

EVENT

The Lee Family in America

By Foster Stockwell

The Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), located in New York City's Chinatown, is holding a unique exhibit of the distinguished Lee family, for which they have published an attractive fifty-four page brochure. It contains pictures of the artifacts and memorabilia of this family's experiences in America over a period from the late 1860s to the present.

The first of the Lees to come to the United States was Lee Ling, who came from the Sun Ning District of Taishan in Guangdong Province of China. He arrived in San Francisco in the late 1860s, probably with some relatives who helped build the Pacific section of the Transcontinental Railroad. Lee Ling, however, remained in San Francisco where he started a business selling Chinese herbs and merchandise. He was later joined by his wife, Chin Shee, and two sons who had been born in China. A third son was born in San Francisco.

The MOCA exhibit includes a genealogical document of the family tree that extends back to the 12th Century during the



Soong Dynasty. It was compiled by Lee On, the son who was born in San Francisco in 1874. Lee On thus became a U.S. citizen through birth, the first in the family line. When he was nine years old Lee On was taken by his parents back to their native village in China where he lived until he married at age eighteen. Lee On then returned to America, leaving a wife and son behind in China until he could become established in America. He settled in New York where he joined his two older brothers, who had remained in the States after the parents returned to China, to start a Chinese grocery in New York's Chinatown.

Because of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 no Chinese could own real estate and so the brothers rented the building for their grocery from an Italian landlord. They did not actually purchase the building until 1960, even though members of the Lee family had lived and worked in that building for more than seventy years.

In 1904 Lee On's son, then eleven years old, came from China to work in the family's grocery store. He took an American name, Harold, and applied himself to

getting a good education. His abilities resulted in his being accepted as a student at the prestigious boy's preparatory school, Mount Herman in Massachusetts. But he had to withdraw after just one semester because of a serious respiratory illness.

Meanwhile the grocery store added Chinese merchandise to its inventory. The brothers would later expand the enterprise to sell artwork, ceramics, and silks. Lee On himself, because he was an American citizen, was able to periodically go to China to acquire goods for sale in the store.

However, on one occasion in 1899 when as he returned to New York by way of Canada, he was arrested and held for a month and a half by immigration officials in Richland, Vermont. They intensively questioned his citizenship and merchant status. Only after his father, Lee Ling, arrived with his birth records and identity cards was Lee On released and allowed to enter the States and return to New York.

As Harold Lee grew to manhood he proved to be most enterprising. He opened a foreign exchange office to remit currency to and from China, as well as a Chinese film exchange to import Chinese films. Another member of the Lee family opened a highly-successful travel agency, while still another opened the Tai Lung Curio Shop in the space formerly housing the grocery store.

The brochure is filled with family pictures of many generations, and there are short sections on some of the accomplishments of various family members. One of the Lees has become a well-known movie production designer, another is a movie and television executive, and still another was awarded a Bronze Star for his bravery during World War II.

In 2013 the Lee family was able to celebrate 125 years of successful business in New York's Chinatown, with all their various enterprises still centered at the original New York address, 31 Pell Street.

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Foster Stockwell grew up in China (12 years) first in Fujian Province and then in Szechuan Province (city of Chengdu) as the son of American missionaries. Returned to the U.S. just before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941. After completing college, became a writer and editor working for various magazine, newspaper, and book publishers. For 20 years was a senior editor for World Book Encyclopedia in Chicago, and for 10 years was the publishing director for China Books and Periodicals in San Francisco. Has written six published books, two of which are about China, (Religion in China Today, and Westerners in China) and has traveled to China more than 15 times over the past 25 years, working as a polisher and consultant for the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing. Now retired and living in Des Moines, Washington.