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Emily Jones
Delta State University

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A Past Honored: Preserving the history of the Chinese in the Mississippi Delta

Emily Jones

University Archivist, Delta State University

Over 130 years ago the Mississippi Delta was a stop along a sojourner's path. Those few months or years expected to spend in the region turned into decades and generations of roots being planted and families raised. Lives were lived, dreams were built and experiences were remembered. Yet time can also dash away a century of existence in a blink of an eye. What remains when people of different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds interact are traces of the blending of those cultures. For the Chinese in the Mississippi Delta, their presence may not be as strong as it once was but their influence and determination has been enormous.

Collecting the general history of the Mississippi Delta is a component of the mission of the Delta State University Archives & Museum. A quick turn through the processed collections available to patrons demonstrates that this mission is fulfilled but there are gaps. Women and minorities are represented alongside the men and governments that formed the Delta; oral histories document a great deal of the spoken word history passed down from generation to generation when there is little else to document a portion of this history. With this expansive goal of documenting all facets of a region's history, focusing in on a particular portion of the Delta's history is extremely helpful.

Some 15 years ago, Chinese communities in the Delta realized that their history was slipping away with each passing generation. Determined to honor the sojourner men and women who settled here, a group was formed to collect their history. Beginning with an oral history project funded through the Mississippi Humanities Council, many area Chinese were interviewed about their entire life histories. This breakthrough oral history campaign revealed amazing histories and facets of life that had never been discussed or recorded before. The oral histories introduced the idea of preserving history to many in the Chinese community who has previously preferred to keep their family histories within their families. By diligent care and promises to honor the trust these individuals placed in Delta State's Archives, a relationship of understanding and respect developed.

Building on the immensely popular oral history collection, some Chinese families decided to donate family heirlooms to the Archives. The first items donated were church histories and photographs. Although this was progress towards preserving and presenting the Chinese experience in the Mississippi Delta, it was the concentrated efforts of a few individuals within the Chinese communities that truly moved the process forward.

Today, the Mississippi Delta Chinese Heritage Museum is housed on the third floor of the Charles W. Capps, Jr. Archives & Museum building on Delta State University's campus. From the story of the sojourner to the challenges faced by those who put down roots in the Delta and the generations of children who were encouraged to seek their dreams in other parts of the world, the exhibit provides visitors with a vibrant and engaging opportunity to understand the story of the Mississippi Delta's Chinese. While stores owned by Chinese families may no longer exist, doors from those stores and commodities that once lined the shelves are now on display in the museum. Photographs that document how families grew in the homes built on the back of the stores are displayed on the walls and objects share their own story of how material cultures blended together. For instance, Mahjong was a popular yet traditional game among the ladies in the Chinese communities. The special tables and Mahjong pieces are placed on display amongst photographs of modern homes and pastel colored drinking glasses. School books written in Chinese calligraphy are situated beside the King James Bible and other school books. In the Delta, the Chinese were

between black and white and through their work, play, worship and education, they found their way to create their own identity.

Frieda Quon grew up in Greenville, MS in the 1940-50s, attending the Chinese Mission Church established by the First Baptist Church there and eventually met and married John Paul Quon from Moorhead, MS. Greenville had a sizable, well-established community of Chinese groceries and merchants during this time; however, today, that community has been greatly reduced for a number of factors. Frieda recognized the significance of her family history and that of her community; with the need to preserve it as well as make it accessible, Frieda has taken on much of the responsibility of organizing current efforts to move the museum and preservation projects forward.

An oral history project conducted in 1999 demonstrates Frieda's contributions to preserving her heritage. Describing weddings between Chinese couples living in the Delta, Frieda shares, "What we did was mesh. If a couple decided to get married. Then they would do the traditional wedding just like we would. Then afterwards they would perform the Chinese traditions." [i] The challenge was not an easy one for the early families, to navigate between the dual society of the Mississippi Delta. Yet they persevered for the benefit and sake of the generations they knew would follow them.

The need to preserve is demonstrated here in a quote from the oral history interview conducted by Kimberly Lancaster and Jennifer Mitchell with Frieda Quon. Frieda recounts why and how her father came to America in the 1930s:

"[His parents] had the idea that a better life would be in America. They called the United States, Golden Mountain. So dad came, and stayed with my uncle. He learned all those things you would have to do to survive. He never did get to see his father again. The parents in Hong Kong or in China were thinking okay we are letting our child go because he is going to a better life. This was what the belief was." [ii]

Since 2010, the Delta State Archives & Museum has partnered with the City of Cleveland and the Mississippi Delta Chinese Heritage Museum, Inc. to collect, document and provide access to the history and heritage of the Mississippi Delta Chinese. Through this three-way partnership, evidence of sojourner histories and the generations that followed them has grown exponentially. So much material has been collected and solid documentation has been done that three academic articles have been produced, one book is in progress and a permanent museum was opened to the public in 2012. These good works would not have been possible without the encouragement of the Chinese community and the diligence of a few who realized that "the past is a public possession which grows by being shared and belongs to those who are aware of it." [iii]

Being aware of our history is vitally important and in some cases, it is only the stories that remain. Stories have been told of a building that had been the very centerpiece of a community of people and yet, as of 2013, that building of brick and mortar no longer stands. The place where it stood is vacant. There are no marks or grooves even left in the ground to declare that the now empty lot had once held great meaning and significance. In Mississippi in the 1920s, Chinese immigrants sought to educate their children in the public schools while helping their children hold on to a portion of their Chinese culture through the language, foodways and arts. The Cleveland Chinese Mission School once stood on Highway 8 east in Cleveland as an opportunity to fulfill those dreams for Chinese Americans. It served its purpose for many years, as a bridge between cultures. However, over time, the families who had once been served by the school and the communities that fostered the need for such a place began to see the walls of separation crumble. Much like the building, the Mississippi Delta Chinese who attended that school have all but left the Delta and their impact on it is fading as the paint on a building fades in the harsh sunlight of a new day. So as not to forget and honor the sacrifices of their parents and grandparents who sought to better themselves and their generations, work is being done to preserve these histories. Passionate and dedicated leaders have risen to the challenge of rescuing history from the ruin of time. A society, sustained by the memory of its past, is fighting to remember and never forget. The Delta State University Archives & Museum is thankful

and grateful to the diligence of the Mississippi Delta Chinese Heritage Museum, Inc. and to all cultures in the Delta who seek to honor their past by preserving it.

[i] Quon, Frieda Seu. Oral history interview with Kimberly Lancaster and Jennifer Mitchell. January 12, 2000. Delta State University Archives & Museum, Cleveland, MS.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Dr. Walter Havighurst quote.