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Chinese Huck Finn to the Voice of Activism: Irvin Lai 黎國威

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Gum Saan Journal is an annual publication. It solicits manuscripts that explore the historical, cultural, and humanistic aspects of Chinese American experiences, particularly relating to Southern California, as well as contemporary issues of relevance to the Chinese American community. Manuscripts should be approximately 3,000 words in length, using Chicago style of endnotes when necessary. If your manuscript is accepted for publication, you will be responsible for obtaining permission to reproduce any copyrighted materials used in your article.

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Introduction:

Irvin Lai 黎國威, A Lifetime of Service

By Eugene Moy,
President of Chinese Historical Society of Southern California

In May 2010, I had the great privilege of doing the introduction for Irvin Lai at the Annual Dinner of the CHSSC. Irvin was the recipient of our Community Service Hero Award. He was presented with a Golden Spike—a symbol of Chinese American history, but also a metaphor for the strength of Chinese Americans who helped build this great country.

Back in 1984, after I had served a term as president of the Historical Society, I was invited by one of our members to join the Los Angeles Lodge of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance. I didn't know anything about the C.A.C.A. back then, but the late Howard Quon told me it would be good to join with good people who were involved with various Chinese American community issues. He was the incoming president. So I went to the L.A. Lodge on a Saturday night, was introduced to a few individuals, and we sat down for the meeting. Imagine my surprise when halfway through a discussion on a matter I now can't remember, one of the members abruptly stood up and started shaking his fist and pointing his finger and yelling at the top of his lungs! And he had BIG lungs! I thought there was going to be a fight! Who was that guy? That was my introduction to Irvin Lai, a passionate champion for our community.

As time passed, I got to know Irvin better.

I learned that Irvin came from humble beginnings in the farming village of Locke in the Sacramento Delta. He started out in a segregated "Oriental School" in Walnut Grove and skinned skunks for extra money. He came to Los Angeles in 1941 and attended Belmont High School. I learned that Irvin enlisted in the U.S. Merchant Marine as a teenager during World War II,





and was later drafted into the Army during the Korean War, serving his country for two additional years.

After his military service, Irvin settled in Los Angeles, and became a contractor and businessman. Today, his family is continuing with his business, now over fifty years old.

Irvin worked long hours to balance his many obligations: business, church, advocacy and family. His rise to leadership positions provided the visibility and platform for Irvin to affect Chinese American history. He joined the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and became its president. When president of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance Lodge in 1971, Irvin and James Bok Wong supported UCLA professors and students in their push to create the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. Simultaneously, Irvin was involved in establishing LAUSD's Asian American Education Commission. Irvin rallied to seek justice for the Vincent Chin murder case.

In 1980, new health regulations threatened the sale of the popular roast duck, despite the fact that Chinese have prepared the dish the same way for a thousand years. Irvin vociferously fought this all the way to the California legislature. This resulted in the passage of AB2603, the Roast Duck Exemption, which was signed by then Governor Jerry Brown at the Grandview Gardens, owned by Irvin and his brothers.



Irvin speaks at the signing of the "Roast Duck Bill" at the Grandview Gardens Restaurant in Los Angeles Chinatown on July 6, 1982.





Community members were outraged when a police officer was killed and another seriously wounded during a botched robbery attempt in Chinatown. While Police Chief Daryl Gates was attending a Chinatown conference about gangs and prostitution, Irvin and Howard Quon pressured LAPD to establish a Chinatown substation. In 1982, the Chinese Public Safety Association was set up.

In the mid-1980's, Chinatown's French Hospital Board only had one Chinese member, Dr. Diana Lee. Diane Poon in Human Resources was the only Chinese senior staff person. The hospital made a decision to become more involved with the community and Irvin was invited to join the hospital's board. Faced with financial difficulties, caused partly by uncompensated care of low-income Chinatown residents, the Board considered selling the hospital to a Japanese investment firm. A worried community held meetings to protect this important resource. Finally, Irvin and Dr. Diana Lee convinced the Board to give the hospital to the doctors. Thus, the Pacific Alliance Medical Center was born.

When the Historical Society envisioned taking the bold step of purchasing its present home on Bernard Street in Chinatown, our members recognized that we needed a strong leader to take us up to the next level, to raise funds to pay off the mortgage. Who became that leader? It was Irvin Lai. He was already involved as the contractor to restore the 19th century Chinese Cemetery Shrine in Boyle Heights. He became CHSSC president, serving from 1994 to 1996. Irvin has been a passionate believer in the mission of the CHSSC, to bring people together to discover and share the history of Chinese Americans, and helped us achieve our permanent home.

Along with all this advocacy for the community, Irvin had a gentle side. He was a dedicated family man, as a son, a husband, a father, and grandfather. He made sure that everyone got an education and learned values. He was very much involved as an elder at True Light Presbyterian Church since 1960, helping negotiate its challenging moves from East Adams to Lincoln Heights to Alhambra.

So that was Irvin. Irvin always let you know what he believed in, and over the years, we learned to appreciate Irvin as a man who believed in his family, in his country, in God, and in his community. Irvin was a man with





spirit, a fighter with values. If something needed to be done, Irvin got it done. Irvin represented the best of our community.

The Chinese Historical Society is honored to dedicate this issue of *Gum Saan Journal* to our friend. Irvin once said, “My early experience of poverty, discrimination, and segregation as a child growing up in California shaped me into an advocate for the Chinese.” His life from 1927 to 2010 shows so much change for Chinese Americans—because of Chinese Americans like Irvin.

Irvin Lai, 1927–2010

Asian American Education Commission, Los Angeles Unified School District
Commissioner, 1982–92

Chinese American Citizens Alliance

Member, 1960–2010

Los Angeles Lodge President, 1971–73

National Board Member, 1983–2010

National Grand President, 1985–89

Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Los Angeles

Director, 1970–2010

President, 1982–83

Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association

Director, 1983–84

Chinese Historical Society of Southern California

President, 1994–96

Chairman of the Board, 1996–98

Board member, 1994–2010

True Light Presbyterian Church

Ruling elder, 1960–2010

San Gabriel Presbytery Personnel Committee, 1997–2002

University of Southern California's Civil and Community Relations Council

Executive Committee member, 1990–2002

For this issue, we are also indebted to another longtime leader of CHSSC, Susan Dickson. Raised in segregated Tennessee, Susan is a teacher at Castelar Elementary, a long-time board member of the Friends of Chinatown Library, and a Grand Executive of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance.





Reflections

Editor's note: *Assemblymember Mike Eng and Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard's transcripts are from Irvin's memorial tribute at the First Chinese Baptist Church in Los Angeles Chinatown on November 6, 2010.*

Reflections

By Assemblymember Hon. Mike Eng, 49th District

Thank you for that introduction, Marji¹. I feel kind of embarrassed because we're here to celebrate someone who outshines everything I've ever done.

As I look at the list of distinguished speakers here to celebrate Irvin today, I want to focus on one personal memory. I remember being a very naive law student at UCLA. I came to visit Chinatown with my good friend, Stewart Kwoh². Stewart told me that I needed to learn not only from books, but from the community. So I went to this meeting in Chinatown.

I was a very traditional Chinese American male—passive, happy-go-lucky, don't make waves, don't upset anybody, make people feel comfortable... The meeting was about the lack of representation of Chinese Americans in politics. The meeting was at Grandview Gardens. I found out later that this was Irvin Lai's restaurant. I remember I was sitting next to this guy whose glasses were as thick as mine. As a first-year law student, I did nothing but read. All of a sudden, this gentleman started to speak. I don't remember what he said, but I remember being startled and shaken by this

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- 1 Marji Lee, emcee of the Memorial Service, is a member of Alhambra True Light Presbyterian Church and Coordinator of UCLA's Asian American Studies Library. She's also the editor of CHSSC's *Duty and Honor: A Tribute to Chinese American WWII Veterans of Southern California*.
 - 2 Stewart Kwoh is the President and Executive Director of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California (APALC), and a recipient of the MacArthur Fellows Award in 1998.





earthquake and volcano. I remember he was so passionate that he was angry. That was Irvin. I've seen him since then with the same anger and passion.

I learned from him that it is good to be angry, sometimes. It is good to show righteous indignation, sometimes. I learned from Irvin Lai how to be angry. It isn't just appropriate, it is required. He channeled this effectively.

But we can't just get angry, and Irvin knew this too.

Irvin was born in Locke and I made it a point to visit Locke, an original rural Chinatown, and met some of the key leaders. I pledge that I will get a plaque in Locke so that we can give tribute to Irvin.

I want to dedicate the rest of my legislative career to pushing the civil rights message that Irvin Lai represents. So when I leave office, I can know that Irvin will not be angry with me.





Reflections

By U.S. Congresswoman Hon. Lucille Roybal-Allard,
34th Congressional District

I'm very happy that I had the opportunity today to be here. Irvin Lai was a special person to me. He not only did so much for Chinese Americans, but for our community as a whole. He stood tall as a model fighting for justice and equality. He and my dad³ knew each other well. They were part of the struggle for civil rights in the 1950's. That's what I remember. He was a little rambunctious and he would always give me advice about what I should be doing or should not be doing.

He fought for civil rights, but I want also to highlight his role in preserving Chinese American history. He made sure that this heritage and culture would be preserved not only for Chinese Americans, but for all Angelenos and all who visit Los Angeles. To me, that is one of the most important things that he contributed to our city, and to our society as a whole. There are such tremendous Chinese contributions to our history and culture. Particularly now, when diversity is under attack, when minorities are under attack, it is more important than ever that those contributions and the beauty and richness of Chinese heritage be preserved and celebrated. People need to know.

For me, that is something that Irvin gave to the city and our community. We are extremely grateful. What a legacy he leaves us. He contributed to more than just the Chinese American community. He is our role model to what we need to continue to do. We need to speak louder, fight harder for things we know are right and just. I'm so proud to have known Irvin. I'm equally proud to represent Chinatown in the U.S. Congress.

3 Edward Roybal (1916–2005) was a member of the Los Angeles City Council for thirteen years and of the U.S. House of Representatives for thirty years. He was the first Latino Congressperson from California since 1879.





California Delta Blues

Editor's note: In 2000 and 2005, Irvin Lai was filmed by Susan Dickson as he strolled through Locke, his childhood home in the Sacramento delta during the Depression years. In 1941, at the age of 13, Irvin left Locke to move to Los Angeles with his family. These are edited transcripts of Irvin's narrative.

I graduated from Walnut Grove Elementary School. Back in the late 30's, it was built for Asian people and called the Oriental School. I went through kindergarten, first grade and all the way up to eighth grade and graduated in 1941. It was built by the WPA of the New Deal. There would be a sign hanging down, a wrought iron sign that said "Walnut Grove Oriental Elementary School," which was a segregated school with only Asians—Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos—who came to this school and the White school was about half a mile down.



Irvin Lai in 2nd Grade at the Walnut Grove Oriental School in 1934.





I'd walk down along the railroad tracks from Locke. About half the population of this school was from Locke, the rest were from Walnut Grove and from the ranch area around this. It hasn't changed a bit, it still remains the same. Next to the auditorium is the multipurpose room. I used it for a gym and also for commencement and for other activities like dancing and community gatherings. From the first window on that side was the kindergarten, the second window will be the "high" first, second, and third grades. I've been through every one of them. It's very funny you know, in this period of time, there was first and "high" first. You spend nine years in the elementary school here, because we are not that proficient in English. Most people spoke Chinese or Cantonese at that time.

We'd eat our sandwiches here. I'd have pressed ham sandwiches and sometimes jelly sandwiches, quince pear jam. I hated it. Yea that's the staple, pressed ham and bologna.

This park is where we used to have track, shot put, dashes, relays, and football. It was quite a place. You go into there to the boys' bathroom and there's a drinking fountain on this side. This guy was always hopping on me. When I was drinking water, he sprayed water on me. And I pushed him and he told the teacher that I bullied him and lied about it. And I got a spanking—you'd get a whipping with a belt.

Joe Shoong Chinese Language School was Cantonese-speaking. I



attended this school for five or six years. And it was supported by National Dollar Store owner, Joe Shoong. Grades 1 to 6 all in one big room. They had ink wells. You used the Chinese brush.

Joe Shoong Chinese Language School in Locke, CA.

(Photo courtesy of Lucky Owyang.)





This is Locke, population 1,000 after 1920. It was a rural Chinatown. Back here is our packing shed, where we'd pack fruits and vegetables. And now it's a boat house. There was a Chinese grocery store and also a hardware store. They tell me it was one of the largest grocery stores in Locke. It was quite a quaint town. Wah-Lee Clothing Store was owned by Morrison Chung. The family used to live upstairs. It was a general store that'd sell clothing, Levis, shirts, shoes and all the stuff like that. That was right next to the Jing Hoong Company. That building I believe is the Star Theater.

The Lim Kee general store had a lottery and we played lottery. They had a little soda water fountain. They played Fan Tan and Pai Gow and that stuff. And they turned it into a kind of district association, Jung San [Zhongshan中山], or Jin Ying Association. We used to have a Keno run. And this is where they count all the gambling money and they put it in the safe. And they have bars on the window to keep it pretty safe. Oh the police had to pull a phony raid once in a while otherwise they wouldn't look legitimate.

In 1937, General Tsai Ting-kai from China came over here and all the river people from Courtland to Locke came to welcome him and raise money for him. We ate and were marching along the river. I guess everybody in town was in the parade. We had to train people to play the drum and also play the bugle. It was quite a deal. All these students were from Locke, Walnut Grove, and Courtland.

Al the Wop's joint has been here since the early thirties. It is right in back of our old house. He owned a beer joint and now is famous for their steak sandwiches. Real good piece of New York steak and all the bread you can eat. The bread was delicious. Peanut butter and jam on toasted French bread. They maintained the same quality of food. It's out of this world and we'd get our money's worth over here.

There's a trash dump over there. When we were kids, we used to get those empty evaporated milk cans and stomp on it. We liked marching around like gladiators. Next thing you know, the whole sole come off your shoe! And my mother would really hit us on the head, "You ruined a pair of shoes!" We were always very innovative. We didn't have money to buy toys. So what we did was save the wheels off baby carriages. Just nail up an orange





crate. Put two wood sticks and nail in with a big spike that we get from the railroad. And then we'd have a wheelbarrow. That also led us to make ourselves wooden scooters with one wheel on the front, one wheel on the back. We played around with those things. We were very innovative. With no money to spend, that's how we'd do it.

This is Locke's Second Street where the residences were. This is where I used to live. Used to run up and down here when we were kids. That's the house that I was raised in. From six or seven days old till I left near '41. It was two bedrooms, a dining room, a living room, a kitchen, and a bathroom. That's half of the house. The other half was rented out. The master bedroom is where my mom used to sleep with my sisters. The second one is where I'd sleep with my brothers. My older brother also lived here until he went to live with my maternal grandparents in San Francisco. This walkway cuts through the house. Every house had a walkway going through it.

And right down the street over here is where the Christian center was. It used to be operated by the Baptist ministry as part of the United Christian Center. That's where we had our Sunday school and church service. And upstairs is boarding rooms for the missionaries that used to live there. On the porch, when I was three or four years old, I used to sit there and ring the bell for Sunday school. I still remember that. This was the only thing in town we could come to without costing any money. All the kids can go there and we had a little dessert which we didn't have at home. We'd helped out a little bit inside, moving things around. I still remember the missionaries called Miss Joy and Miss Evans. There's another one that my mom asked her to teach me piano. I guess I took maybe about three or four lessons. She got transferred out and that's about all of my piano training. As a group, we learned how to sing Christian music like "Jesus Love Me, This I Know." That was one of my favorite things. We did not know what the lyrics meant. We just harmonized with it and sang as loud as we could.

This used to be the old flour mill warehouse. Hasn't been active actually for at least sixty years. Wasn't active when we were kids. That little pasture over there—my aunt used to plant turnip and Chinese vegetables over there. And the old folks in Locke always had their own patch over here so they could grow their own vegetables. And that's where they spent most of their time. Real nice.





I still remember that we used to go out to the barn and shoot wild pigeon and bird and whatever. One time, I shot some pigeon and the owner of the barn got the sheriff to look for me. And my cousin, Wah Lee or John Cheung, brought the sheriff right into my house and got me arrested. We just went down to Walnut Grove and we talked to the judge. We didn't do anything wrong, we didn't take any crops, we just go for the birds. So they let me go. But the sheriff did take my rifle. Many years later, I helped recover the bodies of the two kids that drowned out in the slough. I went home and made a hook and a long pole and go by there and snagged up the two bodies. Out of gratitude, the sheriff knew who I was and he gave me back my rifle. That's my favorite pet. I remember I bought that rifle for \$3.75 from Montgomery Ward during those days. That's my pet. A single shot. I still got it at home. A 22 single shot. I shot rabbit and things with it. I'm quite good at it too. Quite a marksman. I remember one time I walked on the rail tracks down by the slough. And way down, maybe fifty feet away. There was a little hole where the squirrel was hiding. I was watching it and it stuck its head out there and I aimed and got it right in the head. What a deal.





My Mother, Effie

Editor's note: In Gillenkirk and Motlow's book, Bitter Melon, Effie Lai is interviewed. She was born in San Francisco in 1904 and married Lai Foong in 1922 at the Red Room of San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel. Lai was twelve years older and a foreman at the Meyer Ranch. In 1927, Meyer Ranch had gone bankrupt and Lai had to work as a ranch hand, sometimes leaving the family for months during the Depression years. The La's had five children: Harriett, Milton, Irvin, Collin, and Millie.



Effie Lai

My mom was an unpaid social worker because she understood Chinese. She could read and write Chinese and understand English. So she's an interpreter for many people to go to Sacramento, to the hospital, or fill out whatever paper for immigration or aid. And even fill out their applications for social security. Mom was quite a helpful woman. And anybody who had any kind of problems would run by and see my mom. But she didn't get paid! She just spent her time and that's it! She had been doing that for many years until we left for Los Angeles in 1941. From 1927 to 1941, she was an unpaid social worker for the whole river, not just Locke. Walnut Grove, Isleton,

Rio Vista, Courtland, everybody come down to see her to get help on an application or whatever it was.

Back in 1937 when Japan invaded China, they always had news coming through the newspaper and everybody would buy an English paper and come by and ask my mom to interpret it. She was just like a reporter, and talked about the advance of the Japanese troops and some of the Chinese troops' fighting and all that. The town was well-informed what's going on in





Effie & Irvin in front of old people's home in Locke in 1928.

China because they were very interested in their homeland.

Our house was always full of people. I remember it was always full of people when we had our Saturday night bath. I was maybe 6 or 7 years old and Collin was 4 or 5. We had those big galvanized wash tubs. We filled it up with warm water and Collin got in there and scrubbed down, stark naked. And we had a whole bunch of mamas and people sitting around the table, shooting the breeze and having a good time talking. Looked like it was going to be a regular show to see Mama scrubbing us and clean us and rinse us out and then get the towel and rub us dry. I think Milton was the last one to get in there. One tub of water washed three persons. We didn't have a hot water heater; we

boiled our water with the tea kettle. And that's every Saturday, we had a bath. We couldn't take a bath every day, you couldn't afford it. You use too much kerosene to boil the water. At that time, we didn't have any real good hand soap. We used that White King brown soap that we washed clothes with. That stuff had a lot of lye that would take the skin off your back. Fortunately we rinsed it out real good, and we were real clean and sterilized with that strong soap. We'd have a Saturday night nude show for the community. We didn't have any shame and those guys and mamas were over there looking, chattering and all that stuff and we were over there scrubbing ourselves clean. Our Saturday night bath.

Every year Auntie Phil, Auntie Henry, Auntie Pearl, and Aunt Wathena would come to Locke for about two months in the summer. My mother was also a forelady for a packing company. And they asked her to hire the workers for the company to grade pears on the conveyor belt. They had two conveyor belts and they hired maybe about a total of 25 or 30 people, maybe about 40 if the season got heavier. Just like an employment office





there. Everybody would go there and beg my mom to let their daughters work. Jobs were very hard to find those days. Nobody employed you because of the restrictions and discriminating laws. You can't work anywhere else. It was very hard for my mom to deny them a job. Most of the people usually came back and want the job again. So they had the first priority. The only people that ever quit had moved out of town, then there's an opening. When there's more people looking for jobs than there were openings, Mama got some enemy by that.

Mom did canning too. After the green asparagus, they canned white. She used to work during that season. The season lasted about maybe a month, a month and a half at the most. By that time, they just plowed it over and let it grow. And that's their season of asparagus.

For dinner, we ate very simple. Usually a main dish is a meat, and then a vegetable, and then a little soup. I ate so much Campbell's soup—vegetable beef. Open one can of soup and add two cans of water with it. You did not have individual bowls. Each one keeps dipping their Chinese spoons into that common bowl of soup. And another thing we ate a lot were hot dogs. What we'd do is buy a pound of hot dogs and cut it in slices, then we sautéed it in the frying pan, put some onions on it and doused it with ketchup. We eat a lot of rice with that. Sometimes we get half a pound of ground pork



Collin, Milton, Irvin, Millie and Effie Lai in 1932.





and then we usually have a piece of swordfish on top of it. That is the main entrée. On holidays, we'd go buy a pound of roast pig with a little vegetable, and eat that with a little oyster sauce. That is good with a couple of bowls of rice. My mom always liked to eat pork steak. And each one of us would wolf it down. And then we'd be eyeing Mom's steak. She usually eat about half. We all sit there waiting and waiting and waiting. The next thing she did was cut her half in half and give it to me, Collin, or Milton.

The Depression years were very hard on my family because there were no jobs. I remember one time our rice bin was empty. My mother was sitting in the kitchen wondering where she could get money to buy some rice. I guess she was praying. There's a knock on the door. There's a man that used to come in and used to buy the moonshine my mom made. He owed fifty cents and he gave my mom the fifty cents. That was a lot of money. So she used the money to buy some rice and we had our dinner. It was really pretty tough. In those days, you didn't have government aid or anything like that and you're too ashamed. Your neighbor's just as poor so you don't expect your neighbor to help you. So that's the way it goes.





Chinese Huck Finn

When we got a little older and could work, we'd go off to the orchard and picked pears for the farmers. That's how we made our allowance for the whole year. I remember that I was working in my uncle's ranch and he paid me a dollar a day. I worked from sun up to sun down. The only thing that is different is that we get fed three meals a day and that's about it. I worked the whole summer and probably earned less than one hundred dollars. That is big money during '37, '38, '39.

The other income I got was that I was a fisherman. I went to the back slough and I'd catch bluegills and catfish and sell that to the neighbors over here for five cents a pound. That's how I'd make some movie money. I'd go to the movies for five or ten cents a movie and also buy myself some goodies with that extra money that I earned. So I am very frugal. I kept the money under my pillow and it turned green before I spent it. So that's how things are.

When I got a little older, I was sixth or seventh grade, I partnered with another older person and went out to the back sloughs and set traps to catch skunks. And we go out there in the morning to check our trap and after that, we kill the skunks and we skin 'em and dry the skin. And we sell it. I think we'd get about a dollar to two dollars a pelt. I remember we went out there to check the trap and the skunk there was very unfriendly and I got myself all sprayed with the skunk. At that time I'm so immune to the smell that I didn't realize that I smelled so bad. So when I went to school and get in the room, all the students left. Finally the teacher said, "You better go home and change." I went home and cleaned myself up and changed clothes and went back to school.

I'm like Huckleberry Finn! I'd go back there by myself in the back woods and do the trapping and also there's some wild fruit out there. I used to pick some of those cherry plums. I used to get a bag of that stuff. Nobody wanted to eat it anyway. And when we were a little older in the summertime, we used to go camping on the river over there with another buddy of mine. And





we'd go down the river and get some water in a little five-gallon can and light a fire and we went across the levee. The farmer over there had lot of chicken corn and we went there and borrowed half a dozen ears of the chicken corn and boiled it. And that's our dinner. And we gaze at the moon, gaze at the stars, and day dreamed. And spend about three or four hours out there before we come home. That corn is harder than pebbles, real tough. Chicken corn is usually ground up and fed to the chicken, but we got it for nothing and just boil it and eat it. It was a lot of fun.

On the river, we saw people coming in a big yacht, and we always figured that when we got older, we could buy one of those things and do what they're doing. We didn't realize it was so expensive. So we dreamed about businesses, money, and traveling. My buddy and I, he's just as poor as I was, we'd talk about something way out of reach. At that time, opportunity wasn't open that much for us. As far as jobs were concerned, I don't care if you have an engineering degree or have a professional degree, they won't hire you because the state law won't allow Chinese to be hired. So we were more or less oppressed to do manual labor in a farm, harvesting in the summertime for peaches, pears, cherries, and plums.





Reunion of the Bad Boys of Locke

Editor's Note: On September 24, 2005, Irvin Lai (IL) had a reunion with friends from Locke including Gay Lum (GL), cousin Ping Lee (PL), first cousin Daniel Leung (DL), Henry (H), Albert (A), and two others. This was taped by Susan Dickson. This is the edited transcript.

IL: This is my friend, Gay Lum. And we were kids when we were here in Locke. Climbed through everything. And he said we were bad boys, the bad boys of Locke. We turned out pretty good.



GL: I'll tell you a story. He had a shotgun. And we went to somebody's barn and killed a pigeon, a local pigeon. Another thing too, the people born and raised here were *gee jay*, local born. I'm from the old country. Usually they don't mix together. They think they're better than we are. But he's the one who took me in and we became friends. That was unusual!

IL: I'm the ring leader. We had a group, we formed a group.

Gay Lum

GL: Let's put it this way. Everybody says, when you were a kid, you were *fan do*. That means you were smart. You were smart like that. I don't know how smart I am, but you are... There were two whore houses. One's called the Columbus Room. I don't know what the other one was called...

IL: The Three Star?

GL: I guess. A lot of sailors would go there and come out happy. When we were kids you know, we went in there and we'd try to play tricks on them. We'd ring the doorbell and ran. After a while, the madam got real smart,





was watching us and caught us. Instead of get us held, they said, “Come in, come in, sweetheart.” So we’d go in there, and they said, “Will you do me a favor and go buy me ice cream? Here’s fifty cents for a pint of ice cream.” So we’d get the ice cream and was invited to her parlor. Instead of buying the ice cream for her, she’d feed us ice cream. Ice cream and soda. Now I can tell people, I think I’m the youngest person to go into the whore house at eleven years old. Every time I see a flower that smells good, it reminds me of that whore house.

IL: You used to play a trick, push the bell and run.

GL: After a while I’d get smarter. I’d push the bell and put the toothpick in there! I used to live down in the basement. And in the evening time, especially the winter time, it was cold! We burned those kerosene stoves. Everyday you’d come out and your nose is black because of the kerosene. And then they...

IL: There’s no heating. You’d burn kerosene to heat up the house. That’s not too efficient. Smoked up the house... Hey cousin from Grass Valley. Come in! His father was a farmer up there. They had a lot of gold on the ground, but they didn’t get anything. And when they moved down here, my mom was very good friends with him. And mom used to go there at least five times a week at night and talk till about nine or ten o’clock at night and talk about old things.



PL: Not only that, your mom was like a big sister. When my mother came over from China, the first place she went to was to see your grandpa. They knew each other in China. Way back.

IL: Their mother knew our family way back in China. That’s the reason why they were so close! And my mom speaks Cantonese.

PL: She spoke more than Cantonese. She knew every language!

Ping Lee





IL: And that was just right for his mother. I don't know what they talked about for two to three hours. They must have talked about something!

PL: Well I'll tell you. Effie, his mother, was the first Chinese woman that could stand up on the platform and talk...

H: Remember? They came down to look for you for putting all those graffiti on the river bridge. We all did it, but they went after you. That was really something!

IL: They knew who I was. They called me the ring leader.

H: No, because you put your name there! The biggest name there!

IL: Maybe you put my name down there!

H: Those were the good old days.

A: You remember those sleds you made out of metal signs that we used to go back and slide out?

IL: Yea the Huckleberry Finn gang. That's right. All the sloughs back there and we'd go there and fish.

H: We used to be called the Barney Boo Boo gang. We all did that.

IL: I used to trap skunk, fox and everything back there.

A: Raccoon?

IL: Fried skunk? Delicious!

DL: Irvin's reputation wasn't that good.

IL: Hey you're my seventh brother. You watch your tongue. I'm still older.

DL: And all those pigeons in the house?





IL: You remember I had pigeon coop up on the roof?
Raised all those pigeons and I wanted to eat it.

DL: My mother was always after him to clean
up those pigeon droppings and everything.
That was amazing.

IL: Everybody was against me because I had a
bunch of pigeons up there.

DL: Everybody!

IL: You guys are giving me a bad reputation. If I had
known that, I would not have come down here (laughs)...



Daniel Leung

PL: [Opening of reunion program] You know today I see so many old
faces, some new faces. It makes me very happy. I was born and raised here
88 years ago. I'm going to say a few words about the history of Locke. In
1915, when Walnut Grove was burned down, that's when this town was
this little orchard. Throughout the years, it grew and we had all Chinese
living here. Of course the Chinese stores. They used to commute up and
down the rivers. We were all serving as farm hands, which were all Chinese
in the Delta area. In 1920-1940, the town was very promising. We did
very well. We had about twenty-five businesses and three hundred people
in Locke. Some of the other Chinatowns had a number of Chinese too.
Anyway in 1940, the war broke out and then things began to change. The
older persons, the sharecroppers, who were all Chinese, had gotten too
old. The young people naturally didn't like to get back on the farm. As a
result, after the war, many of these young people had a good education.
The government put them through schools and they left the area. This
whole river and Chinatown died. As a result, the businesses locked up and
everything else. And just like the town of Locke, the county redevelopment
bought the town and Locke and the resident parcels were established so that
people could buy it. Before you couldn't. Of course the town was getting
old and luckily the county reinforced some infrastructure like sewage and
water. Furthermore, the Parks and Recreation was going to establish some
museum on the north end of town. The Locke Foundation is going to



have a memorial for the Chinese that did so much for the history and the development of the area here and so forth.



**Irvin Lai at the
Locke Reunion.**

IL: [Speaking to crowd] I began living here in 1927. I was six days old when we came over here. The house I lived in was right behind Dai Loy gambling joint. That's the house I lived in till 1941 when I moved out of here. Those boyhood days were really fun. We have the whole gang here. And we had all the places back here, the slough for us to go fishing, hunting, and trapping. My childhood days were over at the Baptist Mission. That's where we'd hang out and we'd get our drinks and some Christianity over there. And our group would have Bible study and our craft classes. I still remember the two important occasions we had over there was Easter and Christmas. We always had a good program then. And at Christmas, we always had—I still remember—hard candy. I think I still have some of that candy left. Those candies were so hard! Every year we'd have at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of the candy left in that sack. It was so hard, we didn't eat it. Those were the candy from Sacramento from the mission.



**The Dai Loy gambling hall that Irvin
lived behind.**



**Many of the gambling devices used at the
Dai Loy were common household items:
tea cups, pans, basins, bowl, buttons.
In case of a raid or arrest, the participants
would not be accused of being in possession
of gambling paraphernalia.**

(Photo courtesy of Lucky Ouyang.)



We were so poor we couldn't even buy our toys. We had to make our own. And those days, everybody was in the same category. I can tell you that. Sometimes there was no rice in the bin. You'd have to go to the neighbor and borrow a cup of rice. It's that bad. Back in those days when you don't have county aid, when the pear season was not doing so good, then you have to hope for the best for the next season. So I've been through that back in the Depression, it was real bad then.

Another thing I still remember we used to go to school. Our school was different. Down South is the same thing. We had the same school here called the Walnut Grove Oriental School. Because we're segregated, we had a White school down the street. And our athletic equipment was always old. They'd go to second-hand store to buy that stuff, we got the hand-me-down. That's how we were treated. I remember when I went to school when I was 5-6 years old, I didn't speak one word of English. At home we spoke Cantonese. I don't know whether it was good or bad. But I went to school and I didn't understand what the teacher said. I went a couple of days and they sent me home. I had to stay an extra year before I could go there. That was how it was. There's no ESL training at that particular time. They don't have any special classes. They don't have any special teachers to teach. And we'd go there and sit there like a dumb duck, listening to the teacher, not understanding what they're talking about. I guess that's why the people in Locke were set back by the English language.

Fortunately I was in the service and I got the GI bill, I went to school and I made a business. I owned a construction company and a refrigeration company. I'm involved in real estate development. That is from Locke. We are the guys from Locke and we are doing well out there. I want you to believe that there are many people from Locke that are doing very well outside of Locke. Because of the prejudice, we had determination to get ahead. That's how we got ahead.

I did a lot of things with the community in Los Angeles. In fact, I do a lot of things for the whole United States and the Chinese American Citizens Alliance which I was the Grand President. We are a civil rights organization. We went to Washington to fight the unequal laws. Like the wife can't come to the United States, all the laws that segregated, 1882 laws, the Chinese property laws, Chinese cannot be a witness in a court...all those things.





The Chinese cannot work for the government, nor corporations. You can't imagine what we did in those days. We can't work for anybody except in the farm picking pears and tomatoes. That's all we had.

I'm glad an organization like mine went back there and repealed all of those laws. We did it in 1944, repealed all those unequal laws in the whole United States. Not only in California.

Have you ever heard of the Peking Duck Bill? I was in the restaurant business in Los Angeles that had the health department enforcing the USDA Law of 140 degrees. You cannot have any protein-type meat hanging up there at room temperature. I was in the restaurant business. They threw away all of my duck, all my dim sum, all my *don-tat*, all that stuff. All the inspectors came in and put a thermometer in my food. That's it. Throw it away. I got mad, and because of economic survival, I went to ask them. "What you want us to do?" All the restaurants over here are in the same predicament. They said, "Go change the law." Change the law? All right. What you want us to do first? They said you go there and check all your products, your duck, your dim sum, your soy sauce chicken, your sausage and all those things you sell below those temperatures. So we did. Which laboratory do you want us to go? So we went there. And all the items that we tested come out negative. No germs, no bacteria. We take that and go to Sacramento. In Sacramento we had another lab test of our duck. We had six ducks from San Francisco. And we took it in to Dr. Brent at the University of California at Davis. And he's the USDA research doctor. We delivered the duck on a Friday. And he happened to go out on a speaking engagement that weekend. And I said, "By golly, that duck will probably spoil and all kind of bacteria in it." He checked the duck out. We went to a hearing at the Assembly and also in the Senate. And then one guy asked, "Dr. Brent after you checked those ducks out, what did you do with it?" Dr. Brent looked at them and said, "We ate it." So that is a story that we can back our right in history, a history that we've been eating duck for 5,000 years. And we checked with the USDA and the health department in Atlanta¹. There are no cases of people getting sick eating Chinese roast duck. I'm glad we passed the law. It's not only for the Chinese roast duck, but all the dim sum, and all the soy sauce chicken. That's the reason inspectors today walk by and they don't say anything. I'm glad that I did it. And I'm a Locke boy. And you can take credit for it!

1 Centers for Disease Control.





1940s in Los Angeles

Interview by William Gow

Editor's Note: This is excerpted from an interview conducted on September 20, 2008, in Los Angeles, California as part of the Chinatown Remembered oral history project focusing on Los Angeles of the 1930-40s. See www.chinatownremembered.com.



Irvin at Belmont High School, 1943.
“Look at those shoulders.”

We left Locke in 1941 because my uncle had a restaurant in Los Angeles and he wanted us to maintain his restaurant. He got drafted in the army and my mother felt that maybe it would be good for us to get out of Locke, get out of the river. All lock, stock, and barrel, we moved to Los Angeles.

We first lived in a rooming house and then the family bought a house close by the restaurant on 7th and Union. It was at 1333 Ingram Street, which is about two blocks east of the restaurant. Later, we had three restaurants: the first was located at Seventh Street and Union Street. The second was at Fourth Street and Western Avenue and the third was at





Century Boulevard and La Brea Avenue. One brother operated each of them. They were “The Royal Canton,” “The Royal Steakhouse” and our original place, “Wong Duck Cafe.” My uncle’s name was Wong Duck and it was named for him.

Life in Los Angeles really surprised me because it’s completely different from the life in Locke. Locke is a regimented area. It’s an area where we know everybody by their nickname, not just their name. Here you’re coming into a foreign country and we have to make new friends. And a lot of our new friends are Caucasian and others.

I went to Virgil Junior High School, and then Belmont High School. Belmont was close to Chinatown and there’s a lot of Chinese from Chinatown at Belmont. We have a Chinese Club, and I joined that to meet the other Chinese people. The club celebrated the traditional New Year, Moon Festival, and things of that nature. For New Year, we had lion dance and all the other things. We featured our food, and we explained to other students what kind of food we eat in Chinese New Year, the culture, and the difference from occidental culture. For example, you don’t wash your hair during New Year. You celebrate actually on New Year’s Eve and then during the New Year, you sleep late and eat the leftovers. And that’s the day when the children go to their relatives and get blessings. We wish them a happy new year, fortune, and all that, and you get some red package. You know, you get yourself some gift and money and candy and whatever they give you.

Those days when you have a restaurant business, you go to work. After you get out of school, you go home and have your snack, and put on an apron and you’re working either in the kitchen or outside in the dining room. If you’re not good enough to be a waiter or a waitress, you’d be in the kitchen peeling potatoes, deveining shrimp, and cleaning and washing dishes. And then you slowly learn how to do the short order cooking because the chief cook is probably too busy with something else. People want to have a ham sandwich and a cheese sandwich and you go ahead and make one.

At Wong Duck restaurant, most of the clientele were Caucasian and at that time you had a lot of servicemen. We had a combination menu. We





have a Chinese menu and we have an American menu. We have steaks, hamburgers, French fries, and all that. Some of the servicemen wanted some experience with a Chinese menu and they ordered chop suey, egg foo young, fried shrimp.

They still feel that we are foreigners. They think you just get off the boat and at that particular time, they don't have that much of a liking of others than Caucasian because they come through fighting the Japanese in Asia. Their feelings towards the Asians are very hostile. They can't tell the difference. That's the whole problem. They did nastily call me a Jap, J-A-P. That is very demeaning, that word. We tried to defend ourselves; we tell them we are Chinese American; we're not Japs.

In the Chinese American community, there was a lot of animosity towards the Japanese because of how they treated our parents or grandparents in China. They're killing them, beating them, or whatever. We received letters from China, telephone calls that said a certain great uncle was beaten up, beaten to death by the Japanese soldiers and this and this woman, cousin, aunt, so and so was raped by the Japanese soldiers, and so and so grandmother was robbed and they took all her jewelry and belongings... And the foodstuff in their house was taken away and confiscated. It's never good news and we over here can't do anything for them. Our own bodies and minds are locked in with those kinds of stories. That's the reason why we begin to hate Japanese, even those people over here who didn't do anything to us, we hate Japanese Americans because of that reason. After the war we began to change because we realize Japanese Americans are not responsible for what the Japanese government did, you know.

During the war, we have a parade and the parade had a big Chinese flag marching down on the street and then everybody throw money into it. The flag was held by the Women's Society. And we all marched in the parade holding small flags and things like that. There were buttons that say "I am Chinese" or "I am not a Japanese" or something like that. Those buttons were given to people; some organization printed those buttons.

At that time China City is still in full bloom because that was the first place they built after the Union Station. It's just like the honky-tonk stuff.





They were trying to depict the Great Wall or ancient China, similar to Olvera Street. That place is strictly a commercial-type deal to attract people into patronizing that place. But not too many Chinese go there to patronize it because either the Caucasians sell goods that you could buy elsewhere cheap. And they have a little takeout restaurant, a little fast food place and a place where you can buy Chinese art goods and clothing.

New Chinatown is structurally built. China City is temporarily built, just like a cardboard, you know. New Chinatown is built well, it's a solidly built place. It cost a lot of money too. That place is solidly poured concrete. Because I did some remodel work there, I found out how well that thing was built. New Chinatown was a place where Chinese congregated. It's not only Chinese business area, but the family associations were there. You have all kinds: the Wongs, the Chans, the Woos, the Yees, and any kind of a surname that has some kind of affiliation to Chinatown. And they used that as a meeting place. You go down to Chinatown for a family association meeting, then you go for lunch or dinner, and do a little grocery shopping before you go home.

I played football for Belmont. Oh, that was really something, I never know anything about football and I went in there and learned to play football. And I remember we were down, bottom of the league. We were the lowest of the low and the last game we played was Wilson High School. I still remember they were top of the league. We tied them, zero to zero. We came back to campus, we were big heroes. There's only one more or two other Chinese on the team. I was the only one in varsity.

We had a camaraderie in football. At school we always go around together, you know, the football players. We belonged to the same club, the varsity football club which is fairly high-esteemed. And some of the female students wanted to borrow our letterman sweaters. I have to confess, I only loaned it out to one. That's it. After that, no.





Irvin and teammates

I belonged to ROTC, the Reserve Officer Training Corps. And we have our dance once a year. A lot of different ethnic groups belonged to the ROTC. In that time, you either belong to the ROTC or you take a sport, but I went in both. I took a sport and the uniform fascinated me.

There were about fifty or sixty Chinese students out of three thousand on that campus. There were Spanish and Black, Mexican and colored. And then there's also other Asians, Japanese, Korean, and Filipinos. Chinese is considered the most Asian group.

I loved to sing popular music, you know. That's one of my favorites, you know, Hit Parade. We used to sit and pick ten songs and send it in to Lucky Strike. If you pick all ten, you get a tin of cigarettes free. One of my favorites was Bing Crosby, all those oldtimers. And some of those Black singers.

I love movies. One time we go to the movies, we see the whole thing twice. You see, we go there when it opened up and we get out of there after we see the feature all over again. We usually go down to Broadway or Main Street in downtown. They were all 24-hour movie theaters.





My maternal grandfather was a Presbyterian elder. My grandfather's a merchant. He came to the United States as a merchant, as a dress designer, as a tailor. He operated a tailor shop, made dresses for women, wedding gowns and all that. I joined the First Chinese Presbyterian Church. We belonged to a club and I organized a youth group that's called UCCYF, United Chinese Christian Youth Fellowship. And then united all three denominations, Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian.



Irvin, a member of the Reserve Officer Training Corps.

I joined the Merchant Marines in '45. I was a teenager and I gave my consent form to my mother to sign the release. I'm involved in school and ROTC. I'm pretty gung-ho on military stuff and I feel that maybe I can do more for my country by joining. This way, I get to choose what I want to do. If I waited another six months, I'd probably be drafted in a service I don't like. Over here, I'd be on the food service, I'd be on the ship, you know. That time it's very important

that you don't be sleeping in a ditch or in the mountain or the snow. In the Merchant Marines, you have a bed, sleeping on a ship.

William Gow was project director of the Chinatown Remembered Project, an effort supported by a grant from the California Story Fund of the California Council for the Humanities. Gow has a BA in Film Studies from New York University and an MA in Asian American Studies from UCLA. He teaches Asian American studies at UCLA and high school social studies.





Two Tours of Duty

Interview by Suellen Cheng

Editor's note: *This is excerpted from Chinese American Citizens Alliance's Veterans History Project. Suellen Cheng interviewed Irvin Lai on October 23, 2004. Thanks to Randall Bloch for the transcription.*

You were very young, 17 years old. Were you old enough to be in the Service [Merchant Marines]?



Irvin serves his country as a U.S. Coast Guard Merchant Mariner in 1945.

My mother had to sign the papers. She was questioning me: "Why do you want to go so early?" I said, "Mom, in another year I'll be drafted anyway, so you might as well let me choose the branch I want to be in." Finally, she consented.

She wasn't happy about it but she knew it was my choice and she supported me. I still had a younger brother who was with her, Collin. My other brother was already in the Army so we were a military family anyway. There's not much she could do.

Could you describe your Basic Training a little?

I went to Catalina Island for my basic training. It was nice over there. One thing I remember is in those days, we still had discrimination. I remember vividly in my company there was a Caucasian kid who kept picking on me: everything I did was wrong. I prayed to get kicked out of the Service but I just took it in, was patient, and took whatever he gave. But, it's still implanted in my mind that I was discriminated against.





It was like any other military basic training. I learned the weapons, sea safety, and operating the ship. We were assigned to the engine room, doing our duty as firemen and operating the steam engines . . . things to keep the ship going. We learned how to man a lifeboat. I have a license to man a lifeboat that can carry 40-50 people.

Was that toward the end of World War II?

Just about. Germany was still fighting at VE Day. After that time, Germany and Italy surrendered. Later on, Japan surrendered which was VJ Day. I was still sailing on the ocean and we were alert about Japanese submarines. We were in a convoy and traveled very slow, about five or six knots (6-7 miles per hour). The convoy had 50-100 ships, going in a pack. Usually, a freighter would be on the outside in case of torpedoes so we weren't hit first. They didn't want to lose an important supply ship or an ammunition or gasoline supply ship. The freighter would be outside the convoy carrying Army goods, etc.

The ship we sailed on was very heavily armored. We had a five-inch gun in the rear, a three-inch gun in the bow, machine guns and anti-air guns, and we had to learn to use them. In our training on the ocean, we fired those weapons. You don't get that training as a civilian!

How many people were in your unit and who were the people that you met?

I met a lot of ordinary kids—people in my age group from around the country who signed up for this. They had the same idea as me: to get into some action or choose the area they want to serve, be on the open sea and be a sailor. That's what we were, sailors. Everyone had a different idea why they served. But we were very compatible because we were all serving our country.

It was the USS Halliburton and it was a Victory Ship—the big, ten thousand-ton freighters—heavily armored. We also had Navy personnel on the ship, besides us, to take care of the armaments. If there was an attack by a plane or submarine, we fired those guns and shot them down or sank the subs. We had very heavy artillery.





At that time, the war was still going on. Was there any fear? How did you deal with it?

At that age, the fear was not as bad as it would be now. You're young, you're adventurous, and you take your chances. If you're unlucky enough to be torpedoed, so be it. We learned to use sea safety, survival ships, and the other equipment we were trained on. There's no way you're not exposed to fear in the military at wartime. You could be bombed or strafed by an airplane with a machine gun. You're open for that.

How long were you in the Service during World War II?

A little over a year before the war ended. After it ended, they discharged everyone. They didn't want to carry the burden of pain.

I was pretty happy. I got off the ship and I was on my way home! I think I was up in San Francisco. That was my separation from the Service.

On VJ Day, everybody celebrated. We whooped and hollered. We were all happy the war was over. We could get back home and do our own thing. The load was off my shoulders and I didn't have to continue on.

While you were in the Service did you communicate with your family? How often did you correspond?

I'm a lazy writer. I wrote maybe one or two letters and a post card and that's it. On a ship, where are you going to mail that stuff until you hit port? The telephone was expensive so we didn't use it. Of course, you miss your siblings and your parents. I wondered how they were and wanted to be helping with their business. My sister wrote me and my mom wrote me. Nothing from my brother. I did receive a letter from my older brother, Milton, from the Army to me.

He was in the European Theater on a hospital ship. He said his duty was quite gruesome. He had to take care of the wounded soldiers who were hurt and shot up. He said he had to take care of someone who had gangrene on the knee and they had to use maggots to eat the dead flesh which was gruesome to me. But that was the method of cleaning gangrene in a wound.





Some of the soldiers had been wounded for two weeks before they got to the hospital ship.

I wrote to him and before I went into the Service, I wrote again to see how he was and how things were going in the family. One time when he wrote, he said when he was in Italy, he was on a bombing mission and almost got fired upon by his own plane. That really frightened him. He told me, "Don't join the Army!"

And that didn't frighten you?

I guess I have a mind of my own. I like to be a little independent. And when you're on a ship, you don't have to go hiking on a mountain because you always stay on the ship. That's the benefit of being a sailor. You have your quarters, your food, and you eat at a regular time. In the Army, sometimes you have to eat K rations and that's not something you cherish to eat!

I was chief steward. That involved taking care of all provisions, food, and supervising the sailors responsible for bedding and other services. I also did some cooking since part of my job was to see everyone was fed. I ordered provisions for the next six months every time we docked. It was quite handy for me because I had experience from the restaurant business: I could tell the difference between a can of beans and a can of tomatoes!

On Catalina Island, they sent me to Cook and Baker School. That's how I learned how to cook, American style.

You were drafted into the Army during the Korean War?

The Army was a little different. I was 23, single, and the Army didn't give me credit for serving in the Merchant Marines so they drafted me. That was in 1950. I received my basic military training at Fort Ord, near Monterey, California, and learned how to be a good soldier. They trained me as an infantry person. We went through rifle training, other weapons training, maneuvers, learned how to march 30 miles a day and that kind of stuff. We carried a full pack on our shoulders. All our living stuff, clothing, blankets, weapons and water was in a pack on our shoulders. We carried a piece of canvas called a shelter-half. We would bunk with another soldier





who carried the other piece of the shelter-half and we put them together and made a pup tent. Each soldier would crawl in on one side and that's where we slept in the rain. And it did rain! We just crawled in and went to sleep.

After I finished Basic Training at Fort Ord, I went to Fort Benning, Georgia, for advanced training. I was assigned to the 42nd Field Artillery. I spent about three months learning to shoot the howitzer artillery gun. Fortunately, I didn't go to Korea. I was in Germany for about 1 ½ years.

How did you feel when you got drafted? How did your family react?

I was disappointed because I had already served. At that time, they needed soldiers and there was no alternative; either you served or went to jail. If you didn't report for duty, you were AWOL. Military justice is very severe. You might land in the brig and stay there a couple of years.

What do you remember the most about Germany in the Service?

At the time, we heard invasion of Germany by Russia was imminent. We were sitting there waiting and it was our watch to stay there. We were worried they were going to start shooting at us. We'd never been on the battlefield but the Russians were seasoned soldiers. They had the armaments and they could outshoot us so we were quite worried.

I don't think the U.S. wanted a war in Germany when we had one in Korea. So, we tried not to antagonize them and they didn't want to fight us. I was sure happy for that!

We were in the Fourth Infantry Division and the 42nd Field Artillery which was our company. From there, I was in the Service Battery: Batteries 1, 2, and 3. We were in the battery that supplied ammunition, food and everything else. I was a staff sergeant and took care of the food. I was a cook.

You always liked cooking so that was not too bad an experience?

Of course! A cook didn't have to stand guard duty in the middle of the night in heavy rainfall, cold, and snow. We always had a warm kitchen. Unless we had to cook in the field.





You mentioned about discrimination during the war. In Germany, did you get similar treatment? How were you treated by your colleagues and officers?

Discrimination in the Army was subtle. I was supposed to have a higher rank, considering the job I did. They passed me up and gave it to someone else who wasn't doing that job. So I felt I was discriminated against. They didn't tell me, but I knew; everyone got a promotion but I didn't. The person who got my promotion was doing nothing.

I talked to my sergeant major. He made an excuse: "Don't worry Irvin, it won't be long, I'm going to promote you." By that time, I had been discharged.

In one incident, I felt I was really treated badly. We had different work shifts in the kitchen and one soldier whose shift I covered for was supposed to cover mine. But when I took off, he didn't take my shift. Fortunately, I had informed a sergeant about the arrangement. They court-martialed me for not showing up for duty, just before I was going to leave Germany. An army attorney defended me and I was exonerated because I wasn't actually missing from the camp—I just didn't make myself available for duty. The person in charge of the commissary was very prejudiced and he filed charges that I had gone AWOL. But everyone knew I didn't report for duty because I covered for the other person and he was supposed to cover for me. The other guy just kept his mouth shut. So I was court-martialed and I got out of it.

I had lived through a time when I faced a lot of prejudice. In the Sacramento River area, I went to a segregated school through the eighth grade. The whole area was segregated. You couldn't go to a barber shop, the same restaurant, and in a store they would ignore you. We felt that and tolerated it because there was no way to combat it. The majority had a very heavy hand on us. I've had that in me for all these years, so this particular discrimination I just took in and didn't act out and get violent. I accepted it and waited my turn.

When you heard about the Japanese internment camps, what did you think about that?





I knew about it because a lot of my schoolmates at our segregated school were sent to the concentration camps. Half the student body at Walnut Grove Oriental School were Japanese. A lot were friends of ours. Some lived in Walnut Grove and some lived in Locke. We didn't feel that much animosity toward them because we knew they weren't the ones who bombed Pearl Harbor. But we still had that feeling in us because we knew Japan had invaded China and at that time we were very pro-China. And because of our origin, or discrimination, we felt that even though we were born here, one day when China got strong enough, we might go back there where we wouldn't be subjected to discrimination. We felt we would have more opportunity in China. Here, we couldn't go to certain schools and universities, were restricted about buying homes, and sometimes we couldn't be a witness in a trial—all which, we felt, was institutional discrimination... not morally acceptable but legal.

You mentioned that you went in the Service because you felt patriotic. How could you feel you loved this country, if you were treated so differently?

I wanted to do my part. I was mistreated but it was still my country. I was born here; I wasn't born in China. I overcame that adversity because I wanted to be a good American citizen and joined the Service to serve my country.

I felt every citizen has a duty and I felt it was my duty to serve. It was my prime time. I was destined to go into the medical field but after my second tour, I lost all interest in that. The loss of that opportunity didn't hurt me much. I continued to do the best I could. I understood that no matter how they treated me, I would have the chance to correct all that stuff. I've been trying to do that my whole life. Trying to improve my life so the people who come here from the same origin might have a better, easier life. I went through it and I didn't die from it. I survived. I don't want them to go through the same thing I did with discrimination and other bias.

Were you the only Chinese American in your unit?

No, fortunately we had Howard Chan. He served on Catalina Island at the same time I did. We had good communication and went out and talked. We are both from Locke. When I left the maritime service, he joined the paratroopers. He served in the Korean War.





Irvin with Howard Chan on Catalina Island

During the war with Japan, were you ever mistaken as being Japanese or was there any bad feeling toward you?

I always had the feeling I didn't want to be misidentified. A few times, I was mistaken for being Japanese and called, "Jap." It was ignorance not to understand the difference between the Japanese and Chinese and I understood where they were coming from. It didn't bother me that much being misidentified. Of course, I didn't like it. Going into a restaurant or place to shop, they would look at you. They're not sure who you are; they give you that stare. Not a welcome or a friendly smile.

During the Korean War, China was an enemy. How were you treated, even though you were an American of Chinese descent?

I knew that China was involved in the Korean War. People here used the word "Chink" regarding Chinese troops fighting the American soldiers. I understood that but it was hard for me to have the same feeling. I didn't like it but I couldn't do much. I couldn't go out and demonstrate because what good would that do?

Did you benefit from the things you never would have learned if you hadn't been in the Service? Did your military experience contribute to your attitude toward war in general?

Yes. I got to see the world. I never dreamt I would be in Germany or visit Europe. I went to France, Holland, Belgium and a lot of other places while on leave. For a country boy like me, it was a dream to meet people with





different backgrounds, countries and languages. Unfortunately, I didn't keep up with it but I can speak broken German and can get around the language. The people there were very nice. Maybe because we were the conqueror. I just tried to help them rebuild their country, had good dialogue, and helped them understand why we were there. I thank the government for the opportunity to travel there free of charge!

The Service changed my feeling toward society, itself. Whatever discrimination society dished out, my comrades as a soldier and sailor did not reflect that. That changed my attitude. We took care of and looked out for each other. In spite of discrimination, there is still good in America. There are people who believe that first, we are human beings. That's why I can't be prejudiced. Only a few are bad, biased people. Most are good, wholesome, fair people. The military taught me that through my experiences. Except a few incidents, most of the time it was very pleasant. That's why my attitude is not to try to get back at people who want to suppress us. I feel that intermingling and enjoying life with them improved my feeling toward American society.

Have you joined any veteran's organizations?

I didn't join any. I was too busy raising a family. Then I got involved with the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA), it took most of my time. But when I was with CHSSC, it was very exciting. When I was president, I suggested many projects. I think the most notable was the veterans recognition project, *Duty and Honor*. Marjorie Lee was the lead person and we spent almost four years on it. We interviewed and photographed over 200 veterans and published a book. Up to that time, I don't think there was ever a book like that which was researched and produced by the community. I was very pleased and I know the Chinese American veterans were pleased. The first edition of 3,000 copies sold out.

Suellen Cheng is Museum Director and Curator at El Pueblo Historical Monument. She is Executive Director Emeritus of the Chinese American Museum and coauthor of Linking Our Lives, Chinese American Women of Los Angeles.





Church Elder at Chinese Presbyterian Church

By Susan Dickson



Irvin worships at True Light Chinese Presbyterian Church in Lincoln Heights.

Irvin, whose grandfather was an elder in the Presbyterian church in San Francisco Chinatown, attended the church down the street from his home in Locke. This church, which was led by Baptist missionaries from nearby Stockton, provided his early Christian instruction. When Irvin moved to Los Angeles as a teenager, he and his mother attended the Chinese United Methodist Church in Los Angeles Chinatown. Effie chose this church because she knew the pastor, Rev. Wun Bew Wong.

As a member of their teenage club, Irvin organized a youth group that was called UCCYE, United Chinese Christian Youth Association. This fellowship united denominations from the local Chinese churches:





Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian. Those student members who were good in music formed an orchestra and a choir that performed for each others' churches. Irvin sometimes did the cooking for some of their dinner events. UCCYF provided the opportunity for Chinese Americans from throughout the city to have good times with other Chinese.

Irvin joined the Chinese Presbyterian Church on East Adams in LA because his wife, Jessie, attended there. Throughout his life, Irvin made many contributions to the spiritual and material growth of the Chinese Presbyterian Church, later known as True Light Presbyterian Church. Irvin became a church elder in 1960. He served on the governing bodies in the church: the Session of Elders and the Board of Trustees. Later, Irvin served as a representative on the San Gabriel Presbytery.

When the Chinese Presbyterian Church moved to Lincoln Heights in 1967, Irvin continued as a leader chairing many committees: Church Building; Stewardship; Budget; and the Centennial Committee (100th Anniversary of CPC). He was also the editor for two and a half years of the monthly "Highlights Newsletter." Its final publication at Lincoln Heights commemorated the 120th Anniversary of the church.

Irvin and Jessie were part of a group of young couples and parents at the Adams Street Church location that formed a fellowship group called "the Mariners" in 1956 because they felt the need to fulfill their social interactions. Programs and speakers on child care, parenthood, school activities and teenage concerns were common in those early years. During holiday festivals, the Mariners' socials focused on bringing families together in Christian fellowship. In the 1970's Irvin was a Mariner Area co-chair with his wife, Jessie. After her death, he continued to take an active role in the Mariners, which continued to foster social interaction as well as service and support for church projects and special events.

While on East Adams, the Chinese Presbyterian Church sponsored a Chinese school that was held in two houses that the Church owned. Prior to the Church's move to the Lincoln Heights area of LA, those houses were sold. The proceeds were spent towards the renovation of the Lincoln Heights' church. After a hiatus of ten years, Rev. Philip Lee restarted the Chinese School which taught both Mandarin and Cantonese. Their goal





was to teach Chinese language to attract newcomers to the church. This Chinese School which was held in the church was a separate corporation. Irvin began as co-chair of the board, but later became its chair. At one time 350 students were attending the school.

In 1996 when True Light merged with another Presbyterian Church in Alhambra, Irvin remained behind in Lincoln Heights to start a neighborhood ministry. Irvin felt that there was still a need and an opportunity to reach out to the people in the neighborhood. After three years of weekly Sunday school and bilingual services, the church in Lincoln Heights was closed down and sold by the San Gabriel Presbytery. Irvin then began to worship at Alhambra True Light Presbyterian where his son, Lawrence and daughter, Kathleen attended.





Fifty Years with Chinese American Citizens Alliance

By Dr. Munson Kwok



**Irvin (second from left in front row)
at the 50th Biennial CACA National Convention in 2009.**

Leadership mixed with passion, with a good dose of common sense of what is right and what is wrong, with an open willingness to fight for the right. That is the Irvin R. Lai that I knew.

Irv is ever more remarkable when you think of him in the context of his generation. Irv came out of a generation of native Chinese Americans





who were locked in, literally during the nadir of exclusion and sanctioned discrimination in California. There was no leadership training then for Chinese, no internships, no grooming to take one's place in American society, no discussion of opportunities to pursue a good life. Rather, it was a time when America was looking to ship Chinese out, or at least to prevent more of them from coming in.

Irv had to get his leadership training from hard knocks—hard lessons learned from mistakes and paying for them, seeing injustice up front and personal.

The passion? I will attribute that to his mom and dad, especially his mom whom I knew, and to his God, who gave him the talent for loving and caring.

“Thank God, he was a country boy,” and I mean that in the most affectionate way, because he was not inhibited. And he learned to speak up. He became that voice, that voice for the right, fearless, unfettered, unrestrained by the subtle, suppressive, subjugation of living in an urban Chinatown, unlike most of us. It was also a God-given talent; Irvin knew how to speak in sound bites long before we all knew what a sound bite was! He would be front page stuff. And goodness, his community needed him—we needed him, several times, to get that attention.

Irv had a fifty-year career with the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, the focal organization for his civil rights activities. He joined while Los Angeles Lodge was rebuilding, having been dislocated from old Chinatown by eminent domain ten years prior. I think you could call him one of the young liberals in a lodge once known as the Republican bastion of Chinatown under Y.C. Hong. He learned how the lodge could burn that mortgage quick, and that would have consequences years later for the Chinese Historical Society.

Often an organization shapes the man, and, yes, Irv grew to cherish the tradition, the friendship and the camaraderie of fraternity. He rose quickly through the ranks because of his willing energy and dedication, serving as President of the Los Angeles Lodge and then moving on to the National





Board based in San Francisco. He served faithfully and patiently for over sixteen years before reaching the top spot of Grand (National) President.

Just as an organization shapes a man, more importantly, occasionally a man comes along who shapes the organization. As Grand President from 1985-1989, Irv started the movement of the Alliance into the modern era, re-energizing the organization with a rededication to a national mission. The Alliance in its longevity had fallen into a time of ennui and local preoccupation, surrendering national voice and impact. Irv reversed that and brought back a national viewpoint, even an international viewpoint as China reopened. Since then, the rest of us who followed have built upon this revived commitment to civil rights, immigrant rights, political education, battling discrimination, fighting racism, adding youth leadership development, and preservation of ethnic pride and heritage. A national posture for the Alliance needed an executive directorship, so Irv created that job, and it so happens the first incumbent, whom he found, was the Hon. Yvonne Lee, who would go on to be a Clinton official and member of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. Historically west coast-based, the Alliance now looked eastward to intensify the effort to increase the visibility and voice of Chinese Americans at the national level.

Irv always championed the education of citizens to create an intelligent national community voice, so he concurrently sat on the Board of Directors of *Chinese Times*, for sixty years, the only national Chinese American newspaper in the Chinese language. That means it was the only established national voice. Here he was in the fine company of prominent Angelenos Y. C. Hong, his son Nowland Hong, and Wilbur Woo. The styles of all these great leaders was different, and certainly Irv was unique and distinctive among them. The *Chinese Times* was founded by the Alliance in 1924, and then operated by the Alliance until economic competition by other national newspapers run by foreign Chinese companies forced its disappearance into history in 1984. Irv always second-guessed whether the board should have chosen to convert the *Times* to English to survive, but it never did. Past 80, he formed Los Angeles C.A.C.A. Community Action to force a focus on the local mission.

Grand Presidents remain on the National Board for life, and Irv moved from among one of the more liberal members to more conservative in his





fifty years, defending the hard-won traditions forged by a Chinese American community. Or perhaps we had all changed as members and his far-sighted viewpoints had become mainstream.

However, there was one area in which he stayed on the cutting edge, well into his 80s. He never waived in his passion and quest for justice, for respect of his fellow man, and he never stepped away from taking willing persistent action, when he regarded such rights to be threatened or abridged.

One more time, again well past 80, out of his pneumonia sickbed, I asked him to go to Sacramento to testify on behalf of Assemblyman Eng's bill on respect for the accidentally disinterred in future digs. And he did it. The bill passed the Assembly. He would use that sound bite voice again. He would get public attention. We would rally. We would sense the urgency. And we would believe, and then, we could solve it.

In a generation, there have been few like him. He leaves us a legacy and a lesson: as individuals in this country, we must be ever vigilant against injustice, disrespect. That which affects one, affects us all. We all possess a voice, which we can join together. We possess the ability to lead or to join with others to lead. We just need to find the passion and the willingness within us. That is what Irvin Lai would expect us to do.

Dr. Munson Kwok is an aerospace engineer and physicist who has served as National President of CACA (2005-2009), President of CHSSC, and is a Founding Donor of the Chinese American Museum.





A National Leader

By Nancy Gee

In the late 1980s, which saw big growth of Chinese and Asian American populations in Silicon Valley, it was decided that the time was right to try to put on a Chinese New Year's parade in downtown Mountain View. Chinese American Citizens Alliance Peninsula Lodge members had put in a lot of behind-the-scene efforts in getting this idea off the ground. Unfortunately, a couple of members of the Peninsula Lodge were not on board. However, instead of raising their objections within the Lodge itself, they chose to take their issues public and sent a letter to the City of Mountain View. The City saw this as internal dissension and became reluctant to allow the parade to continue. With this potential scuttling of the project, Irvin Lai, who was Grand President, was consulted.

Bro. Irvin immediately took charge of the situation and stated unequivocally that Grand Lodge (National), would be in charge and responsible for overseeing the parade. Bro. Irvin also met with the disgruntled members of Peninsula Lodge and in no uncertain terms told them that they were out of line for "airing their dirty laundry in public." From then on, no further objections were brought forth. As a result of Bro. Irvin's swift, stern, and steady action, the first Asian New Year's Parade in downtown Mountain View took place as scheduled. The parade was successful and continued annually for a number of years until the City of Mountain View decided to raise the fees significantly for police and other services so that holding the parade became too cost prohibitive.

I became Grand Secretary when Bro. Irvin became Grand President. Bro. Irvin took the title of "Secretary" literally, asking me to write letters on his behalf in addition to taking and keeping the notes and records of the board meetings. I never begrudged him that privilege because (1) I knew he was a product of his generation, when most women were given secretarial roles (I believe that I was the first female officer on the Grand Board), and, more importantly, (2) all of the letters written were not for his personal benefit,





but for the betterment of the organization and the Chinese American community as a whole. In particular, I remember writing a letter for his signature in which we objected to a movie that stereotyped Chinatowns and the Chinese American communities as drug and crime havens. This letter was published in a number of newspapers, including, I believe, the *Los Angeles Times*. I also recall Bro. Irvin's comments on the vitriolic hate mail and phone calls that he received as a result of that letter. Bro. Irvin willingly took them in stride as part of the price that had to be paid for standing up to what was right. The movie turned out to be a bomb and faded quickly from view. (I no longer even recall its name!) Hopefully, times have changed, but it was certainly the efforts of people like Irvin Lai that brought about the changes.

Nancy Gee is a Mountain View attorney. She broke ground as the first female elected to the board of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, historically an all-male organization. Moving up the ranks, Nancy subsequently became the first female Grand (National) President of the organization and continues to serve on its board as a past Grand President.





Fighting for Education: Asian American Education Commission

By Dr. William Chun-Hoon

Irvin Lai was a man of commitment and courage, and an advocate of civil and human rights. Whenever he saw injustice, he was there with all his energy to rectify it. Even in recent years, despite his ill health, he kept fighting for what he believed in.

He took the leadership in improving the education of Asian students in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The late 60's and 70's brought the migration of new families from Asia and Southeast Asia due to changes in federal immigration and refugee legislation. These immigrant and refugee students began enrolling in large numbers in Los Angeles city schools. They came from Hong Kong, People's Republic of China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Korea, and other Asian Pacific countries. The students brought with them their primary languages, unique cultures, minimal education, health needs, and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

Irvin at that time was the president of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (C.A.C.A.) and saw the special needs of these students and their parents. He rallied C.A.C.A. and other Chinese organizations and—along with other Asian community and university leaders—appealed to the Los Angeles Board of Education to assess the needs of this new population and take corrective measures. Irvin took the leadership for the Chinese community in a number of discussions and meetings with other Asian communities to address this problem. As a result, an Asian American Education Commission (AAEC) was proposed. It was modeled after the Black and Mexican American Education Commissions which advised the Board, administrators, and teachers on ways to best serve the educational needs of the students. AAEC would review curriculum modification, bilingual education, English as a second language, educational services, multicultural education, and parent education.





On April 26, 1971, Irvin articulated his concerns before the Board of Education. Through his efforts, in coalition with Korean, Japanese, Filipino civil rights leaders, the motion to establish the Asian American Education Commission was passed by a 4-3 vote of the Board. However, a year later, conservative members of the Board led by J.C. Chambers introduced a motion to dissolve the three ethnic Commissions. Again, Irvin stepped forward to plead the case for Asian students. At the Board meeting on February 17, 1972, Irvin vehemently protested Chambers' motion. After much discussion by the Board, the motion was rejected by a 4-3 vote and the Asian Commission was allowed to proceed in its mission for Asian American students.

This is an example of Irvin's dedication to human rights and the education of Asian children. His life leaves a legacy for all of us to follow. Among the other C.A.C.A. members, the late Herbert Leong and Dr. James Bok Wong were active with Irvin in representing the Chinese community on the organization of the Asian American Education Commission. Subsequently, Herb Leong became its supervisor (1973-83) and the liaison between the Board and the Commission. Irvin served on the Commission's Board of Directors along with Dr. Wong.

Dr. Chun-Hoon is the retired principal of Castelar School where he served for 19 years. He represented the LA Unified School District and worked with Irvin and other civil rights leaders in the formative years of the Asian American Education Commission.





Two Cases: Vincent Chin and Redistricting

By Stewart Kwoh

I met Irvin through my parents, Edwin and Beulah Kwoh (Quo). As I became more interested in community service and advocacy in the 1960s, they said, “You really have to meet Irvin Lai. He’ll be a role model for you.” I was supposed to do bar review at UCLA, but because of people like Irvin, I decided to start a legal service program in Little Tokyo and Chinatown. That has become my career.

I want to tell you about my relationship with Irvin. In 1982, Vincent Chin was killed in Detroit, Michigan. Vincent was out celebrating his upcoming marriage when two White autoworkers thought he was Japanese, cursed him out, and then beat him to death. It was a hate crime. Instead of going to Vincent’s wedding, his mother, Lily, went to his funeral. In 1983, the nation heard about the Vincent Chin case because the state judge sentenced the two autoworkers only to probation and a \$2000 fine. We were outraged. Irvin was outraged. I saw the *Los Angeles Times* article about the case and about a rally in Detroit. I spoke to my advisers like Irvin and they said that I should go to Detroit and offer some help. There, I met Lily Chin who told me, “I want justice for my son.”

Although our Asian Pacific American Legal Center was a regional organization, we went out to Detroit, Michigan. I met with some of the activists there and determined that it really wasn’t going to work just to appeal the sentencing. President Reagan was a conservative president but we thought it was best to get a federal hate crime prosecution against the two killers. No Asian American victim had ever been helped by that law.

We launched a campaign and C.A.C.A. under Irvin Lai was one of the prominent national organizations that worked with the Asian Pacific American Legal Center. The Legal Center was the only out-of-state co-counsel that helped the Asian Americans for Justice that Lily Chin had set up. And even though the number of hate crime prosecutions had





been dwindling, our advocacy eventually won the day and the Justice Department did file a federal civil rights case.

In Los Angeles, we had a rally for Vincent Chin with about 700 people who marched from Chinatown to City Hall. Mayor Tom Bradley was there; Irvin was there. I had asked Irvin to arrange a gathering after the rally for Lily Chin. He had everyone come to his restaurant. I was the moderator for that solemn occasion. Lily Chin spoke and begged the crowd for help to get justice for her son. I was standing next to Mrs. Chin and Irvin was on her other side. At one point, Mrs. Chin just collapsed. Irvin and I helped Mrs. Chin



to her feet and asked, "Are you all right?" Mrs. Chin said, "There is nothing I can do to bring back Vincent. But I don't want any other mother to go through what I'm going through."

Mrs. Chin was hopeful when the Justice Department brought the hate crime prosecution against the killers. The killer was sentenced to 25 years in prison, but there was a technicality and the sentence was overturned. When the case was moved to Cincinnati for a second trial in 1987, the almost all-White jury didn't understand the racial motivation of the killing and acquitted the killer, who never spent a day in jail.

Through all of this, Irvin was my mentor. I learned from him never to give up, never to set limits, never to hold ourselves below others.





I then worked with Irvin in 1986 on another case. The City of Los Angeles discriminated against Latinos by gerrymandering so that there was only one Latino district despite the large overall population. We supported the Latino community in their call to redistrict the City. But in that redistricting, the City decided to take apart the only district ever held by an Asian American, Mike Woo's. Irvin and I went to a City Hall meeting. We were very mad. Irvin said in front of the press, "This is racist to divide up the only district ever held by an Asian American. You have discriminated against Latinos for decades and now you turn the problem on Asian Americans. How ironic. How unfair." Irvin used the word "racist" a number of times. But the City Council didn't dare to yell at Irvin, instead they yelled at me. I remember meeting with some City Council executives who told me, "You have to control your people" (laughs). I'm not going to try and control Irvin Lai. He says what he believes is right. The City Council backed down and changed their plan. They saw the power and anger that was provoked when injustice was done.

We've lost a leader but gained a legacy. When Irvin helped Mrs. Chin to her feet, he showed compassion and caring. But he was always outspoken for justice. We need to be like Irvin. I'm proud that Irvin is my mentor. I'm proud that with his teaching and urging, we've developed the largest Legal Center for Asians, Latinos, and others. I owe Irvin. His legacy will live on.

Stewart Kwoh is founding President and Executive Director of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California (APALC). Amongst his many awards, Kwoh received the 1998 MacArthur Fellows Award and the 2010 Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Civil Medal of Honor.





Chinese Memorial Shrine Restoration

By Randall Bloch

INTRODUCTION

President Irvin Lai and I co-led the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California (CHSSC) Shrine Preservation Project. While I was writing letters to preservationists and politicians, and submitting grant applications, Irvin recruited affordable contractors to build the shrine's protective architecture and restore its structural elements.

The Nineteenth Century Los Angeles Chinese Cemetery Shrine (Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument No. 486) is located in Evergreen Cemetery in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles. Nominating it for historic status and restoring the memorial was a seven-year initiative of the Society between 1990-97. The ad hoc Shrine Preservation Committee—at different times consisting of Randall Bloch, Eugene Cooper, Elmo Gambarana, Robert Kwan, Irvin Lai, Eugene Moy, Cy Wong, Earl Wong and Susan Woo Yamasaki—managed all phases of the project. Other CHSSC members lending their support were Suellen Cheng; former president, Kipham Kan; Munson Kwok; and Emma Louie.

THE HISTORY OF THE SHRINE

The Evergreen Cemetery Chinese shrine was built in 1888 by the people of Los Angeles' Old Chinatown. It consists of two 12-foot-high kilns or "burners," a center altar platform, and a common memorial stone, or *stele*, inscribed with Chinese characters translating to: "Respect As If Here." The monument is approximately 1,000 square feet in size.

At funeral ceremonies, Los Angeles' Chinese American pioneers burned gold and silver paper—symbolizing money—and the deceased's personal effects in the shrine's burners. This was believed to encourage a safe transit





to the next life, or afterlife, and the well-being and abundance of the departed. Elaborate presentations of food such as whole roast pig, poultry, fruit, potable spirits, and joss sticks were placed on the altar at burials and seasonal rites and festivals such as Ching Ming.



A frontal view of the shrine from a photo taken in the 1890s.
(Photo courtesy of the Huntington Library Photo Archives.)

The shrine stands on land with an interesting history. In the 1870s, Evergreen Cemetery's promoters, needing a zoning variance to operate within city limits, offered the City the easternmost nine acres of the development to use as an indigent graveyard. The City Council approved the arrangement and the Los Angeles Cemetery Association dba Evergreen Cemetery was incorporated on August 23, 1877.

The Chinese community adapted a section of the indigents' cemetery to its use and erected the shrine in September of 1888. Documents produced from the County archives prove a ten dollar fee was assessed for Chinese burials and that non-Chinese indigents were buried free. In 1937, most recorded burials in the Chinese section were returned to China in a joint effort between the Ning Yung, Yin Hoi and Kong Chow associations.





In 1964, Evergreen Cemetery, desperately needing grave space, purchased back most of the nine acres it gave the City in 1877. Evergreen prepared the land for new burials by covering it with eight feet of soil but fortunately left the Chinese shrine untouched. It then sat undisturbed for the next quarter-century, apart from its wood fence being dismantled, the stele falling and breaking apart, and its being vandalized by graffiti.

THE CHINESE HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S INVOLVEMENT

In 1990, members of the Chinese Historical Society—learning of its imminent demolition—acted to protect the shrine for the short term by filing for historic status. In July, the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Commission visited the site to review the nomination. The Commission, CHSSC members, reporters and others present were surprised a century-old artifact of Chinese-American culture had survived in its original location. On August 31, 1990, the City Council designated the shrine Historic-Cultural Monument No. 486.

But the monument was deteriorated, its further decline seemed inevitable, and Evergreen Cemetery showed no sympathy toward preserving it. When CHSSC offered to purchase the grave lots containing the shrine, Evergreen demanded a price twice that of comparable land in the same cemetery. The coup de grace came when the cemetery insisted the shrine be stripped of historic designation as a condition of its purchase. The City Attorney responded with a letter listing the protections given City monuments and the penalties for ignoring them.

It was then that CHSSC's president, Irvin Lai, entered the fray.

THE SOCIETY PURCHASES THE SHRINE

Historic preservation in Los Angeles is a high-stakes game that is by nature confrontational. It can restrict the use of historically designated structures but only for a year. It was apparent the Society needed to purchase the shrine if it hoped to proceed unfettered.





On January 16, 1991, the CHSSC Board passed a motion supporting acquisition of the monument and giving the Shrine Preservation Committee power to negotiate with Evergreen Cemetery.

Chief architect for the project was Barton Choy of Choy and Associates, a local firm with other historic restorations to its credit and deep roots in the local community. Irvin Lai was well-acquainted with Barton and his late father, architect Eugene Kinn Choy¹, one of the first Chinese American architects working in Los Angeles. Irvin and Randall Bloch visited Evergreen Cemetery with Choy on October 15, 1991. Mr. Choy took measurements and photographs of the shrine and reviewed maps in the cemetery office. In November, we met Choy at his offices in the Silver Lake district where Barton and Irvin agreed that purchasing the 42 grave spaces encompassing the shrine was a prerequisite to carrying out the project.

On December 19, 1991, Lai and Bloch negotiated with Evergreen's owner, F.S. Montgomery II, whose family co-founded the cemetery. Irvin made an opening offer of \$12,000 for the 42-grave parcel but Montgomery would not budge from his demand of \$28,000. The owner's demeanor was churlish and the negotiations were unpleasant and humiliating.

At Irvin's suggestion, John Gill of the State Cemetery Board in Sacramento was contacted. An inquiry was made regarding the propriety of Evergreen Cemetery making new burials atop old graves in the former indigent section. Mr. Gill said it was legal if the new burials were not made directly over old ones but could not state to a certainty whether State cemetery codes had been violated. Gill said he was acquainted with F.S. Montgomery II and volunteered to intervene to achieve a lower price. After we contacted Gill, Evergreen suddenly and drastically reduced its asking price from \$28,000 to \$14,000 without perpetual care. Montgomery agreed to a proposal of \$7,000 down and seven monthly payments of \$1,000.

On February 19, 1992, Randall Bloch, Eugene Cooper and Irvin Lai informed CHSSC's board of the breakthrough. The Board agreed to ask

1 Eugene Kinn Choy (1912–1991) received his Bachelor's of Architecture degree from USC in 1939 and designed the current headquarters of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance in the 1950s.





for the membership's approval (required under CHSSC's bylaws) at the upcoming general meeting. On June 3, 1992, CHSSC's membership approved the purchase. There was much discussion but support for the measure was solid.

On September 9, 1992, Randy Bloch, Eugene Cooper and Irvin Lai met with Evergreen officials to confirm their plotting of the 42 gravesites aligned with Barton Choy's design.

The Society executed the land sale agreement on September 17, 1992. The agreement was presented to Evergreen by Randall Bloch, Eugene Cooper, Irvin Lai and Cy Wong with a check for \$7,000. President Lai said in the following day's *Los Angeles Times*: "This is a milestone for our community. The monument shows that the Chinese have roots here and that we contributed to the building of the West."

FUNDRAISING

After the acquisition, the Shrine Preservation Committee conceived a two-phase plan to preserve the shrine and considered a fundraising strategy. Project phase one would build a protective structure for the shrine and phase two would restore its structural elements.

On May 6, 1993, the Shrine Committee gave a presentation to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce at its monthly meeting at Hong Kong Low restaurant in Chinatown. At Irvin Lai's behest, the Chamber showed its support with a \$1000 contribution.

On March 1, 1994, Jeffrey Herr of the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs' Grants Division informed the Society its application for an \$8,750 grant had been approved. In 1996, an application for a Cultural Affairs grant for phase two was approved in the amount of \$9,700. Notably, the two Cultural Affairs grant awards were the first ever given to restore a Los Angeles historic-cultural monument.

\$4,036.43 was raised for phase two at CHSSC's spring fundraising dinner in May, 1996. Both project phases were also partly funded by more than one hundred CHSSC members' financial contributions.





PRESERVATION WORK AND COMMEMORATIVE CELEBRATIONS

The Shrine Preservation Committee quickly learned historic restoration contractors don't work cheaply. Given his construction contacts, finding affordable contractors fell exclusively to Irvin Lai. Were it not for his business associations and creative solutions, the preservation work could not have gone forward.

On January 12, 1995, the Society held a successful groundbreaking ceremony to initiate phase one. The event was threatened by days of unrelenting rainfall and the shrine was submerged in rainwater which president Lai called "the swimming pool." The Shrine Committee considered cancelling the kickoff but Lai insisted we "be done with it!"



Restoration Groundbreaking Ceremony.
Left to right: contractor John Alexander;
Department of Cultural Affairs general manager, Adolfo Nodal;
CHSSC president, Irvin Lai; CHSSC Board members Randall Bloch and Cy Wong;
and Larry Ung, vice president of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association.
(Photo courtesy of Rafu Shimpo.)





Guests included Councilman Richard Alatorre; Adolfo Nodal, head of the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs; representatives of Councilman Michael Hernandez, California senator Richard Polanco, U.S. Representative Xavier Becerra and California Assemblymember Antonio Villaraigosa; Larry Ung of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association; and armed forces veteran, James Gee. Mr. Gee recited a stirring poem in Cantonese, eulogizing Los Angeles' 19th century Chinese pioneers in addition to presenting a bouquet of chrysanthemums.

On June 3, 1995, phase one's completion was celebrated with speeches and a ceremonial ribbon-cutting. A four-foot-wide red bow was draped across the new, wrought-iron gate and gold foil pots of yellow chrysanthemums stood atop brick columns built to protect the shrine. A retaining wall with an embedded wrought-iron fence now encircled the memorial and a new row of steps led from the gate down to the shrine. Roella Louie, director of the Department of Cultural Affairs Grants Program, was present and obviously pleased with CHSSC's dramatic phase one improvements.

Over 100 people gathered on June 28, 1997, to celebrate phase two's completion—the joyous consummation of CHSSC's seven-year effort to preserve the shrine. A feast of Chinese delicacies was served, including a whole roast pig and dim sum. The altar platform had been rebuilt, the monument's brickwork was painstakingly restored, and a new center stone was in place that is a meticulous re-creation of the original. Suellen Cheng of the Museum of Chinese American History explained the significance of the shrine and the ceremonies once held there. Keynote speaker archaeologist Roberta Greenwood, and UCLA Historian Dr. Leonard Pitt, stressed the importance of preserving symbols of the City's history. Assembly majority leader Antonio Villaraigosa attended and immediately moved the Legislature for a resolution praising the project.

Irvin Lai was the skilled master of ceremonies for all the commemorative events held at the shrine. He was a natural for the role and his overflowing ebullience and humor drove the proceedings.

In December, 1998, the Society learned it would receive the Governor's Preservation Award for its efforts to preserve the shrine.





It was an honor being involved in this meaningful work with Mr. Irvin Lai. I will respect him and never forget him as long as I live.



CHSSC president Irvin Lai at the Preservation Completion Ceremony.

Randall Bloch is committed to helping save the few remaining symbols of Los Angeles' ethnic and cultural history. In that capacity, he has served on the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California's Board of Directors, worked as CHSSC's administrator, and written and edited extensively for the Society.





MTA, Irvin's Last Fight for the Community

By Susan Dickson

In January 2006, CHSSC learned the Chinese community was not notified when the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) had discovered empty coffins and Chinese artifacts buried with over 100 sets of human remains during widening of East First Street for the Metro Gold Line project in Boyle Heights. The initial response of CHSSC was to write MTA a letter requesting thirteen points of action. CHSSC wanted MTA to rectify this unfortunate situation and ensure it would not happen in the future. CHSSC Board member, Irvin Lai, then contacted the media in order to inform the public about the sad history of the early Chinese who, due to prejudice, were unable to be buried in Evergreen Cemetery. Irvin's interviews focused on giving respect to the early Chinese pioneers as well as the Chinese community. Not only was this story covered on local television, it was carried in newspapers from Paris to Beijing.

In February of 2006, MTA formed an ad hoc committee charged with making recommendations on the remains, cultural artifacts, memorials, and a fitting reburial ceremony. Three community members joined the ad hoc committee: Irvin, CHSSC board member Susan Dickson, and C.A.C.A board member Daisy Ma. Although CHSSC felt the cultural artifacts should be preserved and curated for educational purposes, the first committee decision was to quickly and anonymously rebury all remains and artifacts. Irvin successfully fought for the reburial of the remains next to the historic 1888 Chinese shrine that is owned by CHSSC in Evergreen Cemetery. After considerable deliberation, the committee approved the design of a large memorial wall. After sixteen months, the ad hoc committee was dissolved. However, CHSSC members continued to work on the project to decide on the exact wording on the wall and on the historic plaque next to the cemetery, as well as the wording on the grave markers. Irvin continued to serve as the liaison between the Chinese community and MTA for the next three years.





During this time Irvin compiled a list of laments he remembered hearing from the sojourners from his youth in Locke. He combined them into a poem. The MTA agreed to inscribe each line onto a grave marker that would mark each set of reburied remains adjacent to the shrine. Despite his illness, Irvin read this poem out loud—always in his strong clear voice—at the memorial wall dedication at Evergreen Cemetery on April 3, 2010. Irvin provided a voice, as he always has, for Chinese Americans past, present, and future.

*Away from my village and away from my wells
With no home to return
Across the oceans and across the seas
Shifting beneath someone's fence
Hero of the iron road
The Pearl River in my dream
Leaving my wife and leaving my sons
Joining the Chinese railroad crews
Forging ahead without path
Leading to my homeland
Dreaming of arriving
Only to cry without tears
My homeland is fancy and the moon is round
My heart is an arrow aiming for my home
Seeking dreams in America the beautiful
Golden mountains in blood and tears
Men like high mountains
Water flows down streams
Day and day my homeland fills my thoughts
My thought is eager and my heart aches
Immigrant's blood and tears
In desperation my thought changed
No hope of reunion
Upon me The Lord's grace
Heavenly gifts His loving kindness
Joy and happiness my daily bliss
Away from my village and away from my wells
With no home to return*





Irvin Lai at the memorial wall dedication at Evergreen Cemetery.
Irvin provided a voice for Chinese Americans—past, present, and future.
(Photo courtesy of O. C. Lee.)



