

George Hee—78 Year Reflection

By PAT MCKAY
Staff Writer

MENDOCINO — George Hee sits near a window inside the traditionally-painted red and green Chinese temple on Albion Street and looks out at the town where he has lived all of his 78 years.

He has been a delivery boy, a woods worker, the owner of a pool hall and grocery store, and an all-around mill man and lumber grader.

Now retired, Hee is the caretaker of one of the few remaining Chinese temples in the state.

"Things have changed," Hee reflects, from the time "you had to make your own way or you'd starve. There were no handouts."

"Now half the town is torn down. Building it up again is all right as long as the taxes don't go up," he feels.

Taxes are too high now, he says. Hee held out his December installment of property taxes along with a few hundred other Mendocino Coast taxpayers, but "gave in" in February, realizing one can't hold out forever.

"But I'm going to stay. I'm not going to sell," he emphasizes.

His is the only Chinese family left in Mendocino from its "lumber town" days, an impressive reminder of the pioneer contributions of hundreds of Chinese around the turn of the

century.

Hee is the grandson of an adventuring Chinese gold-seeker, Ah Sy (later Angolized to "Ah Hee"). His grandmother may have been a "mail order" bride.

When news of the 1849 California Gold Rush reached China, Ah Sy was one of several Chinese in seven sampans to head east. Two junks reached California. One landed in Monterey, the other at Caspar Beach north of Mendocino.

Since Chinese pottery and coins have been found off Point Cabrillo, Hee suspects one or more other junks also got as far as the North Coast but were wrecked.

Sy and another man from the seven-member sampan that beached at Caspar stayed in Mendocino. The others headed for San Francisco. None ever found gold, according to Hee.

Sy went to work as a cook and gardener for William

Kelley, who gave him three acres for the temple. A 40 by 80 foot piece is all that's left of those three acres now, Hee says.

He's mother was Yip Lee Hee, Sy's thirdborn child. She was born in the place where Hee's house now stands, just west of the temple, a house Hee built in 1944 for \$500.

George was the fourth of 11 children born to the Hees.

After graduating from the Mendocino Grammar School and a little time in secondary school, Hee went to work to help support his family as a delivery boy in a butcher shop across Main Street from the present Bank of America.

That's where Mendocino's "Chinatown" was, Hee says. Among the buildings were two stores, a hotel, a big livery stable, and four family houses, including the Hees.

At that time there were five or six Chinese families in

the area, and as many as 600 "bachelors" from Gualala to Westport, Hee recalls.

After the butcher shop was torn down, Hee went to work for the Albion Lumber Company in the Comptche cook house. He was also a "whistle punk"—the person who blows the whistles for the logging crew and a lumberjack for the Mendocino Lumber Company.

Then he bought a pool room and skating rink for \$100 from Ine Nichols. It was located in the building owned by the MacCallums (now Kellie Owen Hall on Lansing Street). Rent was \$10 a month.

"He ran the business for a year (he says he never sold "bootleg booze" and was a "pretty good" pool player), then went into the grocery business there off and on until 1932. The store folded during the Depression when business got poor.

In 1934 Hee went to work as a roustabout at the Caspar mill. "They paid a little more money in Caspar, so I went up there," he says. The Mendocino mill reportedly paid \$35 a month plus \$12.50

for board. Caspar paid 63 cents an hour.

A strike shut down the mill in 1944 and Hee left. From 1946 to 1963, when he had a heart attack and retired, Hee was a lumber grader for Philbrick's in Comptche.

Hee's grandfather returned to China in 1900, his father in 1926. Both wanted to see the country where they were born. They died in China.

Visitors enter the small temple through narrow double doors, passing under a Chinese sign that is translated "Warlike Emperor Temple" or "Military God King Temple."

It's a Confucian sign and a Confucian temple, Hee says. Confucius, the revered Chinese philosopher and teacher, lived 500 years before Christ.

At one time many smaller temples were tucked away in Mendocino businesses and shops.

Only this one remains. It survives because of Hee's efforts and a promise he made to his mother to take care of it as long as she lived.

Inside, the temple is simple and elegant.

In contrast to weathered wood walls and floor are ornate silver-colored urns, candle and incense holders.

Vertical banners on three walls list the names of Chinese families. There's a banner for the Hee family.

Delicately formed painted rice paper sculptures and elaborately decorated feathers—offerings for the Chinese war lord—surround a faded cloth painting of a red war god.

On an altar is an empty urn that is sometimes used to hold the cremated remains of a follower. There are also Chinese fortune sticks.

On a table are small bowls for offerings of rice and liquor.

The temple still is used by "old timers," Hee says. A ceremony was held a few months ago.

Most of the time the temple is locked. Vandalism and pilfering have taken place off and on for years, Hee said.

Persons who want to see it

In 1941 Hee and his wife Martha were married.

They have seven children: Raymond, who lives at home and takes part in the Paul Bunyan Center program; Loretta McCoard, who works for the school district; Dewey, a Boeing Aircraft engineer in Seattle; Lorraine, a student teacher in Humboldt county who is working on a master's degree in speech and ethnic studies; Wesley, a Georgia-Pacific lumberjack; Mervin, who is studying to be a game warden at College of the Pacific in Stockton; and Wayne, who will graduate from his school this year and plans to study auto body repair in Denver.

Though donations are accepted, money to maintain the temple comes mostly out of Hee's own pocket.

Outside he stoops to pick up a shingle that has blown off the roof. The roof needs to be fixed.

He says that what happens to the temple after he's gone will be up to his children.



MENDOCINO'S CHINESE HERITAGE — George Hee of Mendocino is photographed inside the Chinese temple [Joss House] on Albion Street. Hee is a retired lumber grader, former woods worker, delivery boy, pool hall and

grocery store owner who was born and raised by Mendocino. In a recent interview, Hee talks about his life on the coast, his ancestors, and the temple he looks after. [Photo by Pat McKay]