

**LUNAR NEW YEAR FESTIVAL
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

WASHINGTON, DC

Oral History Interview

**with
REGINA CHOW MCPHIE
by
DAN KERR**

**CHINATOWN
January 26, 2020**

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Dan Kerr 00:05

Today it's New Years Chinese New Year, on January 26, 2020. We're in Chinatown in Washington DC. Could you tell us your name?

Regina Chow McPhie 00:16

My name is Regina Chow McPhie. I was born and raised right here in Washington DC. And for only a few years I lived in Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but I came back home to Washington DC, and lived and worked in Washington DC most of most of my life. I did live in Richmond, Virginia for at least 22 years. And at the time that I grew up in Washington, DC, it was a southern city. So I have a southern accent. I don't know if it's obvious, but some people see it right away. I grew up not far from Chinatown, only a few miles, on North Capitol Street. But my family was an integrated part of DC Chinatown in the early days.

Regina Chow McPhie 01:14

My grandfather was was an early resident of Washington, DC. And he helped to start the Lee Family Association. His name was Charlie Lee. He left China. He was a scholar in China. He was a medical student. He was supposed to become a doctor. However, a lot of turmoil, political turmoil, poverty, war, strife occurred in southern China. And so he came to the United States to find a better life. He brought my father over when my father was a teenager. So my father grew up here in Washington, DC and in the early days, the Chinese were relegated to the laundry business and the restaurant business. And this was due to this racial (discrimination) that occurred way back in the 1800s.

Regina Chow McPhie 02:14

In the early days when the the Chinese came to America after they finish on the railroads, and they... Many went back to China and the railroad, I am a descendant of the Chinese railroad workers on both sides of my family. As a matter of fact, I went to the 150th Anniversary of the Chinese Railroad Workers Descendants Association convention in Utah. And there was a big celebration at Promontory Point in Utah. It took 150 years for America to recognize the contribution of the Chinese railroad workers to the railroad to the Transcontinental Railroad. That's on my family and both sides I'm a descendant.

Regina Chow McPhie 03:00

So my grandfather settled here in Washington, DC and bought my father over and his sons. And even though he was medically trained, he was an intellectual. He was relegated to the laundry business as well as many other Chinese people who were relegated to... in the early days, they called it domestic work. Women domestic work. And that was due to race discrimination and the hatred of the Chinese. After they finished working on the railroads, many went back, but some stayed and tried to assimilate into America. They were hated though. They were seen as taking jobs and they were seen as threats. So what wasn't a threat was what they called women's work. And the Americans who were here, those of mainly European ancestry, were not threatened by the Chinese men going into domestic work. That is cooking, cleaning, etc. So that's why there are so many Chinese whose origins are in the laundry business and in the restaurant business.

Regina Chow McPhie 04:15

So here we are in Washington, DC's Chinatown. And it is one of the Chinatowns in the United States that's diminishing. The area itself has grown a lot. That's due to progress -- gentrification. However, there's only a semblance of what is Chinese here in Chinatown. Albeit you have a Chinese lettering and the DC government's effort to try and preserve Chinatown. Many Chinese have moved out of out of the DC area out of Chinatown. I grew up in Washington, DC. I was born In the 50s. But you mainly used to visit Chinatown in the 1960s. And the 1970s. And I went away to school in the 70s. But I grew up here and it was a thriving community. There were thousands here. And thousands who would visit... Chinese people who would visit all the time. It was our way of connecting with each other. So, so even for the Chinese who did not live within the Chinatown neighborhood, those who came as far away as even Maryland would come to Chinatown on weekends to connect with their brethren. To connect with other Chinese. To have your children know other Chinese. My father felt it was important that we grow up knowing other Chinese and knowing our heritage. We have family here so we would visit our relatives. And so every weekend, we'd come and we would visit we

would buy Chinese food... all the groceries... medicines. Connect with family. Say hello. And then my father was part of the Lee Association. So they had different activities. And back then it was it was very active and there were a lot of activities for the association members to participate in.

Regina Chow McPhie 06:18

But the big event was the Lunar New Year parade, like what is happening today. That's very important. And the Chinese banquet. The Lunar New Year, we Chinese say the Chinese New Year, is probably the most important holiday of the year for Chinese people. That is, Chinese from overseas as well as Chinese who are born here -- Chinese Americans, naturalized Chinese, and people who are here as immigrants. But it is the most important holiday.

Regina Chow McPhie 06:52

I had the dilemma, which is the resolve, but I was I'm active on a church committee and I was supposed to go to a very important meeting. But it was killing me that I couldn't come to Chinatown. So I appealed to them saying I need an accommodation because this is a very important part of my culture and my heritage. And I would like to stick with my word to say that I will go to this meeting. But I also knew that I had suffering inner turmoil that I am giving up my culture, part of my identity to participate in this Western meeting, when part of my legacy is here. And even though I'm not as involved, I still come and I get involved because I go to the Family Association, I connect with people and I talked to people, and that's important.

Regina Chow McPhie 07:46

However, Chinatown is shrinking. This part of progress is part of urbanization. And it is sad. At one time DC was struggling, I remember in the 1960s and then in the early 70s, DC, Washington, DC was a struggling city. We had big financial difficulties and it was managed, but I won't say that we had really great management. Plus, I do believe there was some graft and some poor management of money. A good example, one of the pet peeves I have of Washington, DC and I don't live in Washington, DC now, but I did live here for many, many years. I paid taxes. I lived here. My mother lived in the Wah Luck House for many, many years until she passed away. But I hate paying those traffic tickets. So parking tickets, the moving violations and they seem to set it up now that you will get a ticket. If you drive in DC you're going to get a ticket because they have like one light after the other and it's very confusing, this easy to get a ticket. But they've collected millions if not billions. Why is it their schools are not the best in the country? I just talked to a woman who's part of something about neighborhood greens where

they feed people in need the working poor. And she said they do get some money. They can get a lot of money from the DC government. But I said they should give more.

Regina Chow McPhie 09:20

I think that the DC government has come a long ways in terms of managing his neighborhoods and preserving what is Washington, DC -- what is uniquely Washington, DC in terms of the culture, the socio-economic status, in terms of businesses, and government, etc. So Washington, DC has changed tremendously in my lifetime. I was born in 1950s. Here it's 2020. In this 60 plus years I've seen it change tremendously and I see it from the perspective of not just someone who was born and raised, but I had studied urban planning. And so I knew these changes were coming. And how do you deal with the dilemma of preserving this culture, the people, when the cost is so prohibitive, now. The buildings are deteriorating. It costs a fortune just to pay for basics to fix it. That in a smaller town like where I lived in Richmond, Virginia, it was much more reasonable to hire people, carpenters and building construction people, it's cheaper than here. It's still not cheap, but it was much cheaper than here.

Regina Chow McPhie 10:36

This place is so expensive and the buildings are starting to deteriorate. How do people afford to live here? Well, you see a lot of the Chinese people who lived in an apartment building further up the street. Some of them had to move because they couldn't afford to live here anymore. That's the problem. There aren't many Chinese here now. I mean at one time, there were thousands. Now it's only a handful, maybe 300. The last stats I saw was something like maybe 300. And barely that Chinese people live here. And they're struggling. Most of them, I think are service workers who are catering to the industry. They're just eking out a living.

Regina Chow McPhie 11:21

They probably do rely on the help of the DC government. And the DC government has come a long ways in terms of helping the working poor. In terms of helping I mean, I have to applaud them that there's a lot of effort to do the right thing and to do a lot. But I also wonder, with the millions, if not billions that they collect for traffic violations. And I know a lot of it comes from tourists who don't want to pay those traffic fines, so parking tickets, the moving violations, but they don't want to pay it because they live in other parts of the United States, if not the world. They're not gonna pay it. I mean, they're not gonna come here and appear in court so they gotta pay it. And they get a lot of money. So I read the paper, it said

that a lot of the money goes to the school system and goes to the housing. It goes to a lot.

Regina Chow McPhie 12:16

But with all that they make, I think it could be better with the shrinking of Chinatown. Why is it? Why are they getting pushed out? What can we do? What kind of help can we get? So yes, we have is a dichotomy of the older generation, the baby boomers who want to preserve our heritage who don't want to leave. And then there are the younger generation, the sandwich generation, and the millennials. They don't have anything to do with this. They'll just come and it's just cool to come to Chinatown, to go to the convention center, eat Chinese... But in terms of keeping your Chinese identity... I do believe that's changed a lot. But I also believe that's changed a lot because of the intermarriage of Chinese and Asian people with other groups of people. So is this perhaps is not so critical for the younger generation to maintain their Chinese heritage and identity. It is up to the sandwich generation, the Gen Xers, the baby boomers, to say it is critical. It is important. And, it's great.

Regina Chow McPhie 13:31

We had I know, Samir (Dr. Samir Meghelli), with the Smithsonian Anacostia Museum, and they've done exhibits on Chinatown. And I have to applaud the director who passed away, but she made it happen and Samir made it happen. And Samir worked on it for a long time. Because it is not easy, penetrating the Chinese community to try and get the cooperation to to even do some of the exhibits that he did. He worked with me and my brother. My brother's Harry Chow, and he has a collection of Chinatown. A photographic collection, which has been used in many different venues. The Smithsonian. It's also in China at the museum in China, I think it's Shanghai on DC's Chinatown. My cousin's wife Penny Lee is doing a film, a documentary, on one three Chinatowns. And DC is one of them. DC has a diminishing one. I think he's doing one on Chicago, DC, and I can't remember the other one. So they're opposite in the spectrum. One is thriving. One is barely hanging on, which is DC. And one is almost non existent. And in my lifetime, I've seen like in Philadelphia, in some other cities like I saw the old Chinesetown in San Francisco, which is changing. But San Francisco has a large Chinese community. And they made a lot of effort to preserve it. There is New York's Chinatown that exists. So I guess the question at this point for many people would be, why do you want to preserve it? Why not assimilate and acculturate, and just become one, like everybody, an American. But of course, we all recognize, culturally, that it is important to preserve your heritage, to preserve your culture to preserve your history, to preserve your language. Because if you

don't, and it disappears, what happens? If you don't want to erase what existed. You don't want to have it die out. The past is what makes us great in the present, but it also shapes our future.

Regina Chow McPhie 15:56

So in terms of dealing with this dilemma, And I'm involved with the Lee Association, which is a major organization here in Chinatown. We have contributed so much to Chinatown. And it is a struggle to draw the young people to come and join. It is a struggle to continue to exist. We have an old building that we are doing our best to try and keep up. But we're like many other organizations and institutions and businesses in DC's Chinatown, where they're struggling to survive. There are many ways to do it. There's the Surratt House (Mary E. Surratt Boarding House). You could make that a national landmark and then you'd get funding to preserve it. I don't know if you know the Surratt House, but that is the building where the plotting of Abraham Lincoln's assassination occurred. So it happened at the Surratt House that you got here in the heart of Chinatown, and that has preserved that building.

Regina Chow McPhie 17:01

The DC government contracted to create the Wah Luck House. So it is preserving an existing heritage of the working poor, the people in need, and many Asians and Chinese who live here. My mother lived here and it was great because they would make a lot of effort to preserve the heritage. They would show Chinese films to them. And there's a Chinese church that would come. And the social service organizations, the Chinese social service organization would come and do a lot to help the people. So there's a lot going on to try and preserve it. And I do believe it is worth preserving. Because if you don't have your heritage and you don't have your history, you don't exist. It's the way I see it. So wa la here we are.

Dan Kerr 18:01

That you for all of that. That's perfect. I really appreciate you taking the time with us this afternoon. And we, you know, are very fortunate to be a part of playing some small role.

Regina Chow McPhie 18:16

Thank you. Thank you for doing this.