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An Interview with
James Chow
February 24, 1977

Interviewed by
Jerry Young

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Interviewee: James Chow

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Scope Note: The Washington County Library System, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens. The project interviews took place between 1976 and 1978. The interviewees included long-term residents of the Greenville-Washington County area in their late 50's and older.

This interview is being conducted by Jerry Young with Mr. James Chow on February 24, 1977 at Mr. Chow's store, next door to Lucky Food Store Number One, at 1837 East Alexander in Greenville, Mississippi.

The first thing, Mr. Chow, that we are supposed to get on our interview is some biographical information about you. The things that we need first of all are where you were born, what date you were born and who your parents were.

CHOW: You want me to tell you.

YOUNG: Yes, sir.

CHOW: Well, I was born in Canton, China and I came over to the United States the first part of the year 1926. I came from Seattle, Washington direct to Greenville, Mississippi, and I've been staying here ever since.

YOUNG: Sir, you were born in Canton, China? In what year was that?

CHOW: I was born in 1910, June sixth.

YOUNG: June 6, 1910 and you came from China to Seattle, Washington.

CHOW: This is a port, you know, the ship came there. We had to land at the port and then came on by railroad.

YOUNG: Can you tell me why you came from China?

CHOW: My daddy and my uncle were all here and they sent for me to come to Greenville. They were already here in business, with the Joe Gow Nue grocery.

YOUNG: So you came from China to Seattle on the boat and then you took the railroad from Seattle to Greenville. You came here to help with Joe Gow Nue.

CHOW: I stayed with them, stayed with my daddy and my uncle.

YOUNG: And your uncle was?

CHOW: Joe Tuck. That was his name. My daddy's name Chow Wai, C-h-o-w W-a-i. Chow and Joe just the same it's just family.

YOUNG: That's interesting. So, Chow Wai was your father and Joe Tuck was your uncle and Joe Gow Nue was your —

CHOW: It's just a trade name for the store, a trade name.

YOUNG: All right. So, you came to Greenville to help in the family business. Can you tell me about what you did in the business? How you operated?

CHOW: I came here in 1926 and I stayed here during the flood and in 1928 I left Greenville. I went to Memphis to school and I stayed in Memphis for three years and I went back to China in 1931. When I came back in 1932 I've been staying here.

YOUNG: All right. So, you stayed in Greenville

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during the flood and you left in 1928 and went to Memphis to school. Can you tell me the name of the school and what you were studying?

CHOW: Well, I was just a young boy. I take a little grammar school and junior high.

YOUNG: Went to grammar school and junior high school in Memphis for three years and then you went back to Hong Kong and can you tell me why you went back?

CHOW: Yes, my mama and my brothers still lived there. I went home to visit my mama and my family, my grandmama. I had a pretty good family at home so I just went home to see the family, and I came back here in 1932 in January.

YOUNG: So you came back from Hong Kong in January of 1932. Did you bring your family with you, your mama... ?

CHOW: No, my mama didn't come in until 1941, my mama and my four brothers - they didn't come in until 1941.

YOUNG: But they all did come, your mother and four brothers came in 1941. Can you tell me what you had to do to get them to this country?

CHOW: Of course, at this time Japan and China were at war and they tried to get out of that part of the country. So, my daddy sent for them and they came over here.

YOUNG: Was there any problem with the immigration officials in getting them into this country?

CHOW: There was no problem because my daddy was already a merchant here and he had no problem bringing them

over here! The reason they came in so late my mama wanted the children to have more education in Chinese before they came over here to study. This way, of course, they sent my brother - I got two, one five and one is seven when they first came here.

YOUNG: Did your daddy make periodic trips back to China himself?

CHOW: No. He went back in 1932 after I came back and he came back in 1934. He did spend two years in China, that's the last trip he made to China.

YOUNG: And he came back in 1930?

CHOW: Thirty-four.

YOUNG: And he didn't see his wife until 1941?

CHOW: No.

YOUNG: So that explains how your family got here and the dates that they got here.

I would like to ask you this...you said that you stayed in Greenville during the flood of 1927. Can you tell me what it was like to live in Greenville then?

CHOW: Well, at that time, I do not know too much of the language. You know, the English language. Of course, I tried to pick up little by little from different people I met and they tried to talk to me and so I just learned how to talk. At that time I went to a lady by the name of Mrs. B. L. Burford...

YOUNG: B. L. Burford?

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CHOW: Yes. I went to her house every morning. She taught me for an hour, you know, how to read and to write in English. In fact, I went to her in 1926 and 1927 and also a part of 1928, she taught me for three years.

YOUNG: She taught you from 1926...

CHOW: I came here in 1926.

YOUNG: 1926, 1927 and part of 1928. How many hours a day did she teach you?

CHOW: She taught me an hour.

YOUNG: One hour a day.

CHOW: I went to her house and she taught me.

YOUNG: I'm just curious, how much did it cost to be tutored in English?

CHOW: Well, of course, it's not much not like that much.

YOUNG: And then when the flood came what did you do - the 1927 flood?

CHOW: I just stayed in the store. Of course, at the corner of Washington Avenue next to the levee the ground was pretty high. Of course, I had to walk in the water every morning. The water was knee deep. This was the highest ground, you know, in the city. Of course, they built a little bridge from the levee to the front of our store and people would come there, you know, and we would supply them with what little food they got at that time because the people just need something to eat. We had to give them. There was no water to

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drink the first two days until they bring some water from Vicksburg by barge... Greenville had a hard time. Everybody's in a panic.

YOUNG: You stayed in the store and there was probably a wooden bridge, kind of a sidewalk...

CHOW: They built a sidewalk from the telephone office to the post office, you know, and in front of our store and then we built one to go inside the store where the people could come in and walk and everything.

YOUNG: Well, did you do a fairly good business?

CHOW: We just cleaned the store out of everything we had up there for the people needed something to eat and we had to let them have it.

YOUNG: So you got through the 1927 flood in satisfactory condition. Let me go back... You told me that you were educated both in Memphis and you were tutored in Greenville. What did the other Chinese do for education?

CHOW: Well, of course, at that time - the people in the school they don't admit the Chinese to their school. We feel like we're mistreated so whenever we had a chance we would get out of the state of Mississippi and Greenville and go somewhere else, you know, to get educated, that's why.

YOUNG: So, you were forced to depend on either being tutored or to go out of the state to receive an education.

CHOW: Of course, Mrs. Burford, she was very nice. She met me at the church. I went to the Baptist Church.

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Her husband is a secretary of the YMCA, Washington County YMCA. They were real nice and kind and talked to my uncle and asked if I come to their home and let his wife teach me. So, that's how I did it.

YOUNG: Was the actual teaching done at the church or at her house?

CHOW: They asked me to come to their house so that she could help me and teach me. At her home.

YOUNG: I see. Mr. Burford was at that time the secretary of the YMCA?

CHOW: Yes.

YOUNG: Do you remember where their house was?

CHOW: Her house, at first they were living in the three hundred block of South Broadway and then from there she moved to 408 or 418 Arnold. I used to get the street car here. They used to have a street car here and I would get off at Washington Avenue and then I would walk.

YOUNG: You caught the street car and then you walked part of the way to her house.

CHOW: Yes.

YOUNG: Can you tell me this... I know that the Chinese were not admitted to the schools. How would you say in the early years your relations were with the caucasians in general?

CHOW: Well, at this time we had the feeling that we are not wanted, in a way. But, we tried not to mix, you know,

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with the caucasians. Not in business, we had to do it in business, but we just didn't associate with each other too much. We were afraid, we get the word they don't treat us right, so we just afraid, you know, not feeling too close to them that way.

YOUNG: So you came into contact with caucasians in business because it was necessary and not socially in other words.

CHOW: Socially, in other words.

YOUNG: Well, then this was true with caucasians, what about your relationship with the black people?

CHOW: Well, of course, most of the young children raised after the late twenties, the young generation had nothing to do with it either because the only purpose they came over here was to work and try and make a living. They really don't care for intermarriage, you know, with the black race. They don't want it.

YOUNG: So, also, it was necessary to deal with the blacks in business but there was no, they didn't want intermarriage.

That brings me to an entirely different subject that I want to ask you about and that's the Chinese cemetery. Can you tell me when it was established and why it was established?

CHOW: All right. The old Chinese cemetery - that was before my day coming here - they had one that used to be

called... they used to call it the Poor House, down below. It was just a small plot of ground, just all Chinese people buried there. Until 1927, the late twenties, the Chinese people have been raising money to send home to help General Chiang Kai-Shek to unite the country. We were going to use that money to buy a plane, you know, to fight the war lords in China, so we find out when Chiang Kai-Shek get up as far as Hangchow and the party was split, one to the left and one to the right, which was Chiang Kai-Shek in the right wing and the left wing was communist - there's a mix-up. We hold this money here, we don't send it back because we don't go for that, communist way. We turned around and used that money to buy a cemetery, what we have now, today. That's way back in the early twenties.

YOUNG: So, the money that was used to buy the cemetery where it is located, which is off South Main Street, was money originally raised to send back...

CHOW: To help finance Chiang Kai-Shek, General Chiang Kai-Shek to unite the country. At that time China was divided under different War Lords, each one control so many provinces and they tried to unite the country back in 1927. That's when we first started. This money was to be used just for that, to help them, and finally we found that the country would soon be split and then the party was split so we just kept this money here.

YOUNG: Now, tell me something. I know that you

said that the place where the Chinese buried their dead before they had the present Chinese cemetery was at the Poor House?

CHOW: By the Poor House. It wasn't a real plot of land, just in the woods, you know, but they still had a place. Well, I would say it was a pretty good size. They got quite a few people buried there.

YOUNG: Yes. Is that close to where the present Poor House is now?

CHOW: Well, it's real close. They used to have a wooden building there, they tore it down, they built a new one. I think it is the same place, just right close to it.

YOUNG: Now the County Poor House is on Mill Road, I think.

CHOW: Mill Road, that's right. That's the way we had to go out Mill Road and then we took a turn to the left - we had to go through the woods to the cemetery. Of course, this has been abandoned for so many years.

YOUNG: I see, but are the graves... ?

CHOW: There are still many graves in there.

YOUNG: Can you see the markers?

CHOW: Yes, they got markers inside, the fence up too. At this time, way back in the forties, Mr. Frank Chu Lin, he was the one that worked out there. He kind of remodeled it, the whole cemetery and also the old one he put all the fence up and make it look real nice.

YOUNG: This is something that I've heard, I don't

know if it is true but you can tell me. In the present Chinese cemetery is there any separation of christians from non-christians?

CHOW: No, as long as they are Chinese they were buried there free with no charge.

YOUNG: I see. There was no charge for the ground.

CHOW: No charge for the ground.

YOUNG: All right. Now, I want to get back to education also. There was at one time a Chinese school here.

CHOW: Yes.

YOUNG: Can you tell me please when it was organized, who was responsible for opening it?

CHOW: Well, I don't remember that long. We did have one little school on O'Hea and North Theobald, a small house. You know, I imagine they got quite many students at that time, fifteen or twenty. There were some Chinese people who would come from as far as Beulah every day, you know, just to school, with some children. Of course, at that time we didn't have many families, we didn't have many children - just a very few, so they all came on down here to school.

YOUNG: Did the people... did the children from Beulah drive in every day?

CHOW: They drove here every day and go back every day.

YOUNG: And you would say that the most people they had was maybe twenty at one time?

CHOW: Might not be that many. It was probably less.

YOUNG: But you don't know about when it was organized?

CHOW: I don't remember. It was during the thirties.

YOUNG: During the thirties. And, who organized it?

CHOW: Well, I cannot remember. Some of the people older than I tried to get the Board of Education in Greenville to help out. In this way - we told them you don't allow us to go to the white schools and our children don't want to go to black schools so they felt they would give us a little place, little house, for class rooms and this is how it started. I don't remember - it might have been my uncle - in those days...

YOUNG: But it was the Chinese people?

CHOW: Yes. All Chinese there. I think my uncle was a part of it because he was the oldest and had been here longer. Of course, I was young at that time, you know...

YOUNG: Do you know any of the names of the teachers who taught there?

CHOW: I don't remember. I know one lady, I remember Miss Witt. She used to live on Poplar Street. I couldn't think of her first name, Miss Witt.

YOUNG: But her name was Witt?

CHOW: W-i-t-t-, Miss Witt.

YOUNG: Was there a Mrs. Hamilton who taught there?

CHOW: I think Mrs. Hamilton taught a little later. Of course, I don't know Mrs. Hamilton too well but I know

Miss Witt, you know, and I knew her family too.

YOUNG: Who owns the building and the land at this time?

CHOW: Which one?

YOUNG: Where the school was?

CHOW: I don't know, it was just a little one room shack, that's all.

YOUNG: But it is still... ?

CHOW: No, they closed that down, I think the building...they have condemned it, a good many years ago they tore it down. It was just a little shack. Finally, I do know that we had one up there on Nelson. See, we the Chinese people we, I think we bought it, lot. We put up the building, it's a Chinese school. We teach the Chinese class and when we move into that school we teach English and Chinese.

YOUNG: Were there two buildings and one building that was on O'Hea and

CHOW: Well, they found that the building was too old so we built one later.

YOUNG: The first building was provided by the Board of Education, then the second building is the one that was bought by the Chinese people. Is that building standing?

CHOW: It's still there. Yes, it's still there right next to the old Trigg school, right across the street from the old Trigg school.

YOUNG: Right across the street from the old Trigg

school. Now, let me ask you this - who owns that building?

CHOW: Well, actually now it belongs to the Chinese Cemetery Association. In other words, we haven't been paying tax, you know, for that building, after that you know we were admitted to the public schools, and have never used it, any more. It used to be that we teach a Chinese class at that time. We had a Chinese class, after that an English class. The students would come up, we had a Chinese teacher, so he taught the Chinese language for many years. That school closed, probably during the war, in the early forties.

YOUNG: Do you know the name of the teacher who came and taught Chinese?

CHOW: Yes. Doctor Wu, W-u, Doctor Wu.

YOUNG: Doctor Wu taught Chinese.

CHOW: He was superintendent of the Chinese Mission and the school and for many years in the school at that time, you know, and the Chinese Mission. He and his wife taught the Chinese class. We hired a Chinese teacher when we first came over here.

YOUNG: Whatever happened to Doctor Wu?

CHOW: He went back to China after the second war. He was sent here by the government to study but since the war started he couldn't go home until war over, so they went home. They went back to Canton, I think about forty-six or forty-seven. They go home to teach school again, I think somehow. I don't know what happened to them.

YOUNG: Well, he was sent here by his own government and then when the war broke out he couldn't get back. When he could go back, he did go back.

CHOW: Yes.

YOUNG: It's interesting that you say that the building and the land where the Chinese school was belongs to the Chinese Cemetery Association.

CHOW: Yes.

YOUNG: Another question too, back in the earlier days, was the Chinese New Year celebrated by the Chinese community? Is it still celebrated?

CHOW: Well, the Chinese people in the South, Mississippi especially, don't know too much about the Chinese New Year, they not celebrate like the people on the west coast and the east coast and New York some of the cities like Los Angeles, you know, but the people here they just go the American way more than they do the Chinese.

YOUNG: All right. Now, was the same thing true of Christmas customs?

CHOW: People do the same as the American customs.

YOUNG: Gifts were exchanged among the Chinese just like...

CHOW: Yes.

YOUNG: All right. Now, before the Chinese were included as a part of general activities in Greenville, what sort of social activities were available to people, for the

Chinese people?

CHOW: Well, actually, we don't have any social activity around here, except the church. That's all.

YOUNG: You mean the Chinese Mission.

CHOW: Yes.

YOUNG: The church gave you a chance to be together socially.

CHOW: Yes.

YOUNG: I hope you don't think this question is improper but I would like to ask it. Was gambling ever a common practice among the Chinese?

CHOW: Gambling, you know, the older generation had no family in here. They have nowhere to go. Some places they want to go they don't accept them. So, they had to get drunk with a few of the old countrymen who got together. They've got nothing else to do except to keep together, you know, for recreation or for money or they just get together to keep gambling more.

YOUNG: They did enjoy gambling but it was because they had no families. It was just something to do.

CHOW: Yes.

YOUNG: Were there ever any crimes committed because of gambling?

CHOW: No, not any Chinese people would do that thing.

YOUNG: What would you say about have there ever

been any crimes committed by Chinese against Chinese that you can think of?

CHOW: We don't have such a thing in here because we have too few Chinese in here but we did have the so-called Tong in old days, just a few members - not many, and most people not belong to them so it finally goes out in here.

YOUNG: You mean that there was a Tong in Greenville that had just a few members.

CHOW: A few members one time.

YOUNG: I'm not familiar with it at all. Can you tell me just a little bit about what Tong is and what they did?

CHOW: Well, Tong just a few members get together like a party. Of course, they get together where there are people gambling, this is where they used to have the place in here. You know, how all the single men get together. They get together and play in here. That's the only thing, you know, Tong's like a club. In English, it's just a club.

YOUNG: Now, immigration. Was immigration ever a problem? Was it ever hard to get people to this country?

CHOW: Yes. The problem is that in that time they tried to keep the Chinese from coming to the United States, you see. They used every way they can to keep them from coming. That's why our menfolk come in first and we send for our wives later. The law was harsh. There was no way they could get around it, you know, to get the people here like

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they wanted - the family, the children and the wife.

YOUNG: If a Chinese... Well, for instance yourself, was it hard for you to come here?

CHOW: Well, in a way it was hard at first. They held me in the detention center for thirty days. You know, they had to question my identity and question all the witnesses that knew me and finally, I stayed at the detention center for thirty days. Some people stayed there longer.

YOUNG: But they held you in detention center, was your father actually there?

CHOW: No. My father was still here but they sent an Immigration Officer from New Orleans to question him, they out there questioned me, so it all... we say the same thing so we know everything to come out the same.

YOUNG: But was there any paper work involved before you left China? I mean, did the Immigration people know that you were coming?

CHOW: Yes. We just sent them in, you know, this passport. We applied for the passport so I came with a passport.

YOUNG: So, you came with a passport?

CHOW: Yes.

YOUNG: Did any people ever get into this country illegally, did they ever... ?

CHOW: Oh, yes. You make the law so harsh so the people had to get by it. When they want to come to a free

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country they had to get every way they could to get over here. You can't blame them. There are some seamen, they dodge the ship, you know, they come over here. Yes, there are quite many over here.

YOUNG: There must have been a shortage of Chinese women too.

CHOW: Yes, there are, because they try every way to keep - the law, to try to keep them from coming over here.

YOUNG: Did any, for instance, if a young Chinese man came to Greenville and he worked in a business he could send for his wife and children and they could come but the officials would make it very difficult?

CHOW: Yes, they made it so difficult.

YOUNG: Do you know if anybody was ever turned away and sent back to China?

CHOW: Oh, yes, quite many people got sent back. They sent them back, yes.

YOUNG: So, some of these Chinese people actually came to this country and then were turned around and sent back?

CHOW: Yes, sent back.

YOUNG: Let's switch from the past a little bit to the future. From your personal point of view, what part do you see the Chinese playing in the future of Greenville and of this country?

CHOW: Well, of course, they say Greenville... we

get along; real good now for the last twenty years. The people, you know, we understand each other better too. We all have a better understanding. So, people we get together, we have the chance to talk to each other. Everything seems to be much better. After the schools, the Chinese were admitted to the schools ...

YOUNG: So, really, you think the Chinese will play the same role as anybody else.

CHOW: Yes, yes, yes.

YOUNG: So things are much better for the Chinese now. Could you please tell me why you think, what you think the reasons are why things have changed - why everything is better? What happened, in the beginning the Chinese were not accepted... what happened to make them accepted?

CHOW: You say what make them accepted?

YOUNG: Yes, sir.

CHOW: Well, since the second World War, of course we had served the country like everybody else and were denied the privilege of the school and, you know, most everything we were denied the privilege. They didn't let us have what others had. So, after the second World War everybody get sympathy and understanding, we were fighting side by side of each other, then that the law became gradually changed. That's why they gave us the chance to go to school and our families could... even if the immigration law changed it would give us the chance to bring family over here. That's why after that

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everything changed, you know, since the second World War.

YOUNG: You see the second World War as being your chance to prove by fighting side by side, then things changed.

CHOW: Yes, side by side. We were allies at that time in the war, so this is what made the people's attitude change considerably since the second World War.

YOUNG: I see. Now, you told me what it was like during the first World War but have you ever heard anybody speak about what the Chinese who were here in Greenville during the Civil War did?

CHOW: No, no. I don't believe anybody ever did, that has been quite a long time since the Civil War.

YOUNG: All right. Then let us touch on this last topic. You mentioned earlier the Chinese Mission and the fact that it provided a social outlet for you in addition to it being a religious organization. Can you tell me about when this was organized and who started it?

CHOW: Well, I wish I had the picture. Mr. Ting took the picture from my album. You know we had about six or seven of us and my uncle, Joe Tuck, Mr. Hai (Min Sang) and George Su and Mr. Ting and I had my uncle in there, Mr. Frank Chu Lin, Mr. Mee Sun, which were the uncles of C. W. Sidney...

YOUNG: The uncles of C. W. Sidney.

CHOW: Yes. I think this is about all that we started with. We just started with six or seven. We had started with the class with the teacher, D. L. Simmons.

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YOUNG: What was his name?

CHOW: D. L. Simmons.

YOUNG: D. L. Simmons?

CHOW: Yes. He was very nice. Of course, he moved from here to Jackson to be in an insurance, some kind of an insurance company. When we started at first, this was when we had a class and, of course, his wife was very nice too and taught us how to sing Church hymns, you know. It was way back in 1935 or 1936. I don't remember the particular year nor just when we first started.

YOUNG: But it was in the middle thirties?

CHOW: That's right, the thirties.

YOUNG: All right. Was it the idea of the Chinese, your idea to organize this...

CHOW: It was our idea to try to keep the people coming, it was the only decent place we could meet the people, particularly these American people, to go to church and we try to build understanding better. You know, a better place to go, so that's why we feel like the church is necessary. The people, it's better to understand, you know, and ...

YOUNG: Where did you hold your meetings?

CHOW: The First Baptist Church, in a wing of the First Baptist Church.

YOUNG: All right, so you met in the First Baptist Church, you organized this Mission yourself. Now, before the tape began you were telling me about the baptism? I would

like for you to tell me about that again. Who was baptized?

CHOW: When I first came here in early twenty-six my uncle took me to church, Sunday School and Church every Sunday morning, so when the time come for me to be baptized he asked me if I wouldn't be baptized. I said, Yes, I said okay, so I been baptized in April, 1927. He also told me he was baptized a year earlier. He was probably the first Chinese to be baptized in the First Baptist Church and I was the second one.

YOUNG: And his name was?

CHOW: Joe Tuck.

YOUNG: Joe Tuck was probably the first Chinese to be baptized and you were probably the second.

CHOW: Yes.

YOUNG: And you were baptized in April, 1927.

CHOW: Yes, right before the flood. Doctor Charles Henderson was the pastor at that time.

YOUNG: How many members did you have at the most?

CHOW: At the church? Well, of course you mean the Chinese Mission?

YOUNG: Yes, sir.

CHOW: Well, I cannot remember how many members. Of course it not too many. Of course, they come to the church but are not a member of the Baptist church. Of course, at this time with the help of Mr. Kern Pratt and Mr. John Davis.

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YOUNG: Mr. Kern Pratt?

CHOW: Yes, this is the way we organized the Chinese Mission, they helped us.

YOUNG: And Mr. John Davis.

CHOW: Mr. John D. Davis. Yes. They were really the biggest help to the Mission for because without their help we would need to... you know ..

YOUNG: All right. Mr. Chow, do you have any particular item which you would like to include in this tape as part of the Chinese history in Greenville that I haven't touched on, something that you think should be included?

CHOW: Of course, you know, I have been here so long and so many families, you know. In fact, you know, when I got a little bit up in age my memory is not so good and there is something that I could have skipped too, you know, because you see so many people and deal with so many people every day, you just can't remember. Sometimes, I get confused. We have a real nice Mission but when we started we didn't allow

('phone interrupts)

and now that our members have increased and many more people come to church, you know, as we go along, but at first we had just a men's class, then we had the ladies' class, then a few years later we got a few children and we could have a children's class. We were kind of growing, you know, for quite a few years at the church.

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YOUNG: All right. That's fine. Thank you,
Mr. Chow.

(End of Interview)
(Transcribed by Vivian Broom)

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