

The Sing Family

I. Context

According to The New Handbook of Texas, “[t]he Chinese were the first of the Asian immigrants to come to Texas.”¹ Also according to research done on early Asian residents in Austin at the Austin History Center, Mr. Joe Sing was one of the first Chinese men to settle in Austin, Texas. He was a pioneering Asian to set roots in Austin, Texas by establishing a laundry business. He came from China to financially support his family due to massive levels of poverty in that country, in hopes of providing better a quality of life for his family. Joe Sing married Frances Moreno who played a key role in establishing Hong Lee Laundry.²

Mrs. Frances Moreno Sing, wife of Joe Sing, stated that at times other Chinese men would come ask for loans from him because during the 1800’s, it was difficult for minorities to ask for loans from financial institutions due to the discrimination against minorities. He had a ledger to show such transactions being made at that time.³ Mr. Sing’s financial support to his fellow community allowed for business growth in the Austin community. The Chinese families in Austin established restaurants, grocery stores, and laundries. Mr. Sing’s willingness to support his community and fellow neighbors was an important contribution to Travis County on two counts: 1) Building community networks within themselves to sustain financial stability and 2) He invested his time and resources to assist his community to contribute to the economic growth of Travis County.

II. Overview

Joe Sing, previously known as , Jo Fung Sheng, was born in China in 1860 and came to the United States around 1890 to find work. His name was “Americanized” to sound more familiar to western ears, thus, Jo Fung Sheng became Joe Sing.

Joe Sing first came through Boston then New Orleans and eventually settled in Austin. He opened Hong Lee Laundry on 311 W. 5th Street. His business provided laundry service to many State Legislators and Austinites.² After settling in Austin, Sing married Francis Moreno, a Mexican American woman, who was employed as a cook for the first female Governor of Texas Ma Ferguson.² Because of the law back then, Moreno unjustly lost her U.S. citizenship for marrying a Chinese man.

The couple had four children, Senovia, Joe Jr., Rumalda, and Margaret. Sing’s family knew him as a quiet man who never talked about his life in China even though he corresponded with his family in China during his time in Austin. Joe Sing died in 1927, at the age of 67 in a hit-and-run car accident.

Margaret Sing, second daughter of Joe Sing worked at Hong Lee Laundry, helping her dad as much as she could as a child. Eventually she got a job working at Home Steam Laundry. She never married because she had to take care of her mother. She resided in her home on 1705 Willow until her death in 2006. Having faced discrimination, Joe Sing and his wife were never able to own property and were subjected to renting all their lives. Because of this Margaret took great pride in becoming the first homeowner in the Sing family and especially as a single woman.² This house was built by Axel Paulson, a carpenter at Calcasieu Lumber Company in 1930⁴ and shows many unique characteristics of homes by this builder such as long leaf yellow pine lumber used

for flooring. This company helped many families afford homes by providing low-interest loans through low monthly installment plans.⁵

Following Margaret's death, her family found a box of items in her home that belonged to Joe Sing. They donated the items to the Austin History Center and the collection became The Sing Family Papers, the first and oldest Asian American archive acquired under the Asian American Liaison program. This collection includes valuable research materials about early Asian Americans in Austin, including family photographs, a certificate of residence and correspondences with other Chinese in America. This collection is one of the few primary sources on early Asians in Austin.

III. Historical/Cultural Significance:

The Sing family has always held onto the Chinese culture that was passed down through oral history, documents and pictures. This was typically done at the family home on a Sunday afternoon or after dinner. 1705 Willow is the only family structure that is left physically to connect the family to Chinese heritage. This home is also a link to the history of early Chinese in Austin. Because this history is under documented, it is vitally important to preserve the structure and help uncover the history of Asian Americans in Austin.

VI. Documentation:

¹ Tyler, Ron., editor. *The New Handbook of Texas*. Austin, 1996, p.86

² Mary Frances Aguallo. November 23, 2009. Digital recording. Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Austin, Texas.

³ Sing Family Papers (AR2008.002). Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Austin, Texas.

⁴ Morrison & Fourmy's Austin (Texas) City Directory 1930-31

⁵ Centennial Report. Calcasieu Lumber Co. 1883-1983. Austin File – Lumberyards – Calcasieu L3610 (1) 1960=1969. Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Austin, Texas.

FINAL MARKER TEXT

THE SING FAMILY IN AUSTIN

BORN IN CHINA AS JO FUNG SHENG IN 1860, JOE SING IMMIGRATED TO THE U.S. AROUND 1890 TO FINANCIALLY SUPPORT HIS FAMILY. HE SETTLED IN AUSTIN, BECOMING ONE OF THE FIRST CHINESE IMMIGRANTS IN THE CITY. SING OPENED HONG LEE LAUNDRY ON 311 W. 5TH STREET, WHICH HE RAN ALONG WITH HIS WIFE FRANCIS (MORENO), A MEXICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN WHO LOST HER U.S. CITIZENSHIP FOR MARRYING A CHINESE MAN. JOE SING SUPPORTED THE AUSTIN CHINESE COMMUNITY BY PROVIDING LOANS FOR OTHER CHINESE MEN, WHO FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO PROCURE FUNDS OTHERWISE BECAUSE OF DISCRIMINATION. JOE AND FRANCIS HAD FOUR CHILDREN INCLUDING MARGARET, WHO BOUGHT THIS PROPERTY, BECOMING THE FIRST HOMEOWNER IN THE FAMILY.