



*Happy 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday*

*Lee R. Leong*

*Thank you all for coming and honoring our dad on his first 90 years. We love and respect our father, and are so happy for the opportunity to have this celebration with all of you. He has been a role model for all of us and maybe some of you too. He has stood by our mother, and she by him for 67 years. We should all be so lucky. Likewise he has supported and loved us kids through ups and downs, including the difficult teenage years. Whether it was a pack of cigarettes, a marijuana plant in the bedroom, or a few wrecked cars, he and our mother were always there for us, with undying love.*

*Uncle Lee, as many of you know, is number 6 in a family of 7 children. He was born on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1919, in Chinese Hospital, SF next door to their home on Jackson Street to Chow King Leong and Lau Yung Leong, who, at that time, had been in the US for 23 years and 10 years, respectively. At the age of 5, the family moved to Oakland, in an attempt to alleviate Lau Yung's asthma. It was there, our father started school at Lincoln Elementary School. Life was good, and filled with adventures, walking through the Posey tube to Neptune beach amusement park, and summers spent in Waterford, CA on the family peach farm.*



*In 1930, when Lee was 11, the family made a sojourn back to China. Lacking a formal Chinese education, to this point, and much to his chagrin, Lee was entered into the 1st grade, at a Chinese Boarding school. In China, there were trips to the village, an elaborate wedding of his 2 older cousins, and narrow escapes from bandits, in the warlord run territories. When things got too dangerous, (American Chinese were often targets of bandits) the family was forced to leave China, and return home. As Dad puts it, when the steward rang the bell "All ashore who is going ashore" his father turned to him and his younger brother, Andrew,*

to announce, "that's you". This is how he found out the family was returning home, but he and his brother were to remain and continue their Chinese education. Life in China was spent at a boarding school, but vacations were with relatives back in Canton (Guangzhou), and Dad did not miss an opportunity to show his American side, by issuing an expletive at some British colonists who were treating the locals rather badly.

2 years later, as the onset of the Japanese invasion drew closer, Lee and his brother were called home to the US. Here they arrived to a new house on Nob Hill, as, during their absence, the family had moved back to San Francisco. In spite of missing 2 years of American education, he was placed into the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, at Francisco Junior High, and he got to play catch up. Around this time is when Lee started to show attributes that would define his early life and career. At age 14, with the encouragement of his cousin Howard, he started driving the family business car, a Reo, although he had already taught himself, and had been driving his older brother's Model T Ford in the driveway, since kindergarten!



Life in SF Chinatown, during this era consisted of getting free bicycle tows from the streetcars, sneaking on and off cable cars, and working at the family clothier business, H. William Co. He had always shown a musical interest, tinkering with the family piano, but Francisco Jr. High gave him an opportunity for the only formal music training he ever had, playing the saxophone in the school band. He would go on to teach himself and play by ear, the piano, guitar, ukulele, and of course, his favorite, the organ.

By the time he started Galileo High School, his musical interests were running high, and restlessness was coming on. At this time he showed another trait, unique to our dad, in being one of the only family members willing to leave Chinatown. He announced to his father that he was moving to Hawaii, to play in a band. His father convinced him to move across the bay to Berkeley, instead, thus avoiding the military school fate of his brother. A friend of the family arranged for our dad to become a houseboy for a Berkeley family, while attending Berkeley High, where he was taught to cook and take care of a household. If you have ever had one of his roasts, you would agree it paid off.

Somewhere in here, he managed to spend summers in Isleton, Ca picking pears, but also about this time, an older friend convinced him their next adventure should be in the military, so he lied about his age, and joined the National Guard, while still in high school. He always managed to convince his confused father that there was nothing

wrong with this picture, and everyone did it. It is a good thing this lasted only 2 years, as his unit did not survive WWII several years later.

After a stint at San Mateo Jr. College, he enrolled in the Boeing School of Aeronautics, where he was trained as a commercial airline mechanic. Throughout this time, Dad always showed his mechanical aptitude by tinkering with cars, teaching himself to replace a clutch, and it was here that he met our mother, whistling at a pair of legs, as she walked by, while he was under a car. Further courting led to hanging around Fong Fong Ice Cream Parlor, where our mother worked as a waitress, and more mischief. We asked mom why she thought the guy who loosened the tops of the salt shakers was the man for her, and she just laughs. They were married Feb 10<sup>th</sup>, 1942, on a Tuesday, 2 months after Pearl Harbor.

They lived in Niles, CA, close to his brother's Hayward farm, and maybe a little out of the way, in case of a Japanese attack. His first airline job was with United Airlines, but it was thought that an international company like Pan American might offer a few more opportunities for Asians, so this is where he ended up. PanAm provided the opportunity to work on Treasure Island, where he worked on the famous Pan American Clippers, which were the Space Shuttles of their era. In the meantime, Linda was born, and the family moved to one of the Leong buildings at 801 Broadway, in San Francisco Chinatown. Sharon was born 2 years later.

It was during the war, that dad was made part of the US Navy, and sent on trips to Hawaii and Wake Island, to service PBY Catalinas. Dad finally made it to Hawaii, fulfilling a boyhood dream, and when paperwork prevented his transfer to Wake Island, he actually got to



spend an extra 6 months there. He spent many months away from home, family and his daughters, but the pay was lucrative, and this is when we got our first Hoover, Television, and Buick. In 1951, he again showed his independent streak, and became one of the only Leongs to move away from The City. He moved the family to Redwood City where David was born, and the family would have a suburban upbringing from here on out. When the family first moved in, there were only a handful of houses, and goats grazed on the golden hillsides. It wasn't long before Dad showed his resourcefulness and exceptional ability to work with his hands, as he learned construction watching the neighboring houses being built. He was then able to apply this knowledge by building a new garage and master bedroom effectively doubling the square footage of the original house. All this while working full time at Pan American.



*In 1959, the independent bug struck again, and he decided to enter the world of small business owner with his brother-in-law. We all moved to Oakland, where Dad and Uncle Joe ran G & E market in East Oakland. Uncle Joe sadly passed away shortly thereafter, and Dad ran the business alone. This meant 4am trips to the produce market, working all day, home for dinner, and then back to the store to close up around 9pm or 10pm. This lasted for 10 years, and somehow, during this time, Dad still managed to get a boat, and take us all on evening bay cruises after closing the store. Some of our most memorable trips were vacations hauling the boat over the old highway 40 to Tahoe, (before US 80 was built), cruising the Delta waters fishing for catfish, and swimming around the tules. As the Oakland neighborhood around the store deteriorated, it became time to close the store and start his 3<sup>rd</sup> career.*

*Around 1969, maybe at some urging from the kids, who wanted a "Robert Young" dad who came home in a suit each night, instead of working until 10pm, dad became a financial advisor for Investors Diversified Services, which became a subsidiary of American Express. Of course by this time, the girls were out of the house, and David was a rebellious teenager. All things mechanical kept Dad and David close, however, as the Wrenn St. garage started to resemble the many garages dad grew up around during the 30's and 40's, with car parts and grease everywhere. It was about this time also that Kelly was born, and now there was a grandchild around.*

*As Mom and Dad became empty nesters, it was time for travel. There were cruises to Europe, trips to the Far East, and motor home trips across the country. In 1983, our parents moved to Alameda, where they still reside today, and a couple years later, Dad retired. There was even a brief foray into the world of foreign cars, but that didn't last long, and it has been all Buick for many years now, but I think there is still a special place if a killer deal on a Corvette ever came along.*

*In the last 25 years, we are now up to 4 grandchildren, which Mom and Dad had a major role in helping babysit, providing meals, and enjoying. We all get together for all major holidays, and weekly dinners. Dad just passed his driving test, so the Buick stays, and now that Mom's hearing is not as good, I think the opportunities for playing the organ has increased slightly.*