

Interview transcript of Wilton Lee, California Historical Society, September 29, 2021.

[This version has been lightly edited for clarity. The unedited transcript is in the records of the CFM at the California Historical Society.]

Frances Kaplan: This recording is taking place on Wednesday, September 29th, at the California Historical Society at 678 Mission Street in San Francisco. My name is Frances Kaplan. I'm the director of Library & Collections for the California Historical Society. And I will be conducting the interview today.

The interview subject today is Mr. Wilton Lee, second-generation florist in San Francisco. In the room is Al Bersch, Metadata & Systems Librarian for the California Historical Society.

Mr. Lee, would you mind stating your name and the date for the record?

Wilton Lee: Okay. My name is Wilton Lee. I was born in Berkeley, California, Alta Bates Hospital, probably where your two children were born, too. And I was born in 1947. And I've lived all my life in Berkeley except for when I went away to college. And I grew up basically in the flower shop that my family owned.

Frances Kaplan: And was that flower shop in San Francisco or in Berkeley?

Wilton Lee: That was in Berkeley.

Frances Kaplan: Can you tell me a little bit about you? You're a Berkeley born and raised. Can you tell me a little bit about your family background, though? Were your parents also from Berkeley? Were they American born?

Wilton Lee: My father was from Toisan, China. His father, my grandfather came over first in the late 1800s. And my father came over in 1926 when he was 16 years old. My mother was born in Berkeley. She was the oldest of four children. And her mother, my grandmother, was from Kyoto. And my grandfather was from Toisan.

So, when we visited the family village back in 2002, we tried to find my grandfather's records or history. And we were able to connect with the family secretary. And he came to visit us at our hotel. And he told us that in the journals of the village there that my grandfather left in the mid-1800s to come to California. And he told his wife of that time to adopt a son to carry on their family name just in case he didn't come back.

So, he met my grandmother who was a student of music at the University of California. And they fell in love and got married. So, maybe you could edit this out. My grandfather was a bigamist.

Frances Kaplan: Do we have to edit that out?

Wilton Lee: I understand a lot of families did that. When the men came over, they told the wives to adopt sons to carry on their family name.

Frances Kaplan: Yes, that is such an interesting story. That must have been ... Was it shock, surprise? How did your family ...?

Wilton Lee: I didn't hear about that till later on. I always knew that my mother was half-Japanese and made me a quarter-Japanese. I did know my grandmother. She lived until I was about six or seven years old. So, I had a little bit of Japanese food influence from her.

And when I met my wife who was all Japanese and I started eating at her house all these treats that they were having, "I remember eating this," or, "I remember having that. My grandmother used to give me this." And so, it was a little bit different.

The story about my grandmother is that she was sent over by her family to study music at UC Berkeley. And supposedly, I don't know if this is true because I haven't found out anything about this but it's what's been passed down among our generation is that she was a member of a Royal Japanese family from Kyoto, and that I have Royal Japanese blood flowing in my veins. However, when she married my Chinese grandfather, they disowned her. So, I have disowned Royal Japanese blood flowing in my veins.

Frances Kaplan: I can only think she must have been incredibly talented.

Wilton Lee: My mother played the piano really well. I remember hearing my grandmother. I took piano lessons. I think the buck stopped with my mom. The only thing I could play is Heart and Soul duet with you if you know the bottom part. Or I could do the bass or the treble.

Frances Kaplan: The next round of questions, we're going to get into more of the flower selling and your store and your interaction with the California flower market. So, you are actually a second-generation flower seller. Is that correct?

Wilton Lee: That's correct, yeah.

Frances Kaplan: And your store was in Berkeley or is in Berkeley.

Wilton Lee: Yes.

Frances Kaplan: Can you tell me a little bit ... It was your father who started it and mother?

Wilton Lee: My father was a gardener before the war and used to buy all the supplies he needed from a Japanese family. They had a flower shop that the wife ran and the nursery that the husband ran. And when the war broke out, I'm assuming that because my mother was half-Japanese that they asked my father to take over the business and watch it for them while they went to camp.

And I also have a copy which you could have of the document that Mr. Nabeda wrote up for my dad to sign. It was called San Pablo Florist & Nursery. And it was run by the Nabeda family.

Frances Kaplan: Wow. And so, for the duration of the war, they were incarcerated?

Wilton Lee: Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: And your family took care of the store?

Wilton Lee: Yeah. And then, after the war when they came back, my dad returned everything to them. I was told that he even steam-cleaned the engine of their delivery van and gave it back to them. And he and my mother were trying to figure what to do now.

My brother was born in '43. So, they had one child. And they decided, well, they could open a restaurant or they could open cleaners. He can go back to gardening, but they both like the flower shop or the flower business so they decided to open a flower business. They looked for land. And there were two pieces of vacant land on University Avenue, one coming into Berkeley and one going out of Berkeley.

And my father said, "Well, let's do the piece of land that's coming in because people could stop and buy flowers on their way home." So, they bought that land. And of course, at that time, banks weren't loaning money to Asians. So, a lot of his friends and relatives loaned him money to build the building and greenhouse and the nursery structures in the back which are incredibly still standing today, but they are in need of repair. And I'm not as handy ... The handiness jumped a generation, too, because I can't do everything my dad did.

So, we've been in the same location since 1946 is when it was built and he opened. And I was born in '47.

Frances Kaplan: So, it was just postwar. So, the family returned to their store. And at that point, your father had this experience in the flower industry.

Wilton Lee: Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: So, he was also able to open it with money loaned all from friends and family?

Wilton Lee: Yeah. And the money he made from operating the flower shop. He and my mom took classes at City College of San Francisco. And there used to be a [Shramp] Florist on, I think it's on Mission Street, not Mission. Anyway, there is a Shramp Florist that Mr. Shramp was the instructor at City College of San Francisco that they took lessons from, and are able to learn enough to run the business.

Frances Kaplan: That's interesting. So prior to that, they didn't have or prior to taking over the store during the war period, they didn't have experience in that area.

Wilton Lee: No.

Frances Kaplan: They were city people.

Wilton Lee: They were city ... Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: And so you and your brother grew up in the store.

Wilton Lee: Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: Did you grow up going there? It was a family-run business?

Wilton Lee: Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: Everybody pitching in.

Wilton Lee: The office of the flower shop now used to be our nursery. We had a crib and a bed in there and toys and stuff. And then, I remember in the greenhouse, my dad built a sandbox. And I used to spend hours in the greenhouse just playing in the sandbox. And that was a lot of fun.

And I was just telling my wife, I was working in the greenhouse the other day, I said, "You know why I like working with plants in the greenhouse? I think it's because I spent so much time when I was a kid playing in the sandbox." And she says, "Yeah, it might be. It might be."

Frances Kaplan: So, I'm going to ask you a couple of things just to remember about those first experiences. As you started to grow older, did you work in the store as well?

Wilton Lee: Yeah. Well, we grew up in a store. And one of the things my dad built into the store was a little kitchen. So, we ate breakfast at home but we always had lunch at the shop. So he always cooked a hot lunch for us. And then, prior to going to school, we just spent our days there. And then, after we started school, after school, we'd go back to the shop because he opened till like 7:30 I believe during the week and 8:00 on Fridays and Saturdays to catch the people going out to dinner and things like that.

What was the other part of the question?

Frances Kaplan: I can't even remember myself. But tell me a little bit about then some of your memories, more of your childhood so before you took over the store. So you've got like going up and eating lunch there. But what about interacting with the customers or who would come or the kinds of flowers they had?

Wilton Lee: We would help them process flowers when we got them back from the market. And one of the first things I learned was cleaning, processing the carnations, where you have to take the leaves off that are going to be underwater. I don't remember him letting us use any clippers or anything. That's the only thing we did.

We didn't really interact with customers unless we were out in the front sales area which one of the things I used to do was we sit on this wooden box that we kept fern in and there was a fan on the counter. And I used to sit on that and turn the fan on and pretend I was flying an airplane.

Another time, [00:13:30] I remember I played with dolls when I was a kid. And I didn't have my first haircut till I was four or five years old. And a customer came in a little bit later and said, "Oh, where's your little girl at?" And my dad said, "He's right there. He just had long hair." So, that's the only time I remember any interaction with customers [00:14:00] then.

Frances Kaplan: That's funny.

Wilton Lee: When I'd go on delivery with my dad or his delivery people, I get to take the flowers to the door. And they, not always but a lot of times, they said, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute." And they go around and get me a cookie or a piece of candy. So that was always fun. I always like to do delivering.

And then, of course, as I got older, I got to do more things. And I go, "This is kind of fun." And my brother was four years older than me so after graduating from Berkeley High, he went to Cal and he became an engineer. And I just like working with my hands at the shop. So, as soon as I got my driver's license, my dad said, "You want to get your license?" And I said, "You're going to let me get a driver's license?" He says, "Yeah." I said, "Okay."

And the reason I was questioning that is because we only had ... No, we had a car and we had a truck. And my brother, of course, had his driver's license. And he was dating then. And he would get mad at my dad when my dad said, "I'm going out and I'm taking the car." And my brother is, "No, no, I need the car. I'm going on a date." My dad said, "No, you take the truck."

So, I thought that because of the conflict between the two vehicles and the two drivers, adding a third driver is going to be worse. So, I didn't think I'd get my license. But he had an ulterior motive.

Frances Kaplan: Yes.

Wilton Lee: Okay. So, I got my permit, got my license. The day after I got my license, he said, "Come to the shop tomorrow by 10:00." I go, "Why?" He said, "You have to deliver." I go, "Oh, okay." So, that was the start of my delivering experience and also the start of my design experience.

I was delivering a casket spray to Oakland going down Telegraph Avenue and just got my license. So, you have the radio on, listening to rock and roll and bouncing around. And this car stopped in front of me. And I hit the brake and the casket spray rolled off the stand from the back of the truck to the front of the truck. And I go, "Oh, no." I didn't have time to take it back to the shop to fix it. It wasn't damaged that much and I just put it back together. And that was my first design.

Frances Kaplan: Keep note this is on tape, right?!

Wilton Lee: I've told this story plenty of times before. Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: And you were about 16 at that time because you had your license?

Wilton Lee: Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: And so, after you graduated from Berkeley High, did you know that you wanted to go straight in the business?

Wilton Lee: Yes, I did. Yeah, I already applied to Cal Poly Ornamental Horticulture. And I wanted to do that.

Frances Kaplan: And then during the years that you were away for college and your father kept the business, was there an understanding that you would take this over one day?

Wilton Lee: That's a good question. I don't remember if ... He expected me to come back and work.

Frances Kaplan: And not go for anybody else.

Wilton Lee: Yeah. He wasn't going to sell it out from underneath me. But as soon as I came back from college and started working, I tried to implement a few of the ideas we learned in college to improve the business. And some worked and some didn't, but he never said, "I told you so."

And then I got married. And he said, "You want to take over the business? I'm ready to retire." So, I said, "Okay." So, I took over in 1971.

Frances Kaplan: I'm curious when you said that you brought back ideas that you had learned in college and sort of integrated them a little bit into the business. Can you

remember any of the things? Because it's sort of this interesting, your father very much learned this from scratch.

Wilton Lee: Right.

Frances Kaplan: And everything about flowers and the floral industry and also the growers. And that sounds very interesting like bringing in new ideas, but also sometimes realizing that the old ones really work.

Wilton Lee: Yeah, the old ones really work. Well, a lot of the things I learned in college for growing in, because we had to take plant prop classes which my dad already knew because he'd been self-taught in propagating plants. He used to grow and propagate a lot of azaleas and camellias. And so, our nursery was heavy in those things.

Some of the merchandising ideas, I tried to change, upgrade. But at that time in the '70s, I should have stayed to my dad's merchandising plan and just sell flowers because I would buy things that I liked but not necessarily you would like as a consumer. And so, we still have a lot of those things that I brought back.

And any salesperson that came in, I would buy something from because that's just the way I am. People say, "You're a pushover. You're too soft." And my dad would come in. He would just look at it and he said, "Why did you buy this?" I said, "Oh, because we could send it out as an add-on to a flower arrangement." And he just shakes his head and walks away.

At one time, we did a lot of gourmet baskets. And so, we started carrying gourmet food items that had a longer shelf life. And we started carrying, I don't know if you ... I think they're still around, Kick Ass Hot Sauce. If you go to a store that sells a lot of hot sauce, you'll see a brand called Kick Ass Hot Sauces. And we had a whole display of them.

That was the start of the internet. You could go online and look for places where you could buy it. And it listed our flower shop as a place to get this hot sauce. And people would come in, "I'm looking for Kick Ass Hot Sauce." "Yeah, it's right there on the shelf." "Why do you carry hot sauces in a flower shop?" I said, "Because we do a lot of gourmet baskets and that's one of the items that moves pretty well." So, that did okay. That did okay.

Frances Kaplan: And you didn't need to grow it.

Wilton Lee: Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: What flowers have been consistent all the way through?

Wilton Lee: Chrysanthemums and roses. Yeah, chrysanthemums and roses. And then, carnations would be consistent but there's no more domestic growers. They're all offshore grown now. But actually, they're having a comeback now because of the different varieties and hybridizing that they're doing with getting different colors with the carnations.

Frances Kaplan: So that leads me to when you were managing the business, growers were coming to you with their flowers?

Wilton Lee: No, we'd go to the flower market.

Frances Kaplan: You'd go to the flower market. So the flower market was obviously well established at that point.

Wilton Lee: Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: And was it sort of this one-stop shop where you could go and see everything from all the growers pretty much around the Bay Area in Northern California?

Wilton Lee: Right. When my dad started, he was going to the old flower market at 5th in Mission where that parking lot is now. And I used to go with him sometimes. I remember getting up early in the morning and going with them. And then, when they moved down the 6th and Brannan, I remember going to the grand opening with him. So, that was exciting.

And I brought a picture of him. I'm not sure if it's at a grand opening or one of the design shows they had. But it's on the Master Florist Association Facebook page. There's a lot of old pictures on there. So, this was one of them I found and printed for you.

Frances Kaplan: Thank you. So, you also grew up going to the California Flower Market?

Wilton Lee: Yes.

Frances Kaplan: And what were your first impressions of walking into that?

Wilton Lee: I thought it was a lot of fun. The best impression, not the best impression, the impression I had was we get there, he'd do his buying. And then, he'd meet with some of his friends and they'd go across the street to this bar and have breakfast. And they did something with dice. People still do it. But I don't eat breakfast at the flower market anymore. But they shake dice and throw it down. And I don't know if it's like poker that the highest hand wins or the lowest hand. But whoever lost bought breakfast.

So, he'd do that every morning when he went to the flower market. A couple of good florists buddies he'd have breakfast with.

Frances Kaplan: How frequently would he go?

Wilton Lee: He'd go three times a week to San Francisco and two times a week to the Oakland Flower Market.

Frances Kaplan: And then, when you were running the business, how frequently would you go?

Wilton Lee: I'd go three times a week to San Francisco Flower Market.

Frances Kaplan: And did you have consistent growers that you [00:24:30] work with? Did you see a change at all? I guess this is a few questions. Did you see a lot of family-owned businesses continuing while you were there?

Wilton Lee: There are a few that come to mind. One was Sakai brothers rose growers. They finally closed up maybe 10, 15 years ago but they were consistent [00:25:00] rose growers. They had nurseries in Richmond and Hayward. My last carnation grower, he was Ben Tanizawa Junction Nursery. He had his nursery in San Leandro, in the Ashland area of San Leandro.

And I think his two sons are doctors I believe so they didn't want to take over the business. So, when he got tired, he said, "Okay, that's it. I'm closing up." And he just closed up. But other growers have flourished like the Kitayama brothers. They were four brothers who started KB Farms. One of the brothers became mayor of Fremont. I think it was Tom Kitayama. And they had sons. And the sons now took over the family business and run it.

And they have farms and they closed the nurseries in Fremont. But they do have nurseries in Watsonville. And I'm not sure if they still have their nursery in Colorado. Well, yeah, they had a nursery that grew carnations and roses in Colorado.

Frances Kaplan: Are there as many growers now as there were perhaps during your father's time period or are there more? Or is it sort of being consolidated into few large growers?

Wilton Lee: There are a lot less now. I think in order to maintain a nursery now, you have to be a specialty grower maintaining small acreage or else, other big companies will [00:27:00] buy you up. Two of the bigger companies I know of are Mellano & Company in Los Angeles. They grow in the Carlsbad, San Diego area. And then, Sun Valley Farms in Arcata, they grow bulb crops, tulips, irises, lilies.

And then, they bought up some farms down in Southern California and grow field crops. And so, those are like conglomerate growers.

Frances Kaplan: And the history of the California Flower Market, I mean it's predominantly Japanese-American families, growers and sellers. And that's how it started. Have you seen that change as well?

Wilton Lee: Yeah. It used to be Chinese, Italian and Japanese. The Chinese all sold their land off and no longer grow. They were some of the biggest chrysanthemum growers. And then, the Italians sold off a lot of their nurseries, too. And actually, the Japanese did, too, except for the Kitayamas. There's another one in Half Moon Bay. A senior moment here. He grows lilies, Oku Nursery. And then, mostly everything else is imported now.

Frances Kaplan: And that's a change from before?

Wilton Lee: Yeah, big change. One of my son's classmates became an organic flower grower. And she started out in Sunol. And now, she's growing on a rooftop in Berkeley. And there's a building and it used to be the Dodge dealership. I don't know if you remember where that was on, Fulton and Dwight way, J.E. French Dodge. You're not that old.

Frances Kaplan: I don't remember the Dodge dealership but I know Fulton and Dwight.

Wilton Lee: There's an apartment building there. And she grows on the rooftop of that building. And she sells to the flower market. And she does Farmers' Market, too. And my son buys from her, too.

Frances Kaplan: I'll look for it. The Berkeley Farmers' Market?

Wilton Lee: Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: So, when you were growing up and when you were ... I mean, your involvement with the California Flower Market and in this flower industry has been your entire life. Has it flowed through into your social life as well? Did you have people that became part of your social group or part of your community and that you had met through the flower industry?

Wilton Lee: Yes. Let's see. My close friends are either ... Well, actually, they're flower shop owners. And they no longer ... Well, one passed away and the other one closed down his business. And his mother's family was a big grower of potted plants, Sunnyside Nursery, the Yoshida family. And they developed the Optimara African Violet which was a big seller back in the day when African Violets were very popular.

And they had nurseries in Florida, Texas, and Ecuador, and California. And they were a huge grower. And they just closed up. I don't know the economic reasons why but they did. Another close friend, his family came back after the war and started over again. They had nurseries before the war and they lost everything when they went to camp. But they came back. And I think it was his father and an uncle that rebuilt the business and they had nurseries in Monrovia, Santa Barbara, and San Leandro.

Right off 80 Freeway, there's a shopping center called the Greenhouse. It's where you take off and go to Stockton and Tracy and 582, whatever, 238. On the right hand side, there's a shopping center called the Greenhouse. And it's called the Greenhouse because there were actual greenhouses there before. And that was the Shinoda Nursery that grew roses there.

Frances Kaplan: The flower market itself was so strongly Japanese-American. Did you end up finding yourself celebrating either Japanese holidays or anything like that that was really because of your work?

Wilton Lee: Not mainly because of where I grew up, it was mainly, predominantly Japanese families, the kids that I played baseball, football and basketball with. And so, I have strong friendships with a lot of Japanese families.

Frances Kaplan: In the East Bay Community?

Wilton Lee: Yeah, in East Bay.

Frances Kaplan: Now, you ran the store for 50 years, something like that?

Wilton Lee: Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: Did you see any major changes? Well, I'm sure you so many but how you had to adapt with those times? I mean, you went all the way through the internet time period and online and ...

Wilton Lee: Recession.

Frances Kaplan: ... recessions, yes. Could you talk a little bit about that? Is that one of the things that are ... I think about that during COVID, too. Were the flower stores hit incredibly hard? Or did people say, "Hey, we're going to buy flowers to cheer us up?"

Wilton Lee: During the recession, everybody is in the same boat so the prices never rose. And you just have to ... The key to a successful flower shop, running a successful flower shop is you buying. So you have to buy good quality and at the right price. And one of the things my father said, "When you go to the flower market, don't quibble about the price. You just pay the grower what he wants and he'll always take care of you at the holidays.

If you quibble about it, they see you coming, they're going to raise the price. You're going to quibble with them and they're going to lower the price to what they were going to get from you anyway. So, don't argue with them. You want them to be your friends." So, I took that philosophy. And that's paid off.

During COVID, the difference my son had when I was going through recessions, in COVID, he couldn't open the store.

Wilton Lee: ... It's all online ordering. And what he does is he knows the limits he can do. For a while, start of COVID, he was doing it all by himself, going to the market, processing flowers, making the flowers and delivering it. So, he knew his limits. So he said, "I could do 10 a day." So, as soon as he got 10, he shut off the website.

The next time if you came in and tried to order flowers or next day for delivery, your pickup would be the next day. And so that way, he was able to control what order she had. And the designs that he had on the website were all of his own design. So, he'd get 10 orders. He'll look at the orders and he'd buy flowers for 10 orders. And that was it.

So, he's actually making more money with the store being closed and just online than when I was doing it, having the store open and buying product hoping to sell.

Frances Kaplan: Because it wasn't made to order and it wasn't specific orders.

Wilton Lee: Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: During those recession periods, did you find that ... I'm curious of your customers. You had obviously people buying flowers for friends and, like you said, coming in and out. But were you also providing for hotels or events when the event business and weddings seemed to get grander and grander?

Wilton Lee: Yeah. We were doing weddings and events. We only did one or two businesses where we went in weekly and changed the flowers. We weren't heavy into that at all.

Frances Kaplan: Was there a boom period?

Wilton Lee: Yeah, back in the '80s. Back in the '80s, at that time, we had two stores and we had about 10 employees. Now, he runs it with one employee and a driver and me because he didn't have to pay me.

Frances Kaplan: But the store is located at the same place on University Avenue?

Wilton Lee: Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: What is the name of the store?

Wilton Lee: Lee's Florist & Nursery.

Frances Kaplan: So, let's talk a little bit about when your son started to take an interest in the business. Or did he?

Wilton Lee: Yeah. Well, he did because I'd have to pick him up from school, nursery school, and bring him to the store. My wife at that time was assistant teaching in a school so she didn't get off till 3:00, 3:30, 4:00. And she'd come by and pick him up and take them home. But I didn't have a sandbox for him, but I made kind of a playroom on top of the office where he played or he would find things to do. He'd go out to where we keep the flower foam.

And he loved to take brand new bricks of foam and cut them up like he was cooking. And he'd do stuff outside that I probably don't know about and shouldn't know about. And he'd always go on delivery with me. And I think one of the reasons he liked going there after school is that if he wanted to eat something that he wasn't supposed to eat, he knew I'd always go next door and buy it. That's when Andronico's was next door to us.

So, he took an interest after ... Well, my dad took the whole family to China. And he seemed to get close to my dad at that time. And in working with me, I started to give him more responsibilities in designing and things. And he was like our IT person. Said, "Can you do this on the computer?" "I showed you that last week." "I know but show me again. I was the one who changed your diapers, so show me again how to do this."

So, he started getting an interest in the technical side of the business. And he's actually a very good designer. And he graduated from San Francisco State with a master's degree in International Relations. And his professor said, "You should apply being a professor at San Francisco State." And I said, "You should do that. You get summers off. You get good health plan. You get good benefits. You should do that." "No, I think I want to run the flower shop and carry on grandpa's legacy." "Grandpa doesn't care. It's okay. We've been here almost 75 years. It's okay if we shut it down."

And he said, "No, I really want to do this." And I said, "Okay. If you want to do it, then you could have it. I'll step away."

Frances Kaplan: I love that you were like, "You don't have to." Because I always wondered how it felt if you had taken over a business from your parents and then you've run it all that time and then seeing it close must be so, in some ways, heartbreaking. But were you prepared for that?

Wilton Lee: Yeah. The one thing about him taking over the business is that I kept thinking, "If I close this place, what am I going to do with all this crap?" Because my friends closed before me and he says, "Come on down. I want to give you some stuff. I want to show some stuff and I want to give you some stuff." So, I went down and I bought some supplies from him. He says, "Okay. This pile over here

is for you. Just throw it in your truck." And I go, "I don't need it. It's okay." "No, just take the stuff. It's free. The price is right."

So, I took all that stuff. Another friend in Alameda closed her shop. She says, "Come on over. I want to give you some stuff." So, I got her stuff. And then, we decided to close our second store. I got all that stuff. And then, my other friend passed away and his daughter said, "Come down and get some of the stuff from dad's shop because we have to clear it out. We're closing the shop down." I said, "Okay."

So I have one, two, three, four inventories from four flower shops. And it's scattered all over the place. We're not a nursery anymore. We have junk over the nursery and in the greenhouses and storage. We only use one greenhouse and the rest is all stuff is in there.

Frances Kaplan: When did you stop growing flowers?

Wilton Lee: We never grew flowers. We just grew plants.

Frances Kaplan: You just grew plants in the greenhouse?

Wilton Lee: Yeah. And actually, we still grow house plants that we sell in the sales greenhouse.

Frances Kaplan: Was that common for a lot of stores that they would have some greenhouses attached and they would ...

Wilton Lee: No. But it was good for us because if you didn't sell a plant, you throw it in the greenhouse in water. And next year, the azalea would be blooming again or the camellia would come back or the Kalanchoes, things like that.

Frances Kaplan: Your son has now taken over the business which means that it's a three-generation business which is possibly ... Do you feel that's pretty rare from what you have seen amongst other flower sellers?

Wilton Lee: There are some three-generational flower shops throughout the United States. I don't think there are any around here. I know Ah Sam in San Mateo is two-generational but I don't think any of their kids ... I haven't heard of any of their kids wanting to take over.

Yeah, three-generation is kind of rare but there are some within the United States.

Frances Kaplan: What do you see as the future for flower stores and the flower industry in general? Just the flower industry in San Francisco is always been fairly strong.

Wilton Lee: Yeah. I have mixed feelings about that. If he could refine what he's doing now a little bit better and hopefully open up the store to walk-in customers, I think he'll be fine. The way he's marketing now is good. But if he's going to grow, he's going to have to expand upon that. And some of the ideas that I throw at him, he listens and it goes out the other ear. He has to hear it from someone else than his father.

So, I try to encourage him. I forward him articles that I've read on the internet and things like that. But he'll be okay. He'll make a living. But I'd like to see him grow bigger.

Frances Kaplan: Do you think that the California Flower Market which is the place that everybody goes to, correct?

Wilton Lee: Yes.

Frances Kaplan: Do you see that continuing on that model also where all the growers can congregate in one place and the buyers can go?

Wilton Lee: I'm scared. As you know, they got bought out by Kilroy Corporation. And I don't understand all the aspects of that deal. But their new location down by the hospitals, they haven't even started remodeling that building yet. And that's going to take a long time. And Kilroy said that they aren't going to raise the rents. I think it was for seven years. It's almost seven years now since they bought the place. They bought over the property at the flower market. And when the rents go up, I don't think those growers can't afford it.

So, I'm scared for the growers and I'm scared for retailers. And if they don't have a place to buy product from, how are they going to get their product? I don't know.

Frances Kaplan: Do you see the flower business and flower stores being sustainable? Do you see the internet as being a plus or a minus when it comes to selling flowers? Because now, you can do Interflora and...

Wilton Lee: Buying flowers on the internet is a hit and miss. There are a lot of good companies out there that provide good product and good quality. And there's a lot of bad companies doing it. So, it's hit and miss every time. If you go on to the websites of FTD and Teleflora and 1800Flowers after a holiday, you'll see hundreds and hundreds of complaints. I don't know how they sustain those complaints, how they deal with them. But it's always better to deal with someone yourself.

Frances Kaplan: But did you notice it impact your business when all of a sudden, it seemed like you could just go online and click? Or were you part of that where you also developed in online?

Wilton Lee: Yeah. We used to be FTD ... Well, we still are members of FTD. And we were at one time the leading flower shop in Berkeley as far as outgoing orders. And that has all disappeared because people can now just call a florist in Boston, Massachusetts and talk to them and get what they want rather than call me and put on a computer and it goes to a shop in Boston.

So, we always tell people when they call us, "We could do it for you. But if you want something specific, it's better for you to call a shop in Boston." But what's happened with that is you could look up any city in United States and google the flower shop and somebody will come up, whether it's a flower shop or it's what we call it an order gatherer, someone that takes over a domain name. And they have the know-how and expertise to put their name at the top of the list. And they are not a flower shop, they're a phone bank.

And that's where all the complaints coming from is. If you're going to call somebody in another city, make sure they have a local address, not just a phone number or a website. [00:51:00] My son, the way he built his website, it's beneficial to him. So, he reaps the benefits of not having wire service and having a website. He gets it both ways.

Frances Kaplan: That's good. Does he have regular customers? Did you have regular customers throughout your 50 years?

Wilton Lee: Yes, we did. Yeah. A lot of our customers, my customers I inherited from my dad. And I did get a lot of their children. But since everything is online now, he doesn't keep a record of it. But sometimes I look at the orders that come through, I'll say, "Oh, this is so-and-so's son or daughter." And he says, "Okay." I don't know. He doesn't see the relative importance of that. He just fills the order and said, "Why should I treat anyone differently? They're all equal. That way, everyone will get the same treatment." And I said, "Okay. It's all right."

Al Bersch: Well, because this collection is so much about the flower market and centered around that organization, I'm curious how much time you've spent over the years going there to buy flowers? Is it something you do or that you did do every day? Or is it a place you have spent like a huge amount of time or more just sort of like going to pick stuff up?

Yeah, I'm curious about some memories from the building and being there and spending time there.

Wilton Lee: Yeah. I still go to the flower market now. I enjoy seeing all my friends there or friends that are still in the business there. When I first started going to the flower market, I leave the house at quarter to 7:00 and breeze across the

bridge, get the flowers and be back by 9:00. And I was also eating breakfast at the flower market.

Now, as the years moved on, I'd have to go earlier and earlier. And now, if I don't leave the house by 4:30 to get across the bridge and get into the parking lot at the flower market on the busy days, it's horrendous. One of the things growing up at the flower market, they'd have an Annual Open House Christmas show where the two big terminals, they'd turn into different booths for vendors.

And they'd have people designing in their booths. They'd have a design show on one end of the building and everything. And I always look forward to those. And then all of a sudden, they stopped. Cost-wise, I don't know. But our local FTD district took over and rebirthed the Christmas show. And I think we did it once at the flower market again. And then, we moved it offsite to Fort Mason. And we ran it for several years.

And then, the same thing happened. People stopped coming. "Sunday is my only day-off. I don't want to spend time looking at flowers. I look at flowers six days a week." Or, "Why would I want look at flowers on a Sunday for? It's the only family time I have?" Everyone has an excuse of why they don't. But when we were growing up, we thought it was fun. We thought it was educational. We had a good time at the show. And that was one of the highlights of going to the flower market was where the shows.

Frances Kaplan: When you say it was educational, tell me a little bit more about that, what the growers talk about?

Wilton Lee: Okay. They would have vendors, for instance OASIS. They make our flower foam and then a lot of different products for the floral industry, so they'd have their products on display. And they'd have a floral designer there showing how to use the new products. And then, there'd be a designer on stage showcasing all the flowers that are available at the flower market. And all the vendors' stores outside would be open for business. And it was a lot of fun.

But now, people make excuses not to go. I don't know ... For me, to go to a flower show, it's fun. I still like going. You can teach an old dog new tricks. If you just learn one thing, it's worth it. If you meet one new florist or vendor or grower and develop a relationship with him, that's a plus. But people today don't see it that way.

Frances Kaplan: The growers that you dealt with predominantly in your time ... what locations were they? Where were some of those main growing areas? I know you mentioned some before.

Wilton Lee: You mean where do they grow?

Frances Kaplan: Yeah. Where were the flowers coming in from?

Wilton Lee: Half Moon Bay, Pescadero, Salinas, Watsonville, San Leandro, Hayward, Arcata. There's some in Marin County, too. And South San Francisco before was all redeveloped. You know where the Serramonte is?

Frances Kaplan: Yeah.

Wilton Lee: There are a lot of flower fields there. There still are some, but that was a big flower-growing area before. Now, it's all shopping centers and houses.

Al Bersch: Can I ask another question ...

Frances Kaplan: Yes.

Al Bersch: ... about the breakfast because you mentioned your father eating breakfast and the dice and everything, and that he liked the breakfast? Is there still a place to get breakfast at the flower market? And then, do people still do that?

Wilton Lee: Yeah. There's a restaurant there, but it doesn't open till 6:00 or 7:00. I'm usually gone by then. And I'm not sure during if COVID it's closed up or for it's still there. But there is a restaurant there. There always has been a restaurant there. Yeah.

Wilton Lee: I don't what it's ... Do you know what that game is called?

Al Bersch: Yeah, dice. I actually am part of the group that plays dice.

Wilton Lee: So, it's the high hand wins or the low hand.

Al Bersch:: It's combos of five. Or you have to add the numbers on the dice equal some kind of denomination of five. And then you get to add up how many times you do that.

Wilton Lee: And the loser buys or you're just doing it fun?

Frances Kaplan: That was a wonderful story. I very much like that. Is there anything that you would like to add before we close this down?

Wilton Lee: I have great hopes for the flower industry. But then, I'm very optimistic about the reality of paying rent and things. I just hope they could pull it off. I mean, I don't understand why they sold. Well, it's like anything's for sale for right price. And I guess Kilroy offered the right price. Just like FTD was a coop before, member-owned wire service. And then there was a big fight when we decided to sell. And we sold. And then in 2020 hindsight is we never should have sold FTD. We should have kept it as a coop because right after that, it just went downhill.

And I don't want to see that happen to the flower market. I wish that someone could win the lotto and then donate it to the flower market. And they could go buy their own property and set their own rules and their own rents and they wouldn't have to be subject to somebody else. But yeah, I don't believe Kilroy has even gotten the permits changed to do what they want to do at that site.

Frances Kaplan: And that's been a long time.

Wilton Lee: It's been a long time, yeah. And I was even surprised. I must have not gone to the market for a span of a month or so. And I went by there and the San Francisco Tennis Club was down. And then, the Old Chronicle Building where they housed their trucks was gone and it's just bare land now. It's amazing the change in the landscape there.

Frances Kaplan: Yes. That's the other thing that you will have seen over time is a massive change in the landscape. Both as you said around the flower market but also where growers used to be.

Wilton Lee: Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: Well, thank you. Thank you so much.

Al Bersch: Thank you so much for sharing your experience. I'm glad to hear it.

Frances Kaplan: It's so interesting because you sort of almost take it for granted like that their flowers get to the store. You don't really think about the supply chain or the people at the other end of the supply chain.

Wilton Lee: Right.

Frances Kaplan: And how disrupted. I mean, I guess that was one question. We're still rolling the tape? That was one question ... how that supply chain was impacted by World War II and incarceration. I mean, it was predominantly Japanese American families that had the farms and that had the businesses... It decimated the community, so it must have just decimated the industry for those number of years as well.

Wilton Lee: Well, a lot of Italian growers made out because they took over the Japanese farms, not in the way that my father took over their flower shop. But they just said, "Okay, I'll give you 10 cents on the dollar for this stuff." And a lot of that happened, too. A lot of that happened and a lot of people just took, too.

Frances Kaplan: Yeah. And then probably, a lot of people never ... Actually, families never came back.

Wilton Lee: Yeah. One thing that was nice about the Nabeda family is that when the mother, the wife died, the granddaughter came to us for flowers. And she put in the

obituary, "We're forever thankful," to my father, "Homer Lee, for watching our flower shop and nursery during the war when we were at camp. And without him doing that, we wouldn't have survived." And I read that in the obituary and I go, "Oh, man, I've got to go to the service and represent dad."

And then, she even recognized me at the service, too. She said, "This is Mr. Lee's son. Would you stand up?" I go, "I can do that." But it's a good thing that my dad did that. And since then, I found out that a lot of other people have done the same thing for other Japanese' businesses and families. So, we're not the unique family. It's good karma to do that.

Wilton Lee: And I also just ... I texted you a picture of a sign that my dad had in the flower shop ...

Wilton Lee: ... that says, "American-Chinese florist." And he had that up during the war. [01:05:30] And then, this other picture that I just gave you, I'm not sure if it's the grand opening of the flower market or Christmas show. That's my dad walking through the parking lot. And if you notice the way the cars are parked, it's the opposite of the way it is now.

We used to enter on Brannan Street and exit on 6th Street. And now, we enter on 6th and exit on Brannan Street.

Frances Kaplan: Is it your father with the two women walking through the parking lot?

Wilton Lee: Yeah. That's his second wife and one of my dad's longtime employees. Yeah.

Frances Kaplan: I didn't ask how many employees? You mentioned in your one where you had two stores. And so, did he have to put Chinese American-owned because of the fear of retaliation if you didn't explicitly say that it wasn't Japanese?

Wilton Lee: Yeah. And I was looking for ... I have some correspondence from Mrs. Nabeda to my dad and I didn't have time to look for them. But I do have a letter that my mother wrote back to her. She was asking or telling her that she was getting out of camp that her husband was at a different camp, and she didn't know when he would be back to Berkeley. But she was wondering how customers treated my mom and dad, as well as what she should expect in their predominantly Italian neighborhood.

It's right on the corner of Delaware and San Pablo, kitty-corner from Popeyes there. And my mother told them that everyone was always asking about them and how they were doing and they were happy that they would be coming back. But I couldn't find it, those letters.

Frances Kaplan: Well, thank you. Thank you so much.

