Oh, maybe eleven, twelve, until I got married.

0:04:29.2

Castle: What did you do when he did take time off? Who cooked in the house, or did you go out to eat?

Shoong Lee: I think when he took time off, he would take time off during the day, and he was always back by dinner. I don't remember that any of us ever cooked dinner.

Castle: So, you don't have any memories of going without his Chinese meal at night?

Shoong Lee: No.

Types of Meals and Listening to the Philharmonic

Castle: You described that you had Western breakfast and lunch. What would you have?

Shoong Lee: The usual breakfast things. For me, I always loved my Chinese food so if there were leftovers from the night before, that's what I had for breakfast. (laughter) Lunch, of course, was at school during the week. It was just on Saturdays and Sundays. Sundays were always noodles at lunchtime. Those wonderful noodles. I can remember from the time I was maybe eleven, twelve, thirteen, on up, was that Sundays was when the New York Philharmonic came on the air. It was radio at that time, no television. Three o'clock in New York was lunch time in San Francisco. My sister and I would sit on the steps and have our lunch and listen to the New York Philharmonic.

0:06:01.8

Castle: So, you'd eat your noodles on the steps of your house.

Shoong Lee: Yes, at that time, the big radio was in the front hall.

Castle: You just cranked it up enough so you could hear it? This was something that just you and your sister did?

Shoong Lee: Yes. My sister and I.

Castle: What about it did you like? You just enjoyed the music?

Piano Lessons

Shoong Lee: Well, we both took piano from the time we were in high school, or before that really. But certainly at the convent at Holy Names, they emphasized piano. My sister was very good. She had her own tenth grade recital, that she herself did the whole thing. For me, I did seventh grade, so I did one piece every recital with a lot of girls. Each did one piece.

Castle: How long did you continue with piano?

Finishing High School Early

Shoong Lee: Until I left high school after the third year. When she graduated, I left the convent. I wanted to finish high school as quickly as I could and go to college. So, I finished my last year of high school in one semester. I went to a school in Berkeley that is no longer in existence called A to Zed School. I took the whole year of chemistry, the whole year of English, a whole year of French in six months. And I went to Berkeley, U. C. Berkeley.

0:07:39.3

Castle: So, before we get to Berkeley and explore that further, I have a few more questions about your younger years growing up. What was your neighborhood like? Did you play with other girls in the neighborhood? It doesn't sound as if you had much time to play, but if you did, what would you do? Do you socialize with other Chinese-American girls? Who were you friends at the time?

Friends and Being Joe Shoong's Daughters

Shoong Lee: We really led a very quiet, a very sheltered life. As you say, we really didn't have much time to play at all. I can remember the family across the street. There was a girl about our age that we liked. Her name was Rebecca Brinkerhoff. Her brothers became quite well-known as engineers, the Brinkerhoff family. We really didn't have many activities outside of the home growing up until we got to college.

0:09:10.3

Castle: You were on your own then?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: That is one of the things that I wondered. The wealth that your family enjoyed at the time, did that isolate you at all? Did people treat you differently because of it?

Shoong Lee: I think they probably did. The few times that we ventured out into Chinatown to social gatherings, I think we were sort of pointed out as being different or something. I can remember, we were always introduced as Joe Shoong's daughters wherever we went.

Castle: That was your identity?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

0:09:52.9

Castle: Did you have any feelings about that?

Shoong Lee: That's the way it was. That is the way people introduced you. What could you do? (chuckles)

Castle: If you did go out you, maybe it was Chinatown. It was really you being separated from other Chinese-Americans at the time?

Chinatown and the Community Center

Shoong Lee: I guess at that time there weren't too many Chinese families that ventured and lived outside of Chinatown.

Castle: That's what I was interested in knowing about because people very much did live within the cultural security of Chinatown.

Shoong Lee: That's right. And at that time there wasn't that big an Oakland Chinatown. San Francisco Chinatown has always been the very established community. But Oakland Chinatown at that time was rather small. Now it is quite different. It's large.

0:10:56.4

Castle: Are there differences between the Oakland Chinatown and the San Francisco Chinatown communities?

Shoong Lee: Now or then?

Castle: Both, if you could.

Shoong Lee: Well, then I guess my dad felt that there was a need for more a community feeling in the Oakland Chinatown, so he started a community center. He built a building and started a Chinese school in part of it. Part of it was like a gymnasium for kids to come and play basketball or whatever people do indoors, besides basketball. That is still ongoing now. At some point he started a foundation which was called the Joe Shoong Foundation. One of the purposes was to finance and maintain that school in Oakland, as well as at that point there was a school in Locke which is up in the Stockton area. There was a Chinese school there that he supported and also a school in his village in China.

0:12:33.4

Castle: When, the community center in Oakland?

Shoong Lee: Oh, I had that date on the tip of my tongue. I don't.

Castle: I will find out; I have those dates. I was trying to get a sense of how old you were at the time. Do you remember?

Shoong Lee: I must have been in my twenties.

Castle: So, you were out of the house; you were in college or married or beyond.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

0:13:05.6

Castle: We're going to come back to that and talk about his philanthropy in detail. Obviously your father recognized a need to build the Oakland-Chinese community, and did so by a very significant gesture, which is building a community center. At that time having moved out of Chinatown in San Francisco living over in Oakland, did you socialize with any non-Chinese families that you remember. Or was it primarily a social life that was comprised of other Chinese-American families?

Shoong Lee: We really had very little outside contact until I got to high school.

Castle: Now, you may not see people after school when you are younger, because it sounds like your regimen. How long did this regimen of Chinese tutoring go on?

Shoong Lee: Through high school.

0:14:23.6

Castle: When did you start? When you were in first grade?

Shoong Lee: We were in grammar school.

The Tutor Who Asked Shoong Lee to Marry Him

Castle: Did you have the same tutor or did that person change?

Shoong Lee: No, we had a series of tutors. It started out, it was a cousin of my dad's, and we called him uncle. Later on it was a graduate student from U. C. Berkeley who became our tutor. That lasted until he asked Dad if he could marry me. I was about fifteen. That was the end of him as a tutor. (Castle laughing)

0:15:31.3

Castle: Tell me about that story. What happened there?

Shoong Lee: Well, I guess we were attracted to each other. I think I went out with him once. He was a graduate student from China. That's when he approached my dad, and my dad thought he was crazy. So he said, "That's enough of Mr. Hsieh." So that ended the tutoring.

Castle: What was his name?

Shoong Lee: H-s-i-e-h. Hsieh. I think he got his doctorate at Berkeley and went back to China and never heard from him again.

0:16:25.8

Castle: So he was tutoring you when you were fifteen?

Shoong Lee: I guess he started when I was maybe fourteen. It lasted for maybe a year or two and that was it.

Castle: You said there was a mutual attraction, though.

Shoong Lee: Yes, I thought he was nice.

Dating

Castle: But you were fourteen. It sounds as if you were a rather sheltered fourteen. Your life very much consisted of your family, which I think is normal for people of your status at the time. Was there any discussion over dating? Were you allowed to date? How was that handled within the family?

0:17:14.3

Shoong Lee: I think that after that episode, I did date a little bit with college young men from Berkeley, U. C. Berkeley.

Castle: When you were in high school?

Shoong Lee: Yes, I guess I was a junior, senior in high school.

Castle: Where would you meet them?

Shoong Lee: By the time I got to A to Zed which was in my senior year, my sister was at Berkeley. She was there, so that was my entrée to meeting college—

Castle: College boys when you were in high school. What did your parents feel about that? Did they know that this was going on?

0:18:06.9

Shoong Lee: Oh, yes. Oh, sure. He would come to the house where there weren't that many people.

Castle: It is always an interesting contradiction when you are growing up because you married a lot younger in those days.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: Than you do now, at the same time, there is still a vulnerability to being fourteen or fifteen. It's kind of an interesting balance. Your father, I wonder if he was more disturbed by the fact that you were—there was obviously a pretty big age difference between you and the tutor.

Shoong Lee: Yes, he was in his middle twenties.

Castle: But people were less surprised by it then, than they would be now. Now, I think, people don't always marry at such young ages,—I don't know—What do you think about that?

0:19:12.3

Shoong Lee: I think that if he had thought about it at that time, that he would have known that it was impossible, and would not have asked.

Castle: Wouldn't there also be an element of status? I mean, he was the tutor. Wasn't there a certain expectation of your finding a husband within the business elite or was that part of it?

Shoong Lee: I was too young to even think about anything like that. It was just a little crazy.

Castle: That's probably what I'm trying to get at. Your father recognized it as crazy. It sounds a little crazy.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: So, you are going to this A to Zed school, to finish up high school. Why U. C. Berkeley?

Going to Berkeley

0:20:15.0

Shoong Lee: It was right there. It was close. My sister was there, and so it seemed like the easiest thing to do, which it was.

Castle: What changed from your mother's generation in terms of an expectation that you and your sister would go to college? Was there an understanding from an early age that you would go to college?

Shoong Lee: Yes, I think so.

Castle: Was part of it the idea that you would go to college to find a husband?

0:20:51.2

Shoong Lee: No, there was nothing like that.

Castle: So you are getting ready. You are going to college. Did you move out of the house?

Shoong Lee: No. I was a day student as my sister was. There was no need for us to try to stay in the dorm in Berkeley. We lived fifteen minutes from the campus.

Castle: True. Did you drive yourself to Berkeley?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: Did you still have the same Ford convertible? [Shoong Lee laughs] Or had you gotten a new car?

Shoong Lee: No, I think by that time I had a Packard, or something like that. A bigger car.

0:21:39.1

Castle: Did both your sister and you have a car, or did you drive together?

Shoong Lee: It seems like I drove. I don't think that she drove at that time.

Castle: That's interesting. Your sister, you described her as highly competitive and also—

Shoong Lee: Only really academically, but not in other areas.

Castle: So you had the confidence since driving takes a certain amount of confidence. You took care of the two of you when it came to driving. Were you close, your sister and you?

Family Trips

Shoong Lee: Yes. We were. I remember that we took trips when we were still teenagers. I remember I was like thirteen or fourteen, and my sister and I and our governess,

we called her then. We went to Chicago and New York, and I was the treasurer. I took care of all the bills and going to restaurants and taking care of all of the things that you do when you are in a restaurant, and the hotel and all of that. So I guess I sort of took care of the money.

0:23:08.8

Castle: So you've been good with money from a young age?

Shoong Lee: Yes. I think so. When I was in school I was always the treasurer. In grammar school and in high school. (chuckles)

Castle: No surprise there, I guess. When you say you took these trips, were they personal family trips or were these school trips?

0:23:25.8

Shoong Lee: Personal family, just to—what did we actually do? We went to hear the symphony, maybe. Went to museum. Just things that we wanted to do. The strange thing was that we didn't go with our mother. We went with the governess.

People Who Worked in the Household

Castle: In terms of the different people who worked in your household, you said you had a cook, a driver, and a maid, and then a governess?

Shoong Lee: She was more than a maid. She was with us for ten years, from the time I was six until I was sixteen. Then she left to get married.

Castle: What was her name?

Shoong Lee: Laura Burton. She was a lovely person.

Castle: Was she a Chinese-American woman?

Shoong Lee: No, she was part black, part Indian, part white.

Castle: Do you know what Indian tribe she was from?

Shoong Lee: No, I don't.

Castle: But it was evident, the fact that you mentioned, that meant that you knew about it.

0:24:42.7

Shoong Lee: She told us about it, about her background.

Castle: In terms of phenotype, or how she looked, would she be identified as an African-American or black woman?

Shoong Lee: Yes, as African-American, but light-skinned and attractive.

Castle: The reason I ask is that I'm curious whether she appeared to have native features as a Native American. A lot of people, race and culture is very moveable.

Shoong Lee: I think because of her white and also Indian background, the features were not typically African-American or dark.

0:25:29.3

Castle: So she took care of you. She also would clean, but she wasn't just relegated to a maid position, because as a governess—

Shoong Lee: She was our companion as well.

Castle: Was she in charge of teaching you anything in particular?

Shoong Lee: No, not teaching that much, although I think she had very good common sense, and a good sense of values as far as what was right and what was wrong and what was not good. She was with us a lot.

Castle: I ask because you describe someone as a governess, who travels with young people. Obviously your parents are putting a certain amount of trust in her, that she is a good model for you as young women.

0:26:24.6

Shoong Lee: Yes, yes.

Castle: So you would take some of these trips really to broaden your horizons, if you will, your cultural experience.

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: Your worldliness. Was this your parents' idea to go on these trips?

Shoong Lee: No, I guess it was my sister's and my idea, because as I say, we didn't have a great deal of outside contact with friends. It wasn't as if we could just easily go out and say we were going to go off with our friends and go off for a week someplace or another. That wasn't there.

Castle: In some ways it does sound pretty isolating because like you said, instead of going off with a group of friends, you go off with someone who works in your house and your sister. That's just the way it was.

0:27:18.9

Shoong Lee: Yes. That's right.

Castle: Do you recall ever missing those kinds of opportunities growing up?

Shoong Lee: Well, we'd never had them. We'd never had them from the time we were very young. Sometimes you don't miss what you haven't had.

Relationship with Mother

Castle: Did you ever wish your mother had ever joined you on some of those trips?

Shoong Lee: I guess it never occurred to us that she would want to, and she never said she wanted to. If she'd said she wanted to, certainly we would have gone with her.

Castle: I was just trying to get a sense of how close you were to your mother growing up.

0:28:02

Shoong Lee: Actually I think I got closer to my mother later after I was married and after I had children. I really saw more of her then than I did when I was growing up.

Castle: I think that's natural in some ways for women, once they've gone through things where they have a lot more to share with their mother. You've gone through motherhood and marriage. I wonder if it is appropriate to say that because your mother had so many people that supported her in the tasks she normally would have done if she weren't upper class at this stage, there is kind of a distance that might be created between her and you, as daughters. Would you say that?

Shoong Lee: Yes. I think that's probably true. Also that she enjoyed so much being in San Francisco with her sisters for a good part of the week.

0:29:06.9

Life at Berkeley and Beginning of the Joe Shoong Scholarship

Castle: Tell me about going to Berkeley. What that was like for you? Did you know what you wanted to study when you got there?

Shoong Lee: I think I started out saying it was going to be philosophy and psychology. That was fine. I enjoyed Berkeley, and I think at that time, Dad and Mom had become good friends with the provost there whose name was Munroe Deutsch. That's when I think Dad started the Joe Shoong Scholarship Fund which is still ongoing today. At that time he specified that it was for Chinese students who needed help. We can't do that anymore. It is ongoing and Berkeley sometimes tells me who the students are.

Castle: When they made changes in the law, basically propositions, that no longer made it possible for it just to be for Chinese-American, so it was opened up everyone of all racial and cultural backgrounds. I guess my question is how did you feel about that? And did you put anything in to the scholarship description that would still help choose a student that might be more in line with your father's wishes?

0:31:0

Adding to the Fund for the Donor Wall

Shoong Lee: No, I don't think we did that. I think when the university told us that it was no longer possible to say Asian, Chinese, that they would open it up to any student in

need. We went along with that and didn't ask to have any language changed. As the years went by, the scholarship grew in size. In more recent years, when the Donor Wall went up, my husband Ted asked the university how close Dad's scholarship fund was to the million dollar mark and found that it was short by a few hundred thousand. So we put that amount up so that his name is now on the wall. I am happy for that.

0:32:22.5

Castle: That's a pretty powerful tribute because he's not here to experience that. I think it is in the spirit of the Wall because at that time, though it has grown over the years, I am sure that that amount that he gave at the time would qualify. Wouldn't you think?

Shoong Lee: Yes, since in the dollar amount by today's standard, we made up the difference.

Castle: We will return to talking more about your father's role with the university in particular because there are a number of questions to ask about that. Before we move into that, as a student, let's place you age-wise. You finished high school early. How old were you when you went to college?

Experiences at Berkeley

Shoong Lee: I was just sixteen.

Castle: That places it in 1937?

0:33:30.4

Shoong Lee: Thirty-six, thirty-seven. Thirty-six.

Castle: What did you remember of women who attended? Were there a lot of women there when you went?

Shoong Lee: Oh, yes. We quickly made friends with a group of all Chinese. At that time there was a Chinese Students' Club, and there was a house. It was on Etna Street, or something that sounded like Etna Street. There were lots of gatherings there, so we very quickly had quite a full social life aside from classes and such. It was a happy time.

0:34:41.6

Castle: It sound as if you pretty immediately gravitated toward your peers both in age and, to a degree, cultural background. Was that important to you?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: You mentioned the student house. Did people live in the house?

Shoong Lee: I think a few of the fellows who lived there, no girls. The house was open on weekends when they had gatherings, parties.

Castle: So, it was a Chinese-American student house.

Shoong Lee: Yes, correct.

0:35:13.6

Castle: Was it recognized by the university as a club?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: Tell me what you all would do together. What kind of gatherings? Would you go day trips?

Shoong Lee: No, we didn't do trips. It was just evening parties, really. Just what kids did at that time. Nothing that wild or nothing that unusual. At that time there was no drinking, there were no drugs. There was nothing like that. Very innocent times, really.

Castle: Did you start dating at that age?

Family Travels to China for a Year

Shoong Lee: Yes. Had friends. Then by thirty-six, Dad decided that the family should go back to China for a year. We did; the whole family went back to China for a year.

0:36:19.7

Castle: You had just started college. So you maybe had a year of college?

Shoong Lee: That's right. We went back to China. Dad and Mom stayed in Hong Kong at the old Gloucester Hotel, which is not longer in existence. My sister and I went to Lingnan University in Canton. At that time it was called Canton. Also we lived on campus. Then sometimes on the weekends we would go down to Hong Kong to visit with Dad and Mom. Sometimes we just stayed on campus.

Castle: So you and your sister shared a room there?

Shoong Lee: They put us in different rooms. As I recall, there were two or three girls per room. They always put us with a local girl.

Castle: Was that for language improvement? How did you get by with what you had learned linguistically?

0:37:32.8

Shoong Lee: We got along all right. What happened was that like with my curriculum, we had one language class, and that would have been Mandarin then. Then I had an English class, and I had a—what else did I have? Wasn't science. It was, I can't remember what else.

Castle: Were they classes you chose?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: How different was learning Mandarin for you?

Shoong Lee: It was good.

Castle: Was it difficult to transition?

0:38:32.7

Shoong Lee: No, it was learning another language. I've always been kind of good at languages. I've had quite a bit of French, and since college, some Italian. Languages come easy.

Castle: Suddenly your father decides you're going to China. What did you think? What did you feel? What were your memories of it?

Lingnan University

Shoong Lee: Well, Lingnan and living at Lingnan was quite an experience because we had never lived at a dorm before. It was sort of Spartan, the dorm facilities. There were three meals a day there in the dorm. Breakfast was always, we call it congee, sort of a rice gruel or noodles. All Chinese food for lunch, and dinner was all Chinese food. There was a curfew. I think it was ten o'clock at night or something like that. They locked the doors. That was on the weekends as well. It was different.

Castle: I was thinking. That was a huge transition from what you are accustomed to?

0:39:54.3

Shoong Lee: So what happened was that we quickly found a group of friends from overseas, both male and female. We got tired of dorm food, so there was a little restaurant on campus called, in English it would have been *Eight Corner Pagoda*. That's how it would have translated out.

Castle: What is it in Mandarin?

Activities and Dating at the University

Shoong Lee: In Cantonese it was (Cantonese words). So we would oftentimes have either lunch or dinner there with a group of six or eight or ten kids just to get away from the dorm food. On weekends we would go into the city, into Canton, and roam around and have lunch and dinner. You'd go over by boat because the Pearl River was between Lingnan and the city. You'd get into a little boat and go across, and you'd have a boat to come back. Everybody rode bicycles on campus because the distances were pretty far.

Castle: So did you also?

0:41:23.7

Shoong Lee: Yes, we rode bicycles. Of course, when you were on a date, the fellow packed you. You sat on the back. (Castle laughs) So that was really fun. Going into Canton on a date was fun.

Castle: What kinds of things did you do on a date?

Shoong Lee: Go in and have a meal. Sometimes go to a movie. Then you had to be back by ten.

Castle: That probably posed a problem, didn't it?

Shoong Lee: Yeah, and there were times when we had to go in through a window.

Castle: You were late, huh?

Shoong Lee: Late, yes.

0:42:03.4

Castle: Do you remember how late you were? What were some of the latest nights you pulled?

Shoong Lee: It could have been half an hour—

Castle: And you figured out how to get in through the window?

0:42:15.1

Shoong Lee: You had to have somebody inside helping you.

Castle: And you don't have cell phones like you do today.

Shoong Lee: No cell phones. (laughter)

Castle: If you went out on a date, I'm just curious, did you let somebody know who might be home, so if you were late you—

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: Did you have a way of contacting each other? What did you do?

Shoong Lee: Throw a rock up at the window, or something, or would call out. But if we were going to be late, we pretty well knew.

0:42:45

Castle: Was there a matron?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: Did you ever get in trouble?

Shoong Lee: No.

Castle: Your father and mother were staying how far away?

Shoong Lee: In Hong Kong, and it was—how did we get down to Hong Kong? By train? By bus? Let me think, how did we get down there? Maybe it was by train.

Castle: How often would you go see them?

Shoong Lee: Not that often.

Castle: Why did your father think it was important to go live in China for a year?

Father Returns to His Village

Shoong Lee: Here again, he wanted us to get a feel of what it was like in China. He himself had not been back in many, many years.

Castle: Do you know when the last time he had been back since he came over? Had he gone home to visit since his—

Shoong Lee: I don't think he had. I don't think he had.

Castle: Did you go to his village?

0:44:05.9

Shoong Lee: No, we didn't. He did. We didn't. During the interim his mother had come over and spent almost a year in this country and had lived with us. Then after six or eight months she got lonely and wanted to go back to China. So she did. During the Second World War, she was on a boat going between Hong Kong and Macao, and the boat was bombed, and she was killed in that accident.

Castle: It is interesting that your father does not take you back to his village to meet any of your family or extended relatives.

Shoong Lee: To this day I haven't been back.

0:45:25.8

Castle: Do you have any sense of why he did not take you?

Shoong Lee: No, I don't.

Castle: You wonder if it was that you would not have had a lot in common, or you're obviously very removed from the life that any of your relatives would have been living in the village.

0:45:50.9

Shoong Lee: I remember that the people came out to see him. He always had people coming out to see him. He really stayed in Hong Kong. I don't think the weather agreed with him because after about six months, he didn't feel very good. So he and Mom ended up coming back to the U. S. by spring.

Castle: And you stayed?

Shoong Lee: We stayed until the end of the school year.

0:46:26.7

Castle: Just the two of you?

Shoong Lee: Yes, my brother went back with my parents. My brother in the meantime had not gone to school when my sister and I were in school.

Castle: And he was supposed to be in high school, wasn't he?

Shoong Lee: Yes, he was high school age. He had a year, or at least six to eight months when he was just roaming around Hong Kong with an older cousin and not doing anything very productive.

Castle: You're at a pretty young age. So your sister is eighteen, and you're sixteen or seventeen?

Shoong Lee: I'd be seventeen, yes.

Castle: That's a pretty young age to be in China by yourself when you'd been pretty sheltered thus far.

Shoong Lee: After school was over we were supposed to go on a sociological trip, the group. To go to a village which was halfway between Canton and Beijing, to where Dr. James Yen was trying one of his experiments of teaching people to read and write a thousand words. The thousand words were in four little books. Seemingly, if you were able to learn these words that you would have enough of a vocabulary so that you could get along. Dr. Yen was a very famous educator. Our group got up to this little village. I think it was called Ding Yuen and that's when the war broke out.

0:48:28.3

War Breaks Out and Difficulties Returning to the United States

The Japanese attacked China, so the railroads stopped for a couple of days. There we were in this little village. So that was the end of our tour. We were told, find your own way home.

Castle: What did you do?

Shoong Lee: Well, we got on the first train that we could get on going back where we came from. They let us off along the Yangtse somewhere, and we got a boat going down to Shanghai. In Shanghai, we had some family friends, so we contacted them and asked them to help us get back to the U. S. By that time, my parents had heard what happened, of course, and were frantic to know where we were, had contacted these friends in Shanghai just in case we got hold of them. We were told to take a certain boat to go from Shanghai to go back to Hong Kong.

0:49:52.7

When we got to Hong Kong, we had passage on the last President liner out of Hong Kong. I think it was called *The President Coolidge*. So my sister and I were on that boat and we had to go up past Shanghai to get back to the U.S. By that time the boat could not dock in Shanghai, and we could see the Japanese firing into Shanghai. We could see that from the boat. It anchored out in the water. The few passengers who were coming on to our ship had to come over by barge or by motorboat because we never landed in China. Then off we went to come back to San Francisco.

0:51:02.2

Castle: Do you remember anything that you were feeling during that time?

Shoong Lee: Yes, we were thinking, oh my gosh, are we lucky to be on this ship. It was the last ship out of China.

Interview 2. March 3, 2006

Audio Tape 3

Father's Beginnings and Business Philosophy

Castle: Today is March 3, 2006, and we are beginning our second interviewing session with Doris Shoong Lee. What we would like to dive into today is to talk more about your father's legacy in terms of the building of his business and then his philanthropic works.

0:00:24.2

Shoong Lee: Right.

Castle: In 1903 he comes over, and he works with three business partners in the China Toggery, a dry goods store.

Shoong Lee: In Vallejo, that's right.

Dollar Store Concept

Castle: In Vallejo. Between 1923 and 1928 he is really building a business empire, gradually increasing and adding more stores. In 1928 he moves to the National Dollar Stores. In your time growing up with him, did you ever get a sense of what he was thinking? For example, why this concept of low cost goods, of value for money? It seemed to be a very different trajectory than a lot of other businesses at the time.

0:01:13.7

Shoong Lee: I think he felt that he was filling a niche for people who did not have that much money to spend for staples, to be able to get full value in his stores. It was really like discount merchandising before that ever became widely accepted as a way of doing business.

Castle: The Dollar Store reference. Everybody has a Dollar Store in some way. He is the original.

Shoong Lee: That's right. That goes way back, way back.

0:01:50.9

Father's Business Philosophy and Business Organization

Castle: Did you ever get a sense of his business philosophy?

Shoong Lee: I don't think that he ever verbalized it, vocalized it. I think it was just something that he felt very early on was the way for his business to grow. He just opened

more and more stores in not necessarily small towns, but I would say, in the less affluent areas of those towns, so that he was where his potential customers would be, would live. I think that's why he ended up with so many stores in Southern California, in the less affluent areas.

0:02:55.6

Castle: Did you get a sense that he was seeking to serve a need in those communities?

Shoong Lee: Yes. Exactly.

Castle: The reason I bring that up is that in a lot of business circles today there's talk of moving into less affluent communities for more exploitative reasons, because there are certain things that developers can and cannot do in that area, but you see this as very different?

Shoong Lee: Well, that's right. That's giving good value to people who did not have that much to spend for the necessities of life.

0:03:36.3

Castle: Often our family does not verbalize to us the things in the same way one might to a reporter or something at the time. You are giving us the impressions that you had knowing your father. That might be his business philosophy. How might that extend to how he built loyalty and nurtured employees and how he worked with them?

0:04:06.5

Shoong Lee: First of all he brought the young men over from his village in China, and he had to vouch for them with immigration saying that he was giving them employment and that they would not end up on welfare. I think that alone was the beginning of loyalty they felt towards him. Otherwise they would not have been over here in the U.S. at all. Then once they started working in the stores, it became like a part of an extended family because in the stores that were outside of the urban areas, the people who came over, the younger men, lived in the homes of the managers of the stores. It was almost like a family situation.

0:05:07.4

Then when they rose up within the organization and became managers themselves, then they ended up usually with a house that belonged to the company that they lived in. They perpetuated the system by doing the same for younger men who came over from China to join the organization as they had. Then when their children became old enough to go to college, if they weren't able to afford the tuition or whatever, Dad would oftentimes help. So you have people who spent their whole lives working for National, and they felt very close to my father.

Castle: Did he continue throughout this time to continue bring men over from China to work in the management? At what point did he start hiring locally?

0:06:23.1

Shoong Lee: The managers of the stores were always Chinese up until the end. I think if the store was big enough to have an assistant, the assistant was also a Chinese gentleman. But the salespersons were all from the local areas and women. Of course, whoever applied that satisfied the qualifications were hired as far as the sales persons were concerned.

Castle: That brings me to an important question about the make-up of the stores as you understand it. Could you run through for me the model of the employees? You just mentioned manager, if it was big enough, assistant manager. Maybe you could just give us a picture. If you walked in on a day, who would be employed there, how many employees?

0:07:18.7

Shoong Lee: Well, of course, it depended on the size of the store. San Francisco was one of the bigger stores because they had a main floor and a basement, and I think maybe even a mezzanine.

Castle: Where was it located?

0:07:41.1

Shoong Lee: Market Street. It was 929 Market Street between Fifth and Sixth. In those days it was retail on both sides of the street. It looked a lot different than it does today. You might see the manager or the assistant walking around, but otherwise it would all be Caucasian sales persons. The cashier was probably a Caucasian lady. I even filled that role at Christmas time a few times and that was sort of fun. (chuckles)

Castle: How old were you when you did that?

Shoong Lee: I was married. Other than the Chinese manager or possible assistant manager, you really couldn't tell, walking into the store that it was Chinese owned. Is that what you mean?

0:08:48.4

Castle: That's part of it. It is one angle. I also think it is interesting to flesh out how the company ran.

Shoong Lee: Upstairs would be the main office of the Dollar Stores. Upstairs, I think, most everyone was Chinese. My father would have had his office up there. The vice president who for a while was my uncle, Uncle Lim who was married to my mother's sister Grace, was there until he passed away. All of the buyers, three or four buyers, had their offices up there.

Castle: Would they be Chinese?

0:09:32.8

Shoong Lee: Yes. They were all Chinese. The secretary was Chinese. Practically everybody upstairs was Chinese.

Castle: This is an important reversal of how a lot of businesses worked at the time considering how race and class and culture work in the United States where you have the upper echelon, Chinese-American, and the employees, white. I think that is an important point to make. I wonder, did you ever have any situations of cultural tension? How did people get along?

Shoong Lee: Well, I think people got along fine. I don't think that the salespeople ever felt uncomfortable working under a Chinese manager because if they had, they would never have started to work there.

0:10:39.7

Castle: I'm not necessarily looking out for negative tension, I just think it's interesting, because it's obviously going to be different cultural practices. People are going to eat different foods in the break room, things that make a place culturally unique or special. I just wondered if there were any recollections. You were not there on a daily basis to see that?

Shoong Lee: No.

Castle: I wondered if your father ever shared anything about that.

Shoong Lee: No, no.

Castle: What was his philosophy, and again I think you are interpreting this from his behaviors, around race relations, for example? What did he express to you about that?

Father's Racial Philosophy

0:11:24.5

Shoong Lee: I think that he tried to deemphasize as much as possible anything that he came across as being hostile or race related. He didn't carry a chip on his shoulder the way some people do or have in the past because they feel they've been discriminated against. I think that he presented a very nice, I can say almost an elegant, face to the public. He made friends very easily with Caucasians and had lots of good friends.

0:12:30.9

I can think of one instance, when there was a murder case. A Chinese cook, they said that he murdered the lady that he worked for. At that time all of a sudden there was a lot of hostility shown to Chinese. So my dad jumped in and got a lawyer for this poor cook to defend him in his murder trial. I think in the end he was found innocent. But that's where my dad felt if he could help keep that kind of hostility down, he would do what he could to help.

0:13:40.4

Castle: I think that is an incredibly important example of his demonstrating leadership as an honest businessman, as a community leader, because he could really be

criticized for that. At that time that there was a lot of cases where men of color, Chinese-American, or African-American men, especially of lower classes, could be easily accused on the word of a white woman. You could just lock him up and throw away the key without your father's intervention. I think that is an important expression of his consciousness about that.

0:14:21.6

Father's Political Beliefs

Shoong Lee: Yes. And I think that another area that he tried to do as much good as he could was in the political arena. He would donate to both sides, to Republicans and the Democrats. Or if two people were running locally, and they came to him running for the same office, he'd give to both of them.

Castle: What prompted that?

Shoong Lee: Well. he felt that way that no matter who won, they couldn't (laughs) that he'd be on their side. (laughter continues)

0:15:04.1

Castle: So he is the consummate businessman. He is a smart businessman. So he is participating in the political process. (Shoong Lee chuckles throughout)

Shoong Lee: Right, right.

Castle: Ensuring that whoever gets into office—

Shoong Lee: —would remember him kindly. (chuckles) I haven't learned that lesson. (laughs heartily)

Castle: Well, you know, it's not done often, is it?

0:15:23.1

Shoong Lee: I know, I know.

Castle: That's interesting. I was going to ask about how his politics expressed themselves. You say he contributed to campaigns. Were there certain issues that he took up?

Shoong Lee: No, he did not; he wasn't really politically oriented. He didn't have very strong feelings about political issues. I guess that is why it was not hard for him to donate to both sides.

0:16:03.2

Castle: We'll come back and talk about it in a little bit, but the politics as they were might not have motivated him, he was certainly deeply committed to certain issues such as education.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: I think that's it pretty safe to say that politicians were not going to be advocating for Chinese-American, language, for example. So he just does it on his own.

Shoong Lee: That's right.

0:16:25.7

Castle: He doesn't look to politics.

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: As you recall, we have talked about a kind of Chinese-white relationship. During his lifetime at least, during the forties and the fifties, were there ever any black or Hispanic employees at the time that he hired? Or any other races that you recall that worked in the stores?

Shoong Lee: I don't remember many African-Americans at all. At that time there weren't that many Hispanics. So I don't remember.

0:17:06.2

The Company's Managers

Castle: You described the family model of a manager who lives in the house that's company owned, and then the men brought over to work in the upper levels of management or to work their way up into it, lived there also. This can be very positive in the sense of home. It could also tend to have potential for conflict as families do. Do you ever remember any stories, your father sharing anything about people who weren't happy with their situation?

Shoong Lee: I think that because the secondary level of people who were in the same house with the manager were always single men that you would not have had that. If they felt that they were constricted somehow or another or too closely watched, they could always go out and get their own apartment. No, I never heard of any conflicts of that sort.

0:18:20.1

Castle: So they did have the freedom to leave [Shoong Lee: Oh, yes] or get their own apartment, [Shoong Lee: Right] while they could live in the manager's [Shoong Lee: house. They did it rent-free.] Did he ever bring any women over?

Shoong Lee's Grandmother and the Practice of Binding Feet

Shoong Lee: No, no. Oh, he brought his mother over. She lived with us for about six, eight months and then went back to China.

Castle: How old were you when that occurred?

Shoong Lee: Oh, we were in Oakland, so I must have been school-age. It had to be I think when I was seven, eight, nine, something like that.

Castle: Do you have any memories of her?

Shoong Lee: Yes. I do remember her.

0:19:03.7

Castle: What was she like?

Shoong Lee: She was a very sweet gentle lady. I remember that she had bound feet, so she couldn't walk very much or very far or very fast. I remember thinking that bound feet were terrible, having seen hers. My mother said it was just lucky that her mother had not insisted that she bind her feet.

Castle: That's what your mother said?

Shoong Lee: My mother said, yes.

Castle: So she was quite relieved to not have bound feet?

Shoong Lee: Yes, yes.

0:19:45.7

Castle: Did your grandmother ever say anything about, probably unlikely, how she felt about that type of experience?

Shoong Lee: No, no she didn't, except to say that they hurt.

Castle: It is just interesting to explore people's experiences and memories around that because it is a symbol of status.

Shoong Lee: Yes, a terrible symbol.

Castle: Terribly painful [Shoong Lee: Yes, yes.] Did that mean your father, I want to make sure I understand clearly, your father came over here. What was the status of his family in China?

Shoong Lee: I believe they lived in the village. As far as I know they may have gone out to Canton, as it was called in those days, but I really didn't know much about how they lived or where they lived.

0:20:59.2

Castle: It's probably my own historical ignorance, but I was under the impression that you were really of a particularly certain class when you had your feet bound. I didn't know what level of life they lived there that would necessitate binding her feet.

Shoong Lee: I don't know.

Castle: Do you remember if it required any special care for her feet?

Shoong Lee: Not by the time it was done and she was an adult. By the time she came over to visit with us, she was an older lady.

0:21:45.0

Castle: But there was still pain?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: Do you have any other memories of her? She wasn't with you for very long?

Shoong Lee: No, no. I remember going to say goodbye to her on the boat when she went back. We even have pictures of that. That was the last that we saw of her.

0:22:08.4

Castle: You had said the other day that she was lonely?

Shoong Lee: In the U.S., she was.

Castle: Culturally lonely?

Shoong Lee: Well, when she was back in China, her daughters were there, and probably friends of a lifetime. But when she came over and lived with us, my mom and dad were gone almost all day, so if she was home while we were at school. We weren't that much company for her.

0:22:40.7

Castle: When she came over, was it just for a visit? Do you know?

Shoong Lee: Yes, it was for a visit. I guess my dad knew that once she went back, she would not come again.

Shoong Home in Adam's Point

Castle: This also brings me back to some questions about your home in Adam's Point?

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: It was north of Lake Merritt?

Shoong Lee: Don't ask me directions. I'm very poor at north, south, east, west.

0:23:18.4

Castle: Well, your home in Adam's Point which was on the north side of Lake Merritt, and it was Bellevue?

Shoong Lee: That's right. Bellevue Avenue, 385 Bellevue.

Castle: Three eighty-five Bellevue. It was described as a Mediterranean style.

Shoong Lee: Yes, there were arches. There were arches.

Castle: Julian Morgan.

Shoong Lee: That's right. It was a very pleasant house and really not fancy. But it was nice.

0:23:51.6

Entertaining Notables

Castle: It has been described as the place where you would find the who's who, the luminaries of Chinese-American society. There was a lot of entertaining that went on. I wonder if you recall any particular evenings that you were involved in?

Shoong Lee: I remember that when there were big parties that the kitchen was humming and that oftentimes I could go in and help the cook with last minute preparations like shredding the chicken for Chinese chicken salad. Things like that. I remember one evening in particular that Mr. A. P. Gianinni came over for dinner. That was a very special evening, and after dinner I remember my sister and I were asked to play the piano. I can say I played the piano for Mr. Gianinni.

0:24:54.8

Castle: I also heard or read that there was a visit at some point by Chiang Kai Shek?

Shoong Lee: That one I remember hearing about but for some reason or another, I don't remember seeing him.

Castle: Did your father ever talk about it? Why he came to visit? What went on during the visit?

Shoong Lee: I think he was friendly with that regime, and as he was friendly later with Mr. T.V. Soong who was the minister of finance and that family. I do remember Mr. and Mrs. T. V. Soong coming to the house. Mrs. Soong, a lovely lady, she and my mother became very good friends.

0:26:03.1

Description of the Dollar Store

Castle: We're going to weave our way back to talking about your father and the National Dollar Stores. I'm interested in where he got the name, too. Do you know?

Shoong Lee: I think "dollar", of course, came from the fact that the merchandise at that time were like multiples of a dollar. When he first got that name for the company, you could buy like maybe ten handkerchiefs for a dollar. You could buy four pairs of underpants for a dollar. You could buy a shirt for a dollar. So that's where that part came from. I think as far as "national", he was probably thinking that if he went to various parts of the country that "national" would be an appropriate name.

0:27:14.8

Castle: I think that the sense of the product carried that a lot of the stores today, for example, it's usually non-clothing, things where you can get hair conditioner, or a number of different things all in dollar multiples, or so-many for a dollar or two dollars. But what else was sold? There was clothing?

Shoong Lee: Yes. Lots of clothing for men, women and children. There were, I guess they called them household items, like sheets and towels, and bedding, blankets and that sort of thing. Also kitchen equipment, like pots and pans and silverware, but nothing in heavy appliances.

0:28:08.0

Castle: I see. I was thinking about stores, chain stores today that have had tremendous growth and wondering how many of them got some of their ideas from his model?

Shoong Lee: (chuckling) It's hard to tell.

Castle: You can see some of it in Wal-Mart, Target, in terms of the attempt in serving a particular community with certain value. Could you tell me the story as you remember it of your father's investing in the stock market?

Father's Adventures in the Stock Market

Shoong Lee: I don't know how he first became interested, but I just know that when he did he really loved it. He would watch it from the beginning until the market closed. He became such a large investor that the brokerage company that he used, I think it was called Moody's at that time, they put a ticker tape in his bedroom, so that he could watch the market from the opening until the closing. And he did.

0:29:30.6

I remember that this was in 1929 that he and my mother and his broker were going to New York for a trip. Somehow or another he had a premonition of something bad happening, and he started selling his shares while the train was headed from San Francisco to New York. At that time the trains took three, three and a half days to get across the country. He was telling his broker every time the train stopped at a station, "Sell, sell, sell." By the time the train arrived in New York he had sold his entire portfolio. It was while they were in New York that the Crash came. And Dad was out of it. So, when he came back, he got a check from the Bank of America, through Bank of America, for a million dollars. He was very proud of that check. So he framed a picture of it, a copy of it before he cashed it. (talking and laughing) He kept that around, and I think I still have a picture of it as well.

0:31:06.3

Castle: That's a pretty amazing story with the image of the train stopping, and the broker would run out, (Shoong Lee: Yes, and wire a message.) a message saying to sell. There was no (Shoong Lee: No indication. It was just a premonition that he had himself) So they wouldn't even be able to get him on insider trading? (Castle chuckling)

Shoong Lee: No, no, he had no inside information. He had a portfolio of many stocks, so it wasn't all in one stock.

Castle: Did you have a sense of what he was investing in?

Shoong Lee: No, not at that time.

0:31:48.2

Locations of the Dollar Stores

Castle: Unless he had told you later on in life. You were only eight, nine years old at the most. It's 1928, and he has launched the National Dollar Stores. A number are popping up all over. Were the majority of them in California?

Shoong Lee: I'd say so, but then he ventured up into Washington and Oregon and down into Nevada and Arizona and into the Hawaiian Islands.

Castle: Why did he make a move to the Hawaiian Islands?

0:32:31.4

Shoong Lee: When he would go over there to visit, wherever he went to visit for vacation, he would oftentimes end up with either the real estate or with the locations for another store. So, he ended up with a store in Honolulu and one in Hilo and one in Maui.

Castle: It sounds as if vacations in your family were always double-duty.

Shoong Lee: Yes. Busman's holiday. (chuckles)

Castle: You mentioned going down to Long Beach where your father would work in the store and—

Shoong Lee: Find new locations.

Castle: He was scouting new locations at the time.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

0:33:21.5

Castle: Did you ever go to Hawaii on vacation then?

Shoong Lee: Oh, it's so long ago. I can't remember, but I think during those days he probably went with my mother and we were in school.

Castle: Would your father have an office in every location?

Shoong Lee: No. Not at all.

Castle: Just in San Francisco?

Shoong Lee: In San Francisco in the main office which was the 929 Market Street.

Castle: So that was his main office for the whole operation?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

0:33:58.7

Castle: What kinds of things would he do when he would spend some time at a store?

Shoong Lee: Talk with the managers. Maybe have dinner or lunch or whatever. It was conversation.

Shoong Lee Accompanying Her Father

Castle: When you would accompany your father on things as you grew up, I imagine there were times in public ceremonies, for example, following some of his philanthropic gifts. Do you recall being a part of those? Being on the stage or ribbon cutting?

Shoong Lee: I remember something to that effect when they opened the Oakland Chinese Community Center. I think we have some pictures of that, but other than that one I don't really remember any.

0:35:01.6

Castle: I was just wondering whether you developed a sense of a public self and a private self because it sounds as if at some point you are becoming aware of the fact that your father is an important man in the community. Do you remember taking that in and realizing, well, Dad is pretty important, so I should behave in a certain way?

Shoong Lee: Well, I guess by the time I was a teenager, I realized that whenever I was introduced it was always as Joe Shoong's daughter. So, that was the frame of reference that was given for me.

Castle: I imagine that would come with certain expectations of behavior?

0:35:58.4

Shoong Lee: (chuckles) Of behavior, yes. (laughter)

Castle: That's what I was getting at, what kind of a public self. You're expected to be a good daughter.

Shoong Lee: Yes. I think it was expected. And I think my sister and I were really very compliant those days growing up. I think we did everything we were expected to do, and nothing that we weren't expected to do. It really was a very sheltered life, growing up.

Castle: Did that same behavior hold true for your brother?

Shoong Lee: Less so for him. And I can't tell you why. I cannot explain it.

Father's Discipline Philosophy

0:36:45.5

Castle: You had mentioned also that your father wasn't much of a disciplinarian when it came to your brother in the same way that he was. Maybe not disciplinarian, but strict.

Shoong Lee: Strict, and that was—again I cannot explain why. Because you would have thought that if he expected my brother to take over from him, that he would have been extra strict on him. But he wasn't.

Castle: Do you remember the two of you, you and your sister or your brother, ever getting in trouble?

Shoong Lee: No.

0:37:31.2

Castle: That's significant because (Shoong Lee laughing while Castle speaks) it's hard to find someone who doesn't have a childhood memory of getting in trouble. So you don't remember your father ever yelling or being stern with you or any situation where you were behaving in a way that he didn't approve of?

Shoong Lee: No. no.

Castle: That's impressive. (laughter) You were very well-behaved. (laughter continues) Do you recall in the process of building these different stores across the country, if your father ever ran into any conflicts with labor unions?

0:38:18.9

Father's Conflict with Labor Union

Shoong Lee: The only conflict with labor union that he had was right here in San Francisco. This was early on. There was a little factory here in Chinatown. All of the ladies who worked in the factory were Chinese, and they were making garments to be sold in the stores. The union came to them and tried to unionize them and called a strike. At that point my dad said, "I don't need this. What they produce is so little that it doesn't make any difference as far as National is concerned, and I was trying to provide employment for a few people in Chinatown. If it is going to cause me trouble, I will close it down." So that's what he did.

0:39:34.2

Castle: Do you remember the community response to that at all?

Shoong Lee: I don't think there was much. I think that unions in that day were not looked on as the saviors of the poor working person, as least not in the Chinese community. I don't think that they'd ever come into the Chinese community before to do anything. They probably picked the wrong person.

Castle: Do you think that the way in which they approached the Chinese community from this outsider status didn't help?

Shoong Lee: That's right.

0:40:28.0

Castle: I guess I'm trying to think of what the elements are? What's going on? Why would that be?

Shoong Lee: It was like the white union coming into the Chinese community to cause trouble for the one company that employed a lot of Chinese, and were known to be good employers. I think they just picked the wrong company.

Castle: That's an interesting angle because part of what could be said then is it was the labor unions trying to move in on an area that was definitely providing Chinese employment to see if they could open up that employment maybe to other white workers.

0:41:18.9

Shoong Lee: I don't know how they picked that particular little factory.

Castle: We don't know the background to it. The reason I throw it out there is that there is always a balance in business. If you're sewing garments in a factory, are you being paid livable wages? It sounds as if your father had a certain reputation for doing that.

Shoong Lee: I think so.

0:41:44.8

Others' Viewpoint of Father

Castle: When we're talking about Chinatown in particular, for example, in San Francisco, do you have a sense of how your father was viewed? There is a certain ownership as a Chinese-American business person that they publicly have over him. Was there any expressions from Oakland or San Francisco about how they viewed him?

Shoong Lee: I think that he was revered, well-respected and for many years after he passed away, I still heard very good things said about him.

Castle: Was there ever any kind of negativity about him having moved from Chinatown, that he should have been living there?

Shoong Lee: I don't think he ever lived in Chinatown. By the time we moved to Oakland, I think I was about four or five, so he never really lived in Chinatown once he became wealthy.

Castle: He lived in San Francisco, didn't he, before—

Shoong Lee: Before that? But I don't know where. I have no recollection of where we lived before Oakland.

0:43:09.20:

Castle: When would you say that your father would be described as wealthy. How much money did that mean at the time? Was there kind of an, "I've arrived," moment where your father moves into a different category of wealth?

Shoong Lee: Well, seeing as how my first remembrance is living in Oakland, and that we always had a cook and someone to do the housework and a driver, that's as far back as my memory goes.

Castle: So we could trace these memories to the early '20s.

0:43:59.5

Shoong Lee: When I was about four, five, or six, yes. The early '20s.

Castle: That makes sense then, because 1928 is when he makes the move to the National Dollar Stores.

Shoong Lee: During those years he is investing in the stock market as well.

Castle: What about real estate?

Shoong Lee: Real estate came a little later. I think that was during the days when he loved the Arizona Biltmore. He'd go down there every winter for several weeks. That's when he started expanding the stores into first Arizona and then into Las Vegas, Nevada.

0:44:43.1

Castle: Would you as a family go with him down to the Biltmore?

Shoong Lee: Well, my mother would go, and I would join him. Sometimes I remember joining him several times, but never went with him to Las Vegas. (laughs) But that's when he became interested in real estate in Las Vegas.

0:45:08.6

Castle: So, what years would that be? In the '30s?

Shoong Lee: That would be the '30s, '40s.

Other Memories of Father

Castle: Do you have any other particular memories of your father? He obviously was very busy, and not necessarily always around because he was out working. Of things that you ever did together on his time off or weekends, outings or activities?

Shoong Lee: Let me try to think of how the weekends were. I don't think that we really did many things as a family because he worked Saturdays as well as during the week.

And Sundays we were home. We didn't go out a lot. I can remember Sunday lunch. Sunday lunch was a nice meal. It was home-made noodles by our terrific cook and listening to the New York Philharmonic. That was the big thing for Sunday. We did homework. My sister and I, and maybe my brother may have gone to a movie. There was a theater which is like three or four blocks from home down in the Grand Lake area. It was called the Grand Lake Theater. We could go there by ourselves to a movie. And that was about it.

0:47:06.5

Chinese Language Schools and Empowering Education

Castle: Why did you father begin to reinvest, if you will, or put money into the Chinese community in the form of a community center, or example in Oakland? I'd like to go through the different educational investments that he made.

Shoong Lee: I think he felt that San Francisco had Chinese language schools for children growing up, but Oakland did not. So he felt that he could help provide that for the children in the Oakland area to learn language. He wanted very much for us, all of us, not to lose the Chinese language. That's what started the Oakland Community Center. That Chinese language school still exists today.

0:48:19.9

Castle: So you have that model in the community center, so was it the same? One of the things that I was noticing was the regimen that you had at home became very similar for the community center for the Joe Shoong School in Locke, California, where it was that time after school until dinnertime.

0:48:41.7

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: Where students would go, for example, in Locke, they would go to Walnut Grove nearby to public school. They would go in the afternoon from four to six or something similar.

Shoong Lee: Yes, to the language school, the Chinese language school. I think the same thing happened in Oakland that it was something that happened after school and also on Saturday mornings. Then he supported a Chinese language school in his village in China.

0:49:13.9

Castle: What prompted that? To go back to China and do that?

Shoong Lee: It was sort of giving back to where he came from, and here again it was a question of educating children, so that they could read and write, because at that time not all children went to school and learned to read and write.

Castle: Do you know what people paid for tuition? What they paid to attend?

0:49:46.2

Shoong Lee: I don't know. I don't think it was completely free. They may have paid a very small sum because if you give people something for nothing, sometimes they consider it like nothing. I think the idea was if they pay at least a little something, then it was more value for them.

Castle: They're invested it in?

0:50:17.2

Shoong Lee: Right.

Castle: Do you know if they were well attended?

Shoong Lee: Yes, I think they were. I believe they still are.

Castle: What languages were taught?

Shoong Lee: Just Chinese. I'm wondering now whether it would be in Mandarin or in Cantonese. (laughs)

Castle: Yes, that's what I was wondering.

Shoong Lee: My guess might be that it's Mandarin.

Castle: But at home, you were tutored in—

Shoong Lee: —Cantonese.

0:50:48.3

Castle: I keep guessing and I always get it wrong. (laughter) Why do you think education was so important to him? There's lots of things he could have given back.

Shoong Lee: I think it's cultural. I think this is something that has been important to Chinese for centuries. In recent times we've seen where Chinese emigrate to various parts of the world. When they become affluent, as they seem to wherever they go, because they seem to be business people, and tend to accumulate wealth and rise up in the community as they stay there longer, they're discriminated against. In some places they have been either run out of the country or killed. What can you take with you if you have to suddenly leave because you're discriminated against? You take what you have in your head, which is your education. You may not be able to take out anything else. I think this is something that is in the back of the minds of Chinese for centuries. I think it's the same with the Jewish population. They've fought discrimination all over the world for a long time, and what do they take with them. Education.

0:52:42.4

Castle: When you learn language and maintain language, you maintain culture, cultural identity.

Shoong Lee: Yes, that's right.

Castle: So even though your father in some ways was probably a master of assimilation at certain times, he certainly expressed a very strong connection to cultural identity.

Shoong Lee: That's true. That's right.

Castle: At University of California Berkeley, at what point did he set up the scholarship there?

0:53:30.0

Shoong Lee: It was after he became friends with the then provost by the name of Monroe Deutsch. I think that was about the time that my sister and I were attending Berkeley. This would have been in the sixties, I guess the middle sixties, that he started the scholarship. At that time it was for Chinese students, but later on you could no longer specify any particular race. So, it is now open to whoever applies and qualifies.

Castle: So, your father, across the board, was interested in empowering education.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

0:54:30.9

Castle: So you had some at the university level. You had educating probably villagers, people who did not have access to a lot of opportunities in China. Then, here in the city, being able to maintain language. This was open to boys and girls?

Shoong Lee: Yes, That's right.

Father's Attitude toward Gender Roles

Castle: You did mention a few times, once at least where your father had lamented a bit how things might have been different if you were a boy. Did he ever express any elements about gender behavior? Was he a traditional husband? The role your mother played? How did you interpret that?

0:55:16.1

Shoong Lee: Well, he was the traditional, I think, Chinese husband in that he didn't expect his wife to take part in the business at all. So she knew nothing about the business. As far as his children were concerned, we were, I guess, expected to play the traditional role at that time, of women, which was that you got educated, that was fine. But then you got married, and you raised a family, and you didn't go to work. That's why I guess at some point, he said to me, "If you had been a boy, you should have been a lawyer." I guess he thought I liked to argue, but whatever. (laughs) But, he didn't say it that often, but I knew that he felt that had I been a boy, I might have been the one that had gone into the business.

Audio file #4

Flight from China at the Beginning of Sino-Japanese War

Castle: Doris, in terms of tracing your own trajectory when it comes to education, marriage, and family life, you were coming back on the last boat out of China when the second Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937?

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: You were finishing up with some memories of that. What were you thinking? When did you realize how fortunate it was that you were on that boat?

0:00:39.0

Shoong Lee: When we saw the Japanese firing into Shanghai when we were on the boat heading back to the U.S., we realized how lucky we were. But when you're young, you don't realize really when you are in danger. You just think, it's going to be all right. I'm going to get out. We're lucky we did. Once we got back to the U.S., it was time to go back to college. My sister went back to New York and went to Barnard.

Castle: Why did she decide to go to Barnard? She was at Berkeley before?

0:01:22.7

Sister to Barnard and Shoong Lee to Stanford

Shoong Lee: She was at Berkeley before. She wanted to get away from home for a while, so she applied and she went to Barnard.

Castle: That was okay with your parents?

Shoong Lee: That was okay with them. I applied to Stanford because sometimes during the interim I met a young man that I liked. So I applied to Stanford and was accepted and went there a year. During that time we decided to get married. I'm kind of amazed that my parents didn't really object to my getting married at such a young age and didn't insist that I finish college before I got married. But they allowed it. So, in 1938, I got married.

Marriage to Richard Tam

0:02:22.8

Castle: This is Richard Tam?

Shoong Lee: That's right. After we got married, we went back east, and he went to Columbia graduate school to get his MBA. We were there for a year. Then, my dad wanted us to come back to San Francisco. I don't know exactly why, but he sort of insisted that we come back because it would have taken another year for Richard to get his degree. So, we came back. That's when Richard went to work for my father. He worked for him for many years. I say many years, I guess about fifteen years. Then

after about that time, after fifteen years, we, Richard and I, were investing in Las Vegas on our own. Then my dad said to Richard, you need to spend all of your time and energy on the Dollar Stores, and if you are not going to do that, then you should leave. So Richard left and then spent a lot of time doing investments, watching our investments in Las Vegas. That went on for another five or six years. Then Richard and I were divorced.

0:04:18.0

Castle: You met him as a student in Berkeley. Did you meet him at one of the houses?

Shoong Lee: At one of the parties at the Chinese Student Club because the Chinese from Stanford, and there weren't that many of them, would come up and join in the social gatherings.

0:04:40.4

Castle: So there were more Chinese-American students at Berkeley than at Stanford?

Shoong Lee: Oh, a lot more.

Castle: Do you recall what you were thinking about when you switched to Stanford? Today it is not considered that far away.

Shoong Lee: No, it isn't. It isn't that far away.

Castle: What made you decide to go over to Stanford, rather than Berkeley? Just to be with him? It was easier?

0:05:22.1

Shoong Lee: Yes, that's right. On the weekends I came home. It wasn't that far away.

Castle: Where did you live when you were in Stanford?

Shoong Lee: At Union House. I'm not sure that is a dorm anymore.

Castle: Where did he live?

Shoong Lee: He lived at the Chinese Students' Club. They had a house at that time.

Castle: How old are you at this point?

0:05:49.4

Shoong Lee: I was eighteen when I got married.

Castle: It is interesting with your parents, since they were very insistent about education.

Shoong Lee: Yes. Sometimes it is a little hard to understand why they took certain stands that they did, or why they didn't take a certain stand at a certain time.

Castle: Clearly they were comfortable with telling you what they felt you should or shouldn't do?

0:06:13.8

Shoong Lee: Yes, yes.

Castle: So you don't remember this being any concern?

Shoong Lee: The only concern they had was that I was going to get married before my sister, who was older.

Castle: That was more appropriate for her to be married first.

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: She was at Barnard at the time. Was she there when you went to Columbia?

Shoong Lee: She was living at International House. Yes.

Castle: What did you do while you were in New York?

Early Marriage and Move to New York

0:06:46.0

Shoong Lee: I went to some classes in the extension, and I remember when I went back they'd call me in to Barnard and said, "Why don't you come to Barnard. Your record is fine and you could be a full time student." But I think I was a little lazy. I said, "I don't want to be a full time student."

Castle: Had you talked with him about having a child right away?

Shoong Lee: No. We didn't have one right away. It was a couple of years later that we had our first child.

0:07:21.4

Castle: So did your father call and want to talk to you or to Richard or both of you?

Shoong Lee: He talked to both of us. I can't remember exactly why he wanted us to come back at that time, rather than waiting another year.

Castle: It was only one more year for him to get his MBA?

Shoong Lee: Right.

Castle: It was an urgent enough matter. So he offered Richard a job?

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: As long as he was staying with the company, your father didn't care if he had an MBA?

0:07:58.6

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: So you came back. Where did you live when you came back?

Shoong Lee: In Chinatown.

Castle: Oh, really. Where?

Shoong Lee: At the corner of Stockton and Washington. My dad had an apartment house there. We lived in one of the apartments.

Castle: What was that like for you? You had never lived in Chinatown up until that point.

0:08:27.3

Shoong Lee: No. It was fine. It was very convenient. It was right on the Stockton Street—I think, was there a streetcar? It seems as if at that time there was a streetcar. There isn't anymore, I don't think. No, but at that time, you could take the streetcar and go downtown. Or you could walk downtown. It was only a few blocks. It was very convenient to go marketing. The restaurants at that time even delivered to you, to your apartment, which they don't do any more.

0:09:05.9

Castle: What was life like as a married woman? What did you do now that you weren't in school? For a long time, you were very much sheltered, as you say. A lot of people cared for you in different ways. What were you doing in your household now?

Shoong Lee: I saw a lot more of my mother at that point, because when she would come over oftentimes she would spend the afternoon or day with me. It was soon after that I became pregnant and had my first child. That was in 1940. It was just soon after we came back, the year after we came back. Then the year after that we moved to Oakland. We bought a house and moved to Oakland.

0:10:05.8

Castle: While you were in San Francisco Chinatown it's kind of, not ironic, but interesting that you wouldn't necessarily see your mother while you'd be at school but she'd spend the day over in Chinatown with her sisters. Now you're over there. So did she see her sisters in the morning and spend the afternoons with you?

Shoong Lee: Some days one or the other. But I saw a lot more her than I ever had growing up.

Castle: Did you talk more and bond a little bit?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: Was she sharing with you advice about being married or anything like that? Do you recall any of those talks?

Birth of Child; Move to Oakland; Relationship with Mother

0:10:40.1

Shoong Lee: No. She was not much at giving advice.

Castle: What about when you were pregnant?

Shoong Lee: She was very solicitous, of course, of me, and she adored by firstborn, a boy, Richard, Junior. She loved him, and he was very close to her and to my father.

Castle: You provided the first grandchild?

Shoong Lee: Right. Yes.

Castle: You moved to Oakland. Did you move close to your parents?

Shoong Lee: Not far away. I lived on a hill above Lake Merritt. It was called Merritt Avenue, 528 Merritt Avenue. I lived there for twenty-some years. Had a nice house.

Castle: What was it like? How big was it?

0:11:45.8

Shoong Lee: Well, when you first walked in, there was a good sized living room and a nice dining room, a big kitchen, a nice breakfast room. There was a study on the left hand side as you walked in, and there were maid's quarters on the first floor. Then upstairs there were four bedrooms, and three baths. It was a nice house with a big garden, a big garden.

0:12:11.4

Castle: Was that important to you?

Shoong Lee: It was nice because I had children. It was a place for them to get out and get some fresh air and play.

Castle: Was it a flower garden?

Shoong Lee: There was a big terrace, and we did a lot of entertaining on that terrace. It had a barbecue at the end of the terrace. Then there was a big lawn down below for kids to play.

Castle: In your Oakland house, what kind of household help did you have?

0:12:49.6

In-laws Move In

Shoong Lee: I had a live-in maid, and very shortly after that, my husband's family moved in with us: my father-in-law, my mother-in-law, and sister-in-law.

Castle: How did you feel about that?

Shoong Lee: I felt all right. My mother said to me, "Do you really want that?" I said, "I think it's okay, Mum." The war had broken out. It was 1941, so they lived with me for the four years of the war. After the war, my father-in-law moved back to Hawaii. But my mother-in-law stayed for a while longer before she moved back with him. My sister-in-law got married, so then she moved out.

0:13:50.1

Castle: What prompted their moving in with you?

Shoong Lee: I think there was fear at first that the Japanese might go into Hawaii.

Castle: So they were in Hawaii during the bombing of Pearl Harbor? Did they share any memories of that day?

Shoong Lee: Not really except that they seemed to be anxious to leave the islands. It was shortly after that that they came to live with us.

0:14:23.4

Attitude of Americans Toward Chinese During War

Castle: There is another element going on that people don't always historically recognize which is the relationship between Chinese and Japanese because of the history of warfare. Do you remember any experiences during wartime in particular because a lot of people don't recognize differences between different Asian people.

Shoong Lee: Between Chinese and Japanese you mean? Well, yes. I think that Chinese really dislike Japanese because we heard about the atrocities that happened during the war.

Castle: Against Chinese people?

0:15:13.8

Shoong Lee: Yes, when the Japanese came in and invaded China. I think for a long time after the war even Chinese did not like Japanese. You did not have Japanese friends. I think over the years that has sort of gone away. Yes, for several years afterwards, I would say that Chinese did not associate with Japanese.

Castle: Did you ever deal with the added element of the fact that Japanese Americans were interned?

0:16:04.0

Shoong Lee: That how unjust that was. Yes, but I don't think that it spilled over into a lot of good will towards the Japanese Americans even though they did suffer unjustly.

Castle: I was also thinking, whether the racism that might be displayed towards Japanese Americans because of their visual association—

Shoong Lee: That's right. It spilled over to them unfortunately.

Castle: What about you as a Chinese American? Did you ever witness or experience any racism in particular during that period?

0:16:49.9

Shoong Lee: It seems to me that there were even buttons at that time to identify us as Chinese and not Japanese.

Castle: That you willingly wore?

Shoong Lee: I can't remember whether we wore it all the time or sometime or not at all. I think we did wear them sometimes. I had forgotten about that.

Castle: It's one of those little elements of history we don't think about.

0:17:21.9

Shoong Lee: Yes, that's right.

Castle: When you're being racist, you are being unreasonable and lacking in logic, so nobody is necessarily going to care whether you're Japanese, you just seem Asian (Shoong Lee: Yes.) because some people (Shoong Lee: Right.) don't pay attention to details when expressing racism. But you don't recall any experiences?

Shoong Lee: Nothing unpleasant that happened to me, no.

Castle: Or your family?

Shoong Lee: No.

0:17:50.9

Castle: That's a lot to take on to have your whole family move in (Shoong Lee: laughs) when you're in the early stages of marriage, and you just had a baby.

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Conflict within Family

Castle: Did you have any conflict with the family?

Shoong Lee: No, not during those years. In later years, after my father-in-law passed away in Honolulu, my mother-in-law came back to live with us again. That time there was

some conflict, and I guess it was because she didn't have enough to do. So she came into the areas that I considered my area. But it was because she didn't have anything else to do. Finally when it got close to the time that I was unhappy enough that I was thinking of divorce, my mother-in-law moved out into an apartment, very close by where we lived, so that her son could go and visit her every day, maybe have dinner with her. Then she'd come and have dinner with us a few times a week. But at least she wasn't underfoot all the time.

0:19:27.1

Castle: Did you encourage her to move out?

Shoong Lee: Yes, I did.

Castle: Did you just say, "You need to move out."?

Shoong Lee: Yes, I did, yes.

Castle: With what areas was she trying to interfere? Was it family or business?

Shoong Lee: Not business. It was just in the household. She wanted to take over my kitchen. That was one area that I had always been, it was my kitchen. I prepared the meals. It's just hard for mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law to live together. I think mother and daughter is a lot easier.

Castle: Did Richard ever help you in dealing with this, or were you on your own?

Shoong Lee: I was on my own.

0:20:19.2

Castle: That's a problem because the child needs to mitigate (Shoong Lee: Yes.) between—You have expressed pretty fond memories of Lee See.

Shoong Lee: Yes, our family cook who taught me how to cook Chinese food.

Shoong Lee as a Cook

Castle: Is that the kind of food that you cook at home now.

Shoong Lee: Yes. Well, I cooked Chinese, American, some French, some Italian. I liked to cook. I've always liked to cook. In those early days we used to do a lot of entertaining. I could do that because I wasn't working. So I could spend a day or two days preparing for company. Now if I spend two hours preparing for company, that's a lot of time. (laughs)

0:21:10.3

Castle: So, you never had a cook then?

Shoong Lee: No. But I taught our live-in help to help me with the prep work in cooking. They could do the chopping and that sort of thing.

Castle: Who was the person who was the housekeeper?

Shoong Lee's Housekeeper

Shoong Lee: We had one lady who was with me for about fifteen years who helped me raise my third child who was handicapped. Her name was Gracie McAway. She stayed she became, she was not well. She was very heavy, and at some point she couldn't work anymore.

0:22:01.6

Castle: Where was she from?

Shoong Lee: From Arkansas.

Castle: Was she an African American woman?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: Did she have family around the area?

Shoong Lee: She had nieces, a couple of nieces. She had friends from her church. She was very religious. On her day off, she would go and stay with her family and go to church. She had a group of people to help her be around her once she stopped working for me.

0:22:39.3

Castle: Where did you find her? Where did you come across her?

Shoong Lee: I think it was through the newspaper. A newspaper ad as I recall.

Castle: So, let's go back. You said you had your first child in 1940? That was Richard.

Shoong Lee's Son Richard and Daughters Judy and Lisa

Shoong Lee: Richard, Junior.

Castle: Tell me when you had your next child?

Shoong Lee: In February of 1943 I had a girl, a daughter, Judy. She is my surviving child. Then about ten years later I had my third child, Lisa, who was cerebral palsied.

0:23:22.9

Castle: You had a lot going on. How was the health of your, you saw a lot more of your mother. Did that continue throughout the time you lived in Oakland?

Shoong Lee: Yes, I moved over to Oakland in forty-one. It was after Pearl Harbor. Mother died in 1950. She saw my first two children, Richie and Judy, and she adored Richie.

Castle: As the firstborn?

Shoong Lee: As firstborn, and he adored her. Judy was fine, (laughs) but there were obvious favorites. And he was a favorite of my father as well. When Richie got to I guess sixteen, my father bought him a car. It was a very fancy little car. Now let's see. What was it? It was a—I can't remember the make, but it was a little two-seater.

0:24:43.9

Castle: It was a sports car?

Shoong Lee: A little sports car. He was still in high school.

Castle: That was a big deal.

0:24:50.8

Shoong Lee: Yes, it was a big deal.

Castle: How did you feel about it? Did you want him to have a car?

Shoong Lee: Well, I really didn't know that Dad was going to give it to him. Then there it was one day.

Castle: After having moved out of your father's house, gone to college, and then you married Richard, did your lifestyle or wealth status change?

Shoong Lee: We were comfortable. At that time it was not on Richard's salary. It was on the income from my trust.

0:25:39.0

Shoong Lee's Trust from Her Family

Castle: So you were receiving money from your family?

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: Was there a certain age from which you received trust money?

Shoong Lee: No, it was kind of a different arrangement. Dad had given us the stock, but then at a certain point after my sister got married, and they didn't like her husband, he wanted her, my dad wanted my sister to put her assets into trust, into a trust. Then he said to me, "It would be easier for me to convince her to do that if you do the same." Then I took what I had been given, and put it into a trust. So my sister did the same.

0:26:38.2

Castle: So does that protect the money?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: From your spouse upon divorce?

Shoong Lee: Yes, that's right because it was obviously ours before we got married. They could lay no claim to it. Yes.

Castle: If you hadn't done that, they would be able under California divorce law—

Shoong Lee: To take half if we were divorced.

0:27:01.4

Castle: Why didn't your father or your parents like your sister's husband?

Shoong Lee: He came from a Jewish family.

Castle: He wasn't Chinese American?

Shoong Lee: No. It was a middle class family. They just didn't like him.

0:27:32.7

Castle: I just also wondered whether how important it was to your parents considering his emphasis on maintaining cultural—

Shoong Lee: Yes, that he was not Chinese.

Castle: It was important to them?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: That makes sense.

Shoong Lee: Yes. Okay.

0:27:50.1

Castle: Basically you are still living in a comfortable lifestyle because of the family trust money.

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: You have the mother-in-law. We were talking about your mom, did you call your parents *mom* and *dad*?

Death of Shoong Lee's Mother

Shoong Lee: Yes. Mom and Dad.

Castle: When did your mom pass?

Shoong Lee: In 1950.

0:28:22.7

Castle: So in the forties, she was there to see Richard, Junior, grow.

Shoong Lee: Yes, until he was eight or nine, and Judy was a couple of years younger.

Castle: How old was your mom when she passed?

Shoong Lee: She was just sixty. She had high blood pressure, but she'd been to the doctor that day, and he said that she was all right. Richard and I took her to dinner. My dad was away in Arizona at the time. During dinner she just fell over and went into a coma. We called 9-1-1, and they took her to the hospital. I think it was St. Francis. I'm not positive, Children's. But she never came to, and she died within a few hours.

0:29:26.2

Castle: Were you pregnant at the time?

Stillborn Birth and Impact of Lisa's Cerebral Palsy

Shoong Lee: Yes, I was. I was about three or four months pregnant. That child was stillborn.

Castle: So you carried the child to—

Shoong Lee: Eight, eight-and-a-half months. It was stillborn.

Castle: How did that affect you?

0:29:49.1

Shoong Lee: I was unhappy about it, and as a result, I tried again to have a third child. Lisa was born a month premature, and had to stay in the hospital for a while in an incubator. She was cerebral palsied.

Castle: What kind of impact did that have on your life? That is a huge event to happen. (Shoong Lee: Yes.) We don't often talk about it, because we don't often know what to say because it's so tied up with issues of people's ethics and morals and pains about—it's very difficult to care for another person that way and people aren't always very well suited for it. How did it affect you?

0:30:51.7

Shoong Lee: It kept me very close to home for several years, because Lisa couldn't even go to any kind of school, I thought, until she could talk. She didn't start to talk until she was between three and four. Then I was comfortable sending her to a special school in Oakland. I don't know that it still survives. It was called the Charles Whitten School for Handicapped Children. It was a wonderful school. A wonderful school. Once she started there, I would go and spend a morning helping in the classroom a couple of times a week. We did that for many years, until she was about eleven or twelve.

0:32:06.6

Then she had gone as far as she could go there. It was time to think about where she could go to school after that. That was about the time that Rich and I were divorced. I had stayed with him rather unhappily for a while because I wanted Lisa to have both a father and a mother in residence. By the time she was out of Whitten and we had to think of some other school for her which would be a public school that could take a handicapped person, then it was time to think about making a move anyways. At that point I divorced Rich.

0:33:08.1

Castle: So this is 19—

Shoong Lee: Sixty-five, sixty-six.

Castle: So, she is thirteen?

Shoong Lee: Yes. She is about that.

Castle: Give me a sense of what she was like?

Shoong Lee: What she was like.

Castle: Yes.

Lisa

Shoong Lee: 'She wanted to think of herself as being absolutely normal. She didn't like to think of herself as being handicapped. In many ways she could get along in a social situation, and yet she couldn't or didn't understand or, how do I say that, the fine-tuning of a social situation, she didn't get.'

0:34:26.4

Castle: The nuances.

Shoong Lee: The nuances. So as much as she wanted to be absolutely thought of as being normal, with normal friendships, it really took people who understood her situation to be friends with her. She was lucky to find some people like that here in the Bay Area and also down in Las Vegas because after the divorce, she spent part of the time with me and part of the time with her father who moved to Las Vegas.

Castle: What were her physical restrictions?

0:35:18.4

Shoong Lee: She walked differently. Her gait was different, and she couldn't walk as fast as you or I. I'd say that her mental development was like maybe a ten or twelve-year-old.

Castle: A few years behind?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: At a certain stage, Richard is told that he has to put his energies toward the National Dollar Store. Where did he want to work or go?

0:36:10.6

Divorce from Richard

Shoong Lee: To Las Vegas. Once we were divorced, he moved immediately to Las Vegas. Then with our division of assets, he invested in Las Vegas and did very well.

Castle: He came out of the marriage with what he brought in. I wonder what benefits he received having worked at the National Dollar Store, or for being a part of your family.

Shoong Lee: Well, I guess he got business experience working at the Dollar Stores. Then in the divorce he came out with half of the community assets. So, he was able to start his own life in Las Vegas. He remarried and divorced, but he did very well financially.

0:37:18.5

Castle: Did he want to keep up his relationship with his children?

Shoong Lee: Yes, I think he did. I think that he had kind of a stormy relationship with his son because they just didn't see very much eye to eye on anything. Judy lived in the East from the time she finished college and got married. Neither of us saw much of her for several years.

0:37:57.1

Judy and her Family

Castle: What college did she go to?

Shoong Lee: She finished at U. C. Berkeley.

Castle: Did she marry someone at Berkeley?

Shoong Lee: Yes. She married the young man who got the University Medal that year as top student and went east to live.

Castle: Was he Chinese American?

Shoong Lee: He was Jewish. Yes, and he went east to get his Ph. D. Where did he get that? Harvard. He got it at Harvard. Then he went to teach at Carnegie Tech. I think he is now part of the Stanford Think Tank.

Castle: Are they still together?

Shoong Lee: No they divorced after about fifteen years.

0:39:01.9's

Castle: What does Judy do and where does she live now?

Shoong Lee: Judy lives in Michigan now. She is there because one of the twins, Judy Junior, we call her, is getting her Ph.D. at Michigan. Judy's (the mother's) passion is dancing. That's what she's doing, and she loves it, and she competes in her age group in dance competitions around the country.

Castle: What type of dancing?

0:39:38.5

Shoong Lee: All different kinds of ballroom dancing.

Castle: She didn't remarry?

Shoong Lee: No, she is not remarried and when her father passed away, she was the only survivor of his family. She inherited everything from him.

Castle: So, that's how she takes care of herself?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: Judy, junior, what is she getting her Ph. D. in?

0:40:09.7

Shoong Lee: She is a registered nurse. She's getting it in some kind of public administration for nursing. She was in hospitals before when she was a registered nurse. She was in pediatric surgery. In the pediatric I.C. intensive care. It was very stressful because these tiny little babies, some survived and a lot didn't. I think you can only stay in that for so long before it sort of gets to you. So then she went into public administration, and she was in a hospital in Minneapolis trying to get it accredited. I can't remember the name of the hospital. It was saint something. St. Joseph's or St. Mary's or something. But she was able to get it accredited. Then she moved on and decided she wanted to go back and get her Ph.D., decided she really didn't want to do administration. She wanted to go into research once she got her doctorate.

0:41:44.0

Castle: How old is she right now?

Shoong Lee: She would be in her thirties.

Castle: During and after your divorce from your first husband, he is working with the National Dollar Stores.

Shoong Lee: He stopped a long time before our divorce.

Castle: What year was that then?

Shoong Lee: I'd say it was in the fifties because by the time my dad passed away which was in 1960, Rich was long gone from the Dollar Stores.

0:42:31.2

Richard's Experiences Working for The Dollar Stores

Castle: I wonder if you can comment on the challenges of family working for family? When your father gives Richard this ultimatum, and he chooses to go the other way, how difficult was that for you as the wife and daughter?

Shoong Lee: I thought it was a good idea. As a matter of fact I felt for a while, a long while, that it was not a good idea for Rich to have worked to my dad because I think he was always comparing himself with my father and trying to make his mark on his own and coming out on the short end.

0:43:20.9

Castle: So that didn't help anybody involved?

Shoong Lee: No. It didn't

Castle: Did you father see that in him?

Shoong Lee: I don't think so.

Castle: But it didn't cause you any particular conflict?

0:43:37.4

Shoong Lee: As long as he wanted to stay there he stayed there. When he started moving out and doing things on his own, that was when my dad said, "You can't do this. It's time for you to go out on your own." I agreed. It was time for him to go out on his own.

Castle: Do he was doing things that were potentially competitive?

Shoong Lee: Yes, that's right. In real estate.

Castle: You wouldn't pay any negative consequences for the actions of your husband?

0:44:11.5

Shoong Lee: No. Not vis-à-vis my father.

Changes in the Dollar Stores

Castle: How is the Dollar Store changing over the period of the forties and the fifties prior to your father's passing? Are they able to keep up that same—Are they still bringing people over from China? Are they hiring from within the country?

0:44:30.9

Shoong Lee: I think they're hiring form within the country because the immigration status is a little different than it was earlier. Also, in the stores they didn't need that many more people.

Castle: It was management that was brought in?

0:44:57.3

Shoong Lee: Yes, only management. I think by the time the stores were up to like in thirty-five or forty, that was about when my dad became to lose interest in the management, the day-to-day management of the stores. He was really into real estate and the stock market which was a lot easier for him to manage. He sort of turned over management to the top people who were there at the time.

Father's Decline and Turning Over the Dollar Stores

Castle: So you are saying that when he amassed about thirty-five to forty different stores on that level, and who were the people that he turned the stores over to?

Shoong Lee: It was to a man by the name of Walter Shu and another man by the name of Frank Lee.

Castle: Was that Shu, S-h-u?

0:45:48.0

Shoong Lee: S-h-e-w. And Frank Lee, and Wally Leong, L-e-o-n-g. Those were the main ones. Then when my dad took ill very suddenly, and ended up in the hospital, I guess he realized that he wasn't going to get better. That was when he tried to do what he could to see that the stores would remain in a more stable management milieu. So he formed a trust of the voting stock of the Dollar Stores. My sister and I put our shares in the trust, and he put his shares which he had given to his foundation in. So that was like three-fifths of the stock. My brother, who had his share, and my mother had given her share to him. Those two shares did not go in . But because it was sixty percent, it was able to control the corporation.

Shoong Lee Begins Working with Dollar Stores Management

0:47:40.2

He formed this voting trust, and he put the management of the Dollar Stores into the control of this voting trust. That's when I came on the executive committee of the National Dollar Stores. This was in 1960. So once my dad passed away, after being in the hospital for about three months, the executive committee went immediately into operation. I found that I was sort of catapulted into management on the day-to-day kind of basis. We had meeting once a week over at 929 Market Street. Start in the morning and they would go through lunch. For me it was reading up on all kinds of things to sort of bolster background, my knowledge on what I should know. So I did a lot of study at home.

0:49:17.6

Castle: What other things did you look at, because it sounds as if you're now having to—a home taught MBA.

Shoong Lee: That's right. Management books, advertising, accounting. And I took to accounting like a duck to water. I like that. That was what I was doing there for quite a while.

Castle: There's lot that we covered there, and I'd like to go back and trace a few points of it out. When it came to dividing up the stock, then. Your mother before she had passed at some point had given Milton hers.

0:50:06.1

Shoong Lee: When she passed, her share, she gave to Milton.

Castle: Is there a reason for that?

Shoong Lee: This was the old-fashioned Chinese way that things went to the boy; valuable assets went to the boy.

Castle: With the assumption that you are taken care of by your husband?

Shoong Lee: Yes, but she also left my sister and me each an amount of money. So she didn't forget us completely.

0:50:39.8

Father's Division of Assets

Castle: Correct me if I'm wrong, but your father and your mother were still together?

Shoong Lee: Oh, yes. They were together.

Castle: They did not divorce?

Shoong Lee: No, no.

Castle: So, he had given her—

Shoong Lee: Each member of the family had twenty percent. There were five of us. Mother, father, and three kids. We each had twenty percent of the company.

0:51:05.7

Castle: Why was that?

Shoong Lee: That was their way, his way, their way of taking care of all of us, all three of the kids. Then when she passed away, then her share went to my brother.

Castle: I'm just interested in why her share was separate from—

The Joe Shoong Foundation

Shoong Lee: From my father's? Well, my father took his shares and put them into the Joe Shoong Foundation.

0:51:47.3

Castle: That's a very important point, too. We've talked about his philanthropy, that all his philanthropy was conducted through this foundation. When did this foundation come into being? Do you remember?

Shoong Lee: No, I don't, the year. I don't remember the year.

0:52:02.4

Castle: I'll check. I actually just read it last night, but I was trying to determine whether he established the foundation before he began any of these major ventures, like the Oakland Community Center, for example.

Shoong Lee: I don't remember. I have a copy of the formation of the foundation. It's sort of hard to read. I don't remember the year.

Castle: I'll take a look at it. It wa—

Shoong Lee: Oh, I have it too.

Castle: You said he put his shares into the foundation?

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: What was the reasoning behind that?

Shoong Lee: That gave the foundation the money to disperse, invest, disperse, you know, annually.

0:52:53.1

Father's Illness and Passing

Castle: When your father takes ill, and he is in the hospital with what's ailing him, he sees the need to organize his affairs. What kind of conversations, how often are you seeing your father? What's going on between the two of you in terms of talking about the future of the—

Shoong Lee: While he is in the hospital? I visited him almost every day. While he could eat, which he couldn't do much of, I would take food over to him. But then after a while he couldn't eat. I guess we talked about what he was trying to do with the living, the trust, and also the men there who were going to be part of the executive committee, would talk to him too, about how he hoped things would go, how it would be managed afterwards. It was mostly by committee. He certainly trusted Walter and Frank, but he wanted me to have my input and also a cousin by the name of Martin Joe who became part of the executive committee. So there were four of us who met weekly.

0:54:40.6

Castle: What role did your brother play in this?

Shoong Lee: None.

Castle: And why was that?

Shoong Lee: Because I think by that time my dad was convinced that he really had no management skills, and that he would be hard to get along with if he were part of the executive committee.

Audio file #5

Changes in Managing the Business

Castle: We were discussing your father's passing and how quickly and painfully it happened. In the middle of all this he is trying to put together a trust, and a committee that is going to look after the National Dollar Stores. And how, unfortunately at this time, your brother is not part of that. You were starting to explain to me how you very quickly took this major role and your adjustments to that role.

0:00:50.9

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: Could we continue to talk about these weekly meetings and the structure of the National Dollar Store? How it changed, and how it was changing, and how you handled that?

Shoong Lee: I think that once the executive committee started to meet, that the people in the management there in San Francisco realized that that was the way it was going to continue. It was quite a peaceful transition, except for my brother who did not accept it until he realized he had to. Right after my dad died, he went into the stores and wanted to take over my father's office. Then he was told that it wasn't going to work that way, and that he was not going to be part of the management. So after that, he and I, our relationship, just disintegrated. That's too bad, but that's what happened.

0:02:13.0

In the meantime, I was busy trying to learn all I could learn by reading and studying. At that time I was still married to Richard. He thought at first that he could exert control through me on what was happening, but I told him that was not going to happen, that I was going to use my own judgment, and if I made a mistake, it would be my mistake, and not a mistake that I'd made because of taking his advice. So that didn't set too well with him, either.

0:02:55.4

Castle: That further distanced your already challenged or troubled relationship?

Shoong Lee: Right, right. It was like a half a dozen years after that that he and I were divorced.

Castle: Just to take a step back at this moment, not that I even want to take you there, but this is an amazing amount of difficult things to juggle all at one time. You're caring for your daughter, you've lost your father, your relationship with your brother is no longer, and you're dealing with a husband who's making your life harder (Shoong Lee chuckles) rather than easier. Is that what's going on?

0:03:38.2

Shoong Lee: Yes. All of that concurrently.

Castle: How did you get through it?

Shoong Lee: I was just so busy that I just didn't think of anything other than the things that you've already mentioned: what I was doing for the stores and taking care of Lisa.

0:04:06.2

Castle: So those two elements really dragged you through it, whether who is pulling or who is pushing, it is hard to say. I guess if you have a child to care for, you stay focused on that.

Shoong Lee: Yes. Whatever free time I had was devoted to the stores. Or studying.

Castle: This might be a stretch, but was your new commitment to the stores a way for you to honor your father? Did you feel that at the time?

0:04:38.8

Shoong Lee: I really felt very good that he had enough faith in me to put me in that position. I was going to do all that I could to make sure that he hadn't made the wrong choice.

Castle: Did it surprise you?

Shoong Lee: What, that he had picked me?

Castle: His decision, yes?

Shoong Lee: Well, I was the only link to keep control in the family, through me and also through my cousin who was farther removed than his own child. I guess he wanted to maintain some continuity with the family. So, I was the link.

0:05:41.5

Castle: Why not your sister?

Shoong Lee: She had no business training at all, had no head for it. He used to laugh and say, "We'd send her a check and she'd put it in the drawer and not even open it or cash it for a year." So he knew that she was not much interested in business or anything having to do with even money.

Castle: Why did he find that you had these skills? What were you doing that demonstrated a business sense?

0:06:20.5

Shoong Lee: I was interested in what Rich and I were doing on our own. We talked business sometimes with Dad, and so he knew that I was interested in business and in real estate. Maybe I was even investing a little bit in the stock market at that time in a small way.

Castle: You were speaking the language?

0:06:58.8

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: Is there any moment that you remember from those conversations with your father about the future of the business or what he wanted you to do? Anything he told you in particular?

Shoong Lee: When he was in the hospital and I knew what he was planning and that I would be part of it, that he made me feel that if I did the best that I could, he would be satisfied.

0:07:42.2

Relationship with Brother after Father's Death

Castle: Your brother, in the meantime, did he know what was going on? Was he around?

Shoong Lee: He knew that Dad wanted him to put his stock in the trust, and he refused. So, I guess when he realized that it could function even without his stock, that he knew something was coming, but he didn't know what.

Castle: That's a very decisive move, to basically refuse your father's dying wish on his part, whether he was conscious of it or not. You were describing some very uncomfortable situations, it sound like, in the actual offices in San Francisco.

0:08:38.3

Shoong Lee: That was right after Dad passed away, yes.

Castle: Pretty much immediately?

Shoong Lee: Yes. Pretty much immediately.

Castle: But you had the law, if you will, on your side?

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: Because of the trust established? What kind of scene were you facing if –

0:08:58.7

Shoong Lee: Luckily I didn't face it with him personally. I think those who were in the office told him in as nice a way as they could that he was not going to be part of management.

Castle: What did he do? What was his response?

Shoong Lee: They didn't tell me exactly what he said, but he was very unhappy about it. Then when he realized that there was nothing that he could do, then there was just no need for him to appear at the Stores any more.

0:09:29.5

Castle: It is really fortunate that you didn't have to—

Shoong Lee: Face him personally. Yes, that's right.

Castle: Did you speak with him from that point on? What happened?

0:09:42.8

Shoong Lee: I guess I really had no direct contact with him for several years after that.

Castle: Was it on both your parts? Or was he saying, "I don't want to talk to you any more." How did it work itself out?

Shoong Lee: There was just no occasion that we would meet. I think he also moved down to Los Angeles, I think, about that time.

Brother's Marital History

Castle: Was he married?

Shoong Lee: He was married and divorced from his first wife by whom he had four children. I guess he was maybe, let me think now. (pause) He had not remarried. But it seems to me that sometime in the sixties, they were divorced, he and his first wife, Cory.

0:10:53.0

Castle: Did you have any relations with his children?

Shoong Lee: Yes, with his children and also with his first wife whom I have always considered my sister-in-law even after they were divorced. I kept up my relations with her until she died.

Castle: Did Milton have any other official duties with the family or family business, the foundation?

Shoong Lee: Well, when my father passed away, he left the foundation to my brother.

Castle: I did see some pictures of him.

Foundation Passes to Brother

Shoong Lee: Yes. A few years after that, my brother changed the name of the foundation from Joe Shoong to Milton Shoong Foundation which I thought was terrible.

Castle: That's pretty disrespectful.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

0:11:59.8

Castle: So things didn't get better?

Shoong Lee: No. (laughs) Because then he did kind of foolish things with the foundation: golf, what do they call them when they –

Castle: Tournaments.

Shoong Lee: Yes, golf tournaments, beauty contests, children's [fair ??] in Oakland. That one's all right. But some of the others were kind of silly.

Castle: They did not really fit within the legacy or work of your father?

Shoong Lee: No.

Castle: Were they successful?

0:12:38.2

Shoong Lee: Well, if you give money to a tournament, you have the tournament. It guess it's successful. If you give money to a beauty contest, and you come out with a queen, I guess you're successful. But there was nothing academic. But the only thing that he had to keep up was the Community Center and the Chinese Language School. He had to do that.

Castle: That was part of the [unintelligible ??] and testament?

0:13:06.5

Shoong Lee: I guess, I guess. As part of the foundation, that was the primary thing that they did. So he could not stop that.

Castle: But the things that he could manage to change—

Shoong Lee: If there was money outside of what the Community Center needed to maintain itself, then he could spend that as he wished. That's where he went into these other things.

0:13:33.1

Castle: You had mentioned then what happened to him financially.

Ted Lee Sets Up Situation so Milton Shoong Runs Dollar Stores

Shoong Lee: Well, I continued on the executive committee from 1960 when my dad died until about 1970. Ted and I were married in '69. Ted could see that Milt and I certainly had different ideas on how the company should run. So he said why don't we try to

separate out the interests of different members of the family and see if we can arrange it so that Milt could run the stores if that's what he so anxious to do?

Castle: So all this time he was still very interested in getting his foot back in the door to run the National Dollar Stores?

0:14:36.5

Shoong Lee: Yeah, right, right. But it wasn't until Ted came up with the plan of separating off all of our different interests. So, in the separation of interests, Milton came out with all of the operating stores and the real estate that they sat on as far as ones that were owned by the company. We took out some real estate. At that point, my sister and my sister-in-law, Cory, and her son Milt, all came out with us. The only one that stayed in the stores were my brother's stock.

Castle: So at the end of the separation of interest—

0:15:30.0

Brother's Marriages, Continued

Shoong Lee: He came out with the operating stores which is what he wanted. So, I think it was around that time that he got married again to a swimmer by the name of Papsy. I don't know her last name. That didn't last too long; they were divorced. But then they remarried a little later. The first time she had signed a prenuptial. Second time she did not sign anything. When they divorced the second time, he had to give her quite a bit, a big settlement. Then I think he married a young woman from China, but that didn't last too long. It didn't go too well, and he had to end up giving her a settlement.

0:16:43.1

Castle: He didn't sign a prenuptial agreement with her?

Shoong Lee: I guess not.

Castle: Was Papsy Chinese?

Shoong Lee: No, no. I don't know what her nationality. Caucasian. But the third wife was Chinese, so then after that he decided that he didn't need to marry the ladies. So, that was better. By this time the stores were not doing that well.

Dollar Stores Begin to Fail

0:17:09.1

Castle: What year is this approximately?

Shoong Lee: This was in the seventies. It was after we were out.

Castle: You weren't involved any more?

Shoong Lee: No, we weren't involved any more. I guess in the seventies. I can't quite earmark it more than that. During that time there were those race riots down in southern California, Watts. Several of the stores—

0:17:42.3

Castle: That would be in 1965.

Shoong Lee: Sixty-five?

Castle: The first—

Shoong Lee: There were things after that because—

Castle: Tell me what happened?

0:17:56.5

Shoong Lee: There were several stores that were gutted, burned down, and others that had been, not destroyed by fire, but the mobs had come in and just wrecked the stores and taken out everything they wanted, merchandise. And the insurance company came in and offered Milt something like eight or nine million dollars to take care of all of the stores, all of the damage. That was during a very brief time when Milt had asked Ted to go back on the Dollar Store Board to help him. Ted suggested strongly that he not go back and redo all of those stores, but take the money and maybe make the ones that were doing well outside of that particular area, improve those stores. But no, Ted was soon after that told he was no longer on the Board, and Milt went back and redid, rebuilt all of those stores. They didn't do well because a lot of the population was gone from there by then and didn't go back into that area. So those stores were just going from bad to worse.

0:19:40.7

Milton Shoong's Daughters

Then he started to suffer health problems. He had first one stroke, and then a second stroke. Then turned over the management to his two daughters, neither one of whom had had any training in business at all. Rosemary went to college for a couple of years. I don't remember exactly where, but then she became interested in gurus and ashrams and such, and she would go to different parts of the country to be with a particular guru. (sigh) The younger daughter got married at a very early age to a young man in the Lake Tahoe area. Their family had a construction company and so she lived in Lake Tahoe since then. They were managing the stores by telephone from wherever they were. So you can imagine how much management that was.

0:21:16.1

Castle: How many stores were there at this point left, roughly?

Shoong Lee: I don't know that that many of them had closed in the interim. But I was so far removed from them, I really don't know.

Castle: I was just trying to remember. At the height of development, there were how many stores?

Dollar Stores Close

Shoong Lee: About thirty-five, thirty-seven, something like that. When it finally closed down, I don't remember how many there were at that point. As a matter of fact, I didn't really know that they were closing down until after it was done. Had no idea that that was in the works, because it happened very quickly. When Milton decided that they would close the stores down and just keep the real estate, the girls went to a law firm, I don't know where, and gave them the commission to close them. They did it within a week. That was it.

Castle: Throughout this time, we'll come back and trace that part out. You meet Ted in the process of this?

0:22:43.3

Doris Shoong Meets Ted Lee

Shoong Lee: Yes, this is back, this was after my divorce, and he came to visit me in Oakland on behalf of one of my partners in a piece of real estate in Napa. I wanted to sell the real estate and he, this one partner, wanted to keep it. I had two partners. So he sent Ted to see me. Ted asked my why I wanted to sell it. I said I had gone to ask for someone from Davis to come and look at the property, test it, and tell me if it was suitable to grow grapes. They came back and said, no, it was not suitable for the growing of grapes. I said, why do I want it then? I want to sell it. But Ted convinced me to hold it for a while, maybe it wasn't quite the right time to sell. So, that's how I met Ted. This was in like sixty-seven, sixty-eight. We were married in sixty-nine.

0:24:03.

Castle: Tell me, how did Ted woo you? (Shoong Lee chuckles) How did he make you his? How did you make him yours?

Shoong Lee: We found that we had a lot of the same interests, and even more importantly, a lot of the same values.

Castle: What are some of those?

0:24:27.3

Shoong Lee: Our interest is in real estate. We both love real estate. And he loves business and being entrepreneurial, and I favor that too. He is such a straight arrow. He had such integrity, and he is, it is so important for him to be fair in whatever he does. He says there is no agreement that is good unless each person walks away with something. There is no way you can do something where you think you can do it all and give the other person nothing. It's just not going to work, and it is not the right way to do business. I so admired that. And he's always been that way. My first husband was not that way.

Castle: That brings the ethics back into the practice of business which I think is where the stereotypes of greedy capitalists and all of that come out and because it means when you exploit a situation rather than mitigate it (Shoong Lee: or being fair). Do you think that fairness helped in his role trying to sort out this rather sticky mess?

0:25:46.5

Shoong Lee: Absolutely. So that everyone came out getting something and was satisfied.

Castle: When you say you shared values, what are those?

Shoong Lee: I think that family is very important and that business is fine and it's good, but it's not your whole life. I think that we were very lucky that we both felt as strongly about each other as we do, and we still do after thirty-some years. I think that's a wonder. After we were married, I was happy to adopt his two boys by a previous marriage.

Castle: Why was that important to do? It doesn't always happen?

0:26:53.6

Shoong Lee: Well, it doesn't always happen, and I am very grateful that his former wife agreed to it because if she had not, we could not have done it. When they were living with her after their divorce, they lived in Honolulu in a very modest situation. That was the way she wanted to live, and she knew that if the boys came and lived with us, that there would be a lot more opportunity for them as they grew up. She was generous enough to allow that.

Castle: Did she want them to have a mother? Was that part of the—

Shoong Lee: Well, we've always felt that, the boys have always felt that they had two mothers.

0:27:50.6

Castle: That still works?

Shoong Lee: That still works. It is unusual in that you don't often find a lady as generous as she was.

Castle: In building your new life with Ted, it does sound like Ted came into your life at an important time. You had been struggling for five to ten years at least with a very heavy situation. I guess the point is, any one of which would be burdensome, but you have them all at the same time. Tell me about how—you said you were a duck to water when it came to accounting. Would you consider this kind of a blossoming of your more professionalized career as a corporate executive, and how that came about?

0:28:50.2

Shoong Lee: I think I had a very fortuitous, I guess you would call it, indoctrination into accounting because a partner of the firm that had been doing Ted's and my work, Richard's and my work for several years, after the divorce came to teach me how

to keep books myself. So I learned how to keep books. The old green eye-shade way before you did everything by computer. That really gave me knowledge on how to look at statements, what makes a good one, what makes a bad one, and what to look for. Then I took a few courses through Berkeley. I think it has been a big help.

0:30:04.5

Castle: So you knew a lot of this before. You did have training before you ended up in a position with the National Dollar Store.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Reviewing Brother's Running of the Dollar Stores

Castle: We were discussing the National Dollar Stores' demise, your brother's insistence upon taking it over. I do have one question that kind of sticks with me. It seems unusual since your brother specifically didn't play any role in the National Dollar Stores until, did he play a role until your father's death?

Shoong Lee: No, not until 1970 when we divided the company up.

0:30:46.1

Castle: But upon your father's death was when he expressed extreme interest in wanting to run the Stores?

Shoong Lee: Yes. That was in 1960, yes.

Castle: I wonder what was behind that, because if he hadn't been in training or working or doing any of that, did he just want to be in control?

Shoong Lee: That's right. He wanted to be in control, and to be known as the head of it, and all the perks that went with it.

0:31:12.2

Castle: It sounds as if your brother was also like Richard in trying to measure up to your father.

Shoong Lee: Well, there was no way that Milt could even begin to do that. Not at all, in any way.

Castle: I wonder if it can become a challenge when—

Shoong Lee: He just wanted recognition, I think. As head of the National Dollar Stores, he would have some recognition.

0:31:47.8

Castle: He just didn't have the character for it?

Shoong Lee: Or the ability to run it.

Castle: So this whole time it is difficult. Ted comes in. He married you in 1969. When does he start playing a role on the board?

Shoong Lee: Soon after that. Yes, right after that.

Castle: So, it was accepted that he could do that.

0:32:13.9

Shoong Lee: Yes, in my stead.

Castle: In your stead. He was able to navigate certain things.

Shoong Lee: So, within a year, was when he came up with the idea or the plan through which people could separate out their interests and some of us to get out of the day-to-day management or out of the operating company.

Castle: Why did you want out of the company?

0:32:46.1

Shoong Lee: Because I could see that if Milt were to come back in at all, that it would not be a peaceful way of trying to run the company.

Castle: And he was insisting on doing so.

Shoong Lee: Yes. There were times when my sister would agree with him, in which case they would have a majority of the stock in which case he would come back in and run it. If she decided to stay with me, then he would stay out. That was an unstable situation as well.

0:33:24.6

Castle: That sounds very uncomfortable.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: So you were facing a situation where he still held stock—

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: What, 40 percent?

Shoong Lee's Relationship with Brother and Sister and Stores

Shoong Lee: Yes. That's right. So, if my sister, who had 20 percent went over to him, then that was 60 percent on the other side.

Castle: So he was working on her?

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: So that was a good time for you to make your move out of the situation?

0:33:47.6

Shoong Lee: Yes. And yet when we went out, she didn't stay with him. She went with us, and got out.

Castle: Did that surprise you?

Shoong Lee: Yes, in a way, it did. So why was she backing him at all if she didn't want to stay in with him?

Castle: Did you ever ask her that?

Shoong Lee: No.

Castle: What did this whole thing do to your relationship between you and your sister?

0:34:10.7

Shoong Lee: Well, we had once we grew older we had not that peaceful a relationship. I think there was maybe some jealousy on her part of what I was able to do. I think she was an unhappy person. When you have someone who is basically unhappy with their lives, they don't have too many good relationships with many people at all.

Castle: What happened to your relationship with your brother?

Shoong Lee: Once he came back into control of the company, then he was feeling a little bit better towards Ted and me, but we were never really close. Too much water under the bridge.

0:35:27.6

Castle: So you have come out of this situation with real estate in Las Vegas and where else?

Shoong Lee: Vallejo. We had a piece in Vallejo.

Starting the Urban Land Company

Castle: What do you do now with Ted? This is the beginning of a new phase in business? Is it the Urban Land Company?

Shoong Lee: Yes, we started Urban Land. That was our first one, and we started to develop the real estate. Some of we've had to wait for, until the time was right to develop. It's lucky that we've been able to hold on for as long as we've had to until the time, which is now, is right for development.

0:36:19.1

Castle: So, what is your working philosophy on real estate in terms of when you sell and when you don't sell?

Shoong Lee: Well, we call ourselves developers, but we are different in that we develop for our own account. Everything that we have developed, we have held on to. We don't sell it. And we don't develop for other people.

Castle: Why is that?

Shoong Lee: Because it's easier if do it for yourself, and you don't have a lot of partners because then you can do as you like. You can spend as much or as little as you like. You maintain it the way you think it should be. You put in tenants that you are happy with, and it's just easier not having to deal with too many other people.

0:37:15.6

Castle: It sounds in some ways that those are lessons carried over also on Ted's part from doing redevelopment work.

Shoong Lee: (Chuckles) Oh, yes. We had to deal with so many people, yes.

Castle: This sounds like the reversal of that.

Shoong Lee: Yes. That's right.

Castle: You're kind of vertically controlling things along the way. When you say it was difficult to hold out, that means that it times when it would have been nice to liquidate that or sell it.

0:37:41.9

Shoong Lee: Well, times when we've had to put in money to, like in Vallejo, we had to join an assessment district where we had to come up with a million dollars over a period of years help build the infrastructure. At that time, we didn't have that much money, and it was a big investment to take on. But it's turned out very well.

Castle: So in coming it to in terms of asset merging, you had your real estate from the agreement. Is that the entire bit that you take from your father's, or do you still have a trust?

0:38:25.5

Shoong Lee: No, the trust was terminated a number of years ago. I shared the assets with my children and kept a part for myself. It all depended on how old I was and how long I was expected to live. It was all divided up so that everyone came out of it with something.

Castle: At one point in your father's life, I think it was 1938 approximately, he was featured in the *Time Magazine* article where he was written about as the second richest man in California at the time. I just wondered, he was described as a millionaire many times over. Either at the time of his death, or at the time that the trust was dissolved, was it a multi-million trust or, just to get a sense of how much he had accumulated over his lifetime.

0:39:25.5

Descriptions of Trusts

Shoong Lee: Now, which trust are you referring to?

Castle: Well, maybe you could explain to me when the different holdings were. Just getting a sense of what he was worth? What had he built to pass on to you?

Shoong Lee: Well, what he had passed on to me he had given me back in 1930-something. It was right after my sister got married, and he disapproved of her husband. I think I had said that earlier. So, what he had given up at that time was X number of dollars and our share of the National stock. So he invested the money that he had given us, which was then in trust, and put it in different things for the different trusts. So, like the money that was in my sister's trust, he bought property for her in Las Vegas. I told you about a piece that he had bought for her on the Strip. For me he had gotten something else. But then by that time he had let Richard, my then husband, invest in some shopping centers in southern California and in Las Vegas. I don't know what he invested in for Milton. I really don't know.

0:41:06.0

Castle: In building your own world of real estate, now that you and Ted are together, you really enjoy that process?

Ted Lee's Acumen in Real Estate

Shoong Lee: Yes

Castle: What does he take on? What do you take on in terms of still sets?

0:41:24.2

Shoong Lee: Well, I call him our rainmaker. He goes out and he finds the deals, and then he brings them in, and someone has to take care of them once they're in-house. That's what I do. I watch the accounting of them on a month-by-month basis, and I'm the one that makes sure that we do our tax returns with the help of a good tax consultant. As months go on during a year, I will show Ted how we are doing in various projects, various buildings. Then if there is anything that I think that needs his attention that isn't going right, I'll show it to him and say, "What do we do about this? I think we're going to have a problem." If something is doing very well, then I show it to him and say, "This is doing particularly well over last year." So he leaves that end of it pretty much up to me.

Castle: So you make these decisions together?

Shoong Lee: Together, yes.

0:42:39.3

Living in Las Vegas and California

Castle: Tell me how you begin to live this dual business life between California and Las Vegas, between San Francisco and Las Vegas, because that seems as if it is more than a small feat to accomplish. How did you decide to do it, and in what is it that brought you into establishing residency in Vegas in addition to California?

0:43:04.8

Shoong Lee: I think that we've been investing in Las Vegas for a number of years going back thirty, thirty-five years, almost our whole marriage. We've always had either an apartment, a condominium or a home in Las Vegas, even though we weren't residents of Nevada. Once we got into gaming and I think in Ted's oral history he probably goes into that so I won't do that, but as a result of that, and as we grew a little bigger in the gaming end of the investments, then we either had to become residents of Nevada or else we would have to have what they call a "key employee."

Gaming and Key Employee

0:44:04.5

What is a key employee? He makes decisions for you in your gaming operation. We didn't want that. So we decided to become licensed ourselves to do that and to live in Nevada as residents. So at first, it was just Ted and Greg, by that time he was an adult, who were going to be licensed. Just before the people who had been sent up here to do all of the exploratory work on our background, before they were going back to Las Vegas, I asked Ted, "Now, what would happen to the operation if something happened to you?" He said, "You couldn't be any part of it. You couldn't participate at all. You couldn't even get any of the distribution from whatever profit there was."

0:45:17.7

So I thought about that overnight. I said, "Maybe I should be licensed too?" Then we approached the three men who were up here doing their investigation, and said, "How difficult would it be if I were to join in on this and be licensed?" They said, "It would be very easy, because all of your assets are community assets, and we've already examined them all. So it would be no problem at all." So that's how three of us went in at once to be licensed. At that time Ernie wasn't twenty-one so he was not eligible. But once he became twenty-one, then we licensed him too. We were one of the first families in Nevada where the whole family became licensed.

0:46:01.6

Castle: How did you feel about moving into the world of gaming at first?

Shoong Lee: I wasn't crazy about it because way back there had always been a stigma to being in gaming. It was really only when Howard Hughes went into Nevada, and then the big corporations became the owners of casinos that it seemed as if it were not so bad to be a casino owner.

Castle: It was a little more acceptable?

0:46:39.0

Shoong Lee: Yes. So there is was sitting in our laps, and it would have been kind of silly to not take advantage of it because we found out quite by accident that we had a location for a casino. The license goes with the location and not with the person.

Castle: So, there was an unrestricted gaming license on—

Shoong Lee: Our property in Las Vegas. Yes. Eureka, in Las Vegas. So it was too valuable to give up. That's how we sort of fell into the business. This was like in 1989, 1990.

0:47:33.5

Castle: Once you get into the casino business, how long does it take before you really start to develop some wealth and see profit from it?

Shoong Lee: Well, the first few years, I'd say it was profitable, not no, not that profitable. But then after we built a new building on top of an old building and put in more machines, then we could see things really, really taking off. We have really done very well in that particular location. I don't know exactly why. We are surrounded by apartment houses there, and those are some of our most regular customers. But we seem to be an easy place for people to spend time and feel at home.

0:48:51.9

Castle: I think it's probably important to point out that it's not one of the big casinos on the Strip. It is more like a neighborhood casino.

Shoong Lee: Yes. It's more like Boston's Cheers, friendly bartender and everybody knows your name. They know what you like to drink, know all that sort of thing, to make people feel as if they're really important, whereas you go into the big casinos, they don't know you. They don't know that you are there or you're not there.

0:49:24.8

Interest in Art and Symphony; the Museum Society; Asian Art Museum

Castle: At what point do you begin your involvement in terms of societal work regarding your interest in art, and your symphony work. Could you trace some of that?

Shoong Lee: Well, I think my interest in art and in the museum society here in San Francisco goes back twenty, twenty-five years. It started out that the Museum Society was really the organization that handled the membership or both the Fine Arts Museum and the Asian Art. They were both side-by-side in the park, the Golden Gate Park, and if you belonged to, if you bought one membership, you were a member of both.

0:50:37.1

It was some years later that it was decided, and I'm not sure by whom, that the two should be separate and that if you bought a membership, you bought it either at the Fine Arts or at the Asian Arts, that one did not get you into both places. And also

that the Asian should move out of the Park, and that it was the Fine Arts that was going to stay there. I think Dianne Feinstein was the mayor at that time, and I don't remember the exact years, but you can go back and research that, but she offered the Asian the library because the old library was building a new building right along side of the old building in Civic Center. She said that if the Asian wanted it, they could have that building, and that the city would do the retrofit because it was after the earthquake of seventy-nine. Was that the Loma Prieta in seventy-nine? That the city would take care of that part of it, but that Asian would have to do all the rest as far as rehabbing the building. Couldn't touch the outside because that's an historical monument. So, that's when the Asian had the gift of a new home, but it needed rehabbing.

0:52:06.2

Castle: What role were you playing throughout this?

Shoong Lee: I was still in the Museum Society, okay? Then when it came to the separation, I went to the Asian Art Museum side of it, and a lot the members went over to the Fine Arts. The Asian came out with practically nothing. Didn't have a data base for members because that went with the Fine Arts. But they had members from the Asia Society and various names like that. We started from scratch.

0:52:51.7

I stayed with the Asian Art Museum until, I guess it was eighty-nine or so, ninety, when we got into the gaming. Then I felt that we had too much going on down in Las Vegas, so I resigned and I stayed out of the museum until a few years ago. I was asked if I would come back and be chair. By that time they were still under construction, hadn't opened in the Civic Center yet, but were about a year, a year-and-a-half away from it. So, I came back and then the museum opened in Civic Center in March of 03. I became chair in 04.

0:54:00.3

Castle: What did those duties entail as chair? Fundraising?

Shoong Lee: Some fundraising, and trying to get more people involved in various committees than before when we'd been in the Park, sort of been part of the Fine Arts. Also it was the transition time for the museum from being like, I call it like being a little private club in the Park when the museum was run by a few families.

0:54:41.3

Castle: How have you found the politics of the art world and the board membership? Was it difficult?

0:55:22.1

Shoong Lee: It has been difficult.

Castle: About anything in particular?

Shoong Lee: Around my being chair. I think it was when these families realized that the power was passing and that it was no longer going to be like a little private club that was

run by these people almost on a day-to-day basis telling the director what to do. They had a hard time accepting that.

0:56:01.0

Castle: It wasn't necessarily personal towards you, or was it more about their reluctance to give up power?

Shoong Lee: I think maybe 70 or 80 percent was reluctance to give up power, and maybe the other was aimed at me, maybe because I was a woman, maybe because I was Chinese. I'm not sure. Maybe my percentages are wrong. Anyways it was directed at me.

Castle: What is the background of most of these families? Culturally?

Shoong Lee: It was like they were saying that it had been run by San Francisco families, old families, Caucasian, and that was the way it should be.

0:57:13.6

Castle: Right. There is always an unrecognized element which is you're a Bay Area family who has wealth and established for a long time, but there is a way in which white families become normalized. They are the center of all things. Even though you are equally established with an equal amount of wealth, if not more, you are Chinese American.

Shoong Lee: That's right.

Castle: That is an element that goes on in race relations. Do you think that that was part of what was at play here?

Shoong Lee: Well, maybe part of it.

0:58:02.1

Castle: What was your concern, why are you interested in art?

Asian Art Museum

Shoong Lee: I have a particular interest in the Asian Art Museum because I think that it is a wonderful, wonderful collection that we have. We are so lucky that Avery Brundage gave it to San Francisco. It has grown in the years since he gave it to San Francisco and I think we have one of the most valuable collections outside of Asia. We are one of three, only three, all-Asian museums in the Western world. One is in Paris, it is the Guimet. There's one in Washington, D.C., the Freer and then us. Here we are at the gateway to the Orient. We are positioned to be a very important institution, not just in San Francisco, but really for the world.

0:59:16.2

Castle: When the decisions were made, it does sound like there was some significant unfairness about where the museum would be, and the decision between the Fine Art Museum, under Feinstein and others. Would you say that that was at play?

Shoong Lee: Yes, probably. I think Harry Parker, who has now resigned, he stayed long enough for the fine Arts to open in Golden Gate Park, and now he's resigned. But he was instrumental in getting the Asian out of the Park.

Audio file #6

Castle: Let's finish up our discussion of our role in the art world, supporting the Asian Art Museum.

Shoong Lee: Yes. Particularly the Asian Art Museum.

0:00:13.3

Castle: Because of its international importance.

Shoong Lee: Yes.

Castle: And its significance to the local area. The history also, and the quality of the collection. The final statement I'd like to follow up on, is your statement about how it was kind of a private club, if you will, where these few families controlled it. Did you have a particular goal in seeing that the art was more accessible when you were taking over as chair.

Shoong Lee As Chair

0:00:41.3

Shoong Lee: I think my goal was to open it up so that it was no longer considered a little private club, that we are an institution now that we are in Civic Center and we should act like one.

Castle: What does it mean to act like one?

Shoong Lee: That means that no one person, no family controls it. It's a city-owned collection. The city owns the building, and we need good people to be the oversight committee to see that the director and that the staff run the museum right. We have to raise the money to keep the museum running because the city doesn't give us but maybe a third of what it takes to run the museum. I don't think it belongs to anybody. It belongs to the city.

0:01:52.6

Castle: It's also important that families of any income be able to enjoy the collections.

0:02:23.4

Shoong Lee: Yes, but it also the money the donations by the trustees is important too, because they have to be able to count on a certain amount of money to keep the museum

running. I think that as the years go by, the city contributes less and less to the museum. When Brundage gave the collection to the city, the city agreed to maintain the collection and the museum one hundred percent. Now it's down to about a third. So over the years they've given a little less, a little less, a little less each year.

Castle: So you've been chair since 2004? You were the vice-chair prior to that?

0:03:18.2

Shoong Lee: That's right. For a year before that. My tenure is up in September.

Castle: So you will be stepping down?

Shoong Lee: I will be stepping down. They're looking for a chair to replace me now. The politics are still at play on the board, so I had formed a search committee of twelve members of the board to find my successor. Now we're going out to executive search company to find the next chair. The idea is that this search team would be unbiased, so that whatever candidates they come up with, it won't be influenced by the committee. In the end we do the picking of the candidates as they are brought forward. So the committee still has the final say on who will be picked.

0:04:30.5

Castle: What's important to you in the next chair? What do you want to see carried on?

Shoong Lee: I hope they don't have as much trouble as I had coming in with members, dissenting members of the board, making life difficult by going out and saying, "Oh there is such turmoil on the board. Oh, don't give yet. Wait."

Castle: That's really undermining. It serves no one other than trying to get you out.

Shoong Lee: That's right.

0:05:08.2

Other Civic Activities

Castle: What other activities have you done in terms of your civic commitment?

Shoong Lee: In Las Vegas I am on the founding board of the Las Vegas Philharmonic and that's been going on seven, eight years.

Castle: Do you enjoy that?

0:05:29.3

Shoong Lee: Yes, I do. And in the last year we're looking for a new conductor. So I'm heading the search committee to find the new conductor for the philharmonic. That has been fun. I've had a really good committee to work with. We've traveled to four different cities, and we have come with three candidates who are going to be making guest appearances in this coming year in the fall, and decide from the three that we've asked to guest conduct. So the new conductor will come in '07-'08.

That will be just about when I will retire from that board because I will have been on for nine years.

0:06:16.0

Doris and Ted Lee's Philanthropy

Castle: This brings us to talking about the many other ways that you looked at ensuring your father's legacy as well as you and Ted on your own making important commitments to education. Maybe we can talk, in closing, a little bit about how you have taken upon yourself to see a full circle of the things that your father started, such as his donations to U.C. Berkeley, and some of the things you've done recently to see him as part of the Founder's Wall and the chair?

0:06:55.7

Shoong Lee: Well, Ted and I went on the Wall earlier.

Castle: Tell me what the Wall is?

Shoong Lee: Oh. The Donor Wall is a place on the campus outside of the library where donors who have given a million or more, their names are engraved on this huge wall. Ted's and my name went on there earlier. Then we started to think about my dad, so Ted went back to research how much his gift was valued at now and found that it was like three hundred thousand short of the million. So Ted said, "Why don't we make up the difference, so that your dad's name will be on the wall, too?" So that's what we've done and so just recently, his name went up. I'm very happy for that.

Castle: What else have you done in his name at U.C. Berkeley?

0:08:06.4

Joe Shoong Professorship for International Business

Shoong Lee: Well, we have a professorship in his name. It's called the Joe Shoong Professorship for International Business or something like that. That is there now in perpetuity, as much as you can say perpetuity these days. Then in Las Vegas we wanted to have something for him there. So we have a park that has been named for him. It's called the Joe Shoong Park, a piece of real estate that we sold to the developer many years ago with the proviso that there would be a park, and that it would be named for my father. So, since then we have given money to parks and recreation in Las Vegas to add new features to the park. Most recently we gave a water feature for the kids to enjoy during the summer which is like, I don't what else you'd call it, but the water comes up in different forms and children can play under it. All they do is they push a button and the water comes on for like ten minutes and all these different things.

0:09:27.2

Castle: That's very cool (laughter). It's in the summer, and it's terribly hot. We could spend a lot of time detailing all the ways in which you have carried on your

father's legacy of giving. Why is it so important to you? Ted at one point in his interview said you had to keep working and doing so well because you had so much money to donate. That's kind of not how it usually works. What would you say is your motivation for being so generous?

0:10:02.5

Shoong Lee: I think that my father set a very good example for me. I think that Ted has a very strong feeling within him that he should give back where he has profited from education, like at Harvard. He always says Harvard changed his life. I'm sure it did. So he's always been grateful and has given back to Harvard. I think we feel that way where we live here, and also in Las Vegas, that Las Vegas has been good to us. We need to give back.

The Joe Shoong Legacy

Castle: What would you say in looking at your father's importance historically both to the American business world as well as to Chinese America. What is the Joe Shoong legacy?

0:11:12.5

Shoong Lee: That I guess if you want to succeed and you're willing to work hard and be good and fair along the way, that you can be successful and you can leave behind a legacy that your relatives can be proud of if you remember to be grateful if you've succeeded and to give back to your community.

Castle: Is there anything else that you can think of in closing that you would like to add. Anything that I didn't ask that you would like to talk about?

Shoong Lee: I can't think of anything at the moment.

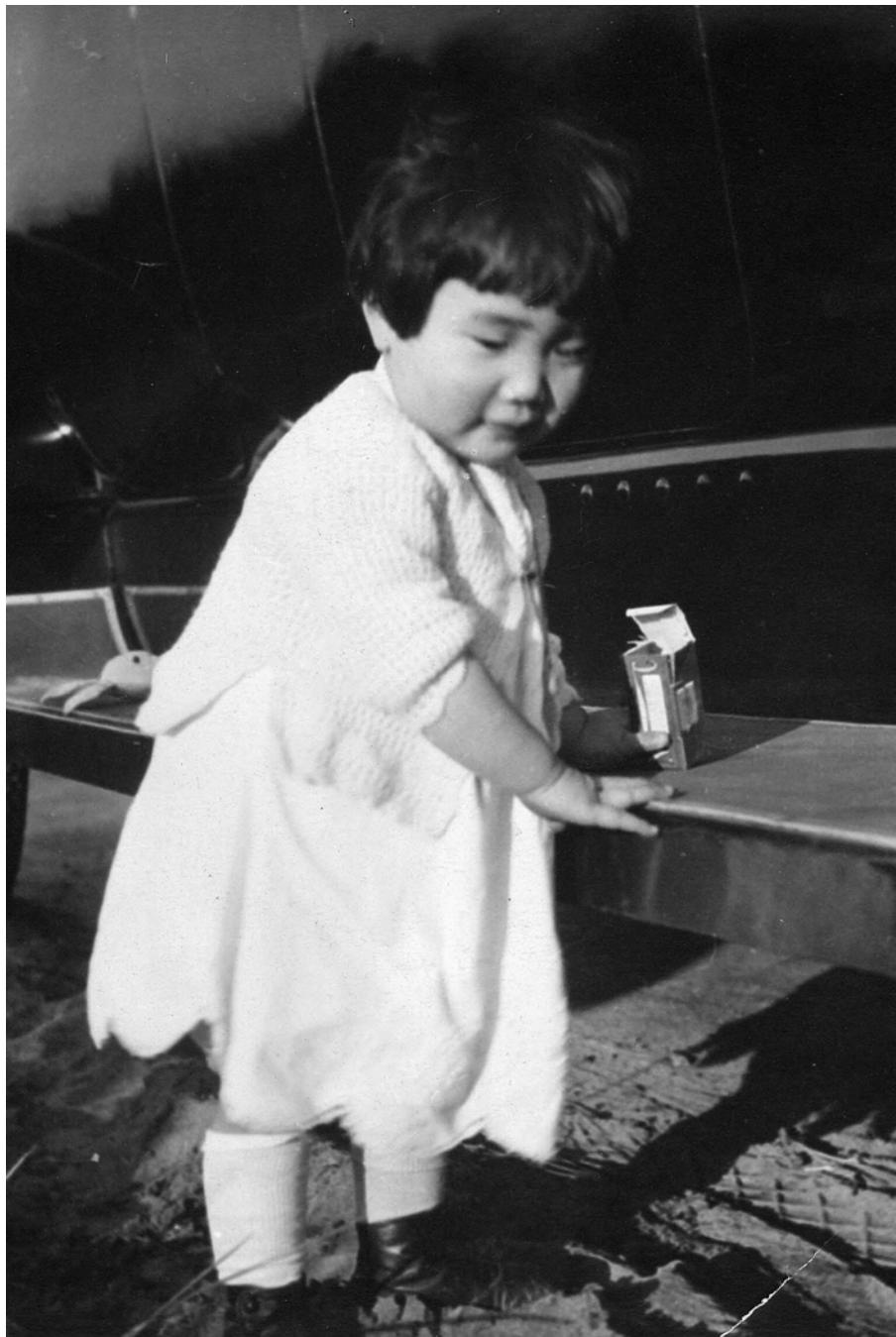
Castle: I guess one of the comments I just wanted to make and get you response to is that, I don't know whether you think about it that way, but it's remarkable how similar in some ways your life has been to your father's in as much that neither one of you finished education, for example, formally. And you both faced different challenges, but have led a very successful kind of business life, but in coordination with having a good family and in making family important and in giving back to community. I just wondered if you had seen yourself connected to him in that way? Because you really are his living legacy.

Shoong Lee: I hadn't thought of that. But there are some similarities, I can see.

Castle: We don't always see it in ourselves. You might be reminded of it through the many, many, many families whom he touched, for example, like the young man who came to you and said, "Your father paid for my education." Those are—some of the greatest exhibits of generosity are those that just happen and they aren't told. It's been a pleasure.

Shoong Lee: Thank you.

Photographs



Doris Lee at an early age



Our Lady of Lourdes School, Oakland, CA—Class picture third grade



Doris Lee in her living room, 1966



Rose Soo Hoo Shoong, wife of Joe Shoong and mother of Doris Lee
Aboard ship *President Hoover*, 1936



National Dollar Stores—managers of all stores at 50th Anniversary celebration.



Joe & Rose Shoong with Betty, Doris, and Milton in garden of home



Grandmother Chow Wong Shee, Joe Shoong, Doris, and Milton in front garden of home



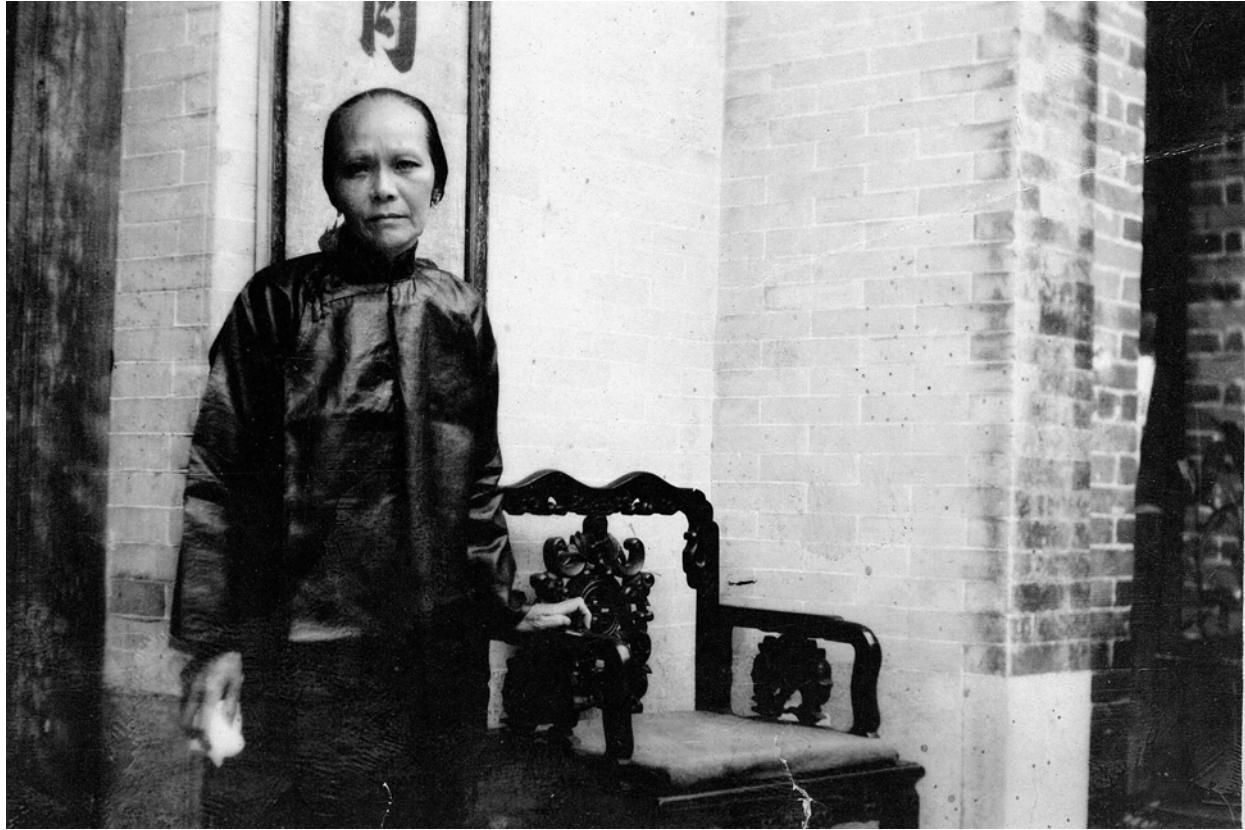
Grandmother, Joe and Rose Shoong, Betty, Doris, and Milton
in back yard of home on Bellevue Ave.



Doris Lee, teenager in China



Family Gathering



Grandmother, Chow Wong Shee, taken in China



Joe Shoong, Founder of National Dollar Stores



Richard Tam, Jr. and mother, Doris Shoong Lee—1969



Theodore and Doris Lee, Honolulu, 1979



Gregory, Doris, Ernest and Theodore Lee—Paris, 1987, at the Rue de Bac