

U.S.

# Cleveland Journal; Delta Chinese Hang On To Vanishing Way of Life

By SOMINI SENGUPTA NOV. 1, 2000

Just off the Delta blues road, Highway 61, a small brick church sits in a grove of oaks, next to a boarded-up two-story building. Above the sanctuary's water-stained wooden doors hangs a seemingly improbable sign, in English and Chinese:

"Chinese Baptist Church."

A symbol of new Asian immigration? Not quite.

The church and the dozen or so elderly worshipers who gather here, clutching English-Chinese hymnals every Sunday are among the last remnants of a Chinese-American community that has been in the Delta for well over a century.

The midafternoon service is itself a reminder of what was once a small but thriving community of Chinese grocers who served mostly black customers: services began late in the day so the worshipers could open their shops in the morning. The building next door is a reminder of Chinese-American life under Jim Crow laws: until the 1940's, this, and others like it, was a school for Chinese children who were barred from the town's whites-only schools.

Patricia Wolf, now 51, was born and reared in the back of her family's grocery, on the corner of Chrisman and Ruby Streets. Commerce was handled out front. Domestic life went on in the back. Bok choy and long beans grew in the backyard.

Like many other Chinese-Americans of her generation, Mrs. Wolf lived in many worlds as a child. She grew up in the town's black district, but attended a white school on the other side of town. On weekends, instead of going to school dances, she and her four siblings attended Chinese parties.

"It was something that nobody talked about," Mrs. Wolf said. "We had our own functions."

The fading history of the Delta Chinese is being talked about a lot these days. One second-generation Chinese-Mississippian, John Quon, a business professor at Delta State University here, has begun to collect family photographs and artifacts for a proposed museum in Greenville. Historians at Delta State are in the midst of an oral history project on the Delta Chinese, collecting interviews for the university archives.

From the 1940's to the early 1970's, Chinese groceries dotted the Delta, from Louise to Greenville to Merigold. Census figures show that at its peak in 1960, there were more than 1,200 Chinese in the 12 rural counties of the Delta. Some stayed quietly with their own; others merged into black or white Mississippi families.

Today, the experience of the Delta Chinese, who arrived in the years immediately after the Civil War to work on the cotton plantations and then opened groceries, offers scholars a unique window on race. Neither black nor white in the Jim Crow South, the Chinese navigated a confusing, sometimes inconsistent set of laws and social mores.

"The Chinese in Mississippi were a third race in a system built for two," said James Loewen, a historian and the author of "The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White" (Harvard University Press, 1971). "Neither they nor the system knew what to do about that."

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The Chinese were central to a school segregation lawsuit considered by some to be an important precursor to the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education case.

In the fall of 1924, a Chinese grocer named Gong Lum filed the lawsuit after his daughter was barred from the whites-only public school in the western Delta town of Rosedale. The case ultimately went to the United States Supreme Court, which upheld Mississippi's longstanding policy "to preserve the white schools for members of the Caucasian race alone."

If the Delta Chinese sometimes fell through the cracks of segregation, those who started families outside the Chinese fold fell away from the community. With immigration laws making it extremely difficult for Chinese men to bring their wives to the United States, it was not uncommon for a Chinese man in the Delta to have a common-law wife, either black or white.

Even now, Mrs. Wolf wonders what happened to those who, like her, found love outside their own community. "I see people who I think I could be kin to, but I'm afraid to ask," she said. "I think a lot of it was going on -- both black and white. We're all human."

Long after her siblings left, Mrs. Wolf stayed on. Today, she runs a pharmacy with her husband, Otto, who is white. She still plays piano at the church. The old Chinese groceries are mostly gone, but every now and then, Mrs. Wolf sees a new Chinese face in town, like the family that runs the Chinese takeout on U.S. 61. She feels little kinship with them, she says. She pops into their restaurant when she is too tired to cook, or when she wants to offer authentic Chinese food to a guest.

"They look like us but that's about it," she said. "We don't have much in common."

And yet to speak to some of the surviving Delta Chinese is to be struck by their quest to remain, well, Chinese. Frances Wong's cluttered little house just outside town is a virtual museum of Chinese tchotchkes: an ornately carved Chinese screen she picked up at a yard sale once, red silk screens of Chinese calligraphy on the walls, a Chinese-English Bible. Born and reared in Louise, Mrs. Wong spent much of her life behind the counter of the Wong Foo Market that she and her husband ran on Chrisman Street. Now 75, Mrs. Wong has spent her retirement nest egg on six trips to China.

"Don't get me wrong -- I'm an American," Mrs. Wong said. "I'm proud to be an American."

"But no matter where I go," and here she poked herself in the cheeks, "I'm still going to be Chinese."