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CHINESE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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## THE 1927 CHINESE BASEBALL TEAM

by GEORGE and ELSIE YEE

1927 was an exciting year for baseball. That was the year the Pittsburgh Pirates took on the mighty New York Yankees in the World Series. It was said that a day before the start of the Series, the Pirates were psyched out when they saw the likes of Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Bob Meusel, Tony Lazzeri and the rest of "Murderer's Row" rocket the ball out of all corners of Forbes Field during batting practice. The rest is history -- the Yankees took the Series in four games. Here in Los Angeles, history was also being made on a smaller scale -- rocketing the ball around in these parts was the famous Los Angeles Chinese Baseball Team. This is their story:



### 1927 LOS ANGELES CHINESE BASEBALL TEAM

Kneeling - Kenny Ung, William Chan, Allen Chan, Ray Lue.

Second Row - Walter Chung, Tommy Lee, Willie Chung, James Chan.

Third Row - Victor Wong, H. Chu, Clark Ung, Charlie Lee, George Lee.

The 1927 team was not the first Chinese baseball team to play in the area. There was a short-lived team in 1924, made up of people from the wholesale market area at Ninth and San Pedro Streets. Kenny Ung remembers the team.

"I was the bat boy and mascot for that team. Chinatown didn't have a playground then, so all the games were played elsewhere, mostly at Echo Park. The 1924 team was a semi-pro team; a hat was passed around after each game to collect nickels, dimes and quarters from the spectators."

By 1926, the old team had broken up. In the meantime, other events were happening around Chinatown. Behind Old Chinatown, where Union Station now stands, there was an empty field with horse stables, housing 40 to 70 horses and wagons rented by Chinese peddlers to sell their fruits and vegetables throughout the city. By the mid-1920's, the stables had deteriorated to an unusable condition. Mrs. Margaret Cope, a teacher from the Macy Street Elementary School, approached the Southern Pacific Railroad (owners of the land) and the city of Los Angeles, suggesting the area be converted into a badly-needed park for Chinatown. Both parties agreed, and thus Apaplasa Playground came into existence. Mrs. Cope was appointed playground director, assuming these duties on Saturdays and Sundays in addition to her woodwork classes during the week (Margaret Cope took a very special interest in Chinatown and its residents. Kenny Ung remembers visiting her home near 36th and San Pedro Streets in the 1940's. She still kept an album full of photos and information of all the playground activities through the years).

Before the area could be safely used for any type of recreation, it needed a massive cleanup job.

"After school, the kids came and picked up the rocks and glass, and raked the ground. Even after a fence was put up and we were playing, we were still picking up the rocks. The field had no grass. There was only some sawdust where the swings and bars were located."

Allen Chan



Team Members Ray Lue, William Chan, and James Chan being interviewed.

"All of us kids got together and rented a plow to pick up all the bricks and glass. For a dollar a day, we rented a horse and cultivator. Finally the city sent someone to help us."

Kenny Ung

As the playground was taking shape, a baseball team was being organized. "At that time, some of us attended the Brethren Chinese Church on North Los Angeles Street. Victor Wong was helping out at the church. He was a star baseball player at Belmont High School. We asked him if he would coach us and teach us some of the fundamentals of baseball. He agreed. That's how we got started. Victor was a great help, and very dedicated. He taught us how to bat, how to slide, and all the basics of the game."

Walter Chung

The team included outfielders Victor Wong, H. Chu, Clark Ung, Charles Lee, Willie Chung, Kenny Ung (also pitcher); centerfield, George Lee; first base, George Tong; second base, William Chan (also shortstop); third base, Walter Chung and James Chan; pitcher, Ray Lue; shortstop, Tom Lee. Allen Chan was the youngest member of the team -- 13 years. He was the bat boy and mascot and sometimes played outfield. More often than not, Allen was called to fill in whenever the team was short of players.

"I was 4 ft., 11 in. tall and weighed less than 100 lbs. in 1927. Because of my short height, the pitcher threw the ball slower. This helped me. For a 100-lb. boy to throw the ball a great distance was difficult, but it had to be done. I remember the time we played a Sawtelle veterans team when I threw the ball from left field all the way to home plate. Those Sawtelle veterans were really surprised!"

Allen Chan

Heightwise, George Tong literally stood head and shoulders above the rest. "George was 6 feet tall. We used to call him "City Hall". He played baseball at Lincoln High School, and made the All City High School Team in 1931. He was batting .400 at that time. George later went to USC and played baseball there, too."

Ray Lue

(Tong earned an Engineering degree at the University of Southern California. The Los Angeles Sports Arena is one of the landmarks engineered by him.)

The power hitters of the team were George Tong, Victor Wong, Walter Chung and James Chan. The other members of the team made up for the lack of hitting power by their speed. It was bunt, run and steal bases a good part of the time.

"The opposing teams figured we couldn't play, so we stole bases on them and advanced. They would get excited and make errors, and we would win the game."

James Chan

"We all knew the Chinese language, so when we gave signals, we gave them in Chinese. The other side didn't understand us."

Ray Lue

The team had only one steady pitcher, Ray Lue. Ray had to pitch most of the games without relief. He was better known then by his Chinese name, "Tango" (Tang, elder brother).

The team uniform was a makeshift situation. Some members bought secondhand uniforms from the Goodwill Store. Others bought parts of uniforms. There were no two uniforms alike. Everyone, however, had his own baseball glove. Other recreation equipment was in rather poor shape.

"When we first started, we used discarded equipment from the old Chinese team. The bats were cracked -- we nailed and taped those together with wiring tape. After we got through taping the ball, I would say that it must have weighed a half pound more than the original ball."

Kenny Ung

"We had no support from the merchants in Chinatown. You know how tough it was in those days. A baseball cost two-fifty, a bat was a buck and a half, and a good glove cost five bucks."

Ray Lue



Members of the 1927 Chinese Baseball Team identifying the old Team photo for Oral History Team Member, George Yee. First Row - Allen Chan, George Yee, James Chan. Back Row - Kenny Ung, Ray Lue, Walter Chung.

"When we hit the ball over the fence, the game was stopped while everyone looked for the ball so we could start playing again."

Allen Chan

Later on, the playground supplied some of the equipment. Some of the games were arranged by the playground director and some were through direct team contact.

"There were a lot of teams in the area. The Japanese had about twenty teams. They were sponsored by merchants. The Mexican teams were sometimes sponsored by wineries and breweries."

James Chan

"One time we played the Japanese Junior Championship Team of Southern California, and we beat them! That was the best we ever did."

Ray Lue

Did the team have a name?

"We called ourselves the 'Chinese Owls'. The boys decided that the owl was a smart bird and we wanted to be considered as smart birds."

James Chan

After two years, the team began playing in the semi-pro leagues, and changed its name to "L.A. Chinese". Some of the opposing teams at that time were: Pacific Clay, Palm Merchants, Redondo Beach Merchants, plus others too numerous to remember. Several of these teams had players that once played in the major and minor leagues. Winning a game against these teams was difficult.

To get to other playgrounds, the team either walked or squeezed into the two available cars driven by James Chan and William Chan. The semi-pro games were always played elsewhere because the Apaplasa Playground field was too small for the hitting power of the semi-pro teams.

Many of the players on the Chinese team attended Chinese school after the regular school day. This heavy schedule made it difficult to have enough hours of practice except on Saturdays. The games were usually played on Sunday afternoons. Even then it was sometimes difficult to field a team. Some of the players could not play because of their work schedule.

"In certain seasons, there were many time I couldn't play. There was planting to be done. In the summertime, it was cauliflower. Our farm was down in Vernon. We had another farm in Downey."

William Chan

When the team played in Chinatown, there were few spectators. Many of the Chinese oldtimers did not understand the game and could not understand why the youngsters were playing instead of working. When the team played elsewhere, the spectators numbered in the hundreds. The team had very little problems with the audiences who came to watch.

"People were curious in those days -- they wanted to watch a Chinese team play, which was a great change from the many Caucasian teams playing in the area."

James Chan



**APAPLASA PLAYGROUND**  
Director - Margaret Cope

"The spectators sometimes called us 'Chinks'. The younger people who played ball with us were O.K. The older people thought we still wore pigtails. They would yell at us from the stands. However, by 1930, they were applauding us when we played a good game."

Kenny Ung

"I remember when Willie Chung hit a ball over the center field. The centerfielder climbed over the fence and lost the ball. Chung was rounding first base and everyone was hollering for him to come home fast. He rounded second and the guy was still looking for the ball. Finally, Chung rounded third base in a walk. The center fielder found the ball and threw it into the field. The fielder threw it home and Chung was out by ten feet. We were laughing all over the place."

Kenny Ung

"My biggest thrill was when I hit a home run with the bases loaded. It was against a Mexican team. I don't remember who was on base, but we won the game."

James Chan

"I remember a game we played against a Japanese team in 1929. I struck out the first eight batters. We won the game 11 to 7."

Ray Lue

The team went on to play until the mid-1930's. By then many were working; some moved away, and the team gradually faded out. Other Chinese youngsters at one time or another had the opportunity to play with the group.

In the seven or eight years of the team's existence, the players were faced with a number of obstacles -- inadequate playing area, inferior equipment, lack of support and understanding from the community, unequal competition with opposing teams, heavy work and school schedules. In spite of these deterrents, the team members doggedly played on, game after game -- winning some, losing some, but enjoying the competition nevertheless. Perhaps the indomitable spirit of the Chinese Baseball Team of 1927 can best be described by the inscription on the George Tong Memorial Award plaque that hangs today on the wall of the Alpine Playground gym in Los Angeles Chinatown:

*"The greatest failure is not trying your hardest"* -- a fitting tribute to each member who, by trying his hardest, came out a winner in a very special way.

### FAREWELL TO A FRIEND

*The untimely passing last month of Victor Sen Yung, well-known actor of stage, screen and television, saddened the hearts of his many friends, co-workers and his legions of admirers. Best known as the "Number 2" son in the Charlie Chan movies, and in later years as Hop Sing, the cook in television's long-running Bonanza series, Victor started a new career a few short years ago -- as culinary consultant, traveling throughout the country demonstrating recipes from his cookbook (The Great Wok Cookbook) with the use of the Chinese wok.*

*In November 1977, Victor, along with Keye Luke and Benson Fong, was honored by CHSSC as the three outstanding Chinese American actors in the motion picture industry.*

*How well-loved was Victor by his family and friends, and how deeply he will be missed by all who knew him, is well evidenced by the eloquent and touching eulogy delivered at his memorial service by Beulah Quo, fellow co-actor and a friend of long standing.*

TO VICTOR, WITH LOVE ---- As we come to pay final respects to a friend and fellow artist, I am sure each of us is thinking of the special moments when Victor Sen Yung had touched our lives.

I remember a dashing bright young University of California college graduate in the early 1940's who had an aura of gaiety and warmth and likeability. He had an energetic capacity for fun and mirth, and a great ability for making friends. These same traits followed him throughout his life. Across the years, there were pains and hurts -- he was in a business where hopes and dreams easily turn into disappointments and frustrations. But in the forty years that I had known Victor, I never heard him complain. He never allowed his problems to bother his friends. He always fought to meet life with gaiety and laughter.

I admired his warm and affectionate relationship with his family. He idolized his father, and used to tell me, "My father is in his 80's, and even though I'm an adult, when he tells me what to do, I do it." Victor's love and friendship for his son Brent was especially heartwarming; he had a deep affection for his daughter-in-law Marty, and was a doting grandfather of two precious grandchildren.

We consider Victor a pioneer among Asian American actors. His acting career spanned 43 years. His favorite movie role was his portrayal of a young lawyer in "THE LETTER" with Bette Davis. For his brilliant performance, he was nominated as the best supporting actor by the New York Film Critics Award in 1941.

His latest career as a Chinese wok demonstrator with the Broadway Stores gave him the opportunity to travel to many cities, delighting his audiences with his special brand of humor. He came in touch with people from all walks of life, and with his usual likeability, he made many friends. Most recently, he was working on his second cookbook and was beginning to write his memoirs when the tragic accident took his life.

Dear Victor, we shall miss you, but we will not say goodbye as we will continue to laugh with you in the re-runs of BONANZA and your other films. Thousands across this land will remember you as they cook Chinese food, using your cookbook and the wok which you helped to introduce. And we, your friends, will always remember how you touched our lives with gaiety and laughter. Yes, we will always remember, and the beautiful memories will linger on .....

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