

Tie, Edward: A Second Life ^[1]

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Edward Tie: a second life

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 8/14/2005. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Edward Tie was one of Raleigh's first Chinese immigrants. He traveled to America, by himself and almost penniless, when he was only 11 years old in 1935. When he retired, he was the owner of a successful restaurant called the Canton Cafe and lived in one of the city's finest neighborhoods. "We have always considered my dad a hero, as somebody who lived the American Dream," his son Sam told me.

Edward Tie was one of the relatively few Chinese immigrants in the South before the Second World War. In fact, fueled by anti-Chinese prejudice, Exclusion Acts long prohibited nearly all Chinese immigration anywhere in the United States. Wary of the South's Jim Crow laws, those who did make it to the United States usually chose to settle in the West or North. Nevertheless, small groups of Chinese immigrants did make a home here. A Chinese laundry, cafe or grocery was a common sight even in many small Southern towns.

When I visited him at his home, Tie often paused, overcome with emotion, as he told me about coming to America. But, talking almost in a whisper and sometimes looking to his wife or son to help him translate his thoughts into English, he always began telling his story again.



Edward Tie. Photo by Chris Seward, 2005. To request permission for [Edward Tie to purchase a print](#), please contact the [News & Observer](#).

I was born in China in 1924. My mother was a widow. My father had gone to Cuba to look for a job. After he got over there, not long, he died: no doctor, no money. My mother took care of me and my brother until I came here in 1935. I was 11. My family wanted me to come to America, and I did, too. They didn't have anything over there. No jobs. When we come here, we call it "born a second life," because that whole life over there was dead.

I came over on a Japanese ship called The Empire of Japan. It took 18, 19 days. I was scared to death. You never knew what would happen on the water. My grandfather was already here, and he said he came over here on a junk boat. He let me come to Newport News, Va. My grandfather had been working in a laundry in Elizabeth City, N.C., but he was in Newport News then. There were very few Chinese there, but right many on the other side of the river in Norfolk.

A lot of people from my village, Sah Gong, lived in Norfolk. They worked in chop suey restaurants and laundry. That was the only thing they knew that they didn't have to know too much of the language.

I tried to go to school, but Newport News did not take any Chinese in the schools at that time. So I went to Norfolk and lived with my cousin's family. They accepted Chinese. I finished the second grade, and then I got a job in restaurant in Newport News.

After I came over here, I felt like I had a good life, better than over there. But some parts of life here were pretty hard because they did not allow Chinese people to go in a lot of places, like in the theater. In the high-class places, they would not let me in. One time, I took a street car. A white man would not sit next to me, but a black man would not sit next to me, either. He would rather stand up there. The street car was full of people standing there, but they would not sit with me.

I was the only Chinese boy in Newport News. And even if a white girl, waitress, saw me in the street -- we both worked in the same restaurant -- she took off on the other side, so that she would not have to talk to me. I was very lonesome.

I lived by myself in an old four-floor hotel. Downstairs was a poolroom. No lights from second floor on up to fourth floor. I was scared to death that somebody might stay there in the dark and scare me. Back in those days, they'd kill a Chinese if they caught him.

I used to hope that an orphanage would take me. Then I would not have to look after myself all the time.

Everything changed during the war. When I was drafted in the Navy, I was so glad. I felt free when I joined the Navy. I felt like I was mixing in America for the first time. They were happy days.

One time, when my ship was in Hong Kong and I got liberty, I went back down to Sah Gong. I was wearing my Navy sailor's uniform when I got to the village, and my mother did not recognize me at first. Everybody was wondering who was that.

After the war, I got a letter from my mother that said I was engaged. She said, hurry up, come home and get married! I don't even know her name or what she look like, but I take a chance to get married to her. It was not up to the children in China. I brought my wife back to Newport News. I went to cook, and my grandfather, when he died, he left me a few thousand dollars so I start my own restaurant. We had this restaurant in Newport News when I saw this place in Raleigh was for sale.

Raleigh was kind of lonesome, because we were the only Chinese family here at that time. But I did all right. I have a good wife, good children.

I went back to the village in 1996, my wife and I. I gave the village money to buy a shelter, so they can sit and talk out of the sun. And I had a party for all of them for Ching Ming. At Ching Ming, you visit the graves of your family, and you eat food.

Hard days, those days. But when you are young, things are a little different. When you are young and strong, you could take it. But of course when you get older, you couldn't take it, so I am pretty satisfied. I think I have had a good life so far.

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