

## *Chinatown Reunion 2002 Bulletin*

### **Summary:**

#### **The Mid 50's 1955-1959**

#### **The 60's 1960-1965**

**Life in Chinatown:** Youth, Education, Social Activities, Economics, Religion, Celebrations

Growing up in NYC's and Newark NJ's Chinatowns in the 50'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 bias and staying within your own turf was the environmental constraint of the time. NYC's Chinatown back then had a border on the Bowery from Canal St. to Chatham Square wrapping around Worth and Mulberry Streets back to Canal St. (At one time the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave El rumbled above the streets on the Bowery to Chatham Square before turning into Park Row to go down to City Hall or to South Ferry). The streets in Chinatown were Mott, Pell, Doyer, Park, Bayard, and Elizabeth Streets. On the peripheral of Chinatown were Forsyth, Chrystie, Division, Henry, East Broadway, Madison, Catherine, Oliver Street(s) and St. James Place.

In this close knit ethnic community were families with last names like Chin, Chu, Chun, Chung, Eng, Fong, Gee, Hong, Hom, Hor, Jack, Lau, Lai, Leong, Leung, Lee, Pon, Ming, Moy, Ng, Ong, Soo Hoo, Tom, Wong, Won, Wu, Yee, etc...A point to note here is that there were many large families with 5-8 children.

The nearby surrounding neighborhoods around Chinatown were “Little Italy”, north of Canal Street; the various Italian and Jewish wards around the aforementioned peripheral streets; and City Hall and the municipal, state, and federal courthouses to the south.

For good “Discount Shopping” in the 50's and 60's, there were merchant stores on Orchard, Allen, and Delancey Street(s) areas in the Jewish wards, where one's negotiating skill was put to the test to secure a good bargain. Today, we have Outlet Centers in the suburbs offering “alleged discount shopping” on name brands.

We grew up in difficult times with a perceived dual identity of Chinese and American roles depending on where you were at a given time or day like American public school during the day time and Chinese school in the evenings and who you were dealing with at

the moment. Everyone was kept busy from dawn to dusk with American and Chinese School schedules and homework. For many family members there were also a couple hours of work required to help with family finances. There were the crowded tenements above the stores where most of the families lived but there were also the larger buildings like 37 Mott and 44 Mulberry. Public schools were PS 23 and PS 130 for the Chinatown kids; whereas, PS 1 and PS 65 were for the kids living on the Chinatown peripheral streets.

Then there was the old Chinese School on Mott St (Survivor Course 101-broken windows and no heat). Some of us went to the old Chinese School before it was torn down and rebuilt as a Community Center and Chinese School (Ref: Al Leong's Photo CD). Parochial school was at the Transfiguration Roman Catholic Church where they had both American and Chinese Schools.

For recreation and ball games there were Columbus Park, Bridge Park, and Forsyth Park; and the gyms at True Light Lutheran Church, Transfiguration Roman Catholic Church, and Mariners Temple. During the summer, there was **Coney Island** with the world famous "Cyclone" and "Parachute" rides with swimming at the "Washington Baths" and Nathan's hot dogs. When we were able to drive, **Jones Beach** was the place with the white sand beaches and we concluded the day with a quiet beach party at night under the stars on the sand dunes. Many of the Chinatown families have homes or rentals in **Bradley Beach NJ** and "*Newark Ave.*" became "*Chinatown*" on the Jersey Shore during the summer months.

Since "**education**" was a major part of our lives and it was perceived as a critical discriminator for success in our adult life, a lot of attention was given to schools and possible career fields of study. For public high schools, the majority of the girls went to Washington Irving, Julia Richman, and Hunter; while, the boys went to Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Tech, Bronx Science, Haaren, and Seward Park. There were also the Catholic parochial high schools and other private schools for the families who could afford to pay the tuition and fees. During the 50's and 60's, engineering was the professional field in high demand and a large percentage of the young people pursued engineering as their career endeavor. Out of this 50's and 60's group also came a number of doctors, dentists, nurses, physicists, chemists, biologists, lawyers, accountants, investment brokers, salesman, businessman, teachers, social scientists, and entrepreneurs.

On the “**social scale**”, there was the **Ging Hawk Club** in the early 50’s (Ref: Al Leong’s Photo CD) followed by the **Four Seas Club** on 22 Pell Street; the **Jade Club** on 20 E. Broadway; and other smaller social clubs in the late 50’s and the 60’s. The Jaycees hosted the annual New Year’s Eve Dance Party in the early 60’s at the Commodore Hotel and in subsequent years at the St. George Hotel in Brooklyn, NY. Many of the larger dances were held at the Mac Burney YMCA on 23<sup>rd</sup> St. and major NYC hotels; college dances sponsored by the respective Chinese Student Societies were held at the City College(s), Columbia, and NYU; and church socials were held after basketball games at True Light Church (True Light boy’s and girl’s basketball teams “Daughters of China” (DOC)--Ref: Al Leong’s photo CD) and Mariners Temple.

The “Teen Hops” were held at the Transfiguration Church where many of the Chinatown teenagers were able to meet and socialize with teenagers from the other New York boroughs and New Jersey. Today, the Four Seas Club is continuing to hold their annual dinner in Chinatown during the month of July.

During the summer, everyone looked forward to the last Monday in July when the *Chinese American Restaurant Association* held its “**annual boat ride**” from **South Ferry** to **Bear Mountain** starting at 8am and returning at 11pm. Here was an opportunity to see old friends and meet new ones as there were all kinds of activities for people of all ages and it was truly a family outing with something for everyone to participate in from various games of chance; to dancing; to a table tennis contest; to a dance contest; to a food festival of great home cooked food; to just plain socializing and meeting new people on the boat; to a picnic and swimming at Bear Mountain; and to the return trip under moon light and dancing away the night were memories to remember and cherish.

Another summer event worth remembering was the “**Baby Contest**” held annually at Columbus Park with games, refreshments, and socializing followed by a serious softball game with a team from Philadelphia’s Chinatown. Some of you may remember being crowned *King* or *Queen* or being the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> runner-up at the Baby Contest?

Throughout the year there were many other social activities like the **Chinese Christian Youth Conference (CCYC)** who had summer and winter social/sport/church related long weekend retreats to Lake George NY and the Berkshires in Pittsfield MA. Other groups like the **Long Island Chinese Circle** had their social functions for many of the people that moved out to Long Island (Ref: Al Leong’s Photo CD).

While all these social activities were taking place during the 50's and 60's, there was a subtle social integration of young people evolving between the Chinatown crowds with guys and gals from all of the 5 boroughs, New Jersey, Long Island, Westchester, and cities like Boston, Philadelphia, Washington DC, Detroit, Chicago, San Francisco, and Toronto, Canada. With the increase in social opportunities and the young people's related *sphere of influence* spreading over a *larger demographic area*, there were many new relationships developed and even subsequent marriages that followed.

Making this social integration possible over the years were the many dynamic organizations like the Ging Hawks, Four Seas, Jades, CCYC, CCC, LI Chinese Circle, Churches, Newark NJ Groups, Chinese Student Societies, Jaycees, and others, which all served as *social conduits* for getting the young people together at parties, dances, sports' events, and various church activities for the necessary social interchange.

In addition to **Chinese New Year**, which was usually celebrated in January or February depending on the lunar calendar, the other big Chinese holiday which received a lot of attention was the *Chinese Independence Day* celebrated on *October 10<sup>th</sup>* or commonly known as "**Double Ten**". "Under the direction of progressive minded organizers in the mid 50's, the Chinatown community decided to initiate and participate in the **Miss Chinatown New York Contest** and to celebrate the "**Double Ten**" holiday with a grand parade consisting of a variety of sponsored imaginative parade floats hosted by beautiful contestants; Chinese School and True Light Marching Bands; Dragon Dance and Lion Dance; and dignitaries, both politicians and veterans' organizations marching and winding its way through the narrow streets of Chinatown (Ref: Al Leong's Photo CD).

**Miss Debbie Gong** from Queens, NY was crowned "**Miss Chinatown New York**". She served with a "touch of class" and was an excellent role model for subsequent beauty pageants.

Since **Latin American dancing** was the "*in craze*" at the time, a decision was made by the committee to have a dance contest in **Mambo, Cha Cha, Merengue, Rumba, and Samba** with a judging panel led by "Killer" Joe Pirro from the world famous **Palladium on Broadway**. Danny Lee from Chinatown and Carol Lee (Chinese-Cuban) from Cuba were fortunate and privileged to be the winning couple of these five Latin American Dance Contest competitions, as part of the "**Double Ten**" celebration festivities.

Here it is in **October 2002** and we are participating in a "**Chinatown Reunion**" of all

reunions in Las Vegas with various age groups that grew up in the Chinatown era of the 40's, 50's, & 60's. It has been a long journey for many of us from humble backgrounds and the difficult hard times encountered in the crowded streets of Chinatown. A large number of us have since relocated to Long Island, Westchester, New Jersey, Connecticut, Maryland, Virginia, California, and a number of the other great states.

Many of us are now professionals, highly educated, and making our mark in the business, scientific, engineering, medical, legal, financial, educational, social science, and vocational world. These accomplishments were made possible by sacrifices from our parents and families through years of hard work and with our own personal objective to succeed in our chosen endeavor. It was never easy as Asian Americans made up only **1-2%** of the population back then and today it has increased to about **4%** of the total population.

However, we should be proud of the fact that Asian Americans have exhibited the ***highest professional grouping*** per population ratio and a ***higher average salary percentage*** above the norm; the ***best universities and colleges*** from coast to coast have accepted us on ***merit*** and continue to maintain a high enrollment of Asian American students; and the ***top high schools*** in the nation which require ***competitive entrance exams*** in New York City, Boston, and San Francisco continue to have a high enrollment of Asian American students.

“USA Today” recently had a survey of the **20 top “USA Today” high school students in the nation** where 5 of them had scored a **perfect 1600** in the SATs of which **4 of them were Chinese American**. These statistics and facts speak well of Asian Americans in the United States and illustrates how far we have progressed since we still ***comprise only 4%*** of the total population. There are many more statistics and examples to highlight our economic and professional accomplishments through the years from the 50's and 60's to the present.

But for the moment, let us enjoy a great memorable reunion and the best of what Las Vegas has to offer, *among friends old and new* whom we may not have seen in years. The **“Best of Health”** to all and let us **“swing into action”** for the festivities and **“play”** as we always did back in the **50's and 60's**.

***Best Regards,***  
***Daniel (Danny) Lee***

*Division Street (1950's)*  
*New York City, New York*

*September 12, 2002....Chinese Year of the Horse, 4710*  
*Harris Preserve*  
*Nashua, New Hampshire*