

Transcription

Nov 17, 2011

Interviewer: John Price

Interviewee: Alan Lowe

John Price: First question we had for you was if you could tell us about growing up in Victoria? Your childhood memories, school, family, community, things that you recall. What it was like in those days and to grow up in Victoria.

Alan Lowe: I was born in 1961 and I was the youngest of 3 children. My parents immigrated to Canada in 1957 after the federal government, I guess, lifted the exclusionary act. My grandfather on both my mother and father's side came to Canada in the early 1900's. And they essentially came to Canada like everybody else looking for a better life for themselves as well as their family back home. Coming to Canada as single... as males trying to, I guess, find work, to send money back to China. My grandfather on my father's side was, I guess, lived until he was 92 years old and my grandfather on my mother's side lived till he was 101. The... Their wives like my grandfather on my father's side, his wife wasn't able to join him in Canada until about 1965. Actually no, probably about 1962. And my grandfather from my mother's side, his wife didn't join him until 1970. So they were apart for many, many years. Mainly because of not only was there the head tax but the exclusionary tax or the exclusionary bill and then after that I guess it was dealing with immigration until it was the right time. When I was growing up I lived in Chinatown for the first 3 years of my life living on the 2nd floor above where the Forum restaurant is today. So it is the building east of QV's bakery and coffee shop on the corner there. Remember riding my tricycle and stuff in the hallways there. We were a family who did not have very much. My father was a cook at the Strathcona hotel and he worked there as a cook for probably about 25 years and then went on to be a butcher at Thrifty Foods until he passed away 19 years ago when he was 58. My mother was a homemaker so she looked after the kids and did odd jobs with families in the more affluent neighborhoods of Oak Bay and Rockland area where she was cleaning house for them few hours a day. Growing up, we knew that the Chinese community had to, I guess, be tight and help each other. We realized that there was discrimination and, you know, even when we were young kids in school we could still feel there was some discrimination and at times people would still be using words like "chink" and the like to talk about the Chinese community. Grew up in an inner-city neighborhood, so after moving out of Chinatown in, when we were 3, we moved into a house on Green Street, which is in the North Park neighborhood. It was about a 10 minute walk to George Jay Elementary school. So the Chinese community probably started... if they moved out of the Chinatown area, they probably started living in that inner-city neighborhood area until there was an influx of Chinese that started moving out to the Gordon Head area. We grew up and went through the public school system: George Jay, Central and Vic High. Had... For... I guess when we were not going to school, spent a lot of time at the park, Central park was within walking distance of our backyard and spent many days and evenings hanging around the park. And at that time kids could hang around the park and not have to worry. I remember getting my first baseball glove from a... somebody at the park because, you know we... our family couldn't afford

things and you know, I enjoyed watching baseball and then started playing baseball and so somebody at the park gave me a glove. There were lots of activities during the summer time at Central park that was at that time was probably through the City of Victoria park system. And so we... I attended that. Had... Didn't go anywhere travelling because family couldn't afford it. Every 4, 5 years we might be able to go to Vancouver for a day and that was about it as a outing.

John Price: Did your family and/or you go back to visit Chinatown after you moved to Green Street?

Alan Lowe: Oh, definitely. Dad would take me down to the Embassy Café all the time, where he would have his coffee and I would have a egg tart or whatever and enjoyed those times definitely. We also... Mom and dad did not belong to too many associations, they did belong to the Hook Sin Tong society which is the society from... where our family immigrated from in the Zhong Shan area. To this day, I'm still a member of that society and went to some of their functions and events. My grandfather from my father's side hung around downtown a lot more. He had a lot more friends down there. He enjoyed a bit of gambling down there as well and enjoyed going to a lot of the banquets where the liquor was free flowing all the time and so he enjoyed his social time with his friends.

John Price: So tell us more about your grandfather Lowe Sai who worked at the cement factory out at Todd Inlet.

Alan Lowe: He was a interesting character. He worked hard but he also enjoyed socializing. He smoked a pipe and he like to drink. And I guess when you immigrate to Canada with all the other men, young men that are living in Chinatown they pass their time by smoking and gambling. He lived with us so it was an extended family and I would always bug him when he came back from either Chinatown or came back from a banquet and asking him whether or not he won today or not. And sometimes he would say he did, other times he didn't want to talk about it. He did enjoy having liquor and he drank, I think it was, Johnny Walker and enjoyed socializing with his friends. He worked in the Butchart Gardens in the quarry. So I would say that where the Butchart Garden's Sunken Garden is right now is probably where he worked and did some work in the quarry there before it was planted as a garden. He and my mother's father both at the end of the day really were gardeners. They worked for, I guess, families that lived in probably the Oak Bay area and tended to their gardens and pulled their weeds and mowed their grass.

John Price: So when he was working up the quarry, would he... How would he travel?

Alan Lowe: I would have no idea how he would have travelled. But...

John Price: I wonder if he was living up in the... 'Cause they did have some dorms and stuff.

Alan Lowe: Yea, they might have. I don't know because that would have been quite a distance from Chinatown where he would have been living.

John Price: So how has the Chinese Canadian community in Victoria changed over the years, in your perception?

Alan Lowe: How has it changed over the years? See, I think a mantra for all Chinese families that have come over from, emigrated from China is that they want to make sure that their children have a better life than they have had. And that would always mean work hard at school, get a job, and then get married and it was always those 3 things and in that order. The Chinese families would always ensure that the kids are studying, ensuring that they did well in school because they wanted their kids to go to university whether the kids wanted to go to university or not. They wanted their kids to go to university so that they could have a better education. I think what has changed from back then to now is there are a lot more Chinese Canadians that are professionals, a lot more Chinese Canadians that are entrepreneurs and they're not really, I guess, in a lot of labor intensive jobs anymore but working in offices and other occupations that will provide for a better life for them. The Chinese community also did not like to spend more than what they had. So they would not like to be in debt and, you know, if you looked at buying a house, you would try to pay off the mortgage on the house before you had any extra spending money to do other things like vacationing or buying things that one would like to have. The other thing with that is, the Chinese community worked very hard in the past where it would mean not having holidays, not having vacations, and you can see today a lot more of the younger generation, their looking at it and have the ability to take their kids on holidays, able to drive around with cars and having the ability and the means to do more than their parents had. You know, my dad didn't really even have a car until probably 1970s. And today, my wife and I have 3 cars. Right, so there is a big difference.

John Price: How about Chinatown, how has it changed, you think, over the years? And what do you see as the future for Chinatown?

Alan Lowe: Chinatown being the oldest Chinatown in Canada will always have a historic significance. It is a smaller Chinatown than it was in its heyday but... and you will also see that the "tongs" and the associations that were established in the past are still around and are still functioning. Although with members that are probably with the average age of 70. Unfortunately, a lot of the younger generation are not coming out to these association meetings nor are they getting involved. There are new associations that have been forming as well in the recent past and there is good value in that because it continues to keep the culture going and allows us to share culture with other individuals. I think from a physical point of view, the Chinatown heritage buildings that we have today will be... with either remain intact or will be renovated so that it can be protected and saved during any earthquake or any seismic movement of the earth. There are some buildings or some lots and some land down in Chinatown that definitely will be redeveloped. Only because in order to have any area, whether it's Chinatown or any other area, vibrant you need people. Back 20 years ago, in the evening you could shoot a cannonball down the street and probably will not hit anybody because after 9 o'clock it's pretty well dead. Today, there are more people going down there but it's still not as vibrant as it could be and I think by having more people down there it will help. There are still the few grocery stores of Chinese origin that are still down there. The vegetables and the like that are displayed on the sidewalks creates that atmosphere in Chinatown. There are still the Chinese restaurants down in Chinatown but there are more and more western shops that have started opening up there. I guess trying to use the draw of Chinatown to help their businesses and I guess you will probably see more and more Chinese Canadians that have grown

up in Canada not wanting to open up businesses like restaurants etc in Chinatown because they are more educated and looking at more professional occupations. Those that might immigrate to Canada and want to start out or want to buy a business and have the ability to cook and to run a restaurant, they may be the ones in the next few years that will continue the... being the restaurateurs of the Victoria area in Chinatown.

John Price: In terms of education, the Chinese public school has played an important role. Did you attend the public school at all?

Alan Lowe: I did but unfortunately I have to say that I didn't agree or didn't enjoy the Chinese public school as my parents would have liked me to enjoy and because there were so many other things that I wanted to do at that time. I probably only went to that Chinese public school for about a year and I can speak Cantonese, although not as well as I would like. I could speak my home dialect which is Long Du, which is from the Zhong Shan area and unfortunately don't know the Mandarin language very well at all. My kids unfortunately can't speak the Chinese language and that's because they have grown up in an environment where my wife and I both speak English, understand English, and there wasn't any need to speak to each other in Cantonese. The kids when they were young did not think they were Chinese. They would say that they are Canadian and we would ask them: "Well, then are we Chinese?" meaning the parents and says "Parents weren't Chinese either, but our grandparents were" they were saying. So it's funny how children see or reflect to see how they are and how the other generations are and I guess it's the mannerism of the grandparents that make them that much more Chinese. The parents because they can speak English and were born in Canada, are Canadian and they themselves are Canadian.

John Price: You were the youngest mayor ever elected in Victoria and as well you were the first mayor of Chinese heritage. Can you tell us a little bit or your reflections on that experience?

Alan Lowe: Well, I think that when I was elected mayor it was a proud moment for the Chinese community as well as for my parents and as well for the people back in the homeland because to hear that a descendant from the Zhong Shan area was elected as a mayor in a western city and a capital city was quite an accomplishment in their eyes. I guess it's more of an accomplishment being a mayor of a western city than it is being a mayor of a city in China, right? So from their point of view it was big news and they were very proud of the fact that someone of Chinese origin became the mayor. I always have to say though that just, I guess, half a century prior the Chinese community didn't even have the right to vote in any elections. So we have come a long ways in the last 50 years. The only reason why I have had the opportunity to seek election and to become the mayor is because of the sacrifices made by initially the Chinese veterans where there are only a handful of right now in the city of Victoria as well as our parents and their friends and associates because they are the ones that paved the way for us to have the life that we enjoy. The Chinese community are not very political in Victoria. They like to put their head down, work hard, look after their family and they don't like to, I guess, get embroiled in issues that could be controversial nor do they like to get involved in many organizations that are beyond their own communities. So for me to take the step forward to run and seek election, first as a councilor in 1990 where I was elected twice, meaning 1990 and 1993, and then decided to take a term off in 1996 so that I could run my business as well as look after our young family. 1999 was a opportunity where the present

mayor decided that he was not going to seek re-election. I was out of politics for almost 3 years, my family was still young but felt that this was the right opportunity to jump back into it, to seek the mayor's seat and fortunately I was able to win that election where I had two credible candidates running against me. During that election and actually during any of my elections, the Chinese community supported me a lot. Unfortunately, many of the Chinese community don't live in the city of Victoria proper. So we had to seek out those that were within the city proper to ensure that they went out to vote. Unfortunately, not very many of them voted before and many of them didn't understand English that well. So we had to tell them where we were on the ballot and at times even tell them that in order to vote for myself, your number whatever on the ballot and just remember that there's 4 letters in the front... in the last name, 4 letters in the last name and choose that person and vote for him. I had a lot of friends in the Chinese community that ensured that they drove them to the polls and made sure that they voted for me and, you know, that helped. But it was the... really the entire community that I was able to gather and garner the support from in order to be elected.

John Price: What do you think we should highlight in our web museum about the history of Chinatown and the community?

Alan Lowe: Well I think that definitely you have to look at the history, where we came from and where we are today. You know, not only have you had a mayor in the city of Victoria, you've had a chancellor of university which is Ronald Lou Poy, you've had MLA's such as Ida Chong, you've had city councilors Charlene Thorton-Joe, Jackie Ngai, you've had a mayor Jack Mar, Ed Lum in Saanich. So, you know, there were other politicians of Chinese ancestry. There are lot of business people that have done very well in the community, Don Nguyen has the Fairways chain of supermarkets which can easily compete with the Thrifty's chain of grocery stores. You have entrepreneurs and professionals such as lawyers, school teachers, you've got... you know. The... Without the sacrifices of those before us, we would never have had the opportunities that we have had to make a mark in Victoria's history.

John Price: So are there particular elders or people from past generations in the community that you think we should highlight, that have done a lot for the community?

Alan Lowe: Oh, definitely you know like... obviously you could highlight and I'm sure you will do that, the Chinese veterans that are still around and they'll have stories to tell. I'm sure Kileasa has a lot of contacts in the Chinese community and the associations where I'm sure there are members of those associations that have been members for many, many years and have been the backbone of those associations. They have served a huge benefit to the community by assisting those that have arrived from China. They continue to work with families that are from those areas and like to continue to keep those ties. Dr. David Lai, the historian, is very valuable in giving information to everybody and I guess the... it would probably be interesting to chat with some young students of Chinese ancestry that were born in Canada, maybe 3rd generation, to see what their view point of this is because, you know, from their point of view they might not even know much of the history of Chinatown and the only time that they may go down to Chinatown is for a meal with their parents or grandparents or with their school outing during Chinese New Year. But if you looked into Victoria's Chinatown, there's a huge connect

with the past, a huge cultural aspect of the Chinese community that they want to show with you and it's very rich in culture.

John Price: So is there a specific message that you'd like us to share with visitors to the website if you were to be speaking to people who are not necessarily in the Chinese community here who visit our website? What would you like to say to them?

Alan Lowe: I guess that Victoria, the Chinese community has come a long ways in the last century. The discrimination that was evident in the first half of this century or of the last century I guess is still remembered by many of the senior members of our community and that over the past 50 years, the Chinese community has gained a lot of ground in being leaders. Just that they should enjoy seeing the oldest Chinatown in Canada where there probably isn't too much change from a architectural point of view, from buildings of the past. But understanding that there are alleys and courtyards within the Chinatown fabric because there were times when the Chinese community needed to, I guess, hide from those that were after them, whether it may have been the police or other members of the community that were not as nice to them.

John Price: Charles, do you have any questions that you want to add?

Charles Yang: I think I'm good. I'm just thinking if you want to cover... (question on paper regarding family members buried in Ross Bay).

Alan Lowe: No, I don't have any family buried in Ross Bay. They're... All the family that I have are buried at Royal Oak.

John Price: So what about family photos or documents, grandfather's passport or head tax certificate or anything like that that you would like to share?

Alan Lowe: Yes, well I do have a copy of my grandfather's head tax certificate. I do have some pictures of my grandfather when... with their overalls on as gardeners and the like. So those are around.

John Price: Would you like to share them? I mean that would be... it would really give some depth to...

Alan Lowe: I could scan them in and send them to you if you want?

John Price: Sure.