

## Woman recounts time living in Suisun Valley

By Kristin Delaplane

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'My father, Chun Tim, came into America in 1873 at 20 years old. He traveled from his village, Sek Keh, to Hong Kong and took a boat to San Francisco. The trip was four months. Toward the end their supplies were getting low.

"My father didn't want to work on the railroad, so when Mr. Hatch came down to San Francisco from Suisun Valley looking for someone to take his wife and daughter to church and to town to do their shopping, my father told him, through an interpreter, he would take the position if they would teach him English.

"A few years later Mr. Hatch wanted a fruit ranch. He had my father send for some men in Sek Keh to work on the farm. Hardly anyone brought their families. The men lived in a long wooden shed with bunks to sleep on and with a kitchen at one end. A cook made all their meals there. My father was a very pleasant fellow. He could be severe when dealing with the men, but everybody respected him. If they had any problems, they'd always come to him.

"In 1887, my father was going to go back to China to marry, but he was in San Francisco one day picking up provisions and the brewmaster said, 'I have a daughter. She's 17, but maybe not pretty enough for you.' My father thought it over: The trip to China would take a long time. He married the brewmaster's daughter, my mother, Ding Shee. I saw the picture of her as a bride. She was very pretty. How modest they are!

"For the wedding, she wore a long black jacket, embroidered. There was so much embroidery in different colors, you could hardly see the material. The skirt was red and hand pleated. Several years after they were married, my father's sister was getting married in China. My father said, 'Why not send your bridal clothes to her?' So that's what they did.

"My mother was from a village outside of Kow Lum in Hong Kong. She came to San Francisco with her mother and father when she 6 years old. As a young girl, she made buttonholes for men's suits. She did the most beautiful handmade buttonholes. She used to teach us. She said you have to pull the thread up a certain way so you'd get that little edge on it properly. My grandfather was up-to-date and he hired a teacher for her for a couple hours a day or two a week. Even when my mother was 90 years old, she read the Chinese newspaper. If she didn't know a word, she would always ask someone and try to learn.

"Mrs. Hatch told me once, 'I used to feel so sorry for your mother being the only lady. She must have been very lonely.' But never a complaint from her. She was so mild tempered. My father had a temper, maybe, but we never heard an argument between them. They got along so well.

"My father never did talk much, but he used to tell us about his village and the poor people. He would never eat potatoes and yams. He said, 'We had to eat a lot of that when we were small.' They would have rice mixed with sweet potato to save the rice, which was harder to grow.

"When Moy, my oldest sister, was born in 1887, my grandmother came to Suisun with a midwife. A month later my grandmother went back to San Francisco. At some point she and my grandfather returned to China. When my older brother, Gum, went back China to get married, they located her and took her Sek Keh for the wedding.

"I was the fifth of seven children. My Chinese name is Lin; the American for that is 'Lily.' None of us has a birth certificate, but I was born in 1901. My mother told us when we were born by the Chinese calendar, and I figured it out. Of the children, a brother passed away from pneumonia when he was 3 and Mabel passed away when she was 16 from tuberculosis.

"We lived in a house on the ranch. A room was built over my parents' bedroom and we had a living room, the children's room, and a guest room. They did build a tiny kitchen a short distance from the house with an awning, so Mother could walk over there. It was set up with a grill with a wok on either side. That's where Mother would build a fire to heat water and she washed her dishes there. But she never cooked a meal there. Our three meals came from the bunkhouse kitchen. "We got our water from a pump in front of our house. It was so sweet. There was an enamel cup that hung there for anyone who wanted a drink. Transients would come by every year and stop at the ranch, 'Oh, we always come to Tim's Ranch to drink that nice cool water.'

"Imagine, my mother had to pump that water to wash all our clothes by hand. She didn't even have a washboard until later. It was all hand rubbing. She had to heat the water and bring it out in big kettles and pour it into a big galvanized tub. She'd pushed the tub up close to the edge of the pump, so she could pump the water right into it. The soapy water would run off into Suisun Creek.

"My mother cleaned house, swept the floors and sewed. She loved to sew. My grandmother sent her all us clothes from San Francisco, but Mother made little aprons and things like that.

"My mother practiced Taoism. She burned incense and had like a temple in the house.

She used to tell us some of the old stories. The one about the seven sisters from heaven, who came down to earth. One fell in love with the shepherd boy, so she stayed behind. But before dawn, she too left and went back to heaven. When he woke, she was gone.

“She didn’t go anyplace. She stayed home with the children. I don’t even think she ever crossed the creek on the swinging bridge. She’d say, ‘It looks too dangerous.’ There was one other Chinese lady, Mrs. Lum, who lived nearby, but she and my mother only saw each other on Chinese New Year’s. Both had children to look after. The Lums had six or seven boys. Then a daughter came. Mrs. Lum used to carry that little baby all the time! The girl must have been 6, 7 years old and she was still holding her. Years later the parents and the little girl went back to Sek Keh. The boys stayed here.

“The first time my mother went back to San Francisco was for the 1915 fair. Oh, she enjoyed that. She stayed a whole month.

“I learned a little cooking from the teamster’s daughter, Goldie Mack. Her father drove the big horses to plow the land. Goldie showed me how to make taffy in our living room where we had a little four burner stove. Mother always had a kettle of water on for our tea. Mother watched us make the candy After Goldie left she said, ‘I’m not going to eat any of that. She kept dipping her finger in it.’

“Across the creek were the cherry trees. We go over the swinging bridge and with a hook, we’d grab the branches down and pick the ripe cherries. My sister, Alice, she will not buy cherries to this day. ‘They’ve all been touched by different people. I have to pick my own cherries.’

” ‘Wash them. What’s the difference?’ She’s stubborn.

“Where we lived was called ‘Big Camp.’ Other Chinese from nearby ranches would come up to buy things in a little tiny store my father started in a room in the house. They named it after my brother, Sam Kee. We had canned goods, tobacco, etc. In the wintertime we used to get the Chinese sausage, lop cheung. We used to wrap those and wet the paper and put them over the coals.

“I think we were pretty well off. We were never hungry. We always had clothes. My sister, Moy, always sent us clothes for Chinese New Year. For the New Year there would be a special dinner with some special food.

“I didn’t go to school until I was 10. I was the first girl in the family to go to school. My brother Gum said I should go and learn English. He said I needed a coat because it would be cold in the winter walking to school, so he took me to Fairfield in the horse

and buggy to Mortenson's, a general store. Gum liked a blue coat, but I liked a tanish brown one because it was warmer. I wore it for three years.

"I spoke very little English, but I learned quickly. I was just dying to learn and be like the others. There were two sisters named Lum and we'd babble away in Chinese. Rockville School was one room and Mrs. Bauman taught grades one through eight. There were about 40 pupils. I made third and fourth grades in one year. I made fifth and sixth in another year. I finished grammar school in six years, graduating when I was 17.

"My brother Gum asked me 'Do you want to go to Armijo or do you want to go to San Francisco? If you do want to go to Armijo, I'll buy you a little Ford.' In those days, you had to crank the car to start it. When it rained, you had to get out and pull down the flaps. 'Suppose I get stuck on the road? I'll go to San Francisco and stay with Sis.' I moved in with my sister Moy and went to Commerce.

"Moy's husband had a little men's store in Chinatown. He also helped people mail letters to China and the mail from China could be picked up there. I slept in a bed in the front room. The kitchen was down the end of a long hallway. The bathroom was near us. This was Chinatown, tenement housing. On that floor was a family with five or six children, an old bachelor and a couple; must have been 10 people on that floor.

"My mother never thought of sending the girls to school and Moy spoke very little English. When she came to San Francisco, she met a minister's wife, who was giving lessons in Chinese, so Moy went to school.

"I went to Commerce and to Chinese school, too, but quit in 1919 when I got married. My husband had a partnership in a little store and they had a cook for the six men. I watched him cook sometimes. Then we lived with a family and the woman taught me a lot. Her father-in-law was a caterer in China and she was a wonderful cook. Little by little, I caught on. After that my husband was manager for a National Dollar Store and he bought us a house in Oakland.

"After I had the children and learned to drive in 1928, I used to drive up to the ranch with my children and we would stay for a month or two weeks. And we used to bring my mother down to Oakland to stay with us.

"In his later years, my father more or less retired from ranch work and just had the little store. After he passed away, Mother stayed on the ranch. Then, Mr. Robbins who had taken over the Hatch Ranch, built a house for her. He said for all the years that the Tim family had been with their family, he wanted to do something for her. Her little house had running water, a toilet, two bedrooms and a living room. But she never lived there. Youie, my brother, and his wife moved there. His wife said, 'I have a family. I need the

room more than she does.' So Mother moved into a camp house and we put in a toilet for her. She still had her meals brought to her or she ate with her daughter-in-law. Mother was 97 when she died.

"It was a peaceful life we lived in Suisun and we were a close family. Not as affectionate as the American family, but we all love our family."

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