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Wong Family: John Wong (Elder)

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STOCKTONSpeaks!

JOHN WONG

In 1932, at the age of 15, John Wong's adolescence came to a quick and unexpected end with a life-changing shock — the death of his mother. It was a tragedy for his entire family. John was the eldest of 10 children; suddenly, with this event, his whole world changed. The beloved mother who was at the heart of the family was gone.

The young teenager now had to take on new responsibilities. No longer able to turn to his mother for direction, he now had to work hard and find his own way to be a good example for his siblings, to guide them as a parent would. The death of his mother made him feel more like an adult because now he was the second parental figure, alongside his father. The absence of his mother and this new role was a painful reminder that his childhood had ended abruptly. He had been thrust into an adulthood for which he felt unprepared.

Immediately after his mother's death, at the onset of America's Great Depression, John had to find a job to help support the family financially. That was not so easy. During the Depression, it was increasingly difficult for adult men to find work, let alone a teenager. For a young Chinese boy, it was all the more problematic because of racial discrimination against minorities, including Chinese, which existed in those days. Thus, when John's father saw an opening for a meat cutter in a local grocery store, he told John to get an interview. After his interview, to his surprise and his relief, John was hired to work despite his youth.

It was his first outing as an adult. He was now on his own, with a job and tasks to complete for someone else. The hours were long and the work wasn't easy. There were many work lessons; he not only learned to cut meat, he also learned there was a specific way of cutting meat for certain recipes. And he learned how to wait on customers and give them good service. Successfully

accomplishing these tasks, and getting paid for it, was eye-opening experience for the youth-who-had-become-a-man. John came to see the value of money and need to spend wisely by finding the best, most prudent buys. He also realized the importance of being efficient and working quickly in order to get satisfied customers. John gained many valuable lessons from his experiences and responsibilities as a meat cutter. And, still a teenager, he discovered he had easily acquired the art of developing good interpersonal relationships.

Adding to his maturity, John had to leave home and live in a bachelor house close to his work. Being on his own and independent, away from his father and family, was another factor in helping him become more of an adult. He had to take care of himself, paying for his own board and keep, while still supporting his family financially. Life was tough for the youth, but all these events became powerful learning experiences. They made him strong and set him on a path that would bring him to adulthood.

John was born in Canton, China in 1916 and was brought over to America as a 22-month-old baby by his father. Years earlier, in 1905 his father left China for the first time to come to the United States. After ten years, he went back to China to marry. Three years later, John's father brought his new wife and their son to the United States. During that time, there was no airline travel, so the new family had to travel to the U.S. by steamship, which was took longer and was a dangerous and arduous voyage. After arriving in Seattle, Washington, they made their way to set up their home in Stockton, California where John's father had work.

Despite the fact that John was born in China, he considers himself a Chinese-American, because he grew up in America, which has been his home for more than eight and a half decades. John spoke Chinese to his parents at home and English to his teachers and with his peers in public school. His parents also enrolled him in the private Edmond Wong Chinese School and Chung Wah (Chinese Benevolent Association) Chinese School, to study his native language and keep him in touch with his heritage. With his bi-lingual skills, he was able to

serve as an interpreter for his parents, whose English fluency was limited.

While he was growing up, John's mother and father were very supportive. He felt closer to his mother because she was a homemaker and spent more time with him than his father, who kept busy away at his job as a cook in one of the several gambling houses that was part of the Stockton's downtown. But they both tried to ensure that their son had safe, happy childhood experiences. His father advised him to act carefully, to be smart, and above all, not to "do bad things." Because of this advice, John worked hard to stay out of trouble. John's favorite memory of his youth was playing basketball at the local YMCA and football at elementary school.

Yet, with ten children, John's mother relied heavily on his help as the eldest son in the family. Thus, his mother's passing affected him greatly, leaving a great void in his life. He kept her memory close, never forgetting his mother's guidance throughout his childhood. He recalls that his parents' shared goal was for him to be "a good citizen and self supporting." John thought it was great advice and dreamed of becoming a successful businessman. His first job as a meat cutter was only the start of his career. He learned about the retail industry and became more prepared for the business world.

After graduating from high school, John's desire for college was thwarted by lack of money. But he knew that getting ahead would require more education. Many years later, he was able to take some accounting classes at Stockton College, now San Joaquin Delta College. After attending those classes, he took the CPA exam—and passed.

John was an accountant for five years but eventually left that field for something different. He began the career he's enjoyed most of all—being a real estate agent. He loves selling houses—finding the right homes for his clients--and did it successfully for ten years. He considers real estate to be his talent.

But he remembers the job discrimination that many Chinese suffered in the past, especially prior to World War II. Given those attitudes prevalent during his youth, John truly feels lucky to have been successful throughout his multi-

faceted career.

Although John is a religious man now, that wasn't the case while he was growing up. His parents didn't attend church—they were constantly working to make ends meet for their large family—but they did believe in God. John's wife helped him discover an interest in organized religion. Now, John attends St. Mark's Methodist Church, where he has been a regular parishioner for the past 40 years. The church has been a significant part of John's and his wife's lives, so their children also became involved and attended church functions.

John's history includes active membership in a variety of community organizations. He is part of the Wong Family Association, the Stockton Cathay Club, the Moose Lodge, Seniors in Retirement (SIRs), and the Chinese Cultural Society of Stockton. Several of these organizations help him keep in touch with his Chinese heritage. John's long and deep involvement in the Chinese community, which values work and school, has reinforced his belief in hard work and education. John's own experience-- losing employment opportunities because of a lack of a college degree-- leads him to stress the importance of getting a college education.

When he himself had the opportunity, John returned to school and got his first professional certificate.

John Wong is grateful that he had the opportunity of growing up in America. At the age of 87, John calls the United States "the greatest country to live in."

"I am happy and contented with my life," he says with pride. John is very grateful that his children have turned out to be good citizens. They took the advice he feels that would benefit anyone: get a college degree to become successful, stay away from drugs, and always work hard.

John has lived a long and fulfilling life. He was able to succeed because he had a strong and supportive family, who never failed to guide him in his journey to adulthood.

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Ethnic Group: Chinese American
Generation: Elder