

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

THEODORE B. LEE

FROM CHINATOWN TO HARVARD:
A LIFETIME OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND PHILANTHROPY

Interview Conducted by

Elizabeth A. Castle, Ph.D., in 2005

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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Doris Shoong Lee and Theodore B. Lee at their San Francisco home, 2001

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Interview History

The Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) at the University of California, Berkeley, invited Theodore B. Lee to record his memories and historical interpretations of his rise from a young man with ambitions in Stockton, CA to a successful career as a lawyer, businessman and developer in California and Las Vegas, Nevada.

He responded with enthusiasm and we began the series of interviews beginning May 2005 in his San Francisco office at 611 Washington Street. I traveled to Las Vegas to continue our interviewing at his Vegas home and visited his casino. We finished the interview with a video tour of Lee's development of Japantown and Nihonmachi. The oral history covers Lee's remarkable journey from Stockton, CA to Harvard University, the son of Chinese immigrants and the first to achieve higher education. An extraordinarily driven student, he earned his bachelor's degree from Harvard and a degree in law and business from the University of California, Berkeley.

Colleagues, business partners, friends and family have described Tee Lee as an imminently approachable, fair and socially concerned man. During our interview, he demonstrated an intense thoughtfulness in his responses reflecting on his life's accomplishments.

The tapes were transcribed and lightly edited at ROHO. Mr. Lee made very few changes, maintaining the conversational tone of the interview. In preparing the final version, a table of contents and index were added. The Regional Oral History Office, a division of The Bancroft Library, was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. Tapes of the interviews are also available for listening in The Bancroft Library. The Regional Oral History Office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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[Interview 1; May 3, 2005]

[Begin File 1]

Lee's birth in Stockton and Remembrances of his Mother and Father

Castle: So we were thinking back to where you grew up. If we could just start and you could describe to me—tell me when you were born and where you were born and if there's any—I don't even know if you can access your earliest memories about your house or what it was like. I'm trying to get you in a descriptive mode and to talking to me about where you grew up.

Lee: I was born in Stockton, California, on December 28th, 1932, at the Dameron Hospital in Stockton. My mother was also born in Stockton. I think she was born in the same hospital.

Castle: Tell me how your family ended up in Stockton. You said your mother was born there so tell me, maybe, the genealogy. How did your family find their way to Stockton?

Lee: My mother's parents ran a restaurant in Stockton. That was in the Chinatown part of Stockton, just off of the downtown area. She was born in Stockton, went to school through the eighth grade, and then—that would make her about thirteen or fourteen. When she was thirteen or fourteen years old, her father and my father made a deal, so he gave his daughter in marriage to my father when she was only—she was very, very young, like, fourteen years old.

Castle: How did that come about? Do you know the story behind that?

Lee: Yes. It's kind of—remember, in those days there were very few Asian women because Asian men came over to get jobs to send money back to China. They didn't do that for women, so there were very few women around. My father wanted to marry my mother, and her father agreed to it. As far as I know, it wasn't a bargained exchange, but my father was a butcher and supplied a lot of meat for my grandfather's restaurant, and I think—

Castle: I see, so that's how he knew him.

Lee: That's how he knew him.

Castle: Do you have any idea how well your father—did your father know your mother at all?

Lee: No.

Castle: Had he seen her?

Lee: He had seen her, yes, but there was no dating her. He wanted to marry her. I talked to my mother's very good friend, and I asked her about, "You guys grew up together. What happened?" "Well, there came a time when your grandfather told your mother that she had to marry this person, and she was a dutiful daughter." [Laughs.]

Castle: Wow. I should say so. Do we have any sense of what your mother's reaction was?

Lee: She was very unhappy.

Castle: She was?

Lee: As a matter of fact, they eventually got a divorce, around 1952.

Castle: Around that area.

Lee: Yes, around 1952.

Castle: You had gone to college then.

Lee: I was in college. It was something that she never was really happy about. It was something she had to do. She did what she had to do, but that didn't make her happy.

Castle: So it wasn't like over time, they fell in love. I mean, how did they manage their partnership, as far as you could tell?

Lee: They got along, I think, fairly well until about the time I went to college.

Castle: What changed at that point?

Lee: I think that she began to feel there's more to life than she had experienced up to that point, because my mother only had, like, an eighth-grade education, but she got along with people very, very well, so she knew what was going on in the world.

Castle: I see. She was very aware.

Lee: She was very aware, and very, very kind to people. In fact, one of the things that I can remember, as long as I can remember, my mother stressed, with her children, including me, to be nice to everyone. Our whole family did well in school and athletically, and therefore when you do well athletically in this country, even back in those days, you enjoy a certain status, which gives you a lot of confidence, and so when you're young you could be arrogant or you could be less thoughtful than you ought to be. Whenever my mother saw that, she would remind us not to be ar-

rogant and that if you're luckier than somebody else, treat it that you're fortunate, not that you are in fact better than someone else.

Castle: I see. That's a pretty powerful lesson.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Do you think it's shaped you—

Lee: Probably, because I heard it so often.

Castle: What I think is fascinating to me is that in so many respects, your mother could have pretty justifiably been a very bitter person, to a certain degree. I mean, she could have just gotten along, but it sounds like she really—

Lee: It's probably also a case that my mother was an attractive person.

Castle: How do you think that affected the scenario?

Lee: Because she was attractive, my father was very frugal, but wanting to go out and buy clothes and things like that. She wasn't extravagant, not by today's standards, but by the standards of that time, she wanted to have nice clothes. My father had no pretensions. He was not a conspicuous consumer, except in one area.

Castle: What was that?

Lee: The car. He always had to have an expensive car. Of course, at the end he didn't, but after he stopped driving, then he didn't care what kind of car he had.

Castle: When you say your mother—she was an attractive woman. You remember growing up and wanted to—did she trade on her looks? I mean, did it help her kind of get some of the things she wanted?

Lee: No, it's just that growing up, that I had heard from so many people that “you have a very attractive mother.”

Castle: I see. I see.

Lee: But I don't think that affected her.

Castle: Maybe a positive sense of self.

Lee: Self-worth.

Castle: Right, right.

Lee: Yes. My mother and father were the same height. They were both, I think, five foot four, so my father was not an impressive guy, but he was a very strong per-

son, very confident, extremely confident. I've often wondered how did he gain that confidence. In part—well, he was very strong. He would lift a lot of weight.

Castle: So he was strong in his—

Lee: Physical.

Castle: Physical, as well as—

Lee: He wasn't very tall, but he could lift meat that other people couldn't lift. There would be a big piece—half a cow there. Others would have to cut it in half to move it but my father could lift the whole thing. Or you can lift the whole thing – they'd say, "that's too big."

Castle: And he would lift it? I mean, it's very interesting to think how did your parents, or your father in this case, come by confidence in a harsh country—and I would like to talk more about this as we go along, but there's not a lot of social indicators to make him feel respected.

Lee: No, you're right. And if you said something that could be considered derogatory, he stopped it immediately. I remember, because of his height, that there's only one person that had called him Shorty. He had a brother who was also—everyone called him—but somebody said that, and he immediately said, "I don't want you to call me that again." Just immediate, and the person said, "Fine." [Laughs.]

Castle: Yes, especially if they'd seen him lift the whole cow!

Lee: Anything negative and derogatory, he stopped it.

Castle: Okay. Would that be a negative—I mean, one of the things that's interesting is to be successful, you often have to look at pretty dire situations and find a positive way out of it. Was it that type of interpretation or just he kind of kept people from saying bad things about other people, or both?

Lee: He knew that he was only five foot four, but "don't call me Shorty."

Castle: I see.

Lee: He didn't say it all the time, but you tell one person or two, they're going to tell other people, "Don't do it." So it never happened.

Castle: Right, but he didn't allow that to cause any—I mean, he wasn't going to tolerate a lack of respect based on it.

Lee: Exactly, exactly.

Castle: First of all, could you tell me your parents' names?

Lee: Oh, sure. My father's name was Bo, B-o, and my mother's name was Daisy.

Castle: Bo and Daisy, okay. And if we could just kind of give this a historical context, what's really significant, as you mentioned when we first started to talk, when they're coming in the country is of great significance. Your mother, born here, but her parents—do you know how they got here? Because the stories—people don't realize the immigration laws or the exclusion that went on. Could you talk to that?

Lee's Father Immigrating to the United States

Lee: Sure. My mother, I've told you about. My father was born in China.

Castle: About when?

Lee: Around 1900. He came over in 1916, and he came in as the child, the son of somebody else who was already here. Interestingly, I think that was not true, but he insisted that he was entitled to be here. He never considered himself an illegal immigrant, and he was very proud to be, in his mind, a legal immigrant because he always voted. Voting was a big thing. But when Immigration claimed that he was an illegal immigrant and gave him a hard time, he lost his voting rights, and that really hurt him.

Castle: Really! Do you remember the genealogy of how this came about—so he comes in; you said he was sixteen?

Lee: Sixteen.

Castle: Sixteen. All by himself.

Lee: All by himself. And what had happened—I think the family did not do well, that my father's father was—he trained to be a bureaucrat, and in those days placement was based on the exam in China, and he did extremely well on the exams, and he could expect to have a top bureaucracy job for the rest of his life. Then they abolished the bureaucracy, and they abolished the test, so he really—he was an herbalist; he was a Chinese schoolteacher—this is my grandfather—but never was able to support his family. So my father, at a very early age, I think really early, started really supporting the family. I said, "How did you do it?" He learned how to make peanut oil, and just worked in the village.

Castle: This is prior to his coming over at sixteen.

Lee: That's right.

Castle: So he maybe not even—

Lee: About twelve.

Castle: Wow.

Lee: But he was the only one that could support the family.

Castle: So did he get the idea—was he going to America—did he ever tell you why—did he come to America to support family back home, or just to make a start for himself?

Lee: No, to support his family back home. In fact, they told him—grandparents told my father that he was coming to the United States to work. They were at the ship when my father asked his mother, “How long am I going to be gone, and when am I coming back?” And she said, “I haven’t thought about that.” “You’ve got to tell me when I can come back.” And she said to him, “Oh, in about twenty years.” And my father said, “Twenty years? If I knew it was going to be that long, I wouldn’t have been willing to go.” This is at the—

Castle: Right, this is the last minute.

Lee: —dockside, okay? And so he went. Got on the ship and came over here and— I should have asked him so many things now that he’s gone, but fortunately I did ask him a few things. He arrived in San Francisco. He got on a cable car, and he was told, “Get off in Chinatown.”

Castle: So he’s immediately racially identified.

Lee: Well, because that’s where he’s supposed to meet somebody.

Castle: Right. Okay.

Lee: So he got in the cable car, and he was riding, and then he heard, “Chinatown.” And the cable car was still moving, but he was afraid that if he didn’t get off, he would miss Chinatown, so he jumped off a moving cable car, and he said he went sprawling out on the street, and he said—he didn’t know. He didn’t know whether the cable car would stop in Chinatown. He said, “I was afraid that if I missed Chinatown, I’d never be able to get back there.” Remember, he comes from a village. He comes from the country. He didn’t come from a big city. He was coming to San Francisco, is the big city. So his introduction to San Francisco is he jumps off a moving cable car.

Castle: That’s so traumatic! And he speaks no English?

Lee: He never studied English. Even in the rest of his life, his English was very, very poor and very minimal, and since we don’t speak Chinese, there wasn’t that much communication between us and our father. Our mother, there was no problem, because she was born in this country, but my father’s English was very poor. He had to have a very lonely life because this is before television, and even his kids can’t

Speak to him very much. But, then, we communicated, but on a very, very basic level.

Castle: You describe it as though you've really thought about what that must have been like.

Lee: Recently, yes, I have. He told me one time that from San Francisco he went to Sacramento, and I think before going to Sacramento, he had—I think the first month or two that he was in this country, he worked two full-time jobs, because he had no money at all, and he worked two full-time jobs to save up a little money. Then he went to Sacramento, and I think the person who claimed him as a son, which must have happened, okay? Even though my father denies it happened. There's no other explanation. The man who brought my father into the country lived in Sacramento, so my father went to Sacramento, got a job—first I think he worked a couple of months in San Francisco, in two full-time jobs, to support himself. Then he goes to Sacramento, and he learns to be a butcher, and then after he learns to be a butcher—there's already a Chinese butcher in Sacramento, so he was the first Chinese butcher in Stockton.

Effect of the Chinese Exclusion Act

Castle: Before we go to this point, which I want to explore further, there are a couple of things that we've mentioned so far I want to make sure I have clear. The stories, obviously, about how people get into the country at a time when the Chinese Exclusion Act is in place—

Lee: That's right, and its only merchant Chinese allowed in so there's no way you could get in. My father didn't feel that he was an illegal immigrant because he said, "We had ancestors who worked on the railroad."

Castle: So when he came in, though—it sounds like you're saying, though, [is] that he denied—that he was denying later on that somebody had claimed him as a son, because he wanted to put forth the story that he had gotten in on his own.

Lee: Yes, he got in as a son of an American citizen.

Castle: I see. Okay. This obviously worked to get him in the country—

Lee: Yes, but—

Castle: —but at some point—

Lee: —after he got here, he wanted to maintain that fiction. He wanted to be an American, and he wanted to vote, and he cared about—he couldn't read, but he cared about politics; he cared about who our leaders were.

Castle: I think that's an important story because often we look back, and you'd think, "Oh, they're going through"

[Tape interruption]

Castle: It sounds like it's an important story, primarily because often we look back historically and go, "Oh, you can only imagine the daily discrimination he's going through, and wouldn't that distant you from the country you're in?" But very much the opposite, in terms of wanting—

Lee: In fact, when World War II started, he said that he would really like to fight in that war, but he was too old, because he disliked Japanese.

Castle: That's another element.

Lee: Because of what they had done to China.

Castle: So, he comes to San Francisco, has this traumatic first beginning of jumping off the cable car at Chinatown; he speaks no English; he's got no money; he knows no one basically; but he works very hard and makes his way—

Lee: Well, his first job, he had two full-time jobs, and now, when you see his circumstance—I said to him, "How could you do it?" He said, "I had to do it. I had to have two." I said, "For how long?" He said, "A couple of months."

Castle: But that means you don't sleep.

Lee: Yes, you basically don't sleep. Well, you sleep three or four hours a day.

Castle: Right, right. What brought him to—you said Sacramento was—

Lee: Probably the man who sponsored him, who claimed to be his father—

Castle: Do we know his name?

Lee: No, I don't. At one time, they tried to keep in touch, when I was very young. He tried to keep in touch. That was it. In fact, I think my father, when I was young—I think he went to Sacramento a couple of times just to visit this gentleman.

Castle: Okay. So he's able, obviously, to function in terms of finding other people he can communicate [with] in his language well enough, actually, for most of his life.

Father's Butcher Business

Lee: He was also a very outgoing person. When he had the meat market—I've never seen—well, no, some butchers are that way. He called everybody "sweetheart" or

“darling” or—you know. But he always greeted them in an over-friendly manner. He got along with people.

Castle: I wonder, was there a sense—now, you mentioned he kind of become known as the “Chinese butcher.”

Lee: Yes.

Castle: So were most of his clientele—you know, were of they of different races or were they mostly Chinese?

Lee: No. In fact, most of his business, if not all of it, except for the restaurant—he did a wholesale business, and he sold to Chinese, but most of the business was not with Chinese, whereas the people we knew, the Chinese—they tended to have the business largely with Chinese, but my father didn’t.

Castle: Do you have a sense of who the people were?

Lee: Yes, he tended to go lower-income, white—of course, in those days, Stockton was a white town. There were very few blacks. You know, blacks didn’t come to California until World War II.

Castle: Really.

Lee: Are you aware of that?

Castle: Yes.

Lee: And then there were some Filipinos. The Filipinos in those days were only men, and they were only farm laborers. They didn’t consume—when you’re a farm laborer, your housing is provided by the guy who hires you, so you’re not a part of the economy. There weren’t that many Japanese. I’m trying to think. There weren’t many blacks. Some Hispanics. It was mainly a white community. If we had minority (in other words non-white) more than 20 percent, I’d be surprised.

Castle: I was thinking—and this is something probably only your father could answer, but—so we’re looking at—when does he arrive in Stockton to set up—so is he a butcher in—he learns how to be a butcher in Sacramento.

Lee: In Sacramento.

Castle: Okay.

Lee: When he came to Stockton, he’s a butcher. He starts his own business.

Castle: Do you remember when this is, roughly, he comes to Stockton?

- Lee: Okay. [Pause.] I was born in 1932. I also know that when my parents got married, they never had a marriage license because she wasn't old enough.
- Castle: I see.
- Lee: So they didn't get a marriage license until 1936, when I was four years old. So if he got here in 1916, and I was born in '32—I have a sister two years [older]—that's '30. My father—my father and mother got together around 1928. In 1928—
- Castle: And he met her when he got to Stockton, because that's where she—
- Lee: That's right. So he probably hadn't been in Stockton very long. He probably came to Stockton around 1928.
- Castle: Now, was he running his own shop, a butcher shop?
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: And by the time you were born, or not long after that?
- Lee: No, by the time I was born, he probably had his own business. He told me that his first store he opened with my mother, and in those days when you sold groceries, the customer would walk up to the cash register and tell you what they wanted, and you'd go out and pull a can of beans out, a can of corn or whatever, and then they'd ring it up. And then they stopped getting it, letting people go and help themselves to the cans of goods, and that was self service. That was the beginning of self service. When my father started business, it was not self service. You had to wait on your customers. A short time later, it became self service. And then he opened—let's see, one, two, four or five small grocery stores, probably about 3,000 square feet. But while he had grocery stores, the main source of revenue was from the meat, so it was grocery and meat. He sold groceries, but he made his money on the meat.
- Castle: When you said your mother, he opened it with your mother, what role did she play?
- Lee: Probably cash register—
- Castle: They worked together.
- Lee: They worked together. Cash register. She did some of the accounting, because I remember that she did a lot of the bookkeeping, paying the bills.
- Castle: Okay, okay. We'll come back to talk more about that, because I want to get a sense of what you remember about yourself growing up, to a certain degree, and clarify a few things. You've mentioned a sister. Could you tell me who your siblings are and what their names are?

Lee: Sure. I have one older sister, who grew up in China. I actually don't know where she was born. She may have been born in China. Then I'm the second.

Castle: How was your sister born? How much older was she?

Lee: She's about a year, a year and a half older than I am.

Castle: So your mother at some point—

Lee: Well, when she got married, she was about fourteen, so she must have had me around sixteen. Then I had another brother a year and a half younger, then a sister another year and a half younger, then another sister who's eight years younger than I am, and then a brother who is—[pause]—my gosh! He's twelve years younger.

Castle: So that was three sisters and two brothers?

Lee: Two brothers and two sisters.

Castle: Two brothers and two sisters.

Lee: No, no, two brothers and three sisters.

Castle: I was just curious because you mentioned your older sister being—how did she end up—I mean, do you know how she ended up in China?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: I mean, because if your mom was born here—

Lee: When they left China—my mother and father went to visit, and I went along, so I must have been about three years old, which means it was—I think it was probably 1936. And the reason for that: My father left China in 1916, and his mother said that “you can come back in twenty years.” If you take 1916 and add twenty to it, then you get 1936. And so I feel terrible. My father probably waited all those years before going back to home. My father—when I was growing up, before I went to college, my father often felt that he did not want to spend the rest of his life in the United States because of discrimination, okay? He said, “It's just not the same than if I go home. It's better.” I remember talking to him once. I said, “Dad, I ain't going. This is my country. If you move back to China, don't expect me to go with you.” My parents got a divorce, and he remarried, and he remarried in 1955, I think, and had four more children.

Castle: Wow.

Lee: And the first child that he had, when he was, like, sixty-two years old—let's see, it was '55. I said it was 1900, so I guess he was fifty-five years old, but he could

have been sixty because I think that his immigration papers said that he was four or five years older than he in fact was, so that's why there's confusion [unintelligible]. I think as far as the *Stockton Record* was concerned, here was a man who was sixty years old when he got married for the third time and had four children. I have not seen that article, but I am told that it was a front-page story about this guy in Stockton—

Castle: Really!

Lee: —at sixty—

Castle: It was newsworthy?

Lee: Yes, it was newsworthy. Well, I mean, at sixty to have four more kids?

Castle: Yes, that's no small feat.

Lee: Yes, yes. Now, what was I telling you?

Returning to China; Lee Ancestral Village

Castle: We were talking about your siblings. I was just trying to figure out—so it's interesting that you go back for a visit to China. I mean, still I wonder about the difficulties about getting back in and out of the country. That was part of what I was trying to explore.

Lee: We must have been there for some time, because my mother told me that I should be grateful to a missionary doctor in the village because I was very, very ill, and he came to treat me, and she is absolutely certain that but for this doctor, whose name I don't even know, but for him I would not have survived.

Castle: So you went back to—was it your father's village?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: And could you tell me where that is and what you remember—if you remember anything of it or what your father passed on to you.

Lee: I took my father back in 1982. I haven't been back since. In fact, next month we travel to Asia. Doris and I may go back there because I haven't been there but once.

Castle: And where is it? And the name of it?

Lee: Flower Garden. The village is called Flower Garden, in Cantonese. The sub-village, where there may be 150 people living, is known by my father's name. My

father's name is Bo Lee. However, in China he's known as Wong, Bo. My father comes from Fah Yuen in Kwong Tung, in Wong Bo Jong in Dai Dung Bo Cheun.

Castle: And what area of China is the village located?

Lee: Kwong Tung.

Castle: Or just it's translated as Flower Garden?

Lee: Well, Flower Garden is the area of the village, and then within that area, there are some smaller—I don't—I'm going to ask some relatives to find out, get it clarified.

Castle: Do you still have family there?

Lee: No, and we don't know anyone there. The only person that knew my family passed away a few years ago.

Castle: Okay. So you spent some time—I just was getting a sense—you were over there for a little bit. That's where a sister—

Lee: She stayed.

Castle: And she stayed.

Lee: And then when the war broke out, she couldn't come.

Castle: So is she still living there?

Lee: No, she now lives in Fremont. She came to Stockton. My father arranged for her to be married, and they moved to Stockton, where she had four kids.

Castle: So did she also marry someone she didn't know?

Lee: Yes. My father arranged it. He arranged the marriage. He went back to China, met her, married her and brought her. So she came in not as the daughter of an American citizen but came in as the wife of an American citizen.

Growing up in Stockton

Castle: I see. Okay. Well, let's talk a little bit about growing up in Stockton. You had said—at this time, you gave the racial composition, that it really was a majority of whites. The people your family engaged more often in the grocery store were more working class?

Lee: Yes, working class. That's right.

Castle: Just giving me a sense of where you lived, do you remember anything about your house and what the neighborhood was like?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: If you could describe that.

Lee: The first house that I remember was at 1209 East Oak Street. It was on the wrong side of the tracks, but it had three bedrooms and a big basement, a full basement. They don't build things like that anymore. He bought it from the mayor of Stockton.

Castle: Really!

Housing Discrimination in Stockton

Lee: Yes, at that time. And after he bought it, they weren't going to let him move into it, claiming it didn't meet the code, some things. My father was angry, and he said, "Look, when the mayor owned the house—he could live in it. Now I own the house but can't live in it?" So he called a lawyer in, Joe Tope—you know, Joe—I talked to him once or twice, and he's told me that he knew all about my family and kind of implied that "there's nothing that I don't know. I've been your father's lawyer for a long time." When they weren't going to let him live in this house at 1209 East Oak, my father went to the lawyer's office, [unintelligible], and was screaming at him. "You can't do this. You let the mayor live in it, and now you won't let me"—Joe later became the city attorney, I think, but what I've always remembered was that this guy went to bat for my father. Anyway, so he moved in. I lived in that house until around 1948, and then in 1948, we moved to a very fancy house on the wrong side of the tracks, wrong side of the tracks, but a very fancy house.

Castle: So you were still on the wrong side of the tracks.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: And the lawyer that your father went to—was he a white guy?

Lee: Well, everybody was white in those days, remember.

Castle: Right, yes. I just didn't want to fully assume. And you made a case—I mean, it would be interesting to see the case as to whether it was around housing discrimination.

Lee: What they did was they said the house didn't comply to code. They weren't going to give an occupancy permit. But it had already been lived in already by the former mayor.

- Castle: Right. I just was interested in how—the different ways people use other methods of preventing—
- Lee: To distort it, yes.
- Castle: Was there a big difference—did you move far away from when you moved to Oak Street to the fancy place? Was that a big move?
- Lee: It was at 345 West Clay. Actually, the neighborhood on Oak Street was probably a better neighborhood than the other one, but the other one was older. Everyone had a single-family home. It was next door to a Japanese church. The Japanese church—the house was a very large house. As a matter of fact, it's on the registry at Stockton.
- Castle: Oh, the historic registry.
- Lee: Historical buildings.
- Castle: Wow.
- Lee: My father didn't pay very much for it because if you had money, you didn't want to live in that neighborhood. My father was happy with that neighborhood because it's a very fancy house, and it's very, very large.
- Castle: So he was more interested in getting a large, comfortable house.
- Lee: Yes. And also when I told him that's it's not a prestigious neighborhood, he said he didn't care, because [in a] prestigious neighborhood he wouldn't feel as comfortable living there.
- Castle: When you describe, like, what's a good or a bad neighborhood, what were the elements that made it so?
- Lee: The homes are old. They're well maintained. The guy across the street was an Italian who had a liquor store. Another guy was a schoolteacher. It's just an old neighborhood.
- Castle: The neighborhood that was considered not as nice.
- Lee: Well, there's no prestige living in that neighborhood, but it wasn't dangerous.
- Castle: I see. Okay. So at this time it's not really about criminal concerns—
- Lee: No.
- Castle: —or crime.

- Lee: No.
- Castle: It's about the prestige that often comes with either—usually all-white neighborhoods.
- Lee: Yes. Well, for the amount of money my father spent on the house, he could have gotten in a much better neighborhood, but it wouldn't have been—you know, half the house that he ended up with.
- Castle: I see. Did you enjoy living in this house? Do you have memories of it?
- Lee: Yes. It took place at a time—let's see, this is 1948, so how old am I? I'm sixteen years old. And I told you that around fourteen years old, my mother says that I should know some other Chinese, because we didn't know any Chinese. We lived in a neighborhood where we were the only Chinese. I went to a school where my family was the only Chinese in the school, and then as soon as I was old enough, I helped my parents work in the store.

Neighborhood Composition in Stockton; Experiences in Elementary School

- Castle: I was wondering, and I haven't asked you this—that was the next question I was going to ask you: Who were the people that lived in your first neighborhood, and then what was school like? Who were your classmates? Who were your friends with, and does that change over time?
- Lee: I went to Jefferson Elementary School. There weren't any Mexicans; there weren't any other Asians; there weren't any blacks. It was all working-class whites and us.
- Castle: And your family.
- Lee: Yes. But first of all, it was very interesting: There were three of us at school, and in each one of the classes, we were the best student. In other words, I was the best in my class; my brother was best in his class; my sister was the best in her class. So there was a certain status when you're the best, but in my case and also my brother's, running fast runs in the family.
- Castle: Okay. I was going to ask you what sports you were involved with.
- Lee: Running fast—actually, I'm the slowest, but as a family we are very athletic. And so in elementary school I played basketball, baseball and football. The baseball wasn't hardball; it was softball. And I was good at it. And so when you're a good athlete, you're everybody's friend, and then you're good in school as well—I never got into one fight. But you don't get into fights or anything, and everybody's nice to you. So that's how I grew up. There was nobody who picked on me.

- Castle: So you don't have a lot of memories of people treating you differently.
- Lee: No.
- Castle: I mean, if you're the only Chinese family in a school, one would expect that, to a certain degree.
- Lee: I wasn't treated any differently because, remember now, these are people who are not snobby people; they're working-class white, who tend, on the whole, to be friendly people. They're not overly secure. There's no snobbery. There's no snobbery in our neighborhood. There was none.
- Castle: There are no airs to put on.
- Lee: No airs to put on, and that's how I grew up. It wasn't until I got to high school that I saw some differences.

Leadership Roles in School; Working

- Castle: Tell me about those, what you observed.
- Lee: When I was in elementary school, when they had elected office, I was always elected as class president, things like that. I think beginning around the sixth grade, they started having a class president, and I was the only—
- Castle: As the president.
- Lee: I was always the president.
- Castle: Yes, that's got to help your confidence.
- Lee: Yes. So I was the star in a working-class neighborhood elementary school. Nobody goes to college. Of the people I went to elementary school [with], maybe one or two—let's say there were thirty students. I don't remember, but thirty is about right. Maybe two went to college.
- Castle: Really.
- Lee: Then I go to high school, and I compete with everybody in town. That was an eye opener, because there were other people that were as good as I was. I saw that. And these people who had the more privileged background—they made no effort to include me, even though I continued to be maybe the best student. You don't know who's the best, but I was a very good student. I continued to be—I didn't play high school sports until I was a junior; then I played on the basketball team.
- Castle: How come you waited until then? Was it family obligations?

Lee: Yes. The first two years of high school—let me think now. It had to do with the war, too. See, I finished high school in 50. I started high [school] in '48, and I started —no, I started in '46. Earlier was the war. The war ended in '45, right?

Castle: Right.

Lee: So during the time of the war, I helped my father in the store.

Castle: Oh, okay. So you took a break from school at that point?

Lee: No, no.

Castle: You were just working after school.

Lee: After school. And weekends. We never got days off. And whenever I was not needed for school, I worked to help my father.

Castle: Okay, okay. I want to come back—this is where the chronology—I mean, there are multiple tracks going on at once, so I want to come back and talk about World War II for sure, but I was trying to let you kind of trace out the change over what it was like to go from kind of being big fish in small pond to—

Lee: That's right.

Race and Class Differences in High School

Castle: And what you mentioned, and maybe you could clarify this for me, is that it sounds like in high school, one of the big places of difference was less about race and more about class,—

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Would you say?

Lee: Absolutely. As a matter of fact, when I went to the new high school as a junior, I was elected class rep. It's usually the people who get it are the ones who come from a more privileged background. I did not come from [a privileged] background, and yet I was elected class representative. That says something.

Castle: Right.

Lee: And also I was non-white. I was the only non-white in my classes.

Castle: And this is at the beginning of high school or this is junior high?

Lee: Junior, a junior in high school.

Castle: Junior in high school.

Lee: Eleventh grade.

Schoolwork

Castle: One of the things, too, is that—you've mentioned this: What subject—I mean, you said you were the top student in class. Were there certain subjects you excelled in? To go to school and to work and to do sports. How did you balance all that? And what subjects did—do you remember liking one more than another?

Lee: I was able, going through high school, to do all my homework at lunchtime and study hall.

Castle: No wonder you're so successful!

Lee: Lunchtime and study hall, because after school I had to go work.

Castle: Right. So you learned to get it done.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: And you could.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: You could get through the work. Were you a math-science person over humanities?

Lee: No.

Castle: History?

Lee: I'm not a humanities person, I'm not a history—I'm better at math.

Castle: And how did your parents—what did they talk about when it came to school? Were they encouraging you to think? I mean, you know, your parents had worked so hard for most of their lives. What did they encourage you to think about for your own future? Do you remember?

Lee: My parents hadn't gone to higher education. They never pressed us to do well, but they'd ask, "What did you get? How'd you do?" We would tell them. During that period, everything was an A. There was never anything other than an A.

Castle: Really.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: I mean, without your parents' pressure, what do you think motivated you? You could just do it?

- Lee: Yes. I think that's where I won the respect of my classmates. And, you know, I said that when I was in the eighth grade, there was a city track meet, and the coach told Max Wiley—see, I still remember his name—that he was going to be entered in the 100-yard dash. And Max said, “Ted's faster than I am. He should run the 100-yard dash.” And Mr. Nash said, “I'm telling you to run the 100-yard dash.” And Max Wiley said, “If Ted's not running it, I'm not going to run it.” So he had to—otherwise he would have had nobody, so he had to enter me. I didn't win it, but Max Wiley, a year later, was arrested for burglary, for breaking into people's homes and stealing. And I've often thought, here was a guy who had the proper instincts to know how unfair it was—if Ted Lee can run faster than I, but Frank Nash won't let him run. But I'm not going to do it because I know Ted's faster than I am, and I'm not going to do it. And the same kid makes a mistake. I've always thought about Max Wiley ever since. In fact, if I knew where he was—you know, whatever happened to the guy? Because he had the right ethics—how many people would—
- Castle: Stand up to a coach.
- Lee: —would stand up to the coach and say, “I'm not running.”?
- Castle: Yes. Yes. And how old were you at this time?
- Lee: Eighth grade.
- Castle: Very few people would do something like that.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: What do you think was behind the coach's decision to—
- Lee: In my case, I think he felt that “Ted does so many things, I'm not going to run him” but I also I think it has to do with race—but there was something else. Anyway, he didn't care for me. He didn't talk to me very much or anything else. It's easy to say it was racial, but—
- Castle: You never really know.
- Lee: —when nobody else in the school is that way except him, it also could have been that he didn't want me—
- Castle: Right. But isn't that the nature of discrimination, too, is you're kind of like, well, that's the hard part, is you don't quite know.
- Lee: Okay. And, see, with me, I have consciously—if I don't know, I don't attribute it to race, because it is so easy to attribute everything to race, so if I don't know, I do not attribute it to race. And that's why I will bring it up, just to find out.

- Castle: With ease, in a way.
- Lee: Yes. It doesn't bother me. You may think somehow you're superior to me, for whatever reason, but if I don't feel that way, if I don't agree with you, it really doesn't have that much effect.
- Castle: It doesn't have the power to affect you, right? You don't give the power over by letting it affect you in that way. Because, I mean, I think it's interesting about the coach because—you're the kind of person who basically probably ran in the maximum amount events that could be in the sport—you know, in track; you know, three or four events or something. You're doing all the other sports; you're top in the school.
- Lee: It was just a city track meet that day, so they chose the fastest—every school sent their two fastest guys, and I was sent—but when we got there, even though I was faster than Max, the coach was going to enter Max. Every school had two runners but you only ran one.
- Castle: I see. So it was important that you were representing the whole school in terms of who's the fastest. That's a little bit different than whether somebody doesn't run you in a race because you're running other things or you're trying to balance out and be fair.
- Lee: Well, you know, I was the only Chinese to play basketball—in fact, any sport at Stockton High at that time. I wondered—because I had played for a Chinese team—how we were going to be, because—anyway. The coach had his favorites. If you know the parents of your players and if you come from a professional background—because there was one guy who—I could never understand. He wasn't any good, but he always played a lot. He was always a starter and everything. But he wasn't any good. I always felt that Coach Corrigan—well, Coach Corrigan did know the father. [Laughs.]
- Castle: Wink, wink. Right. Okay. We've covered these questions in different ways, as I expected we would, and I'm getting a sense of you over time, throughout high school, with a lot of things going on. I also wanted to ask if you were involved in any other extracurricular activities. Are there any that we haven't talked about?
- Lee: Just sports.
- Castle: Sports.
- Lee: But I was elected to class rep. It was a new high school that I was going to, brand new, so there's no tradition. And we were all thrown in together. This new high school—you had A, B, C classification[s], and I think they were trying to get rid of that, but in any case, I remember going into these classes, and I didn't know a soul, even though I'd been to high school—remember, I'd been to high school as freshman and sophomore, my first and second year. Going into the junior year, it

was a new high school, and I went in and didn't know a soul, didn't know a soul, and then I was elected class rep.

There was one teacher that was very, very nice to me, and I think she would have enjoyed knowing what I did, but I never called her. And then the year that I was going to call her—I was in college now, and I got a call—I remember Elizabeth Jones. She got killed in an automobile accident.

Castle: You have a great memory.

Lee: She got killed in an auto accident.

Castle: Oh, no!

Lee: So I was not able to contact her—

Castle: Oh. She was a high school teacher?

Lee: She was my social studies teacher.

Castle: What do you remember about her that sticks in your mind?

Lee: She helped me with my college application. Have I told you about that?

Castle: We haven't gotten there yet, but go ahead.

Applying to Harvard

Lee: This is an interesting story. It was, like, February, February 1950. A young Chinese guy by the name of Joe Mah, M-a-h, who I know, but we've never done anything together; we've never even gone to a movie together; we've never gone to a game. He's just someone I knew, but not well. I was working in my father's store, and I was lifting lettuce crates. Do you know what a lettuce crate is?

Castle: Yes.

Lee: The big thing. And he said, "Ted, where are you going to college next year?" And I said, "I don't know." "Where have you applied?" I said, "Nowhere." And he said, "But you have to apply. Do you plan to go to college? If you plan to go to college, you got to apply." "You mean there's no school that I can go to without applying early?" And he said, "No." I said, "How about Berkeley?" "Yeah, you have to apply." "Okay." "How about Delta Junior College?" And he said, "No, you can go to Delta without applying." I said, "Then I'll go to Delta." But he says, "You don't want to go to Delta." [Laughter.] He says, "You don't want to go to Delta." "So where do I want to go?" He says, "You want to go to Princeton." I said, "Why? Where is it?" "It's the best school in the country, and that's where

you should go.” And I said, “Why is it the best school in the country?” He said, “It is. Promise you will apply.” I said, “Okay.”

A week later, he comes back, and he says, “Ted, have you applied to Princeton?” I said, “No.” And he said, “Good, because you should apply to Harvard.” And I said, “You told last week that it was Princeton. This week you tell me it’s Harvard. Why is Harvard better?” And he said, “Because it has more Rhodes scholars.” “What’s a Rhodes scholar?” “Okay, look, Ted, apply. Now, you promise me you’re going to apply.” I said, “Okay.”

So I go—it was, like, on a weekend I had this conversation with Joe Mah. On Monday I go to my college counselor. His name was John Fox. “Mr. Fox, I’d like to apply to college.” And he said, “Where do you want to apply?” I said, “To Harvard.” And he said, “Forget it.” That was it. He said, “Forget it.” So that made me angry, so I went back, and I wrote a letter to Harvard, saying, “I would like to apply to your university.” I wrote the letter myself—

I had it typed by—I wanted my letter to look perfect, so I had it typed by a Chinese girl that I knew. I don’t know how I knew she was a good typist. I may have asked her, “Do you know how to type well?”, because I didn’t know how to type, okay? And she typed the letter for me. I sent it off, and I get a response saying, “It’s too late to apply to Harvard. The deadline was two months ago.” That was in the first paragraph. Then in the second paragraph, it said, “But if you want to apply anyway, we’ll consider your application.” So I then filled out the application. I did not get any help from John Fox, so I went to Elizabeth Jones. All she did was—I answered the questions on the thing, and I asked her, “Is this right?”—she didn’t fill it out for me; she just said, “That’s right. That’s fine.” It asked what sports you played, and I said basketball. How many years and things like that. I played two years, but one year varsity and one year B, and I was probably the youngest player on the team, because going through elementary school I had skipped a grade, so I was younger than everybody else. I started college at seventeen.

I had to take the SATs and the achievement tests, three achievements and a three-hour SAT - six hours. I took them, like, a week before high school graduation. I took the exam. They must have gotten the result, because by the time that I graduated high school, I knew I was going to Harvard.

Castle: Wow.

Lee: I had no idea how lucky I was. And I got mostly A’s in everything until my senior year. I got the only D that I’d ever gotten in high school, from my art teacher.

Castle: Oh. I was going to say, what subject was it?

- Lee: Yes, art. And I was a little bit worried because it said, “Your admission is contingent on your completing high school properly and there are no disciplinary problems.” I remember that. And that was it.
- Castle: Were you worried?
- Lee: Yes, I was worried because of the D, but something happened—well, maybe I got the D; then I was accepted.
- Castle: Can you recall, in writing the letter—how do you think this came about?
- Lee: The D?
- Castle: Not the D. I was thinking about the process of you taking this on, you going to Harvard directly.
- Lee: I think she resented it, my art teacher.
- Castle: Oh. I see. I see.
- Lee: I mean, “He’s not that smart. I’ll show him.”
- Castle: You had to be the first person from your school—
- Lee: Second, to go to Harvard.
- Castle: To go to Harvard.
- Lee: That’s right.
- Castle: What I’m thinking about is the letter that you wrote to Harvard and kind of whether it’s—because everything is so rigid now. You know, everything is so hyper-competitive, I wonder if it was a product of the times that they would consider an appeal like yours that’s kind of outside the framework.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: What would you say—
- Lee: Harvard—
- Castle: —was behind that?

Leaving for Harvard

- Lee: —began going national at this time. If two people who were the same but one came from Stockton, California, and the other one came from Worcester, Massachusetts, the guy from Stockton, California, would get it over the guy from

Worcester, Massachusetts. I talked to Fred Glimp, who used to be in the admissions office at that time, and I said, “Fred, my recollection is this happened. Is my recollection correct?” because it seems kind of strange, what I’ve just told you. And he said, “Oh, yes, we don’t do it very often, but every now and then we get an inquiry from someone who hadn’t even heard of Harvard on the day [of] the deadline. We’ve done it just a very few times, but we have done it, so apparently you were one of the guys we did it for.” And so they did do that, and that’s what happened.

Now, when I got admitted, I didn’t keep anything. I didn’t keep the letters. I didn’t know when school started, so I took a train, and my recollection is that I had to go to Sacramento to catch a train. Why did I go by train? Because I think I was saving, like, \$150, and it is a 150-hour trip from Sacramento to Boston, okay? And if I could save \$150 for a 150-hour trip, how much am I making per hour?

Castle: [Chuckles.]

Lee: A dollar an hour. In those days, I couldn’t get a job for a dollar an hour, so why not pay myself a dollar an hour and go by train? Well, I can tell you, that was the hardest dollar an hour, because I was homesick; I’d never been away from home. And try sitting up for three or four days, okay? It’s tough. It’s really tough. When I arrived, I found that I was arriving a week early. I was the first one there. I didn’t know what to do. Harvard gave me a room. They gave you a bed. You’ve got to get your own sheets and your own blankets and all of that stuff, and so I did all that. Then I learned that you have to wear a coat and tie to meals, so you had to own a sport coat or a suit. I didn’t. I had nothing to do, so I went down to the Tremont Street area, the entertainment district area of Boston, to buy my suit. It was a worsted, gray suit with red—you know—

Castle: The school emblem?

Lee: No, no, it’s just criss-crossed with red stripes, criss-crossed with red stripes, okay? And then when I got it, I went back after school started. I learned that I was the only guy in the whole school—I had never owned a suit before. I was the only guy in the whole school to dress like that. [Laughs.] That was how I—then went I went to the first orientation, I was sitting in the front row, got there early and sat in the front row, and promptly fell asleep. So my roommate was saying that some people really don’t care. When I went to classes, I just sat in class. I didn’t take notes or anything. I never took notes. Going through Stockton High, I never took notes.

Experiences at Harvard

Castle: Is your memory that good?

Lee: Well, no, that was to learn. No, it’s just I’d never studied. I’d never written a paper. I went through high school without writing a paper. Anyway, I was woefully

inadequate. And I did poorly for the first two years. Then I woke up one day and said, “This is ridiculous.” Why was I being this way? I wasn’t a serious student, I wasn’t working hard, because I was trying to be everybody’s friend and be blasé about studying. And then what happened was when I barely passed my sophomore year, I said, *my gosh!* That scared me, and mainly because it’s embarrassing to flunk out. It would be embarrassing. So I made up my mind that my last two years of college were going to be a lot better. What I said to myself is that I wasn’t going to try to be everybody’s friend. Like, if somebody wants to go to a movie, “Hey, who wants to go to a movie?” “I’ll go.” “Let’s go out and get a hamburger.” “I’ll go.” In my sophomore year I went to see the Boston Red Sox almost every home game, okay, almost every home game. This is crazy. I sat in the bleachers for fifty cents, but it was crazy.

Castle: Right.

Lee: What happened is, when I saw how close I came to flunking out, I sat down—my parents never said a thing. I may not have shown them my grades, because at Harvard they give *you* the grades. Then I made up my mind—in those days, people liked to hang around in groups. I think less so now. And I made up my mind that I wasn’t going to hang around in any group. I wasn’t that popular a guy to begin with, which makes you all the more want to go places—and everybody once a week wants to go out and do something. My problem is I’d go with each person once a week, and there was more than one person.

In my freshman year, I went home for Christmas and came back, and I broke my ankle, and so I couldn’t do a lot of things. I had to walk on crutches. I was sitting in my dorm, looking out on the Harvard Yard, and I saw somebody’s initials with, like, 1812. And it occurred to me that someone like myself had been sitting exactly where I was sitting, probably unhappy like I was unhappy, and what happened to him? Where is he today? Who was he? And as I thought about it, I went into a six-month depression because that was my first experience with the fear of death, because the fear of death is very strong, even now. It is very strong. I handle it much better now than I did before, but at that time, I just turned eighteen. I was away from home. I foolishly broke my ankle, so I couldn’t get around. I couldn’t do a lot of things. I went into a depression. Be sure I tell you about my second depression, because I think I learned from it. And so that kind of took care of my first year, when I didn’t do well.

Socialization at Harvard

And then, coming back for my second year—when you are of minority race at that time—you’ve got to realize, there were six Asians, six blacks, three Filipinos in my class at Harvard. Everybody else was white. And in those days, your white friends and roommates don’t know how to include you. You don’t know, because there’s another person involved, too: the female. Is she going to be comfortable going out and what have you? And it turns out that it’s very difficult to know how to behave, how to act. And so there was that tied in. I was among the very few of

Asians, maybe one or two guys, and I was one of them, but I went to all the mixers. You know what they are?

Castle: Describe them for me.

Lee: In the Eastern schools—Wellesley, Smith—in order to meet the young men, they have mixers, and I don't know who pays for the bus. So the bus picks you up at the Harvard Yard or picks you up at Harvard. It's mainly freshmen. And they drive you out to Wellesley, where you have a mixer. You meet. And someone like me is not quite sure, but I go, because I never want to say that I didn't go because I limited myself.

Castle: So you were conscious of that at the time.

Lee: Oh, yes, because when people went there, I was conscious that no one said, "Ted, I'll go with you." I mean, we'd go together, but I felt that I was more alone, that I was more alone than other people. In those situations, we'd all go out together. We'd go to a mixer, it was less that way.

Castle: So you were nervous about it, it sounds like.

Lee: Well, everybody was nervous, but I had an extra something to be nervous about. Also, remember, I was young, hadn't dated much, so even if it wasn't racial, I didn't know how to behave. And I didn't know what a country club—my roommate took me to a country club the first time, and I didn't know what we were going to.

Castle: I've been in very similar situations, actually, going to the University of Cambridge, encountering just entire protocols that have been in place for a long, long time, that you just kind of feel like a bull in a china shop sometimes.

Lee: What then happened was at the end of my sophomore year, I was thinking, and I was driving across the country with my mother, that I was going to be myself and I wasn't going out with a group of guys anymore, no more of that. I would do everything myself, consciously.

Castle: What brought this decision on?

Lee: That I was wasting too much time trying to be everybody's friend.

Castle: Okay. And you mentioned coming in that first year. What do you think contributed to wanting to be liked or wanting to be people's friend in that first year? It sounds like it took control of you.

Lee: First, I didn't study, so I had a lot of time to do different things. Well, I guess I never had to study, because I never had to study—I mean, this is forever. I didn't study. I did well because I focused, but I never studied. When I went to law

school—business school is quite different; then I studied very hard, but I learned how to do it when I finished up my last two years.

But what I did was I was going to be myself, not try to be everybody's friend, and driving across the country, I stopped off in Salt Lake City for a week. I went out and had a very good time in Salt Lake City, and I learned from that to just be yourself, do what you want to do, don't worry about pleasing people, just be yourself. And I did it in Salt Lake City. I behaved in Salt Lake City in a way that was completely different from how I had been in Cambridge.

Castle: And how was that? And what did you do for fun, and how did you act?

Lee: I didn't worry about whether someone liked me or not. I'd just go out. And I remember—you know, they have a lot of dancing in Salt Lake City. Did you know that? And guess what? They don't serve—

Castle: Alcohol.

Lee: —alcohol. Only sodas. But they have dances, and everybody goes because it's clean, all-American fun. And it turns out—I didn't know this: People in Salt Lake tend to be Mormon, and they tend to be very down to earth. Mormons tend to be very down to earth. Anyway, I had such a good time that week that when I got back to California, I just changed. I'm very much a loner now, very much a loner. I don't belong to a lot of things. I contribute to a lot of things, but I don't get involved.

Castle: Right. So this was on a trip between—was between freshman and sophomore?

Lee: Into my sophomore year.

Lack of mentorship and the differences of Harvard

Castle: I mean, in terms of thinking about this trajectory, where you're going all the way from Stockton to Harvard, you've had no support, you didn't have a counselor, someone who prepares you, you didn't have anyone to tell you what to expect.

Lee: What do you call somebody to look up to?

Castle: Mentor.

Lee: People need mentors all the time. I've never had a mentor as such, but I've had people who have said, "Apply to Harvard," people who have been helpful, but I've never had a mentor in the sense that I think other people have had.

Castle: Right. No one was there along the way to kind of guide you or give you advice—

Lee: That's right.

- Castle: —at that stage, so in a certain way you followed your instincts. You'd keep sticking your hand in the fire; if it burns you stop—to a certain degree. I mean, it sounds like your first year or two—I can imagine the space quite clearly, that it's a very powerful social atmosphere, to a certain degree, where you really—you are different in more than one way. It's not just about how they see you physically.
- Lee: That's right. In fact, I was different in every way.
- Castle: How would you say that? In what ways were you—
- Lee: In those days, 50 percent of Harvard students were from prep school. All my kids have gone to prep school, and a lot of my best friends are prep school people today, but in those days, that was something, one additional factor that I wasn't as comfortable, because I didn't go—I mean, just the way you dressed. I mean, I just didn't know. The first suit I bought—I didn't have any idea the kind of suit I should have bought. And what I found out was that I should have bought a gray flannel suit, and not the one I actually bought. I refused to buy one for about a year because I felt that I'd be caving in to social pressure. But after I bought the gray flannel suit, a friend of mine told me, "I knew that you'd eventually break down and buy a gray flannel suit." In those days—you know the movie, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*?
- Castle: Yes.
- Lee: Wasn't that Gregory Peck or somebody like that?
- Castle: Yes.
- Lee: But that's part of it. In those days, the gray flannel suit was—
- Castle: It was an indication of social status.
- Lee: It was called the preppy look.
- Castle: The original preppy look. And you described also—I mean, another element is to remember this is 1950, and we're not even approaching the civil rights movement, it is still the time of Southern segregation and how you fit into these scene in the university, because what you're talking about is basically going to mixers with white women.
- Lee: That's right.
- Castle: And there was a big issue, especially—
- Lee: Everybody was white except me, that's right.

- Castle: And so it's one thing when you're amongst other young men, but then to add the gender element—
- Lee: Exactly.
- Castle: Do you remember any moments or discussions about white womanhood and men of color? There's an importance of distance and propriety. You're talking about not knowing how to act, or whether you might cross a line? What was the thinking at that time?
- Lee: First, I didn't know how to act with any woman, okay? Then you add the race, because I could feel that some of my male friends may have felt a little uncomfortable with me around the women. I was very fortunate to have—of course, my roommates were not that social. Also, in those days—remember, Radcliffe was off by itself, so there wasn't the mixing that goes on today. I mean, you could go through Harvard without having a female friend. You couldn't today, but in those days, you could have.
- Castle: Sure. Did you find, for example, in these social situations—was there an anxiety or a tension?
- Lee: I remember meeting a young lady who was very friendly, and I felt that I would have enjoyed going out with her. And I think I was going to ask her out, and then I heard that she had a boyfriend who was in the Air Force or something like that. I can't remember. So I saw her graduation week at a Chinese restaurant. I hadn't seen her in two or three years, but I should have asked her out. So I walked over to the table, and I said, "Hello, Cynthia, remember me?" "Yes, of course" and all that. I said, "We're through school now. Isn't it interesting that our last meal in Boston, we end up at a Chinese restaurant, and the same one?" And I didn't know if she went there anyway. So I said, "I hope college has been good for you, that you had a good time and all that." And she said, "No, not really. I hardly ever went out."
- Castle: [Laughs.]
- Lee: I still remember it. "I hardly ever went out." [Laughs.] That had an impact on me, because then I learned later on to be more aggressive. If someone turns you down, it doesn't matter, but unless you try or unless you take advantage of the opportunity, you got nothing. But part of it goes back to what Cynthia had said to me. Oh, my gosh! Oh! I think—I'm not sure. I think I said, "Are you going with someone?" or something like that, and she wasn't.
- Castle: So she was available.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: There were just imagined boundaries.

- Lee: Exactly.
- Castle: Which are powerful ones, right?
- Lee: Yes. If it affects—it's the fear of rejection, that we don't want to take a step that might lead to rejection, and if I've learned anything it is that you've got to be prepared to take rejection; otherwise, you'll never do anything. The fear of rejection is a very powerful fear.
- Castle: Absolutely. You know, what I think we can do—first of all, we've just blown through two hours, by the way. I want to come back to Harvard. I just didn't want to stop the story. But I have a few more questions to kind of maybe wrap up childhood, if you will.

[End File 1. Begin File 2.]

Childhood Ethnic Composition; Religion; Socialization

- Castle: We've been talking about the factors that shaped you and the experiences of growing up and this very big journey from Stockton to Harvard, you growing up during wartime, and these are some of the things I'd like to return to and ask you about. You have a mother who was born and raised in Stockton, who marries your father, who's done this amazing thing of coming at sixteen to a country all by himself and making a life, and then they come together in an agreement of marriage and do what they're supposed to do. What do you remember about growing up in terms of any ways that your parents communicated to you how you should be behaving or acting? I'm trying to flesh out this phrase—assimilation—because of course you're born here, you're raised here, and in some ways as an Asian-American person at that time, you're considered "the perpetual other" in some ways. That's one of the phrases that's used to describe being "forever foreign," no matter how long you've been here in the U.S. How would you take what I just described and apply it or disagree with it in terms of your years growing up?
- Lee: I know that going through elementary school, all the teachers were very nice. I skipped third grade on to the fifth grade.
- Castle: Because of your skills? You were just ahead of the other kids?
- Lee: Yes. The teachers were always nice, except for Frank Nash. My parents spent most of their time working, bringing up the kids. In later years, when the kids were grown, my mother was—actually, both my mother and father were outgoing.
- Castle: Was that unusual in any way?
- Lee: [No immediate response.]

- Castle: You've referred to it a couple of times.
- Lee: Being outgoing?
- Castle: To be outgoing, especially your father, not speaking the language. I think that's pretty tremendous.
- Lee: They were both very outgoing. My mother went to church a lot.
- Castle: What church?
- Lee: Methodist. The local Chinese church I think was Methodist. I really don't know the difference between—you know, Episcopal. I know a little, but not much. I'm not a churchgoer.
- Castle: Did you have to go when you were growing up?
- Lee: Growing up? Yes, Presbyterian church. The neighborhood East Side Presbyterian Church.
- Castle: And the congregation was primarily Chinese-American?
- Lee: It was all white.
- Castle: Oh, it was all white.
- Lee: Yes. When we went there, we were the only non-whites at East Side Presbyterian, but at the Methodist church, which was largely Chinese, that was when my mother felt we should know other Chinese, so she also went to the church. First we went there, and then she ended up going there. She stayed there when the rest of us stopped going, stopped going to church.
- Castle: I see. I see. When was it you remember your family—I mean, it's kind of like the reverse: Instead of being in an enclave where you were always around other Chinese-Americans, it actually seems you were always around other, young white kids.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: So your parents wanted you to get to know your Chinese—
- Lee: We should have some Chinese friends. At about that time, as a teenager, the only social functions that I went to were at the Chinese church. Other than that, it was just work and—I was going to say something. Oh, our son. Our second son, Ernest, has been to a prep school and then Harvard, and he didn't have hardly any friends of Chinese ancestry. Then when he finished college, I introduced him to a young man in Hong Kong. They became the closest of friends, so that at the pre-

sent time, his friends are largely Asian, completely. But his closest friend is his former roommate, who is not an Asian.

Castle: From Harvard, yes. How old were you when you started going to the Methodist church?

Lee: About—let's see, I left when I was seventeen. About thirteen, fourteen.

Castle: Okay, and you moved to the new, bigger house—

Lee: Yes.

Castle: —when you were how old?

Lee: In 1948. That would be sixteen.

Castle: Was it a journey? I mean, your mother decided to take you from—to go to whole other church just to get you more involved in the Chinese community.

Lee: That's right.

Castle: Was that farther away?

Lee: Yes, further away.

Castle: So it was important to her.

Lee: Yes

Castle: Do you remember at all how you reacted at that age?

Lee: I remember—I think she said, "Our children don't know any Chinese people." I remember my mother saying this. "And don't you think they should?" [Laughs.] Oh, then—it was a big house. Then we started entertaining, but when we entertained, it was mainly Asian, Chinese. It wasn't a lot, just once in a while.

Castle: Like a dinner party or something?

Lee: Yes, a social event.

Castle: What would constitute a social event?

Lee: Eat, drink, have music.

Castle: Did people dance, or did they just listen?

Lee: I think they danced, but I can't remember me dancing.

Castle: Okay. That's one of the things I wanted to ask, is what you did for fun and then what your parents did for fun. Did they have time and did they socialize outside of work?

Lee: After we were all grown. My mother got active at the church. She moved out to San Francisco, and she had an active social life, largely with Chinese ladies. My father—he supported Chinese organizations in Stockton, but he really didn't—he didn't go out very much. The older Chinese population in Stockton is very small, so there isn't that much to do.

Castle: Are we talking just like a handful a people, a couple of hundred people?

Lee: Less than that, a handful.

Castle: That would be his Chinese peers.

Lee: That's right. I would say not more than twenty people.

Linguistic Barriers

Castle: Okay. Yes, there's a few things I want to ask about this. One of them is—and you told me this before, but your father never really became comfortable or fluent.

Lee: In English.

Castle: In English.

Lee: That's right.

Castle: So he lived a lot of his life in linguistic isolation.

Lee: He lived much of his life in isolation, which explains why he really needed to get married the third time, because it's his children that he'd communicate with, that provide company and all that. Remember, he now got married—he had four more kids. I mean, some people would be happy with one or two, but he went with four.

Castle: He was an overachiever. So in Stockton—well, let me finish this part up, because I want to ask about the business, too. So you moved. You've gotten your big house, and then you remember your parents entertaining occasionally. How often would you do it, and who were the guests primarily? Who would be coming over?

Lee: They didn't really entertain as much as my mother encouraged us to invite other young people to visit us, but it wasn't for my father. My father didn't.

Childhood Socialization

- Castle: And who were the people? Were these other Chinese kids?
- Lee: Yes, the Chinese we knew from church. In those days, the local Chinese church had youth clubs, thirteen- to fourteen-year-olds was one club; fifteen—and then you stayed with your friends—
- Castle: Your age cohort.
- Lee: —the rest of your life. There are some people that I still know from those high school days.
- Castle: Really.
- Lee: Just one continues to be a close friend.
- Castle: And you met him in one of the youth clubs at the church.
- Lee: Yes, that's right. And they also had a Chinese school, but that was run by a different organization. They had a Chinese school when I was young.
- Castle: Did you go to that?
- Lee: I went for a couple of years.
- Castle: What were they teaching? Just language, or culture?
- Lee: How to read Chinese, read and write Chinese, but I didn't remember anything.
- Castle: Because in the home, English was spoken—
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: —basically. And did you learn any Chinese to speak with your father?
- Lee: A little bit.
- Castle: Little bits?
- Lee: Yes, very little.
- Castle: So who were your friends when you were younger? Did they primarily come out of the youth clubs, or did you have—
- Lee: I was about fourteen when I first made some Chinese friends. They came out of the youth club.

- Castle: Okay. Did you have any white friends before then or at that time?
- Lee: I did, but I never hung around with anybody.
- Castle: So, like, at school they were friends?
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: But they didn't come over necessarily?
- Lee: That's right. I remember one disappointment. I thought there was a guy who was a real good friend. He was a swimmer. And then when graduation came, he gave a big party. Another friend said, "Ted, were you at"—his name was Bob Brown. I think he said, "Wasn't that a great party that Bob Brown had? Sorry I missed you." And I said, "I wasn't invited." And so the guy said, "He didn't invite *you*?"—because we were supposed to be good friends. And that is something that I remember. Then I said "Who was there?" And this other guy told me, "Everybody." It was a very large party. And so the fact that he didn't invite me, it strictly had to be race because we were good friends.
- Castle: You see people at school or you do things in your work, but at home life or the social aspect, they wouldn't invite you over to a party. We were talking previously about the business, your parents' business and how much time you spent working. How old were you when you started to help out at the business, and what did you do there?

Working in the Family Business, Packing Eggs; Saving Assets

- Lee: I think when I was about a freshman in high school, so that would be about thirteen.
- Castle: Okay. And what were your tasks?
- Lee: Oh, when I was younger, eggs came in crates and not in boxes. You had to take a crate of eggs and put them in boxes of a dozen, and that's what I did. And you couldn't afford to break an egg.
- Castle: Yes, I was going to say, what happens if you broke an egg?
- Lee: Because then it becomes very expensive. My mother said, "Be sure to not break any eggs." I did that for the longest time, and when I was very young, ten—when I was old enough to hold two eggs in one hand. You can do it. Anyway, my parents would give me a nickel to do a case of eggs, and that's what it costs—I think it was a nickel, then dime, and then twenty cents. But anyway, they'd pay me enough money to go to the movies. And then after a while, I didn't spend the nickel or a dime, because I wanted to get my money's worth, and I couldn't decide where to spend it, so I ended up not spending it—we used to go to Santa

Cruz for summer vacation. I think it was two weeks. My father would come down for a day and drive back, but it was just for the children and my mother. I would get twenty cents to go to the boardwalk, and I'd walk up and down the boardwalk. Couldn't decide where to spend my twenty cents, so I'd end up keeping it. Time and again I did that.

Castle: So is that the key to your success today? [Laughs.] It started with saving nickels.

Lee: Could be. Making sure I got my money's worth and not wanting to spend it on something that I was going to wish I'd spent on something else. I laugh, because it *is* funny.

Castle: [Laughs.] It's really funny! [Laughs.] Starts with nickels. So Santa Cruz—you had the ability to go on vacation from—

Lee: Yes.

Castle: How would you say your parents—I mean, they worked very hard. They kind of moved their way up. But how would you kind of define your class status now, looking back at it?

Lee: For a Chinese, my father was one of the most successful people. If you're in a restaurant, I think he did better in his business than the restaurants did. And he was a smart guy. And I think because he was smart, a lot of people respected him.

Castle: He had good business sense?

Vacationing in Santa Cruz

Lee: Yes. We went to Santa Cruz every year—let's see, how old was I? It had to be—we started going while World War II was still being fought, because I remember seeing a ship that looked like a submarine, and I was wondering, is there any chance that had been an enemy submarine? But it wasn't, of course.

Castle: Right.

Lee: So that would be probably when I was ten, twelve years old we began going to Santa Cruz for two weeks every year.

Castle: Okay. And you said you'd go to the boardwalk and the beach.

Lee: You rent a little cottage and the whole family stays there.

Castle: This is in the forties. Was this an unusual thing to have—I mean, as a Chinese family at that time, vacationing?

Lee: To do that?

Castle: Yes.

Lee: As a matter of fact, yes. In fact, we met another Chinese family, and he was a minister in San Francisco. That family and our family were the only Chinese we ever saw in Santa Cruz at that time.

Castle: Really. I mean, was there any problem—did you ever face any issues there?

Discrimination in Berkeley; Father's Financial Savings and the Importance of Education

Lee: We never did, but I'm sure—in those days—when I went to Berkeley, there was a guy that turned me down for an apartment. Said, "I'm sorry, but I can't rent to you." He closed the door, and that was it. My father always felt that he was reasonably successful. He didn't spend any money, but he said, "It's not how much money you earn every year, it's how much you save that determines your wealth and status," so he says, "Both my doctors and my lawyers make more money than I do, but I have more than they do because I don't spend it." He just saved and saved. None of us went through—I had the G.I. Bill. Going through college, my father paid for the whole family to go to college.

Castle: So he paid your tuition at Harvard.

Lee: He paid everything, room and board. My brother went to Brown. He paid room and board. My sister went to Cal and Mills, and he paid for all that. Education was important to him.

Castle: Tell me about that.

Lee: He told me that "education is something that you can use your entire life, and it can't be lost. Someone can't come and steal it from you. And so get as much education as possible, and use it. And once you get the education, you've got something that no one can take away from you." I heard that.

Castle: He told that to you growing up a number of times.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Were they strict with you growing up, or how would you describe the way they parented?

Lee: They were pretty lenient but, of course, there was no reason not to. We never got into trouble, but the parenting was very, very lenient.

Castle: You did well, but it wasn't that your parents—I mean, it's not that they—

Lee: Yes, we weren't pushed.

Castle: You weren't pushed. Were you encouraged? Lee: That's right, there wasn't the pressure. Of course, there was no pressure because also we never didn't do well. And we did well without grinding it out. In fact, I think the reason I work so hard now is because I didn't work that hard when I was young—I mean, studying-wise.

Cultural Identity; Marriage

Castle: Do you remember your parents talking about—I mean, you just shared your father's—one of his philosophies about wealth and status—you know, being born in another country, coming to America. You talked a little bit about how he felt when his voting rights were removed at some point. I mean, your sense of identity kind of growing up, and your connection to America. I mean, it's where you're born; it's who you are. I just wondered how your parents might have communicated some of that to you in terms of a sense of identity.

Lee: I've always considered the U.S. as my home, and if there was a loyalty between my racial group and the United States, there would be never any doubt in my mind of my loyalty to my country rather than my race. I noticed, as I was growing up, that some people—their racial identity sometimes trumps their loyalty to their country. That's completely foreign to me.

Castle: I mean, in one way, what you're describing, too, is that—you know, there's no way to divide those two things for you, right? I mean, you aren't an Asian and an American—well, you're an American with a certain—

Lee: Asian ancestry, but my loyalty is completely American. In fact, I knew very little about Asia and Asians until after I got out of college. What I haven't told you is that I've been married three times. My first wife was a Singaporean that was attending Bryn Mawr, my second wife was a Japanese from Hawaii, and then my present wife is Chinese from San Francisco. I knew, with my first wife being from Asia, that I thought I should know something about Asia. I spent a year and a half in the Army in Europe, so I had a lot of experience in Europe. I was an Army inspector, so I traveled around a lot. I had a very cushy job.

Then when I got out of law school, I couldn't get an interview, much less a job. I thought that the only thing I could get was a fellowship from Boalt. And since that was the only offer I got—and I also thought I'd take the opportunity to learn something about Asia. And so that's what I did. I went to Singapore. I studied Singapore law for a little while, and then I published a chapter on the tax laws of Singapore. With that, I was offered a position to join the faculty, which I took.

My wife at that time thought that I was overly concerned about accomplishing something with my life, because she didn't think it was that important.

End of First Marriage; Difference in Importance of Career

- Castle: This is the woman you met at Bryn Mawr?
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: And what's her name?
- Lee: Violet.
- Castle: And so you're over in Singapore.
- Lee: Yes, but she didn't go with me. Then we separated and got a divorce. There was too much living that I hadn't done, and when my career was not that important to her, I felt that there was just going to be trouble. It's not that I didn't care for her or anything, but I wasn't going to—she came from a very prominent family, and couldn't understand why I would want a career when it wasn't necessary.
- Castle: That's a big difference—a career, as in accomplishing something, as in a sense of having given something to the world.
- Lee: You're right. Oh, you're absolutely right. She didn't understand that. She said things like, "Why do you want to worry about something like that? You'll never be as well known as my father." [Laughs.]
- Castle: The beginning of the end of that relationship.
- Lee: What she said was true, but she was missing the point that a person has to have self-satisfaction. I used to say, "I'll be very happy if my last minute on earth, I think back on my life, and I have no regrets and I've done most of what I wanted," as opposed to, "Oh, my God, I haven't done this, I haven't done that."
- Castle: I have to write that one down. I want to come back—now that I have written down the trio of wives—come back to that a little bit later on, but I guess I just want to ask this, now that I was thinking about it. You know, you talked a little bit about how you view your identity, and you have indeed—you've married a Chinese woman from San Francisco, that you married other Asian women—did you ever have any serious relationships with white women or women that were non-Asian?

Interracial Relationships and Marriage

- Lee: What's really interesting is that answer is yes, but I can't think of any—I've often wondered why. We never talked about getting married. It's really funny, because I have dated a lot. In traveling and doing all these things. And I was in charge of cultural programs at the East-West Center. That was a glamorous job, so you're doing a lot of fun things. You're meeting a lot of people, you're going out with a

lot of people, and I did. Okay. The reason I'm hesitant is that I'm not sure I'd want this in print—

Castle: Sure.

Lee: —because there might be sensitivities involved. I guess what it is, is that I can like a person a lot and though I've been married three times, I don't go into a marriage that easily. It may not seem that way because of the number of times that I've been married, but I in fact don't. I don't consider marriage

Castle: Lightly?

Lee: Yes. The circumstances have to be right. The circumstances have to be right.

Importance of Marrying

Castle: What it makes me think of a little bit, and I don't know if this has any relevance, is that, you know, a lot of people kind of rush into marriage, for example, on, like, impassioned love that doesn't have any context of how your life is going to be in ten years or fifteen years or what it means to have certain status positions. So I think maybe—I don't know if this is true at all, but you're looking at it and thinking, what are the challenges going to be, or what will be involved if I am with this person.

Lee: First, I have this very strong fear of death. I don't want to get into any kind of situation where I'm going to be unhappy or I think the likelihood is unhappy. If I see this potential problem, I tend to avoid it. I tend to avoid it.

Castle: It's like having your nickel on the boardwalk.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: I mean, you're not going to just spend it any which way.

Lee: That's right. I laugh, because I don't know of anybody else—I've asked other people, "Have you ever walked up and down the boardwalk all day and can't decide how to spend your only nickel?" It's the only nickel I had? I went up and down the boardwalk. Oh, boy.

Castle: But it sounds like you're comfortable with the tradeoff. I mean, the amount of effort that you put into making a decision—I mean, you don't regret having spent the time.

Lee: That's right.

Lee: I have two sons, and I married their mother in large part because I was ready to have a family.

Castle: That's practical, too.

Lee: Yes.

Role of Hard Work and Doing Well

Lee: You know, if I may digress.

Castle: Sure.

Lee: This is a digression. I used to think that I would want my children to do well in school, be smart and work hard, and be more successful in business than I am, or at least be as successful. I have one son, my second son—the first son—he does everything well. The second son has higher scores on all his tests and everything, but he really doesn't care. He actually really doesn't care about what he's doing. He's very thoughtful. He's a good kid. And my own thinking has evolved as a result of having this son, because I thought about it: How should I treat him? What should I expect from him?—and all that.

And I've come to the conclusion that a lot of people like myself are disappointed in their kids because they won't be as successful as we all think they should be, but—and we know that a lot of wealthy families have children like that. They say, "Oh, what a curse that would be if I had a child like that." I now feel that that is not the right way to think, that my children have been brought up in a way that—the way I was brought up and the way they're brought up is completely different. I bring them up the way they're brought up and then hope and pray they're more like me. That's unrealistic. How can you expect them to have the same work ethic and all that when there's no reason for them—unless they just happen to.

The older son tends to be a pretty hard worker. And the other thing is when the kids don't work as hard as you, that people say they aren't doing well. It's not that they don't do well; they don't have to do well. If a person doesn't have to do well, why should they do well? And what first caused me to think this way was when my second son was in prep school, and he said to me, "Dad, I can see that you and I are going to have problems." [Laughs softly.] I mean, the kid's in prep school, and he says, "If you want to disinherit me, that's okay with me. If you think that somehow I'm not deserving of your love and support, that's okay with me. But I want to be honest with you. One of the biggest problems that I have is that I can't understand why you work so hard when you don't have to."

Of course, I didn't let it show, but that blew my mind because that's what every parent is afraid of, but when you think about what he said, there's logic to it. Why are we all working so hard? You know, you're lucky. You're doing something you enjoy. I think the most important thing is to find a job you enjoy; secondly, find the right spouse. If you get those two solved, life is easy.

And so I thought about that, and he's absolutely right. If you don't have to, which he doesn't, to do anything you don't want to do, why should you do something you don't want to do? For the discipline of it? Which is what you hear. That really doesn't make sense. So I have evolved in the last ten years to be more understanding. Does that make sense, what I've said?

Castle: Yes. I was interested when you said—because part of it is when you're describing “doing well,” is “doing well” making money? And that's the key, is there's a difference between of course doing well and making money—

Lee: Most business people think in terms of doing well making money. There was a guy, and first met him in Singapore years ago, and I can't remember who it was, but a very substantial businessman. I said, “How many kids do you have?” “Five.” “And how many are in the business?” And he said, “None.” I said, “What? None of your kids are in business?” He says, “No. They're doing what they want, which is all I want,” he said. “I want my kids to do what they want, what they enjoy doing.” He was right.

Castle: Yes, because that's the true privilege of having money—

Lee: It's the freedom. They may not have the same enthusiasm as you'd like, but I also think that for people who have been successful, that you really shouldn't put your own work ethic and objectives on somebody else.

Castle: And judge other people by them.

Lee: Yes. We all tend to be that way, of course.

Castle: That probably explains also a lot of why you have been so generous. I mean, it's an interesting balance, because clearly there's blood, sweat and tears in the money that you have earned over your lifetime, yet on top of that, you give a lot of that money back, to give people the privilege of doing what they want to do.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: And that's a pretty big thing, because—capitalism is tricky.

Lee: [Laughs.]

Castle: No, really, it's a good digression, and I want to return to it as we kind of track you through how you end up on this track, because I think that's the balance that—and it's a big thing to change your thinking as you grow older, because you've kind of had to have a certain way of thinking to function. Everybody's got to grasp onto a set of beliefs.

Lee: That's right.

Castle: I'm going to come back to that, just kind of contrast it, because you were saying there is a difference in the way you were raised and the way your children have been raised—what would you say—could you describe that difference?

Assets and Privilege; Connections

Lee: I guess it's really privilege. When you have what they have—a person who is fortunate enough to have asset privilege and then doesn't abuse it is a very nice thing to see. I'm just trying to think. I think both of our boys are that way. I'm trying to think. Sometimes the way they spend money disappoints me, but—

Castle: Your standard is, though, the nickel on the boardwalk, so—

Lee: [Laughs.] You're absolutely right. Sometimes I don't spend a dime for something because I realize that fifty years ago, that this dime was a dollar. My father wouldn't have done it. And I think that in order to have some touching to my roots, that having that kind of experience of really understanding—I often take public transportation because that is the transportation that everyone should. And people can't understand that, but it's important to me. I often take the bus just so I'm riding the same way as everybody else.

Castle: You're still very conscious of why you are where you are, to a certain degree.

Lee: And also I know that not having very much is still very real. The experience of it is still very real to me, and I don't want to forget it because I think when you forget it, that's when you can make some mistakes.

Castle: You shared a story previously, about when you really started to work—when you were growing up—probably a teenager working with your father in the store. Was it about the fruit or the fish?

Experience of Going to the Produce Market

Lee: Oh, yes, in the produce market.

Castle: The produce market.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Can you describe what went on there? Because it seemed to be a genesis of when you first had some real business sense.

Lee: Let me think. I was probably around fifteen. I was aware that my father got up in the middle of the night, two o'clock, in the middle of the night, and then went down to the market, bought the produce for the day, then would come home, sleep for a couple of hours, and then go to work. And my mother would say, "Be quiet because you're dad is still sleeping, and the reason he's still sleeping is he had to

go to the produce market.” So I thought that if he didn’t have to go to the produce market, he wouldn’t have to get up in the middle of the night, he’d get much better sleep and it wouldn’t be so hard on him. So I said, “Let me go for you. Let me go to the produce market for you, so you don’t have to get up.” And he finally said, “Okay.” So he took me to the produce market, introduced me to all the vendors—

Castle: And these are people he knew.

Lee: These are all farmers. These are farmers bringing their produce to the market to sell. They have different quality. They were largely Italian. “This is my son.” “Hello.” They weren’t listening. “I’ll take six crates of peaches.” I went with him twice, where he thought he was introducing me to all the farmers who would be selling to me, and when he bought, he didn’t have to talk about the price; they always gave him the best price at the time. They’d known each other, had been doing business for a long, long time. Finally, after two times, I told Dad, “I can handle it now. I know where to go. I know who to talk to. And why don’t you just sleep in?” I then went down, and either they didn’t recognize me or they didn’t care. When I said, “What are your prices of peaches?”; then, you know, “I’ll take four crates,” they wouldn’t even answer me. They wouldn’t even look at me. And I came back from market without having bought anything, because nobody would sell to me.

So I told my father what had happened, and he said, “Oh, I guess I have to go back and do it myself.” Then the next day, I didn’t go, he didn’t go, and he stopped going. Once he got used to sleeping through two o’clock and he learned how much he needed the rest or enjoyed the rest, he stopped going to the market, which meant only that he paid a dollar a crate extra for whatever he was going to buy, because you then buy your fruits and vegetables from the wholesale distributor. Anyway, that’s what happened, and he never went back.

Ethnicity of Produce Growers

Castle: You were mentioning with Stockton that—so these guys were—you remember them being Italian farmers.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Do you remember other kind of ethnic groups of whites that were there? You were describing mostly whites. I mean, were they German, Irish?

Lee: Mainly Italian.

Castle: Mainly Italian.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Okay.

Lee: That's my recollection.

Castle: Okay.

Lee: In Stockton, there were a lot of Lebanese and Syrians as well.

Castle: At that time?

Lee: Yes, but they weren't farmers. They were wholesale grocers. Abdallah Rishwain, Barkette—because I was told that they were Lebanese or Syrian, but I really didn't know what that meant.

Socialization in Stockton; Making Friends; Dating

Castle: So you mentioned, before you went off to Harvard, when you were a teen—what did you do? You said socially you were part of the clubs. Did you, like, date? Did you go out? What happened when you were in high school?

Lee: First, I did not date. I didn't hang around with people in Stockton. I made a couple of friends who lived in Sacramento, and they were both a year or two older than I, and I would like to go and just hang around with them and go bowling. I'd drive up to Sacramento, visit and drive back.

Castle: How far is it?

Lee: Fifty miles.

Castle: Were these Chinese guys, or white?

Lee: Chinese guys, but they were more like myself.

Castle: What does that mean?

Lee: People who grow up in Chinatown tend to have different values, different—they're different. San Francisco—you can tell a Chinese who was born in San Francisco by mannerisms, attitudes. We say that among Chinese, "Ah, you can tell he's from San Francisco." From San Francisco, we felt that the Chinese were beaten down, that they accepted—people we knew who were Chinese in Sacramento or what have you had a certain achievement that Chinese in San Francisco did not have. I think that was attitude.

Castle: One of the aspects of a space like Chinatown is that while it lets people live in almost an entirely ethnic enclave, where they can still speak languages and be connected, yet if they go outside of Chinatown—

Lee: They don't do so well. I competed in an unsheltered environment, and it's hard. They were from Sacramento. They had grown up in mixed communities, maybe mainstream white.

In Sacramento, the Chinese population was really more integrated than in Stockton. The Chinese people that I've known from Sacramento all were in non-Chinese businesses, and were successful. One of them used to be the Alameda County administrator in Sacramento.

Castle: Okay. So you're driving up, and you're hanging out with these guys. You were saying the story kind of leading up to whether you were dating or not. That's what I had asked. But you hung out with these friends in Sacramento.

Lee: I really didn't date. I dated one person, like, a month or two before I left for college, and I didn't really date. At that age, women are more aggressive than the men.

Castle: Oh, really?

Lee: Yes. [Laughs.]

Bombing of Pearl Harbor; Subsequent Internment

Castle: I have about three more questions in this area, and I think we'll probably stop at it, but I'm going to jump back first, again, unfortunately—I don't mean to do this, but you were about ten, nine going on ten when the U.S. enters World War II after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Lee: In '41, that's right.

Castle: Do you have any memories of that, and did that affect you or your family in any way?

Lee: Yes. First I remember December seventh, because it was a Sunday, and someone who was walking through the neighborhood, [was crying], "Extra! Extra! Read all about it." This is in the neighborhood. What is a guy selling newspapers Sunday afternoon? Then he goes on, "Pearl Harbor has been attacked. Turn the radio on!" and what have you. I remember that. And then I remember the Japanese being rounded up. Now, what I remember is that it was unfortunate, but everybody wanted it, for the Japanese to be incarcerated. I had people asking me, "Are you Chinese or Japanese?" And then I would say, "Chinese," and "Then you're okay." But it never bothered me because of course I'm okay, but that did happen.

During the war, it was very difficult to get any kind of help. If you had employees, they all went into their own businesses, and everybody had to help, and so that's probably one of the reasons that I started working for my father early, because he needed help. At that time, he had, I don't know, four stores. He shut

down two of them because he couldn't get help, and he just kept two. One was the retail store. It was the newest store but in a very poor, blue-collar neighborhood, and the other one was in Skid Row. That did mainly wholesale business. In Skid Row there were a lot of restaurants, a lot of Chinese restaurants.

And so I did eggs. I cashiered very early, cashiering was not difficult. At twelve years old, you can cashier. I cashiered—let's see, twelve years old in 1944. I'm trying to think when I—my father had a small store. The store in Skid Row, I remember being the cashier, and I wasn't old enough to sell beer and wine, but I did. It was in a rough area of town, but I didn't know enough to be afraid. [Laughs.] It was in the middle of all the wrong kind of people. I saw that around me every day, but it had no effect on me.

Castle: So you were about twelve at this point. When you mentioned at the beginning that—you know, the bombing of Pearl Harbor and—when you said the incarceration, are you talking about in the internment camps?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Of Japanese-Americans. Do you remember what people were saying at that time, because now we teach about it.

Lee: Yes—

Castle: And the Germans and the Italians didn't have the same kind of persecution

Lee: Well, it turns out that they did, you know.

Castle: But they weren't interned in the same way.

Lee: I think they were, but not as many of them. I had heard this. Well, first for Chinese, you have to remember that Japan had attacked the Chinese in 1936, so there had been a five-year war with Japan.

Castle: So there's not a lot of sympathy, is what you're saying.

Lee: Yes, not a lot of sympathy for Japanese, but the people who were locked up in some cases were people my father knew and felt badly for them. But the Japanese in fact did commit a lot of atrocities during World War II and prior. They're the ones who bombed Shanghai. Bombing civilian targets was a no-no until the Japanese did it, and they did it on a very large scale, so think, growing up, my memories are that the Japanese were very ruthless and cruel. There was talk that they killed babies easily. I think that there are some Japanese—the nature of Japanese society is that some people, because of the way they're brought up, could be particularly ruthless.

I'm going to tell you what happened. I was in Germany, just arrived in Germany, and I was traveling on a troop train to go to where we were going to be assigned, and the meekest—I mean, as we pulled into every station—remember, at that time when I was there, I was part of the army of the occupation. That means that you're an occupier. So this young American soldier was shouting, "Hey, Fraulein, hi!"—just making a complete ass of himself. And those of us who knew him, he was the weakest, he was the poorest soldier, and yet he was the one that was acting out being the conqueror.

And I think there's some of that with the Japanese because the Japanese can be very—there's something about the samurai tradition. They can really be tough and mean. If you know Japanese women, a lot of them say they won't marry a Japanese guy who thinks he's a samurai, and that's what they mean by that, because a lot of the Japanese aren't very tall, and they know about being a samurai. Even if you see the movies now, there aren't many movies about being kind and gentle—It's usually the beheading people or they're just very tough. And I think that every society has those elements in it, but in the Japanese case, I think the way they're brought up, that may be hard to control.

Castle: And I think it's always a challenge, too, as to when stereotypes are over-represented sometimes, but, I mean, obviously at this historical point in time, obviously there's a very negative history going on between Chinese and Japanese.

Lee: That's right.

Castle: One of the challenges is that the behavior of the Japanese military is being projected onto Japanese-American citizens—

Lee: Oh!

Castle: Right, and that's the only breaking point, where "American" is a very crucial word to have in there, because that was the total injustice, of course, of the internment.

Lee: That's right. That's absolutely right. There was a difference. I'm pointing out that at that time there was a lot of hatred.

Impressions Left by Stockton when Leaving for Harvard

Castle: Well, I want to close with this question thinking about your life until the maybe the moment you get on that train to head off for Harvard. I guess the train might have been a good place for reflection, if you could even imagine getting through those 150 hours, but looking back, what kind of sense of yourself were you bringing to college? Did you have a certain worth ethic or sense of morals or identity that you carried with you, that came from growing up, influenced by your parents or Stockton?

Lee: I was homesick and all that, but I went to Harvard without fear. I mean, people asked, “How did you do it?” It never occurred to me that I wouldn’t do it or I couldn’t do it. I remember that there were some prominent people, and I can’t remember who they were, in my class—oh, I know. I picked up *Life* magazine, and it was a party they had somewhere in New York or Boston, and it turned out that half the people in this picture were in my class at Harvard, so they were socially important.

Anyway, I saw this picture, and I learned that these people—some of them from very prominent families, were not more able than I or any better than I. I learned that. That’s probably the only thing I learned my freshman year, that I still carried with me, that these guys weren’t any better than I was. I could do anything they could do. Because you don’t know. You come from a small town. You don’t know. When I first went to high school, I competed with these guys who came from the right side of the tracks. Okay, that was the first time I realized that there were these other people that I’d never competed against, and that was an eye opener. But I continued to just roll along.

[End of interview.]

[Interview 2; May 26, 2005]

[Begin File 3]

Graduate School, Focusing on Weaknesses; Establishing Clients and Career

Castle: And we’re here with Ted Lee, beginning our second session of interviewing. Ted, I have a quote that you offered at our very first session, where you said, “I went to Harvard without fear because it never occurred to me that I couldn’t do it.” I was thinking, as I looked at it, that you did go to Harvard in a unique way, outside the normal application process, and you made it work for you. Do you see this as a metaphor for how you’ve lived your life?

Lee: Golly, I hadn’t ever thought of that, but the answer is yes. Now that you describe to me what I told you, the answer is yes.

Castle: Are there some moments you can think about when that plays out for you, moments when you did do things outside maybe the normal expectations or the stereotypes of how a business person might do something or a lawyer? Just if you wanted to think about it in a larger picture at all.

Lee: I had the opportunity to work for a law firm in Hawaii, and I learned that you can be a very good lawyer, but if you don’t have any clients you can’t do much, and so when I came back to California—I came back to go to business school because I didn’t want to be just wasting my time or not accomplishing anything while I

tried to figure out what I was going to do with my life, and so I got an MBA. I studied those areas that I felt I was deficient in, and one of them was math. I hadn't taken math since I was a sophomore in high school, and I had a difficult time reading books because a lot of concepts are expressed quantitatively, and so I went back and I took Math for the Social Scientist, and I did a lot of things like that to improve my skills.

Castle: So you actually went back and took the very things that were your weaknesses.

Lee: Yes, that's exactly what I did. Then, during that period of time, I put together what I was going to do. You have to have clients. How was I going to get a client? First, I did not have the opportunity of working for a large firm, and so if I was going to have any clients, I had to get them myself. I think that one of the big advantages of working for a firm is that they bring in the business, and all you got to do is turn it out, but when you're starting on your own, how do you get the business? Well, what I did was I organized minority communities to engage in redevelopment, and they became my clients. Not only did I have the community organizations as clients, members of the community became clients as well.

Castle: I see. Well, that's a perfect big-picture look because now I'm going to take us back slowly through that. One of the things you just represented—because I've been thinking as I looked at how to form these questions is when you say going to Harvard without the fear because it just didn't even occur to you that you couldn't do it, that really applies itself into how you approach things, which was so pragmatically, whereas most people—it's the challenges of self-doubt and confidence, and you were kind of reaching right into that space, and it wasn't that you were reaching it and worrying about your lack of ability or confidence, it was, *Well, if I'm going to do this, I have to work harder, and if I'm not good at this, I'm not going to ignore it, I'm going to go take classes in it.* And that, I would have to say goes with how you've approached issues around discrimination, for example.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Would you say?

Lee: You know, I've never thought of what you just said, but you're absolutely right. After I finished school, I continued for a few years to take courses in extension, and they were always things that I felt that I had to improve on.

Castle: [Laughs.] Nobody does that!

Lee: [Laughs.]

Castle: As an academic—especially kids today. You kind of run from the weaknesses, and you focus on the strengths, but it sounds—you know, and self-image has so much to do with that, or doubt. But that really explains a lot about how you bridged a lot of different spaces, as a lawyer how else can you become a commu-

nity advocate who is also a business person? Those things don't, in a traditional sense, how people think of them, work together. But this isn't about my understanding of you—

Lee: [Laughs.]

Castle: It's so hard because whenever you sit down, you offer such good things. When you went—your first time at Harvard—if you can take yourself back to that space, where you're on this huge train journey across the country, can you describe to me some of the things that took you by surprise when you first got to Harvard? And had you any frame of reference for what you would find there? Had anyone given you any sense of what I would imagine was a very different daily life than you had been living?

Lee: Well, first, I had no idea of what to expect. I had never known anyone who had gone to Harvard. In fact, except for our doctor and our lawyer, I hadn't know very many people who went to college. Certainly there's no one in my family that had ever gone to college. But you asked me about when I got on the train to go to Boston, what do I remember. I remember it was the longest train ride—in fact, it was the longest ride of any type that I had ever had. It was very, very difficult. What I had done was I opted to travel by train rather than airplane because there was, like, a \$150 saving, and the trip was, like, 150 hours. I don't know exactly. And I figured out that if I took a train, I would be paid a dollar an hour for every hour that I traveled, without doing anything, so I thought that would be a good deal, so that's what I did. But it was the hardest \$150 that I've ever had to earn. What struck me was how big this country was. You go for a whole day, and the landscape doesn't change; it's still like that, and it just goes on and on and on.

Castle: So to this day—I mean, that story is so vivid. The way in which some people might look at your life now, and there are material possessions that you have that you couldn't have dreamed of at that time, but would you say you have a strong sense of how you earned a certain \$150?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Old habits die hard.

Castle: Do you ever have conflict with your family about that?

Lee: My oldest son has said to me, “Dad, I can't figure out why you spent so much time trying to save \$150 when you're making decisions that represent a lot more, and you don't spend any more time.” I guess it's because I've always tried to find better ways, less expensive ways to do *everything*.

Castle: Right, right. Right, and it's also the balance. At that time, your time wasn't as valuable, right?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: It's not valued the way it is now.

Lee: That's right.

Recollections of the Harvard Experience

Castle: But over time—I mean, you were cognizant of it at that time, if you were already thinking in that calculated fashion and weighing things.

So when you first arrive and you're at Harvard, do you remember any specific moments or sitting down to a meal? What was dining like? Did you dine in a great hall? Were you expected to wear anything in particular that denoted Harvard status?

Lee: Okay, I'll tell you. When I arrived to South Station, I got on the subway and went to Harvard Square. South Station, where all the trains come in. And I got out of the subway, and I looked around, and it's like a downtown anywhere, and I said, "Where's Harvard?" And somebody pointed, "Through that gate." I said, "What gate?" Oh, I saw a little gate, and I was disappointed. I mean, I was going to a university I had seen other schools. I had never seen a campus right in the middle of town, where you walk through a little gate. I went in, and I learned that I was a week early, because I couldn't remember when school started. I guess I could have called to find out, but I didn't want to spend what it would cost, and I just assumed that it would be right.

They said I was a week early, so what am I going to do? They gave me a key to a room. "This is where you're going to be living. Go ahead." So I went in, and it was very old. The building was very old. Weld South. Then I spent a week walking around, looking at different places.

Castle: Were you excited?

Lee: I wasn't particularly excited, but I went around because I had nothing else to do, and this was a new place, some place that I had never been. I took the subway down to Tremont Street. In those days, Tremont and Boylston was downtown. Like a lot of older parts of towns in all cities, they have stores that stay open till ten, eleven o'clock at night, selling suits and what have you. I can't remember exactly when I bought it, but I learned that—that's it: I learned that you had to wear a coat and tie to all meals, and I didn't have a coat and tie, so the first thing I did was I went out and bought a suit at some store on Tremont Street, because it did not occur to me that there are different kinds of suits. I just wanted to buy a suit, which I did. It was a gray suit with red stripes, two-button, and it leaned towards having a zoot suit. It wasn't quite that, but it was two buttons, and it went down—a medium gray, a worsted with red stripes? [Laughter.] Anyway, I bought it, and I wore it. When school started, I wore it when you had to, and eventually I bought a

sport coat. In fact, I think I went through college with never more than one sport coat, one or two sport coats.

Castle: Was wearing that suit the equivalent to having a clown suit on in terms of how different—

Lee: Yes, it was, but at that time I was not comfortable wearing a suit, and I had never owned a suit.

Castle: So you weren't comfortable in a suit, you hadn't owned one, you bought one that didn't look like anyone else's in your class.

Lee: That's right! [Laughs.]

Castle: So if I just can draw a quick parallel of extreme—there's extremes and similarities in this. Your father, as a teenager, comes to the country from China and jumps off a trolley in Chinatown.

Lee: [Laughs.] Yes.

Castle: And in a generation, his son is going to Harvard. You have the connections where you're just getting on—you're a week early to school, you have no idea really what you're supposed to be doing, but you're there.

Lee: That's right.

Castle: As your father was, for his family.

Lee: I hadn't seen the comparison, but that's absolutely right.

Castle: And the hard work that comes in one generation that can happen—I mean, that's phenomenal. And yet there's always a place to build and grow, so here—wow. So here you are, the odd suit out. Did that translate into your experience socially? What was it like being not from the families that often funnel their students through prep schools to Harvard? What was that experience like for you? Were there times when you really felt different? Were there times when you felt connections?

Lee: Okay. In my class at Harvard, there were maybe, at most, ten Asians, and so there weren't very many. And when you're of Asian ancestry and you're in a non-Asian surrounding, you tend to play down your background. Most of my friends were non-Asian. It wasn't until I gained a lot more confidence and was comfortable being by myself that I knew more Asians and more non-white people.

Castle: So it is fair to say, then, that what you're describing is, in seeking the acceptance or the comfort, playing down Asian-ness by not seeking out other Asian people for comfort or to socialize.

Lee: That's right, initially.

Castle: It's more socially acceptable.

Lee: That's right, but I had so much to learn. I had never been to a country club, and my roommate took me to the country club for the first time, and he would jokingly say that "the first time I take Ted to my country club, he walks into the ladies' locker room." Okay?

Castle: Yes.

Lee: It's kind of funny because I didn't know where anything was, and I ended up in the ladies' locker room.

Castle: You're in the ladies' locker room in your funny, striped suit. What was that experience like at the country club? Were you uncomfortable?

Lee: No.

Castle: Was it curiosity?

Lee: At first, when I was accepted at Harvard, there was some literature I got, and one of the things it said was, "Massachusetts has an equal protection law, and universities are prohibited from discriminating." And I was really surprised. I didn't know what they were talking about, but after I got at Harvard, one of the things I noticed—first, people at Harvard tend to be very independent. They go their own way. They say hello to people and they have friends, but there isn't a cliquishness. Now, there is, among those who belong to private clubs. Harvard has—and I think for those who join these private clubs, they feel a need to belong to something, because otherwise you're really pretty much on your own.

But I noted that in that environment. the atmosphere at Harvard was very liberal. People were nice. You had people who went to prep school and had a more privileged background, but even that type tended to be friendly. Everybody was very friendly. They may not do anything for you, but everyone was friendly. I remember what I read about the no discrimination in Massachusetts, and I had never even heard of that.

Castle: So you're saying you remember at that age reading that in the literature.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: And that stayed with you.

Lee: Yes, because I didn't know what they were talking about.

- Castle: Through your time—once at Harvard, though, did that stay in your mind and you get a greater sense of why that was there?
- Lee: Yes. Even in those days, black students were regularly elected to high student positions, and that was a time that the American ambassador to the United Nations was Ralph Bunche.
- Castle: Right.
- Lee: Remember him?
- Castle: Yes.
- Lee: He was black, and he was right at the very top. In California, I didn't see any of that. I can't think of a prominent black person in California in the days that I was in high school.
- Castle: Interesting.
- Lee: I go to Harvard, and I see that this guy was a Harvard alum, is ambassador to the United Nations. Then I thought initially that maybe because they were at Harvard they had this advantage, but with time, I think it was more that Massachusetts was more liberal in general.

Role and Desirability of Social Clubs

- Castle: Yes. It's interesting because one of the things you started to talk about was the private clubs. I mean, I'm assuming these are dinner clubs.
- Lee: That's right, exactly.
- Castle: Now, did you ever feel the desire to join one of them?
- Lee: No.
- Castle: Why was that?
- Lee: First, I never had the opportunity, but I also never had the desire. I feel—like, I can tell you, my son is a member of one of the clubs, and we talked about it. I feel that the need to belong to a club is somewhat of a weakness, that you need something to hang onto or to help you—I can't think of the word.
- Castle: It's an emotional fortification. It's about kind of a confidence—

Discrimination of Legal Fraternities at Boalt

Lee: And it shows that you need this emotional fortification. You know, having said that, I'm really not much of a joiner, never have been. And that's part of the reason. However, do you want me to tell you what I did at Boalt, which is kind of interesting?

Castle: Yes, please.

Lee: We're jumping around. My freshman year at Boalt, I did fairly well the first semester, and I was walking through the school, and a guy, who had gone to Yale, who I knew—we weren't good friends, but we knew each other—approached me and my friend and said to my friend—and I can't remember who it was, said to my friend, "Are you going to join this legal fraternity? It's the best. We have very few Jews. We have no Asians." And I'll be damned. The guy said these things with me standing there.

Castle: Wow.

Lee: So I really got angry. And so I thought what was I going to do? The only way to fight back: Is there another legal fraternity at this school, and find out about it. So I did. And I found that the one that he was a member of had something like fifty members—it was highly desirable. And the other one had, like, twelve members, okay? And it was not highly desirable. I said I was going to do something about that, so I went to see the president of this other one, who was [Robert K.] "Bob" Puglia [pronounced POOL-ee-uh]. He passed away recently. But he was a district court judge in Sacramento. I told him what had happened and how furious I was that this guy had done this to me, and I said, "I want to work to make this other fraternity better" than the one that was then so popular.

Castle: So was Bob the head of the fraternity you wanted to—

Lee: To build up. So I then proceeded to contact almost every member of my class and asked them to join. I told people what this other guy had done and that I wanted to show him—to show him up, okay?

Castle: Yes.

Lee: I talked to everybody.

Castle: What did you say when you talked to them? What was your pitch?

Lee: "Beth, would you join this legal fraternity? Let me tell you, Bob So-and-so really thinks that being exclusive is to be valued. I think that if you're good enough to be a student at Boalt, you're good enough to belong to any legal fraternity at the school, and we should compete by which legal fraternity offers the most to its members." I was dumbfounded when, the first year, I got over half my class to

join. I pointed out that this gentleman had shown some discrimination. I didn't know how people were going to—you know, they may say, "Eh"—they may share that hostility towards me. But there was no one in my class—in fact, very few people turned me down, very few. There was one guy who had promised to join the other one, and he was a very close friend, and I told him. His name was Dave Nelson. "Dave, you gotta join. You gotta be with me. You're my friend." "Ted, I already promised them that I'm going to join." So he ended up joining neither one. But we had a lot of people join. And we became—just two years later, we got the award for being the outstanding chapter in the United States.

Castle: And what's the name of the fraternity?

Lee: Phi Alpha Delta. Now—that's not the whole story. When they came out to present us for the award for being the best chapter in the United States, I met a high-ranking alumnus, and he says, "Ted, we really like what you've done in preaching against discrimination and opening up membership to a lot of people, but," he said, "don't overdo it." [Laughs.] I looked at this guy. "What do you mean don't overdo it? You can't overdo something like that." So I was a little bit angry, okay?

Castle: Right.

Lee: But I didn't confront him. Then the next year, the legal fraternity turned down someone. Never turned down anyone. Once I got active, we never turned down anyone. The idea was if you're good enough to be a student at Boalt, you're good enough to be a member. Then they turned down a guy. And guess what his race was—Black. Who was a good friend of mine. I was so angry, because to me, that was a clear case of discrimination. How in the hell can the only guy you turn down just happen to be black? And so then I dropped out. I said, "I ain't belonging to anything." After all the effort. When we became successful, when it became socially acceptable being a member, now we want to eliminate other people.

Castle: Right, now you had the power to be exclusive again.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: So you had brought power through your efforts to make it a non-discriminating fraternity.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: But the interesting thing is that the first thing you talk about is your experience as an individual standing next to someone who is blatantly being racist,—

Lee: That's right.

- Castle: —is blatantly being discriminatory, talking about the privileged access this other person has to the fraternity. And what was the other fraternity?
- Lee: Phi Delta Phi.
- Castle: Phi Delta Phi. And your response to that is community organizing.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: So you go back to your community, and your appeal is based on discrimination as part of it, but the language is about exclusivity.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: Were you conscious—when you were calling people, what were you thinking about in terms of your appeal to them?
- Lee: First, the thing that I stressed was, “Don’t you believe”—first, legal fraternities—they don’t have much of a function except maybe they can help people while they’re in law school. That’s what you tell everyone, because they got to pay, like, a hundred and fifty bucks to join, and [for] students, a hundred fifty bucks is a lot of money. I could be wrong on numbers, but that’s my recollection. That I want this legal fraternity open to everyone who wants to join, and we all will help each other get through this place. It was a message that—
- Castle: Right. You’re a community organizer with a little politician going on, too, because—
- Lee: [Laughs.]
- Castle: I mean, that’s the perfect approach, is just saying to somebody, “Don’t you want support”—you appeal to the thing—who’s going to say no? Who’s going to say, “No, I prefer that it be”—even if they would necessarily, it’s about challenging people’s assumptions, too. Maybe someone thought to themselves, ooh, maybe I do want something to be exclusive, and they had to think deeper about their personal values. It does connect to a lot of different aspects, and it sounds like at the end, too, there was just a frustration with—you know, after all this—
- Lee: Yes! After all this!
- Castle: Right, which is an important reminder that racism is powerful, and it does continue to persist at times, and it rears its ugly head, and you have to seek other ways. So this is something—certainly when you were at Harvard, your need for the dinner club was not pressing.
- Lee: That’s right. Nothing further from my mind. Of course, I didn’t have the background. I didn’t go to Andover or Exeter or some prep school. I think we’ve no-

ticed or I've noticed—everyone knows; it's common knowledge that for a long time, members of the private clubs tended to be prep school grads.

Castle: You actually started to answer a couple of different questions, and one of them was about other men of color. You talked about maybe ten other Asian students that were there. I just wondered at what point—you know, you are in a predominantly white environment—did you acknowledge each other? I mean, is it the head nod or what happens?

Lee: Just a head nod. "Hi." But I don't think my first two years—I don't think I ever had a meal with a non-white person.

Studying at Harvard

Castle: We talked about socializing, and you talked about—well, actually, let's do this question first. I want to talk a little bit more about academics, and maybe we'll come back to kind of social life. What did you enjoy about your classes? What were your strengths, and what were your weaknesses? We talked about this a little already, in another context, but as a student your first few years there, kind of describe change over time for me in terms of when you first got there, what kind of student were you.

Lee: Okay. When I first got there, I was a terrible student. Also I didn't study. I didn't know how to study. And what I was studying, I had no interest. I studied great literature, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and *Don Quixote* and all that stuff. Actually, to this day I don't have a great interest. I got a lot of that. And I didn't understand the lectures. I wasn't listening to the lectures. I'm trying to think of other things. That was a humanities course. I'm the kind of person that is quantitative. It was completely new—I remember reading [Henry] James's *Turning of the Screw* in English, and what they did was: "What did James mean when he wrote *The Turning of the Screw*? And the more ideas that you can come up with, the better grade you get," all right? And so I was able to come up with a lot of ideas, but I said, this is baloney. What right do you have to attribute all these things because—and I said, why are we doing this? Because this was completely new to me. I never had anything like that in high school. My first two years of high school, I learned a lot. I took a lot of math. My last two years of high school, I didn't learn anything. Nothing at all. Because it was a new high school. California was growing rapidly. Teachers didn't teach; they just sat in class. And what a difference from my sophomore year to my junior year, the education I got.

Castle: So this is the first time you're sitting in classrooms where somebody is challenging you to—

Lee: To think.

Castle: —to think in an entirely different way.

Lee: Entirely different, that's right.

Castle: And in a way you didn't really like.

Lee: Yes. Well, at first I didn't believe it. *Sitting around trying to figure out what the guy meant? What difference does it make? Okay? What a waste of time!* But we spent class hours discussing why somebody did one—my English teacher read my first paper and couldn't believe it was so bad. He kind of implied, "How did you get into Harvard?" Okay? But he never offered to help me. I said, "How can I improve?" He said, "Just keep writing." "But how do you improve?" "Just keep writing." And the guy's name was French, and he left Harvard to join the faculty at Smith. I remember—

Castle: Inflict it on the women.

Lee: Yes. But what I did was true to form: In my sophomore year, I took courses—first, what few electives you had, I took courses I knew absolutely nothing about. I took a Survey of Music, a Survey of Art, a Survey of Religions, things that I knew nothing [about]. I thought going to college was to study—not to prepare for a profession but to learn about things you knew nothing about, and grades weren't important to me. I wish I had better grades, but I wasn't working to get better grades. It wasn't till I was junior that I became a serious student.

Castle: When you say grades weren't important, are you saying that in the way that you were aware that learning was important?

Lee: Learning was important, but the grade didn't—I think that I learned more by taking a course in religion, something I knew absolutely nothing about in those days, than somebody else who took a course in Shakespeare, that he knew something about.

Castle: Right. It's just an interesting combination because—I'm not trying to box you in or figure you out, but there is an ideal way in which we should go to university; it's the one chance in the whole world that an individual has to explore your brain, your mind,—

Lee: That's right.

Castle: —to build yourself as a full human in the context of the privilege of learning, so that's what I see a little bit, but also, as a pragmatist, as somebody who, if you're going to turn the screw, there's dimensions and there's diameters and if it fits and you turn it and then it's done. I see that kind of figurative application being maybe a little bit more your style, but it sounds like you're doing both. You're both wanting to learn for learning's sake, and then there's a point at which—you know, we got into university and realize that there's a strategy. It's an end game. You have to figure out what you need to get to the next level. What would you say about this?

Lee: I think my first year, I had something like a C minus average, and then in my next year, I think I had, I don't know, a D plus average. That's damn close to flunking out. When I came close to flunking out, the realization of what might have happened hit me, and I stopped—what had happened is in my sophomore—well, first, in my freshman year, I broke my ankle playing basketball, and I couldn't get around very much, so I spent a lot of time sitting in my room, looking out over the Harvard Yard. I went into a depression which lasted several months. I didn't care what my grades were and all that stuff. It didn't matter. The depression was caused by the fear of death because you can't sit in Harvard Yard and not think of all the history that's taken place there. I sat at a window looking out over the Harvard Yard, and I saw someone's initials carved into the wood, and there was a very early date, and I said, *Oh, my God, where is that person now? No one knows. No one cares.* If you think about that, you can get depressed, and I did.

Then I got over—then, in my sophomore year, I came in. In the spring of my sophomore year, I saw just about every Red Sox game that spring. Then when I got my grades, I barely passed. I said, *This is crazy. I'm going to have to settle down.* And then I realized that up to that time, a lot of my effort was trying to be friendly to other people, and really it is to get their acceptance, get other people's acceptance. This wasn't conscious, but someone [would ask], "Who wants to go to the Red Sox game?" "Let's go." And then I decided that first, I was going to change, that I wasn't going—this was a conscious decision. I wasn't going to care whether anybody liked me or not, and I wasn't going to waste time because I looked at my first two years. I wasted a lot of time. I was going to stop doing that and just be myself.

At the time I came to—well, I drove across the country with my mother, and as we drove across the country, I was thinking, When I go back to Harvard next year, what am I going to do? Things aren't going to be like they have been. What am I going to do? Well, by the time we got—I've always had a fondness—people don't know this—I've always had a fondness for Salt Lake City. Why? Because my mother and I pulled into Salt Lake City, and we spent several days there, because my father was attending a Chinese businessman's convention. Why they would pick Salt Lake? There were no Chinese. I think there was, like, one Chinese family or something in Salt Lake. We went to the Chinese restaurant, and I asked the guy, "Are there other Chinese?" No, there weren't. There aren't too many.

But while I was there, I decided that the new Ted—you know, I was going to not care about other people, go out by myself and do the things that I wanted to do, and not seek social acceptance. I mean, I consciously decided not to do anything. I went out, without a lot, by myself. I didn't try to get a group together and do things together. Those days were gone, whereas before, I did a lot of that.

Castle: Why do you think there was that desire?

- Lee: Because if I didn't change, I wasn't going anywhere. I recognized I had to make these changes if I was going to achieve anything.
- Castle: Your need for social acceptance—do you have a sense of where that pressure came from?
- Lee: I don't think there was pressure; I think it was loneliness. Now, remember, I was four years at Harvard. I never made a single long-distance call home, telephone. Not a single. I broke my leg, and I didn't call home. I wrote my mother, and my mother wrote me back and said—I used to [write] once a week. When my mother got a second letter the same week, she knew something was wrong, but she didn't call me; she wrote to tell me, "I knew something was wrong."
- Castle: Did other students communicate with their parents frequently on the phone?
- Lee: No. In fact, people from Hawaii didn't go home. A lot of students from Hawaii, who went to Eastern colleges, did not go home for summer. They got jobs. Saved money to go to school. In those days, people still worked a lot. I didn't.
- Castle: I want to ask if you had a job.
- Lee: No, never had to work to get through college. I went through law school and business school. Law school was with the G.I. Bill, and business school, through savings.

Culture of Loneliness at Harvard; Detachment of Alumni

- Castle: So you're saying, though—I mean, one of the things that you did mention before that also helped you into Harvard was geography, so being from the West—whereas other students didn't call home either, you're not just far away; you're far away geographically, you're far away emotionally; you're really on your own at Harvard because your parents also can't really connect at all to what you're going through, because you're the first. Culturally, just in the culture of Harvard, you're also pretty much lonely and on your own.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: And that's a little bit different than—you know—
- Lee: I'm sure race played a role, but it wasn't racial so much; it was just being alone. You know, there was a young man—I met him as a freshman. I think he told me that his uncle was president of Procter & Gamble. And he said that his uncle was paying for his Harvard education. But he wasn't quite comfortable with his uncle paying for his Harvard education. In other words, his father couldn't afford it, but his father's brother could. And I'll be doggone, the next year he didn't come back. There were other people who didn't stick it out. It wasn't that the work was so

hard. I think at Harvard, the hardest part in those days was the loneliness of going to Harvard.

There was a young man who came from Little Rock, Arkansas. He was a good friend. He only went three years to Harvard because he applied to medical school, was accepted, and never finished college. In those days, some medical schools would let you in after three years of college. He never did anything. He never went out with anybody. And he said he was just going to get his education, and he wanted to get out of town as fast as he could. He never came back for a reunion, anything. But I called [him for] the twenty-fifth reunion, because I figured maybe I could convince this guy to come. I talked to his daughter. She answered the phone. She said, "Who's calling?" And I said, "Ted Lee." And she said, "Oh, we know all about you."

Castle: Really!

Lee: [Laughs.] "We know all about you, from Dad." And then I talked to him on the phone. I couldn't get him to come to the reunion, but we chatted a bit, and he always said, "Ted, I'm a Southerner. I only went to Harvard to get an education. After I got my education, I've never been back. I've never cared to go back, and I'm not going to." But there were people like that. You know, Harvard used to have a very low giving rate. The alums didn't support it that well, the old-time people—but the new people didn't support it that well. I can't remember the number, but it was not high.

Castle: Do you think it's connected to that lack of—I mean, you were talking about the disconnection. I mean, people were lonely, they got their education, and they left. They weren't connected to it in that human—

Lee: It's changed now because Harvard works at it, but in those days, I think so.

Becoming an Active Alumnus

Castle: Do you think that plays a role in why you're so active as an alumnus?

Lee: First, I never expected to be this active. They kept asking me to do things, I kept doing it, and pretty soon you're active.

Castle: Yes. [Laughs.]

Lee: The first big thing I did—have I told you how I took the Harvard basketball team to China?

Castle: You told us off camera, but you haven't told—

Lee: Do you want it on the camera?

- Castle: Yes. Well, we can come to it chronologically, but if you feel like telling it now, go ahead.
- Lee: Okay. I went back to visit Harvard. First, I hadn't gone to visit Harvard for twenty years, and I went to my twentieth reunion to simply find out whether I wanted to go to my twenty-fifth.
- Castle: [Laughs.]
- Lee: My oldest son enjoyed it so much that—I took him back to a reunion where you're not supposed to bring your kids, and I didn't know better, so I brought Greg. Greg had so much fun at the Harvard reunion, he said to me, "Dad, I want to go to Harvard." And I said, "You can go to Harvard, but you're going to have to do a lot better than you're doing now," because he wasn't that much of a student. I never expected him to be a good student. But the possibility of going to Harvard? He started studying, and he became a good student.
- Castle: Wow.
- We have to stop.

[End File 3. Begin File 4.]

Sending the Harvard Basketball Team to China

- Castle: [You were] talking about your son, Greg, and his desire to go to Harvard based on the twentieth reunion.
- Lee: Reunion, that's right. And so then by the twenty-fifth reunion, I was pretty active, and I was elected a director of the Alumni Association, and I was on a number of committees: the Visiting Committee for Athletics, committees on Asia, but how this came about: I like sports. I went back to visit Harvard I think while my son was in prep school. Oh, 1980, so '64, '74, sixteen years old. I went back to visit him in prep school and went to see the Dartmouth football game, and the athletic director says to me, "Why don't you ride up with Frank and me to Dartmouth?" I said, "Sure." I get in the car, and a half an hour outside of Boston, a conversation takes place. The basketball coach says to the athletic director, "You have to let us go. You have to let us go to China." And the athletic director says to the coach, "You can't go to China without the money that it takes to get to China, and we simply don't have it." And the basketball coach says, "You're going to turn down an invitation to be the first American basketball team to play in China? You're going to turn down that opportunity?"
- I said, "What are you guys talking about?" And so they explained to me that the NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] has offered Harvard—China

was looking for an American basketball team to bring to China, NCAA put up Harvard, and Harvard was going to turn it down. So I said, "What? You can't, Jack." Jack Reardon was the athletic director. "You can't do that, Jack." "Well, Ted, I don't want to do it, but if we haven't got the money, you tell me what to do." "How much are we talking about?" And they said, "Seventy-five thousand." I said, "Seventy-five thousand?" This is 1980. "How can it cost that much?"

It turns out that fifty thousand was for transportation, and then twenty-five thousand. I thought, and I said, "Let me think about this, see if there isn't something that can be done because, Jack, we got to accept this invitation." Well, I knew that Braniff Airlines had just started flying to Hong Kong, and I also knew that any time a new airline starts anywhere, there's no business. To get people to fly, use your airline for the first time, is very, very difficult. So I contacted the PR—

Lee: I called Braniff Airlines, and met their promotions guy and said, "I'll let you advertise that the Harvard University basketball team chose Braniff to go to Asia. Your planes are half empty anyway, so how about doing it?" They did it.

Castle: Wow.

Lee: They wouldn't give it to me, but they gave us a very, very low price, and so that took care of most of the \$50,000. And so the team went, and Doris and I went with the team to China. It was a terrific trip. But what happened was when I got back, I get invited by the headmaster of St. Paul's to be the president of the Parents' Fund.

Castle: Word got out.

Lee: And what an honor! But why? It never occurred to me, but I did it, and I ended up serving, like, nine years as chairman of the Parents' Fund and president of the Parents Association. Near the end, I said, "You know something?" Well, they gave me a bowl, a very, very nice bowl. And I said, "It's very nice of you people," I said, "but how did you pick me to do these things for so many years?" They said, "You really want to know, Ted?" I said, "Yes." "When [William] 'Bill' [Oates?] heard what you had done for the Harvard basketball team, he said, 'We got to get this guy working for St. Paul's,' and so therefore"—I didn't go there; my kids went there, but St. Paul's School has been very, very kind to me, and all because of the basketball.

Castle: Right. So the word gets around.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: And I think the thing that's interesting about the basketball experience—it's not that you were a very wealthy man who said, "Here's the money"; it was that you took action, and you knew what to do, and you called the right people, and it was really about—as you say, all of sudden people started asking you to do things and

you do them, and then suddenly you're [unintelligible]. But, yes, that's exactly what that definition is, but it's not part of this kind of master plan; it's these moments, taking advantage of these moments and making something of it, and doing it for real, not giving it lip service. And tell me why was it you felt it was so important for the team to go to China?

Lee: Oh, remember now, up until that time, there was no relationship, no interaction between China and the United States. Ping-Pong was first; basketball was second, and maybe because of my ancestry—I wasn't thinking of that, but maybe because of my ancestry, I wanted the team to go to China. I don't know why. But I did think that if Harvard could turn down this opportunity, it wasn't right. They had to do it.

Selecting a Major at Harvard; Ideas for a Career

Castle: Maybe we can sum up a little bit about the Harvard experience and move forward a little. There are a few questions, and I think they're quite relevant to what we've been talking about. One of them is at what point did you, while you were at Harvard, develop a sense of what you might like to do for a career? Was it a powerful moment? Was it clear to you? What were you thinking as an undergrad, and what did your major end up being, and why did you end up choosing that major?

Lee: My major ended up in social relations, which is the study of sociology, psychology and social anthropology together. Harvard had very strong professors in those departments. I chose that as a major, though, only because that was about the only major that I could select at a late date. I really didn't select it till I was a junior. You're supposed to select it a lot earlier. It had the least number of requirements. That's why I did it.

Now, when I was in school, I didn't know what I was going to do. My father wanted me to be a doctor, but the one science course I took at Harvard, I did not do well. In fact, I didn't do well in anything. If you want to go to medical school, in those days, you had to decide early. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I could not see myself—I am by nature entrepreneurial. I like to do things, but I couldn't see myself working in a bank. I couldn't see myself working in sales anywhere. I didn't know what I was going to do, had absolutely no idea, which is the reason I went to law school: I didn't know what I wanted to do. If I studied law, it would give me more time to figure out what I wanted to do.

Castle: You say you're by nature entrepreneurial. Were you aware of that then?

Lee: No, but I knew the things that I enjoyed.

Castle: And what were those?

Lee: One of the things that I did: When World War II came to an end, there was a lot of synthetic soap, but the war is over. Nobody wants synthetic soap anymore, be-

cause the ingredients needed to make soap can be used to make explosives. Therefore everything that can be used to make explosives, you make explosives. Keeping clean is secondary to explosives. The war ends. We don't need explosives. Soap comes back on the market. There were cases of synthetic soap that were being thrown away because who is going to buy synthetic soap when you can buy the real stuff? But I can't stand throwing away—

Castle: [Laughs heartily.]

Lee: —cases of soap, so I got a box of soap, and I said, what can I use this for? I put it on. Use it as cleanser. It worked as cleanser. So I then went around to the restaurants in Stockton, selling discontinued synthetic soap as cleanser for five cents a box. My recollection [is] there were thirty-six boxes in a carton, and at five cents—let's see, at ten cents, it would be three sixty; at five cents it was a dollar eighty. So I sold fifty cases.

Castle: And you liked that.

Lee: Yes, I enjoyed that, and I made good money. Fifty cases at a dollar—what did I say, a dollar eighty?

Castle: Yes.

Lee: That's almost a hundred dollars for a few days' work.

Castle: That's a lot of money.

Lee: In those days, that was a lot of money.

Castle: A lot of money.

Lee: That was 1945. The war ended.

Castle: So it combines some of your favorite things, which is being frugal, taking advantage of an opportunity, and—I like the entrepreneurial aspect of it, too, and then the social relations, so you did get something later on in college from that. You know, would you say you're very straightforward in terms of your relations with people? I mean, that's one of the things you learn in business, is that you just have to say what you need.

Lee: I remember going to one restaurant, and he says, "What? Are you sure this could be used as a cleanser?" So I pulled a box out. I said, "Try it." "Well, I'll be." It just cuts grease, whether it's synthetic or—and I was only a kid then.

Castle: Right. You mentioned that there were strong professors in the social relations field.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Were there any professors during your time at Harvard that had a strong impact on you?

Lee: No.

Castle: And how often did you see your parents while you were at school?

Lee: Just in summer.

Castle: In the summer. You mentioned your father expressed a desire for you to be a doctor.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: What type of communication did your parents have with you about your success and experience in school, and did they mentor you or advise you at all?

Lee: No, not at all. And I got no pressure from my father and mother when I didn't do well. They never said anything.

Castle: Would it have made a difference to you?

Lee: No.

Castle: How do you that shaped you or not?

Lee: No, I think eventually I would have done what I was going to do.

Castle: Now, coming out of college—I think we talked about this briefly before. Did you have a girlfriend coming out of college, or at what point did you—

Lee: No. I didn't date much at all, and then I began dating in my junior [year]. When I drove to Salt Lake City, I started going out. I land in Salt Lake—

Castle: Salt Lake City [cross-talk; unintelligible].

Lee: That's right, a lot of very attractive people in Salt Lake.

Castle: Interesting. So Salt Lake City really is this pivotal moment for you, in a lot of ways.

Lee: Actually, yes. And I remember at that time that I said being myself, I can enjoy all the success I wasn't having at Harvard.

Castle: Trying to be—

- Lee: Trying to be something that I wasn't. Yes, that was a very important—I went back, and—started in Salt Lake that much of my social life changed, just completely changed.
- Castle: And it changed because you said to yourself what? What was it that you said earlier?
- Lee: That I was going to be myself, not depend on other people. I know a fellow in my office. His daughter went to Yale University. I remember, as a sophomore, she wasn't that happy, and I hope she doesn't mind what I'm about to say, but I told her I knew what it was like, coming from California to go to an Ivy League school. I told her, "Stop trying to be friends with everybody. Just be yourself, and whatever you do, just go ahead and do it, and take all the advantages that Yale offers." I tell you, she did it. She had a wonderful time. That way of approaching problems continues to be valid.
- Castle: And also you're now taking, at times, a role of mentoring that you hadn't received—
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: —going through, passing on what you had learned the hard way.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: How to find your own success. I just have a few more questions on this, but one of the things you did talk about is one of the questions I have here, about going through difficult times in college, what the causes were, and how you overcame it. You said you fell into a depression. You say that now, and I wonder, are you saying that in retrospection, looking back at it, or were you aware what was happening to you?

Fear of Death

- Lee: I was not aware it was happening.
- Castle: Because that would be very scary.
- Lee: I knew I was unhappy, and I knew because it happened once again, later. I knew that it couldn't be normal to be so focused on death. I couldn't think of anything else. I was just constantly focused on that, what it meant and all that.
- Castle: Did you come to any resolution in your feeling about it, or is it something that you consider as a panic point for you or an unreasonable or irrational fear? Or what would you describe it as?

Lee: First, even to this day, I don't think it's an irrational fear. What I would say is I can't understand, Beth, why you don't share my fear. Now I'm able to live with it and even discuss it. At one time I couldn't.

Castle: So even asking this would be—

Lee: Would be difficult. When I lived in Hawaii, I could drive home one way, or I could drive another way. The closer way was near a cemetery, so I always took the longer way. I mean, it was that bad. How I handle and cope with it now: I think there may be a hormonal change that nature gives you to accept thing that when you're young you don't want to accept. Maybe. I've never seen a psychologist. I don't think there's any need to because, you know, it's real. I think much of religion is driven by the fear of death. If you think about what they're always talking about, it always goes back to that.

Castle: As an individual, how would you describe—I mean, we're still talking about now and then, but what is your religious connection or your spiritual connection? Do you attend a church? Did you then?

Lee: I haven't attended a church since high school.

Commencement from Harvard

Castle: What did you feel on your graduation day? Do you remember the day? Was it a ceremony that stands out in your mind?

Lee: What I remember: First, it was not well attended, because my class was the first normal class that Harvard had since World War II, because remember that the class of '46, '47—these people were in the service; they came back to finish their degrees, and some went back for one year, some went back for two years, some went back for three years. Those students represented a good part of the student body. In my class, I only know of one person that served in the Army before going to college. That's how it changed. We all eventually went in the Army because [it was] compulsory, because of the draft, but while we were in school, there were no—I said there was just one veteran in our class. So up until that time, Harvard was just mainly concerned about getting people their degrees so they could continue with their life. I don't think there was as much college spirit as slowly evolved later.

Castle: I see, so you don't remember that day as a particularly huge moment in your life.

Lee: No. The only thing that I remember was a number of people got awards, scholarships, fellowships, recognition of some sort, and I remember sitting there. I said, "Doggone it. I never tried for any of that. I could have. I should have, but I didn't." And I remember thinking, I knew that guy. He wasn't any smarter than I was, and look—you know.

Castle: Right, right. Well, that leads us into two different directions. One, we'll come back to a little bit later, which is—you know, you've graduated, and it doesn't sound like you're any closer to knowing what you want to do next.

Lee: I wasn't.

Entering the United States Army

Castle: So how did you end up in the military?

Lee: Drafted. I had a girlfriend that went to Bryn Mawr. When I got out of college, I just thought it would be a good idea to continue seeing her, and one way was to go to the University of Pennsylvania Law School, so I applied and I was accepted. I was planning to go. Then I got a notice that I was going to be drafted. I wanted to be taken in the summer so that when I got out, I'd be able to go to grad school in September. That's what I did. But when I went into the Army, I took the opportunity to do a lot of the reading that I didn't do in college. I was aware that a lot of people knew a lot more than I did, because they read a lot more than I did, so my two years in the Army, I did a lot of reading, a lot of reading. And so I feel that when I came out of the Army, I had as good an education—

Castle: [Laughs.] You were well read.

Lee: —as my classmates who had studied a lot harder in college. I made up for it in the Army.

Castle: So your U.S. Army stint was actually your own self-taught Harvard tutorial in the service of the Army. You learned what you had been assigned but hadn't done.

Securing a Job as an Inspector in the Army

Lee: Have I told you how I got my job in the Army? Did I tell you what it was?

Castle: No. Why don't you?

Lee: Okay. When I went in the Army, I had made the change. You have to work hard, and I was going to begin working hard in the Army. I wasn't going to waste two years, so I did a lot of reading, and I did well in the courses, in the programs that I was enrolled in the Army, with the result that I was regularly appointed an acting platoon sergeant. Now, for an Asian guy in an all-white company to be chosen as the leader is unusual, okay? Because I worked hard. And then, when I got sent to Germany, this guy—he was [of] Polish ancestry; he was a sergeant. I sat down. He said, "Ted, you can have any job on the post"—well, first I have to tell you—

Castle: No, it's fine.

Lee: When I arrived in Germany, there was an inspection, and everybody had to clean. In the Army, everything's got to be spit and polish. And so I voluntarily cleaned the latrines because I thought they needed cleaning. So I was cleaning them feverishly because the general's coming the next day, and everything's got to be perfect. And the first sergeant saw me working and said, "It's a pleasure to see someone who knows how to work," and I said, "Sarge, I don't mind working. I just hope that I'm not doing this for the next eighteen months." And so he said, "What would you like to do?" "What do you mean?" "What would you like to do?" "I'd love to have a job that took me outta here and travel through Europe." And he said, "You know, there is such a job." I said, "You gotta be kiddin' me!" He said, "No, there is such a job. We are a headquarters company, and therefore Army inspectors come out of this place." So I said, "Thank you very, very much."

The next day, I'm called in by Personnel, and this sergeant says to me, "Ted, you can have any job you want on the post." I said, "You're kiddin' me." "You can't have the commanding officer's job, but any other job, you can have." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because of your record. You got the highest scores of anybody here." And so I then said, "How about this job as an Army inspector?" And he says, "How did you know about it?" "Well, just tell me, is there such a job? You said I could have any job I wanted. How about this job?" He says, "Why not?" He handed me my personnel file. "Take it up to the colonel. If the colonel says you're okay, it's yours."

I went up. The colonel said, "If you do a good job for me, I will give you a tour of Europe which I think is worth \$20,000." And I said, "Thank you very much." So I spent my whole time in the service inspecting Army posts, traveling around Europe. I didn't even have to live in the Army posts; I lived in local hotels, ate local food, and put my uniform on in the morning. I had a sergeant as a driver. Picked me up and drove me to where it was. I had an unbelievable job. It was such a good job that when they said, "Ted, would you extend a year?", I fleetingly weighed the possibility of staying in. But also at that time, I hadn't been accepted—I wasn't going to back to Penn. I hadn't been accepted in any California law school. I finally said, "No, I'm going back." I went back and eventually ended up at Berkeley.

Castle: All because you cleaned a mean toilet.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: [Laughs.]

Lee: That's right.

Castle: If they hadn't—all those moments—I mean, you had to have had a great record.

Lee: Yes, I did—well, because I started studying, so I had a good record there. Then you see a guy cleaning the latrines with enthusiasm—because—well, I learned

[to] just do a good—my father always told me, “Whatever you do, do it well, because it makes a difference. Even if you sweep the floor, you can do it better. You can improve. Less effort. Some way to improve.” So I had that in the back—when I worked for my father in his grocery store, I worked very hard.

Castle: What happened to your girlfriend?

Lee: When I went in the Army, she was a junior at Bryn Mawr. When I went to law school, she went to Berkeley and got her master’s in education. In my junior year, we were married. Then—

Castle: What was her name?

Lee: Her name was Violet.

Castle: And where was she from?

Lee: Singapore. She had gone to Shipley School and Bryn Mawr.

Castle: And how old were you then?

Lee: When we were married or when we were going together?

Castle: Well, both. You started going together and—

Lee: When we started going together, she was nineteen, and I was twenty-one.

Castle: And then you got married when?

Lee: Let’s see, I got out of the Army [when I was] twenty-three. When I was twenty-five. She was twenty-three.

Castle: Okay. So it sounds like you had a pretty great time in the military—

Lee: Yes.

Difficulties in Being Platoon Sergeant

Castle: —over all. Were there any difficult moments or negative moments that you remember?

Lee: Yes. The most difficult time was—I was an acting platoon sergeant, and we were waiting to ship overseas to Germany, and I was leading calisthenics. You get up in the morning, you have breakfast, then you got to do calisthenics. As acting platoon sergeant, I was in charge, and I made people jog. There were about twenty-five black kids who refused to jog. They just walked around the track, looking at me, as if to say, “And what are you going to do about it?” So what I did was I had

the biggest, toughest-looking guy in that group, and I told him, "You are my assistant." And he said, "I don't want to be your assistant." And I said, "It doesn't matter what *you* want. You're my assistant, but your job is easy. All you have to do is make sure your friends do everything I tell them."

Castle: [Laughs.]

Lee: "That's all you have to do." "But that means they'll all get mad at me." And I said, "Better they get mad at you than if I get mad at you, because if you don't do it, I'm going to send you to the brig." Okay? "Now, you tell me." And so he did it, and after a day or two, he came over, "I told you! Everybody's mad at me." I said, "Remember what I said: It's better they be mad at you, than me." And that was my most difficult time in the Army, that incident.

Castle: Had you ever had an experience in that position of authority before? Was that one of your first?

Lee: One of my first. Well, in the Army was the first time I had any kind of authority, but my basic training, I didn't have it. When you have the special training, when you're trained for a job, when I went to that school I became an acting platoon sergeant.

Castle: Did you feel that you had been given some kind of training as to how to lead—

Lee: No.

Castle: —and how to make those kinds of decisions?

Lee: No. I think that the people who appointed me felt—but you recognize that's unusual.

Castle: Yes.

Lee: Very unusual.

Castle: Was this 1954?

Lee: Fifty-four.

Military Desegregation

Castle: Fifty-four to '56, so the military had been desegregated.

Lee: Oh, yes, yes. As a matter of fact, I feel that the fairest environment I have ever known was in the military.

Castle: In what way?

Lee: It was the first time that I saw black leaders: platoon sergeants, company commanders, artillery officers, and they enjoyed the same privileges as everybody else, and you took orders from them as you would anybody else. And the military made that happen.

Castle: Did you ever witness or experience people using racial epithets or slurs for each other?

Lee: Yes, you would. But, you know, I'm of the school that racial epithets aren't that important. If you think that something you can say is going to mean a lot to me, you're just dumb.

Castle: So during the military or up until that point, had people called you certain things?

Lee: Yes. In the second eight weeks, one time—you see, I was an acting platoon sergeant, but once we graduated from this training, you're like everybody else. You're acting while you're in this capacity. Well, when I was finishing up at Fort Lee, Virginia, where I studied for the quartermaster, some guy—it was the next day we were shipping out, so that means that night—well, maybe I was still in charge, but it wasn't obvious. This guy came over, put his face next to mine, and said—I didn't treat it as racial because if I were white, he would have done the same thing. "You're just like one of us now. You're no longer our boss, you S.O.B." When you're in charge, you give a lot of orders. And then we end up in a fight. Then the fight broke up.

Then the next day, we were getting ready to get on buses to go elsewhere. He ran in line, this guy, and then he didn't realize that he got in line right behind me. Then he saw that we were next to each other, and I remember he said, "Whoops!" And he got out and went somewhere else, because we weren't going to fight anymore. And actually, I wasn't angry at him anymore. In fact, it's one of the things: I wish I had said something to him at that time.

Castle: Was that conflict more about rank?

Lee: Yes. Yes. But he may have made some reference to my race. I don't remember. But he probably did. But, though he did, though he probably did, the issue really wasn't about race; it was the fact that I was the boss and I was no longer the boss, and "so there."

Castle: Right. It's interesting to explore—you know, it's no longer wartime. It's well after wartime, and part of what you talked about a little bit during World War II is whether somebody would ask you if you were Chinese and Japanese, and obviously kind of mainstream America's lack of understanding around differences in a lot of different Asian groups, and so whether someone calls you a "Jap" or something—I mean, they don't necessarily get the right slur, the right group. Most people don't know what "Coolie" means. They never probably have used that, unless it's in that historical space and time, and it has that meaning; it's usually—

and, like you say, in this interaction it's just kind of available in a moment of anger for him to make it racialized a bit, but it's not the reason he came at you.

Lee: That's right. I think there was a lot of that, by the way. You could make things worse than they really are by focusing.

Castle: Or you could lose the point of what the conflict might be about because something becomes more racialized.

Lee: And that's the danger because things are racial. It's too easy to blame everything on bigotry.

Castle: We'll have to talk more about that and your experience in community redevelopment, but as we go through, let's just—in terms of the military, then—I was thinking what it would feel like to graduate from Harvard and to make plans to go to law school and then suddenly be drafted. Was that frustrating, or was it expected?

Lee: It was frustrating, but it was for the best. In fact, I think I was lucky that it happened.

Learning from the Army

Castle: What did you learn from your experience there? It sounds like again you took something and made it work to your advantage.

Lee: I traveled everywhere. I read like mad.

Castle: What kind of books were you reading?

Lee: A lot of literature, but there was a course called Survey of American Literature. It was from 18-something—a lot of the people that I like wrote in the twenties and thirties and forties: [John] Dos Passos—I can't remember—[Irving] Shaw.

Castle: Is there any one particular author?

Lee: No. I just read the books that I was supposed to read in college that I hadn't, so I went to the service club, and in the library they just had all these books. I just went through them. Just pulled them out and just read them.

Castle: Did you actually keep your syllabus?

Lee: No.

Castle: Just remembered?

Lee: Yes.

- Castle: What made you do this? How many people would go back and do the homework they didn't finish in college?
- Lee: Yes, I know.
- Castle: Why did you?
- Lee: First, I made up my mind that I wasn't going to waste two years of life. Something good had to take place, so why waste my time doing nothing? I remember in basic training, I'd carry a pocket book, when we were marching and everything. I'd always carry a pocket book, and when they had a break—you'd march five miles and you'd take a break. I sat down, and I read a book. People were really struck by that. But, you know, it made going through basic training easier, too.
- Castle: So you really had a two-year—
- Lee: Catch-up period.
- Castle: Yes, you got to—
- Lee: Absolutely. And I found a book recently—you know, I got some things for you, and I still have Richard Heilbroner's book, *The Worldly Philosophers: the lives, times, and ideas of the great economic thinkers*. I've kept that book all these years because it helped me understand economics. In fact, I was wondering why that wasn't assigned reading when I was taking econ.
- Castle: It's really interesting, because one of the things about university is you go through it, and then all of a sudden you realize you weren't really part of it. I think a lot of people go through the beginning of law school or certainly the beginning of Ph.D. programs, and they're in it because they don't know what to do next and they don't want to waste their time. But it sounds like this is quite a deal, because it really gave you a space to make your next—let's put it this way: While you were in the military, did you have time to think about what you were going to do next?
- Lee: Yes, and I couldn't decide.
- Castle: And why was that?
- Lee: Just—
- Castle: Did you need more information?
- Lee: I had no training, remember. I knew how to run a grocery store, but I didn't know how to do anything else, and, as I said, I didn't want to work in a bank; I didn't want to be a salesman.
- Castle: So you knew what you didn't want to do.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: But you didn't have the vision yet for what you wanted to do.

Lee: That's right.

Castle: Often, in order to get that vision when you're not following the standard path of the normal application process to Harvard, you need to be exposed to it, so you need to take a chance on something. So what was the next major thing that you did in life after military, after the service in the military? You said you came back—

Law School: University of California, Berkeley, Boalt Hall School of Law; International Legal Studies Fellowship

Lee: After the service in military, I went to law school. When I finished law school, I accepted a fellowship from Boalt to study internationally, and you had to submit a program on what you wanted to do, so I submitted a program of going to study in Singapore. You know, with all those liberal Boalt professors, you'd think that that would go over great, but the people who picked Cologne, Heidelberg, Oxford, Cambridge—they were the ones that were treated well. People like me—Cruz Reynoso wanted to study law in Mexico. You know Cruz Reynoso?

Castle: Yes.

Lee: Okay.

Castle: Why don't you tell us.

Lee: Cruz Reynoso was a year ahead of me, and a good friend of Bob Puglia. We were all good friends. When he got out—he's of Mexican ancestry; his wife isn't Mexican, but he is—he had no opportunity. I mean, no interviews and no job offers except in government. I had never wanted to be a government lawyer. Cruz became a government lawyer, but maybe not by choice. He teaches at UCLA now. Cruz and I both got the smallest grants—because the amount they give you depends on how much they want to give you, okay? There's nothing set. Now, if you have a chance to Pillsbury Madison and Sutro and go to Oxford, but you're going to turn down that opportunity to go to Oxford because you have a job from a big law firm in San Francisco that's going to pay a lot more, the faculty would give you more money to go to Oxford. I kind of resented that, but those are the facts of life, and Berkeley did it. And it's the liberal professors that did it. It wasn't the conservative professors, it was the liberal professors that did it.

Well, because I wanted to go to Asia, [they asked], "What do you want to go to Asia for?" And "What is there to learn in Asia?" Well, I'd never been there. And then they said, "You want to go to Asia because you're married to someone from Singapore," and I said, "That's not true. I don't know Asia. If I want to study

anywhere, I want to study in the area where I can learn something about the society.” She felt that I should give up thinking of going to Asia, because, “You don’t need it, and they’re not giving you anything.” I said that I didn’t have a lot of choice on where I could go, and I wanted to know something about Asia. And also I had six months left on my G.I. Bill. See, the G.I. Bill promises you four years of education. Law school is only three years, so I had one year left over, so I took that last year as a student at the University of Singapore.

Castle: So, just to clarify, it’s the International Legal Studies Fellowship?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: How many people were offered—

Lee: About six.

Castle: Okay. And basically you and Cruz Reynoso.

Lee: Well, Cruz Reynoso and I are two recipients of that program.

Castle: Out of these six, and there are the two that didn’t—

Lee: No, no. Maybe it was four. Let’s say four every year. Every year there’s four. So my year, it was Dave Nelson, myself, Bob somebody that lives in Marin County, and Chuck Cranston.

Castle: But you were—

Lee: The only one that went to Asia.

Castle: Okay, because the rest of them were interested in—

Lee: Germany—

Castle: —European destinations.

Lee: —and England.

Castle: And the professors did not—you know, through their cultural ignorance, [were] not seeing Asia as a place of full value.

Lee: As far as I know, of all the people who were given these grants, I’m the only one that published from the experience, the only one.

Castle: Really?

- Lee: Yes. You didn't have to. They'd like you to do something, but people—well, it was a good time. You just finished law school, and you're living in Heidelberg or what have you. Most people have a good time.
- Castle: It's interesting. Do you think that the advisers, the professors would have had a concern for one of the other recipients if they want to go to Heidelberg and they knew somebody's wife was German-American?
- Lee: There's no question. There's no question that they treated me unfairly. In fact, I'll tell you, I was angry about that for the first few years, and I didn't support the school, in part because I felt that they had done me an unfairness, but I've—I'll tell people what happened. I mean, I haven't forgotten it. But I don't—
- Castle: But during that time, that has a really significant impact—
- Lee: Oh, yes.
- Castle: —on your formative—the very beginning of a career, and also the nature of discrimination. I mean, it's clear to you, but it still hovers out there.

Lack of Offers for Interviews after Graduation

- Lee: There's no question that I got no interviews because of discrimination. I went to see the assistant dean, Jim Keeler, a very nice fellow, and I said, "You're aware, are you not, that I haven't had a single interview?" Because he arranges the interviews. He said, "I am aware, and I want you to know I feel terrible about it. I have personally called a number of law firms, and nobody will give you an interview."
- Castle: How did the law firms know that you were Asian?
- Lee: Oh, they know.
- Castle: I just wondered.
- Lee: By the way, it wasn't just me. In those days, Sho Sato, number two in his class at Harvard, was teaching at Boalt. He said that one firm offered him a job as long as he understood he would never be a partner.
- And so he said, "I wasn't going to take that." The number two Japanese guy, by the name of Joe Yasaki, number two in his class? He ended up in the attorney general's office. Nothing wrong with the attorney general, but when you're second in the class, you usually get better.
- Castle: Right. That was the avenue open to him, you're talking about.
- Lee: Government: city attorney, D.A.'s office, public defender, attorney general. I didn't want any of that.

Castle: Hard work, little pay.

Lee: Well, also it's if I were going to practice, I'd want to do corporate, large real estate deals, things like that. That's what I saw myself [doing].

Castle: Because that's what you got excited about?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Okay. Okay. I just asked the question in wondering about whether a lot of it was name recognition about [cross-talk; unintelligible].

Lee: Well, I think they would have to tell. In those days—, “I’ve got a guy here who went to Harvard. He’s [of] Chinese ancestry. Why don’t you give him an interview?”

Castle: How about we take a break?

[End File 4] [Begin File 5]

Castle: That's my question. When I look at—you never know whether—you know, on your résumé, International Legal Studies Fellowship. I thought, is this just one of those things that—how big of an impact did it have? And it sounds like this was quite a huge impact.

Lee: Right. I made it into a big impact event.

Castle: What we were talking about yesterday, and I'd like to kind of give it a larger framework, is this is a very transitional moment, where thus far, in a lot of efforts you put your mind to, you had worked hard, and the result was fair treatment. This was a major moment in your young career, where that same behavior ran up against—what would you say on the part of the—

Lee: Faculty?

Castle: Yes.

Lee: Is disappointment.

Castle: And how would you characterize—what do you think went on in their minds that resulted in—

Lee: Treating me so poorly?

Studying in Singapore; Meeting with the Prime Minister; Writing on Taxation Law

Castle: Yes, yes. Talk through that for me.

Lee: I had, I would say, a fairly successful career in law school in that I did reasonably well in my courses, I had a lot of friends, and I was very comfortable studying law. But I really didn't get any help from anyone. They talked about mentoring, and they said, "Who are your mentors?" I never had any. I just knew what had to be done, and I focused on getting it. For example, I knew that I had to do something with this fellowship that I received. Four, five, six people every year get it, and it had been going on for five years. I was going to make something of it. I could not have made something of it had I gone to a law school in Germany or in France or in England, where everybody else went, so I was conscious of being the first to go to Asia. I could make something, that I would study something.

I originally thought—and constitutional law is probably my weakest subject; I just don't have a good feel for it. But I thought that that's what I would study when I first got to the University of Singapore because that's what anybody else would have done. And then I met the prime minister of Singapore at that time. What's his name? The first prime minister of Singapore—David Marshall. I met David Marshall at a cocktail party, and he asked me what I was going to write about, and he suggested that I write about the constitutionality of some of Singapore's detention laws. He said that he'd be very happy to help me if I wanted to make that a project.

Castle: This is the prime minister.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Asked you to explore this. That seems a bit unusual, doesn't it?

Lee: Yes, yes, but I was probably the only foreign student—the law school was a brand-new law school, so I was the first foreign student and the only graduate law student in the whole place, and the party that I was at was—everyone there, anyone there probably enjoyed some status. I can't remember what it was, but enjoyed some status to be there. I met the prime minister.

Castle: That's what I was going to say, is it's quite prestigious that—it's no small measure.

Lee: At that time, I was married to someone who came from a very prominent Singapore family, which may have also explained why the liberal faculty was so hostile.

Castle: Mmm.

Lee: I think that was a possibility, too. I mean, these are just the facts of life. But anyway, I said, "That sounds interesting," and when other people asked me, "What are you going to write on, Ted? Have you figured it out yet?", I brought up with David Marshall had said to me. And everyone said, "Why that? How did you happen to select that topic?" And I said, "David Marshall suggested it." And uni-

formly they said, “Ted, you’re being used. Stay away from that area. You’re going to get”—well, first, at that time, he wasn’t the prime minister; he was the first prime minister, but at the time that I met him, he had stepped down, and he later became Singapore’s ambassador to France, and the idea, people said, was to get him out of town, so they made him an ambassador. [Laughs.]

Anyway, when that happened, I thought—and what I do well in is subjects such as income tax. I can read something in income tax and just remember it. And so I said that I would maybe look at income tax, which would be a non-controversial subject. And then the dean of the school asked me—he was writing a book, a summary of the laws of Singapore, and one chapter was taxation. He had gotten the leading tax man in Singapore, a man named Graham Hill, to agree to write it, but there was one month to publication and he still hadn’t done it. He had been working on it for a year and hadn’t done it, so he said, “Ted, I’ve got to find somebody else. Would you do it?” I said, “Man, I don’t know anything. I’ve got to learn it all, and how much time do you have?” He said, “One month.” I said, “There’s no way. There’s no way that I can do it in one month.” “Would you try?” And he just said, “Would you try? Please try because I’ve got to have some material to publish.”

So I went to see Graham Hill, and he and I became good friends, and I said, “The dean has asked me to do this, but I don’t know—I mean, I’d have to learn everything. Would you help me? If I do it, would you help me?” And he said, “Absolutely. To tell you the truth, I haven’t done it. I feel terrible. I’m not sure whether I haven’t had the time”—I remember this. I’m not sure whether [he said] “I haven’t had the time” or “I can’t do it. But if you’re willing to step in and do it, I’d be grateful.” So that’s what I did.

I never wrote a paper through high school, and in college everyone told me that I didn’t know how to write. I think I indicated that—

Castle: Yes.

Lee: So I have always been apprehensive about my writing ability. So anyway, what I did was every day, I started at eight o’clock in the morning, and I worked—I had breakfast, and then I worked till eight o’clock at night, nonstop, not even for meals. I did it for thirty days, and I wrote it. When I turned it in—it was my first draft. I wrote three pages a day for thirty days, working twelve hours a day straight for thirty days, and when I finally got it done, I rushed it over to the dean, and he called me up and said, “Come on over.” He said, “That’s fine.” I said, “You understand this is my first draft. Don’t you want me to make some changes?” He said, “No, you don’t have to change anything. This is fine.” You can’t imagine what it did for my confidence. First, I can write well, and then I was able to submit my first draft for publication, and the guy accepted it. What that did to my self-confidence in writing—I don’t write well, but I write clearly.

Castle: And that’s what you want if you’re going to be writing about income tax.

- Lee: Yes. Yes.
- Castle: And the fact that you could pull that off, that's every academic's dream.
- Lee: Well, I mean, that's the high point in my life because of what it did for my self-confidence, because as a lawyer you've got to write a lot. After that, I didn't work on my writing. I know my weaknesses; I just focus on being clear. Be clear. And don't use any unnecessary words or language.
- Castle: And that's an academic's worst nightmare [laughs], because that's what they do all the time. As a lawyer, that's—
- Lee: I learned this, writing this chapter. First, I was pressed for time, so therefore you want to use as few words as possible. And as I studied and I remembered, you want to boil everything down for simplicity, and I did it partly because of circumstances and it was an area I knew nothing about. I understand income tax, but I knew nothing about the English system, which I had to learn.
- Castle: So during that time, you were making the absolute most of this fellowship.
- Lee: Exactly.
- Castle: And you had done it with your own your own empowerment.
- Lee: When I was ready to leave Singapore, I had a couple of very prominent law firms in Singapore ask me if I would stay and work for them on tax work, because at that point I knew more than anybody in Singapore. Nothing had been published, okay?
- Castle: Right.
- Lee: And in many places, income tax is not a legal subject, it's an accounting subject.
- Castle: I see. I see. So what was your response to them? How did that feel to be offered the positions?
- Lee: Oh, I didn't want to live in Malaysia. I didn't want to live in Singapore.
- Castle: That was easy enough.
- Lee: That was easy.
- Castle: One of the things that you mentioned in the process of this story has been about the kind of self-styled liberalism of the faculty, and you pointed out something that certainly could have been a factor in the family you were married into might have been seen politically in a certain way. How were your own politics shaped or shaping at that time? How would you describe yourself?

- Lee: I would describe myself as liberal. I can't remember when I registered, but early in my career I was a registered Democrat. It wasn't until many years later, like—when I wanted to be regional administrator of HUD [Housing and Urban Development], I applied for the job to a Republican administration, and one of the reasons I didn't get the job is because I was a Democrat. And I think that in those days, if you were a minority, the Democratic Party had the reputation of being more sympathetic to problems of racial minorities, and that would have to appeal to me. I didn't get on a soap box and complain about things, but if someone or some party believes in the same thing that I believe, then they're deserving of support. I suppose the experience of how liberals do things—I'm thinking of the fellowship that I got—you know, it could have been very easy not to accept that fellowship because it really didn't amount to much. I just made it into something. Cruz Reynoso and I—we talked. We got by far the least amount of money of anyone who had ever received that fellowship, because it wasn't a set amount.
- Castle: Right, right. How would you describe how liberals can act in situations?
- Lee: I think at that time I began to feel the liberals wanted to do things for you, but *they* wanted to do it. They would not help me do it.
- Castle: That's quite paternalistic.
- Lee: I hadn't thought about—that was in the back of my mind, but I've never articulated or said to anyone what I've just said to you. It's always been back in my mind; it's just come out.
- Castle: Your very experience kind of gets at what is one of the major internal problems with white liberal behavior, which is the paternalistic notion of to do good for, but the idea here was could you be supported in what you did if you were taking the initiative if it went against their very set political core. And that, I guess, also ends up being a bitter irony when liberalism that promotes certain sets of freedoms or desires—it ends up being quite—it's quite hypocritical when, then, that same kind of desire is held back.
- Lee: And also I, on a lot of important issues, such as busing, I'm against busing, always have been against busing, and when it was first proposed, I thought it was the dumbest idea possible, and I'll be doggoned, they kept growing.
- Castle: Why did you think it was such a bad idea?
- Lee: Because I think that it is not necessary to—first, the tradeoff of riding a bus for an hour a day as opposed to spending an extra hour a day studying—the tradeoff—clearly you're better off studying an extra hour. All right. And I don't believe that you have to go to school with whites, though I always have, to get an equal education, and I don't think that it affects your self-image. It doesn't. I believe that I could take a black high school and motivate them, and they would not feel inferior, discriminated against, whatever it is, because it's easier to teach a homoge-

neous group, I think, than a heterogeneous group. If you had a bunch of Chinese immigrants, they have common learning problems, common weaknesses that you don't have when you have a heterogeneous group. And so we're spending all these resources for heterogeneity that I think doesn't translate to better education. I've always felt that way. So when you see people fighting for that one, I think that's ridiculous. Then you slowly began to move towards being a Republican rather than a Democrat. But busing is an issue that I have strong feelings about.

Castle: So part of it is also—when you're talking about the homogeneous group, using Chinese immigrants as an example, you've got—the cultural sameness is a comfort level. I mean, they share, like you say, similar learning problems. Would you spend more time with an integrated group, working across differences?

Lee: That's right.

Castle: Rather than focusing on the problem that they have.

Lee: Common problem that they all—that's right. In fact, if you did it for efficiency, you would go out and break your classes into homogeneous elements. I think it's logical in what you'd normally do. Instead, we go just the opposite.

Castle: Right. Why do you think that is? What do you think is the issue pushing that?

Lee: Well-meaning people believing that it is necessary for non-whites to mingle with whites.

Castle: Out of guilt?

Lee: Partly out of guilt, yes.

Castle: So in the vision that you're putting forward in terms of being efficient, being pragmatic, believing in the inherent abilities of any peoples, regardless of how they're understood racially or culturally, how then does one think about the structural inequity of power? Does that come into play? That's the only element, I think—because I think there's a great argument to what you're putting forth, because now we're resegregating housing and schooling.

Lee: And academies.

Castle: Exactly. But the same problem exists throughout, which is, even with busing, you're not really shifting the structural power differences about who still really controls a lot of elements. What would you say?

Lee: Actually, when you have homogeneous—I think the minority community has more power. Not less, more. When you go to heterogeneity, then it is certain people that get the power, the people who bring about the homogeneity, but the homogeneous elements—they've just given up their power.

Castle: Right. So many people talk about the power that was in inherent, for example, in segregation for black communities. They still had a wholeness to the communities. They just didn't have the same problems now, because they could at least control the communities, although there was still a big power structure difference. That's a very good point, though. A couple of individuals, then, will go out and play a part. Are there any other issues like busing that you've always felt strongly about or that come to mind right now?

Lee: Not right now, but there must have been.

Castle: Well, as we go through—

Lee: The issues, yes.

Castle: —I'm sure we'll tap on them. One of the things that's interesting to me—so, then, after Singapore, tell me what happened next in terms of—you kind of go from—where you go to Singapore, and then you end up in Hawaii sometime soon.

Lee: What happened: When I left Singapore, I was newly divorced.

Castle: You got divorced in Singapore?

Lee: Yes, I was in Singapore, and she was in San Francisco.

Getting Appointed to the Law Faculty, National University of Singapore

Castle: She stayed in San Francisco?

Lee: She stayed in San Francisco. She didn't believe that what I was doing was the right way to be. She didn't value my need to accomplish something for my own self-satisfaction. We always had to make a living, but in addition, one has to have the satisfaction of feeling that what you're doing is important, is satisfying. She thought in terms of only: Can you support yourself, and how do you support yourself and get by.

But anyway, so I was newly divorced, and the divorce came, actually, just about the time that I was completing my article on taxation, because after he accepted my chapter on taxation, he offered me a position on the faculty. I couldn't believe it, that he would do that for me. I was getting a divorce, so I said, "Please don't feel sorry for me," because that's the first thing I thought about. [Laughter.] I was flat broke. I cashed in my round-trip ticket. I don't know how the heck—but I was told that if you're an American citizen and you're stuck somewhere, you go down to the local embassy, to the American embassy, and they will advance money for you to go home. I had never heard of that. So I cash in my round-trip ticket, thinking, if worse comes to worse, I'll go down to the American embassy and get some money.

Well, when I turned it in, he asked me if I'd be willing to join the faculty for a year. Well, I was newly divorced, and the first thing I say to the guy is, "Don't feel sorry for me. I'm okay." He says, "I don't feel sorry. What are you talking about? I don't feel sorry for you." But I couldn't believe that I didn't have to re-write the paper. I couldn't believe that I was offered a position as a junior faculty member. But because of my circumstances, I accepted, and I stayed in Singapore an extra eight, nine months, and I was on the faculty, and I taught four courses. I should have only taught two, because there was just no way that I could keep up with all four. Remember, I had to learn this stuff.

Castle: Yes, that's always the rule: You're trying to stay a step ahead of the students.

Lee: Yes, but I did. I was honest. There was one course in estate planning that there was just no way that I had time to review and learn the material, just no way, and so I told the students that. I said, "There's no way I'm going to do it, but I'll help you as much as I can learn this, and we'll start out by reviewing all the amendments in the last twenty years to the English estate taxation ordinance, because that's where the loopholes are. These are all efforts to close loopholes, and once you know what all the loopholes are, you have an understanding of what you have to know about estate planning." And also in Singapore there's a very good chance that they haven't closed the loopholes.

Castle: Aaah!

Lee: Because those laws came out of the—they have a colony in their justice department. I don't know what it was. They have a section dealing with laws of the colony. They had a model colony code. I learned all this stuff while I was there. But they may find a loophole; they'll amend it in England, in London, for England, but that amendment will not carry over to the colonial, so you go and you study what they did in London and compare that with what you have in Singapore, and that's a loophole.

Castle: So you're really teaching them how to undermine the Empire.

Lee: [Laughs.] Well, that's how I taught that because I didn't know any more than that. But I knew enough about estate tax—I mean, I studied American estate tax, and I knew that, but I just knew it had to be the same

Castle: Did you get a sense of how that worked for the students?

Lee: They understood I wasn't giving them a bunch of baloney. There was just no way—this was the first graduating class. Oh, I was also appointed the internal examiner, which was, again, a very great honor. That meant that I read the final exams—they have a comprehensive exam for a Ph.D. or an M.A. They have that for the study of laws in undergraduate subject matter, under the English system. I can't remember—what was I—

Castle: Your appointment as the internal—

Lee: Oh, yes. I was the internal examiner, and then prominent—this was the first graduating class of the University of Singapore. They got a prominent Australian and a prominent Englishmen to be the external examiner, and so I got to know them. Here again, came a lot of status. And then I failed one guy, but what he submitted—there was no way I could pass him. I wanted to pass him, but there's no way I could, and so I failed him, and that means he didn't graduate. But the dean asked me would I consider—"I'm not telling you what to do, Ted, but would you consider reexamining him?" Because he passed everything else. "Reexamining him on tax?" I said, "Sure, but he's got to do a lot better." And he passed.

About ten or fifteen years later, I'm in Kuala Lumpur, and some local people said, "We want to introduce you to this young attorney. He's prominent and a real go-getter," and I said, "Sure." And so they call him up for lunch at the [Royal] Selangor Golf Club, and in comes this guy, driving an Alfa Romeo, a young attorney driving an Alfa Romeo, and would you believe it, it's the same guy! And he's supposed to be one of the most successful lawyers in Kuala Lumpur. And I didn't have to say anything. He said to me right off, "My success is based not on knowing the law but knowing who the best attorneys are for the various kinds of problems, and I always make sure that my clients have the best legal representation available." He doesn't try to pass them off as being—and it worked for him.

Castle: Yes, yes. And also you never know what your beginnings are. I mean, people think that you often have to build a career based on nothing but successes, brilliant successes, but you learn a lot from your near failures at the same time. The testament is whether you overcome them and then move on, because what people don't realize in the English system, which is in place in Singapore, is you really can go through three years of school and fail, and that's what this person was looking at. And the internal examiner is a very prestigious position. Even though now, as you describe it, it may not sound as huge as the rest of what your résumé has become, you struggle because you believe in it, to go to Singapore when you got no help to do so.

Lee: Very trivial help.

Castle: Your partnership, your marriage is on the rocks from the beginning in terms of this element of life difference and viewpoint.

Lee: That's right.

Castle: Right? You go over, and you get this monumental test and opportunity, but it was a test to attack the very thing that was your major weakness, and then you triumph, gloriously triumph. And that's why—you know, you're trying to express for the camera how important it is, because I think we often forget to stop and go, "Yay!"—because that is such a huge—I mean, would you say that that's a fair—I mean, how does that fit with—you know.

Lee: It did wonders for my confidence. All the things I was apprehensive—my weaknesses—because we’re all aware of our weaknesses. It wasn’t as big a weakness now. It wasn’t something sitting in the back of my mind, causing fear and apprehension.

Castle: You knew how to manage it now.

Lee: Yes, that’s right. And I was forced into it. I was forced into it, but when he really insisted that I try, the guy did me a favor, [unintelligible].

Castle: Because you could have—it’s that “try” word. Before, it’s when he was asking you, but “Can you try?”, because everybody can try.

Lee: I couldn’t turn him down, exactly. “Would you try? And if you don’t get it done, I understand, but would you please try?” So when I turned it in within the thirty days—in fact, it was the thirtieth day. I was very elated.

You asked me what I then did. I saved enough money so I was able to buy a ticket home, but I did it by being very, very frugal. One of the guys who helped me a lot was a man named Lalith Athulathmudali. He’s a Ceylonese—now know as Sri Lanka. He was a Sri Lankan who ran for prime minister of Sri Lanka and was assassinated. But anyway, we were very good friends, and he put me up in his apartment for two or three months so I could save some money.

Going to Hong Kong; Applying for Jobs in Hawaii

From there, I headed back. I went to Hong Kong, and a friend of mine put me up—not with himself but with a good friend—for six months, because I was coming out of the divorce, didn’t have a job, I didn’t know what I was going to do, and he’s one of my closest friends today, but that was a friend in need.

Castle: What’s his name?

Lee: Jerry Lee. I was there six months. He took me out every...single...night. He was a prominent person in Hong Kong. And then what happened was, after about six months he offered me a job dealing in commodities for him. And then another friend offered me a job of being the Minolta distributor for Hong Kong. I asked them, “Why are you offering me this?”, in both cases. “First, we’d like to have you, and we figured that you’ve been here long enough to do the job.” That hit me. And I said, “I can’t spend the rest of my life like I’ve been living the last six months, going out every night and what have you.” So I immediately decided to leave Hong Kong, like, the next day. Once I realized what I had been doing, which was nothing but having a good time, once I realized that, I left, like, the next day. I’ll never forget this: I cancelled a date with someone that I had been wanting to date for a long time, but we never had time; she was always busy or I was always busy, and I finally have a date, but it was, like, two days from now, and I left the next day, so I called her up and I said, “I’m leaving town. I got to go

home. This is ridiculous for me to just”—but that is, I think, really focused, when you call off a date with someone you really wanted a date with.

So I then went and stopped in Hawaii. I had stopped in Hawaii going over to Singapore, and learned that the opportunities were very good for an Asian to get a job. At that time, there was only one Asian member of a white law firm, only one. I showed up, and every firm in Honolulu offered me a job. What a change! But in each case, I would have been the first for that firm. And I said, “Let me think about it.” And so I went back to California to think about it, and interviewed for a job, and nothing had changed in California. Nothing. There was one law firm that turned me down that a year or two later—they went to get attorneys’ fees for a trust, and it was a large amount of money, and I went and fought it, said that they were being overpaid, [that] the amount of fees was unreasonable. The judge asked the attorney for the other side to explain how they could run up so much in attorneys’ fees, and the lawyers on the other side said, “When you’re going up against Ted Lee, you take nothing for granted.” [Laughs.]

I still remember that. And these are the same guys that turned me down when I asked them for a job. Anyway, so I faced the same thing back in California as I faced when I finished law school, and that would be, like, two years earlier. So I decided to go back to Hawaii because that was the only place where I had a job. There were about six law firms. I went back to the six law firms to tell them yes or no and to discuss the possibility of employment. I turned down one law firm because they told me that they could offer me a job now that Castle and Cooke had approved me, and I said, “What do you mean, approved me?” He said, “We had promised them that any Asian that we hired would meet with their approval.” “Well,” I said, “thank you very much,” and I turned them down because I didn’t want to work in a law firm where the client had final say on which Asian attorneys would be hired.

Castle: Who was Castle and Cooke?

Lee: It was Alexander Baldwin and not Castle and Cooke. The firm was the Tavares firm. There were various reasons that—but anyway, I finally decided that I’d work for Tom Rice at Moore, Torkildson and Rice. And then he said, “First, Ted, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, you have to understand that if you join us, don’t ever expect us to sponsor you into the Pacific Club.” I said, “What?” I mean, I hadn’t even thought of that. All I wanted was a job. But I then felt, Wait a minute. There’s going to be one type of lawyer who gets sponsored to the Pacific Club and another type of lawyer in the same firm that doesn’t. Then they also asked me, “Have you interviewed at Fong, Miho, and Robinson?” I said, “No, I haven’t. Should I?” And then said, “We don’t want you to join us and six months later you leave us to go work for Fong Miho.” I said, “Why do you have that fear?” And he said, “Because you’re just the kind of guy that they’re going to want.”

Castle: Well, that’s going to send you to them, isn’t it?

- Lee: So they said, “We want you to interview so that you know what you’re passing up.” So I did. Well, I had interviewed them going over to Singapore, and I met the senior Japanese partner, who, when he learned that I was not from Hawaii and that I was from California, said, “We don’t hire people from out of state.” And I said, how provincial, so I never went back. I went back this time, and I spoke to the former attorney general of the state, a Korean guy who was married to a Caucasian, what they call *haole*. And he said, “Ted, you’ve got to join us. You will work only for me,” [unintelligible]. So I thought about it. With him, I didn’t have to worry about whether I’d get sponsored in the Pacific Club. So I accepted. Then I went back and told Tom Rice that I’d accepted, and then he said, “Ted, I only sent you over to be interviewed because I didn’t want to lose you. I did not expect you to take a job offer.” I said, “Well, Tom”—anyway, I explained to him that his comment, “Don’t ever expect me to sponsor you to the Pacific Club” was a turn-off.
- Castle: Yes. Did you tell him that?
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: I mean, he was saying that to you explicitly because he didn’t—I mean, it was a racially based comment.
- Lee: Of course. Because of what had happened, with Alexander Baldwin having to approve me, all that, when those things happened, I thought I’d want to work for an Asian firm rather than a white firm. Of course, it’s all changed now, but in those days, as I said, I would have been the first.
- Castle: Right. So you had opportunity in Hawaii that you didn’t possibly have—you didn’t have any opportunity in California.
- Lee: Exactly.
- Castle: But it still came with—I mean, you had to work through a number of hurdles to get to a place where there weren’t all these provisions or restrictions.

Boycotting the Pacific Club

- Lee: Yes. But you know what happened? I had been in Hawaii only about a year, and I was asked, and accepted a position on nonprofit boards. I mean, it was absolutely amazing. I was on the board—in just a little over a year, very quickly—I was on the board of Child and Family Service, Honolulu Theater for Youth, the Chinese Cultural Foundation. There was one more. And what had happened was I had objected to the state bar meeting at the Pacific Club. Because Tom Rice had brought up the Pacific Club, I was now sensitive to the Pacific Club. That’s where the bar meetings were held. If I wanted to attend a bar meeting, I’d have to go to the Pacific Club. If I’m not welcome as a member, I don’t want to go to the Pacific Club.

So I single-handedly changed that. But people didn't get mad. I expected people to get mad at me, you know, *haole* people to get mad at me. There was one guy, an ophthalmologist, Holmes. I had drafted a contract for the East-West Center, and there was some ambiguity, and someone said, "Call Ted Lee. He drafted it." And Holmes said, "We don't call Ted Lee for anything." [Chuckles.] And that's because—well—at first, people did not get angry at me the same way that when I was in law school my classmates did not get angry at me when I brought up the unfairness of discrimination. Child and Family Service, which was a very prestigious board, cancelled all their meetings and the dinners at the Pacific Club because if I would accept a position as a trustee, they would eliminate Pacific Club as the venue. Now, that's very nice. First I got the bar association not to do it, the Child and Family Service not to do it. Every organization—

Castle: Did you pick up the phone? How did you go about doing this? Was it similar to how you built the fraternity?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: You called people who you knew—

Lee: I called up the president of the junior bar, who is also a friend of mine, and I said, "I want you to call off the meeting at Pacific Club." I told him why.

Castle: Why, did you say?

Lee: Oh, because they discriminate. They have no Asian members. Why do I have to go there as a guest but not as a member? And he said, "Ted, wait till I step down as president. Please don't do it on my watch." The president at that time was a young man named Vernon Char. I said, "Because if you don't, I'm going to make it a public issue, and you know that it'll get around." So he said, "Ted, you're forcing me to do this." I said, "Yes, I am forcing you." And he did it. Then I left private practice to go over to the University of Hawaii to help start what is known as the East-West Center. I don't know if you've heard of it.

When I got there, I learned that the Friends of the East-West Center was having a party for the East-West Center students of all places, the Pacific Club. Well, when I heard about it, I said, "That is an inappropriate place to have their annual party," and I went and talked to everybody in a position of power at the East-West Center, and nobody wanted to do anything because the Friends of the East-West Center is the volunteer group, which I formed, by the way. I was the attorney that formed it, and in the bylaws somebody found some ambiguity. And so I then got angry, and I went to see the president of the university. I said, "I'm trying to get the party removed from Pacific Club, and I'm unable to do it, and I want to tell you"—Tom Hamilton—"I want to tell you, Dr. Hamilton, that it is wrong, and I'm going to make it an issue unless you can head it off." Well, he headed it off. He said, "You're absolutely right, Ted. I will order that the annual dinner will not be held at Pacific Club." Finally.

They then said, “Ted, we’re canceling.” And I said, “No, you’re not canceling. I’ll put it on.” And I had no venue. I didn’t know how I was going to do it, but I wasn’t going to have it cancelled, so I had it held in the East-West Center cafeteria. No glamour, nothing, but it was a place that I was prepared—so I put on the annual dinner that year in the cafeteria of the East-West Center. And I asked a friend to hula dance. We had to provide entertainment, right?

Castle: Right.

Lee: And I got her to hula there.

Castle: She was a white woman?

Lee: Part Hawaiian.

Castle: And how was the dinner?

Lee: It was received well. Nothing fancy. It was just cafeteria food. Well, after that, Pacific Club changed its rule. They went out, and they made an offer of membership to a number of Asians. Everyone—not everyone—if they [had] really wanted to be smart about it, they would have offered me membership, because I’m the one that was causing this—

Castle: Yes.

Lee: If I were in their position, that’s what I would have done. I’d have said, “Okay, Ted, you’re absolutely right. Why don’t you join?” They offered it to a number of people, always excluding me. For the rest of the time I was in Hawaii, no one ever came and offered me membership. Later on, people said, “Ted, you really ought to join because those days are over.” But I have no use for the club and never use it.

The East-West Center, University of Hawaii

Castle: What made you decide to work for East-West Center?

Lee: Things were going extremely well at my law firm.

Castle: For you?

Lee: For me. The law firm was doing well; I was doing well, and I enjoyed a lot of success in some of the cases that I was handling. And I woke up one morning and said to myself, is that all there is to life? Everything that I wanted, I had really attained now. Is this all there is? I went into a depression. Actually, I had two depressions: one was [when I was] a freshman at Harvard, and the other in my second year practicing law in Hawaii. I still worked, but I was very unhappy. Here

again, is this all there is to life? There's a certain fatalism about it, so I got depressed. I thought of death all the time.

And then one of the clients of the firm was the East-West Center. The chancellor came in and wanted some work done. He asked me when I could do it. I said, "When do you want it?" He said, "The last person I asked, it was six months ago and it's still not done." "So you want it done right away?" He said, "Yes." I said, "I'll have it done by tomorrow." "No, no, no, you can't have [it done by tomorrow]. Be realistic. You can't get it done that fast." "Well, I can," because I had done a similar project, like, two weeks earlier, so I knew exactly what had to be done.

I got it done the next day, gave it to him, and he said, "We need someone like you at the East-West Center." So he talked to my law firm, and they weren't very happy, but they had to say they could. He offered me a job, a very good job. It paid a lot more. It paid almost double what I was earning.

Castle: Really?

Lee: Lawyers in those days weren't paid much.

Castle: Oh, okay.

Lee: A month's vacation every year. Previously it was a week or two. I negotiated travel to Southeast Asia once a year, and I was in charge of all cultural programs, which is fun. It's a fun job. So I took it. Did it for two years, and recognized that I'm not the academic type. I taught business law as well at the business school at UH. And then—you know.

Castle: Let's stop.

[End File 5. Begin File 6.]

Discrimination in Social Clubs

Lee: You're familiar with the English system.

Castle: Yes.

Lee: Because I was aware that it was a big honor.

Castle: The issues around being discriminated against or not allowed into these different clubs based on race—could you talk to me about a few of those experiences? You were recapping an earlier one for me, if you could share that with me.

Lee: Sure. We had that situation that took place while I was in law school with the legal fraternity, so I'm sensitive to those kinds of issues. When I got to Singapore, I

heard about the Tanglin Club and that you had to be white to be a member, which struck me as strange, with Lee Kuan Yew coming to power in Singapore and independence, no longer a colony, that these kinds of behavior would continue. And so I made up my mind that I was going to do something about it, and I knew a lot of lawyers, and so I went to lawyers, and I said, "I want you to help me in the Tanglin Club." I still remember most of my sponsors: Barrington Baker, John Lloyd, Graham Hill. They said that they would sign it, but I could not expect them to work on it. I said, "That's all I want you to do."

But you had to have six members support your application. One of them is your sponsor; the other five are—you have to have the names. I don't know what they were called. I saved the most important person, the sponsor, for an Englishman that I knew who loved to date Chinese women. When I went to see him, he said, "Ted, you'll never be able to get the six." I said, "Hugh, I've already got five. You're the sixth." And he said, "There's no way you're going to get in." "Let that be *my* problem. I simply want you to sign this." And he said—he did. "But, Ted, you're not going to get in." Well, he signed it, and eventually I got in because cooler heads at the club—

Castle: Right.

Lee: So I became the first non-white member of the Tanglin Club, and this was in 1960, which makes me probably the oldest member today, in the world.

Oh. Hugh, who—

Castle: What happened after you joined?

Lee: After I joined, he quit. And when I heard that, I called him up and said, "Hugh, I understand you quit over my membership." He said, "Ted, I wasn't using the club anyway." So I said, "That's fine." And then, like, a couple of months later, I get a call from a Singapore Airlines stewardess, saying, "Ted, do you know Hugh"—and I can't remember his last name. But he was a sales manager for one of the oil companies in Singapore—you know, prominent businessman. And she said, "Is it true that he got you into the Tanglin Club?" I said, "Yes, that is true. But did they also tell you that he resigned when I got in?" [Laughs.] But he was using it to court Asian women.

Castle: It's an interesting contrast between Asian acceptance—you know, this struggle against the power, but yet he—it's okay with women. You know, he's interested. He's very comfortable. He likes, or desires, women. But men are a threat. I mean, your participation in the club, and he disappears.

Lee: When I said he had to sign it, he had to sponsor it, he recognized that he had to.

Castle: Yes. And I wonder if a lot of other people—This is how you have to court acceptance into a club. It's very personal—you know, when people are often fighting

issues of discrimination, it's not as personal as calling up the person who might be sponsoring or blocking you and saying, "Let me in." What was that like, making those calls? Was that difficult to do?

Lee: It's difficult—

Castle: How did you handle it?

Lee: —when you don't know what the response is going to be, because nobody wants to get into a fight. But my experience has been that in just about every case, I've been proud of people I knew. They were supportive. They may not go to bat actively, but no one has ever turned me down when I asked for support for something which may be indicative of discrimination. When I was taking on the Tanglin Club and when I discussed the matter with Run Run Shaw, who was a very prominent businessman, [I] asked, "Why do you tolerate this? You could change it all yourself." I said the same thing to Senator Hiram Fong, who passed away recently. He was a U.S. senator. "Senator, why do you put up with this? Why don't you do something about it?" In both cases, they said, "Ted, I know it's important to you, but it has no importance to me. I don't care." And I thought that that was a cop-out. When I was young, in those days, and these two gentlemen, two very distinguished gentlemen said, "It doesn't matter. I don't care," I didn't believe them, okay?

Castle: Yes.

Lee: Then, when I left Hawaii to come back to California, there was a lot of social discrimination in San Francisco and California, okay? I did absolutely nothing. I didn't challenge anybody at all, because "I don't care." And when I found that I was feeling the same way as these two other gentlemen—and I'm not copping out, but at some point you realize it's really not that important.

Castle: Right. At what point had you come to that? Was that long after?

Lee: No, when I came back to California. Remember, when I came back to California, I had enjoyed a reasonable amount of success in the things that I have done, so I had a lot of confidence when I came back to California to study business, got out and was starting my own business. Being a member of any club made absolutely no difference. And also, I understand these things a lot better.

Castle: So in all, you only worked for about a year at the first law firm?

Lee: A year and a half.

Castle: A year and a half, and then you were at the East-West Center—

Lee: Two years.

- Castle: And you said you had learned from that experience that the academic side of things wasn't your area of interest.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: What were the factors? What about it turned you off?
- Lee: I was in charge of cultural programs for the East-West Center, so I got into a dispute with the chairman of the Drama Department of the University of Hawaii, on who would control the key to the theater. It was a big thing. I was entitled to the key to the theater because it was an East-West Center building; it was not a University of Hawaii building. It was an East-West Center building built with federal funds, okay?
- Castle: Okay.
- Lee: I was the guy appointed by the East-West Center to be in charge. I should get the key. But I wasn't going to fight over a key. "If you want to run the theater, go ahead and run it,"
- One of the reasons I went back to business school when I was at the East-West Center, the East-West Center had senior scholars from Asia and the United States come and study whatever they were studying. A visiting professor from Indiana asked me to read his paper. I picked it up, and I couldn't understand it because everything was expressed in quantitative terms, with graphs and very mathematical, and this was a social science paper. Wow! I had never seen social science expressed in quantitative terms, but that's what people did. So I remember saying, obsolete, and I think it was—whatever it is. It's either twenty-eight or thirty-two. I can't remember. I said to myself, obsolete. My God! I'm fairly young, and things have moved so quickly, I can't even read this paper. And so I knew I had to do something about that, and that was one of the reasons I went back to school, and I studied organization theory, math for the social scientist, quantitative things. And Berkeley is very quantitative.

Going to Brazil—Agency for International Development

- Castle: I see. And that's the transition here, the question I had. The two things before, kind of talking about your business degree, is there is a listing on the résumé about your year going to Brazil, the Agency for International Development, World Industrial Technical Assistance—this sounds very humanitarian. What brought you to Brazil? What did you do while you were there?
- Lee: First, I was a student at Berkeley at the business school, but I was already a lawyer. This project was looking for a finance lawyer type person, and so I had the opportunity to live and work in Brazil. It was only four months, but it was a wonderful experience for me. That is a picture from it

- Castle: Oh, okay, because I wondered where it said the airport was—oh, look at you! Okay.
- Lee: What I learned from that—in everything I have done—I have an idealistic streak in me that likes to help the poor and help the underprivileged, and an opportunity to work on an Alliance for Progress project in northeast Brazil was attractive, so I did it.
- Castle: And you were able to use your skills.
- Lee: Yes, but I didn't really accomplish that much except what I learned was when you go into a foreign country, you have to rely on the locals to provide advice on what can be done and what can't be done. What I learned in most cases is you can't trust them. We hired a Brazilian lawyer to advise us. I think we wanted to build a cement factory in Maceió, Alagoas, northeast Brazil. I thought it should be done a certain way, and they said under Brazilian law, that was impossible. They said other things. It just did not make sense, what they were telling me. And so I said, "What do you do? If you can't trust your lawyer, what do you do?" So when it was over, I flew down to Rio de Janeiro, saw an American lawyer. There were no American lawyers in Maceió. I saw an American lawyer, and he confirmed that all the things that I wanted to do and I thought should be done—
- Castle: Could have been done.
- Lee: —could have been done—
- Castle: What do you think—what was the motive of the local—
- Lee: He was fronting for somebody to take over, and eventually that person did take over.
- Castle: I see. I see.
- Lee: But it was set up by the attorney, our attorney. In fact, that experience got me out of the international field. That experience taught me that I could do more helping people in the United States, urban renewal, than trying to save the Brazilians, the Singaporeans. They can best handle their own problems. And so I pulled away from trying to help foreigners.

Returning to Berkeley

- Castle: So tell me how you ended up leaving Hawaii and starting school at Berkeley again. You described why you felt you needed to. What was the process that got you from Hawaii back to Berkeley, and why did you decide on Berkeley again?
- Lee: I was at East-West Center, and I felt that the way we were spending money at the East-West Center just didn't make sense. They were very unbusinesslike in the

way things were done. And then the disputes that I had at the university were ridiculous. You know, we'd fight over who has the key. And so I knew that I wanted to get out of international, and as a matter of fact, my Brazilian experience took place after I'd already decided that I should focus on American problems and not problems of the world. And everything that happened in Brazil only confirmed what I was beginning to believe, which I to this day now believe.

I didn't know what I wanted to do, and I heard about urban renewal. It made sense to rebuild our cities. That idea appealed to me. How do you do it? How do you get into it? I talked to everybody I could who knew anything about real estate, and no one knew. Remember, I was very early.

Castle: Yes.

Lee: Certain academics talked about urban renewal, but we didn't know what the problems were or anything. So I felt that the way to prepare myself for urban renewal was to learn as much about real estate and, where I had weaknesses in my training, to take care of those weaknesses. And one of the things was, like, writing—one of the things that I was concerned [about] is reading things in quantitative language, social science in quantitative language. I mean, it's like reading Greek. I just didn't understand it. I felt that I had to do something about that. I thought of two places that I might want to go: Harvard Business School and Berkeley, the two schools that I had some experience with. When I went to Harvard Business School to talk to admissions, John Fox, whose son is a friend of mine today—but John Fox was at Harvard Business School, and he said, "Ted, you don't need the Harvard Business School. You already know more than we can teach you." I was surprised. That was John Fox's advice to me.

At Harvard Business School they teach you to manage. What I needed was more educational skills and not how to be a businessman or what have you, how to hire someone, but math or something. Anyway, business skills is what I needed. Berkeley let me pick my own program, and so it was perfect for me, absolutely perfect.

Castle: So it's like going to a buffet. You got to choose the elements of strengthening that you needed for your intended goal.

\The Idea of Urban Renewal

Lee: Which I could not have done at Harvard.

Castle: I see. And so you're going into getting another degree, with a very specific idea that urban renewal is an area—

Lee: Yes.

Castle: —that you wanted to move into, because you thought that was the best way to apply your compassion—because you have a compassion about certain things.

Lee: Yes. It's an area that I thought I could have a career at. And, you know, I've never thought of making money as an objective. I've always felt you do what you want to do, you do what you enjoy doing, and the money will come. It doesn't matter whether it's a lot or not much, because I'm not working for money anyway. And I've always had that attitude. Now, I've been very successful financially, but I never—I suppose if I see a deal that has a big payoff—but I never went out saying, I want to do this because I can make money. I wanted to do this because I believe in the objective, and I think I can get it done.

Castle: That's a very important observation because I think what we're going to be exploring in the next couple of sessions is how are you different as a real estate developer and a business person going into community redevelopment and urban renewal, which—what you just mentioned was—you know, one of the things about business and business school is for those who aren't in the business world, there is this very powerful stereotype that people do business to make lots of money, period. You know, there isn't this idea that—would you say that you went to business school to learn skills—you're not saying you went because you wanted skills to learn money; you went because you needed skills to apply the things—

Lee: To apply to real estate problems, yes. And I got that at Berkeley.

Communicating with Parents During Lee's Career

Castle: You know, I wonder, throughout this time, your communication with your parents—I mean, your father was a successful entrepreneur. Did he ever say anything to you about your budding career? Any criticism or any advice, any interest?

Lee: No, never. And once I got out of college and got out of the service, I ceased writing to my mother, now that I think about it. I would see her, but I don't remember writing a letter again after the Army.

Castle: How often did you see them?

Lee: When I lived in Hawaii—I was there for three and a half years—my mother probably came over twice, and maybe I saw her—in fact, I feel very badly that my mother always complained that I didn't spend enough time with her, because I was always so busy. She said, "You really have to make time for me," and I didn't do it, so she would come over and visit with me.

Castle: But not your father?

Lee: Not my father. They had been divorced for quite a few years by that time.

Castle: That's right, that's right, that's right.

Lee: My father came back to Harvard once in my sophomore year, when we drove across the country. My mother and I drove across country. Other than that, I don't think my father ever made a trip to see me. He had twelve children, so—[Laughs.]

Relationships and Career; Having Children

Castle: A lot of kids. Where are you in your own relationships at this time? Because you have to—based on the whole ages of kids here, at some point have you met somebody else, and how is your family life or your romantic life at this point?

Lee: When I was single, I lived a very active life, social and business, and when you do something about real estate, when you go to community meetings and what have you, there's a social aspect to you. You recognize people that you know, and you chat with [them]. You have a drink together afterwards. There was at some point that I realized that if I were going to have a family, I should. It was at the same time that I was having a depression. I thought, now, if you're going to have family, now's the time to do it. I had known for a long time. We got married and had a family together.

Castle: So there's a little bit of an element of pragmatism to it.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Or a lot.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: How old were you at that point?

Lee: Thirty-two. [Laughs.]

Castle: I'm feeling the same thing. [Laughs.]

Lee: I've seen it happen with other people now. That's the age you think that way.

Castle: Yes. So who is this person that you knew and then married?

Lee: Yes. She was a Pan Am stewardess, Japanese. My mother wasn't exactly thrilled, because she had lost a brother to the Japanese. I have an uncle who was a fighter pilot and shot down by a Zero. There was a book about the Zero, which I just recently found, and there was a paragraph that describes the battle that he was killed in.

Castle: Wow. So she wasn't thrilled in terms of—why does she have to be Japanese?

Lee: But she loved the grandchildren, so that—

Finishing at Berkeley

Castle: Yes. So you're living—is this back in Berkeley?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Where were you living, San Francisco or Berkeley?

Lee: Berkeley.

Castle: Where is Berkeley did you live?

Lee: 2204 Channing Way. No, no, no, no. Yes, well, 2204 is where I lived when I went to law school, but there was a house near there. Well, there was a house in one of the short blocks, and Indians lived upstairs. I lived downstairs, and some Indian students lived—and they always cooked curry. [Laughs.]

Castle: You'll always remember that.

Lee: I'll always remember that, because those were the days that—I only learned to eat curry later. At that time, it was not appreciated.

Castle: So you have your first son—

Lee: In 1964.

Castle: Okay, 1964. And you didn't finish your degree until '66, though, right?

Lee: I didn't get it until '66.

Castle: So how long—was it two years?

Lee: See, I went from '64 to '65, and the only thing that I hadn't done was to write—maybe there was one course—it amounts to a thesis; it's not a thesis, but it's a paper, a research paper. I hadn't done that, but I wasn't going to go back to school for one course, so I went out and started my business, and I did my 299, which was the paper, on a weekend. I dictated my 299. But it was based on the work I'd been doing for the year, and so I just dictated it and turned it in.

Castle: Were you older at all than some of the other students? Were a lot of them coming straight out of undergrad—

Lee: See, I was thirty-two years old. I was probably one of the oldest students. Today there are more, but at that time, I was one of the oldest students. As a matter of fact, it happened a couple of times, when the professor couldn't answer a question

having to do with real estate—his name was Paul Wendt. Paul a couple of times said, “Let’s ask Ted. Maybe he knows.” And I did.

Castle: Right. That was what I wondered, is that—two elements: One, your experience, your life experience put you in a different position than the rest of the students.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Did it help to come back with this very specific goal in mind?

Lee: And what I did, I took a lot of courses, because I really did the whole two-year program in twelve months.

Castle: Wow.

Lee: So I always had extra courses I was taking, so I was always pressed for time. As I said, I dictated my 299. I was practicing law then, and in those days, I dictated everything. It was much faster.

Castle: Right. I mean, the element two is that you’re not there wondering about your skills as before. Would you say there was a very different way in which you approached it? Because here you’re kind of quickly attaining things you need and not worried about your confidence or ability to do them necessarily in the same way. I mean, I don’t know. Did you feel that way at all?

Lee: I felt that I wanted to learn certain things, and I was doing it, and I was right. The skills that I had acquired were important, were useful. Let me tell you what drove it home.

Castle: Okay.

Lee: I read Jane Jacobs, who described the environment of neighborhoods and how neighborhoods can be better. I don’t remember, but I know that Jane Jacobs was someone that I read carefully. [Transcriber’s note: Her 1961 book was *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.] I was in Sacramento, and I ran into one of the directors of the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency at a restaurant, and she asked me, “Are you on the program tonight?” And I said, “Yes.” She says, “Oh, good.” And I said, “Why? Is there something I don’t know?” And she said, “I just like to hear you talk because of the pictures you paint.” I learned that in business school.

Practicing Law in Business School

Castle: So you were practicing law while you were in business school? At the same time?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: What kind of cases? What were you doing at this point?

Lee: I did everything. I was supporting a family. I tried to invest or save 50 percent of whatever I earned, so you live very, very frugally, carefully. The first year I was out, I made three real estate deals, and that money I reinvested. I did not consume. The only thing I consumed was the income from my law practice, but all the real estate deals and everything, I did not consume. And I did both at the same time.

Castle: When did you first meet—who were your friends, and how did you come in contact with them, through business school or had you developed—

Lee: I had not very many, just a few close friends. I had more close friends coming out of law school. Coming out of business school, I had very few close friends. The ones that were friends, we didn't see much of each other. We were all too busy working all the time.

Castle: Right. You know what? I'm going to stop—

[End File 6. Begin File 7.]

Lee: With a local community person because—and in the case of a black community, they came to me, because I had the expertise.

Castle: Did other developers do this?

Lee: No. Well, that's not true. The two guys that are claiming credit—[Greets his wife, Doris, who announced her arrival home.] They brought the community together when I wanted meetings, so there was always a Japanese person involved, there was always a Filipino person involved, there was always a black person involved.

Castle: Right, and their counsel and their experience was sought out by you.

Lee: Yes. It wasn't counsel experience as much as image.

Castle: Oh, really?

Lee: Yes. We have to include that because I'm just thinking—and also in Japantown, I think my total fee for everything that I did was \$2,000.

Castle: Wow.

Lee: Okay? Because when we started out, I billed, and the first bill they paid, and then the second bill they said, "You're part of the community, Ted. We don't pay community volunteers." [Laughs.]

Castle: So you had become a little too involved with the community.

Evaluating Affirmative Action; Working with the Japanese Community

Lee: Yes.

Castle: You were just starting to talk about an important element that maybe we could flush out a little bit more, because we are at a point societally that we have to re-examine affirmative action. It was meant for certain historical redresses, and it was very important and it is very important, but there were problems. You're talking about your experience working in real estate and development and working with federal agencies, and you used a certain phrase that you could repeat, but could you expound a little bit more about what you would see as *your* solution? For example, in your experience, you were just starting to talk about it, but you clearly had an idea of what would work or would work certainly better in the circumstances than what was happening.

Lee: I can understand giving people who have been not allowed to participate in our economic environment—because that was my own experience. I mean, I know that I was discriminated on.. Couldn't get an interview, couldn't get a job. And maybe the government properly should be involved, but how do you do it? And I guess I'm just tight enough not to want to waste any money, that I could understand a policy whereby after the—Something can be built for a million dollars. Then why should we pay any more than a million dollars to have it built? However, if a white person has the job for a million dollars and a black person is willing to do it for the same million dollars, there are other benefits that accrue to society. I could support that. I have some problems with it, but I could support that.

But I could not support paying a non-white person one million one hundred thousand dollars to do exactly the same thing. Now, what has happened from my experience—first, I did get some benefit in Japantown because in order not to pay me, I became a member of the community. Well, members of the community could bid on land in Japantown. As a result, I built and own to this day a forty-two-unit apartment house, a 22,000-square-foot office building, and some other units in Japantown, so I got some economic benefit.

Castle: Because you were made an honorary community member.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: A Chinese person, as an honorary community member.

Lee: Well, I owned a duplex in Japantown, which made me a community member.

Castle: In terms of ownership.

Lee: In terms of ownership. If you owned land in Japantown, you didn't have to be Japanese to be a part of Nihonmachi, but if you did not own land in Japantown and you were not Japanese, no way.

Working for Ernest Hahn; the Expansion of Regional Shopping Malls

Castle: Did you ever have a feeling—and this is observing the relations during that time—that you ever received different or better treatment by whites that you worked with as an Asian over other people of color? You know, that kind of model minority stereotype? You know, trying to trace that out a little bit historically, whether the model minority of—you know, Asians work so hard, and they deal with these things, and so it's still—

Lee: All the projects that I worked on were projects that I initiated. I can't remember a single project where somebody was doing it and they came and hired me to work on it. Now, one of the reasons for that: There were other people who could do a lot of the paper processing and what have you better than I could, and I would use them myself. However, my experience in redevelopment did lead me to the best and the biggest client I ever had, which was Ernest Hahn. Ernest Hahn is a big developer, one of the biggest in the United States, and he wanted to get into building shopping centers in downtown areas, and downtown areas is where, in most cases, is urban renewal. And he couldn't find anybody with any experience in urban renewal, but he heard about me, and he came to see me, and hired me. So I did a lot of work for him for about a year, and then I just didn't have time anymore. But I was honored that ten years from when he started—and when he hired me is when he got started—he was a general contractor that became a developer.

He had a birthday party in L.A., and about thirty-five people showed up from around the country, and he told us all that “you're all invited to celebrate my birthday because when I first got started ten years ago, I was worth one million dollars, and I thought that that's all I would ever need, and I was very happy to retire, but my friends talked me out of retiring, and I became a developer instead. And now I'm worth \$125 million. And all you people in this room helped bring that about, and I want to thank each and every one of you.” And then he mentioned about three or four people that were there, and I was someone that was mentioned as flying up from San Francisco or flying down. I don't know if it's up or down.

Castle: There weren't any party gifts or anything?

Lee: [Laughs.] No. But I tell you, I learned a lot for him, doing his work.

Castle: Anything in particular?

Lee: Yes. Here was a guy—I saw what was coming. I saw that shopping centers were going to become vanilla.

Castle: What does that mean?

Lee: All the same. Before, it was fun to go shopping at a shopping center because you didn't know what kind of stores they had and who would be there, but—

- Castle: And now you go because you know what's going to be there, exactly what's going to be there.
- Lee: And in all the shopping centers, it's the same tenants. It makes it less interesting, less exciting. And I saw how it happened because Ernie Hahn could get on the telephone, talk to J.C. Penney and said, "Okay, I've got a shopping center going up at Oxnard. What do you have in Oxnard? How about it? Okay, we'll make a deal. Now, up in Seattle, I'm doing one. How many stores you got in Seattle? Could you use one on the north side?" That's two. And my gosh, look how fast he was putting together regional shopping centers. A minimum amount of effort. But what also happened is that a lot of these big tenants became like partners. A lot of times, land was sold at a very favorable price to bring them in. And it's really only a handful of people that own all the shopping centers. Did you know that? Anyway, I was in the industry at the time that this was all happening.
- Castle: So that's who we can blame? [Laughs.] As a developer, someone with that experience, what do you think—I mean, it may amass wealth for a developer quite a bit, but what do you think it does to the general American landscape to create these nodules of sameness everywhere? How do you feel about that as an individual and a developer?
- Lee: When I saw it happening, I was apprehensive, but watching it happen—you know, it's been twenty-five years, at least. And that has also led to the growth of the large number of retail tenants. The same kind of thing is being played out in the Wal-Mart dispute, and then—what?—there are a thousand Gaps. I mean, it's just mind-boggling how one company could have a thousand, two thousand—I think Starbucks [has] 5,000 units, something of that scale.
- Castle: Have you heard the Starbucks joke?
- Lee: No.
- Castle: It's like a newsflash. You know, newsflash: A new Starbucks just opened up in the bathroom of an existing Starbucks. [Laughs.]
- Lee: No, I hadn't heard that.
- Castle: [Laughs.] That's very Starbucks.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: I'm sorry. But, yes, so you were saying that with this mass number of—and it benefits the retail tenants, but—I'm just wondering about overall kind of like mass production, American cultural impacts. I don't know.
- Lee: It's kind of unavoidable, and if the public didn't like it, it should be reflected in sales, and it's not, so I don't see it changing. An observation: When I put together

Japantown, there were groups that wanted to do the same thing for the Fillmore. That would be black groups. There were Hispanic groups that wanted to do it for the Mission District. There were Filipino groups that wanted to do it somewhere else. And I'm the only one that made it.

Castle: Why do you think that is?

Lee: [Laughs.] Because it was me rather than somebody else.

Castle: [Laughs.]

Lee: Because I saw what they were doing, and I said—oh, because they were confrontational. I was not confrontational. I threatened confrontation, but I was not confrontational. When the redevelopment agency wanted something from me, I wanted something from them, and I was going to swap. The things that they wanted, I helped them achieve those goals on the condition that we do the redevelopment.

Castle: So is that where good business sense comes in?

Lee: Yes. Yes.

Castle: What makes a good business person? What are the characteristics that make for good business?

Lee: I told a class at Boalt that to be successful in redeveloping and redevelopment is to learn what the city wants to accomplish, and help the city get there, and in the process, get what you want. And Joe Sax said—after class is over, he said, “Ted, thank you very much for speaking to my class, but what you did was you just told everybody that what I teach is irrelevant.” [Laughs.]

Castle: “Thank you very much for blowing my lesson plan.”

Lee: [Laughs.]

Castle: What was it that he was teaching?

Lee: Oh, that you know your rights and what the laws are, because if you focus on what's right and what the laws are, that means you're going to fight. People may know what the laws are and still not give you what you want; they'll fight you as one, and so you're just constantly fighting and getting nowhere.

Castle: So you're really looking at—tell me again—so what you told the class was finding out what the city wants.

Lee: Yes, and make your project tie in to what the city wants.

- Castle: As a representative of the community.
- Lee: Well, at that time it was just as a developer. I had left that kind of work. I'm the developer, myself, and instead of studying what the law is, spend more time figuring what the city is trying to accomplish and make your project help the city accomplish what it wants to. That's more important than knowing what the law is.
- Castle: That goes back to being a Harvard undergrad, and even though social relations wasn't your desired major, social relations has a huge part—I mean, I don't know.
- Lee: No, no.
- Castle: You're talking about what the city wants.
- Lee: That's probably true, but probably that's just my nature.
- Castle: But I guess rather than tying it to the undergrad, it's more about the nature of what the city wants has to do with being able to read and work with the humans in the office that are kind of controlling or dictating what gets to be done, so having those conversations with them.
- Lee: It's obvious: if a city council wants to have a bridge built somewhere, if you come with a proposal to redevelop near the bridge and include the bridge as part of your project, you're just more likely to get what you want. I learned that early.

Community Development with the Black Community and Jim Montgomery

- Castle: When you worked on the development projects with the black community, how did they come about? Had you developed a reputation at that point?
- Lee: Look, the answer is yes. I had a community meeting for Japantown, and Jim Montgomery, who is a black man who had gone to Columbia College, a very smart guy—he came and listened to me speak, and I talked to him afterwards and said, “We have to work together,” and he said, “You're absolutely right. I'd like you to help me.” I said, “I'll help you. I don't see any conflict between the black community and the Japanese community because the Japanese community is only interested in these five blocks, okay? [Laughs.] You guys can have the other ten blocks.” Then I helped him a lot. I provided advice.
- Castle: Who did he represent?
- Lee: The black community.
- Castle: Where?
- Lee: Fillmore District of San Francisco.

- Castle: And was he speaking on behalf of a particular community association?
- Lee: Yes, Fillmore Community Development Association. But Martin Luther King Square and Marcus Garvey Square are the projects that I closed. He was involved in them as well.
- Castle: What years were these?
- Lee: Got to be the early seventies.
- Castle: So could you describe what was going on and how it affected you in terms of larger social and political movements at the time? Because the Bay Area was ground zero for the development of things like the Black Panther Party, other groups. How did that affect your work, or did it?
- Lee: I knew a lot of black leaders. As a matter of fact, when I went and had my own office, working out of my office was [Robert] Bob Pitts, the former head of HUD, regional administrator of HUD.
- Castle: Where was this?
- Lee: I had an office in Berkeley, in the Berkeley Marina. In fact, I built the office, and owned it. John Miller, who was the most powerful black politician in the state, moved into my offices, and it was very interesting that I represented a lot of blacks, I represented a lot of Japanese, and so [former San Francisco Mayor] Willie Brown asked John Miller, "John, does Ted have political aspirations?" And John Miller assured him—because he was a close friend of mine, his office was in my office—that I had absolutely no political aspirations. And Willie said, "Good, because then I can work with him." [Laughs heartily.]
- Castle: Funny. Did anybody ever find it unusual? Because of the larger stereotypes is about conflict between blacks and Asians. I mean, obviously there's [sic; there are] moments of specific racial conflicts in certain cities at times around that, and here you are, at quite an early point, having very successful interpersonal relationships as part of your work also.
- Lee: I'm a good friend of Emma McFarland. I'm a good friend of Yvonne Braithwaite Burke. Don't see them much, but the days when I was active—
- Castle: And how did you know her, and what was she doing?
- Lee: Emma introduced me to her. She was a congresswoman at the time, and she is now chairman of the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors, very powerful politically. I really think that I'm aware of racism, but I personally don't have any racism. I am very comfortable with any group that I'm with. I'm aware there might be a black group or Japanese group or a Filipino group and everything, but I don't change the way I am, I think. About twenty years ago, I was building this 22,000-

square-foot office building at Japantown, and you have to go to a community meeting to get the community's busing—I haven't told you this before. And so I went in. It was held at a local high school or elementary school auditorium, and the chairman called the meeting to order and said, "Now, does anyone want to speak on behalf of the public?" And some young black person, male, got up and ranted and raved that we should fight this project, not allow it because these developers are just screwing the black community and what have you.

Well, this project was not in the black community, it was in the Japanese community, but after hearing this, I got up. You know, [the chairman asked if there were] any other comments, and I got up and I said, "All of you sitting on that stage know me. Are you going to let this young man say the things that he has said and not object when you know it's all absolutely untrue?" And every member of that board—about six people—got up and said, "You can't say that to Mr. Lee. You can't say that. That's absolutely not right." I was very proud of that moment. Of course, I got approval, and I got this 22,000-square-foot building.

Castle: You had established yourself.

Lee: Yes. I was taking some risk, but I know what I've done, and these are the community leaders. They know what I've done.

Castle: So were you just one—I mean, was this a community meeting full of mostly African-Americans?

Lee: And Japanese.

Castle: And Japanese. We were just starting to talk about the leaders that you had known, the black leaders over time, and we were looking at the period of the seventies, where [sic; when] there were more radical elements, activists in place. How did you navigate amongst those? Did you find yourself dealing with the Black Panther Party on issues?

Lee: When it came to dealing with the local community—first, in every project I had somebody helping me, who was a member of that ethnic community. When it came to the black community, it was Jim Montgomery. He did all the dealings. I was more of a lawyer to Jim Montgomery than an organizer, but I had done these other projects and he hadn't.

Redeveloping the Western Addition

Castle: Right. Now, what role did you play in Western Addition A—

Lee: A-2.

Castle: What does that mean?

Lee: There was a Western Addition redevelopment, that part of the Western Addition that was going to be redeveloped, but they did it in parts. There was A-1 and then A-2. A-1 was the Japanese Trade and Cultural Center, where they gave it to the guy from Hawaii. A-2 is when Nihonmachi got Japantown and doled it out to members of the corporation.

Castle: Okay, okay, so that's that. You know, one story that we didn't finish was you were shutting down—and I'm trying to locate this. We're kind of talking generally, it seems like, between mid-sixties and mid-seventies, so we keep kind of moving back and forth, and so maybe we need to date this, but your potential appointment to regional administrator.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: You had gotten as far as closing down your offices, and your projects were being approved—

Lee: In '70.

Castle: In '70.

Lee: Yes. Then I didn't get it. I was told in January I had it, and then in the next few months it was being approved, and then I found out I wasn't getting it, I don't know, in August, September of '70.

Learning the Importance of Gaining Political Approval; Becoming Nominated for the HUD Regional Directorship

Castle: What were you told at one point regarding what you should have been doing? What happened there.

Lee: “Ted, you have got to get political approval. Don't you know about that?” I said, “No.” You have to contact everyone who has any political influence, to let them see you, meet you and let them feel that they'd be comfortable working with you, and that means talk to as many congressmen, as many senators, as many Republican leaders as possible. When they told me that—it was somewhere, let's say, around four months. I spent the next four months doing that and only that, and it was absolutely fascinating. I called on the home builders saying, “I want to make a presentation. I want you guys to meet me. I'm hoping to be the next regional administrator.” And [they said], “Oh, we'd like to meet you. Come on over.” And I sit down, and they ask me questions and shake my hand and I go home. I got to know Pete Stark on one of these deals, and he told me all the guys to look out for that will try to sabotage me. “There are people, Ted—they say they're your friends, but their not. But I'm your friend.” That's Pete Stark.

Castle: Who were some of the other politicians or people—

Lee: Oh, golly.

Castle: That stand out in your mind.

Lee: The leader of the Republican Party at that time, I can't remember—there were two brothers, and one was a lawyer. As I said, Pete Stark. They had to be Republican—you don't contact Democrats.

Castle: Right. And so how were you registered at this time?

Lee: Democrat. That's one reason I didn't get it. I made it to the finals. I went back to Washington. What had happened was I thought that—I had worked for Senator Hiram Fong as his attorney, and when this all started out, they said, "You have to have somebody, one of the senators from the eleven western states, to support your appointment." So I went to Hawaii, and I asked Senator Fong, "I [am] being considered for regional administrator, but I need somebody's strong support. Will you give it to me?" And he said, "I have to favor people from Hawaii." Even the fact that I had lived in Hawaii and I had been his lawyer, he still told me that he'd have to show preference to a Hawaiian. I said, "If there are no Hawaiians and I'm there, will you support me?" And he said, "Yes." So I then told Governor George Romney—because I knew there were no Hawaiians. I knew everybody who was running, and there were no Hawaiians, so I told him that I had Hiram's support.

Well, when I went back to Washington, Romney told me to "go see Hiram now" and have Hiram come out and support my appointment. I jumped in a cab, went over to his office, and I said, "Hiram, I'm here to get the appointment, but you've got to support me now." And he said, "No." I said, "What?" He said, "No." I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, I only support Hawaiians." I said, "But there's no Hawaiian in the finals. It's me and two other guys." It's just three of us that were in the finals. [Ronald] Reagan pushed—he was [California] governor—Reagan pushed for somebody, and Ed Meese was backing him, and then there was me that was from Romney, and then there was a third guy who used to be the mayor of Fresno. He said, "There's no way Price is going to get it." That was the guy Reagan wanted, Reagan's office wanted, not Reagan himself, but his office. And they told me, "There's no way he's going to get it,"—Price is not going to get it—"but they can stop us from appointing you." That would then go to somebody that nobody objected to but wasn't that strong.

Castle: The non-controversial candidate people go with.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Is that who they went with?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: But Senator Fong?

- Lee: I thought about that over the years, okay?
- Castle: That must have really been—
- Lee: Because I did a lot of good work for him and made him a lot of money, but I also left him. People who joined Hiram spent a career with him. There are only two exceptions: Walter Chuck and me. Walter Chuck enjoyed a career as a trial attorney, did very well, and then there was me. I think maybe he was—you know, when I left to go to the East-West Center, they were disappointed, but, remember, I got twice the salary. [Laughs.]
- Castle: And you had business sense from the very beginning. I mean, who's going to turn that kind of opportunity to do something you want to do at that point?
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: So how did that affect you? I mean, you had made some major life changes at that point.
- Lee: It was a real blow. It's not just that he knew who I was, I worked for the guy, and I did a lot of good work for him. Yes.
- Castle: Did it embitter you about the political process?
- Lee: No. I offended him in some way. The only way I could have offended him is that I left.
- Castle: It's too bad, though, he wasn't more up front with you originally.
- Lee: Yes. Oh, it was really unfair.
- Castle: Because you really put your business and career on the line.
- Lee: That's right.
- Castle: It's just these things in our lives shape us. They make us stronger; they make us crazy.
- Lee: Well, there's just a lot of luck—I mean, you'd think that one's success is something—let's say my success, was things that I've done. No, it's things that have happened more than what I've done.
- Castle: Check in with us about your family life. What's happening? You had kids with—
- Lee: Peggy.
- Castle: —Peggy. What's her last name?

Lee: Tanaka.

Castle: Peggy Tanaka, and so we're in 1970 now?

Lee: No, that's 1964.

Castle: That's when you had your first child.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: And then when you don't get the regional administrator position, it's 1970.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Are you still with Peggy?

Meeting and Marring Doris Shoong; Becoming Business Partners

Lee: No, no. Doris and I were married in 1969.

Castle: Okay. So how did that come about, to whatever degree you want to talk about that you met Doris?

Lee: I had a client who had a dispute with Doris. Doris wanted to sell some land in Napa, which he asked me whether it was a good idea, and I thought that no, hang on for a while; now is not a good time to sell. And he said, "I've got a partner who wants to sell. I wanted to hear what you had to say, and I've got a partner. Would you talk to her and try to convince her not to sell?" I said, "Sure." And I met her. When I first met her—I can remember where she was, where she was standing. Obviously, I was impressed by her.

Castle: You remember the details.

Lee: Yes. If you asked me to repeat it, I'd have [a hard time], but I can still see it. It was at her office in Oakland, and she was standing by the filing cabinet, and I think she wore a brown dress, okay?

Castle: Okay.

Lee: [Laughs.] Anyway—

Castle: When you say "impressed," what impressed you?

Lee: It's hard to say. It wasn't any one thing. If you're impressed by an athlete, how many points he scored or how they dribbled and all that—no. I hadn't felt that way about very many people. In fact, I can't think of another person, but there must have been—in my life. It's just one of those things.

- Castle: This is a very powerful feeling.
- Lee: Yes. I said, *my gosh!* And then when I asked her not to sell, to hold off, she said, "Okay."
- Castle: This is just a thought: This is the first woman that you've encountered who you're interested in, and she's a businesswoman. She's—
- Lee: When you say "she's interested"—in other words, someone that I was attracted to over a period of time. Well, this is also true for my first wife, so it wasn't the first, but it was only, like, twice.
- Castle: I guess what I'm thinking is that it's often hard to find somebody you consider a partner, and you're not necessarily growing up during a time where [sic; when] men and women came together in partnerships. Often there was this kind of expectation in American society that there would be this defined male breadwinner and that women had these non-business roles. Sometimes they were imbalanced when it comes to power.
- Lee: What happened was I was attracted to Doris when I first met her, and then I helped her in some of her business, in some of her real estate—I can't think —. I helped her. I was never her attorney. I never sent her a bill for anything, but I helped her. And then after we married, we just continued doing things together. In fact, when I had my law office, there was an occasion that someone needed some legal advice from me in a hurry, and Doris said, "Why don't you tell me what the problem is?" She was told. I said, "I know what Ted would say," and she proceeded to give legal advice. [Laughter.] "My God, you're practicing law, Doris!"
- Castle: [Laughs.] Was she right?
- Lee: She was right.
- Castle: That's the important part. So were you able to move pretty naturally between kind of being two married people and two business people working together? Or did you have to set out some boundaries?
- Lee: Remember, at that time, starting out, I still was practicing law and doing redevelopment, doing everything. Then, over time, I cut down on my law practice and became a developer. The projects we did were jointly owned.
- Castle: Jointly owned between the two of you?
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: Was that unusual?

- Lee: I don't think it was unusual, but not many people have their wives as a full partner. She's always handled all the money. I hate counting the money and adding it up. As a matter of fact, in my second year of practice, I was audited by the IRS. I can't believe it! Now, how much money could I have made? It was only my second year, but I was audited, and I learned that everything that went through my checking account, even though it was my own money, was considered income unless I could prove it wasn't. Boy, was that scary! But that just shows that I don't like to keep track of deposits and withdrawals and things like that. I've always stayed away from that kind of responsibility, and when I worked in a firm, I never had to do that; somebody else always did that for me.
- Castle: So you obviously went about—you got a divorce from Peggy and married Doris.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: And you had two—when—
- Lee: I had two children by Peggy. Peggy tended to be—I mean, I guess, knowing something of my background, it's not surprising that—she leaned towards the alternative lifestyle, which was not me. I mean, I knew socially and business-wise a lot of people who were more liberal, but that's not really me. Equal opportunity, yes; affirmative action, no.
- Castle: What do you mean exactly?
- Lee: What happened was that when we got a divorce, that I was concerned about how—Doris and I were doing things together—what would happen to the business if Peggy stepped in as the mother of the children, okay?
- Castle: Yes.
- Lee: She went through a period that she was interested in more of an alternative lifestyle.
- Castle: Is that socially?
- Lee: Just a way of thinking, a way of thinking.
- Castle: Much more free, or less discipline?
- Lee: Indifferent. I mean, if you had a lot of money and needed her to keep the books, she couldn't do it. So as a part of the settlement agreement between her and myself, she also agreed, which was very generous of her, to let Doris adopt the two boys. The children grew up being told that they had two mothers. It's worked out very well. She voluntarily, for example, had the children live with us. The two boys, growing up, lived with Doris and me. I mean, she cares for them.

Castle: So this is '69. I mean, Ernie is only—

Lee: Yes, he was just—

Castle: Just a baby.

Lee: Yes, just a baby.

Castle: Where are you living right now?

Lee: At that time?

Castle: Yes.

Lee: I was living in Oakland, and Peggy was living in Hawaii with the children, with Greg and Ernie. Oh, no, wait, wait, wait. I'm getting confused here. No, the children stayed in Hawaii until Ernie was seven years old and Greg was eleven.

Castle: Did they have a sense of—so they're both—they're Japanese-Chinese.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Are they more culturally Chinese?

Lee: Yes. A lot of people don't know they're half Japanese. We don't try to conceal it or anything, but they don't know their name. I'm more physical than she is. But all our friends know.

National Dollar Stores; Transitioning out of Community Redevelopment; Ernie Hahn as a Major Client

Castle: So, okay, you've gotten married to Doris, and we just have—maybe if we can spend, five, ten minutes on this, but to talk a little bit about the National Dollar Stores experience. Is that the next major—you know, we're beginning the transition out of community redevelopment at some point?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Well, let's talk first about why that was. How did that happen for you? Why did you—

Lee: Get out of community development?

Castle: Yes.

Lee: Well, first, as I indicated, you couldn't make any money at it. I have enjoyed some success in building buildings in Japantown. As I said, I still own three buildings, and they have been very, very, extremely profitable. But I did it when no-

body else was willing today, because it was only when everybody else in the Japanese community turned down the opportunity did it pass to me. I was always the bottom man, because I was only an honorary Japanese, and I was only honorary Japanese while they needed me. [Chuckles.]

Castle: It's a very tenuous position, isn't it?

Lee: Yes. I'm sorry, what was that?

Castle: You were talking about why you got out of community development.

Lee: Oh. And then the HUD thing. Then, when I didn't get the HUD job, then Ernie Hahn walks in the door. I mean, talking about luck. It was like a revolving door. I walk out, no HUD, and in comes, in the same turn, Ernie Hahn. And so I wanted to help—I forgot about this—I wanted to build a law firm around Ernie Hahn, and I could have, because he gave me as much work to do as I could handle. He got a preferential rate—

Castle: That's a business developer.

Lee: He was a developer. Had a lot of legal work to do, and he had a law firm down in Southern California, in Torrance, that just did his work. He wanted somebody in Northern California, and that was me. I actually put together a four-man, four- or five-man law firm, hoping to capitalize on Ernie's work. Then I was called in and was told that I was bringing other people to help me do the work, and they said that was unacceptable, that they'd hired me, and they only wanted me to do the work. I said, "I've hired people that have a higher class standing than I went to Harvard Law School and Michigan Law School." One guy was the number one in his class at Michigan, and the other guy was the former attorney for the Small Business Administration. I mean, first-rate people. And he said, "Ted, that's not acceptable." I said, "Why? These guys are good lawyers." He said, "Why do think we hire you?" I said, "Well, tell me." He said, "For your judgment." I'll always remember that, is "for your judgment." Because they would ask me things—you know, "What do you think of this? How do you evaluate this?" And I tell them, and they always took my advice, but I didn't realize that that was such an important part of the services that I rendered. I thought the average lawyer is drafting documents, a lot of drafting of documents. But, no, that was not why they hired me. So I went for about a year. I finished projects that I was working on, and then gave him up as a client. By that time, I understood how to develop—remember, I had already done urban renewal development and FHA housing. I learned more about commercial development, so now I had all the tools.

Developing Judgment

Castle: Would you say your experience, your development of good judgment—it's something that I've heard a lot of your colleagues say, in various ways, that "he has

great business sense and great judgment about things.” Was that something that came from all the experience that you had had?

Lee: Probably. You realize I started working with my father when I was twelve years old.

Castle: And you were already problem solving at that stage.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Looking at all the factors, not just at the laws, not just at the parameters but the social aspect and the human aspect.

[End File 7. Begin File 8.]

Becoming Involved in Urban Renewal

Castle: If we could start giving a frame to this next phase in your life, if you could describe for me what you viewed at the time as the changing landscape or—I’m not sure what the best description is, but city planning and urban renewal that’s happening in San Francisco and other California cities in the sixties and how you were drawn into that, how you were maybe a pioneer of that in some ways in the area, if you could just kind of, from your perspective, as an individual who practiced it, talk about those issues as they were coming into play.

Lee: Let me think. I got out of school, and I started looking for urban renewal projects to work in.

Castle: Could you describe what is an urban renewal project? What does it mean to engage in a project like that? What are the issues and goals of urban renewal?

Lee: Do you want me to rehearse it, or do you want to start recording.

Castle: We’re on.

Lee: Oh, you are?

Castle: Yes.

Lee: [Laughs.] Okay. Well, urban renewal is a program usually carried out by the government to demolish and remove old parts of towns and cities and replace it with new development. Every city had an urban renewal project, or most cities had urban renewal projects because the catalyst for urban renewal was money from the federal government, so if you didn’t have urban renewal, then you didn’t get this money from the government. The government gave you money to acquire land

and demolish the old structures. They usually did not give you money to rebuild it. They gave you the land at a very low price, and so you could sell that land, and the money you got from the sale would operate urban renewal.

But there was a program, which I learned, working in it, where the government would give you 100 percent financing to build housing to low- and moderate-income people. In fact, they had a program for market rate, which is no subsidy, but they provided the financing, and then they had other programs where the financing was subsidized. They subsidized it by guaranteeing 100 percent financing, and below-market interest rate. I learned about this and learned that minority communities had priority for these funds, but you can write that legislation down, but it doesn't happen unless somebody makes it happen, and I made it a point to get these funds for minority communities that I worked in. I worked in Sacramento Chinatown, I actually created Filipino Center in Stockton, I worked in Japantown in San Francisco, and I worked on a number of black community-sponsored housing projects in San Francisco.

Castle: That's a perfect introduction, then, to us now being able to go back and talk about it piece by piece. In terms of the philosophy behind urban renewal—first of all, urban renewal and community redevelopment—what's the relationship between the two phrases, and how would you define them? How are they related? How are they different? Do they mean the same thing?

Defining Renewal and Redevelopment

Lee: They really are different aspects of the same thing. Urban renewal is actual acquisition and demolition of old structures; community redevelopment is revitalizing a community, and that often involved urban renewal.

Castle: Okay. The desire to demolish old structures and build anew—what was the philosophy behind that? Was it just to make things look pretty again? I mean, in terms of the government. There are a number of different factors I'm thinking of. Some of the places were suffering—I mean, Detroit and riots. I mean, I'm just thinking the things that I know from my knowledge, but what was the goal behind the government wanting to do that?

Lee: They felt that if you tore down these old buildings and replaced them with new buildings that you'd have a healthier community. You'd have less crime and what have you. There were examples of government coming in—and the government at that time funded complete demolition of a neighborhood, the whole area. Actually, Japantown was one of the first where they did not demolish everything, that we restored as many buildings as possible. They tore down only buildings that could not have been restored.

Castle: Why was that?

Lee: There was a backlash against urban renewal. They were tearing down too many buildings, because when you tear down everything, you have to bring in a whole new—everybody was a new resident when you tear down everything. Now, when you rebuild it, everybody is new, so there was some stability which was lost when you tear down everything, whereas if you keep as many buildings as possible—let's say you kept 25 percent. Well, those 25 percent were occupied, stable, and when you built the other 75 percent, you just had a more stable neighborhood.

Castle: Okay. We'll be talking about that in a couple of different ways. One of the questions that I have is that when you come in, even though you're trying to improve a community, part of what community is attachment to place. You know how people are. If this happened here and this happened here, it's that connection to how you grow over time, so if you take all those away, I imagine that had an impact.

Creating Nihonmachi Terrace

Lee: That's right. Also at that time—well, first, I was able to put together the Japanese community into a nonprofit organization, which was able to gain control of the land that eventually became Japantown.

Castle: What was that called?

Lee: The group called Nihonmachi Community Development Association. The way I did it: The Japan Trade and Culture Center, which is right next to Japantown—all of that is really owned by one or two companies—I mean, like three or four blocks of San Francisco, where we used to have—let's say each block had twenty-five lots—I don't know how many. Then four blocks would be a hundred different owners. When redevelopment acquired all the land, they tended to sell it to one person to redevelop. That one person or one company, that one entity owns everything. Well, then, everyone now is a tenant instead of an owner, and I was very much against that. I thought it was very unfair. I thought it was a government program to benefit the few and not everyone, so I wanted a Japantown where as many of the lots as possible would be owned by individuals and not corporations.

When I suggested that this happen, Justin Herman said, "Ted, there is no way that you can do what you want to do. You guys don't have any money. Where's the capital going to come from to rebuild all these buildings?" And I said I would find a way, that they had to sell it back to the Japanese community or they would never be able to carry out a redevelopment because I would resist every condemnation action, and if they had to try every acquisition, they'd never get it done. So he finally agreed to do that, and then, interestingly, a short time thereafter, he offered me the position of general counsel for the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency. It's something that I would have liked to have done, but I couldn't do that because if I did, I'd lose my credibility. It would look like I had—

Castle: Gone to the other side.

Lee: —yes, sold out for a good job.

Castle: There was a lot packed into what you just said. There's a lot of different, important elements to pull out of it. I'm interested in talking about each and every particular major experience, because they're all very important to San Francisco history, entrepreneurship, just a number of different elements we're looking at. Maybe one thing we could do, because I'm trying to—from your position and your extensive expertise—paint the larger picture for someone who might come and read this interview to understand all the different players involved, for example. As we go through each one of these projects, could you lay out right now, in general—let's say something is planned for an area. Could you kind of summarize the steps of who the players are? Who's the government? Who are the contractors or the developers and the community? Who are the players that are going to be involved in looking at a project?

Lee: Okay. They all go through pretty much the same thing. First, in urban renewal, in every case, the land is owned by a lot of different people within the redevelopment area. This property ought to be torn down, but nobody wants to tear it down and pay for the cost of doing so, so the government comes in and give you the money which you use to acquire the property. And after you acquire the property, you demolish everything, and then you put the land up for sale, up for bid. A lot of times, the government tells you what kind of development the government would like to have, and whether you're willing to do it, or the government can say, "This land is available. Tell me what you would like to do with it." That's how every project went.

What I did was when I saw what was happening, what was available, I formed clients. I formed nonprofits eligible to receive land from the government. The government favored nonprofits over profit-oriented sponsors, and I favored that. Those were the days that I thought that these benefits should go to as many people as possible; therefore it should go to a nonprofit rather than a profit corporation.

But what happened is nonprofit ownership is by and large poorly managed, and most of them—a lot of them or maybe even most ran into financial difficulty. This happened. We found this out later. So at the end of the period that I've been involved in redeveloping, it went to private corporations instead, over time, so that later on, there were very few nonprofit projects. They were mainly what they called "limited dividend" projects. Limited dividend means that if you built this as a profit, you could only make so much; you were limited to the type of return you could have.

Castle: What do you think were the reasons that the nonprofits have difficulty in management?

Lee: There was no profit incentive to do a good job. Everybody was a volunteer, and if they couldn't make money, they didn't want to spend the time. People like myself, who worked as consultants, we were paid, but when the project was over, we

turned the keys over to the nonprofit and went on to the next project. Well, the people who were doing it—if you were sweeping the floor or washing the window, those kinds of jobs they can get paid, but if you were just managing it, you couldn't get paid.

Castle: In terms of how it was set out—the contract between the government and a nonprofit meant that you couldn't receive money as a manager.

Lee: That's right. That's right.

Castle: Because of the nonprofit status.

Lee: Right. Yes.

Castle: Interesting. And that's the challenge, because part of it, the goal behind it is the community control aspect.

Lee: I just remember something. There is a pamphlet out celebrating the twentieth or twenty-fifty year of Japantown, where they discuss the history of the project. I should call the redevelopment agency and see if they have an old copy, and I'll get it for you, but what you will find very interesting is that everybody who had anything to do with Japantown, who is a developer, is named and described in this book, except one.

Castle: And who is that mystery man?

Lee: Me. I tried to find out what happened. I called up the redevelopment agency, and I said, "What is this?" And he said, "We were told that you in no way wanted to be any part of the publication." "I did? Who told you?" "I won't tell you." "Who said this?" "I won't tell you." And what it is—this is really—it's historically accurate, so I'll bring it up, but it should be—the Japanese, some of the Japanese find it very difficult for a Chinese to have been the impetus for Japantown. As a matter of fact, just recently I met somebody, and it came up that I had put together the Japantown, and this guy said, "I know some of the things that you have done, and the most difficult must have been Japantown." I said, "Why do you say that?" "Because you're Chinese." I said, "How did you know?" "Of course I know." I can't remember who it was. It was somebody who is very knowledgeable. If you think about it and if you know the Japanese mentality, it's true.

Castle: That was the question I wanted to ask, is while you were involved in this project, were there moments of cultural difference or issues around heritage and identity and how those play out?

Lee: When we were getting started, I pushed very hard and said you had to do this, you had to do that, and I would get back occasionally, "Ted, you're dealing with Japanese and not Chinese," which wasn't true, by the way; both Chinese and Japanese behave and respond in the same way.

- Castle: But that's what you would hear.
- Lee: But that's what you would hear.
- Castle: Right. One quick question about the process. How did an area get declared a redevelopment area?
- Lee: The local municipal body forms a redevelopment agency, and the redevelopment agency what an urban renewal area will consist of, and then you petition the government for financing. The government has to approve it as well, but the initial start is local government.
- Castle: And who are the individuals in the local government?
- Lee: The city council and the mayor.
- Castle: So [the challenge is they are?] representation sometimes—
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: This is something you are perfect to explain. At the outset, obviously, urban renewal sounds like a great idea, because you're taking decaying spaces and renewing them or rebuilding them. What are the major contradictions, though, that are involved with it? Because part of it is that element of insider-outsider—people coming in from outside the community to dictate the terms, or what are those issues of conflict, and how did they play themselves out?
- Lee: When you designate an area for urban renewal and then you tear it down, you have to then put it back on the market for someone to develop, and you're right: They could end up, as they did in San Francisco, the Japanese Trade and Cultural Center, of giving the land to a Japanese company from Hawaii that had no experience in San Francisco at all, completely insensitive to local concerns, local needs or what have you. And that's the Japanese Trade and Cultural Center. Actually, the guy whose family did the project is a friend of mine. I've gotten to know him. But when it was being done, we were all very unhappy.
- Castle: That seems like a fundamental—is it kind of the nature of business and/or capitalism that it has to be done that way? Because the wonderful idea of improving the neighborhood is great, but then to sell the control—
- Lee: What happened was when they first started these programs, they weren't sensitive to any of these things. Later on, as the government got more experienced, they started putting in an allocation ought to be based on priority given to nonprofit organizations, minority-controlled organizations, prior landowners, and they actually had—my recollection [is that] they had ten factors that you had to take into consideration, and all ten of those factors favored projects that I was doing. They all favored projects that I was doing, but—after I got the site, you still have to

build it, and I was counting on using federal funds to build it. And some of these federal funds are outright grants; others are mortgage guarantees. Anyway, I was counting on federal funds, but to get federal funds, you needed the approval of the local FHA office. I couldn't get approval. I had all these projects lined up, and I couldn't get them funded because the head of the office over my projects would not give me the money. They'd find some reason you don't get it.

So here I was, sitting on these projects and going nowhere. So I finally went to Washington to talk to the assistant secretary for multifamily housing, the very top people, and when I told them that I qualified for the highest priority for federal funds, they at first didn't believe me. I can't remember the guy's name, the assistant secretary of HUD. He said, "I was just out in San Francisco, and I asked, 'Are there any projects that have these criterion?', and they said no." And I said, "They're lying." My first project that was funded—and he said, "So tell me, will you fund me?" He said, "If what you say is true, there's a good chance you get funded." And I said, "No, I want your assurance that if what I told you is true that I will be funded." And he said, "Let me see."

Well, eventually—I can't remember which one—I got one funded. It may have been Sacramento. But it was funded from Washington. The approval for the funding came from Washington.

Castle: Directly from Washington and not—

Lee: Not through—

Castle: —the redevelopment agency.

Being Considered for the Regional Director Position

Lee: And so they were really, really mad. Then Emma McFarland proposed that I be the regional administrator of HUD. That's why Emma is such a good friend. She didn't know me very well then; she only knew what I had done, and I guess she thought I had a lot of ability.

Castle: What position was she in at the time?

Lee: She was working in HUD as a special assistant to the regional administrator, and the regional administrator was a guy named Robert Pitts, a black man.

Castle: And Emma is an African-American woman also.

Lee: Yes. And so she put my name in, and I was told by the under secretary that I was the first guy that George Romney had picked to be a regional administrator. I thought that that was wonderful, and so I began closing down my business, my

consulting business, my law business, getting ready to be the next regional administrator.

Castle: And what year was this?

Lee: Oh, around 1970. Then all my projects started sailing through HUD and being approved. Why? Because all these people were fearful that I was the incoming boss. So whatever I wanted, I could have, and all my projects—that's why I was able to do so many projects in such a short period of time, because they all got approved.

Castle: It did look a bit intense.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Looking at all the different projects.

Lee: It took me a long time to get there. I fought, fought and fought, and then, because they thought I was going to be their boss, everything happened at once, in a very short period of time.

Castle: Did you ever get a real answer as to why your projects were stymied at the local level?

Lee: Yes. They favored people they knew, because there was money to be made.

Castle: Still very nepotistic?

Lee: There was favoritism, definitely. There were certain people who had entrée into the FHA, and they got all their projects, and there were very few people like myself, coming from the outside and not having done it before and tapping this source of funds.

Castle: Let's talk a little bit specifically about the different projects. What was the very first one you engaged in, or were they all happening at the same time?

Lee: Yes, they kind of all happened at the same time because that was my business. But I think the initial contact was probably Sacramento, and then the second one was the Filipino, and then Nihonmachi Terrace, then Martin Luther King Square, Marcus Garvey Square, Jones Memorial Homes and Turk—there was a project, I remember, Turk, T-u-r-k.

Funding Redevelopment in Sacramento's Chinatown

Castle: Let's break these down a little bit. The Chinatown in Sacramento. What was your specific goal in that project? How did it organize? Were there any specific community factors? I mean, this is one of the times where [sic; when]—you know,

Chinatown is, at least seemed to be the first project, it's Chinese, where the others were different cultural groupings. Did that give you any inside edge, did you find?

Lee: As I recollect now, Sacramento was my first project. I had a friend who came from Sacramento, and his father was a prominent Chinese businessman, and so I went to him. Sacramento was going to redevelop a Chinatown. They acquired land in a two-block area and then sold it back to family associations. In my case, I represented the Chinatown business community, and so I wanted the allocation for this low-, moderate-income housing to go to this Chinese businessmen's non-profit. We had a lot of commercial in it because we needed to get some income to make the project feasible. The way you do it is you add commercial. But being a housing program, you are limited as to the amount of commercial that you can use, that you can provide. But Sacramento qualified.

Then the family business association—you know, the Tongs and what have you—they all got allocations to build in different parts of Sacramento Chinatown. By the way, Sacramento Chinatown today is a big, big failure. But I had a very hard time getting the—it was called the Ping Yuen project in Sacramento Chinatown.

Castle: This is P-i-n-g Y-u-e-n.

Lee: Y-u-e-n. I had a very difficult time, but that was a project, I believe, that I got funded out of Washington, and after I was funded out of Washington, my competitor was able to build the Lee Center. They were funded almost immediately. The unfairness of it: If you claimed that you wouldn't give it to me because there were problems or questions of feasibility and then I get funded anyway, how can you fund a competitor to do the same thing or basically the same thing? If you're worried about the market and you've got one that jumped in ahead of you, you'd be doubly worried about the market. But they didn't.

Castle: So they're funding you both to do the same thing.

Lee: They were funding one, because Washington made them, and the second one they did because they probably promised the guy they were going to do it, but they shouldn't have.

Castle: What exactly was it that was being funded, a center?

Lee: Yes. I was building a low-, moderate-income housing project for the Chinese in Sacramento. They funded a senior citizens project for Chinese in Sacramento. Well, a senior citizen project—the market is much smaller than for a multi-family project where anyone can live there, can occupy a unit.

Castle: I see. And as part of these, are there community centers that are built in addition, or how does that work?

- Lee: No, it's usually they take part of a building and they devote it as a community center, as part of the recreation requirements.
- Castle: Okay. When you talk about adding commercial to it, does that mean you have the ability to use some of the funds to pay for the construction of commercial sites?
- Lee: The commercial generates income. In other words, the income—you will get enough to pay for the mortgage on the commercial and have some money left over to pay for part of the mortgage on residential.
- Castle: I see. So this really appealed to you because it's a lot of math problems in some way. I mean, you look at it, and it's problem-solving elements you have to—
- Lee: What was interesting is that—and I had worked at that time just a couple of years, and within those two years, I had done enough for George Romney to think that I could head up the western United States in this, so I think I did accomplish a lot.
- Castle: I was curious as to how—I mean, George Romney, the HUD secretary—
- Lee: That's right.
- Castle: —at the time, hears about you.
- Lee: Emma McFarland did it.
- Castle: Emma, okay. So she was one of the people you got to know as an individual working within the redevelopment agency?
- Lee: She worked for the federal government. She worked in HUD. She was the person that went around and gave all those speeches that Bob Pitts—Bob Pitts was not a good speaker, and he didn't like to go around a lot, so Emma McFarland would go and present the HUD programs all over the place, but it was Emma that did it for Bob Pitts.
- Castle: I see. I see. Just so I make sure I understand it and obviously the viewing audience understands, the redevelopment agency offices were local offices that then appealed to HUD, or what was the relationship?
- Lee: No, that's right. City council could appoint a redevelopment agency or it could itself be also the redevelopment agency. Initially, everyone formed a separate redevelopment agency, but it became so important, because you're controlling land for development—it became so important that most cities went—and the city council became the redevelopment agency.
- Castle: When I spoke with Emma, she talked about—you know, as another example of a black woman who migrates to California—

Working Across Community Lines

Lee: From Arkansas.

Castle: From Arkansas. Even as a young girl, she remembers being very interested in housing, like, always very interested about equal access, and some of the earliest things that she said about you was really remembering you as a compassionate person who very much felt compassion people who had experienced discrimination, and that that motivated you in some ways to actually bring about equal opportunity in your work. I have a quote I would like to read to you that I found in the 1970 publication by the students on "The Roadblocks to Community Building." That was about the Filipino center. It goes as this: "I am an advocate of maximum participation"—and this is you—"in economic development by as many people as possible, particularly by the less privileged in the United States. This often means the racial minorities. I believe that even at the expense of efficiency, it is desirable to allow many individuals to participate in the decision-making process as it relates to urban renewal, and the benefits of urban renewal should pass directly to as many individuals as possible."

Lee: Yes—

Castle: Does that sound like me?

Lee: That sounds exactly like me. You know, I ran across that—I had never read that paper until I was putting together material for you. I was surprised how accurate it was, what the students had done.

Castle: That's a real testament, too, because the students—one of the things they lay out was that they were community members, so some of them had an inclination to be very biased or very attached to a certain approach to it. When I read this, it sets off a lot of political inclinations. So you're saying right now that this was you then, this is you now.

Lee: I suppose so, yes. I haven't changed. I don't do it anymore. You know, the only thing that I really got out of doing all this, the personal benefit, is the satisfaction at having done it, because the amount of money that I was able to—the government controls how much money everyone takes out of a project, and it's not very much. It's just enough maybe to handle the legal work to process an application, just to process it. But what I had to do to bring these projects about—you know, community meetings, community organizations, formation of community non-profits—all that stuff that I also did, you don't get paid for. That's just free. But in the Filipino project, what's interesting—like, say, in the Japantown project, the publication leaves me out completely and no one will explain why it happened except that they understood this I what I wanted, in the Filipino Center, a couple of local Filipinos claim now that they did everything, okay?, that it was their project. It's not important. However, what little satisfaction that I got, even that is being lost, and so who is going to continue in this kind of business?

- Castle: Mmm. It's interesting because part of what you're doing is—this is within different age and cultural groups at the time, and this is something else I'd like to talk about. We're getting at the beginning of the movement period. You know, people are being very openly activist, and one of the trends was nationalism, very group-based issues. I wonder—ironically, it seems, to a certain degree, when you were starting these projects out in the mid- to late sixties and early seventies—
- Lee: That's right.
- Castle: —you were very much openly working in coalitions and across cultural lines to get things done, and now it's almost, like, probably the late seventies and then the history writing—you know, it looks like the Japantown project wrote you out of the history, the Filipino project—
- Lee: [Laughs.]
- Castle: —wants to write you out of the history, and I wonder how much that's related to wanting to see these projects as these—you know,—
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: —group-centered powerful nationalistic kind of—
- Lee: The Filipinos want to think that the Filipinos did it all themselves. The Japanese people, not everyone, by the way—I would say half are very grateful. There was a time during this period whenever I went and bought anything in Japantown, merchants that I didn't particularly know gave me 10 percent discount. I mean, the first time it happened, I was very pleasantly surprised because in those days, that 10 percent was also meaningful. The Filipino project was probably—no, they were all hard. I didn't have an easy project. Every one was hard. And most people—this person who, just within the past month said, “You must have had a real hard time”—what he said was—I guess he knew about a number of things, and he said, “The hardest one was Japantown. The hardest one for you was Japantown.” And my response was, “How'd you know?” He said, “What [was this]? You're Chinese.” And then he said, “I'm really surprised that you were able to do it.” And I should have put that person's name down. It was somebody important, too.
- Castle: But it also goes to your character in terms of—if you had spent more time worrying about what people thought, you probably would have spent a lot less time doing any of this.
- Lee: That's true.
- Castle: Because you had a larger goal in mind. You went in there. You did what you did, but it's interesting how sometimes—you know, we get in our own way when trying to making social change or build positive things, because you undermine it with that kind of prejudice, intergroup prejudice towards wanting to revise the

history to make it kind of a Filipino first project, ironically, which—every group will tend to do this, right?

Lee: There have been Filipino groups everywhere that want to do a Filipino project. They all talk at San Francisco, Hawaii, but not one of them has succeeded at all except in Stockton.

Castle: It's an interesting correlation between what's happening with ethnic studies now as a subject in schools, because what we're forgetting to do is to work as allies, to do cross-racial—actually, hold on just a sec.

[Recording interruption.]

The Japanese Community and Internment

Castle: One of the questions I have about Japantown, for example, is how many of these individuals were—and I assume a number were interned during World War II, and what were the issues that are particular to that experience, about losing control of anything they might have gained control over, in terms of ownership?

Lee: There was dissatisfaction, but the group that got the first part, for the Trade and Cultural Center, was Japanese, but from Hawaii and not local. Most of the people came from families [or? that were?] more personally interned. They felt that justified having priority to build another Japantown.

Castle: And to maintain control.

Lee: Yes, but they didn't know how to do it. What had happened was the first real estate investment I ever made was in Japantown. I bought a two-unit Victorian for \$28,000, but because I bought that, I got to know about the redevelopment that was going to take place, and as I learned more, I thought it was a good idea, but no one knew how to bring it about, and so I stepped in and did it.

Castle: So oftentimes there's a lot of desire on the part of the community to have control, but not the knowledge or the ability—

Lee: On how to do it.

Castle: —to execute it.

Lee: That's right.

Castle: And it sounded like at times that undermined their goals over all. I don't know. I mean, for you it sounds—so here's the big-picture question: What *was* in it for you? Because the irony is that when you look at the community development projects over all, there's this tendency to have this very stereotypical picture of scheming outside developer comes to community, makes lots of money against

the will of the community, when you're really representing kind of the extreme opposite of that, in a certain way, because your desire and willingness to make sure the community had control and to form the nonprofits meant that you were almost paying them, in terms of your time and money, to do these things.

Lee: That's right. I got very little benefit, but I got the satisfaction of seeing it done. As a matter of fact, when I took my oldest son groundbreaking of the Filipino Center in Stockton, he said to me, "Dad, why are we here?" And then two or three [months], maybe a half a year later, he said to me, "Dad, I finally understand why we attended the groundbreaking." But it wasn't done for the money. But it gave me an opportunity to become a developer. I would not have had the chance to build many millions of dollars of new construction without a government program. Without redevelopment and a government program, I would have had no experience developing.

Castle: So that was the exchange. That was the equal exchange of what you received back.

Lee: Yes, the experience.

Castle: You worked hard, and you got the experience that both led to jobs—you know, it taught you how to do it, right?

Lee: Yes, that's right. It taught me how to do it.

Indian Housing and Affirmative Action in Contracts

Castle: What was your goal? This is low-income housing. People talk all the time about HUD-funded housing on Indian reservations is so deeply under par. In your experience, what were your goals in how you constructed these houses? Was it important to you to do it to a certain degree of quality?

Lee: No, I wanted to build as many units as I could. During this period, the Indians in Las Vegas wrote to me and said, "We know what you've done in housing. Would you come out and help us?" So I flew to Las Vegas and went to the reservation, and I looked around. Man, they had nothing, and the land was in a good location. It was in north Las Vegas, I remember. I said that I'd do it. Then I went back to HUD, and at this time, I wasn't fighting with HUD anymore. What the regional office told me—he said, "Ted, how long has it taken for you to learn how to deal with HUD? Do you want to represent Indians as well? Because everything that you learned does not apply when you work with the Indians. Do you have time to learn it?" And the answer of course was no, so I went back to Las Vegas. I apologized, told them what had happened, but I just didn't have time to do Indian projects as well.

Castle: That's pretty powerful, but it does speak to the complicated nature of federal-Indian relationships that come from—I don't know—maybe managing to obtain

the entire continent. Wow. So at the time, your goal was, in a project from beginning to end, to build as many units as possible.

Lee: Yes, and so therefore I wanted to control the costs. What happened was near the end of when I was active, affirmative action was being pushed, and affirmative action meant that non-white groups should be able to build these units or get the contracts to build these units. What happened was that once that happened, a black contractor would get a job and then turn around and turn the contract over to a white contractor to do the actual work.

Castle: For some kind of profit?

Lee: Sure, and they paid the guy who got the contract a certain amount of money. But what happened is that the cost per square foot went up dramatically, and I was very much against that, because that meant less housing. And so I tried to—

Castle: Wasn't that illegal—

Lee: No, no.

Castle: —for the contractor to contract out again?

Lee: No.

Castle: Sorry.

Lee: I tried to fight it, and I couldn't. There was a deal—I told HUD that this project was 20 percent too high, and I explained why I thought it was 20 percent too high, and he told me, the guy in HUD, at the regional level, pretty high up, said that he had studied that and he knew that it was 20 percent too high. I said, "I'm going to call a community meeting, and I want you to say publicly it's 20 percent too high, and I will fight to get the contract reduced." I called the meeting, and I'll be dog-gone, the guy completely capitulated, approved the project 20 percent too high. Well, you know, that's millions of dollars lost. That hurt my sense of idealism, and that made it less enjoyable to do.

Castle: So the government coughed up another—

Lee: Yes, couple of million dollars.

Castle: —couple of million to cover the 20 percent—

Lee: Yes.

Castle: —in order to maintain the preference for—

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Because the challenge of that aspect of affirmative action is that it was potentially reducing the number of housing units, if you —

Lee: What I said at that time—this was just before I got out of the business, by the way. Equal opportunity, yes; affirmative action, no. I could approve of a rule that said that if a black—it didn't have to be black; it could be any minority, but you don't very many Asians in the business; in fact, I don't think I know of a single Asian contractor that's ever built an FHA project, whereas there's been a lot of black contractors. If a white contractor would do it for, let's say, a million dollars, there could be a period where a black contractor, if he could come in for the same price, he would get it. Now, I had a hard time justifying it, but I could see doing it for the policy reasons, but I could not see, if a white contractor would build something for a million dollars, that if you're a black contractor and the best the black contractor could do is one point two five million, he would nonetheless get it. I couldn't see that. But that's what they were pushing for.

Castle: Were there any elements, in terms of your knowledge, of the contractors of color doing things that cost more because they were being more equitable or they were—

Lee: No. Inefficiency.

Castle: Let me stop—

[End of interview.]

[Interview 3; May 27, 2005]

[Begin File 9]

Absence of Community Based Housing Projects Across the Country

Lee: It's occurred to me, as we go through this, people are proud of what's taken place, but there's nobody else in the country that has been able to replicate it. Take a look—nowhere.

Lee: And they all could have done that. New York, Chicago—they could have gotten the community organizations to sponsor housing and commercial development, using federal funds. No one has done it.

Castle: So how did you do it? What do you think were the factors that made it possible for you to do it?

Lee: It's that I devoted a lot of time. I devoted a lot of time, and I knew where I was going, and I sought no advantage. A lot of people, they start out idealistic and

then they start directing it towards their personal benefit, and people see that, and then you lose your credibility. But I never had that problem.

Castle: Because you started out how?

Lee: Because I in fact had no personal interest in bettering myself through these projects. I just wanted them done. When I say “better,” that is make some money. The amount of money that I was paid for these was really nothing, but it didn’t stop me. Most people would have quit when they saw \$2,000 for four or five years’ work. They’d say, “You gotta be kidding.”

Castle: Right.

Lee: But it didn’t stop me.

Castle: So if you had gone into it with your eye on a profit—

Lee: Yes, and then you saw that there wasn’t any profit, you’d lose interest rapidly. I think that’s what happened with a lot of people. The nonprofit part just died, and the limited dividend grew.

Castle: Could you explain that one more time, the difference?

Lee: Yes. Is it recording now?

Castle: Yes.

Lee: Oh, okay. When you have these low-, moderate-income—which is subsidized government housing, who’s going to own it? When I did it, it was always a nonprofit organization, usually a church or a community group. But another way of developing these projects was through a limited dividend corporation; that was a private corporation. But they controlled how much money you could make from the project. But it was private. That way I would have owned these projects, financed by the government. The government took all the risk because it was 100 percent financing.

Castle: Right. But you chose to continue—

Lee: Nonprofit.

Lee: And when nonprofit didn’t make sense, I just got out of it. For me, it was hard to go from nonprofit to limited dividend. It’s kind of like taking advantage of an opportunity which I helped create. People could say that I created it for myself.

Castle: So it was an ethical problem for you?

- Lee: Yes. And now, when I think back on it, there really wasn't an ethical problem, but at that time, I felt an ethical conflict, so I just got out of it.
- Castle: Would you have faced concerns—the reality of losing credibility or people from the community being able to say things, true or not?
- Lee: [Ted?] came in to help us look—look at what he owns now.
- Castle: You talked a couple of times so far about the involvement of the community in these various projects and the great extent and effort you went to see that they had involvement. In what ways did it benefit the community and, at the same time, have either positive or negative consequences for the overall building project, itself? I mean, were there times when they got their own way, or how would you sum some of this up?
- Lee: The nonprofits were the owners, so they always got their way. If you disagreed with what they were doing, you would try to persuade them, but they make a mistake, they could make a mistake.
- Castle: Were there any instances in which that happened where it really impacted the project over all? Something you can think of, a story—
- Lee: No, I can't think of—
- Castle: Are you [unintelligible]?
- Lee: Money was awarded to—remember I said there were about ten factors to be taken into consideration? The more of these ten factors you had in your project, the more likely you were to get funded. One of the factors was minority ownership, so I was always aware that I should have a minority person or organization out front. I did the work; it was my idea; but they were going to be the owner. It helped me get funded if the government saw that I was doing it for certain minority people. It was important to have a minority face, as owner, as owner.
- Castle: So the owner is a face of color, a minority face—
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: —but the entrepreneur is also—
- Lee: There was no priority because I was non-white. There was no priority for that, only for ownership.
- Castle: That's one of the major questions I do have, is—of course, this is described as minority-owned business, but in this case, because you're constructing it so the nonprofit that is the owner in this case—I just am wondering if your role as an en-

trepreneur, a minority entrepreneur had any advantages or disadvantages during this time. How would you define it?

Lee: I tell you, at that time—my nature has been the same, but I probably would not have been described as an entrepreneur, when I was starting out, because I hadn't done anything. I hadn't built anything. I just had an idea, and I had people that I wanted to protect, people that I wanted to help them take advantage of government programs. I could show them how it could be done, and I did it for them.

Castle: When you say people that you wanted to help protect or support, who comes to mind with that?

Lee: Let's say in Sacramento. There was a Chinese organization composed of all the Chinese businesses in Sacramento. I used that as my vehicle to do the project, and that was easy because the head of that Chinese businessman's club was the father of a good friend of mine, so that was fairly simple. But when I got to Stockton, I got the Filipino church. I got a couple of members of the local Filipino church, but I was not too impressed with that church, so I asked them to bring in every Filipino organization in San Joaquin County because then nobody could control it, and it would demonstrate stronger community support. I gave it the name of the Associated Filipino Organizations of San Joaquin County. [Chuckles.] I had that name early so that other Filipino organizations, nonprofit organizations could join if they wanted to.

Castle: I see, so it was a widely cast net, allowing for wide support.

Lee: A lot of time, people just do it with a single church as a nonprofit. In Japantown, there is a very large subsidized housing project called Nihonmachi Terrace. I started out with one church when I was bidding. Then I was fearful—I knew this was going to be a very valuable project someday. Someday, when they want to sell it or tear it down, it's going to be worth \$50 million. The thought of this particular church—I can't remember which one it was—controlling \$50 million bothered me.

Castle: So you were already thinking about that.

Lee: Yes. It bothered me.

Castle: Why did that bother you?

Creating the Japanese American Religious Foundation

Lee: Because it seems unjust that I happened to pick one church and they're going to be \$50 million—and every other Japanese church in town won't have anything, so I went back and created Japanese-American Religious Federation. I said every church in San Francisco that started out serving the Japanese community was eligible to become a member, and so now we have fourteen churches—JARF, Japa-

nese-American Religious Federation, has fourteen churches as members, and every church appoints one director and is allowed to bring a backup. Each church has one vote, but you're allowed to bring a backup, because more than one person ought to know what's going on. That was all what I was concerned about. Today it is worth \$50 million. [Chuckles.]

Castle: Just like [unintelligible].

Lee: And the Japanese community is very, very rich because if they ever sell that property, they would easily get \$50 million.

Castle: Does that give them a certain amount of power or status?

Lee: Oh, sure, because now, instead of being a poor church, you're a rich church. We have a Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist—I think there was an Episcopal—I was surprised; there was an Episcopal Japanese church, maybe not—a Buddhist, Shinto—anyway.

Castle: So just complete participation?

Lee: Everybody in town. And now everyone has a say on how this \$50 million asset is going to be used, and that was my intention.

Castle: It's completely remarkable because what you're describing is absolutely astute community organizing skills. They're like the basics, and it's just not something that is often connected with someone—I mean, I'm not trying to set up these parallels where there's a stereotype, but it's not usually business—

Lee: You know what was interesting? I told you that the Japanese community had some reservations about listening to someone of Chinese ancestry. Have I told you about Jeff Adachi?

Castle: No.

Lee: Okay. I called a meeting at some church—I can't remember which one—and Jeff Adachi and his father came, and I made the pitch on what I hoped to accomplish for the Japanese community in government-assisted housing. I'm told that Jeff asked his dad, "Do you think this guy can do all this?" And his father said, "I don't know, but if there's anyone that can do it, that guy can do it." They didn't know me. And then Jeff said, "I want to be like him." You know, "When I go to school, I want to be like him." And he's now the public defender of San Francisco. I haven't reminded him of that, but I was very flattered. Someone told me.

Castle: So you became, unbeknownst to you, in some ways during that time, a role model.

Lee: Role model, yes.

- Castle: And of all things, cross-culturally in a space where normally there would be friction.
- Lee: That's right. Exactly. There would normally be friction. In this case, I was able to help someone who was Japanese, and it came from someone who is Chinese.
- Castle: Right, right. That's really significant, because that's the essence of cross-racial or cross-cultural change, if somebody isn't at all thinking about a prejudgment about who you are; it's simply the way you are and how you act and the way you include communities. But the idea is that it's not just that you went into a community and said, Okay, here's a church. I'll just pick any church because I need a community front—right?
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: You were already thinking through—and I can tell this takes—I'm interested: How did it occur to you to think twenty, thirty years plus in the future about the future value of what you were doing and the idea that everyone should be included and to set up nonprofits in a way that allows for that? Because that forces community cohesion, in a way. All the different churches can't be at battle because they've got to think about their asset and what it means to the community.
- Lee: There was a church, a Japanese church that fought me to get the project. I won. I beat this other Japanese group. And they were very surprised when I extended an invitation to them to join us in ownership. They couldn't change the consultant; they couldn't change their lawyer; they couldn't change the architect, but they could share an ownership, and they had nothing to lose. They accepted, and today they are one of the main partners in Nihonmachi Terrace.
- Castle: Where it could have been retributive.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: You could have just excluded them?
- Lee: "You fought me."
- Castle: Yes.
- Lee: And I told them that "I know that if you had won, you would have fired me. I know that. Otherwise, there was no reason to bid against me. We could have all done it together." They wanted to go independently. It was the Japanese Methodist Church. They wanted to go independent of me. Why? To get rid of me. But when they lost, then I went back and I said, "You can join, but you can't try to fire me." [Laughter.]
- Castle: You put that provision in there.

- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: How did they respond?
- Lee: They were very happy. They were very happy, because they thought they were out.
- Castle: I just wonder if anyone is ever shamed. This brings up something you've said or alluded to at some point—you know, handling what for a lot of people is constant conflict and confrontation. It's hard to—you've done so many phone calls where you're saying, "Support me. Do this." It's very hard for a lot of people to do. Did it come naturally to you?
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: How is it that it works for you? You just don't personalize it? How do you get through some of that?
- Lee: First, it has to be done, and my motives are always good and therefore it's easier to sell the product. I have a product—and I make the product so that it's saleable. I guess one of the points that I stress is I don't have any self-interest.
- Castle: Have you ever had to say—I mean, what do you do if you have an ethical problem with something?
- Lee: I am very sensitive to ethical problems. That's the cynical side of me. Therefore I avoid getting into ethical problems.
- Castle: So when you're on the phone or you're dealing with people, you really are speaking from a place of belief in whatever it is you're doing.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: But since all of us aren't pure souls, there's an element of tailoring—you know—
- Lee: Oh, yes.
- Castle: —the aspect you're trying to sell.
- Lee: I can still organize the facts or the presentation as I want it to be presented.
- Castle: I guess the last thing that I wonder about that aspect is, for example, going to church and saying, "You can be a part of it." Has that been important for you to not be—I don't know—bitter, vengeful, petty? I mean, things that people could do—because they did hurt you. They did make your life more difficult and threaten you and could have fired you, and here you offer to them—what makes you do that?

- Lee: I think because it's the right thing to do, and it strengthens what I'm trying to accomplish. I mean, how can you have—let's say there are fourteen churches in town, let's say, and I've got thirteen of them, and the fourteenth is not in there because I'm mad at them. I'd have a hard time telling you that and still be able to hold my head up.
- Castle: Right. Now, that has to have backfired on you a number of times, though, throughout your life, in terms of having done the right thing and then somebody gone ahead and fired you. Do you remember any instances of that and how you dealt with that?
- Lee: It has. I can't think of specific examples right now, but yes, it has happened where I said, my gosh! How could they do that? But they do.
- Castle: Do you learn from it? Do you tuck it away?
- Lee: No, just there are some people that are that way; I just won't deal with them in the future.
- Castle: So they're off your list from that point forward. Do you have a sense of who those kind of people might be now? I mean, do you learn over time how to avoid some of that, or is it still surprising?
- Lee: No, I've learned—in recent years, I haven't done very much with other people; everything has been for myself, for my family.
- Castle: The question about the balancing of politics and business—were you keenly aware of the politicking that you had to do in the process of negotiating with communities and the government and contractors? Has that always been a part of what you've done as an entrepreneur or developer? You've had a lot of identities we can invoke. Was that particularly in play during the period of urban renewal that you were engaged in, where your business skills were central but at the same time, without [your] knowing who to talk to and when, and how to work the politics.
- Lee: It took me a year or two to understand the importance of what I was doing, the importance of politics. Remember, I went back to Washington—unheard of!—and was funded out of Washington because I just knew that they control the budget, and I couldn't get fair treatment at the local, regional level, so I went to Washington and talked to the assistant secretary, and was funded. It ought to be able to be done.
- Castle: Right. And that's a major acknowledgement that politics are involved,—
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: —that you get on a plane and fly to D.C.—

Lee: Yes.

Castle: —and put it on the line.

Lee: Yes. I didn't know what else to do.

Castle: And then the experience— it's a strange combination, too, because—so would you say—did you at some point feel that you really had kind of a flair, an ability to maneuver through these politics, or was it just something that you did?

Lee: It did not occur to me that I had a flair for this. I knew that I put in more effort than just about anyone I know to get the project approved. I knew that, but everything I've ever done in my life has required a great deal of effort.

Castle: So it's that hard work ethic that we're coming back to,—

Lee: Yes.

Castle: —where it was less about being able to pick up the phone and have a [smooth mover?] talk with one particular politician and more about the consistency of maybe—you'd fly to Washington or you'd call or you'd just be in there, figuring out the problem,—

Ethics, Politics and the Local Context

Lee: Yes.

Castle: —rather than looking for a short fix to it. I'm just trying to imagine my experience with politics, when you think about how politicians function. How, then, have you dealt with—and this kind of extends later on in life—you know, as a successful person, a lot of politicians are going to be interested in courting you and having your support. How have you dealt with this?

Lee: We support people that we know or who share our beliefs, but unlike a lot of people, if there's a politician that could particularly help me, I don't support him. I don't support them with money. I have always felt uncomfortable contributing money to a politician who could help me.

Castle: And why is that?

Lee: Because it looks like you're trying to buy influence.

Castle: You have an ethical problem.

Lee: Yes, I do, and I've always had it, so when I went to Mesquite [Nevada], at some point—I think I supported a few people, and I'm not sure I did, but nominal support to a couple of politicians who I had met, and then everyone was calling me,

and that's not what I wanted, so I let it be known that I don't get involved in local politics by supporting one point of view or another, that it's up to the local people to decide what they want. "And so what if it means that they put you out of business?" I've been asked that, and I say, "They put me out of business."

Castle: That's the second time you've said that in a different context, where you moved from international work—

Lee: I moved away from international.

Castle: —to national, and then even in something as tiny as Mesquite was when you first came to it, you still believed that local—what's at the heart of this, this feeling that local people should be making decisions? Describe this.

Lee: I'm not going to tell the people in Mesquite how they should run their lives or what they should do. That's for the people who live in Mesquite to determine. Things that I do hopefully will help them achieve their objectives. If they feel that what I do, they don't appreciate, I think I have to accept the fact that they can put me out of business. I may not like it, but that's the way it is. Part of it is there's no way that I can spend the time to understand what the problems in Mesquite are, and what should be done. I'm talking about over all. On individual issues, I may be able to study it and come to some conclusion, but when you're not living there and it's not your home, my judgment is more suspect, so I just don't get involved in it.

When I first went to Mesquite, too, I said something, and my gosh, I got more phone calls from people chastising me because I didn't understand everything, and it was true: I didn't understand everything.

Castle: What did you say?

Lee: I can't remember. Mesquite—

Investing in Mesquite; Finding the Next Laughlin; Building Casino Interests

Castle: Briefly tell us—you know, Mesquite is where you—we'll talk about it later.

Lee: I was looking for the next Laughlin. I had an opportunity to invest in Laughlin, and I turned it down. Then, like, five years later, I went to Laughlin for the first time—a second time, because I looked at it the first time—and it was unbelievable how much it had grown, so I asked myself, where's the next Laughlin? Because I want to start buying real estate in the next Laughlin. And I heard about Mesquite, and so I invested in Mesquite.

Castle: So what does that mean to be the next Laughlin?

- Lee: You know, a lot of business. You buy land at one price. The value of it skyrockets.
- Castle: Was this another small town in Nevada?
- Lee: Yes. Oh, that's right. You're from Berkeley. [Chuckles.]
- Castle: I know about it—in terms of the history of tourism and development in Nevada is that there's [sic; there are] these tiny—sometimes they're border—
- Lee: They're on the border, that's right.
- Castle: Okay. So you had come into Mesquite. Okay.
- Lee: When I came to Mesquite, there were maybe a thousand people there, and they'd had a thousand for a long time, and it was losing population. They felt the only way to make the city grow is to allow casinos, so they went out and actually sought casinos to come in and build. The City of Mesquite actually forced me to build my casino. I didn't want—I bought it mainly for land investment, and then my normal way is to lease it to somebody or sell it to somebody to put a casino on, but I couldn't get anybody to do it, and the city really forced me to build a casino.
- Castle: Why couldn't you get anyone to do it?
- Lee: The market wasn't strong enough. The town was too small. At that time, there were already three casinos in town, and they weren't doing—
- Castle: Three casinos for less than a thousand people?
- Lee: Yes, yes. And they forced me—
- Castle: What were the near urban centers that could feed—
- Lee: St. George, Utah, thirty-five miles away. A lot of the business comes from St. George.
- Castle: And how many people were there at that time?
- Lee: St. George?
- Castle: Yes—
- Lee: Sixty thousand.
- Castle: That's not that much. I mean, to support a casino.
- Lee: I think to support a big supermarket, you need 15,000 people.

- Castle: Okay—
- Lee: Well, anyway, the casinos in Mesquite at that time did not do well.
- Castle: Okay, so why was yours going to be better?
- Lee: The city was only interested in forcing me to commit capital. We're friends now, but at that time I was very, very angry that they were doing this to me.
- Castle: And how could they?
- Lee: Oh, they threatened to take away my zoning, my water, my sewage capacity. They said they were holding this water and sewer capacity for my project, and if I didn't go ahead and use it, they would give it to somebody else, in which case there would be no sewer capacity, there would be no water, and I wouldn't be able to build, and then that would reduce the value of my land.
- Castle: That's some serious politics.
- Lee: Yes. And that kind of—a lot of developers in Mesquite engage in politics in Mesquite. They're heavily involved. I refused to be.
- Castle: What do you think bred that kind of political machination?
- Lee: They think you have to do it. Oh. On any issue, it's like 51 to 49 percent, and so when one side loses, the other side—all it's got to do is pick up 2 percent and it changes, and that's what happens in Mesquite. It's constantly changing. Hopefully there's some stability now, but I've been over twenty—well, I don't know, about twenty years, and I have just watched it go back and forth, back and forth. And thank goodness I'm not involved. I'd go crazy.
- Castle: But at the beginning it was pretty tenuous.
- Lee: Yes.

Factors in Leaving Community Development; Board Member of National Dollar Stores

- Castle: Well, you know, I was trying to build up a little bit to Mesquite, so maybe—if we could just go back a little to—you know, we've really kind of closed out for now talking about community development, and I just want you to reaffirm this: The reasons that sent you in a new direction from community development had to do with the rather unpleasant circumstances of the HUD [Housing and Urban Development] nomination and how that fell through, and what are the other factors? You said and then Ernie Hahn appeared.
- Lee: Yes. It's just what happened. There is another factor we haven't alluded to at all, I realized, is that Doris [Shoong Lee] was on the board of her family company, and

normally in a Chinese family, it's the son that you leave the business to. In Doris's case, I think when he was very ill and he was dying, I guess, he had the revelation that his son would be unable to run the business and that Doris—I think he had three children. Of the three children that he had, Doris was the most capable, so he appointed Doris to—they put everything into a voting trust, and she was one of the voting trustees, which gives you power to vote. No economic benefit, but the power to control the business.

At that time, the business was losing money, and the only way they kept the doors open is they were selling real estate and using that money to carry the business. There were some problems, and so they asked me to serve on the board so that Doris and I were both on the board of her father's company, which was the National Dollar Stores. Everyone was very happy that I was on the board because I could make a contribution. I hadn't done anything in that type of store, but anyway, everyone was very happy.

In part, too, as I pointed out, they were selling off real estate to keep the stores open, and I complained that the president of the company had never disclosed this. They knew they were selling real estate, but the board was not aware that they *had* to sell the real estate. Had they not sold the real estate, there wouldn't have been any capital. So when that became obvious to everyone, he resigned.

Castle: Was he a family member?

Lee: No, but a long-time employee. He worked his way up from the very bottom. He just tried to get along, but he really wasn't spending much effort building the business. So when he stepped down, there was nobody to run the company. We were all board members. He steps down; then nothing happened. So then Doris and I would go in, just to see how things [were] going, and we realized that we had never picked a successor to this man, and so Doris and I kind of ran the company for no compensation, deciding what to do.

Well, within a year, the company became very profitable. The same company which for a number of years had been losing money, now it was quite profitable. Well, once it became quite profitable, Doris's brother tried to kick Doris and me off the board. He didn't have to do that. He could have talked to us, but no, he felt that he wanted to run the company, so he tried to kick me and Doris off the board. He succeeded in kicking Doris off. He failed in kicking me off.

Castle: Wow.

Lee: All right?

Castle: Yes.

Lee: Before this, during that year when things were going well, Doris's brother wanted the corporation to stop buying back the stock of public shareholders. I thought

that was wrong, so I offered to buy the stock myself. If the corporation wasn't going to buy it, would there be any objection if I bought it? And the answer was no, and so I was slowly acquiring small amounts of stock. Then we had the dispute. The public shareholders learned of the dispute and did not want to take sides because these were all friends of Doris's father; they didn't want to get involved in a family fight. So they wanted to sell and just get out, and they all called to sell to me. In other words, these people knew how things were going, and they wanted me to have their stock, which I bought. It became a large amount of stock. And so Doris and I then were the largest stockholders, but we still did not control the company. We were the single largest stockholders, more than any other—anybody.

Then eventually I proposed separating our economic interests, and I offered a very good deal to Doris's brother. I offered to give him all the cash, all the retail business, and simply divide the real estate on an equal basis, okay? And that's what we did. So we had a corporation which owned a lot of real estate and no income, because this tended to be raw land that didn't have income.

Castle: Okay. I was going to ask what was the real estate.

Lee: Yes, mainly raw land that did not have income. It included a lot of land in Las Vegas, which at that time nobody wanted.

Castle: Well, things have changed, haven't they?

Lee: That's right. That's right.

Castle: Did you think then—

Lee: It wasn't planned—I'm sorry?

Castle: Did you have any thoughts about Las Vegas then?

Lee: Yes, I thought that Las Vegas had a future because it was the only place gaming was allowed. When you have a monopoly of anything, it tends to appreciate in value more, because it's a monopoly.

Castle: What did this do to the family? I mean, at this point, what kind of family relations does Doris have with her brother?

Lee: What happened—what was interesting was when we started out, everybody was against us. When we pulled out, the whole family pulled out with us!

Castle: Even the brother?

- Lee: Except the brother. But everybody else. So first it was everybody against me and Doris, and then when we got out, they all wanted to be our partners, and so they got out as well. And then everything was left to Doris's brother.
- Castle: Did a lot of this stem from the fact that the business wasn't just left directly to him?
- Lee: Yes. Yes.
- Castle: That's a pretty powerful thing, though, is that if you—the need for economic stability. You know, the father would leave the business, but in a way didn't it destroy—did it destroy the family?
- Lee: What happened was Doris's father was absolutely right, that in the hands of his son—because he eventually bankrupted the company. It's no longer the National Dollar Stores. With all the assets that he had—actually, a couple of years before they closed shop, Doris's brother called me up and asked me if I would serve on his board. I couldn't believe it. And so I said, "Sure," and he said, "We'll pay you \$500"—"No, no, no, I don't want anything, but I'll help you." And so I went on his board and advised him to close down, to sell off his retail and develop his real estate, and he liked it. Then I got a call from his daughter, saying, "Thank you, Ted, but no thanks. You're off the board." I said, "Okay." And all the things that I said could happen, that he should avoid, happened, and he lost everything.
- Castle: I wonder how that came—someone—
- Lee: No, it's just that the way we were running the retail, we couldn't compete.
- Castle: Right. I just wondered what made him turn down your advice and continue on the road that he was on.
- Lee: I thought about that, and one possibility—because what happened later—one possibility is that his daughter didn't like the advice I was giving her father, and rather than try to talk me out of the idea or discuss it, just get rid of it.
- Castle: Right. Does Doris talk with her brother anymore?
- Lee: He's gone. Doris at this point is the sole survivor of her immediate family: father, mother, brother, sister.
- Castle: Was she the oldest?
- Lee: No, she was the second.
- Castle: So getting involved with the National Dollar Stores—how much time did that take up for you? I mean, what else did you have going on? This starts in 1969.

- Lee: The property that we got from National Dollar Stores was largely—not completely but largely undeveloped land, and there was no income. At that time, it wasn't considered very valuable because of the market. It was sitting out there. Nobody wanted it. This is also true—we got some land in Vallejo. Nobody wanted the land in Vallejo. Nobody wanted it. I usually say if you can't push string—you know, if you've got a piece of string, you can't—some things are impossible. If the market isn't there for real estate, there's nothing you can do to change it. That's what I believe. And so we just held the land and just waited for things to change. We continued in urban renewal, and we bought an industrial park. I told you we have a forty-two-unit apartment house in Japantown.
- Castle: In Japantown?
- Lee: Yes. I built that. That's one of the things we built, and I built it with 100 percent financing from the government, and the first three years we actually lost money, and now it's a very valuable piece of real estate in San Francisco.
- We got into this industrial park, where our offices are presently. I can't remember, we just had a lot of little things. I built an office building in the Berkeley Marina.
- Castle: When did you build that?
- Lee: About the same time, because when I picked up Ernie Hahn as a client, Ernie met me at my offices in the Berkeley Marina.
- Castle: Okay. So a lot of things are happening at once right now, but you built offices—so you're working out of your offices in the Berkeley Marina in the early seventies?
- Lee: Yes. I think so, yes.
- Castle: Okay. And you're going through—with the National Dollar Stores, it sounds quite traumatic in terms of the family involvement, but you end with certain pieces of real estate that aren't valuable at all at the time, but you believe they will be.
- Lee: And also we had no choice. I mean, we wanted to separate. He wanted separate; I wanted to separate. I know that real estate will someday be valuable. I mean, any real estate will someday be valuable. This real estate—it was just the market wasn't right, but the property in Vallejo—it took so long for it to have any value, but when it did have some value, in an eighteen-month period we made six, seven, eight transactions, which just changed everything, changed everything.
- Castle: You made a lot of money.
- Lee: Yes. Increased our incomes substantially.
- Castle: And when was that that finally came about?

Lee: Probably about fifteen years ago.

Castle: So were you losing anything? With the National Dollar Store—what was the name of the new business?

Lee: The real estate part?

Castle: Yes.

NDS Investment and Creating Urban Land Company

Lee: We called it NDS—those are the initials of National Dollar Store—NDS Investment. When we pulled our stock out, I changed the name of our holdings to Urban Land Company.

Castle: Was that the first time you used that name?

Lee: No, my card used to say Theodore B. Lee, Urban Consultant, because I was doing the urban renewal stuff, and so I called myself an urban consultant. Then when we took our share of the land from NDS, we called it Urban Land Company.

Castle: And you chose that name?

Lee: Because of the urban—

Castle: Connection for you.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Okay. Who's "we"? It's you and Doris?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: Are you working with anybody?

Lee: Well, Dave [Hertzer?] has been with me for forty years, and he does a lot of things that I need done.

Castle: And he was very involved in the National Dollar Store?

Lee: He was the legal counsel for National Dollar Store for a while. He might even have been secretary or treasurer. I'm not sure.

Castle: Okay. Is it possible—I mean, one of the questions I had written down before I started to talk about it was how do you try and separate personal from business when dealing with family? Did you learn anything from the NDS experiment?

- Lee: See, when you have real estate, somebody's got to take care of it. If you're going to protect its value, somebody has to keep an eye on it and take care of it. I think that the owner should do it, but in a lot of families they hire professional consultants and property managers. I think that's a recipe for disaster.
- Castle: Why is that?
- Lee: After a while, when someone's been taking care of your property for a long time, they forget who it belongs to, and they're good people, but—trust departments. I have sued trust departments on behalf of clients on numerous occasions, and I've always won. How do they get me angry, or my clients angry is because they forget that this asset belongs to my client. You're only responsible for taking care of it. Well, they forget, and then they start charging more and more fees. Every possible excuse to charge fees for, they'll do it. They treat it like it's their own. And I've seen it happen over and over again. And therefore in our own family things, I'm hoping that our family people can take care of themselves. However, if they don't want to or can't, then what do you do? Then what do you do? You may be forced to do it, forced to let somebody else manage.
- Castle: Right, right.
- Lee: But I don't like that.
- Castle: Is that a point where you think the personal and the business—I mean, that's what I was wondering about. That's what you see as being a problem in terms of family business.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: You, as an owner, should not have a property manager.
- Lee: Yes. To do it yourself.
- Castle: Let's stop.
- [End File 9. Begin File 10.]

Ceasing Law Practice

- Castle: At what point—do you actual stop practicing law at a certain point?
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: And when is that, and why did you make that decision, and what happens after that?

Lee: In 1980, Doris and I took the Harvard basketball team to China. I told you how that happened. The kids were—let's see, 1980—they were teenagers. I was then very conscious that—you want to spend some time with your children, and as I say this to you now, people don't realize that in our lifetime we really don't spend that much time with our children. So in 1982, I decided to take a year off, just to travel around the world as a family, just to look and enjoy things and share traveling together. I thought that that would also be a good time to give up the law practice because what was happening is I was spending let's say a quarter of my time, a quarter to a half, solving other people's problems when I really had enough problems of my own that deserved my full attention.

In addition, Doris reminded me that, though I was a practicing lawyer, I never collected very much because, you know, when you've been in practice ten, twenty years, your clients become your friends. If someone calls you for some advice, it's very hard to send them a bill afterwards when someone's a friend, so I found myself sending fewer and fewer bills out and just not collecting for all the time. And yet I'd say I'd retire, I'm not taking on any work, and someone calls up that's got a problem. How are you going to say no? I can say, "I'm too busy. I don't practice law anymore."

I thought that I was going to tell everybody that we were taking a year off, and, "You better get another lawyer because I'm not going to be around to help you legally." I was gone for a year, and I came back. People did not call me anymore. You're away for a year, they will find somebody. That's what happened.

Castle: How old were your kids?

Lee: This happened in 1982, so—

Castle: They were still in school then.

Lee: Yes. Greg had just finished St. Paul's and was accepted at Harvard. He took a year deferment. Ernie had finished Cathedral School, was scheduled to go to St. Paul's, took a year deferment.

Castle: Okay. So you could actually do that. They could be out of school for a year. And where did you all go together?

Lee: We started in Tokyo. We spent a week or two in Tokyo, spending one day—Tokyo is divided into districts, and we spent one day at a district for a week or two.

Castle: Was that your plan?

Lee: Yes, yes. Then we went to Taiwan and enrolled Ernie into the Taipei American School, and Greg studied Chinese at the Taiwan Normal University language programs. From there, we went to Hong Kong.

- Castle: How long did you stay?
- Lee: We spent about two months in Taipei.
- Castle: So that Greg could learn Chinese.
- Lee: Yes, and Ernie enrolled in the local American school.
- Castle: Just to—
- Lee: Took regular courses. You know, we didn't claim any credit for the year that Ernie traveled, but we could have. In hindsight, we could have, and it might have been better, but anyway, we didn't do that.
- Castle: This was a chance for them to really broaden their cultural horizons.
- Lee: But it had unintended consequences.
- Castle: How's that?
- Lee: Ernie came back a much poorer student than he had been before, because he thought he knew it all. That's the unintended consequence. Someday he'll see what I'm saying, and he may have a different explanation, but that's what I think. After that year, he was not the same serious student that he was before we took the year off. Greg learned enough Mandarin—they also studied Mandarin in Singapore, enrolled in the university language program. Greg was able to learn enough Mandarin that he used Mandarin as one of his languages. I guess in Asian Studies you have to have a certain proficiency in Chinese, and he made it. But Ernie—I remember chastising him about studying harder. I said, "How did you do in your French exam?" He said, "I don't know." "Do you know that if you get a high enough score you won't have to take a language at Harvard?" I'm not sure whether he knew or not, so I said, "You ought to know what your score is, and you ought to know what score you need to opt out of taking a language." He went and checked, and he found out [chuckles] that even during this period, his score was sufficiently high that he didn't have to take any language at Harvard.
- Castle: He tested out?
- Lee: Tested out. But he never knew.
- Castle: So was part of the challenge the fact that he's obviously a very naturally bright person, and so the performance around grades didn't seem as important to him?
- Lee: Yes, and I really can't fault him because I was the same way. I didn't care about grades, but I knew what they were, but you didn't find me working extra hard to raise my grades.

- Castle: When do parents learn from their own behavior—
- Lee: [Laughs.]
- Castle: —and be fair to their children? No, you make your children do what you didn't do—
- Lee: That's right.
- Castle: —because you maybe thought you should have. Okay, so we're talking about your trip.
- Lee: Oh. Then from Singapore we went to Bangkok [Thailand]. Let me see where else.
- Castle: Did you ever go to your village?
- Lee: No. At that time, no, we didn't. That was before China really opened up. It was open, but we did not go. Then we went to Italy, which is the family's—one of the favorite places in the world is Rome. We spent I think about a month. Then we went around Germany, where I'd been in the service, and then we went to London. We went to Germany, Switzerland and France, Holland, England, and then we came back, and they started—one started St. Paul's, and the other one started Harvard.
- Castle: So you successfully now stopped practicing law.
- Lee: When I came back, I no longer practiced law.
- Castle: What were you focusing your attentions on now?
- Lee: Developing real estate.
- Castle: Where did you start doing this? I guess the other question is what was your personal business philosophy about real estate development?
- Lee: You know, I don't really remember any project in particular. From then on, I was just making a living doing these things. We controlled a lot of real estate that I knew would someday be profitable, but I believe that you can't create the market. You've got to wait till the market is there and then take advantage of the market, so I did think—but, you know, the next twenty years, I can tell you what I did through that twenty years, but nothing was particularly eventful or memorable, unlike my earlier day, when all these things I was doing was exciting, had a social impact. It was exciting. After that, no. I built small shopping centers; I built small office buildings; I didn't build any apartments. I'm trying to think what I did build. You know, it's during this period that I became most successful because I had the resources to develop. I didn't have to go out and get the resources. I now

had them. We had all this land, we had different things, and the market—I guess part of the reason I could take off a year, too: I thought the market wasn't right.

Castle: So when you say “successful,” again that's equated with—you had the resources.

Lee: Land.

Castle: Land—

Lee: I had the land, yes.

Castle: Does that take some of the challenge out of it for you?

Lee: It took some of the pressure off of me. When you're starting, you have nothing but challenges, but after you build up and you have some resources, it's pressure—you know, not to lose it, to develop it properly, but it's a different kind of pressure.

Castle: You say that you're having a difficult time picking out anything in particular.

Lee: That's right.

Castle: Whereas before, some of these things are imprinted on your memory because of the excitement or the impact or the meaning involved. How did you feel about what you were doing then? I mean, was it not as exciting for you? Was there something to it that's just kind of the grind of capitalism that makes it less thrilling? How would you describe how you were feeling during that period?

Lee: I have to really—it's the most recent and should be the freshest in my mind, but I really draw a blank. Isn't that interesting?

Castle: Part of it is that when you're in the middle of doing something, you don't think philosophically about it usually. You know, you don't often think about bigger picture or question it, you're so busy in the middle doing it.

Lee: Right.

Castle: But you're somebody who's soon going to have their five-year check-in and make a decision about a new direction, because isn't that part of how you—

Lee: Yes. I took that year off also to think. Things must have been slow. Gave me an opportunity [to ask myself], what am I going to do with the rest of my life? It was at that time that I became more active with Harvard and Berkeley.

Castle: Oh, really?

Lee: Yes. I didn't have time before. Now I began to have time.

Castle: Before we get fully into that, I need to make sure I understand the genealogy.

Lee: Do you want to turn off the—

[End of interview.]

[Interview 4; September 28, 2005]

[Begin File 11]

Factors in Father's Immigration to the United States

Castle: Describe to me, as you know it, as it was passed on to you, the factors behind your father's coming to America, and to what degree he shared with you the political or the economic factors that led to his leaving for this country.

Lee: My grandfather—that is, my father's father—was trained to be part of the bureaucracy, and he studied and examined for a position in the bureaucracy, and apparently did very, very well on the tests and was set to go into the bureaucracy, and then there was a revolution in China and they abolished the bureaucracy, so he didn't have a job. He was kind of the philosopher type, teaching school, what have you, but he couldn't farm; he couldn't manufacture; he couldn't do manual labor. My father at a very early age felt that he had the responsibility for supporting the family, so around 1916—my father then was about sixteen years old—the family decided that he should go to the United States to work to support the family, which he did.

Now, my father has told me that we have an ancestor who worked on the railroad, which means that we had members of the family in the United States at an early part in history; that would be around 1850, 1875—I don't know exactly. And so it was decided that he would come to the United States to work. Probably what happened—because my father has always denied that he was not here legally; it was just something he felt very strongly about, that he was here legally. But in fact, he probably was not here legally. He probably came over as the son of someone who was already here.

Anyway, when he was leaving China, my father said to his mother, "Oh, I'm going to the United States, but when am I coming back?" And his mother said, "I don't know." He said, "No, when am I coming back? I got to know when I'm coming back." And she said, "In about twenty years." And my father told me that he then said, "Twenty years? If I knew that it was going to be that long, I wouldn't want to go." But he was boarding the ship, and so he had to go.

When he got over to the United States, he got on a cable car, wherever he arrived, and he was going to go to Chinatown. He was on the cable car when the conduc-

tor yelled out, “Chinatown!” And he was so afraid that he was going to miss Chinatown that he jumped off of a moving cable car, and he sprawled all over the street, but he wasn’t going to take a chance of missing Chinatown. After he got here, he went to Sacramento to work for a short period of time, probably [for] the person who brought him over. I don’t know that person. The name had been given to me years ago, but I never thought of its importance. I wish I had that information now, which I don’t.

Then he learned to be a butcher in Sacramento, and then moved to Stockton to start his own business as a butcher. He was the first butcher of Chinese ancestry in Stockton, and that means that at time, everyone of Chinese ancestry who became a butcher during that period got his start from my father, because if you were looking for a job, you come to Stockton—if you’re Chinese in those days, you go to another Chinese person for a job. He sold meat to restaurants, and he sold meat to my mother’s father, and so he knew that this man he was selling meat to had a daughter.

Castle: The beginning of all good relationships. [Chuckles.]

Lee: My grandfather, who had the restaurant, was probably not a very good businessman, but my father didn’t press him to pay his bills because he wanted to get in and get along with his future father-in-law. Well, my grandfather and father made a deal, and my grandfather gave my mother to my father as a bride. It was an arranged marriage. The only problem is she was too young to get married.

Castle: Do you know how old she was?

Lee: I think fourteen. As a result, they couldn’t officially be married. I don’t know all the details, but I know that they weren’t married officially for a long time.

Castle: But they were living together as—

Lee: They were living and had a family. Had me. I have an older sister. It wasn’t until 1936 that they actually got married.

Castle: So your father got here—

Lee: I was four years old.

Castle: Okay. Interesting. And how old was your father when he began the relationship with your mother? She was fourteen.

Lee: Thirty.

Castle: Wow. Was there anything unusual about that at the time? To have such an age difference?

- Lee: Arranged marriages, I think, were not unusual among Chinese. I don't think it was unusual if it took place in China, but it was unusual here.
- Castle: I just didn't know if that was a factor, the establishment of—
- Lee: In those days, you had the Chinese Exclusionary Act. Among Asians, there were no Asian women because if you were going to sneak somebody in or get somebody in, you wanted to get somebody who could work to make money to send back to China, and so you wouldn't incur the expense of bringing a female. So they were all males. This was also very, very true among Filipinos. They weren't excluded, but among Filipinos—there were a lot of Filipinos in the Stockton area. No Filipino women. None.
- Castle: So in some ways, your father was pretty lucky to find the scenario where he could get a wife.
- Lee: Yes. And my mother was fairly attractive, so he was doubly lucky. [Both chuckle.]
- Castle: It was a bargain. Do you know how old your mother was when she had her first child? And are you the oldest?
- Lee: I'm the second oldest.
- Castle: Second oldest, okay.
- Lee: I think around fourteen. She had me probably when she was about fifteen, sixteen.
- Castle: You've talked about your father and his becoming a butcher. Are there any particular stories he shared with you or things that you witnessed that were descriptive of his experience as the Chinese immigrant, business person he was?
- Lee: He told me how difficult it was to get started. A lot of minorities, a lot of Asians—people don't realize it, but the reason there are so many entrepreneurs, people with their own businesses is because they didn't have the opportunity to get a job.
- Castle: No one would hire them.
- Lee: Nobody would hire them, so if you wanted to work, you had to start your own business. My father told me that when he first started, nobody would sell him meat. But there was a guy who took pity on him, a man named Wagner—I think it was Wagner Meat Company or something. He said, "I'll sell you meat. Just don't tell anyone. I can't let anybody know that I'm selling you meat, so you'll have to come after we're closed. You have to come after five o'clock." So my father would get his meat from Mr. Wagner after five o'clock, when the place was supposed to be closed. He said one time he was there, and an unexpected customer

stopped by to buy from Mr. Wagner, and Mr. Wagner hid my father in the cold box because he didn't want this customer to know that he was selling to my father. So, I mean, that—

Castle: Did you ever get a sense from him—I mean, now, this is kind of a hard one to think about, how he would pass that information on to you, but how this affected him? Because it's hard—you know, the respect, what it does to your sense of self.

Lee: That hurt him a lot, that he had to go through this, which is one of the reasons—he didn't tell me very much about how difficult it was, but that was one thing he did tell me. It had to be something that he remembered and was very hurtful. He also felt, for a long time, that he would always go back to China to die, I guess. I always said, "Why? This is your home?" And then he would say, "Yes, but we'll always be second-class citizens here, and I don't want that." It wasn't until he married—

Castle: He saw home as?

Lee: China.

Castle: Tell me why you think that is, and what the factors were.

Lee: My father felt that home would always be China because he felt that there was too much discrimination against Chinese here, which he didn't like. So actually, after World War II, my father sent most of his money back to China and became the largest landowner in the village. He actually went back and visited and stayed for about six months, and this was the time when the Communists were fighting and winning battles. When my father came back, the Communists hadn't taken over yet. They had reached a certain river. My father was optimistic that the Communists would not take over, but in fact the Communists did take over, with the result that all the land that he had bought in the village, he lost.

Lee: Then when he came back, he had just two or three pieces of property, small pieces, which is all he had, but he had already in his mind planned to retire, so he really didn't go back to work, so he retired at forty-eight years old. He was born around 1900, so forty-eight is 1948.

Castle: So he had been back home what year?

Lee: For six months, '47, '48. The war ended in '45, right? Forty-seven, '48.

Castle: Okay. So he retired. Now, that's a pretty tremendous story of success, though, when you look—

Lee: From what he started from, that's right.

- Castle: They're starting from nothing, and then they're starting in the U.S. as the only Asian-origin group that's actually excluded legally from entering the U.S., to entering the U.S. with little to no connections, not speaking the language, and not actually having a skill at that time—
- Lee: My father always said, "It's not how much you earn, it's how much you save." He was very, very careful about saving money. I think that I can remember all together less than six times eating in a restaurant. My mother always cooked, and we always ate at home. Remember, we had a meat market and grocery stores, so food was readily available, and my father felt we ate very, very well because we ate a lot of meat, and we had a meat market and there was a lot of meat around.
- Castle: Do you have any memories of wanting for things?
- Lee: No. We weren't allowed to drink soda pop, very little ice cream, only juice and milk and water. In other words, very, very healthy. My father was very proud that we always had so much meat on the table, because when he grew up, there was no meat. He told me that when he was growing up, they would have a little piece of meat they would cook for flavor, but that one piece of meat, which was very small, was for everybody at the table, and now—
- Castle: So meat was a sign of success.
- Lee: —we had veal chops and lamb chops and all that stuff, and he didn't have any of that growing up.
- Castle: That's a strong measure. I think that's part of it, is that each generation has—you each create your own kind of bar of at what point do your children surpass your experience, and that's what your father was able to provide and see that you were now living in a way that represented success. I mean, if you could have meat and you can have the security—I mean, it's still remarkable that he was able to retire at forty-eight, and retire comfortably. But, of course, it sounds like his version of comfortable didn't necessarily reflect, even then, American consuming patterns.
- Lee: Yes. The only thing that he splurged on was a car. He always had a nice car.
- Castle: Why do you think that is?
- Lee: I find that for a lot of people, a car represents status.
- Castle: So is it similar?
- Lee: I think that, but other things, he didn't care about: the way he dressed. Of course, the home that we lived in when he came back from China and saw that he wasn't going to be able to go back to China was a very nice home, but in the wrong part of town. But it was a very nice home, and it was a home that he was very, very proud of, he was very happy to live in.

- Castle: What would you say—
- Lee: As a matter of fact, the home is on historical rolls in Stockton now.
- Castle: Why is that?
- Lee: It's a nice home.
- Castle: Oh, okay.
- Lee: [Laughs.]
- Castle: Okay. I didn't know if there was other accomplishments attached to it.
- Lee: It was one of the nicer homes of Stockton, in its day. But he didn't pay much for it because who wants to have a nice home in the wrong part of town?
- Castle: Right. What would you say you learned from him? What are the lessons that he passed on to you: good or bad?
- Lee: Well, to save. To this day, I'm not a big spender.
- Castle: That's probably how you keep the money on your side. [Chuckles.]

Maternal Influences

- Lee: And also, he brought his whole family over from China, at his expense. My mother had done that for her family as well, had helped. So I guess that as a family, we've learned to help each other.
- Castle: How did your mother influence you? I mean, in a lot of ways she was a very important support. Obviously, your father couldn't have done what he did, it sounds like, without—
- Lee: My mother had an eighth-grade education, so she knew English very well. She was an outgoing person, liked, and I think that that helped, helped him. My father was also a very outgoing person. He's one of these waiters or butchers and everything who are very outgoing to their customers. He's one of those who called all the customers "sweetheart" or something like that. "What do you want to eat tonight? We've got this, we've got that." But he was very outgoing.
- Castle: That sounds like it would have been an important trait in aiding him as a Chinese business person at that time.
- Lee: Yes. He was outgoing in a way that you didn't see other Chinese men being outgoing. In fact, that's what struck me as I was growing up, watching him. I never saw anybody else behave like that.

- Castle: It sounds like he wasn't held back by maybe social taboos.
- Lee: That's right, he was not.
- Castle: I imagine that sometimes that caused problems for him, and other times it's what allowed him success.
- Lee: He was always the boss, so it never caused any problems that way. He owned the store. He was a likeable person because he was outgoing.

Entering the Casino Business

- Lee: I never closed when I built the Eureka, and because one of my customers told me that I had to stay open; otherwise, she wouldn't know what to do with herself—have I told you that?
- Castle: I don't know if we talked about it on camera, so let's—
- Lee: But that actually happened. That's interesting.
- Castle: Let's—
- Lee: Have I told you how I got into it and why?
- Castle: Let's start with that. If we could start by—you know, at what point—when did it occur to you? How did the idea come into your head, and why did you start getting involved in gaming?
- Lee: Well, first, my wife and I have been in the real estate business in Las Vegas for a lot of years, and we always wanted to avoid getting into the casino business. When you own real estate, you can always get into the casino business. But my father didn't like gambling and being in the casino gambling business because a lot of Chinese are involved in gambling in California. In fact, most of the wealthy Chinese—their background is gaming. So my father did not want to have any part of it, and my wife's father did not want to have any part of it, and so maybe that carried down to us, and we actually avoided the gaming business.
- Castle: Why did your father and father-in-law distance themselves from gaming?
- Lee: In my father's case, my father was very proud that he was relatively successful without—
- Castle: Without engaging in that type of [cross-talk; unintelligible].
- Lee: Without engaging that type of activity he didn't even like selling liquor, my father. We never had a store that sold liquor, because he didn't want to sell liquor, and he didn't want to be involved in gambling.

- Castle: Just to take a second there. I mean, that's an interesting proposition because as a business person in a capitalist society, you kind of usually want to exploit all your avenues for profit. What do you think is behind your father's thinking?
- Lee: He just didn't want to promote drinking. He himself did not drink at all until really after he retired. He heard that a glass of wine was good for you— some of his Italian friends, and so he would occasionally have a glass of wine, but that was when he was fifty years old or older, not as a young person.
- Castle: Right. And just because you mentioned it, you referenced his Italian friends. Did he have a rather multicultural or a multiracial set of people?
- Lee: They never visited each other's homes, but yes, he had Syrian friends, Lebanese friends, Italian, Greek.
- Castle: So where did they interact?
- Lee: In business. All the groups I mentioned were all engaged in the food business: either restaurants or wholesale grocers or labor contractors. You know, Alex Spanos is Greek ancestry. He's probably the most successful person to come out of Stockton, Greek ancestry. Serving food to farm laborers is how he got his start.
- Castle: So out of both necessity and then probably human nature, they learn to work together and appreciate each other.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: Because they're reliant upon each other, right?
- Lee: Because Italians had some problems being accepted, Greeks had some problem—
- Castle: Was there some bonding around minority status?
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: So you're father is retiring and starting to drink maybe a glass of wine. [Laughs.]
- Lee: That's right.
- Castle: In the Italian tradition of a glass of red wine or something like that.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: So from the beginning, these lands that you owned in Vegas, you were specifically trying to not get involved in gaming, so what happened?

- Lee: I got a phone call from a business licensing department, from someone whom I did not know. I know him today; at that time, I did not know him. And he said, "Ted, you probably don't realize it, but you own this bar on Sahara Avenue. You don't know that that bar has an unrestricted gaming license, which is very, very valuable. No matter what happens, don't lose that license." I didn't understand what he was talking about, so I went to see my attorney, and I told him I had gotten his call, and he didn't understand.
- Castle: Oh, boy!
- Lee: So he said, "Ask him to put it in writing." And I foolishly, ungratefully—I ungratefully asked him to please put it in writing. And I would not have been surprised if he didn't. He was doing me a favor, and I'm asking him to put it in writing? Well, he put it in writing. I read it, my attorney read it, and we understood that this license could be very, very valuable.
- Castle: Right, so he was just trying to give you the heads-up—
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: Like, a down-low nod that says, "Do you realize"—
- Lee: People don't know I know, because I'm in the regulatory part of the county. Anyway, so that was in the back of my mind. Okay. Then the bar came up for sale. The guy wanted to retire. And so I bought it from him, and it was a big decision on whether I wanted to buy from him to operate a little casino. We agonized over that for a while, and we bought it.
- Castle: And who's involved in the decision when you say "we"?
- Lee: My wife and myself, Doris and I.
- Castle: As business partners?
- Lee: All the business that we've done, we've always done together. And actually, if we were going into the business, I wanted the whole family to be involved, so our oldest son was also made a part of it. We opened—we took over the business but didn't want to run it. We owned it. We hired a company called United Coin, now known as Alliance Gaming to manage the business on I think it was a 75 percent25 percent split. They ran it for a year and couldn't make any money. They constantly complained that they couldn't make any money. So I said, "Just give it back to me, and I'll do it myself." My son ran it for about six months, and in the process learned how much he didn't know, so he said, "Dad, I think I got to go to law school. I can't go in business without more training." So I said, "Fine." And this was, like, January, February of the year.
- Castle: And what year is it?

Lee: Probably around '89. And so he said, "I'll go to law school." He'll apply for the next year because it was too late to apply to law school now. And I said, "Why wait? You're just going to lose a year." He said, "How are you going to run this bar yourself?" And I said, "Don't worry about it. I will run the bar. You go to law school." So he then checked around, and ended up attending USC that August, September. He was in law school for three years. I took over managing, and I increased business a little bit but not enough to devote the time and effort and the resources that I was devoting to this little casino, so I decided that the only way is that I'd have to build—well, also the toilets didn't work very well, and when I got a price to fix up the toilets, I said to my contractor, "My gosh, I can't afford to remodel. I'll have to build a new place. It costs as much as to build a new place." And he says, "This building is so old, I'd recommend that you tear it down and build a new one." So then I thought, maybe that's what I have to do, so I announced that we were going to tear it down and build a new one.

And then one of my retired female customers walked up to me and said, "Mr. Lee, are you going to tear this place down and build a new casino?" I said, "Yes." "How long is it going to take?" I said, "I don't know." "No, you've got to tell me. How long is it going to take." "I don't know." "Give me an approximate." I said, "Six months." She said, "You can't do that." "What do you mean I can't do that?" "What am I going to do with myself for six months if you're closed?" That had a real impact on me, because I saw how important my little casino was to this retired lady. It was her life. I've since learned people like her would come in for fifteen minutes, a half an hour—it depends on how long it takes for her to go through her money, because if you play long enough, you cannot win in a casino. You cannot. So if you're playing every day, there's no way that you're going to win.

Now, you could temporarily win, but I'm talking that over the long haul, you can't win. At the same time, I saw that we were providing entertainment, and it's an entertainment that she needed, and so I said, "Here's what I'll do. I promise you that I will be closed as short a period of time as possible so that we don't have to be closed any longer than necessary." Well, after I made her that promise, I was able to build a whole new casino without closing a single day.

Castle: Now, how was that possible?

Lee: I built the new building around the old building, over and around it. Then I tore the old building out from the outside, and as I tore parts of it, I finished it; I tore out this part, and I finished it; tore out this part, and I finished it.

Castle: How much more difficult was that to do?

Lee: In fact, it didn't turn to be more difficult at all. The advantage that I had—when people saw what I was doing, they talked about this casino.

Castle: Ah, people were curious.

Lee: People are curious, and so the business kept getting better, even as we were remodeling, and once we finished remodeling—not remodeling, building a new building. Once we finished building the new building, business just took off. But a lot of people talked about this little place.

Castle: So do you think your decision about how you chose to rebuild really increased—

Lee: Yes, and that's luck. It wasn't planned that way. It just happened because I was trying to be nice.

Castle: What it is about this woman who came to you that really—I mean, when she first said this to you, weren't you kind of worried that she was just a gambling addict? How is that you began to know the industry to decide?

Lee: When I saw how important it was—I didn't even know her, so she didn't spend a lot of money with us, but it was important—and actually I had met a retired waitress that came in fifteen—I think she told me she budgeted five or ten dollars a day, and that would last fifteen to thirty minutes, and how important it was for her. You know, when you think about it, when you're elderly and you're not taking cruises and what have you, there really isn't that much entertainment available. I've changed a little bit. When you look at it as providing entertainment, how's that any different than providing golf, tennis, bowling? It's exactly the same. As a matter of fact, the customers that I have, some of them, spend a lot less than somebody else who goes bowling all the time or plays golf all the time, a lot less. And yet that's acceptable.

And the other thing we do, though, is that we don't encourage gaming. We don't extend credit. I refuse to extend credit for the customers' sake because you may end up borrowing more than you can afford to lose.

Castle: So you don't provide the environment that would—like, for example, somebody who may be addicted or—you know, make it easier for them to lose their money.

Lee: There was a person who I felt was gambling too much, and so I told her to go home. "You played enough today. Please go home. Come back tomorrow." And she says, "No, I don't want to." I said, "Really, I think it's best that you go home." She said, "I'll never come back. If you do this to me, I'll never come back." Guess what. She left and never came back.

Castle: Well, she's in another casino. She probably has nothing left now.

Lee: [Chuckles.]

Castle: But it was more important—

Lee: I just felt that she was—partly she was too tired. She didn't know how she was playing, and I didn't like that.

- Castle: We were talking about this woman who made this request of you. You really saw the casino at that point as being more of a Cheers environment in terms of—
- Lee: Yes. That woman did that for me. When she appealed to me not to be closed, and how important it was to her. I thought, my gosh, we're like a Cheers.
- Castle: When you first started getting involved—you talk about how you built Eureka, the casino in Vegas. Can you describe kind of what the casino is like compared to—I mean, a lot of people now, when we talk about casino, they think of the highly marketed strip casinos. Could you give me a sense of maybe—I don't know if it's hierarchy, but what's the lay of the land in terms of types of casinos or where you go for certain entertainment. I mean, it would be nice to get kind of your view of the larger picture of Vegas.
- Lee: A lot of my customers live in very modest apartments. It's not the kind of apartment that you would invite guests to, so if you want to get together with your friends, they will get together at Eureka, and if you play the machines, all the drinks are free. If you don't want to play the machines, the drinks are, like, a dollar to two dollars—I mean, very, very inexpensive.
- Castle: Is this soft drinks or alcoholic drinks?
- Lee: Alcoholic drinks. The most expensive drink to give away, and we give away a lot—the most expensive drink to give away is a bottle of beer.
- Castle: So it's really a local casino.
- Lee: Yes. And the new one we opened in Mesquite is also a locals' casino because that's what we know best. You can't be all things to all people, and I think we do best being a locals' casino, giving value, being friendly, making people feel welcome and not pushing them to gamble.
- Castle: So it sounds like your business model for gaming really reflected partly your reluctance to get into it in the first place.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: And then some modicum of ethics, which isn't something that people normally connect to gambling.
- Lee: Some people don't focus on that. We did.
- Castle: When you first began the investment in the gaming in Vegas or Mesquite—at one point you used the phrase, “other people's money,” and I was wondering if you could describe what that means in terms of startup costs or how different people enter a business model.

Lee: I don't use OPM. Most people do. I don't. What I do is I start very modestly, only what I can afford to lose, and build the business that way.

Castle: Which is why your goal isn't Mandalay Bay.

Lee: That's right.

Developing in Mesquite

Castle: What did you observe when you first came to the Vegas scene, as a developer, and what did you observe about the life of other casino developers? You had mentioned some kind of stories from when you first started, and then maybe how things have changed over time.

Lee: I guess that until I built the casino in Mesquite, which was a large casino, and it's a full-service casino—

Castle: What does that mean?

Lee: It had everything. The one in Las Vegas is only slot machines, but the one in Mesquite has everything. It has poker, blackjack, craps—

Castle: So card games table.

Lee: Yes, — I got into the business in an unexpected way as well. Somebody came and asked me to loan him a lot of money to buy some land in Mesquite. He was buying it at a very good price. If I would put up the money, within a year he would sell it for a substantial profit, which would be shared with me. Now, this person was a very influential person, and I felt he knew what he was talking about, so I loaned him the money. Actually it wasn't him; it was a group of about four, all influential people. I loaned the money. One year goes by. Nothing happens. Two years go by, and nothing happens. I say, "This wasn't what I bargained for." So they said, "We can't sell it, so we'll sell it to you." At the end, they couldn't pay me back. I bought them out because they were people that I knew, and I wanted to be more than fair.

After we bought it, we sat on it for about five years and nothing happened, and Doris was very, very disappointed.

Castle: What were you expecting to have happened?

Lee: Somebody to come and buy us out.

Castle: I see.

Lee: That was the intention. After two years, my partners dropped out. Five years later, we still—

- Castle: Nobody's come knocking at the door.
- Lee: Nobody's come knocking on the door. [Laughs.]
- Castle: I hear you.
- Lee: Okay? Then I get a call from the city. They said, "Ted, this casino land that you bought? When are you going to develop it?" And I said, "Not now, because there's too much capacity already, money." And they said, "They are making money. I don't care what they tell you. They're all making a lot of money, and we want you to build a casino." And I said, "I don't want to." "If you don't build a casino, we're going to take away your zoning, we're going to take away your sewer access, we're going to take away your water access, and what will your property then be worth? A lot less than what it is now." I was mad. In fact, I reminded the present mayor of Mesquite what they had done to me, and he claims that he didn't know about it. [Laughs.]
- Castle: Had that happened to you before?
- Lee: Never.
- Castle: Had anybody tried to strong-arm you into development?
- Lee: Never. Never. And I had told them, "You think you're going to get more taxes. Let me tell you, you're going to get less taxes because if there's too much capacity, all the casinos are going to begin losing money, and when you lose money, the casinos are worth less money. If it's worth less, your taxes are less." Well, that is exactly—I built it. That is exactly what happened. And for three years, we lost money like mad. Then for the next two years, we broke even, so at the end of five years, we were still deep in the hole, and I was really mad at the city because it not only happened to me, it happened to everybody in the city, just as I had predicted.
- Castle: That would be a pretty stressful work environment.
- Lee: Well, I tell you, during that period was probably the most stressful period in my life, ever. Yes, it was stressful. In fact, the people at Harvard—I had made pledges that I had to hold off on because I didn't have the resources. But fortunately I did not borrow a lot of money; they were my own resources. If I had to pay interest as well, that would have really been tough.
- Castle: You've often expressed a pretty strong sentiment about really doing what you want to do with your life and kind of reevaluating at certain points. What were you thinking when you found yourself in this situation? Especially not having wanted to go into gaming, right?

- Lee: Yes. I looked back on my life, and at that point I didn't know how things were going to go.
- Castle: Did you really think this might be, like, the beginning of the end for you?
- Lee: Yes, because of my age, that I stayed in business too long. My judgment wasn't—on hindsight, they could have made all those threats; let them do it. That's what I should have done. But now that things have turned out well, then that's not necessarily the case.
- Castle: But one of the things you're saying, which I don't think we hear often, is you losing some confidence in your judgment as a business person.
- Lee: You know, up until that time, I had very few failures. I made a number of decisions which were not appreciated by most people in the industry. When I did not do well, the reasons given were not that the market was lousy, which was the real reason; it's because Ted did something that nobody else does. Number one, I built the hotel away from the casino. No one does that. You build a hotel adjacent to the casino and make them walk through the casino to register.
- Castle: Right.
- Lee: I didn't like doing that. If you don't want to gamble, then don't gamble. You don't have to walk through a casino to stay in my hotel. That's number one. Number two, if you put the hotel next to the casino, you take away a lot of convenient parking. If you take the casino away from the hotel, now you can park on four sides of the casino, easy in and easy out. Anyway, when things weren't going well it's because Ted built—
- Castle: Crazy Ted.
- Lee: That's right. And I began to think they were right, because they were all saying it. "Ted really screwed up this time." And I spent a lot of money on a very good air conditioning system. I told everybody that I have the freshest air in any casino in town. Well, people thought that I spent a lot of money for nothing. "Nobody else does it, Ted. Why did you do it?" Then we had our first focus—what do they call it?
- Castle: Focus group?
- Lee: Focus group. And we asked these people, "What do you like most about Eureka?" And guess what it was: fresh air. "What do you like the next?" Convenient parking. And then slowly the word has gotten out. People realize what we provide, which is fresh air and convenient parking, and our business has just steadily grown. But nobody else does it. We're still the only casino in town that does that.

Castle: So the time line between Eureka and Mesquite, Nevada—and what's the population of Mesquite? What's the.

Lee: When we made our original investment around 1988, there were 1,200 people.

Castle: [Laughs.] That's not a lot of people.

Lee: That's right. Today it's 18,000. But more importantly, thirty-five miles away in Utah is the town of St. George. When we made the investment initially, there were 55,000 people in St. George. Today, 175,000.

[End File 11. Begin File 12.]

Lee: When I got into the business, I was apprehensive, and I asked the gaming control people, "Do I have to worry about someone coming to me and making me an offer I can't refuse? Does that happen?" And they said, "We don't think so." I said, "If it does happen, what do I do?" And the guy said, "You tell us, and we'll take care of it," and that was very reassuring, because if you don't know anything about the business, which I didn't, and you're getting into it for the first time and I've heard all these things—now, Nevada probably is the most regulated state in the country, and it would be very difficult to do anything wrong, whereas some of the other states, I just don't know. But where Nevada casino operators have gone into other states, they've often gotten into difficulty, legal difficulty.

Castle: Because there isn't as much regulation?

Lee: Yes, and they thought they could get away with certain things—

Castle: Oh, I see.

Castle: —and couldn't.

Castle: I see.

Lee: Including Hilton. Hilton Hotel got into trouble. Arizona Charlie's got into trouble. Palace Station got into trouble.

Castle: Some type of legal conflict?

Lee: They had to pay a fine. They sold their business and dropped out, and that ended the investigation.

Castle: So did you ever encounter any situations—

Lee: No.

Castle: That just hasn't been part of your experience?

Lee: No.

Castle: Okay. One of the things it will be interesting to know is—you know, in terms of the skill set you had developed at this point, really being a pioneer in low-cost housing and urban development, did you find that there were connections? Are there similarities? Was it a very different kind of business getting into gaming, and what did you carry over and what did you learn that was new?

Importance of Community Ownership

Lee: When I was in low-income housing and community building, I tried very hard to involve the people that I was trying to help, to give them credit, and all my low-income housing or subsidized housing was done under nonprofit ownership, and not limited dividend ownership. In other words, I could have built some of these projects for myself and just limit the return I could get, but I never did that. All my projects, I did as a nonprofit and allowed the community to own the projects.

Castle: Why did you do that?

Lee: In those days, I felt that it was fairer for people to own their own housing. I was a little bit against landlords in those days.

Castle: Now, you say "in those days." Does that mean that you changed over time?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: In what way?

Lee: I found that there is only one nonprofit ownership project that I've done which I can say is a resounding success, and that's the housing in Japantown, San Francisco. All the others have not done well, because when there's no profit incentive, the owners don't care. That's what I learned.

Castle: We'll talk about that in particular tomorrow. Back to the original question, which was you were talking about—in doing low-cost housing, you wanted to really devolve a lot of not control necessarily but to a certain involvement to the people you were working with.

Lee: And also control. I wanted to give control to the people who were going to live there, but I learned that if there's no profit, they would rather not have the responsibility of managing the project. When that happens, the project goes down very rapidly. Most of the projects that I've done, over half went into financial foreclosure, only because we couldn't get anyone to care.

Castle: So without the profit incentive, there wasn't the investment in—

- Lee: They were not willing to put in the time and effort to make a project successful.
- Castle: So in some ways you're talking about—you have a certain idealism.
- Lee: Yes. Was shattered. Yes, that happened.
- Castle: And that happened as a process of watching project after project—
- Lee: Yes, that's right.
- Castle: What do you think are the elements behind that? Was it just human nature
- Lee: Yes, human nature. Now, the one you're going to see tomorrow in Japantown. I made a special effort to involve the entire Japanese community of San Francisco and made it a very visible project so that people had to care. I started out with one nonprofit client. I beat everybody in getting the award, because you have to bid on these things; you have to compete for them. After I secured control over the project, I invited the nonprofits who had competed against me—I invited them to join for the benefit of the Japanese community in San Francisco, and so I ended up getting, like, thirteen Japanese nonprofits to join and form a single nonprofit organization. It's called Japanese- American Religious Federation.
- Castle: What we'll do is—and maybe off tape we'll do this, just to kind of make sure we've got good questions for tomorrow—I've got that down.
- You did most of your—I mean, you've got a pretty good span of time between urban redevelopment and the beginning of your involvement in gaming.
- Lee: Oh, well, I did a lot of real estate. After I got out of housing, I did real estate. Let me think. I did real estate, and then I went into gaming. I still did real estate while I was doing gaming.
- Castle: Describe for me how did the nature of business change for you? Were you doing more of what you enjoyed? You've always talked about that being a priority. We started to talk about this. Were there certain skills that were useful to you in gaming that you learned in urban redevelopment? How would you describe it? Maybe that's not a question.
- Lee: In both areas, it pays to get along with people.
- Castle: You have more success.
- Lee: Yes, because you have people helping you instead of fighting you.
- Castle: Were there things about the gaming business that were unexpected in terms of challenges you had to deal with or conflicts due to the nature of the fact that the product is money?

Lee: People can take advantage of casinos effortlessly, and I had to learn to live with that. There's more litigation when you own a casino. Every little thing leads to a lawsuit.

Castle: And you hadn't had that experience with other—

Lee: No, not to the same extent. Actually, it's casinos and theme parks. I owned a theme park, and my gosh, the litigation there.

Castle: What kind of cases?

Lee: They want to participate in the theme park business, and then once you allow them to participate at all, they end up suing you to make more money.

Castle: What type of individuals are these? These are other businesses?

Becoming Active as an Alumni; Motivation for Philanthropy

Lee: They're promoters, people in the promotion business, yes. And it's been a real eye opener.

Castle: Let's talk about your—we have talked about this on tape before, so we don't necessarily need to go over it in detail, but you talked about your help, sponsorship and efforts in getting the Harvard basketball team to China in 1980, and then—because what I wanted to talk about was your first kind of significant donation and/or work in fundraising for education, and how you got involved in it and what motivates you to do it, so if you could kind of trace that through for me, that you returned from China and what happens next?

Lee: I took the Harvard basketball team to China in 1980, and when I got back, I had one son going into St. Paul's. We had had no relation with St. Paul's at all, and yet I was asked to head the parents' association.

Castle: Could you give a little context to St. Paul's? What is it? What kind of reputation does it have?

Lee: St. Paul's is an elitist prep school in Concord, New Hampshire. It's a very, very nice place, and it's a place that everybody wants to send their children; if not everyone, a lot of people. Our son wanted to go there, so we said okay. And then you go back, my first visit, and they asked me to chair the parents' association, and I was shocked that they would think about me, much less know me. And so a short time later, I asked somebody—I can't remember who it was—"How did you happen to pick me? Of all these people coming in, how did you pick me to be the head of the parents' association?" Because when you take that job, you're also expected to do a lot of fundraising.

Castle: Right.

- Lee: And he says, “Oh, we heard about your taking the Harvard basketball team to China, and Bill [Oates?], the headmaster, said, ‘That’s the kind of guy we need heading up the parents’ fund.’”
- Castle: So it’s something that’s quite prestigious,—
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: —as well as it’s a lot of work, too.
- Lee: Yes. Yes. Well, once you start giving there, and my twenty-fifth reunion would be—let’s see, ’54, ’64, ’74, ’79—the China trip was ’80. First, I had never gone back to Harvard until my twentieth reunion. That would be ’74. I went mainly to find out whether I’d go back for my twenty-fifth. Well, you’re not supposed to bring your whole family, but we did. We didn’t know you weren’t supposed to bring your whole family. We had heard that the twenty-fifth reunion, you bring your whole family. We assumed all reunions you bring your whole family. But I brought Greg, and Greg had such a good time, he said, “Dad, I’d love to go to Harvard.” And I remember saying, “Not the way you’re going, but if you really want to go to Harvard, then you better start working right now.” So he transferred from Punahou School to a school in San Francisco, Cathedral School, and he started studying. I made my first significant gift—and I can’t remember how much it was, but for me that was significant—at my twenty-fifth reunion. I had such a good time, they put me on the Harvard College Fund committee board. I’m still on it, okay?
- Castle: So you’ve been on it since then?
- Lee: I’ve been on it since then, that’s right.
- Lee: It’s fundraising, fundraising for my class. And then once you start giving, they keep asking, and if it’s something you believe in and can afford it, you do it. Everyone, I think, is that way.
- Castle: And then it sounds like you actually have to do some work to kind of keep up, to support your habit, your gift-giving habit. [Laughs.]
- Lee: I’ve said that after my twenty-fifth reunion, I could have retired business wise, and I jokingly say that I’ve not retired because I’ve got too many pledges out there.
- Castle: [Laughs.] You’ve got to make good on them?
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: One of the things about fundraising, too—I mean, do you enjoy doing it? Because I think it always have a stigma of people—you know, it’s about money.

- Lee: I'm not a hard-sell person. I have no problem asking and being turned down. I don't get upset. It really makes no difference to me. I've asked. "If you want to do it, you give; if you don't want to, fine."
- Castle: I guess that helps because as far as you're concerned, too, you don't take offense if someone asks you, it's just, "Here's the deal," and then if not, you just turn it down. And so if you keep that mentality when asking others, it's just yes or no.
- Lee: That's right.
- Castle: It's not personalized or anything.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: Okay. So it was your twenty-fifth reunion before you start this relationship that you still have with Harvard in terms of being a donor. What are your feelings towards Harvard when you look back? I mean, was the impact that Harvard had on your life one of the reasons why you are compelled to give, or how does it fit into your thoughts, what Harvard meant to you, what it has meant to you over the years?
- Lee: I recognize that Harvard has been very good to me. Do I feel an obligation? I feel an obligation to anyone who's ever done anything for me. I kind of remember. I told you that I'm accepting this position at the East-West Center because I used to work there. They gave me my start.
- Castle: Just to make sure we kind of have it clear, all the different places, all the different institutions that you have benefited from in some way, you support, basically.

Academic Philanthropy; the Importance of Breadth in Education

- Lee: Yes, that's right.
- Castle: And what are all those places? You don't need to think of all them, but in terms of the places that you really continue to support or spent a significant amount of time with.
- Lee: Harvard and Berkeley.
- Castle: And you have two schools within Berkeley.
- Lee: The Law School and the Business School. I took courses in the School of Environmental Design so I support that school as well at Berkeley. I didn't get a degree.
- Castle: Why did you take those courses, and how did that affect you?

- Lee: I knew I wanted to go into real estate, and I felt there were certain things that I needed to know, and I found the courses in the School of Environmental Design would satisfy my need.
- Castle: That's part of a pattern that you talked about, that has emerged from you talking, which is you really do—a lot of people fake their way through things, but it sounds like when you feel you need training or you need something, you seek it out; you go take classes in it.
- Lee: That's right.
- Castle: You get involved.
- Lee: In fact, for a long time—when I was living in Hawaii, I took half a dozen courses for credit in areas that I thought I needed help.
- Castle: Just to bolster your skill set.
- Lee: Yes. People don't do things like that anymore, but I did.
- Castle: So the environmental design courses—what were you after when you took courses in that?
- Lee: When I finished, I wanted to hold myself out as a real estate attorney consultant. There weren't people trained like that at that time. I wanted to get into urban renewal and didn't know how to do it, so I thought I'd go back to school and learn about real estate, learn about housing, learn about planning.
- Castle: And did that help you?
- Lee: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, when I was doing a project in Sacramento, I was eating at a restaurant, and the chairman of the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency was sitting at the next table, and she said, "Are you on the program tonight?" And I said, "Yes." And she says, "Oh, good." And I said, "Why do you say that?" She said, "Because I like to hear you paint the pictures, the things that you say." I learned all that going through—reading Jane Jacobs. People in business and law didn't read Jane Jacobs. I did, so that when I went before the Sacramento Redevelopment Agency, I could present projects as Jane Jacobs—with her ideas. And it's impressive. Here's a lawyer that's just talking about Jane Jacobs.
- Castle: Right, right. So you really demonstrated a knowledge of the field.
- Lee: Yes, and it was appreciated. This chairwoman appreciated what I was saying, and that makes you feel good. It's worth going to school extra to be able to do that.

- Castle: So it's both, it sounds like, for just a professional and business edge but also for your own personal sense of self, to feel like you're doing the best job that you can.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: You were mentioning when it comes to donation or gift giving to the various schools that you've attended or your boys have attended, that it's a beginning of a relationship that seems to last and last.
- Lee: [Chuckles.] And continue and continue, yes.
- Castle: I'm trying to think. As we've talked about your life through the years, you've at times kind of talked about politics and maybe talked about a particular political party, but you haven't been very wedded to one in particular. How would you describe your political belief system, having changed over time, and what is it that influenced it and what have you learned?
- Lee: I think I'm still concerned about the have-nots and how people who don't have anything—society's responsibility to take care of them. At the same time, I am more conservative and believe that you provide the environment for people to take care of themselves rather than just take care of them. I'm more conservative than I used to be. Like, at one time, all of the apartments that I built were for public ownership, not for private ownership. Well, today I wouldn't do that; I would only do it for private ownership. If someone came to me and asked me to help them do a nonprofit housing project, I'd do it, but I wouldn't necessary think that was the best way.
- Castle: This is a good way to flesh some of these issues out. I wanted to ask you about this. From your experience—and I don't know how much you've paid attention, but I think anybody has some working knowledge of it at this stage—you know, the manmade and natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina brings to fore a great number of the issues I think you've dealt with throughout your life in terms of—some of them around race and inequality, some of them around access to the tools or equal opportunity. A lot of those things are in play now, where the national scene has finally come looking at things they might not have known unless they had done a job like yours, for example. From your experience, what do you think either is going to happen and/or what would you recommend doing when it comes to rebuilding, for example, and affordable housing, and the fact that so many of the displaced people are some of the most vulnerable? And then also balancing that with who the federal government is right now or developers, all those things. It's got a lot of those elements going on. What would you say about that?
- Lee: Oh, golly. I've followed what's happened, and I really don't know, but they're talking now, on major catastrophes, turning it over to the military to handle because they're equipped to handle larger projects. That's probably true, but I tell you, I don't know. I can see problems. I don't like the concentration of power in

the hands of a few people because you depend on the honesty and goodwill—when you have to depend on the honesty and goodwill, that's kind of dangerous. Yes, I don't know.

Castle: Here's a specific question, just from your experience. For example, how does one rebuild? The Ninth Ward is where mostly an African-American, low-income population lived. And this is a general question; it doesn't even have to pertain to this specific example. Is it possible to actually have an integrated, multi-class kind of housing area, and what would that look like, and how would one achieve that?

Lee: You have that now. In most government projects or projects the government is involved in, they require 25, 35 percent of the housing to be subsidized, so you're having a mix of income families, and that's why they do it. So you've got that already. And with the housing shortage, there's ample demand for these mixed-income projects. Some of them are even condominium[s]. You have to sell a certain percentage at a subsidized price, at a reduced price, which means that the remaining units pay more.

Castle: Right, right. Well, I think it brings into issue a lot of other questions which we don't have to really talk about for these purposes, but I was just thinking in terms of the amount of experience you had in really slugging it out in the trenches of a lot of that. In some ways, this kind of brings up a lot of the negative parts of all that for you. So when you talk about—I know you are thinking of yourself as both economically and socially more conservative now than you once were?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: And that leads into the question, kind of as a minority business person—

Lee: You asked whether it's more difficult today than it used to be. I don't think so. It's about the same.

Castle: You were a pioneer, as a minority businessman, really when affirmative action quotas were being introduced as part of business practice. Looking at the state of racial inequality today, what kind of efforts would you recommend, and how can the federal government play a role in ensuring that equality of opportunity?

Lee: When I first got into the business, I did not favor preferences, and probably I still don't favor preferences. What I wanted merely was an equal opportunity to get the project and that maybe the government should tell us when projects came up that they were required to let us know about the availability and then give us a chance to bid on it. That's all I wanted. Personally, that's all I've ever gotten. When affirmative action meant priority, which I really have not favored, I stopped—I got out of the business because it wasn't something that I wanted to support.

Now, whether it's harder today for an immigrant to get ahead, not necessarily. It may be easier. The head of United Commercial Bank, which is the largest minority-owned bank in the country, is headed by a Chinese immigrant, Thomas Wu. A lot of the high-tech companies—their founders and their officers are immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Castle: Are these individuals, though, that are coming in under the same model—I mean, part of what I think about is the model of your family.

Lee: Uneducated.

Castle: Uneducated and without financial means?

Lee: I think it's the education that is the big difference. The immigrants today who are successful are also very well educated. That's changed, whereas [in] my father's day, they came in unable to speak English, which was the case of my father.

Castle: Right, right. I think one of the things that you have mentioned at one point is the challenge of developing capital, for example. Like, how does one own an independent business and build it successfully in an increasingly chain-based—how ownership works increasingly so these days? What are the strategies for someone to see some success in how the trend is today?

Lee: If you want to go into business, you have to save some money. How much depends on the kind of business you're going into, but you've got to save some money, and that money is like a partner. You now have a partner.

Castle: I see, so you have to create your own partner.

Lee: Yes.

Castle: In such a short period generationally, your father arriving here, you and now your sons, what do you hope for your children and their children, your grandchildren, in kind of what direction they may go in terms of business? What is it that you would see or consider success for them in terms of the choices they make? Is it continuing what you've created for them and now they're participating in it as your sons? You know, kind of looking at everything, how would you describe that?

Lee: First, I think the most important thing for my children and grandchildren is to find out what you want to do with your life, because I think that's absolutely the most important, and take time. Have different experiences, different education, and find what you want to devote your life to. If you have to spend a lot of time on that problem, it ought to be done. Having found that, no matter what it is, is to pursue it—in other words, live the way that you're going to be the happiest, and you're going to be the happiest doing things you want to do. And hopefully they won't have to worry about having enough resources to live the way they want. I don't

mean going out and buying cars and everything, but the professions that they choose, they don't have to take into consideration which profession earns more or whether you have to go and get a student loan. I hope that never happens and they're able to find what they want to do with their lives and then do it, regardless of what the salaries are or the financial constraints.

Castle: So in your estimation, whatever sacrifices that you have made would be worth freedom for them.

Familial Legacy; Beliefs

Lee: Yes, that's what I hope to give my children and grandchildren.

Castle: The challenge always is just kind of the—the irony is, of course, in order to give them that freedom within how things are structured in this country and most democratic countries, at least, means you have to be able to pass on to them a certain amount of intergenerational wealth so that they don't have to worry about survival when it comes to choosing—because you're really wanting to give them a chance to choose their passions, is what you're saying.

Lee: That's right, exactly. You know, I can't remember who he was, but someone said the same thing to me when I was living in Singapore, and this person was a very wealthy person. I asked him, "What do you children do?" And none of them were in the business. One was a schoolteacher; another was a banker, but they all had positions they enjoyed, and none of them wanted to come into the father's business. He told me he was so happy that he was able to allow his children to live and work at what they wanted. He was the first person I've ever heard say that. I've always remembered it, and as the years have gone by, I wish I remembered who he was, but I remember he was a very important guy. I agree with him. He's absolutely right, and he got me thinking the way I think now, way back then.

Castle: That was a question I had, is has it been a journey for you to get to this point where you are pleased to see your children kind of choose their passion versus what a lot of—it happens in a lot of circumstances, where you really kind of expect your children to follow the path and kind of nose to the grindstone and this is how you do it kind of thing, but you're saying that this person kind of gave you that vision—

Lee: Yes. And I've always turned that idea over in my mind, and as the years have gone by, I've moved closer and closer to that ideal.

Castle: Do you feel that there were ever times where you just wanted to grab your kids and say, "No, you should think this" or "you should do that"?

Lee: I'm not even sure I haven't done that already, but I'm conscious that we shouldn't try to have our kids live the way we want them to and to live our lives.

- Castle: Do you see the world, from your experience, as a more equitable place for your grandchildren? What would you say are your hopes and your fears?
- Lee: I think that the world is more equitable today.
- Castle: Are there any developments that you find worrisome in particular? You created some significant opportunity for your grandchildren.
- Lee: What's happened is my children and grandchildren are going to live much differently from the way I've lived. They're going to be brought up quite a bit differently from the way I was brought up. The way I was brought up led me to have certain beliefs and a certain work ethic, which was necessary. I mean, there was no choice. But we think that I am lucky that that's what happened. What was a disadvantage in fact turned out to be an advantage. We're not bringing up our children the same way we were brought up, okay? How can you expect the children to have the same values and the same goals when they've been brought up so differently?
- Castle: What are the differences?
- Lee: Let's say when I ate out at a restaurant maybe once a year until I went to college, as opposed to going out today almost every night at the nicest places. You look at the world a little differently. After I started eating out a lot, I always looked at—I still do today—look at what something costs, and I'm surprised that members of my family don't look at what something costs; they order what they want,; it was expensive or it wasn't expensive, but that has never been a controlling factor [as to] whether they ordered it or not. With me, it would never be that way.
- Castle: So you're still frugal after all these years.
- Lee: Yes, but—yes.
- Castle: Yes. But it's also the value, the kind of value for money also.
- Lee: Yes, because I think that being wasteful I think is a sin, yet if you've never had to worry about anything, you can be wasteful without even knowing it. Things like that bother me.
- Castle: Have you tried to pass that on to your children?
- Lee: Yes. I say it.
- Castle: You've mentioned work ethic. How would you say the work ethic has changed generationally from you to your children? How is it different?

- Lee: My oldest son has had many of the advantages, and I didn't know what his work ethic would be like. He's really had the business to himself of late, and his work ethic is very strong, so that's reassuring.
- Castle: But there was a period of time where when you were concerned whether— he had been spoiled?
- Lee: I was afraid that because he had been spoiled that—he still plays his golf and all that, but it always comes second, but he manages to get his golf in. But, yes, I was worried about that, and I don't think I have to be.
- Castle: You just used the word—defining “wasteful” as a sin, and I know one of the things that we haven't really talked about or haven't brought up is what role religion plays in your life. I wondered if you wanted to describe that.
- Lee: Sure. I wish I could be religious, but I'm not, so it plays really no role in my life. But I was pleasantly surprised—because I happen to think that religion—if you can have it, you're lucky. But my oldest son baptized himself and both grandchildren at a very early age, so for him, religion is important.
- Castle: When you say you wish you could have it, do you mean that you're thinking, like, the belief in spirituality or a higher power is just something that doesn't—you can't mentally do that?
- Lee: Accept it.
- Castle: It doesn't work for you. It's not logical?
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: If you were to—I mean, is there a certain—what would you engage in, in Christianity, Buddhism?
- Lee: Christianity probably because I've been to enough churches, and I've been to enough services. My mother—when I was five, six, seven, eight, nine, I went to the local Presbyterian church.
- Castle: That's right, yes. But you've just never had a connection.
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: But it sounds like you've tried to live your life in a particularly moral way that's based on—
- Lee: I think it's important to live in a moral way because you feel better. If you've lived morally and done what you think is right, you're a happier person.

- Castle: Do you think that the moral code you've developed for yourself has really helped you in terms of your business practices?
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: In what way?
- Lee: I think that if people know that you're a fair person, they're more apt to want to do business with you.
- Castle: So in a way, by not following what is kind of a stereotype about business, [which] is that you're always looking to exploit an avenue to gain profit from it, but actually you've created for yourself kind of your own set of rules or working—I mean, you've got kind of a framework to work within because you have certain things about fairness and being good to—you know, that help you.
- Lee: Yes. I would not be happy if I had a business deal that everyone didn't profit. I'm happiest when everyone profits—it was a deal we all came out on. If one person came out extremely well and another person very poorly, if I had say, I would do some adjustment so that it became fair.
- Castle: Is that normal?
- Lee: I don't know. That's the way I think.
- Castle: I just wondered if, in your experience, you've had other people find that unusual that you were committed to—you know.
- Lee: Actually, the people that I know best—ever since I was very young, with many friends, we never split the bill. I very seldom, when I was young—I never split the bill, but over a period of time it always came out that everyone did his share. When we split the bill, you're trying to find an exact allocation. If you don't split the bill, then you just work it out so that it comes out fairly. I have tended to be that way.
- Castle: Could you describe also how you found this to be within your business practice, your partnership with your wife—I mean, would you say that it's been a full business partnership throughout your time together?
- Lee: Yes.
- Castle: Are there any ways in which—I mean, it is unusual, at the face value, whether or not culturally or other areas of difference—it isn't always the norm, for as long as you've been in business together also. What do you think of this? How do you view your partnership?

Lee: I liked to be busy and active. I don't like to read contracts. I don't like to count money. These details are very, very important, but I don't happen to enjoy carrying them out. My wife, on the other hand, is very careful with numbers, keeps track of quite a bit and is someone that I completely trust, so I've never had to worry. I've been very fortunate that I have Dave [Hertzer?], who has been with me for forty years, and we get along well, and I completely trust him. And then my wife handles all the money. And being able to have someone that I can trust [to] handle the money, between Dave and my wife, I can just focus on doing deals.

Castle: So you really are able to complement each other?

Lee: Yes.

Castle: It's something she enjoys. What you do, you enjoy. And then together—

Lee: That's right.

Castle: —it's quite beneficial.

Lee: We enjoy our work. That's right.

Castle: That really brings me to the question I want to close with, which is—it's something you have talked a little bit throughout our long conversations, but what would you say you've enjoyed most about the path of your life? There is that moment for a lot of people when you kind of wake up in the morning. Where do your thoughts go? What's motivating you that day? What are the things that drive you? Is there a feeling of satisfaction in looking back at where things have gone and that path?

Lee: Yes. Up until about five years ago, everything had turned out well, and then about five years ago, I began having unexpected problems, and I think that was a result of competition and factors—I think all of us have less control over what happens than we realize. Much of success or failure is luck driven. I'm absolutely convinced that that's the case, and if you believe otherwise, good luck.

Castle: [Laughs.] So you've had great luck in many things.

Lee: Yes. Then I had a series of bad luck about five years ago, and—

Castle: Business wise.

Lee: And I thought, luck evens out; now I'm getting my share of the bad. I worked through the tough times. That was very satisfying. And, you know, I don't want to do it again. I don't want to have to do it again, so maybe it's time to begin retiring. At the same time, things come up that I feel that I'd like to accomplish or it

would be interesting to accomplish it. And realistically, at my age, my life could end at any time, suddenly or not so suddenly, but it could end. I'm aware of that.

Castle: Is there one thing on your mind that you really want to do that you haven't done?

Lee: No. There are some things in the education [unintelligible] the world that my wife and I are giving some thought to. If either one of us goes first, the other will finish it.

Castle: Is it something you want to talk about?

Lee: Well, it's setting up a foundation.

Castle: And what would be the goal of that foundation?

Lee: To help people who need help. Probably mainly the education world, and poor children. I feel for children who don't have anything, lose their parents. I just don't know how to do it.

Castle: So right now the idea is something that really provides opportunity, educational opportunity?

Lee: Yes. I'm not so big on scholarships. I went through school with no scholarships. It can be done.

Castle: So you haven't really come up yet with how exactly the foundation would work.

Lee: No.

Castle: But you know you want to do something that provides educational opportunity, and when you look back right now—there are a few moments in our life when we hear some news or something happens where we're either dancing—you know, and everybody dances in a different way that moment of euphoria or great pride in accomplishment. What would you say are those moments for yourself? What are the things that really gave you a true sense of pride or accomplishment?

Lee: Our business has done extremely well. There's a lot of satisfaction in knowing that. We've gone into—like, the casino business, you find very few minority people in the business, and we were one of the first. But when I think about it, there have been a lot of firsts. I was probably the only Asian doing subsidized housing when I started. There was nobody else. And blacks came along later. Many of my clients were from the black community, because there was nobody else, so there's satisfaction there. The gaming business has also enabled me and my wife to have the resources to do some of the things we wanted to do and we have done. My wife is chairman of the San Francisco Asian Art Commission, responsible for the whole Asian art in San Francisco. That has represented a major commitment of time and resources.

Castle: Okay. That's a great place to end.

Photographs



Theodore with father, mother, and one sibling



Theodore's father, brother, and two sisters



Mother: Daisy Lum Lee



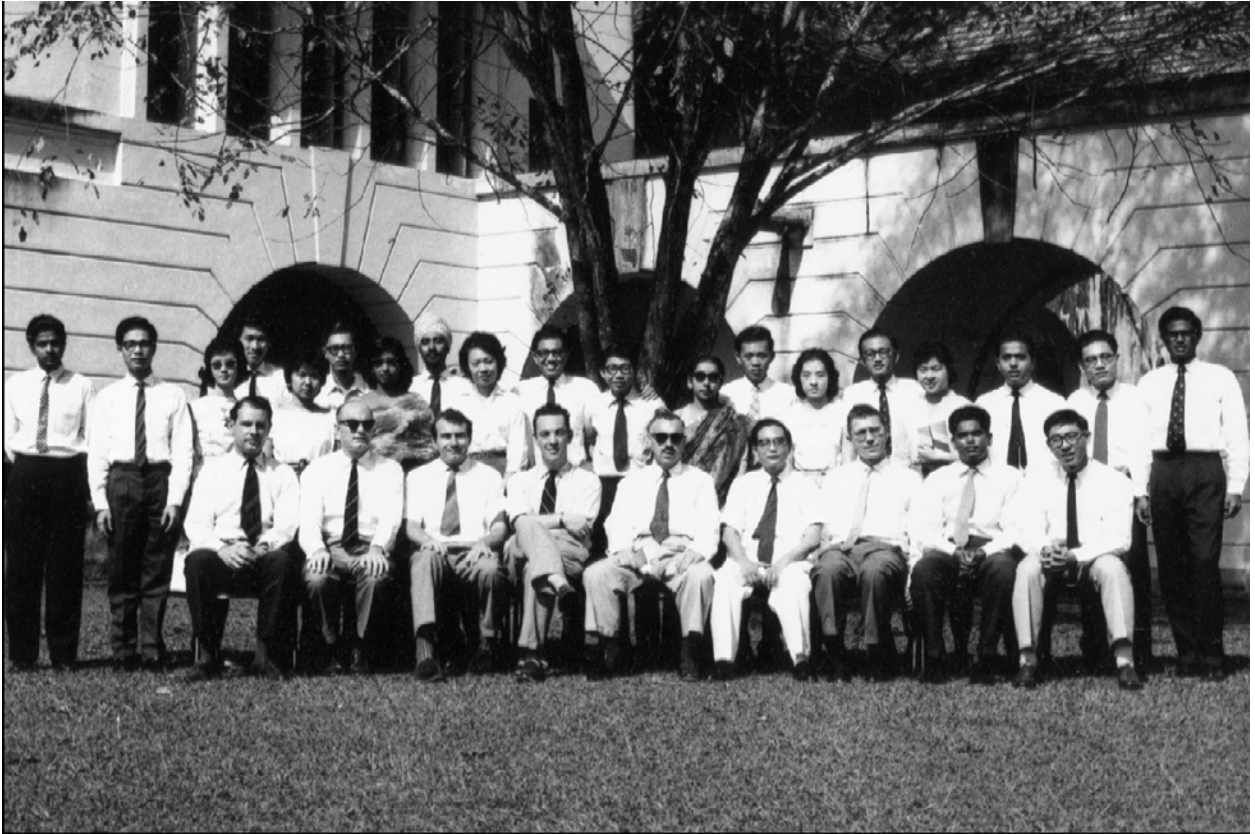
Theodore with brother: Dr. Fredrick B. Lee; Sister Dorothy J. Lee; Young Sandra D. Lee, circa 1942.



Basic Training: Fort Lee, New Jersey, 1954.



Private Theodore Lee, United States Army. Idar — Oberstein, Germany



Theodore with Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore. 1960.



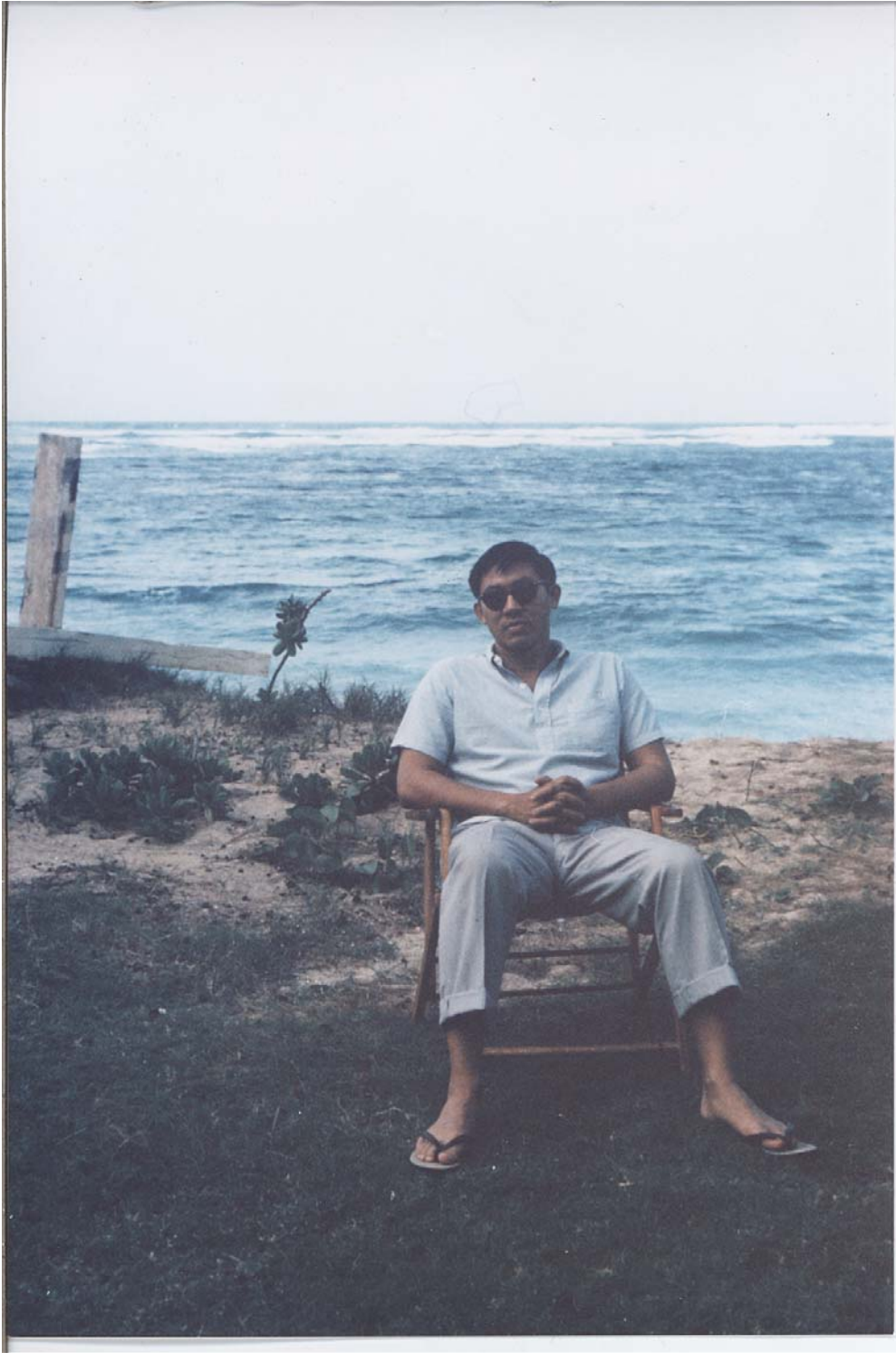
Theodore with friends in Singapore
Hsuan Au Yang; Richard Lim; Ted Lee; T.L. Whang; Teck Kim



Theodore Lee, Summer 1958



Theodore's First House, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1961.



Theodore Lee, Summer 1963



Theodore Lee—Brazil, Summer 1964



Theodore with Harvard Basketball Team—Trip to China.
Cyril and Kenneth Fung; Frank McLaughlin, Coach; Jack Reardon, Athletic Director; Fred
Jewitt, Dean of Admissions.



Theodore Lee's Ancestral Home
Flower Village, Canton, China.
With Last Surviving Family Friend, 1980.



Father Wong Bo Lee's Family. Theodore is upper middle.



Gregory, Doris, Ernest, and Theodore Lee—1987 in Paris at the Rue de Bac



Ernest, Gregory, Doris, and Theodore Lee in front of the Builders of Berkeley Memorial,

UC Berkeley, 2005



Gregory's children—Graham and Katie at Easter Day hunt in Las Vegas, Nevada, 2005

