Minding the Store

A family legacy is gone but not erased.

by MANDY MORRIS

On a December day two years ago,

my mother texted me a photo that catapulted me back to my childhood. With my thumb and index finger on the phone screen, I pinch-zoomed on the picture. Even though the Wing's Grocery sign was missing from the top right corner of the brick wall, I still recognized the building. Nearly all the faded red bricks that formed the exterior wall, once painted with advertisements for Falstaff Beer and Wonder Bread, were now stacked on three pallets surrounded by rubble and broken bricks, exposing the hollow guts of the roofless skeleton structure. The store facade,

LEFT: The author's grandmother Choy See Wing (Poh Poh), at the Wing's checkout counter, ca. late 1980s; BELOW: Main Street, Webb, MS, 1997

facing Main Street, was still intact, but the neighboring storefront, like the rest of downtown Webb, Mississippi, no longer existed. Over two thousand miles away, in my San Francisco apartment, I took the time to reflect and say goodbye.

Wing's Grocery was more than our family business. When I say I grew up there, it's not a figure of speech. My sister and I were the third generation of our family to live in the two-bedroom apartment at the back of the store. I raced my red tricycle down those grocery aisles. I hid from thunderstorms in empty cardboard boxes that once held rolls of paper towels. I ran from the kitchen in the living quarters to the soup aisle to fetch a can of Campbell's chicken broth when my grandmother asked for *gai tong*.

I left the store behind when I went to college. After graduation I departed the South, eager to define a life for myself. I am the youngest member of my family and the last to live in one of the original Mississippi Delta Chinese grocery stores. Not quite Chinese enough, not quite Southern enough, I've always felt trapped between generations and identities. The store is one long chapter of my family history. It's a story that begins in the Guangdong province of southern China, nearly seven decades before I was born.

I peddled up the main aisle, past the ice cream case and checkout counter, past the Nabs and Wonder Bread on my left and the canned goods and condiments on my right.

MY FAMILY'S PATH to the United States did not follow a simple trajectory. Like so many immigration stories, it was a complicated back-and-forth. It began in an era when global travel took weeks, not hours, and family members maintained long-distance relationships by telegram rather than text message. In 1910, my great-grandfather, Hong Ah Wing, boarded the *Princess Victoria* in Hong Kong, bound for Seattle. It was the first of several trips he'd make to North America by sea. He was twenty-five years old, and he left his wife and son, my grandfather, in Taishan. Born into a family of merchants, he saw little long-term opportunity in the city of his birth.

Despite the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, my great-grandfather believed he could build a better future in the United States. As a merchant, he qualified for permission to enter the country. His wife and child did not. From the Pacific Northwest, he made his way south and east, working odd jobs in laundries and restaurants. By 1920, he had settled in the Mississippi Delta.

Chinese immigrants first came to the Delta to work in cotton fields after the Civil War. Often referred to as the third race in the segregated South, the Chinese were not social or economic peers to whites, but were afforded more opportunities than Black people. Unlike Black Southerners, the Chinese were able to get credit or capital from white-owned banks to open businesses. So the Chinese transitioned from the fields, opening small grocery stores that competed with plantation commissaries. They sourced basics like meat, cornmeal, and molasses, often underselling the plantation stores.

The author rides her tricycle in Wing's Grocery, early 1980s.

Photos courtesy of Mandy Morris

The train depot in Webb, MS, 1997

My great-grandfather apprenticed in one of these grocery stores, eventually opening his own shop, Wing's Cash Store, in the 1920s in Jonestown, Mississippi. By then, my great-grandmother and grandfather had made their way to the United States as well. The growing family lived in the back of the store, where my great-grandmother gave birth to three more sons and a daughter. In the early 1930s, they moved into a house. It was the last house in the white neighborhood, one block from the beginning of the Black neighborhood. They literally lived between the races.

Hong Ah Wing's oldest son, my grandfather Hin Fook Wing, made the long journey from China at different stages in life: at the age of 13 in 1922, again at 21, once more at the age of 30, and finally at the age of 38 in 1947. Between trips, he married my grandmother and had four children in China, all while working for his father learning the trade. He ran a branch of his father's grocery business in Friars Point, about thirteen miles from Jonestown. Although the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, allowing the immigration of Chinese women and children, arranging for his family to move to America was not straightforward. The federal government imposed a stringent quota for Chinese immigration, allowing only 105 visas per year. World War II was raging as well. Finally, nearly three years after the war ended, my grandmother, Choy See, and infant mother arrived on February 9, 1948, in San Francisco. They were likely processed by immigration officers at the U.S. Appraiser's Building, about three miles from my apartment.

My grandfather moved his young family thirty-five miles south of Jonestown and set up shop in Webb, in western Tallahatchie county. The business district centered around Main Street and the depot. Freight trains hauling cotton, soybeans, and other commodities ran past his store, which was catty-corner to the depot. This building had living quarters in the back. This was a common living arrangement for Chinese store owners in the Jim Crow-era Delta. It provided a sense of security for the business, and for families who didn't fit into the racially binary neighborhoods of the South. Although the groceries were scattered across the Delta, Chinese families were able to form a closely knit community. Mahjong tiles shuffled and clicked during all-night games between store owners. Their teenage sons and daughters donned their best suits and swing dresses and danced to Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra in rented ballrooms in the larger Delta towns. Families swapped long beans, bitter melon, and fresh water chestnuts from home gardens. These traditional ingredients found their way into shared dishes for Sunday potlucks.

My grandfather's business flourished. It served Black and white customers, including those who needed credit until payday. His kids and other Delta Chinese attended white schools. They no longer sat in the colored waiting room at the doctor's office. His sister and youngest brother attended state universities. In 1965, two of his brothers, John and Luck, were elected mayors of their respective Delta towns, Jonestown and Sledge.

But the progress wasn't seamless. By 1959, the Wing family—my grandfather, grandmother, and their four children—had outgrown the three-room living quarters in the back of the store. My grandfather found a house for sale in a white neighborhood and reached a purchase agreement with the seller. My family was ready to move into the house until a large group from the neighborhood passed around a petition signed by residents who did not want Chinese neighbors. Not willing to risk his family's safety, my grandfather stayed put in the store. He added on to the living quarters instead.

Decades later, when my grandparents' health started to decline, my mother moved home from Chicago to help care for them and the store. In traditional Chinese culture, sons are favored to carry on the family legacy. But my uncles pursued other careers. When my grandfather died in 1979, my thirty-two-year-old single mother, whom customers called Miss Cathy, took over the business. Later that year, I was born. From the hospital in Greenwood, my mother brought me home to Webb, to the store on Main Street.

I SOMETIMES WONDER why my mother didn't move us into a house. With so much on her plate—a separation from my father, two young daughters, a mother with a heart condition, and a business to run—Wing's Grocery may have provided the comfort and stability she needed. It had been my grandmother's home for more than thirty years, my mother's childhood home, and it became mine. I grew up there with my grandmother, whom I called Poh Poh (Cantonese for maternal grandmother), my mother, and my older sister, Cindy. The long butcher case served as the northern border between the living room and the three main grocery aisles. We often referred to the store as if it were another room in our home.

When Mama closed the store at six each evening, it became my playground. Aisles one and two served as the track for tricycle races against imaginary opponents. The starting line was at the back of the store, by the paper towels and molasses, where the concrete floor of the butcher section met the wooden floorboards of the grocery aisles. On my red trike, I zoomed down the aisle, past Crisco cans and lard tubs on the left and laundry detergent boxes and bleach bottles on my right. I made a sharp left at the frozen vegetables section and dairy case, avoiding the boxes of onions and

potatoes as I rounded the corner, careful not to tip over. I peddled up the main aisle, past the ice cream case and checkout counter, past the Nabs and Wonder Bread on my left and the canned goods and condiments on my right. In the homestretch, I peddled past the dried beans and noodles, crossing the finish line by the two-liter Cokes.

Later, I graduated to roller skates, a gift from one of my uncles. When I looked at those roller skates, I saw fun and excitement—something that other American kids had. Poh Poh and Mama saw skinned knees, busted lips, and broken bones. As a compromise, Poh Poh would let me slip on one skate over one tennis shoe. With practice, I got the feel for pushing off with one foot and gliding on the other. I did not even need the shelves to help with balance.

On Sunday mornings, Mama, Cindy, and I went to the Baptist church while Poh Poh cooked a Chinese feast for us at home. The rest of the week, Mama cooked dinner after working all day in the store—dishes like meatloaf, seasoned with Lipton's Onion Soup mix and topped with dressed-up ketchup; Loretta Lynn's fried chicken (from a recipe torn from a Crisco ad in *Good Housekeeping*), and mashed potatoes from scratch. But Sunday was Poh Poh's day.

We returned home from services to a spread that changed based on her cravings and the ingredients on hand. With flat-bottom porcelain soup spoons, we slurped her variation of egg-drop soup made with creamed corn from aisle two. With our chopsticks, we picked at a whole steamed fish, catfish or perch, delicately seasoned with ginger, garlic, and scallions. If sweet-and-sour ketchup shrimp was on the menu, we lined the table with white butcher paper for easy cleanup. Some variation of pork was always part of the spread: slices of oven-roasted Chinese barbecue pork, or braised black-bean spareribs, or steamed minced pork with salt-cured egg yolks. Stir-fried vegetables like long beans grown in her garden, bok choy, mustard greens, or eggplant balanced the proteins. Steamed white rice anchored every meal. If we were lucky, she'd drop in a link or two of lap cheong to steam with the rice. Special occasions like Chinese New Year called for wontons and egg rolls, which we all helped fold, and steamed barbecue pork buns. Using the plastic spindle from a spent roll of receipt paper dipped in food coloring, she marked each with a wheel-shaped red stamp for good luck.

Although we lived in a grocery store, Poh Poh relied on my uncle in Los Angeles to stock her pantry with Chinese staples like soy sauce, dried shiitake mushrooms, oyster sauce, snow fungus, wood ear mushrooms, mung bean noodles, and jars of fermented bean curd. He threw in candy for me and Cindy. I loved the Haw Flakes, stacked and wrapped like a roll of coins. I placed one small thin, pink disc on my tongue at a time, letting it crumble into sugary, fruity pieces before tearing off more of the wrapper and eating the next one.

Cindy and I spoke English with our mother, but we thought that Poh Poh only spoke Cantonese. We learned the language to speak to her. Cindy and I are the only cousins who speak Cantonese, the village dialect, with an American accent. I listened carefully and tried my best to repeat her tones and sounds. Whenever I did not know a Chinese word for something, she'd tell me in Cantonese to just say it in English. Eventually, I realized that she understood English. After all, she worked in the store and interacted with our customers. You can't live in a country for more than half your life and not understand the language. That said, I only heard her speak English once. I

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Hin Fook "Henry" Wing, ca. 1970s; Poh Poh cooking, ca. 1980s; Wing's Grocery, 1997; Mr. and Mrs. Hong Ah Wing, ca. 1930s or 40s; Poh Poh and the author, early 1980s

was about seven years old and she answered the phone, "Daughter not home. Call back later." I was shocked and confused at the time. It was perfectly clear. Why did I have to speak to her in Cantonese if she could speak English? Why didn't she speak to me in English since we were in America? One day, I caught Poh Poh holding a plastic stencil with my school supplies near my backpack. She recited the alphabet to me, pointing at each letter. Apparently, Mama had taught her when she was in school.

I told classmates that my family owned a grocery store and that I could eat all the candy and ice cream I wanted. But I never admitted we lived there.

Sometimes I pulled up a chair and practiced my Cantonese with her, asking her questions about China. She talked with her hands and paused often for dramatic effect. She told me she hid in the mountains with my mother's oldest brother from Japanese soldiers during the Second Sino-Japanese War. They walked for days with just the clothes on their bodies and the only valuables she had, gold jewelry, hidden in the bun piled on her head. She drank collected rainwater and ate grass when there was nothing else. She survived. She told me about typhoons and boats that capsized. She felt like a heavenly spirit guided her.

Poh Poh loved to watch PBS—nature documentaries, travel shows, and most of all, cooking shows. Together we watched Jacques Pépin break down a whole chicken, Julia Child roll out pâte brisée for quiche, Justin Wilson whisk a roux for gumbo, and Martin Yan skillfully chop vegetables with a cleaver. I was always impressed with Yan's speedy techniques, but I'm not sure Poh Poh was as amused. She found his showmanship over-the-top but respected his cooking skills. If she saw a new technique or flavor combination, she'd work it into Sunday meals.

Some Sundays, my cousins would visit from Memphis. After lunch, the aunts and uncles gossiped in the living room over a sour cream pound cake or lemon meringue pie while we children played in the store. We hid behind cases of RC Cola or between stacks of brown paper grocery bags and chased each other down the aisles. We pulled stools around the checkout counter and played Monopoly, Connect Four, and Perfection. We set up a short-lived bowling alley in aisle two with two-liter Cokes as the pins. When we were older, Cindy organized elaborate treasure hunts inspired by Supermarket Sweep.

When I wasn't in school, I had to work, too. At first, I was the window washer. Armed with paper towels spritzed with Windex, I wiped the glass panes of the green wooden front doors, the sliding glass doors of the reach-in ice cream freezer by the checkout, and the two upright refrigerator cases. As the years passed, I became a stocker. I stamped prices on the cans of creamed corn, fruit cocktail, PET evaporated milk, and Campbell's soup, careful to let the ink dry before shelving them behind the existing cans. I was practicing first-in, first-out, years before I would learn about it in college accounting. During the summer, whole chickens arrived by the case on ice each Friday. I transferred them into individual bags while my sister weighed and priced them.

By seven, I had learned to count change, so I transitioned from bagger to checker. I started pulling Mrs. Berry's glass bottles of Coca-Cola when I saw her white Chrysler LeBaron pull into a parking spot. I could point a customer to the Blue Plate mayonnaise at the end of aisle two or the Swans Down Cake Flour on aisle three. I remembered customers' cigarette preferences by their faces. The accents run particularly thick in this part of Mississippi, so developing an ear for them was kind of like learning another language—not as foreign as the Cantonese Poh Poh spoke, but not as distinct as the English I heard on TV. Words on packaging that I read based on phonics I learned in school did not always align with what came out of customers' mouths. When Mrs. Jones asked for hog joe, I grabbed a package of pork jowl. Mr. Terry would ask for a cho cho, and Mama would ring up a chocolate-dipped ice cream bar.

I went to a majority-white private school about thirty miles away. That's what folks did in Tallahatchie county if they could afford it. I told classmates that my family owned a grocery store and that I could eat all the candy and ice cream I wanted. But I never admitted we lived there. I shared gum and mints with the popular kids to gain their favor. Few friends knew about my living situation. I struggled with an assignment in a high school English class that asked us to create poster-board layouts of our homes and write about a memory that corresponded to each room. I completely left

Mr. and Mrs. Hin Fook Wing and family, ca. 1957

out the store as a room on my assignment. I didn't write about roller skating down the aisles after closing time. I didn't explain how I grabbed my recess snacks from the store shelves each morning before the bus came. I awkwardly pieced together what I believed was an ordinary floor plan. Embarrassment warmed my cheeks as I raised my hand when the teacher asked, "Whose house is a large rectangle?" If I told people I lived in a grocery store, they'd ask why, and I didn't want to explain. I wasn't supposed to.

I was in elementary school when my mother explained the petition to me. She told me it was something we must never talk about with others. It wouldn't be polite. I knew the family who started the petition—they bought snacks in the store, gave Christmas gifts to my sister and me, and attended our church. They owned the store next to ours. We bought my tricycle there. We were neighbors. I never reconciled their behavior.

Growing up, I wanted to be accepted as a regular American. Instead, I was often confused for a member of one the other Delta Chinese families. There were a few other Chinese American kids at my school, but we weren't closely knit like the Delta Chinese of the Jim Crow South. I often hid the fact that I could speak Cantonese. I was afraid to talk to them about being Chinese because it would make me appear less American. I never asked them if they heard the occasional "Ching, Chong" or "Chink" or "Go back to where you came from!," but I bet they did, too. These taunts usually came frequently enough to remind me that I was different. They led me to question my place in Southern society.

Demolition of the former Wing's Grocery building, December 2018

AS A CHILD, I believed living in Wing's Grocery prevented me from being a "normal" American—from taking beach vacations like my classmates or having a backyard with a swing set. Today, I am grateful for having lived in the store. It made me who I am today. It made me American.

Living in the store, I now recognize, fostered my early passion for food. It led to my culinary career, first as a professional cook and baker, and now as a recipe developer for a food technology company. Watching cooking shows with Poh Poh showed me how food serves as a common language. I credit my cooking intuition to watching her in the kitchen without measuring cups or spoons, tasting and adjusting along the way. When I went to college, she asked what I studied. I didn't know how to explain what Management Information Systems was to her, so I just pointed to my computer. She asked if a job with this degree paid well. I replied, "Yes, I will be able to take care of myself." If she were alive today, I could show her videos of my hands cooking in my company's digital cooking app, sometimes recipes inspired by her Cantonese home cooking or my mother's American comfort food. I would like to think she would approve, but also provide feedback on my recipes and technique.

Today, I am grateful for having lived in the store. It made me who I am today. It made me American.

Shortly after moving to California, I practiced pronouncing my name without the subtle drawl of the a in Mandy. If I wasn't careful, my Mississippi accent would prompt a deluge of curious, personal questions from strangers. I'm not ashamed of being Southern, but I quickly grew tired of correcting preconceived notions of the South. Yes, my family experienced racial discrimination, but we also contributed to the economy and culture of the Delta. The community supported us, not just through shopping in Wing's Grocery, but through friendship. Mr. Leroy wrote a letter to my grandfather to share his disapproval of the petition and encouraged him to continue to make Webb his home. Mr. Duward dedicated part of his garden to grow Chinese winter melon and bitter melon for Poh Poh and shared other vegetables from his harvest with us. Mr. Robert brought us pecans from his orchard. Miss Juanita gifted us homemade fudge, pecan pralines, and divinity every Christmas. Miss Sarah and Mr. Jimmy brought us souvenirs from their vacations. Miss Robinn organized a surprise birthday sleepover for my friends and me at her house, because I could never host slumber parties.

I was ashamed of living in that store all those years, and now it's gone. Until recently, I never thought my family history would be of interest to others. In fact, until the building was demolished, I was willing to let it remain untold. When my mother texted us the photo of the store's demolition, my sister said she felt as though we were being erased. But it doesn't have to be that way—she and I are proof that our family's legacy lives on. We will not be erased.

Mandy Morris is a culinary content manager in the San Francisco Bay Area.