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AIOH-14, Alvon Lee Fong
Interviewer Olivia Leung
June 10, 2005

Time: 11:00am – 11:35am

Place: In the residence of Mr. Fong's daughter in West Sacramento

OL: So, where and when were you born?

AF: Where? I was born in China

OL: And when?

AF: 1937... Oh no 1929, excuse me, I was thinking of the year we got here

OL: How large was your family?

AF: Actually, at the time, just me and my sister, 1929. Right now there's uh..there was seven of us and one passed away about the 10 years ago.

OL: And this was in China? Or...

AF: Here.

OL: Oh, after you came here?

AF: Yeah, I came here in 1937 and then so all my siblings were born after that.

OL: Oh.

AF: In China it was me and my sister only one.

OL: Oh okay. How did you guys decide to come?

AF: Yeah, I couldn't tell ya [laughter]

All I know is my dad, I guess bought the paper. Old days, you have to buy somebody else name and, and that's how we got here, I guess.

OL: So you're dad was already here?

AF: Yeah, my dad was already here, but he came over here with an assumed name also. So he came over with an assumed name at first then somehow the family knew somebody had some paper or passport to sell. Paper you know? Chinese style? (Mmm hmm..) Old days they had some name, they had one, so they bought one for me. Me and my mom.

OL: How old were you?

AF: Oh, I was eight.

OL: You were eight? Did you now you were coming?

AF: No, no I didn't know at the time. I was a kid, I don't pay no attention you know. When you're young like that, you're just happy go lucky, you know, you don't care about nothing

OL: You're just following your mom?

AF: Yup, just following...yup.

OL: Do you remember if you prepared to come in anyway?

AF: Yea, I couldn't tell you that either. Other than I know I rode the train from my village to Hong Kong where it was.

OL: Oh, and did you stay in Hong Kong for a while?

AF: Yea, I imagine. I don't know how many days 'cause I know my mom those days says, be careful, these guys with turban, they steal your you know? Old Chinese style? You remember? You probably heard those stories before.

OL: Uh huh, wow ok, do you remember the boat that you got on?

AF: Yea. I was on the USS Cleveland I think it is.

OL: Uh huh.

(Daughter: Hoover)

AF: No, Cleveland

(the form says Hoover)

AF: The Hoover Cleveland. She got some of the paper here. I don't, I don't remember. I thought Cleveland.

OL: Oh ok. So it was just you and your mom?

AF: Just me and my mom came over here.

OL: Oh ok, and your sister came later?

AF: Yea, I came in July. I left China in 1937, about the time Japan invaded China

OL: Uh huh.

AF: My sister came here in 1947 I think it was. And she came here under an assumed name also. Actually my uncle, who's my mom's older brother went over China, marry her and brought her over here.

OL: OH ok, yea.

AF: He was in the service during World War II.

OL: Oh ok, so he went and he married your sister

AF: You know fictitious (the marriage) like they say.

OL: Yea, I know. Do you remember being on the actual boat?

AF: I remember on the boat, vaguely 'cause I was seasick most of the way. All the way practically and a matter of fact I had a couple of accident, what they told me actually that some people had some accident afterwards, after I did, you know? Yea I would slip on the floor and so forth, that's what they told me, I don't know.

OL: You don't remember?

AF: I don't remember too much. I remember vaguely, I don't remember exactly what did happen

OL: Do you remember which part of the ship?

AF: It's a big ship

OL: Uh huh.

(Daughter comes with documentation, the family tree)

AF: Here's the name of our village. I know exactly where it is, but if I tell you no one knows where it is anyway. Everyone uses Canton, China. That's the whole province

OL: Oh, my family's from Toishan too.

AF: Toishan?

OL: Yea. (laughter)

AF: What's your last name?

OL: Leung.

AF: Oh Leung. Ok, L-E-U-N-G?

OL: Uh huh.

AF: Oh ok, I got a friend that live over there in San Jose named Leung

OL: Yea, we're all Toishan people (laughter)

AF: But most of all the older generation are from Toishan

OL: Yea, yea.

AF: All the new ones are mostly from the Northern part. That's why all these Tse and all those different names

OL: Mm hmm, yea I know. Wow. (daughter showing me more family trees) I wish I knew how to read Chinese

AF: Yea sometimes I do too, when I go to restaurants

OL: I went to Chinese school for like a summer.

AF: A summer? I went over 10 years! And I didn't learn nothing. When I was a kid, after school, you got to go American school in the morning and Chinese school in the afternoon. So afternoon what you do is go to school, so you sit there and you learn and the you just go play all the time, most of the time, you know.

OL: Do you remember if there were many other people with you on the ship?

AF: Uhh, that, I couldn't tell you that, other than I'm pretty sure it was probably loaded. It was when Japan invaded China, so I'm sure a lot of people trying to get out of China at the time.

OL: Yea. Do you remember when you arrived?

AF: I couldn't tell you that either. All I know is...you don't pay attention to those things when you're little you know?

OL: Yea. Do you remember, like, any of the buildings or when you just got off the ship or anything like that?

AF: No, I don't remember anything. Actually, I don't remember too much of those things. I only play around those days. All I remember is when I...I can't really remember when it was. Before, I guess I was playing at the dock I remember I got hurt on my hand, I got a band on my hand. That's all I can remember.

OL: Uh huh. Ok.

AF: I told the girl I don't have much of a history you know or memories.

OL: Do you remember actually staying there?

AF: A little bit but, not much

OL: A little bit? Do you remember right when you got there, where they brought you or if you went straight into...

AF: All I know is I was following my mom you know.

OL: Were you separated at all when you got there?

AF: I don't think so, I can't remember that either.

OL: You don't think so?

AF: I don't think I was.

OL: And do you remember where you slept?

AF: Well I can't tell you that either. All I know is what I just told you and when I got off of there I went, I had some friends of the family. We stayed there and visited for a while. Clay street is all I remember. Right off of Stockton Street.

OL: Oh ok. You don't remember anything actually about Angel Island?

AF: No, other than when I visited myself a couple times...and the dock. That's all I remember.

OL: You just remember playing on the dock?

AF: Yea. I guess we were playing or something, whatever it was.

OL: Do you kind of remember if you stayed there for a long time or a short time?

AF: Actually, vaguely, I think I got off and went to San Francisco, in August

OL: In August?

AF: I stayed there for a month or two, I did.

OL: A month or two? Do you remember where you ate and stuff?

AF: Well, I couldn't tell you that either. Actually I don't have no memories of those things. I can't remember going to school back then in the thirties, thirties and forties. Other than a few teachers, I remember their names, other than that...time goes by and you don't think of those things.

OL: So when you went to visit, did anything kind of look familiar?

AF: Yea kinda familiar, but not that you know?

OL: Like do you remember when you went in, where you slept? Where you kind of played?

AF: I remember vaguely, but to be exact, I couldn't tell ya. Other than being in the barracks.

OL: Do you remember the barracks at all?

AF: No. other than what you guys send me in the newsletters (laughing)

OL: So there were a lot of other kids with you since you had a lot of friends

AF: Yes there was, all we did was play around you know. That's all kids do around those days. What else can you do around there?

OL: So, umm, do you remember, like, did you sleep with your mom? Like the same room?

AF: I couldn't tell you that either. I said I didn't have too many memories of that place. I just kind of wiped it out some how.

OL: Do you think you don't remember because you didn't want to remember or you just kind of...it just kind of passed?

AF: Just kind of passed with everything. There's nothing I don't want to remember. I've always been like that my whole life. I don't hang on to things. Good or bad, I don't think about it too much. Once it's over, I don't think about it.

OL: Mm Hmm. Well it's been a long time.

AF: Yea. Too be exact, 68 years.

OL: Yea, and you visited

AF: I've been to Angel Island, a couple or few times. My daughter and her family, her in-law family, they go there every year on Mother's day. I don't know why, but they go there all the time. Actually, they told me to go this year but I didn't want to go.

OL: Oh, you didn't want to go?

AF: I've already been there 2 or 3 times. What more can you do? I wouldn't. What's there to see? You've seen it once or twice. Unless you get the building remodeled, you know, renovated, I don't mind going back. Other than that, all you see is less than half of the buildings. A matter of fact, last trip I went there, I took the tour around the thing. I saw all those buildings and everything. What's there to see? You see it everyday here, why go to Angel Island to see those things? Not that it brings bad memories 'cause I don't remember that much over there.

OL: So when you were there, you kind of remember it but....

AF: I kind of remembered it, kind of looked things over you know, see what it's like you know.

OL: You kind of remembered like the barracks and the bathrooms..

AF: Yea, but well I couldn't tell you about the bathrooms. (laughter) It's so long ago you know? 68 years is a long time to remember things.

OL: Do you remember when you finally left Angel Island?

AF: That I couldn't tell you the exact date or anything other than I know is it's September is all I can tell you.

OL: So was it just one day, your mom just told you "Let's go"?

AF: Yea, we just went over there. I guess family friends took us over, this friend of ours was a import/exporter on Clay street and we went over to his place for a while and then visited. I don't know how long we stayed over there. I think my dad came to get us that same day or next day. It has to be the same because there's no way we stayed over there, this guy's place. Matter of fact, actually my family, other, my uh...cousins from Colusa, they're under Lee too. Somehow they got the Lee name from same people, same village. We changed our surname to

Fong and they left their names as Lee 'cause my uncle had too many business and too many family in Lee names, so they just kept their name Lee.

OL: Oh ok..I see. I think a lot of people do that.

AF: Yea, well you got a lot of business why you go through all the trouble to change all your paperwork. Which I have, you got tell the court to change your name all kinds of stuff.

OL: Yea, it's a lot of work.

AF: It is. You have to hire a lawyer too I think. (laughter)

OL: Um, let's see, anything you remember will help you know? Do you think it had any effect on you?

AF: Well, not really. Just actually that the kind of hate the law at the time you know. Until today I hate the law, the Exclusion Act. Only Europeans come here, why you have to do to the Asians. You know, we made your country rich? Build the railroad and gold mining? That's not right. That's one thing I got against it. That's why I hate the Democrats for one thing. Them being for the Hearst. Hearst and couple other people, rich people. They're the one that create the situation. And that's not right. When they need you, they want you. When they don't need you, forget it.

OL: So when did you realize what Angel Island was? 'Cause you know how you said when you were a child you didn't really realize what was going on.

AF: No I didn't realize it until actually, later in life. Like 19...I guess late sixties or seventies whatever it was, found out about the Exclusion Act. I think I can remember reading about it in the paper. I might have read about it in grammar school but I just don't think about it at the time. You think about it, I mean, what the heck? I mean what, you know, after a while you can't help but feel that way. Why is it that other nationalities, they can come over here? They didn't have no Exclusion Act. Only say...what do you call the word? What's the word they use? You know the word, you go to school.

OL: Um..I don't know.

AF: You go back there you get persecuted. Yea I mean persecuted. 'Cause if you're a Nationalist you go back to China, the Communist China, you're going to be persecuted. But I can use the same word anyway, I might be a Communist and you say I'm a Nationalist so I can come to USA. You have no proof to say you're not one way or the other. Words don't mean nothing. You could say it, but it don't mean nothing. What you believe in and what counts is in

your heart. That's one thing that I kind of...I've been rambling, but I can ramble on about this, about all this immigration stuff you know. Why all the Mexicans come over here and cause all this trouble? They are, in a way, they are good to society, yet they're not. I explain to my way of thinking is, sure they earn ten, twenty thousand dollars. They spend most of the money home, ok, when they file income tax, they get most income tax back anyway. What do they put to the country, other than doing the work? So what they earn, they get back in income tax. Send them back to Mexico, wherever they come from. I don't think that's right. To me, 'cause Chinese people been picked on all these years, all Asians, not just the Chinese, almost all Asians. And that's why I hate this Exclusion Act, you know. It's all kind of politics.

OL: Yea, the politics. So where, do you remember, where did you moved to after you came here?

AF: Actually I moved here in 1937, I landed in 629 East Church Street Stockton California. That's where I stayed until I graduated from high school. 1949, June 1949. From 1949 I went up to Weaverville, the other side of Redding. I stayed there about a year. I went to Colusa for a while, I stayed there about 6 months to a year. Then I went back to Weaverville and I came back to Yuba City in 1952 and there I've been.

OL: Yea?

AF: Yea.

OL: How many children do you have?

AF: I got 5. 2 boys and 3 girls. She's (daughter who lives there) my middle daughter.

OL: That's nice. What did you do?

AF: I retired from the grocery business. In those days all you did was either grocery business, laundry, or what else can you do? Groceryman that's all you do. Most is all family business other than you yourself go into the laundry business by yourself. Mostly those days, we had a good size family you know. My uncle knew a lot of people and associations and they came together and created partnerships for all these stores.

OL: Oh wow, that's great

AF: One time, I, myself associated with 3 stores in the Yuba City area, my uncle in Colusa, but he's associated in about 10, 15, 20 stores.

OL: Wow, that's cool.

AF: Most stores here in Sacramento. There's 6, 7 in Sacramento. They had one in Petaluma, they had a Napa store, they got Auburn, they got all over the place around here. I ain't got nothing to do with it, I just happened to have relation. Matter of fact, one of my cousin live in Sacramento. His name is Lee too. See my name, Lee Tung Tai...uh I don't know what his American name is. He use the name Lee. Oh Lee Tung Leung and my name is Lee Tung Tai. I think half of the river come from that tide...the Lee family. I remember my paper father at the time. I met him twice, 2, 3 times. Ever since I got off Angel Island, I think I saw him once or twice after that, I never see him again, saw who he is.

OL: Was he a friend of the family? Or was he related?

AF: No, only way a family friend was that so happened that somebody know him that he got a passport or whatever you call it for a paper son or what you call those days, and we bought it from him.

OL: And you only met him once?

AF: Yea, I met him 2 or 3 times while we were in San Francisco and so forth to get the things ironed out, you know. Make sure everything was in order. So nothing go wrong after that. Make sure you got the story right so immigration won't go after you. You know, that's all it was. Other than that, I can't remember the guy.

OL: So you remember having a book that....

AF: Yea we had a book that my mom had to learn. I was a little small book about half this size (motioning with hands) maybe about 20, 30, 50 pages. It was all handwriting and my mom had to learn all that. Since I was so small, I didn't have to learn those things. Just follow my mom, hang on to her shirt tails, that's all it is you know. I just sat there, whatever it was. You make one mistake and in you go back, you go back to China. The only time is that the war already started so they couldn't ship you back. I don't think they could anyway.

OL: Do you remember her first interrogation?

AF: Nah, I couldn't tell you that either. I didn't remember any of those things.

OL: Because you weren't in the room with her right?

AF: I couldn't tell you that either. I might've been. I'm sure I was there. It don't make sense of me being elsewhere you know. Like I said, I couldn't tell you that. It's so long ago. I mean at the time I didn't think about it. Even when we came here off Angel Island, I didn't think about

it then. All you, when you're young like that, all you do is play around. You learn the country. I remember when I was little I used to go around the neighborhood. I couldn't speak a word of English.

OL: You said that after you came here, that's when you had more brothers and sisters?

AF: Yea, my brother born in 1938, he lives in Sacramento too. And then after that, he was born in 1938, my other born in '39, and so forth. Total 7 of us, one of us passed away in 1995.

OL: Um..let's see, do you think it's important for future generations to learn about Angel island?

AF: Well I think they should. It's past history, if you don't it carry on who's going to, there's nothing about China, there's family history. That's important part of your life, your past history, your family history, anyway. That's why she (daughter) kept all those papers that she showed you.

OL: Do you talk to them about it?

AF: No, not too much. I don't try to infringe on those things onto them. If one of them ask you, I'll do what I can. I don't make them learn those things. No use force feeding them things, you know. They want to ask about something, I tell them what I can. Other than that, I let the kids do what they want to do, to a degree. To a degree, I said, you know (laughing). I'm sure you understand right? You born in San Francisco?

OL: Mm hmm.

AF: Oh, born and raised there?

OL: Mm hmm.

AF: That's a nice place to visit. Matter of fact I was there 3 or 4 weeks ago, about a month ago I guess.

OL: Do you remember exactly where on Clay street?

AF: I remember exactly where on Clay street. I think it's right there...is there a St. Mary's Church right there on Stockton and Clay? Yea, it's about 2, 3 doors down.

OL: Oh wow.

AF: That I can tell you. You went there so many times you can remember those things. But you're on Angel Island couple of months, you know, you don't remember those things. 'Cause you're there period, it's stationary, but you go back and forth and visit you remember that easier. Just like you drive down highway, you come down here now you know how to get over here. First time you don't remember, you got to look for it. Yea I remember exactly where it is. About 2, 3 doors down from the St. Mary's school over there.

OL: Is there anything else you wanted to add?

AF: No, not too much really. Other than what I said, I mean I thought I had a good life. I know I met a lot of people. When I had the store, I met all kinds of people, you know, the old days. And sometimes I wonder about the old friends I met there in 30's and 40's. I don't know where they went to. That's the only thing, it's kind of sad. You came here in '37 and 1949, and you don't remember all those people and they're all gone. You don't know, at the time being a boy living there. Sometimes you like them you want to go back and find out where they're at. Not today, I'm talking about previously.

OL: You spent 2 months with them...

AF: Well I worked with those guys from '37 to '49 I'm sure I met, must be, 30, 40, 50 people there. I remember one Mexican guy that used to come up to work, his name Martinez, David Martinez. He's a short, stocky guy and he got married and moved to New York. I don't know what happened. I remember him really well because he used to open soda waters with his teeth. You know soda water caps? He opened it with his teeth. Those stupid things you remember you know.

OL: Oh, and where did you meet him?

AF: Oh, he worked for us at our store, fellow employee, and I was kid those days. I remembered the store itself. The store from 1937 til 1949. I can remember the store itself. I can visualize it still today, what it looks like and how it's situated. In those days you were allowed to have cats, old days you had flours in the bins and everything else in the bins and let you have cats. Now they don't let you, can't have those things no more. They get the mice and so forth you know. 'Cause those days everything come in a barrel or whatever it is like flour and wheat whatever it is and it's in a bin and you have the scoop. I remember the scoop, you used to scoop stuff in, I still got one at home.

OL: It's kind of sad how...

AF: It's sad how things changes

OL: Well ok, thank you.

AF: I'm sorry I don't have too much to tell ya, other than what I can remember which I can't remember much.

OL: That's ok, whatever helps.

AF: I'd like to go to one of these reunions back there. They have annual dinners. They're allowed to go back there, but I don't know when. I was going to go back there when they had it at Empress of China. I was going to go that one time, but it was too much trouble. Get dressed and all that. Forget it. I couldn't tell people what I know anyways, that's another reason why I didn't go there. They ask me "Do you remember this?" I don't remember those things, how do I know. Just kind of embarrassing, people ask you these things and you can't remember you know.

OL: Well, you were very young.

AF: That's not a good excuse either. 'Cause people remember things. They remember 2, 3 years old. I mean, I can't remember what it was. All I know is when I went to school in China we went through rice patties and I remember we got these leaches on my legs. Other than that I don't remember too much about China.

OL: You did go to school when you were in China?

AF: Oh yea, I did go to school. Actually every so often we got flooded. It used to always get flooded 'cause it was right next to the river. We had a two story house, so we had to go upstairs. Other than that, I couldn't tell you what else about it. I know that the family had a garden next to the house in the village. All relations live in the same village.

OL: Do you still have family there or..?

AF: The last I heard, I'm sure she passed away, is my uncle's wife, she must be over 100 by now, if she's alive but I don't think she is. Because my mom is still alive and she's born in 1907. She's what? 98? She still alive right now, but she's in a nursing home.

OL: Oh really? Really long life.

AF: Long life but really sad, straining there, you don't know what's going on.

OL: Do you go visit her often?

AF: Well I work for senior citizens before I retired back in '83, '84 and I work for senior citizen I worked for medicar for the senior citizen program and I see too many old people and I just...I took people to go see the doctor and so forth. I kind of burned out on that and I don't, I can't stand the sight of going to the hospital no more. Seeing sick people like that. It's so sad, you know. What makes it sad, 'cause a lot of people don't have a family. And some do have family and don't even visit them. That's the sad part. I shouldn't say though 'cause I don't really visit, I visit her every 3, 4 months or whatever. 'Cause I talk to her and she can't understand what I'm saying anyway. She just looks at you with a blank face. I think the majority of time, she's in bed. When I go it's either before lunch or after lunch. Either sleeping and after lunch she's sleeping anyway so...she's alive is the only thing good about it.

OL: Did you ever talk to her about Angel Island when you were younger?

AF: No, I never talk that much to my mom about those things. Actually, I don't talk too much about any of those things when I was younger. I don't ask about China or anything. My sister and my mom, she came here in late '40's, they can tell you anything about China. Younger days I mean, today my mom won't understand, but my sister can tell ya. She's living here in Sacramento too. Yea she went to school over there and came to the United States after war, you know, '47 or '48, 1947. She married a Lee too. A real Lee, I think. A real Lee I think!

OL: It's funny, how it's like, a real Lee or a fake Lee?

AF: Well it's a paper, paper name in those days. Is that you're real name, Leung?

OL: Yea.

AF: I know this kid, well he's not a kid, about same age as I am or older than I am. He's retired too and his name is Leung. He used to be a butcher, I knew him back there in Colusa, and then he came over here and worked at Marysville. See, I've been good friends with him all these years. Matter of fact I saw him few months back, I haven't seen him in a couple of years and I went back to visit him. It's nice to visit old friends.

OL: Yea, it is, ok, well thank you.

AF: My pleasure, like I said, I don't have much to tell you.