

BOOK REVIEW

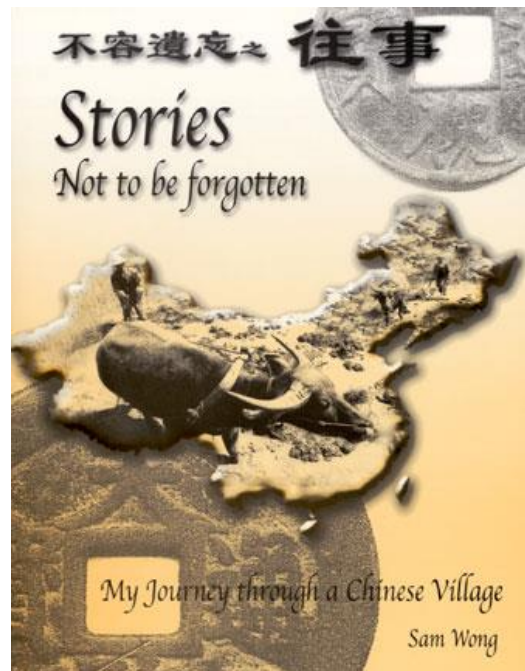
Stories Not to be Forgotten

by Betty Lock

Stories Not to be Forgotten is a homemade book; eclectic and written as one memory pushes aside another and is written down. It recalls life lived in a rural village, the history of family from a life time ago. It is written from the perspective of someone who now has a chance to think about and rethink what is important to leave behind for “my children and others like them”. Sam Wong wrote this homemade book for his children so that they will know his journey and those of others within the United States. It is about Sam Wong’s “Journey through a Chinese Village” and becoming a Chinese American.

The book is laid out in two parts. The first part is a factually researched history lesson that weaves China’s history with the Wong family history into the story. It is also based upon the stories and customs carried forward by Mr. Wong’s ancestors and his recollections of family life in China. The chapter on old Cantonese customs and celebrations is especially interesting to American born Chinese whose ancestors are from Guangdong since many Chinese American families still maintain many of the traditions in the United States. This also can serve as a cultural lesson for those who are second and third generation Chinese Americans who no longer remember these traditions and customs.

One such custom discussed is the Dragon Boat Festival. This festival commemorates a poet and statesman named Qu Yuan, during the Warring States period of China’s history (403-221 BC). Qu Yuan realized that the Kingdom of Chu was in peril of being captured by stronger neighboring kingdoms and asked his king to take action. The King disregarded Qu Yuan’s advice. Fearing the worse, Qu Yuan took his own life by



jumping into the Miluo River. Local people learned of the suicide and took to their boats to try to save him. To lure fish and crabs away from his body, the people tossed sweet rice wrapped in bamboo leaves into the river. May 5th of the lunar calendar is set aside each year to celebrate Qu Yuan’s attempt to save the Kingdom of Chu. The commemoration includes Dragon boat races and eating the bamboo leaf wrapped rice with nuts, salty duck egg yolk and pork. This special food takes weeks of advance preparation and traditionally women in a village work together to produce the commemorate food.

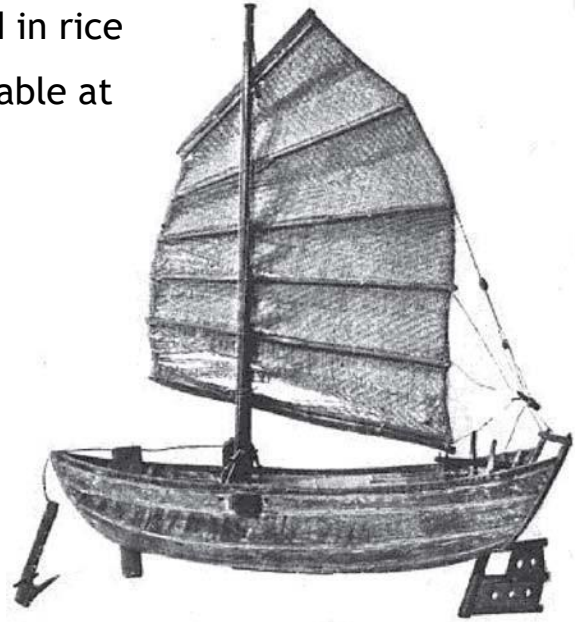
The book traces the steps of the first Chinese workers to come to America. Virtually all of them were from four neighboring counties and all spoke the same dialect called the “four-county dialect”. Business was conducted in this dialect prior to World War II in all Chinatown throughout the United States. These workers were from primarily poor families who worked in the United States to send money to support their families back in China. They worked as laborers, gardeners, house boys, and restaurant workers. In the 1960s, refugees from Hong Kong immigrated to the United States. They spoke the Cantonese

School tuition in Taishan City was paid in rice rather than currency, which was unstable at the time.

dialect; this continues to be the prevalent dialect of Chinese merchants. The last wave of Chinese immigrants was from Taiwan and mainland China during the 1980s. They brought with them the Mandarin dialect, the national language of China.

The book provides enough detail about the daily life in a Chinese village that even American-born Chinese can imagine the daily lives of their Chinese ancestors. It describes how village houses are laid out and built; even the details about door locking mechanisms. It details the work of the various seasons and the chores that are completed by each household member.

The second part of the book deals mainly with Sam Wong's move away from the village and his integration into American society. He tells about the Japanese invasion of Taishan City in June 1944 and how it affected his family when the Japanese soldiers entered the village to confiscate their food and supplies. He details how school tuition in Taishan City was paid in rice rather than currency, which was unstable at the time. However, there were often rice crop failures in during drought years since villages up river would divert the water to their rice fields, leaving little or none for downstream inhabitants.



Sam Wong's integration into American life is cushioned by his love for education and his goal of becoming an electrical engineer. He achieved that and worked for the U.S. Navy in the Electrical Systems Branch retiring in the summer of 1993. Since that time, Sam Wong has contributed numerous hours as a volunteer to organizations such as the Organization of Chinese Americans.

Finally, Sam Wong notes in his epilogue: "It has been said, "to forget the past is to rob the future. This year (2005) marks the 60th anniversary of the end of the Sino-Japanese War. I hope that my story will help Chinese Americans in the United States remember this period in history." Yes, indeed it has.

###

Betty Lock grew up in Seattle and graduated from Cleveland High School and the University of Washington. Her parents were a part of the early wave of immigrants from the Taishan area of Southeast China. She currently works for the U.S. Department Housing and Urban Development where she manages and evaluates housing and community development grants for tribal entities in Idaho, Oregon and Washington States. Betty's board membership experiences include six years of service with the Chinese Information and Service Center and two years of service with Seattle Mental Health. She sees the opportunity to contribute and serve the Chinese community in Seattle and other cities by belonging to the Organization of Chinese Americans, Greater Seattle Chapter.