

Kossman, S. E. (Juliet) Tape 1 of 1 5/2/00
By: Jennifer Mitchell

This is an interview of the Chinese in the Mississippi Delta. The interview is being recorded with Mrs. S. E. (Juliet) Kossman on May 2, 2000. The interviewer is Jennifer Mitchell.

JM: This is Jennifer Mitchell. It is May 2, 2000 working on the Mississippi Chinese Oral History Project. Today we are talking with Mrs. S. E. Kossman. She is going to tell us of their involvement with the Chinese community. Tell us a little bit about how you became involved with the Chinese community.

JK: Well it started when we came to Cleveland. Our business of course was across from Main Street. There was a Chinese grocery right across the street. You know how men like to drink Coca-Cola. He would go over there. He got to be friendly with them. Then we got to be friendly with the ones that were out in the color section, John Wong and his family. We just liked one another. We would visit in their home, and they would visit in ours. Because I got to liking them so much, and liking Chinese things, I went to Hong Kong.

JM: Oh wow, when did you go to Hong Kong?

JK: The first time I went to Hong Kong was in 1965.

JM: You have a beautiful home.

JK: Thank you.

JM: How many times have you been to Hong Kong?

JK: I would hate to tell you.

JM: (Laughter) Well you have too.

JK: About sixteen times.

JM: Oh wonderful

JK: People would say why do you want to go back, and I will say well I feel at home. I like it. There is always something to see.

JM: When did you and your husband move to Cleveland?

JK: 1941

JM: 1941, so when you all were here. You mentioned a little bit earlier about your children going to school together. So your children went to school after the Chinese community had integrated into the public school system?

JK: Yeah right

JM: Some of the ideas that have been expressed by some of the Chinese people is that after World War II when a lot of people had been to other places and seen other people and other things. Attitudes toward the Chinese and different other communities that were in the delta changed. There was a bit more open arm attitude than before.

JK: Right and I always have thought it was nice to know other people. See their different style of life than ours. They were such good people. Whenever there were a drought or anything, because they knew Ed liked Chinese. He was the one that would call them. They were always very generous about everything.

JM: Did you have opportunities to go to some of the weddings and funerals?

JK: Oh yeah

JM: Could you describe a wedding to me?

JK: I don't think I was ever at the wedding, but the banquet they had afterwards. They had wonderful food, and so many people you wouldn't believe it. I don't know how they ever got all that. That started me liking Chinese things.

JM: I know they would have nine course meals.

JK: Oh you just don't know.

JM: How long would the banquet last?

JK: It was just wonderful. Once you eat Chinese food, I don't know how you can not like it.

JM: Were there some delicacies or things that . . .

JK: Yeah, I have eaten Bird Nest Soup. That is a real delicacy. Then when I was in Hong Kong, this jewel that I had to patronized. They were always lovely to us. You always had tea for dinner and lunch or something like that. They took us to a place. Mr. Shin said, "You are always ready to try anything." He said, "Will you try something if I tell you about it." I said, "Well it all depends on what it is." I said, "what is it?" He said, "Snake soup." I said, "Yeah, I will try anything once." It was absolutely delicious. It was the most delicious thing I have ever tasted.

JM: Do you cook Chinese food too?

JK: No, I don't know how too. Poor John Wong tried to teach me. He didn't get very far.

JM: That is fine. Well did you ever attend any funerals?

JK: Yes, yes.

JM: What were they like?

JK: They are very much like ours. Only they gave you a coin as you went out. I don't know why that is. You were always given a coin.

JM: Yesterday at one of the interviews we had, they explained that to us. That is the first time that anybody had said anything about that. They said it was to represent the richness in your life for having known that person.

JK: Then when Joe Im, I think he was part owner in the modern food place, market. It was right next to Kamiens, I think. He decided he wanted to go into the import and export business mostly import. He asked Ed if he would go to New York, my husband Ed to help him get settled. He would always laughed and said, that he was the man with the shortest name. His last name was Im, and the Empire State building, the tallest building in the world.

JM: That is funny, you can't miss it. Something that I am curious about, this is probably before you all became involved with the community. Maybe you can tell, how did the Chinese community start to become a little bit more involved with the larger community? Was it with the collaborations with between some of the families?

JK: Well, I think at first. People you know are like well they are the Chinese. They stay over there, and we will stay over here. Some people when you get to know them. They are people just like all of us. When you get to be friends, you try to get them involved in the things that you are in. All they would have to do is just ask to them. They were glad to enter into everything.

JM: How do you think the Chinese community got so involved with the Baptist Church?

JK: I don't know. I often wondered why they chose that.

JM: Okay they chose the Baptist Church?

JK: Yeah, well I think maybe because it was because of the minister.

JM: They were welcomed to him. When was the Chinese school established, do you know?

JK: No I don't, and that was here when we came.

JM: It was still in operation when you came in '41.

JK: Yes

JM: So by the time, when were your children in school?

JK: Well, let me see they went to Delta State at first to Dem. School. That was a school where they went like a kindergarten.

JM: Oh and the Chinese went there?

JK: No, no Chinese were there. Then I know in high school they were together.

JM: Something that I wondered about, and I never really have asked them or never really thought to ask. There is a lot of documentation about violence with in and against the black community to maintain separation. Do you know if anything like that ever occurred to the Chinese community before people started to change their attitudes?

JK: I don't think there was any violence that I know of.

JM: I have not heard any.

JK: I have never have heard of anything.

JM: It seemed to me perhaps that they were very conscience of the structures, the social structures in the Delta and tried to maintain themselves with in that.

JK: Well they all had nice homes. They were people just like me.

JM: So most of the people that you know didn't live behind or above their stores?

JK: Yes some of them did.

JM: They were very nice. They were gracious kind.

JK: They were nice. Then well John Wong, they lived in the back of their store. Then they bought a home. It was a real nice home. Then let me see, it has been several years now. Their grandson got married. They moved to Houston. They called and asked us would we come to the wedding. So Chester and I went. I felt like I was treated just like royalty. They were so lovely to us. I saw Chinese people that I haven't seen in years that had moved away. It was like a homecoming.

JM: Did they have the banquets?

JK: They had the banquet. We asked where to stay. You know so where we wouldn't be too far from where we were supposed to go. Everything was different there. I thought that was lovely. We didn't want that. They said know that was there present. I had flowers to wear everything. Hotel room was taken care of. Everything, it was just. It made me feel bad though. I didn't want them to do that.

JM: So you enjoyed doing that.

JK: When you are their friend, there are no friends like them.

JM: Give me another example of that.

JK: Well when I went to China the first time. I went with the sister of a husband of Frances Wong. Do you know Frances Wong?

JM: Yes, we sure do. We interviewed her.

JK: She is one of the most wonderful people that I have ever known. Did you know that she walks all of the time, and she picks up Coca-Cola cans? Do you know how much she has given to her church selling cans?

JM: No

JK: Ten thousand dollars

JM: You are kidding.

JK: No I am not kidding.

JM: That is a lot of money and a lot of Coca-Cola cans, wow.

JK: She works up at the hospital. She volunteers. She does all kinds of wonderful things. You would never know it.

JM: She is very humble. She was the first or second person that I had an opportunity to interview. As you can imagine it was a wonderful experience

JK: She is so nice. I am crazy about Frances.

JM: She was a lot of fun. I am not surprised with anything that you are saying.

JK: She really is. I don't know how to say what I am trying to say. She embodies goodness to me.

JM: Do you find that is true of a lot of the Chinese friends you have?

JK: Yes, yes they are much nicer and more forgiving and outgoing than we are. I think. I guess they have been pushed down so much.

JM: Talk a little bit more about that. I kind of sensed that also with this just a depth of forgiveness. They have the lack of malice or something.

JK: I don't know. They just. When they do things, they do it from the heart. It seems to me. A lot of times we do things because we think we ought to, but not them. They are just good people. They have goodness. I wished I had some of it. No, I mean that. If you were sick, Frances would come in and stay with me if I was sick, and take care of me. I know she would. Her husband was so good such a nice man. This sister of his was the leader of a group. I went over to China with a Chinese group. It was four Americans. I wouldn't take anything for that. It was just wonderful.

JM: Were they from this wonderful?

JK: Oh no, they are mostly out in California.

JM: Where did you all go when you went to China?

JK: Oh I don't remember the places. They would try to give the few of us Americans, American food. I said, "I don't want that. I want to eat just what you are eating." We had some of the most peculiar things at the most peculiar times. It was great. We went to places that I don't think they would take an American group through years yet because it was very primitive.

JM: How do you mean primitive?

JK: Well I mean the hotel weren't like ours. It was so cold. I slept in my clothes and my coat. You didn't mind it because you were seeing things that you wouldn't have seen otherwise.

JM: What are some of the ways that people dealt with that coldness there in China? Did they drink a lot of hot liquids?

JK: Yeah hot tea that is the thing, and it does help too. I don't know. I look back on that, and I think what a wonderful experience that was.

JM: When was that?

JK: I don't know. I would have to go back and find all my notes. It has been a long time ago.

JM: Did your husband go with you also?

JK: No, he was dead. It was a wonderful trip. I am glad I went that way instead of going on an American tour.

JM: Sure

JK: Because you saw things that you didn't see otherwise. That was going to be a real good Chinese restaurant that we could go to.

JM: When did it open? How Joy from Greenville?

JK: Yes, I don't know how Ed got to know him, but he ask when he opened. He asked different people from all over the delta to come as their guest. You never saw such a thing. There was so much food so much stuff.

JM: Was that the first restaurant, first Chinese restaurant to open in the area?

JK: I think so. Now there were some in Memphis, and we went to that one a good bit. It was funny. I haven't seen the man that owned it for a long time. I was in a grocery store in Memphis. I said to my daughter, "That looks like Jack Wong." She said, "It sure does." I said, "Well I don't want to make a fool of myself." So I went up to the back of him, and I just said a kind of little "Jack Wong, I haven't seen you for years." He turned around and he said, "Ms. Kossman, what are you doing here?" We got to talking. He bought a car from Chester. He had always bought from my husband. I don't know it is just those people are so nice. I remember once we were in New York. Joe Im had a party. He owned a Chinese restaurant there too. He had all kind of artist that did stuff for newspapers and things. He had us all there one night. It was wonderful. I think the Chinese people here have done well and have been good citizens.

JM: How so, how have they been good citizens?

JK: Well they enter into anything less than for the good.

JM: What does the first memory of that sort of civil involvement?

JK: You know when they get up money. You know how they collect for different things for the town and for national stuff and all of that. They ask different people in town to take names.

JM: I wasn't aware of any of that.

JK: Well Edward would always be giving the Chinese mainly because they knew he knew us. They always responded. Always.

JM: I am not sure that I understand. So you are saying with the Chinese community would raise funds for different things?

JK: Well like he would go to see this John Wong. He would give him money. He would go see another one. They would donate just like we do. I don't know why they thought maybe they wouldn't, but all you had to do was ask.

JM: When did you notice Chinese restaurants starting to develop. I think when Chinese first came they were laborers.

JK: Yeah they worked on the farm.

JM: Then they involved into the Chinese stores.

JK: Then they had the grocery stores.

JM: When did they get to change grocery stores? Do you know?

JK: Well, when we first came here they had two or three stores in the colored section. Then John Wong had one on the main little Modern store. It had been there for years. Then he opened another smaller store.

JM: When you say modern store, what do you mean?

JK: That was a grocery store called a Modern Grocery Store next to Kamiens.

JM: Oh yes you mentioned that. Did they have the people standing behind the counter and get and retrieving the items that you needed?

JK: Yes

JM: When did the Modern Grocery Store close?

JK: Oh it has been close a good while. I am trying to think what is there now. I guess it may have been. Well it wouldn't have been where Jay's was. It was right in there. I remember during the war when things were hard to get. John Wong would wait there. He would come up to me with a very straight face and say, "Bananas?" and if I would have shake my head. He would run to the counter and gets some bananas for me. He didn't get a whole lot of stuff. They didn't put it out. So they were trying to see that there good customers got it.

JM: That is great, bananas. That is funny.

JK: I know it. I can see him right now.

JM: So would the Chinese stores have more of the things that were hard to come by than some of the other stores?

JK: I don't think so.

JM: A lot of the Chinese men went to the war?

JK: Oh I am sure some of them did.

JM: From different families, we help with the store?

JK: Yeah

JM: Back to the question that we didn't answer because I went to something else. When were the Chinese restaurants, when did they start to open?

JK: I don't remember when that was. Now the first real one that we had here was the Pagoda. I can remember when Sally and Jack when that first came. The little store on the corner by the college, Jack Chow owned that. He owned the grocery stores. He worked for him. Then they decided that they would open their restaurant. It was good. He was an excellent cook. She used to call me their mama. Sally was so good. She gave away more than she sold. They live in Memphis now.

JM: Their children are through with Delta State?

JK: Oh yeah, there children all have excellent jobs.

JM: What is the youngest ones name? She was a

JK: Eva

JM: Eva, okay she is also in Memphis, or is she somewhere else?

JK: No, yes Eva is in Memphis. One is in Monroe. I can't remember their names now.

JM: Is there a much noticeably smaller population of Chinese people here in the Delta?

JK: Yes, I think so. Now there are two more restaurants here now.

JM: Now

JK: Smaller restaurants.

JM: They are also, well I think they are pretty good.

JK: Yeah, I have been to both of them. Of course they are not the size of the other ones, but their food is excellent. Family means so much to the Chinese people. They take care of their family. They don't put old people in homes. They take care of them. They think that is their privilege. When a daughter comes into home, she comes in as a daughter. It is just wonderful.

JM: You mean when a son married someone.

JK: Marries, yes

JM: So do they do that? Do they go? When a young Chinese couple gets married, do they go with their father's? Wait what am I trying to say.

JK: Go with the father's family?

JM: Yes

JK: Well, they try to have a home of their own.

JM: I mean go with the husbands?

JK: They are a family. You know how Americans are. They fuss and carry on a lot. I don't think they do as much.

JM: How many generations can you find within a Chinese home? Like three generations?

JK: I think nowadays they don't do as much as they used to. They are getting too Americanized unfortunately.

JM: Right

JK: I don't know two maybe and sometimes part of the third generation. Now they all have their own homes like we do.

JM: That is some of the two that we interviewed yesterday. That was pretty much what they expressed each generation has gotten more and more Americanized. One of the things that they

said that was the idea of the work. How their parents worked all the time. They never even thought about having a vacation or anything like that.

JK: No

JM: Then the generation that we were talking to, which would be the generation above me. They are going to Italy. They are looking forward to it. That is very different.

JK: Yes, and well I will tell you something else. Chinese children studied. They were always excellent scholars because it wasn't. They did what they were supposed to do.

JM: Why do you think that is so?

JK: Because I think they appreciated and getting to have a good education.

JM: Do you think that was instilled from their parents?

JK: Yes because I don't think their parents had the education they have. They didn't have the opportunity. You will find nearly all Chinese students are smart.

JM: They are excellers.

JK: I am not kidding you. That is true.

JM: So the Chinese generation that owned the grocery stores were not educated people?

JK: I wouldn't say they were real educated.

JM: They certainly ran the store very good.

JK: But they knew how to run that store.

JM: Well what about men and women? It seems like women did a lot of business work?

JK: Yes

JM: Was there any other distinctions like that?

JK: No, the men and women both worked. I mean they didn't have anybody to take care of their family. If something happened, we always had family to call on. A lot of them came over, and their family was still in China. So they had to work.

JM: Did people express some interest in going back to China, or did they express interest in staying here? Or did they even they say?

JK: Well now Frances Wong is going to Hong Kong this summer. She is real excited about going back.

JM: Has she been back before?

JK: Oh yes, but she is real excited about this. Did you talk to her at all about this?

JM: We did, it was like in February or January some time ago. I can't remember what she said about that. I think I remember her talking about going back to her home like her roots where her family. Some people have talked about that whether or not the home the original home was still standing. Have you had an opportunity? Well I think a lot of Chinese that are here came from Canton. Have you had an opportunity to go there?

JK: I have been to Canton, yeah.

JM: The reason I ask is, one of the things that someone said about the banquets, wedding banquets, that the food in some ways sort of characterized where they came from in China.

JK: What they would have to serve you mean?

JM: Fay Dong for instance, came from a fishing village.

JK: They would have more fish than the person living inland.

JM: Right, did you see any parallels like that?

JK: No, I really didn't notice that.

JM: What is Canton like? Is it?

JK: It is just a big city.

JM: Okay, so it is an urban area? I had my mind that it was . . .

JK: Well it is out from Hong Kong. Hong Kong you can't believe the people it is so many.

JM: Is it an agricultural area?

JK: Out of Hong Kong is, but it is more crowded than New York City. It is an interesting place. It has been interesting to me to see how it has changed through the years.

JM: How has it changed?

JK: Well the Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong is the finest hotel in the world. The service is like nothing you ever saw in your life. On each floor there is what you call a houseboy. After you have been there a day. He knows you, and he knows your room. He speaks to you. He goes and opens the door for you. I mean, it is a beautiful hotel. They always had orchids in your room for you. Oh we paid for it I am sure. It was beautiful. It is so crowded. You just wouldn't believe.

JM: Are there as many cars and busses?

JK: Oh goodness yes, my son laughed and said. I took them all to Hong Kong one year, and he said, "You know what I would like to have. I would like to own all the neon lights in Hong Kong. I would be a billionaire."

JM: You can see them from ten miles away too.

JK: Right

JM: What about health related issues with Chinese? For instance, did when Chinese women have babies, did they go to the hospital? Did they have midwives?

JK: I don't know, but I will tell you one thing that did happen when we were in China. I took my daughter with me. She said, "Did the mosquitoes bother you last night?" I said, "No." The next night she said, "You still.?" I said, "There are no mosquitoes in this room?" I said, "What are you talking about?" She showed me all these whelps. I said, "I am calling the house doctor. That is not mosquito bites." So I called him. Of course he didn't speak English. Such a time did we have, so he showed them. He drew a picture of a shrimp.

JM: She was allergic to shrimp.

JK: She was allergic to seafood.

JM: That can be so horrible.

JK: So we were getting ready that morning we were getting ready to go to another place. So he called in an interpreter. He said, "Is it all right for me to give her a shot?" I said, "Yes." So he gave her a shot and gave her some medicine and told her what to do. I ask for the bill because we were leaving. It was thirty cents. That is what he charged. So I ask the interpreter, I said, "Is it all right if . . ." He was a doctor, I didn't want to do anything wrong. I said, "Is it all right if I leave him something." He said oh don't do that. He would lose face. Thirty cents.

JM: Are there things like that here in the Delta like he would lose face? Are their things like that?

JK: I imagine so among them. I don't think we would ever know.

JM: So were there sort of . . .

JK: I think they are more private than we are. I think they strictly tend to their own business not like we do. We but into things that are none of our business. As I say, a Chinese friend is the best friend in the world you can have. They are not just your friends in good times. They are there when you need them.

JM: Do you feel like there is sort of a sense of social control among and within the Chinese community?

JK: Well I think at first, I don't think there was as much mixing as there is now. I think you know how Americans just run into just go head low. I don't think they are like that. I don't think they want it to be, so they kind of held back. They are much more out going now.

JM: Oh okay, so this generation is more out going than the previous generation.

JK: Right

JM: When you say out going you mean?

JK: Mixing like, if they were invited to a party. Like on my 80th birthday, my children gave me a party. I wanted all my Chinese friends, and they came. It was just fine. I am trying to think.

JM: We are sort of looking at some of the things that you have here. The screen has the embroidery on either side.

JK: I don't know what that stands for. They have it to rotate. So you can see the back and front. You see that there is not difference.

JM: It is really lovely.

JK: This screen came from Japan. When my husband went out as National President of the Automobile Dealers, they said do you want something for yourself. Or would you want something that your wife would like? I said I want something that my wife would like. They gave us that. I have all the papers on it. It is from the seventeenth century.

JM: Wow

JK: They do not allow them out of Japan anymore. They are called national treasures. So I am very lucky to have that.

JM: It is beautiful.

JK: Even little ordinary things, they just make so beautiful.

JM: Do you see craftsmanship like that here?

JK: You mean do the Chinese do it?

JM: Yes

JK: No, I haven't seen any. In fact I haven't seen any Chinese embroider.

JM: Oh okay

JK: You want everything you see. It is terrible. That little pot over there. That is what they roll on the streets on rollers in Bangkok. They roll that. They have fire underneath that bottom part. They cook. They sell food on the street.

JM: Oh wow, I wouldn't have thought that.

JK: I saw it at somebody's house. I nearly had a fit over it. She was an American with it over there. She said, "Well hurry up, I will take you where you can get one." So we brought them on the plane with us. The back tables over there were wedding presents to my mother. So I did have a love for Chinese stuff way back yonder.

JM: I wonder how she, how somebody just gave that to her?

JK: Gave that to her as a wedding presents. The big vase on this end a Chinese gave it to my aunt in Greenville. When she died, her son gave it to me. ' Cause he knew I liked those kinds of things. The doll sitting on there. A Japanese friend brought on the plane with him from Japan for me.

JM: I guess he would have to. It looks very delicate.

JK: This chest, I have had it repainted. John Wong brought when he went over to get his wife. When he came back he brought some stuff. He brought that to us.

JM: Did people do that a lot? Did husbands have to go back and get their families?

JK: Yeah, they went back to get their wives or to get somebody there to marry.

JM: Oh so they would go back and marry somebody. Then they would come back to the states.

JK: Yeah

JM: What year was people doing that? When did people stop going back to China to retrieve family members or to have a wife?

JK: I don't think much of it was done after we came. Most of them here were all ready married.

JM: We talked a little bit about in Greenville, and your family in Greenville. They were involved with the Chinese community also?

JK: Yes, the Chinese people liked my cousin, Jerome Adams. He was a very well known lawyer. Any time that they had to have a lawyer. He was always their lawyer.

JM: What sort of things among the Chinese community, or just . . .

JK: I don't know just whenever they needed a lawyer. They would have him represent them. Mr. I don't know I guess he is Dr. Quon.

JM: Mr. Quon

JK: Mr. Quon was one of the first people to get the Kossman award at Delta State. I was pleased about that.

JM: He has been a lot of help on this project that we have been doing.

JK: He seems to be a very nice person.

JM: When did Chinese people start going to Delta State.

JK: I don't know. I remember we have gotten engaged. We came to Benoit to a ballgame. It was a baseball game. Ed saw Dr. Kethley there. I don't know if you remember him. That was before your time. I can hear him right now. He said, "Kethley, how is your school coming." He said, "Ed it is just wonderful. We have the largest enrollment than we have ever had. We have a hundred and fifty students." I will never forget that.

JM: That is so funny a hundred and fifty.

JK: A hundred and fifty students. He was high. It is wonderful to have seen that school grow like it has, and get the respect from other larger colleges.