

# John Lowe's father arrived in Suisun Valley in the 1920s

**By Kristin Delaplane**

Sunday, May 23, 1999

At the time this interview took place Mr. Lowe was recovering from a stroke and was taking some Chinese herbal medicines to help him recover. Today he is in good health.

Before the interview, he had this to say about the Chinese herbs, "It's taking me time to recover from my sickness. I went to a Chinese herb doctor.

"When you have a heart attack or stroke, there is a time when you lack oxygen in your brain. In Chinese medicine they say when you have something like that, your heart might recover but the liver and kidney are injured and you are not 100 percent."

Mr. Lowe started out by talking about his father, Moe Lee.

My father, Moe Lee, was the first one in my family in the Suisun Valley. He came here in the mid-1920s and worked on ranches in Winters and Suisun. He gained experience and the ranchers would hire him to manage their ranches.

He became a famous grower in this area. A lot of people were working for him and in the summertime, the kids would always look for him for a job. He'd give them jobs picking fruit or cutting fruit.

He always created jobs for the kids; American kids, Spanish kids, they all knew him. Sometimes, when he'd see some kid he knows, he'd say, 'You want ice cream? He loved kids.

"When I came in this country, he was sharing a ranch with the owner. The one who took care of the ranch would share the business costs and profits with the owner. Whoever operated the ranch had to pay for labor.

"I came here in 1939 when I was 15 years old. My mother, brother and I sailed over on the ship President Pierce from Hong Kong.

"The trip took 29 days. We stayed one week on the immigration island, Angel Island. When the apricot season began, I came to Suisun Valley and started working with my father.

"My job was picking apricots. We would get ready to work before 7 o'clock. Wages then were \$2.50 a day for 10 hours. Fifty cents was deducted for our meals.

"The foreman was Chinese and the majority of workers were Chinese. In fact, they were all from the same county, Loong Doo. Their ages ranged from 30 to 60.

"We all lived together in one wooden bunkhouse and slept upstairs on cots. It was hot, but at least it was clean. When you work 10 hours a day, you're tired. No matter what, you fall asleep.

"I worked the whole summer and made 200 bucks. I went back to San Francisco to go to school. I went to Washington Irving School, which was for immigrants from China. I didn't know English, so they put me in first-grade.

"In six months, they put me into fourth-grade. Not that I learned English that well, but my arithmetic was almost up to high school level. I had gone to a private school in China.

"You know the Chinese abacus? There's a song you had to memorize for multiplying, adding, subtracting and all that.

"Years later, when I was managing the ranch, I did all my own bookwork, like payroll, deduction insurance, state tax, and all that stuff. I always used the abacus to recheck my work and it never failed. If my pencil work was wrong, the abacus corrected it.

"Because I only had \$200 for the next six months, the first thing I did was to buy 50 pounds of rice and one jar of soy sauce.

"The next year, when the fruit season began, I came back to Suisun. I ended up working at the Pierce Ranch, the same name as the boat I came over on.

"My name was Fong On (Chinese style with the last name 'Fong' placed in front of the first name "On" About five years after I came here, the Fong family was working for me. The younger brother's name was Harry and he asked me, 'Can I call you John?'

"I said, 'That sounds good.'

"He said, 'It's easy to say and remember. This name On in this country is kind of awkward. This is the United States of America. You can change your name.' 'Lowe' tells where I am from in southern China.

"When we worked on the Pierce Ranch, we lived in the little old house that belonged to the ranch. I worked all the different jobs; spraying, running the tractor, cultivating ground and making ditches for irrigation.

"In the earlier times, altogether, we had almost 50 people working for us. You're working 10 hours. You took care of the whole thing.

"Payroll and sometimes I worked in the cutting shed myself. I got up at 5 o'clock in the morning to get the crew ready to go out and pick you still have matters, even nighttime.

"You have workers and you have a place to cook, a kitchen with two long tables. I built the kitchen myself. Started from the ground up. Built the frame, the sink, did the electrical wire.

"I met my wife, Lai Ming, in San Francisco. My wife and I got married in March 1955.

"My father died in 1970, and I stayed on two more years. I got out of farming in 1972. The income was just not steady. Sometimes I made more than wages. Sometimes it was a poor crop and you don't make money.

"I had to look for a way to support my family. Not just feeding the children, but also paying for medical care and trying to make their lives better than mine was.

"I felt I had no hope for the future in fruit farming. Unstable prices, weather; there's no way. I worked double hard and still got no income.

"Before I quit the farming business, I was looking for a job like in the restaurant business. It's too many hours in the restaurant business and I wouldn't have much time for the kids, my family.

"I had to think about my children. Would I have time with them to watch them grow up? Would we have time to watch them make mistakes and make sure they grew up the right way?

"Finally I figured out that maybe I could work for school district somewhere and I would get holidays and weekends with the kids. I tried it out at Solano College working substitute custodian job for the regular workers. The people kind of liked me and they were nice, so I applied for a job there. The superintendent said, 'You want daytime or nighttime? Either way you want.'

I said, 'I think I better work nighttime, so I have time to watch my kids go to school and all that stuff.'

Fortunately, all my kids went through poor times, hard times. They learned from being born on a ranch. I remember Christmastime the kids were in bedroom playing and jumping around. Well, let's see what I can give you for Christmas, so you can buy something for each other. I said, This year things are not so good. Maybe \$2 each. They were satisfied with it. They knew how to use that money to buy presents for each other.

"I kind of missed ranching, that fresh air and physical work. But I had a family and you have to face the facts. Whether you like or not, you have to deal with updates, what's best for the family."

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