

Interview of Lily Sung on Her 1906 Earthquake Experience

[CONNIE YOUNG YU]

Lily (Soo Hoo) Sung and
family, 1903. Courtesy of
Ruth Sung Fok



LILY SUNG was born in 1899 in San Francisco, the daughter of Rev. N.A. Soo Hoo, the first Chinese Presbyterian minister in the city. During the earthquake and fire, Lily's birth certificate was destroyed, along with all the family's important documents. Her birth certificate was reinstated, but when she married William Sung, a professor born in China and later president of St. John's University in Shanghai, Lily lost her citizenship because of the exclusion law of 1922.

Lily Sung lived through many dramatic and historic events, the most earthshaking taking place on April 18, 1906 when she was seven. Her family lived on Washington Street in a three-story house divided into apartments, the residents all members of her father's church. On that fateful morning her father divided his family and neighbors into groups escaping the city. Lily's band consisted of her second sister, 14-year-old Clara and their five-year-old brother and little three-year-old sister. Here she

describes their perilous journey out of burning San Francisco.

I was seven years old, 1906, April 18. It was two days after my birthday. My birthday was on the 16th of April. Early in the morning, five o'clock, the house began to shake, and we were waken up very rudely. We didn't know what was the matter. And my mother had said cats had been running around all night making a lot of noise. And this was about early, early in the morning. Of course, we were very young, and we didn't know what was the matter, but Father and Mother kept very calm so that we wouldn't get frightened. Then Mother cooked breakfast for us. There was no more water because the water mains were broken...I think they must have had gas in those days. There was no way of cooking so we had some old rice from the night before and some jing fan, jing sung, so

she told us to eat, but no body wanted to eat. We were too frightened, we were too excited, and I remember father had an organ, a very nice organ. He was musical and he loved to play....

The week before we had gone on a picnic, and we had caught pollywogs....and we had them in this jar and all the pollywogs were on the floor and the glass container was broken. And I had this beautiful French doll that I had gotten for Christmas, a beautiful French doll, with yellow hair, I remember that so well, blue eyes. And that had fallen to the floor. And the head was, you know, they had those bisque heads, and the head was broken. And I remember I wept. It was heartbreaking for a little girl, because it was a new gift that she prized so much.

...Everything was sort of messed up. Things had fallen on the floor. Mother was picking them up. Pretty soon father said we mustn't stay here because there's a fire that's coming into the city. It started near the waterfront....

We were between Mason and Powell Streets, and the fire was still quite a distance down, but father thought, well, this isn't a place for us to stay. So he got together some of the neighbors, and some of the people from the church, and in those days people didn't know English too well, but my three big sisters had gone to school and they knew English. My brother was studying at Stanford in civil engineering and heard about it, he couldn't go back on the train because all the rails were all askew...all buckled. No trains were running, so he walked all the way back to San Francisco and by the time he got back, my father had already gone with his group of people to Oakland....so he went over on the ferry and found my father, and father told him to go back to get the house deeds and our birth certificates because birth certificates were very important for the Chinese. I



Lily sung,
1985. Courtesy
Connie Yung Yu

have a restored one because everything we had was burned up...there was nothing left. By the time my brother got back to the house, they were dynamiting certain streets to make fire lanes.

But this little group that I was in was my second sister and a little brother and a little sister and we had a neighbor with us. She was tall. I remember her as being quite tall. Of course, I was very small then, so everyone looked tall to me. But she had bound feet about, oh, three and a half inches, and she couldn't walk very fast. So Mother had given us each a change of clothing... a loaf of bread and a bottle of water. Second sister was carrying this, and this lady walked so slowly....there were crowds pushing us up along the street so we were pushed up the hill. We were supposed to go down to the ferry to go to Oakland, but then there were so many people trying to get away from the fire, so they thought the thing to do was to go up. So we got pushed, up, up, up and sometimes it wasn't very easy to get around these places that the houses had all fallen down. We could feel the fire on our faces, even several blocks away. My sister tried to keep us away from the fire 'cause we were walking so slowly because of this lady...and we could feel the warmth of the fire on our faces and we could see houses...parts of it

fallen down, the fronts were down like an open doll house. You could see into the houses and see what was happening...see the beds upstairs and the furniture downstairs.

But we kept going up, and we tried to get back down. Sometimes we were separated because a group like that can't stay together very easily with people pushing, pushing against them. So sister said, "no matter what happens, stay real still, and I'll come back and get you." So that's what we did. And we didn't have very much to eat. Part way, this lady, the one with the bound feet, fell against my sister, and she dropped the sack with the bottle of water, and the bottle broke, and the clothing was all wet, and the bread was all soaked. That was the first time I ever saw her cry. She wept because she was responsible for us and here was the food and the water....

And I remember there was a bunch of hooligans who saw this happening, and they laughed. They thought it was so funny...but you know, for us, it wasn't funny, it was a tragedy. Here was the water all broken, nothing to eat, nothing to drink, and being pushed up the hill.

And finally, we got to Taylor Street. That's quite a way up from Mason and Powell. But this was what happened with the crowds pushing us, and my sister said we must get down to the waterfront. So we went to the Jean Parker School, I remember that so well. And she knew a bit of English, and she knew she must get down to the waterfront. And she found a way of cutting across, away from the crowds. At nighttime we had no place to sleep or to rest. So I remember up around Taylor Street, up around where the cathedral is now, we lay down. We couldn't really lie down, but we sat as well as we could. See, I had a little brother and a little sister, and they hung on tightly to me. And they were such good children. They didn't cry even when they

were knocked down, 'cause these crowds pushing us...you know, would knock us down. I was seven. I felt quite responsible and quite a big sister. So they would not cry, but they'd look up tearfully at me and hold my hand closer. We three just held on to each other because we mustn't be parted from our big sister and from this lady. So finally....I don't remember the street, we got around ...we went down toward the ferry....it was two days before we got to the ferry, to the ferry building, and by that time we could sit down by the crowds who were waiting....there was a long line of people waiting to get to the ferry. The whole city was trying to get away from the burning city over to Oakland. So we sat down and waited, and I think that was the first time we really felt a little more safe, because now we knew that we would be getting across to Oakland on the ferry boat as Father had said to my big sister.

So finally, I think that was the third day, we got across the ferry over to Oakland. And at Lake Merritt there was the Red Cross and the Salvation Army. I'll always remember that. They were so good. They were so kind. They gave us each a cup of coffee with Carnation cream and sugar and each a doughnut. And that was the first real food we had had in...that was the third day. And oh my, that tasted so good. And when I smell hot coffee now, hot coffee with Carnation cream, I always remember...that brings back memories.

And finally...my father had this mission, I think, on Harrison Street, and he sent people out to look for us and for other members of the church. And they finally found us and took us back to our parents.

And they were so happy, and we were so happy. I can remember mother with tears streaming down her face, and father just holding us so close.