

## ***“Chatham Square”-Gateway to NYC Chinatown’s “Restaurant Row”--1950’s***

While sitting on the stunning picturesque shore of beautiful Lake Winnepesaukee here in New Hampshire capped by the natural beauty of the White Mountain scenery in the distant background, my visiting college fraternity brother from Palo Alto, California, Richie and I started talking about the neighborhood I grew up in New York City.

The neighborhood was Chinatown located in New York City's lower East side of Manhattan Island. Simply stated: It was an amazing and interesting neighborhood.

- It was amazing because of the transformation of the old Five Points area which was a slum & crime infested run-down neighborhood. Gradually, the Chinese built a safe Chinatown neighborhood with many business enterprises featuring some of the finest restaurants in Cantonese Chinese cuisine. And the children, through high academic achievements, turned the local public schools into feeder schools for New York City's top specialized academic high schools. College education followed which led to entry into professional, vocational, and business fields based on an intense drive & determination to succeed in a competitive world.
- It was interesting because of the peoples' determination to survive in the United States and the challenges that had to be overcome to be accepted and finally assimilated into American society.

### **Formation of New York City’s Amazing & Interesting Chinatown:**

An overview of historical events will provide a perspective on the formation of Chinatown(s) in the USA since there was racial discrimination and bias against Chinese which made it difficult to assimilate into American society with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, followed by America’s fear with the threat of a perceived “Yellow Peril”. By necessity, for the common interest of safety, shelter, security, food, financial, and social well-being, the Chinese people clustered together in Chinatown(s). In these enclaves, the strength of our family unit led to the continuation of family associations; people from the same region of China formed their own associations; and the Chinese business associations which are all based in Chinatown. These associations provided a central place for people to spend time together to socialize and catch up on the latest news and events with other families and friends. *A genuine feeling of belonging, safety, and social connections in times of needs or emergencies.*

The Chinese did not embrace victimology or victim-hood but instead went out and did something about racial discrimination by securing a quality education and hard work broke down the “racial barriers of entry” into the social, professional & economic world.

Growing up in New York City's Chinatown in the 40's, 50's & 60's was tough for the 1<sup>st</sup> generation American Born Chinese (“ABC”) and added a special meaning to the phrase “*Street Smart*” since there was a lot of racial bias in the surrounding neighborhoods. Chinatown back then had a border on the Bowery from Canal St. to Chatham Square wrapping around Worth and Mulberry & Mott Street (s) back to Canal St. The streets in Chinatown were Mott, Pell, Doyers, Park, Bayard, and Elizabeth Streets. On the peripheral of Chinatown were Forsyth, Chrystie, Eldridge, Allen, Market, Division, East Broadway, Henry, Madison, Monroe, Catherine, Oliver Street(s) and St. James Place. Chatham Square was like a steel jungle with 9 streets entering it from different directions and many steel pillars supporting the elevated structure which blocked out the natural light for pedestrians & field of view (FOV) for cars resulting in a very dangerous intersection.

At one time, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave Elevated Subway rumbled above the streets to the two Chatham Square Stations which served as a busy transfer junction point with two super structural tracks/station levels of elevation above the street before the “*City Hall*” line turned into Park Row on the lower level to go South to the City Hall terminal and on the upper level the “*South Ferry*” line continued South through the financial district to the South Ferry terminal at the bottom tip of Manhattan Island. In order for the kids and pedestrians from the peripheral streets to get to Chinatown, they had to navigate through a maze of steel structures under the elevated 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. subway, street trollies & trolley tracks, and motor vehicular traffic, all at the same time. Fortunately, there was an above ground cross-walk covering the length of the two stations above Chatham Square from East Broadway to Mott St. which provided a safer walkway for the kids & pedestrians to use in bad weather.

Once you arrived at the Chatham Square station, which was the gateway to Chinatown in the pre-1960 days, before the City demolished the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. subway elevated line, you can look down Mott St. with all the neon signs lighting up Chinatown. One might think of Mott St. as “*Restaurant Row*” with the best Cantonese Chinese cuisine on the East Coast, if not in the United States. The beautiful unique architectural design of the Port Arthur restaurant greets you on the West side of Mott St. followed by Lichee Wan and Ting Yat Sak restaurants with their large bright neon signs. On the East side of Mott St. starting with the Canton followed by 3 Star, 10 Grand, Yat Bun Sing, China Lane, and Tai Yen Low with the largest advertising neon sign at 22 Mott St. Continuing back on the West side of Mott St, after the Transfiguration Church and pass the large apartment building at 37 Mott St., one arrives at the stylish architectural design of the Pagoda restaurant, Rice Bowl, Rathskeller, followed by the Joy Luck and Golden Dragon which had a beautiful bright dragon neon sign in red & gold colors illuminating that part of Mott St. At the corner of Mott & Pell St is a big neon sign for Lee’s restaurant followed by Joy Garden and Quon Luck on the East side of Mott St. Back on Pell St, the restaurants were Lee’s, Pacific, 22 Club, Wo Ping, and Bo Bo’s with their colorful bright neon signs. Canal St. featured a new Taiwan restaurant with a bright neon sign lighting up the area.

These larger fancy and more formal restaurants were where banquets & parties were held for all different occasions such as wedding reception dinners; baby red egg day celebrations; baby showers; typical family association dinners; business association meetings & dinners; significant birthdays (60,70, 80...); and many other social functions.

The next tier of restaurants were the smaller and casual type restaurants serving a large variety of noodle and rice dishes where the waiters may just wear an apron instead of a waiter’s jacket and bow tie. In addition to lunch or dinner was the Chinese post-midnight snack of either noodles or rice known as “*Seow Yeah*”

After a long day, a party, a dance, a movie, a date, or quality time with friends, “*Seow Yeah*” sounds like a welcomed snack before retiring. This little snack could be an order of noodles on a platter with your choice of meat or seafood and vegetable cooked with your favorite sauce. Noodles can also be served in a soup with your favorite selection of ingredients to your taste. Rice dishes are steaming rice on a platter with your selected topping of meat, seafood, & vegetable in a sauce of your choice. A large variety of food selections written only in a Chinese menu was posted on the wall at restaurants that specialize in this type of service. Popular among the noodles and rice restaurants for “*Seow Yeah*” were Hong Fat, Hong Hing, Sam Wo, Chungking and Wor Hop on Mott St.; New Lin Heung on Bayard St.; Sugar Bowl and Sun Sun on Pell St. and Hop Kee on the curve on Doyers St...When did we ever sleep?

Now for the delight of yummy delights, *Yum Cha--“Dim Sum” A Cantonese gourmet’s delight*. Remember the casual bakery and tea houses like Nom Wah on Doyers St. and Tung Kee on Chatham Square serving Dim Sum-- Shao Mai, Har Gow, Shrimp or Beef rolled in Foon, Char Sue & Steam Pork Bows, Egg Custard Tarts and many other tasty pastries; whereas: the more formal lunch time Yum Cha & Dim Sum were served at restaurants like Lee’s, Pagoda, and Port Arthur. As Dim Sum grew in popularity, many smaller innovative coffee Shoppes’ and bakeries were opened serving yummy Dim Sum and various types of savory specialties at competitive valued prices for us to enjoy. The ever-popular *“Dim Sum Lunch”* evolved into a *“Dim Sum Brunch”* over time. What other ethnic or world cuisine can be sampled from such a large variety of delicious Dim Sum dishes and assorted pastries at a reasonable price? *The wonders of “Dim Sum” literally means: “to point to the heart’s desire”. A Cantonese gourmet’s delight... indeed...*

*“Lonnie’s Coffee Shoppe opened in 1953”*. An instant success and a convenience nice meeting place for the high school, college, and young adult age groups to hang out and enjoy American food on the corner of Mott and Park St. The menu was simple and different with hamburgers, sandwiches, juices, sodas, ice cream, pastries, and coffee. Anyone interested in a Lime Rickey or Egg Cream with NYC’s one & only world-famous Sutter’s Pastries? *Just yummy & a little tease...for the sweet tooth among us....*

*In essence, Chinatown’s “Restaurant Row” covers you 24/7 if you are ever in need of a meal at any time, day or night, and the selection of a restaurant type & tasty dishes are always intriguing since there are many varieties to choose from on the extensive menus.*

In this close knit-ethnic community, there were many large families with 5-8 children. However, this small community was like an island to itself in that it was a big tourist attraction with many gift shops, excellent restaurants, fine bakeries & coffee shops, tea houses, rice & noodle shops, Chinese & American grocery stores with everything you need, candy stores & soda fountains, several drug stores & the Chinatown Pharmacy, Buddhist Temples, Christian Churches, and the smallest US Post Office in the USA. In addition, there was a Chinese opera, Chinese movie theaters, daily Chinese newspapers & weekly magazines with domestic & international distributions. Chinatown was known as a very safe area where many restaurants were opened all night catering to people who came down to Chinatown from uptown after the theater, opera, movies, parties, and nearby Greenwich Village to eat at all hours until early dawn. The neighborhoods around Chinatown were “Little Italy” & “SOHO” North of Canal Street; “Tribeca” to the West; the various Italian and Jewish wards around the aforementioned peripheral streets; and the financial district, City Hall and the municipal, state, and federal courthouses to the South.

Living and growing up in Chinatown and the Lower East Side of Manhattan was like experiencing two different worlds at the same time depending on the time of day and where you were at the moment. At home we spoke Chinese and in American school we spoke English from 9am to 3pm. Chinese school was from 5pm to 7pm where we were taught our lessons in Chinese and spoke only Chinese to the teachers. Everyone at the neighborhood public library on East Broadway spoke English where many of the kids studied and did their homework since there was limited space in their apartments and too many people around. As we got older, there were many family chores & tasks and even part time jobs to add to the busy day.

In spite of our busy schedules, we grew up very fast and had personal responsibilities at a younger age, both mentally and physically, to help out with all family matters. Through

all these rough & difficult times, most of the kids exhibited a mental toughness and were keyed into an educational academic achievement environment based on competing with each other and our Caucasian classmates which was a great sustaining motivator to succeed in life. The end result was Chinatown produced an amazing large number of professionals; namely: doctors, dentist, lawyers, engineers, educators, accountants, pharmacists, bankers, ministers, architects, and PhD's in their respective fields of expertise. To put the timeline in perspective, the Chinese American population in the US was only app. 1% of the total US population in the 1950's.

Our small Chinatown community produced a large number of success stories with our share of entrepreneurs, businessmen, and professionals. The results are an indicator of our many blessings and how we successfully managed life's challenges to overcome adversity & discrimination to where we are today.

A classic example is New York City's 9 competitive specialized high schools where admittance is still by competitive examination only. The 3 top schools, Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and Brooklyn Tech, are populated by 65-75% Asians where the Asian population in New York City's public schools is only about 15%. When I attended Stuyvesant in the mid-50's, the student body was 75-80% Jewish. Today, Stuyvesant is still the top elite specialized high school and has earned world-wide recognition for excellence and remains the most selective of the 9 competitive schools with a 75% Asian student body.

*A few final words:*

*New York City Chinatown as a Center of Activity.....*Chinatown provided the *family and social connected infrastructure* for all the Chinese in the greater NY Metropolitan area as witnessed by the *busy family activities* on Sundays' and respective Family Associations' Banquets on successive Sundays' following the Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations and festivities in the 40's, 50's, and 60's. For young Chinese adults looking for a social setting and meeting new people, NYC's Chinatown was a *magnet for socials' and sports'* activities for kids and young adults from the NY Metropolitan area; Newark, NJ; Boston, MA; Philadelphia, PA; Washington, DC; several Midwestern states; and as far away as San Francisco & Los Angeles CA; and Toronto & Montreal, Canada. As a result, there were many relationships developed during these *socials' and sports'* events with *dating*, steady-couples, long lasting friendships, and even marriages for these young adults socializing in this amazing and interesting Chinatown community of the 40's, 50's & 60's.

The Chinatown 2020 Reunion will be the 10<sup>th</sup> one down memory lane since the initial 2002 reunion started by the late Donald Dick. Since 2002, they have been held biennially and successfully executed by Gladys Chin through 2012 when Richard (Dick) Chu has led & organized the last 3 reunions of 2014, 2016 & 2018. Over the years, many of the attendees have reacquainted with old friends and even met new ones at these reunions. By way of the extensive reunion data base, others have reconnected via the internet and telephone. We, in the NY Chinatown community, are forever grateful & appreciative of Don, Gladys, Dick, and their respective committee members' commitment & hard work to make these reunions a reality for us to reminisce a bit & enjoy each other's company. Thank You!

My simple thoughts on aging & experiences: "Across the Dimension of Age, nothing ever stays the same and time waits for no-one along the Age Continuum". Do Enjoy the Present (every moment of it) and Believe in the Future...while Celebrating the Past.

All the Best, Be Sharp, and Be in Good Health, our most Precious Asset  
Daniel (Danny) Lee, 01/25/20...Happy Chinese New Year of the Mouse, 4718

