

Long family roots grew on Winters fruit ranch

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, September 19, 1999

Melvin Fong and Nira Fong Wong are the grandchildren of Go Long, who started fruit farming in the Suisun Valley in the 1860s.

Their mother, Ivy, was born in Suisun Valley and lived there most of her life, except for a period when she lived in San Francisco with her first husband, Walter Low. They had three children.

After Walter died, Ivy married Jim Fong, a Suisun Valley farmer. Ivy and Jim had two boys and three girls. Nira was born in 1933.

In the late 1920s Go Long purchased a fruit ranch in Winters. After he died in 1937, his widow, Lee Shee Long, continued to live on the ranch. Her son George, along with brothers Bill and Harold, took over the family's fruit ranching business.

Jim and Ivy's children, Nira, Melvin and Robert, recalled being recruited by Uncle George to help out during the season.

"We used to have to go up to Winters and help with the harvest," said Nira. Even when they were very young children, they were expected to put in long hours, often returning to work in the evenings after their suppers.

Though only 4-foot-6 and weighing about 85 pounds, Lee Shee's chores were not for the meek. Nira described some of her tasks:

"My grandmother did so much and she was so tiny. She had a huge garden to tend. She raised chickens, ducks and pigeons."

When company called, Lee Shee had already begun preparations for the meal by butchering some of the farm animals: chickens, ducks, squab or rabbits.

Nira recalled the frequent weekend family gatherings in Winters. "Every weekend there would be a big crowd. As the family grew the numbers increased to around 115 people."

One of the main gatherings was for the Chinese New Year celebration.

“The traditional Chinese customs were followed: special dishes and the gifts of ‘lei see’ (lucky money) for the children,” said Nira. “At night Grandmother and I would sit in the dining room with a huge sheet of red paper and make the little red envelopes and we would wrap the money. She was pretty generous. She would have a dollar in each package.”

During the holidays, and always on Chinese New Year, Lee Shee would make her famous “go.” Nira described the operation. “Lingo is a traditional Chinese cake, the ‘Year Cake.’ It is real solid, made from brown sugar and sweet rice flour. As it is cooking, it gets real thick.”

Nira and her grandmother would take turns stirring the “go,” which was cooked in a huge pot. “Then the two of us would dump it in a huge dishpan. We’d carry it outside where my uncle had this huge oil drum or gas drum he had converted into a steamer on top of bricks. We’d steam the mixture until it got hard. Then we’d bring it back into the house. Grandmother would get a big cleaver and cut a chunk for each person to take home.”

Nira remembered that not only did she help with the meal, but it was the Fong children who always wound up doing the dishes. “What got us was we always ended up doing all the dishes and all the other cousins were out there playing around. But my uncle would give us each a quarter after we did all the dishes.”

Nira’s father, Jim Fong, leased a number of fruit ranches in the Suisun Valley during the years that Nira was growing up. In the 1950s, the family purchased a 4-acre farm in the Suisun Valley. Their ranching business consisted of growing apricots, peaches and pears and selling the fruit fresh. They also bought fruit from other farmers, which they dried and sold.

Besides the seven siblings, there were usually several other children living in the Fong household at various times. It was not uncommon for the Chinese to give support to other “hing dye” or “brothers” from the same village. Children of relatives were cared for because a parent had died or the parents just couldn’t care for them and there were children from the city who stayed during the summer to pick fruit.

In the ‘60s, the ranch in Winters was sold and Lee Shee came to live with her daughter Ivy and family until she died in 1912. Jim Fong died in 1986 and the ranch was sold.

Ivy Long Fong, the Suisun Valley native who had worked hard as her mother had before her, bought a modern home within a mile of the ranch and happily lived out the rest of her days.

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