

## Thomas Hoy Lee: Remembering Stuart Town.

Introduced and edited by Janis Wilton.



Thomas Hoy Lee, 16 March 1999

### Introduction

*In 1998 Thomas Hoy Lee attended a talk on the Golden Threads Project at the Museum of Sydney. In conversation, he mentioned that he was born in Stuart Town in central western New South Wales where his father owned the Yee Lee general store. He was happy to share his memories.*

*The oral history interview took place in early 1999 during the weekly gathering of the senior citizens group to which Thomas Hoy Lee belonged. While most of the group did gentle aerobics, we retreated to the office, set up the recording equipment and started talking.*

*We had a break for lunch at a local Chinese restaurant, did some further recording, including a small segment on video.*

*Thomas Hoy Lee also showed some professional photographs - he'd worked as a model in some advertising material. He'd also played an extra in, from memory, the film Oscar and Lucinda.*

*He was born in 1911 in Stuart Town, and lived there until 1942 when he moved to Sydney where he has lived ever since. He has visited Stuart Town a few times. Most recently for the 140th anniversary of the local school and for the 100th anniversary of the convent school.*

*The following is an edited version of segments from the transcript of our interview. The original recording and transcript will eventually be placed in the Oral History Collection of the State Library of NSW.*

*Janis Wilton  
November 2001*

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## Parents' Stories

We'll say three year ago, my niece and I, Joyce, we went down to the Town Hall [Sydney Town Hall]. They had an exhibition there on Pitt Street and the Haymarket in the early days, see. And on the wall was a photo and my niece said, that would be her grandfather or my father. ... according to the history that the people have, my father migrated to Australia in 1888 and that time he went to Wellington, and I suppose he got a few bob and then he went out to Stuart Town and he started a business out there. While he was at Stuart Town he decided that he would go home and bring his wife or maybe he got married then in China. And that was in 1902. So ... he went back to China in 1902 and he brought his wife, which was my mother, and they lived at Stuart Town ... And my father died in 1936. But my mother did not die till about, I think it was just after the war. I'm not too sure of the date.

*JW Did your parents talk much about their life in China or in coming to Australia to you as children?*

Well, all right, put it this way. If they did, me as a child - which I do regret now - I was pretty crook as a kid. Because, see, my mother had bound feet and she could not speak English because we were the only Chinese family at Stuart Town and there was noone there to teach her to speak English. At this late time I regret that, when we were kids, we ran out and played with English kids a lot, you see. And I should have been more polite to my mother because I often think, now that I've grown up, that we used to come home and we wanted to tell mother something, well we might not have been able to say it in Chinese but we would say it in English... 'Cause we spoke pidgin Chinese I suppose, she would get the gist of what we were trying to tell her.

*JW How much English did your father have?*

My father had to speak English because, when he came to Stuart Town, well he had a grocery business and he employed, I don't know how many, but one was my uncle... And, of course, there was always a little bit of credit and he had to keep a record in Chinese ... but he could not remember their surnames. I know he used to remember, he used to refer to people as 'Jack' and 'Bill' or something like that, but that was only their Christian names not their surnames. So I think he used to keep that record of what they owed in Chinese, in a book.

## Names

*JW Your parents' names?*

My father's name was Wong War Lai, pronounced 'Wah Lay'. War Lai were his Christian names. So therefore, when he came to Australia ... they must have asked him his name and he said 'Wong War Lai', so the nearest they could call it was 'Yee Lee'.

*JW And your mother's name?*

Was Wong Lum Day... And, of course, when they got married and we kids come along

well, my eldest brother ... he called him Wong Poi Tin ... and therefore, at school they called him Tommy Lee. But when I was born well, he [my father] had me ... registered, as Tommy Hoy, because, being Chinese he kept the first name like the surname. See, so therefore, people could not work out how come, there's three ... in the family, there's old Tommy, young Tommy and Tommy Hoy!! How come you're all related? You're all Tommies? [quiet laughter]

*JW* So they called your Dad Tommy as well?

Yeah, they nicknamed him Tommy from Yee Lees, you see. So they called him Tommy because, when my brother was born, he was Tommy Lee. Then I was born and I was Tommy Hoy. But, see, in Chinese my brother was Wong Poi Tin and I was Wong Poi Kwan... and it was not until after my father passed away that I adopted the surname of Lee for legal matters. So therefore, ... when I went to school everyone called me Hoy and my brother Tommy. So I became Hoy Lee.

*JW* ...And your sister?

My sister, when she was baptised, she was Louie Day. But then she changed her name to Louie Lee ... you see. But she only just changed it over. She didn't have it done by deed poll.

### Father's brothers

*JW* You said your Uncle also worked in the store. Is that your father's brother?

My father had ... four brothers that were brought out by Fong Lee, a company of Wellington. ... later on one brother went to Cobar and he started there. But the other two brothers stayed at Fong Lee's at Wellington.

*JW* And their names?

Wong Wah Shu and Wong Wah Hum

*JW* And in English they were known as...

Ah Hum and Wah Shu

*JW* And they're the two who stayed at Fong Lee's?

They stayed with Fong Lee's

*JW* And the one that went to Cobar.

He was Wong Wah Gee

*JW* And in English known as Wah Gee or ?

He traded under the name of Fong War Lee ... That uncle he had a son that had a fruit

business at Blackheath, alright? Then round about 1953 I had TB [tuberculosis]. So therefore I had to go out to Victoria Falls ... There were a party of people, elderly people, brought a concert party out to the Victoria Falls. ... Afterwards we all had a cup of tea together. And there were three fellows that mimed the Andrew Sisters. [laughter]. And I was talking to one of these fellows afterwards, he said, ... 'I embalmed a Chinese fellow once to send his body back to China'. And I happened to sit back, I said, 'Oh, that was probably my uncle.' ... Cobar was too hot [for my uncle], so he went down to his son's place at Blackheath, where the weather was cooler and that's where he died. And then they closed the business at Cobar and the family took his body back to China, and it was this same fellow that embalmed my uncle.

## Links to China

*JW And [did your parents pay] a visit to China after they got married?*

No. I was supposed to take my mother back to China but the Japanese took over, see. Therefore, my mother did not want to go back to China and she passed away in Australia. ...

*JW And do you know which village in China your father came from? ...*

Well, it would be the village of Bak Shek in Canton.

*JW In Zhongshan?*

Yeah, it would be in Zhongshan. I think it is a pretty big town. And my mother came from the village called Doong Goong.

*JW And do you know whether they [your parents] kept in touch with family in China before the Japanese war? Were there letters and correspondence going to and from?*

Not too much, not too much. I think in those days correspondence was pretty scarce.

One of my uncles he used to travel quite a bit ... because he had a wife in China, ... He used to go around and he'd live with different brothers and the tucker was for free and if they wanted any jobs done well, he'd do the job and he'd get a few bob. And of course in those days I think you could travel to China pretty cheaply in steerage. He did not mind roughing it down the bottom and I think it takes him a couple or three months to get to China but that was not neither here nor there to him. At least he got home occasionally

*JW Was he one of the brothers who worked at Fong Lee ?*

Well no,.. another brother, there must have been five brothers. ... We used to call him Uncle Matt. I forget his surname.



**Fong Lee & Co. Store, Wellington, late 1920s.**  
The store operated from about 1880 to 1935.

### Sponsoring people from China

*JW And did your father sponsor any one to come out from China to work in the store?*

No, no, no. See, in Wellington, at Fong Lees, they sponsored quite a lot because Fong Lees had a pretty big business in Wellington and, as you say, he sponsored my father's brothers and they all worked there and there were also other families that were there and they were probably related.

... See, the Chinese, they were sponsored out by certain people. That is why the people in and around Wellington and Dubbo and all that came from one particular part of China. And the people in Tingha and Moree and all that, they came from a different part of China. Because when we were kids, well, we never travelled much cause there was no way of travelling and therefore they were sort of different... and they spoke a slightly different dialect and we sort of only heard of them, we did not know them.

### Yee Lee Store - history

*JW Let's go back to your memories of the store itself, of where you lived and what the store was like as you were growing up, of Yee Lee general store.*

All right. Now I believe that when my father first came to Stuart Town a bloke by the name of Teddy West had a bit of a shop and that's where he [my father] started and on the opposite side of the street there was an old premise owned by Salvation Army and I think they sold out or something like that and my father shifted across from there and at different times he would add to it a little bit at a time.



**Yee Lee Store, Stuart Town, about 1940.** The building on the left end was still standing in 1998.

*(Looking at a photograph of the store)*

That building there was only built during the Depression years by a chap by the name of Bob Moore. Then see, where that part was built the old shop was up here ... and my father lived here in the little old shop. Well, then, as time went by he built a residence on the end and that's where we were as kids and all round the back. Then during the Depression years, well, there was a black carpenter name of Bob Moore there and he was doing nothing so I think my brother got him to build that part of it there.

### **Yee Lee Store – goods and services**

*JW      So what about the store itself, when you were growing up ... take me for a walk through it, imagine you taking me for a walk through it, describe what we can see. ... We're in the front door of the store first.*

... in those days, everything was sort of on display and you had hooks on the ceilings where you hung billy cans and all that type of jive, see, and ... on the left hand side was the grocery section and all that and on the right hand side was mercery or drapery and boots and shoes and all that. Around the back ... we used to carry produce, ... chaff and oats and ... bran ... In those early days well there was no transport and people did all their shopping locally, so, if they wanted anything that was unusual which wasn't carried, they would ask you to go and get it in for them, and you got it in for them. When we were kids there were no motor cars, there was no toilet, there was nothing. Everyone that wanted anything, no matter what, it was bought locally.

In those early days we used to deliver to certain parts of the district once a week and, being no transport or not much communication, you probably would not get peoples' orders but you made up an order because each week they only bought pretty well the same thing. They could not afford any luxuries. So you made up flour and sugar and this type of thing, you know, and they would take that order. See, at one time, if someone ordered a tin of peaches or something, one of the first things you would say to them is 'Hey whose birthday is it this week?' because you're getting a tin of peaches.

... In those days you had no luxuries. And bread was only baked. People that worked in the bush like the young fellows sucker-cutting, they'd work for thirty shillings a week and their meat. Well, they had to come in on Saturdays to go out on Sundays to work. Well, they'd take out bread that was baked on Friday and that bread then would have to last till the following Friday or Saturday, till they came in for more. There was no fresh bread in those days. The same thing used to apply when you delivered groceries, maybe someone who was not your customer would want a piece of meat or some thing like that or corned meat and the butcher would ask you, would you take it and deliver to someone. Well, you done it to oblige them and so you left it in their mail box which was on a gate post and they probably wouldn't come home from work till dark and there was no worry about hygiene in those days, it were wrapped in news paper [chuckle]. It's only since motorcars have been coming in that people now travel to Wellington or to Dubbo or to Orange like that and do their shopping, but in those early days, no, you did not do it.

### Yee Lee Store - staff

*JW About how many people worked in the store, how many were employed by your father in the store?*

Well, mostly there was the family - my brother, my sister and myself and we either employed a girl or a boy and that was about the total that worked in the store.

### Domestic duties – family roles

*JW And did your Mum work at all in the store or she just worked in the home?*

No, My mother could not because she had bound feet and wasn't able to get around, besides she could not speak English.

*JW So how did she manage the housework or did she have help with the housework as well?*

### Food

No, that was one of the things ... All right, when we were kids, my father being Chinese, he used to cook a hot breakfast of a morning and we would have ... maybe a sandwich or something for lunch or some biscuits and we would have a hot tea and my father used to cook those meals. That meant, to have a hot breakfast, he would have to get up pretty early in the morning to cook the rice and cook whatever *soong* there was for us to eat. Because my mother wasn't able to get around to do anything so he had to do all the cooking.

*JW What sort of food ... did he cook? did you like his cooking?*

Well, I suppose we liked it but we had mostly Chinese meals. Because he'd been Chinese and when he came out to work for Fong Lees first, well, he was the cook for

Fong Lees so therefore he cooked mostly Chinese meals and ... as kids, we had lots of Chinese meals and I, even to this present day, if I cook English meals I think I cook it partly Chinese fashion. [gentle laughter]

*JW So, it's a Chinese Australian meal?*

This is right ... Yeah [gentle laughter]

*JW Special cuisine!*

Well, all right then, now if I'm going to grill a chop or grill a steak or something like that I marinate it of a morning before I'm going to cook it, see, and if I buy a fish or something I always marinate it or do something like that. I don't - like a lot of English people would get a piece of grilled steak and put it on a hot pan and then fry it but I find that it is better if you marinate it and then when you brown it in a pan you can use that marinade to make your gravy.

### **Mother's daily routine**

*JW So, how would your mother spend her day, what would she do?*

Nothing. Probably, well, in those days she could not read much but she used to try and read. That's why I regret that I wasn't better to my mother than I was because when you come to think that she spent all day and all night at home, and us kids we would go to school and then, when we came home from school, instead of spending a little time with her or something like that we would run out and play and we would not come in until tea was on the table, then we'd probably eat tea and maybe we'd play again.

### **Houses and housework**

*JW Did your sister help [with the housework]?*

My sister ... done a little bit around the house and my brother done a little bit, you know.

*JW Yeah, so who did the house work? Your dad did the cooking, who would have done the house work.*

Oh well, I suppose in those days there wasn't too much house work done. Because, I think when you came to look at it, homes in those days were not like homes of today. You see, when we were young people, and people had got married they either lived at home with their parents or they went out and lived in any old thing. Not like today, young people when they are married they've got to have a big house and they got to have two motor cars and all that type of thing.

You see, when I was out delivering and I saw a fellow building a house, well, I gathered he must be going to get married and all he done was build two rooms with a bit of hallway in between ... Then later on he'd put a skillion on the front, that was the front verandah and then he saved money. He put a skillion in on the back and that was the

kitchen and see and there were probably dirt floors. There were no boards on the floor cause you couldn't afford them.

### **Furniture , utensils, brick oven, roast meat**

*JW      What was the house like that your dad built, the residence he had built for the family?...*

It was attached to the store. Well, there was nothing in it. I mean furniture was pretty scarce and all that type of thing and if you sat around, then, in those days there was no electrical appliances so you sat around by an open fire and you sat on butter boxes or kerosene boxes or whatever there was to sit on. You didn't have a lounge chair or a comfortable chair to lay back on.

... And... all the cooking my father used to do was in cast iron saucepans or cast iron boilers on an open fire with two bars of steel across to do that. ... There was no ovens in those days, there was no such thing as a stove and so, to cook his meat, like to roast a pork, roast a duck or roast anything he built a little brick oven out in the back yard. It was built out of bricks and mud and all that type of thing and in those days there was tons of wooden boxes around. ...Down the bottom he has a little hole where he put a brick in so you could scrape the ashes out. And to fire this oven he used to light a fire in it and put wooden boxes, you'd break the boxes up and you'd heat it and the heat would be in the oven itself. Well, then if you had a piece of roast pork or a duck or something like that, you had a little camp-oven-thing and you put it down the bottom, put some water in it so that would catch the oil as it dripped out of the pork so it wouldn't burn and you hung the piece of pork off a bar of iron across the top and to keep the heat in the thing you had a dish over the top with a wet bag over the top.

*JW      So, would he build a new oven each time?*

No, that oven was built and it lasted for years because it was built with bricks around the thing and then was plastered with mud or clay and it was there and the weather wouldn't wash it away.

*JW      And how often would he roast meat rather than just use the cooking in the cast iron pots?*

Maybe one or two times a week he'd cook some meat because we had no ovens or anything like that and if you wanted to cook a piece of meat or you wanted to cook a fowl or roast a piece of pork or roast a duck or something like that. See, in those days, the butchers did not carry much meat and therefore he had a lot of ducks and fowls and all that stuff in the yard and he used to kill one of them in no time and he'd pluck it and then he'd cook it. And, being Chinese, I suppose I learnt to eat a fowl from the cock's comb to the feet!! [laughter]

*JW      and enjoy it!*

Well, there was us three kids see. Well, being kids, when one kid likes it so do all the others. So, pop used to have to cut the fowl or the duck head into three pieces so we'd

always have a piece each and one got the comb this week and another got the comb the next week and so forth

## Chinese festivals

*JW And did you as a family celebrate things like New Year and Ching Ming ...?*

Oh yes. Alright then, you see, now, my mother used to always celebrate Chinese New Year and all that. So, one day I spoke to my mother and I said to my mother, 'now look', I said, 'the English people don't celebrate the moon' and I said, 'we have our English day' or something like that. She said, 'But look, Chinese are different. My belief is I worship the moon because the moon governs the tide and the tide governs the seasons and if you have got a bad season you starve. So therefore, if the seasons are good and you have everything left over you give your offering to the moon and you pray to the moon that they give you good seasons and that is more so than when you go to church'. So, she said, no way will she give up worshipping the moon.

I do think that she was right because I think that the moon does govern the tides and the tides govern the seasons and the seasons govern the crops so that you eat well and if you got any left over... that is why at Chinese New Year they give out the red packets ... You're not supposed to carry any money over for the next year you're supposed to give it to your younger people and you start off afresh.

*JW Okay. Celebrating New Year?*

Celebrating New Year. My mother would celebrate the New Year. She would have little Chinese bowls with drink in them or something like that. ... Then she would kill a fowl and cook it and she would have fruit like mandarins or bananas or something like that and this drink ... Then she would celebrate outside in the yard and she would have Chinese incense papers and all that and light those and burn those and offer the thing [drink] and then she would pour the rest on the ground. You see, she still offered to the moon.

*JW And as children would you all take part?*

We would probably all sit around ... while she done that.

## Chinese supplies and networks

*JW Where did all the Chinese supplies come from? The incense, the food, and things like that... Do you know where that came from?*

In the early days ... my father would probably write to Sydney and he would get an order up which would probably last him a few months... and the Chinese shops in Sydney would send it up to him.

*JW Do you know if he got from a particular Chinese store?*

Yes. ... You might not know but in Sydney even today there are Chinese shops in Sydney who look after Chinese that come out from China. You see, ... you came from a certain part of China and maybe you were brought out from China by these people, ... and then, when you came to Sydney, you would go 'round to that place ... and if you wanted to start a business you would get a loan from there and they will send you out and you would send your money back to them.

I gave up work in say 1980. Prior to that we used to set up a lot of Chinese restaurants in Sydney and you'd often get people from say Mudgee or somewhere like that, they would come into where I worked (War Hop) you know and they would say to me, 'alright, how much do I owe you?' You'd look them up and you'd tell them 'x' amount of money, they'd come back in a couple of hours time with the money and they'd pay their bills. See, but what they would do, this is what I think they done, they would go down town, they'd go into a business down there and they'd pull their money out of there and then come back and pay you. ... Well see, in Sydney there's three or four different places that I know of that still look after the interest of the Chinese from certain parts of China.

*JW Do you know which one it was that your father used in particular...?*

No, by that time I think my father might have been a little bit independent. He might have had finance.

*JW But to get his Chinese food supplies and things?*

Well, I would say there was a place Gung Lee Sing

*JW Gung Lee Sing. In Dixon Street?*

In Dixon Street, yeah. ...

### **Other general stores in Stuart Town**

*JW ... going back to Stuart Town ... were you the only general store or were there other general stores in Stuart Town?*

No, there was, would be about two or three.

*JW Two or three. yes. Was yours the main one or ?*

Well, I think we were about the main one at that particular time, yeah. There were a couple of little shops that handled everything and anything.

### **Working in the store**

*JW And when did you start working in the store, what age?*

Well, I suppose from the time ... when I left school. I'd come home from school and I'd

have to do something you know.

*JW What sorts of things would you do to help in the store?*

In those days you'd have to weigh up the sugar and you had to weigh up the potatoes and all that type of thing and get it ready, you know. I mean it's just that sort, you go into it.

### Depression Years - customers

I remember in the early days, the Depression years, the dole days, you see a lot of people... They used to give you the dole every day. ... You could go to a police station and get the dole each day, and a lot of young fellows used to jump the rattler or the trains and they'd say come from Orange, they'd get off at Stuart Town, they'd go over to the police station and get the dole and all they'd want was tobacco and that and a tin of fruit or something like that. The thing [dole] was about eight shillings a week or something like that, then they'd jump the rattler and go to Wellington and they'd get the dole again. Then the government woke up that they were spending too much money so they changed the dole to only once a fortnight and every second Thursday. ...

### School

*JW Disappeared or something, yeah. So, you went to school ... what age ... were you at school? From...*

I was born in ...1911, and I went to school when I was about seven, about 1918 ... till I was old enough to leave school. I was about fourteen because we only had a primary school in Stuart Town and ... you couldn't go to Wellington High School because if you wanted to go to Wellington High School you had to catch the train at six o'clock in the morning, then you wouldn't get home till eight o'clock at night. But ... there was a headmaster in Wellington at one stage that was very good for those kids that went into high school. ... He'd buy some bones or cheap meat or vegetables, and he'd cook a pot of soup for the kids to have while they were waiting for the train. He reckoned, you know, the kids were starving by the time they had to catch a train at six o'clock in the morning and wouldn't get home till eight o'clock at night, 'cause there was no other trains run, there was no buses run in those days.

*JW Did many kids from Stuart Town go into Wellington?*

Not too many at all.

*JW ... And what was school like for you? What did you think of school?*

Oh well, I suppose, you went to school 'cause you had to go to school. And I mean once you got fourteen... I meant, all right then, you only had sixth class, you know, and then once ... you sat for the entrance certificate or something like that, you were only about thirteen, well, you still had to stop at school 'till you were fourteen and you done nothing, in those days. So, once you got fourteen you just left school.

## Working in the store

*JW And you left school and went into your dad's store.*

In my dad's work, yeah.

*JW And you worked there until you left Stuart Town in 1942, is it?*

Yeah, 1942. See, I had to leave Stuart Town because the brother and I... The war was on then. See, so I came to Sydney and got a job.

*JW So, were you working in the store with your brother for a while first?*

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

*JW And what was business like for the store, at what point did it start to fall off?*

Ah, I suppose you didn't worry, long as you got a living that's the main thing.

## When the war came to Stuart Town

*JW Right, right.*

That's why I think, if the war had not have come Stuart Town and the district would have still been the same. But when the war came, me and a lot of others either joined the army or went into services and never went back there again. You take now... Well, there was families there, their fathers were shearers and all they wanted to become were shearers, too, or something like that, Then, when the war came, they went into the armed services or went into protected industries, and, they never went back there again. And they drifted away and they've always ... got something to do somewhere else.

## Work in Sydney during the war

*JW So, you joined the armed services?*

No, I did not. I did work for protected industries. I went to do that, yeah.

*JW Which protected industry, which area did you work in?*

Newtown. Newtown, yeah. ... Place called Hardman Halls... In those days, ... there was no engineering or anything done in Australia much. And where I went to Hardman Halls, I was put on as a fitter. Well then, I worked with another chappie who was a retired person. Alright, this, Dick Davis ... had a junior apprenticed by the name of Bill Hardman, working for him, see, he had an apprentice. Well then, Dick Davis retired and he went out. Then when the war came, well Bill Hardman took on engineering, like you know. So, he got Dick Davis to come back to work and he worked for Hardman Halls. And of course when I went in there I knew nothing, so, they put me with Dick Davis.

And Dick used to help me, like you know, anything that I wanted to know about fitting or some thing like that, well, you'd just ask Dick and he'd help you, see.

*JW So, how did you get the job from Stuart Town to Newtown, How did that job happen?*

Well, I came to Sydney and I was looking for a job, and there was a fellow working in there at Newtown from Binnaway, a Chinese fella. ... he said, they're looking for men in there, so, he took me out there and I got a job there then.

### Getting TB and learning bookkeeping

*JW And you decided after that not to go back to Stuart Town?*

That's right, yeah. Then after that, while I was there, I got TB. I went into Queen Victoria Homes for a while, and I came out. ... I learnt book keeping while I was there. Thanks to the people up there that started it off. They came out to the hospital and they said, 'You'll be here for at least twelve months, you might well learn to do something, so that when you can go back out.' So, I took on book-keeping. But, it's just that I carried on with the government and I got up to intermediate standard, with them, see. And then I was looking for a job. So, Hardman Hall said to me, better come back out there and work in the office. So, I went back out there and worked in the office. Until, ah, ... something like ... about 1950, ah, Les Ling ... the accountant ... he said to me one day, he says, there's a firm in Sydney, they want a fella that can speak a bit of Chinese and do a bit of book-keeping. Do you want a job? So, I thought, well, give it a go. So, I transferred from there to there then.

*JW And was that in Dixon Street or in Haymarket.*

In Haymarket. And I worked for them for 19 years there.

*JW Which company was that?*

War Hop Trading Company. Yes, so I worked for them then until I retired.

*JW And you didn't ever want to go back to Stuart Town.*

No. Place was too small. Well, I mean to say is... you live in the city and if you're too lazy to cook a feed you can go out and eat. [chuckle]

### Marriage

*JW Yes right. And you married somewhere along the line didn't you? You got married?*

Well, I tell you what. When I was in Stuart Town I had a girlfriend up there, see, 'cause she was English and my people are Chinese, you know, I wasn't happy in their family and she wasn't happy in mine. So, that was about 1940 what, 'bout 1940 I came to

Sydney. And 1949, I'd been down here a long time and I thought, I think I was 39 that time and I thought to myself, I was thinking to myself, God if I don't soon get myself a missus I'll be a bloody bachelor! [laughter] So, ... we had been corresponding. I said to Freda What about if we get married?

*JW Where was she living?*

In Farnham, Stuart Town. And so she said, 'Oh yeah, we'll get married.'

*JW So, this is the same girlfriend you had...way back in 1940. And she hadn't married either?*

No. [chuckle] ...So, we got married and she came to Sydney and... '49 or something... I think and she died in 1960.

*JW Right, oh that's sad.*

And I've been a bachelor since. But, the same girl I had many, many, many years ago . ... And I thought ... to myself, God, if I don't soon get married...

### Parents, brother and sister

*JW So, she [your mother] had stayed at Stuart Town with your brother?*

Right.

*JW And did your sister stay in Stuart Town as well?*

No, she got married ... and she came to Sydney to live.

*JW ... did both your brother and sister marry Chinese-Australians or...*

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

*JW ... from the network around the central west?*

No. My sister-in-law came from Gundagai and this other, my sister married a chappie. Well, alright then, I think he was born at Coonamble but he went to live...

*[At this point in the interview – after an hour of recording – Thomas Hoy Lee noticed the time and we went to lunch. After lunch the recording resumed although the thread and focus of the morning was lost. The last segment of the interview consisted mainly of adding further details or trying to fill in some gaps.]*

### Father

*JW Can I take you back to Stuart Town, I just thought the other thing I haven't done is ask you to tell me a bit more about your Dad. Can you describe him, I've got*

*no image of what he was like, what did he look like, how would you describe him? What sort of person was he?*

Oh, gee, that would be very hard to describe my father [laughter] ... I suppose he was a typical man or typical person and just tried to run a business, you know, and please people, like you have to do in small towns, see.

### **Father's daily routine and long hours**

*JW Long hours, did he work long hours?*

Aw, yes! When you were at Stuart Town, well, you got up early in the mornings, say, he had to cook breakfast for us to go to school and then he would not go to bed until late at night and it did not matter if there was a light in the house and someone come and wanted something, they would knock on the back door to be served. So, therefore my father had to work from wee hours of the morning to late at night, seven days a week. Because you could not say to a person if they wanted something that the shop was closed, and I suppose he was willing to do it because it meant extra money.

*JW Did he expect you, both the boys to go on in the business or did he think you'd do something different?*

No, in those days no-one had any occupations because you'll take all the young people around at my age and that, well, if their fathers were shearers or something they became shearers and if their father worked on the railway they worked on the railway because the railway was a sure job and you were on till you retired, so, no-one thought about... I don't suppose in those days there were any such thing as, you know, occupations or something like that.

### **Father's death**

*JW So, your Dad worked in the shop up until he died in 1936?*

Oh, yes he died ...

*JW How old was he when he died, about how old was he?*

About 70, I think. ... He had a stroke one day and we put him in hospital and you know he did not come out of the hospital.

### **Yee Lee store after 1936**

And then the brother and I and the sister, we ran the business.

*JW And then eventually just your brother ran it?*

And then I think, ... my sister got married, she came to Sydney, that was the brother

and I in the business. Then, when the war came, well, I got out and my brother stayed there. Then he decided he'd had enough of it so he sold out then, he came to Sydney and he worked for the railway and that's where he passed away.



Yee Lee Store building, Stuart Town, 1998.

## Daily routine

*JW ...what was... an average day in the store...*



Click on picture of Hoy Lee to see and hear him an average day in the store.

[on video] Alright then. Well, when you're in a business in the country setting I think it was different to anything in the city. Well, when you're in the country you really had no hours. It was, when you got up, if people wanted something they just came around and if the shop wasn't opened, well, they came around the back and you got them what they wanted. So, that is why I remember at one time, the corner shop, they were selling out and they had the newsagency and they wanted us to take the newsagency on. But, I talked it over with my brother and sister and we decided not to take the newsagency because that would have meant that the Sunday papers would come in and we would have to sell the Sunday papers and we would not be able to play sport on Sundays, We'd have to be in the shop all day! Therefore we did not become newsagents.

## Sport

*JW So, Sunday was your day when you played sport. What sort of sport did you play?*

I played cricket in the summer months and tennis in the winter months. Well, ... I thought it was better to play those sports on a Sunday because if you didn't there was nothing else for you to do other than go to the hotel and either drink or play cards at the hotel. And I thought by playing sport at least it took you away for the day and you had a break for the week.

## Street and neighbouring buildings

*JW I just thought of one other thing too. You know how you did a map for me of the store, if you walked along the street where the store is, which I can sort of see having visited Stuart Town, were there shops right next to you or buildings next to you or were you there...? 'Cause at the moment it's sort of like a vacant lot all around what's left of the building. What was in the same stretch of road as your store?*

... now we had a fairly big block of land and next to that was the blacksmith shop with the workshop, well, then they had a house and vacant blocks of land. Then on the corner was a little corner shop and that was a junction, so, the road turned around and then went up to the railway station. Well, because Stuart Town was a gold mining area shops and houses were fairly sparse, you see. Like at Stuart Town there was, what, well, Stuart Town and the public school was say, three quarters of a mile away and then there was what they call, the Westend, which was about another three quarters of a mile away. So, kids had to travel all that distance to go to school each day, and then other kids, they had to walk from, say, the Eastend, which was probably about another half a mile away, so, they had to walk over a mile each day to go to school. Not like the kids today if they were like this they'd be getting a bus ride.

*JW So, you used to walk to and from school.*

To and from school.

*The interview ended at this point. Some segments (for example, memories of the Chinese market gardeners at nearby Wellington, the names and connections between relatives and different Chinese families) are not included in this slightly edited version of the interview transcript. The focus of this version is on Thomas Hoy Lee's memories of Stuart Town.*