

Family Ties—A Success Story

by Donna Anderson

*From a truck farm in Penryn to a chain of supermarkets—
the story of the Wong family's achievement*

Auburn's new Bel Air Market is unmistakably contemporary. It boasts a bakery, delicatessen, gourmet meat and fish counters, hot foods to go, video department, full-service pharmacy—even a post office. Yet, this spacious, up-to-date store evolved from a simple “mom and pop” business started by Gim

and Lee Shee Wong in Penryn 57 years ago.

The story of Bel Air Markets, operated today by six of the Wong children, is one of hard work, strong family ties, and a commitment to serving the community.

In 1916 Chinese immigrant Gim Wong followed his father to Amer-

ica. Here he attended school and learned the intricacies of farm work, and later returned to China to marry and start his family.

But Gim had found here his Promised Land, and a few years later he came back, with his wife, Lee Shee, and a child. He believed in the ethic “work hard and you can



This photo of the Gim Wong family taken some 50 years ago shows (top, from left to right): Al, George, Bill, Gene, Lil, Raney. (Bottom row) Euel, Gim, Nellie, Lee Shee and Paul.

make it in America."

"I was born back in the old country, and Dad brought Mom and me over in 1922," recalls Bill Wong, Gim's oldest son. "Then, the rest of the children were raised here. At first, Mom and Dad share-cropped at the Eckhardt ranch on King Road in Loomis; Dad had relatives in Penryn and Loomis, which was why he came here."

"We lived in lower Penryn town when Dad had the idea to acquire acreage close by to raise vegetables to sell. He bought five acres right below the Penryn Chinatown. Then he built a seven-room house and big basement, where we stored the vegetables and truck."

Located off Taylor Road in Penryn, just below the Griffith Quarry, the house overlooked Sacramento, providing a beautiful view of the valley. There Gim and Lee Shee raised six sons and four daughters: Bill, Al, George, Gene, Raney (who later died), Paul, Lillie, Evelyn, Nellie, and Betty. During the Depression, a time when families worked together to survive, each child was expected to do his or her share in the produce business.

"I remember being down in the basement, cleaning green onions," says Lillie Wong, the oldest daughter. "We cleaned them, then we tied them up and put them in the truck to sell them. I was about six then. I

was young, but old enough to help out."

"We didn't have any refrigeration," George Wong, third oldest son, adds. "But that was the coolest place in the house."

"We had a good acre and a half of garden area," says Bill. "I re-

"My mother worked the hardest," Bill remembers. "She worked from morning to dark. At daybreak she would get up, maybe four or five o'clock, because she liked to pick the vegetables during the early morning when it was cool. My mom used to cultivate all the vegetables. She had a green thumb. She loved it! Even when we moved to Sacramento, she had a small plot in the back yard where she raised a lot of her vegetables."

In the evenings the Wong family cleaned vegetables and loaded the delivery truck for the following day's route. Gim Wong and sons, Bill and George delivered the produce to Auburn residents.

"Mostly Dad and I went," Bill says. "We went from door to door, ringing the doorbells. We started with a Ford pickup, Model A—about 1932, I think. It had only four cylinders. It was a small pickup truck, it wouldn't hold very much.

"We had to help push it up the hill sometimes when the thing

was loaded up," he adds, with a laugh. "We used to gun the engine up, and by golly, we just barely made it up the hill!"

Later, the family bought a Studebaker—red—Bill remembers, which had more power. "We covered all the Auburn areas," he recalls. "We would go to a residence in Auburn twice a week. We had a



The Post Office building in Penryn was the site of Gim Wong's grocery store from 1942 until 1949. (photo by Scott Rush)

member raising cauliflower and cabbage near the house."

With no close neighbors, the family worked and played together, Lillie says. "We were seven miles from Auburn. In those days, that was a long ways! We all went to school, so when we got back from school, we would help with whatever needed to be done."

regular route we followed on Mondays, then another on Tuesdays."

"We went up to Truckee and Nevada City a few times," George adds. "But we stayed mainly in Auburn. Dad had the loyalty of his customers, you know. They knew his vegetables were fresh because they were homegrown."

One of Gim Wong's most devoted customers was Violet Heyer, who met him in March 1933.

"I remember the date, because I had a relative who was ill and aging, and I had come back to Auburn to be with him," she recalls. "He was on a strict low-protein, no-starch diet, and about all he could have was vegetables. I was distressed, trying to find enough varieties to meet his needs. And then one day, this man appeared at my door, with his little truck, and fresh produce. I was overjoyed. He seemed the answer to my prayers."

"Gim Wong was a pleasant person, very nice and outgoing," she remembers. "His produce was always fresh, always the best, and he had all kinds. It looked like the family was very fond of each other; there was very good cooperation among them all."

The Wong's produce business flourished, and around Auburn he became known as "Pop" to his customers. His children continued to assist him, even while finding their own niches in life. After graduating from Placer High School, Bill worked for a retail produce company in Sacramento, then opened his own small store in Sacramento in 1939. Two years later he received his draft notice, and the family pitched in, temporarily moving to Sacramento to run the store.

But Pop Wong was destined to return to Penryn. During the war, most of the Japanese families living there had been evacuated, and the town simply closed down.

"Eventually there were no stores in Penryn then, because of the Japanese internment," George says.

"So we had an opportunity to open a store, and serve the community at that time. We took over the Flint Store, that big stone building, where the Post Office was, and still is today, right in the middle of town."

Ollie Mae Hayes remembers



Gim and Lee Shee Wong started the family business in Penryn 57 years ago.

those days. "The Wongs lived here in Penryn and grew vegetables at first, and sold them from their little pickup in Auburn. Then, in the evenings, they worked down here at 'Grandma's' (Mrs. Babb's) place.

She lived down back of me here in Penryn. She took in boarders, and Gim Wong took care of her orchard. He irrigated, and did the pruning for Mrs. Babb."

"Then Pop Wong took over the store, which belonged to my father, Arthur Flint. He sold it to Dutra & Saladana in Newcastle in 1939, and somewhere along the way, they sold it to Wong."

A Penryn resident since 1945, Thelma Harrison also has vivid memories of the Wong family.

"They were running the little store when we moved here," she says. "Paul and my older boy, Robert, were good buddies. I knew Pop very well. He was so nice. Paul and my son would take their truck down to Sacramento in the summer. They took a load of fruit and sold it, and would bring back a load of groceries for Pop, whatever he needed. I still see Paul once in a while, in the Bel Air store at Main Street in Roseville."

George Kostenko's friendship with the Wong family dates back to his arrival in Penryn in 1943.

"At that time Pop had the store in Penryn. He had it from 1942 until 1949. I grew up with his youngest son, Paul, and with his daughter, Nellie.

"They are a neat family," he continues. "Very close-knit, and hard-working. Both Al and Paul worked at the store in Penryn. Pop ran the store. His wife, always known as "Mama," would come in and work in the store, cutting corn and vegetables, trimming them up.

"Pop was an interesting guy. He was a good manager, very frugal. Pop drove a '37 flatbed pickup all over Auburn.

About 1948 he bought a '37 Chevy panel truck, and that truck stayed with the family for many years. They took it back with them when they had their stores in Sacramento."

By 1945, though they still had their Penryn home, family members were operating businesses in Berkeley, Rio Linda and Sacramento; and Bill, Gene and George had all served in the U.S. Armed Forces.

It was George Wong who decided to expand the family business during the '50s by opening a supermarket in Sacramento—a new concept at that time. And true to Wong tradition, the entire clan again became involved.

"The very first Bel Air Market started up in 1955," Bill says. "I was in Berkeley then. My brother, George, came down. He said, 'Bill, we found a spot for a supermarket that we'd like to open up, and get the whole family involved.' So everybody put all their resources in."

"At that time we were quite innovative, because we were among the very first ones that pre-packaged meat in Sacramento. And we had this coffin-type freezer that was very new. But nobody knew us, and the location was in a residential area, so we had quite a struggle."

"I remember Lil working at the meat-wrapping—everybody worked," he says, with a grin. "Even though I was still in Berkeley, I came up every week and did some of the produce buying."

"We had this philosophy—we were always going to offer good service. That was our goal, to offer better service than anyone else. Friendly service. Then, little by little, we picked up business."

As supermarkets gained in popularity, the Bel Air chain began expanding, and by 1967 there were seven stores in all. But with growth came adversity; two stores closed, and a fire in 1971 gutted the family's first store. The fire destroyed most of the early photographs of the business, including those of the truck farm and Penryn store.

Still, the Wong family continued adding stores to their chain. George Kostenko worked for the Wongs at Bel Air No. 2 while attending college. He remembers that even in his later years, Pop Wong was a stable figure in the grocery scene.

"Pop was way up in his 70s, and I don't think he had a gray hair in his head. He was very active. Even after he retired, he and Mama would come into the stores in the 1960s, and they would be in the back, cutting up vegetables. They would put on a kettle of corn, so all the employees could have some. They never stopped working."

Gim Wong died in 1972; his wife, Lee Shee, in 1981. Today there are 13 Bel Air stores throughout Sacramento and the foothills area; eight Liquor Mart stores in Sacramento and Stockton; and a series of Sizzling Wok restaurants in Sacramento, all under the auspices of the Wong family.

Gim Wong's dream of success has been realized, and come full circle. A family tradition is back in the neighborhood. ♦

Photo right: The lavish produce sections in the family's markets today evolved from a small truck farm. (photo by Scott Rush)



The Wong family shareholders in the Auburn Bel Air with Violet Heyer, an early customer of Gim Wong's. (From left to right:) Gene Wong, Al Wong, Violet Heyer, George Wong, Lillie Fong, Paul Wong, and Bill Wong. (photo by Donna Anderson)

