



Western Edition Episode 5

“L.A. Chinatown: The Long L.A. History of the See Family”

Released June 21, 2022

(MUSIC – SPRITE STAR)

BILL DEVERELL (HOST): Hi, I’m Bill Deverell. This is *Western Edition*, Season Two: “L.A. Chinatown”. In the late 1800s, a Chinese immigrant named Fong See arrived in Los Angeles and opened an antique store that is still open, more than 130 years later.

LISA SEE: This place was just amazing to me. It still is, I mean, now it's in Pasadena, but when I was a kid, it was in Chinatown.

DEVERELL: This is Lisa See, a distinguished writer of fiction and non-fiction whose fondness for – and knowledge about – Chinese American history and culture runs through all her books. Lisa is the great-granddaughter of Fong See.

SEE: I lived with my mother when I was growing up, but I spent a tremendous amount of time with my father's family in Chinatown. You know, this was a big family back then – my great-grandfather had twelve kids; his brother had twelve kids. So when I was a child, I'd say I had about 400 relatives in Los Angeles. There were about a dozen that looked like me. I, you know, I have red hair and freckles. The majority still full Chinese and then the spectrum in between. And so, when I was a kid and I looked around me, what I saw were Chinese faces; what I experienced was Chinese culture, Chinese tradition, Chinese language, Chinese food. And of course, that's why I write the kinds of books that I do. It was on Ord Street – across the street from Philippes or Philippe’s – depending on how you like to pronounce it. It was in the last remaining building of what had once been China City, and China City opened in 1937. There was a fire that causes it to burn down, they rebuild it. And then a second fire closed it down

completely after ten years. And so, there was this last building, and so our family store was in it. And so, there was this main central hallway, which had been one of the streets of China City. And then along the sides were all of these little rooms with upturned eaves. These had been the original shops in China City.

(MUSIC – IN THE TEMPLE GARDEN)

SEE: And so now when you walk in the door on the left, you, it was the bronze room. The next one was the art room and there was – next one, ceramics coming around the corner. Textiles, scrolls, jewelry, but there were also these other kind of hidden nooks and crannies that had the old Chinese City goldfish pond, the old wishing well. So this place, you know, it doesn't exist anymore at all – there isn't a brick left – but to me, it was like the skeletal remains of China City – very magical.

DEVERELL: Well, it sounds like we've stepped into one of your novels – the way you use these words to describe a place, I can see it in my mind's eye. So when you're there – when you go there now – you can see the past all around you?

SEE: I do, but I feel that way about all of Los Angeles, actually. I see it kind of through – I don't know, not even rose-colored glasses – they're some special glasses that somehow allow me to find the buildings from the twenties and the thirties, and really think about – I sort of see beyond strip malls – to the history of the place. I can walk along Spring Street, and I can see where the Sam Sing Butcher Shop was, and the international grocery was, and I have these very specific memories of that as a child. But of course, it's gone now. So for me, there's this kind of sadness that's associated with it. But to me, it's still that place where you come when you first arrive, you know. And so historically, this was the only place you could live because of all the land restrictions – and you still see that today. It may not be Chinese from China, but ethnically Chinese from Thailand, from Vietnam, from Cambodia, from Laos. And they're those big kind of warehouse buildings, but inside they're those little shops kind of built out of fencing material that are, maybe like, you know, 20 by 20 square feet, and this is a place where people can get a start. And that is what Chinatown always has been – a place where people could get a start.

DEVERELL: Lisa See's research into her family story and the changes that took place around them turned into a 1995 bestselling nonfiction memoir, *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family*. Lisa also wrote the libretto for an opera based on the book, and it was recently performed in the Chinese Garden at The Huntington. Let's return to Fong See and his life in California. What happened to him, and how did he end up here in Los Angeles? Leslee See Leong – Lisa's cousin and the granddaughter of Fong See – picks up the story.

LESLEE LEONG: My grandfather came in 1871 to Sacramento. He took a ship and landed in Sacramento. His father was already here in California, as a herbalist to the railroad workers. His youngest son came because his mother sent him to find his father because his father came to

serve as an herbalist with the railroad and never went back home. And he was supposed to make his money in the United States, and then come back home with money to take care of the family – well he, he didn't return. And so, she sent her fourth son, Fong See, to California to find his father. And he found his father, they were together for a short part of time. And then finally, my great grandfather did return to China and to his wife, and Fong See stayed. And as young Chinese boys do at that time, they serve as houseboys – odd errands, everything to make a few cents to buy food and lodging and things like that – which was very reasonable of course at that time, but it still took a few coins to make his way.

(MUSIC – PAPOV)

LEONG: He started his own business manufacturing garments because he would import China silk from Canton [Guangdong]. Everybody coveted China silk at that time, so he would import China silk, and then he made garments of the China silk for the white people actually – for the Caucasians. And one of his main things of course – which always sends atwitter – he manufactured undergarments, in particular, crotchless ladies' underwear. Now, it sounds salacious, doesn't it? But it really wasn't. It's like a big skirt with a crack in the middle. And I think he kinda got it from, you know, from children's underwear because in China – little boys or little girls – they wore kind of a big pantaloon, but it was broken in the middle so that they could go to the side of the road and do whatever they had to do. And of course, Caucasian ladies didn't have that idea. So, it became kind of popular and that's how he made, I think, his first amount of money. And it was quite successful, but it was very difficult for him because he was a Chinese man selling underwear to Caucasian ladies in Sacramento. And, you know, young women, even women of the night trade, you know, isn't going to talk to a Chinaman about her undergarments – I mean, that's just really terrible. So anyway, so he looked for a lady – or a young girl actually – to work in his shop.

DEVERELL: Enter Lettice – or Ticie – Pruet, a white woman whose family had crossed the country on the Oregon Trail. Leslee's grandmother, Ticie, was born in Oregon – the youngest of five kids, and the only girl.

LEONG: My grandmother, she didn't have a real happy childhood. Since she was the youngest girl, she was – she had to do all the chores for all of her brothers – she had to do all the chores. So at a very young age, she left Oregon and went down to Sacramento to seek her fortune. And there, she went into a shop – my grandfather's shop – and asked him for a job. Well, what young white woman is going to go in and ask a Chinese for a job? I mean, it was just, just crazy, but she did. And he did hire her – wisely. He hired her because she could speak to the young ladies who were looking for underwear, you know, and make them feel comfortable. And so, she was a very good saleswoman. And so, the two of them together eventually fell in love. And I think became kind of prosperous with all the underwear, you know, they require a lot of underwear.

DEVERELL: Fong and Ticie married. To do so, they had to draw up a contract because marriage between white people and Chinese people was illegal. And they moved to Los Angeles with their garment shop. But how did they go from ladies' underwear to selling Chinese antiques? As Leslee explains, it was thanks to a friend named Richard White.

LEONG: Richard White, the soldier of fortune. And, you know, in those days it was a great adventure because the soldiers of fortune went back to China when they were just opening up the tombs that had just vast treasures. Because the Chinese of course believe in burying with them all of their worldly possessions – particularly their horses, their cows, their wives, their, you know, their food, whatever – was all buried with them, but they weren't really going to take all those dead horses, they'd be kind of nasty. So, they made effigies of Tang Dynasty horses and Ming furniture and buried that in the tombs with them. And Mr. White, who went back at this time when they went unearthing all this stuff, and, you know, the farmers would find these tombs and open them up and loot them and then sell all these treasures. So, there were great things that were unearthed at that time. Most of the museums like Boston and even San Francisco and Kansas City – that's when they got many of their treasures, because that's when they were coming out. Now it would be called looting, but now we look back at it and say, "Thank goodness they did", because if they had not taken those things and taken them to the United States, they would have been smashed and looted and just destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Many of the artifacts were saved during this period. So, Mr. White was a great friend of theirs and helped them acquire many of these items to sell in their store. And that's how they began the antique business.

DEVERELL: In L.A.?

LEONG: In Los Angeles.

DEVERELL: And that's F. Suie One?

LEONG: F. Suie One. And I don't know when, exactly how, it changed to F. Suie One. But I think my grandmother, you know, she kind of tried to make it a little more romantic, a little more personal, and kind of romanize my grandfather's name. So, they changed it from Fong Suie On, and changed it to F. Suie One.

DEVERELL: Can you just in your imagination, take us back to what you think it was like in the shop in the late 19th century? What was for sale? Who are the customers? What's it feel like in there?

LEONG: Okay well, at that time, you know, they had a lot of shops. My grandmother was quite ambitious, you know? And fortunately, Fong See went along – he utilized her talents. But they had several shops, but one of the main things they did at that time is they erected tents, and they had auctions in tents. And they would advertise these and that was some of their biggest

sales. And in the archive, there are photographs of the tents. They would bring all their goods and make a big display in a large tent. They hired a Caucasian auctioneer. And my uncles at that time were still young, so what my grandfather did to start his business, he brought in paper sons.

DEVERELL: Paper sons – as we discussed in our episode on Chinese exclusion – were people born in China who came to the United States by pretending to be children of Chinese Americans who were already U.S. citizens.

LEONG: One of his first paper sons was his younger brother, Fong Yun. And [he] brought in his younger brother and cousins and Chinese people – brought them in to do work the business. And he didn't pay them all that much, but they did make it to the United States. And of course, it was like a big family thing. Everybody all ate together, lived together, you know. I think it was a very good time for him, and he took advantage of the situation and, and it was, you know, symbiotic.

DEVERELL: And the customers, would it be mostly Caucasian?

LEONG: Yeah, they would be Caucasian customers. I mean, Chinese didn't have a penny to, you know.

DEVERELL: Right. So, the Caucasian customers were interested in Chinese...

LEONG: They were opening up the tombs. It was a very romantic time of China. The Caucasian customers saw this romance. And I remember them saying, "Oh, he's such, he's such a charming man. You know, for a Chinese, he's a very charming man". He romanced the Caucasian ladies – and I think my grandmother was very gracious. And he built up a really good business. He took advantage of the time.

DEVERELL: And the main shop was in Old Chinatown?

LEONG: I mean, they had many shops. I think there were at least thirteen through the years. Yeah, all the way from Long Beach to Wilshire Boulevard, you know, in the Miracle Mile area, to old Los Angeles to Pasadena, and then finally back to Chinatown – and some of them were at the same time, and some of them were one by one. Cause he – fortunately he brought in all of his paper sons, and he could do a lot, you know, he was the mastermind of creating business.

(MUSIC – ORIENT)

DEVERELL: Fong See thrived in Los Angeles Chinatown. His business empire spread as the local Chinese American community experienced a dramatic transition.

SEE: Old Chinatown's been torn down and these two projects are developed simultaneously. The first one, China City, developed by Christine Sterling who had created Olvera Street – basically a square block that was built using old leftover sets, and then surrounded by a miniature Great Wall. So in a way, it was like the first amusement park here. Very touristy, you know, you could go and you could ride in a rickshaw; you could eat a China burger; you could go and, and you could have pirate grog. It was not very realistic. I don't think anybody thought of China City as being particularly authentic, but it was a lot of fun, you know. And families were able to open businesses there, the rent wasn't that bad. And of course, back then everybody worked, right. So, I can remember interviewing people about when they were kids, you know, selling gardenias and the different kinds of things that people can – little kids could sell. And then playing tag in there and hide-and-go-seek. So, even though on the one hand it's this really touristy place, for the kids who grew up there – whose families had businesses there – it was a tremendous amount of fun. And then just within two-and-a-half, three weeks is when New Chinatown opened. And I – that had a very different idea that it was, you know, they tout it often as “the first outdoor shopping mall in America”. I don't know if that's actually true, but the architects were white men and they created – again, you know, how authentic is it? It has the upturned eaves, it's very colorfully painted, all of the neon – some of that's been recently restored. The big difference there was that people could – especially in the second block – have apartments up above. So, this kind of killed two birds with one stone. You had your business, and you could go back upstairs for, you know, for dinner and to go to sleep. And also at that time, if you think about it, with Union Station – all the people coming into town, leaving town, and then certainly during the war, with all of the soldiers who were coming through – and Chinatown had a very, very active USO, you know, where they would serve donuts and have dances. And that was very much because of its proximity to Union Station.

DEVERELL: Lisa has based several of her books in this time period that goes from the late 1930s to the late 1950s.

SEE: I think I have at least four books that start in 1937 for whatever reason. So, it's obviously a time that I keep going back to. But the reasons for me, you have the opening of China City; you have the opening of New Chinatown; but on a more personal level, my grandfather in 1936 had just opened his restaurant, Dragon's Den. And so, you know, I'm giving it one year to get going before I could be there, but that place in my mind is so romantic and different.

DEVERELL: Dragon's Den was a restaurant that Lisa's grandfather, Eddy – Ticie's fourth son – ran in the basement of F. Suie One in the 1930s.

SEE: Here it was the height of the Depression. Everybody's dead broke. My grandfather had a little art gallery in the antique store, you know, where he was bringing together Asian-American artists and showing their work. But nobody was buying art, right – because it's the Depression and nobody was buying antiques either. So they were down in the basement, you know, with his friends who are artists, Tyrus Wong, Benji Okubo. And it was like, well, what's the one thing people still need? And that's to eat. And so, they opened Dragon's Den in the basement. Benji

and Tyrus did all of the murals. Tyrus hand-painted every menu – those are now all at The Huntington. It was this really interesting crowd that came – a very Hollywood crowd – so, Walt Disney and Anna May Wong and Peter Lorre and Sydney Greenstreet. To me, when I think of that restaurant in that time, in that place, it's like Rick's Bar in *Casablanca*.

DEVERELL: Leslee Leong recalls growing up on Los Angeles Street in the 40s and 50s, after Union Station was built.

LEONG: I was very fortunate because I was on the edge of the Old Chinatown. That was just a remarkable area.

(MUSIC – GAIETY IN THE GOLDEN AGE)

LEONG: You know, it was around the Plaza. So, my family – both sides of my family – lived and made their fortune on the east side of the Plaza. The Mexicans were on the north side of the Plaza, Olvera Street – and that was all along the Plaza. And then on the west side of the Plaza was the Italian neighborhood, which was wonderful. And then on the south side, Los Angeles as a city was beginning to build up and that was the cradle. It was wonderful because everybody was right there. I didn't know that Mexicans were different. I didn't know that the Italians were different. It was just all one big melting pot. And it was really special – especially my uncle Eddie at that time – that's Lisa's grandfather – he was beloved by everyone. A great raconteur, always affable and just, he just knew everybody. We would walk to the Italian neighborhood because we all loved Italian salami. The aroma was terrific – you could smell salami a block away. And they would have large gunny sack bags full of breads and cheeses and meats, and my uncle knew all of those guys by name – they all knew him. And on our way there though, we didn't buy bread at the Italian market, we went to the Los Angeles Baking Company, which was one of the really early French bakery. And my uncle would go way in the back into where all the ovens were and the racks and everything – and he'd go back there. And of course, he knew everybody, and he said, "I want, you know, two dozen rolls", and they'd give him these – oh my God, hot, French rolls, fresh off the racks. Oh my God, nothing better.

DEVERELL: F. Suie One moved to Pasadena in the early 1980s, and it's still open for business. Leslee now runs it with Joe Schulman, an expert in Asian antiques. It is believed to be the oldest operating Asian antique business in the United States.

LEONG: Can you believe it? We're successful. I mean, we went through a lot of lean years and my mother always said, you know, "Good, bad – we just keep going". At the beginning, when we were on Ord Street in China City, my grandmother divided up the money that she got from her divorce. And so, she gave each son and daughter a lump sum of money. And so, my uncle Milton and my mother, they took on the F. Suie One company. My younger uncle, Eddie – Lisa's grandfather – started the Dragon's Den restaurant, which was an entity of its own. I mean, there's lots of romance with that. And my two other uncles went into the furniture

manufacturing business – the Asian style manufacturing of furniture. Because at that time, the Hollywood loved Asian theme, Asian movies. And so, the movie stars love to have Asian style, Asian furniture in their home. Black lacquer and you know, all that sort of stuff. And so, they kind of rode that era in on the fifties. As I said, we went through good periods and we went through bad periods and I mean, my mother went, she always said, “I went – I've gone through several depressions, and I've gone through several pandemics” – cause she and my father had polio at one time – “And we've gone through lots of marriages” – no children, but lots of marriages, and some illicit affairs and things like that. So yeah, “It's been a long life, but at the end, you know, we still always stood as a family”. I think that – and that's what Lisa writes about in the book *On Gold Mountain* – I think that's why the story has lasting power and carries so much significance, because it was a family that truly loved each other.

DEVERELL: The See family has been generous with their memories and with the physical artifacts that tell the history of their family and of the broader community. Lisa and Leslee co-curated an exhibition at the Autry Museum of the American West about their family's history and the wider history of Chinese Americans in the American West. And they've donated family archives to The Huntington Library, including papers and treasures that have survived decades in storage, and that help us better understand the Chinese American experience.

SEE: What I have given – and it's an ongoing gift over several years – are glass plate negatives of Los Angeles, Chinatown, and also a lot of studio portraits of people in Chinatown. What I think happened with those is that when old Chinatown was torn down, that my grandfather and my dad went scavenging and they just brought all this stuff back and stuck it in a shed. And it must've been in that shed for at least 50 years when I found them. And then when my grandmother, you know, passed away, those glass plates came up to my house and were here for 25 years. And I've always lived in fire areas, so I'm very prepared for any time there's a fire. And I have a list of, you know, what we pack in the car first, and those glass plates have always been at the very top of the list because I knew that they were special and irreplaceable. I could only hold them up to the light, right? I couldn't really see them. And the first time that I went to The Huntington, and they had developed – I think about the first fifteen images, maybe – I couldn't believe the detail that's in them. I hadn't known this, but glass plates take a much clearer photo because it's not pixels. You can really zoom in, and everything in the background is very, very clear. So for example, they were able to date one of the photos because they could see in the background a poster for a boxing match. And then they were able to, you know, track back when that match was. I don't remember the date, but I think the range for these photos is 1890 to 1915.

(MUSIC – DIGITAL SOLITUDE)

SEE: You know, I told you how I think the family got those – that, you know, they were scavenged – but then you reminded me that, at least one of the photos has an address that was the same address of where the F. Suie One Company was, 510 Los Angeles Street. So could he – that photographer – when he moved on, just left these somewhere and they were just kind of

back in the warehouse of the store. And again, when it was time to move, the family, just, you know, picked up the crate and brought it home and it ended up – happened to end up in my grandfather's shed. I don't really know, but that's part of the mystery of it, and how amazing that they survived.

DEVERELL: Survive they did – the See family's story of resiliency, creativity, and vision continues to run through that fascinating genealogy, as well as L.A. Chinatown more generally. I'm Bill Deverell. Coming up on the sixth and final episode of the season, we look to the future of L.A.'s Chinatown.

MICHAEL WOO: So much of the Chinese population has moved away. And yet in Chinatown, you still have many ethnic Chinese who can't afford to live somewhere else. And also, there are the physical remnants – whether it's in the form of buildings, the courtyards, or other physical aspects of Chinatown – that still say something, they still speak to the Chinese.

DEVERELL: If you'd like to see images related to this episode, head to our website www.usc.edu/icw. *Western Edition's* team includes Avishay [ah-vee-shy] Artsy, Katie Dunham, Greg Hise, Jessica Kim, Elizabeth Logan, Olivia Ramirez, Li Wei Yang, and Stephanie Yi. *Western Edition* is a production of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West. Thank you for listening and be well.