Walter U. Lum: Chinese American Pioneer and Civil Rights Leader

SAN FRANCISCO — Twice within the last half of the year, Walter U. Lum (for Urish) Lum (Lim Wah You 林華耀) has been proposed as a name for an existing street. Many Chinese Americans, however, especially the younger generation and new immigrants, are unfamiliar with the person and many do not understand why he should be singled out for the honor. Yet only a few decades ago, during the Chinese exclusion period, Walter Lum was well known nationally as a fighter for the civil rights of Chinese Americans as well as being a respected leader in the Chinese American community.

The fourth and only son of a Chinese immigrant shopkeeper in San Francisco’s Chinatown, Walter Lum was born in 1882, the same year Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first immigration law aimed at excluding an entire ethnic group. Growing up during a period when Chinese were considered legitimate prey for racist acts of violence, young Walter had to learn English and Chinese in homes of private tutors and at home, since his parents did not wish to subject him to the taunts and bullying from white school children.

SING CHONG BAZAAR
When he entered manhood, Walter Lum worked as a clerk in Look Yuen Hing’s 陸潤卿Look Tin Ebi, Sing Chong Bazaar in San Francisco’s Chinatown. It was during this period that he and Joseph K. Lum (Lum Joe Gay 林家泰) started a clubroom with a recreational place and a poolroom for young Chinese Americans. There on many occasions, he and his friends discussed their futures and that of other Chinese Americans in this, their native land. Soon afterward, these discussions bore fruit when, in 1904, Walter Lum, Joseph K. Lum, and their close friend Ng Gunn 吳根, organized the Native Sons of the Golden State (N.S.G.S.), first founded almost a decade previously in 1895 by Chun Dick 徐德 as a Chinese American fraternal organization. This action determined the course of Walter Lum’s life.

At that time, Chinese Americans were an unwelcomed and unpopular ethnic minority in the United States. Thus an important aspect of the Native Sons’ activities was to fight anti-Chinese laws. In one of its early actions, the Native Sons of the Golden State petitioned Congress to amend the law so that a person denied entry as a citizen may have the right to have the question of his citizenship and consequent right of admission determined by American courts. (At the turn of the century, the Supreme Court in the case of U.S. vsaju Toy had ruled that a person claiming to be a US citizen seeking admission into the country is not entitled to court appeal if he is denied admission by the executive branch of the government.)

Walter Lum and his brother-in-law, Wong Bock Yue (黄伯耀) played prominent roles in another N.S.G.S. action when they went to Sacramento to argue for fairer laws for the Chinese. In 1913, he and his colleagues also fought to stop a bill proposed by State Senator Caminetti to memorialize Congress for a constitutional amendment to deprive Chinese Americans of the right to vote. Walter Lum also journeyed to the nation’s capital to plead before President Woodrow Wilson’s administration, the case of injustices against Chinese Americans.

Walter Lum and his colleagues came to inspire in other Chinese Americans in all parts of the country a desire to organize the fight for their civil rights. The Native Sons of the Golden State became a national organization, and the name was changed to Chinese Americans Citizens Alliance (C.A.C.A.). Walter Lum was elected the first Grand President and remained a dominant figure in the organization for a quarter century, serving as Grand President in 1912, 1914, 1915 to 1917, 1923 to 1929, and 1933 to 1935.

By this time, Walter Lum had become a prominent young leader in the Chinese community. In November 1917, at the request of the Chinese envoy in Washington, the Chinese Six Companies appointed him camp manager, interpreter and coordinator of all activities for Chinese refugees at Ft. Sam Houston near San Antonio, Texas. (Note: These were 42 Chinese refugees who followed General Pershing’s troops from Mexico.)

Walter U. Lum
when the latter returned to American territory, after a fruitless pursuit of Pancho Villa, south of the border.) Because of his strict enforcement of regulations, such as banning gambling in the camp, certain dissatisfied elements among the refugees wrote to Chinese newspapers in San Francisco complaining of mistreatment. The Chinese Six Companies then forced him to resign. However, a subsequent investigation by the Chinese Times position, continued on page 9

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各種存査戸口

有効兼免税
however, was not his first taste of journalism. Around 1912, Lum had worked for the Young China, organ of the Chinese Nationalist Party, for a few years as reporter, translator and finally editor. Unlike his brother-in-law, Wong Bock Yue, one of the paper’s founders and an active Chinese Nationalist Party member who went on to cast his lot with the motherland, Walter Lum, although sympathetic to the nationalist cause, chose to stay to fight for Chinese American rights in his native America. His experience at the Young China as well as his activities with C.A.C.A. probably made him realize the importance of a news organ to speak up for Chinese American interests. Therefore, in 1924, C.A.C.A. members under his leadership raised capital to found the Chinese Times and the Chinese Times Publishing Company. This became the first Chinese language newspaper to speak for the Chinese in America from the Chinese American perspective and came to be widely read among Chinese in the West. It also helped to strengthen C.A.C.A.’s image in the political arena.

In 1925, Walter Lum was also appointed by C.A.C.A. to lead the effort to revise the provision in the 1924 Immigration Act, which had banned the entry of citizens’ alien Chinese wives. After five years of lobbying, Walter Lum and his colleagues convinced enough legislators to revise the law to allow for entry of citizens’ alien Chinese wives married before July 1, 1924. To be sure, this was a limited victory, but nonetheless it was an encouraging advance for Chinese American citizens in that period.

FIGHTER
In subsequent years Walter Lum continued to be prominent fighting for the civil rights of Chinese Americans and for the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, by means of both the Chinese Times and C.A.C.A. He left his strong imprint on the Chinese Times which became his work for the next 35 years, first as editor, then as managing editor, vice president and finally president. He died in 1961 at the age of 79.

Walter Lum was a many-faceted person. He fought for legal and civil rights of Chinese Americans. He was an American citizen, but at the same time, he was also proud of his Chinese heritage. Above all, he dedicated his entire life to active participation in and service to the betterment of the Chinese Americans community. In this he set a good example for posterity.

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