

By: Jan Lee

A restaurant at 21 Mott St. was going through renovation. Two days ago they took away the exterior wall and found an old store sign of a coffee shop named "Lonnie's." The sign had a yellow background with green lettering. That original painted tin sign hung over Lonnie's Coffee Shoppe for nearly 30 years and it still looked great even after 50 years.

The coffee shop used to belong to my late Aunt Lonnie and thus the name "Lonnie's." Lonnie's was in business from 1956 to 1980 and was the only American style coffee shop in Chinatown. It sold hamburgers, pastries, ice cream, coffee and soda. Someone later bought it to open a Chinese restaurant.

Lonnie's was frequented by many Chinese-Americans and even the Italian-Americans from the local Transfiguration school next door. This was probably because it was a burger joint and the only one in Chinatown. Perhaps this is why, while the sign was still up this past week, dozens of Chinatown residents and passersby stopped to take photos under the sign.

A Chinese video crew from Sinovision was sent to 21 Mott St. to document the removal of the sign and suggested that the sign have a place of honor in the new restaurant that will be opening soon.

So Peter Wong, the owner of the new "U-Choose Express Noodle Shop" has arranged to have a "Chinatown History Wall" with the Lonnie's sign in the center surrounded by old photos of the place, the characters and the original residents of Chinatown.

After consulting with Lonnie's daughter, Pat and my immediate family, we got the go ahead to lend the sign to his restaurant so all of Chinatown, tourists and other New Yorkers can have a peek into our diverse past.

The "Lonnie's" sign will eventually be taken down and donated to a museum as part of the history of Chinatown.