

Museum of History and Holocaust Education Legacy Series

Lori Lee Interview

Conducted by James Newberry

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Transcribed by Abby Aden

Born in Kentucky in 1936, Lori Lee spent her earliest years in southern China, where her parents worked as missionaries among the boat people on the Pearl River. In December 1941, Lee and her family were forced into confinement by Japanese occupational forces. They eventually repatriated to the United States. Lee recorded her oral history interview at Kennesaw State University in March 2017.

Full Transcript

Interviewer: This is James Newberry, and I'm here with Lori Lee on Wednesday March 22nd, 2017 at the Sturgis Library at Kennesaw State University. And Mrs. Lee, do you agree to this interview?

Lee: I do.

Interviewer: Thank you so much. Just to start with, can you tell me your full name?

Lee: My full name is Lorine¹ Anne Decker Lee.

Interviewer: Wonderful. And what's your birthday?

Lee: June 17, 1936.

Interviewer: Okay and where were you born?

Lee: I was born in a very small town in Kentucky called Garrard.² And I- I've never really looked it up, I've driven through it and it is a one-horse town. But my mom and dad were there briefly before the rest of their career kind of was launched.

Interviewer: Well, speaking of their career, I want to start by asking what were their names?

¹ Wasn't sure on the spelling. Could be Laureen, but she goes by Lori so I went with Lorine.

² She pronounced it "Garad" but the closest thing I could find in Kentucky is a small town called Garrard:

https://geonames.usgs.gov/apex/f?p=GNISPQ:3:::NO::P3_FID:512280

Lee: My father's name was William Decker, and my mother's name was Viola Decker. Yeah.

Interviewer: And what did they do for a living?

Lee: Well, they were both raised, um- No I can't say that. My mother was raised on a farm. My father was first generation American, from Holland. His dad was a bak- uh baker so he was raised in New Jersey. But early on, through some influence that he had or a person that he met he got very interested in mission work. So, I think shortly after high school, in fact I don't think he finished high school, he went over to Chicago from New Jersey and entered a school there called Moody Bible Institute.³ It's still going, it's a thriving place of educating missions to be or missionaries to be and he was there with the express purpose of getting a degree so that he could go abroad. My mother from Ohio, was influenced through somebody visiting her church who was very interested in India. And that led to her investigating further education. But neither one of my parents ever graduated from high school. So back in those days, evidently, you could go on and get some qualification from a higher school of learning without having to have a high school diploma. And that's where they met, was during those years at Moody Bible Institute.

Interviewer: I see. So, you talk about what drew them to mission work, so when you were born, what stage were they in and what were they preparing to do?

Lee: That's a good question because after they graduated, they had applied for a visa to go to India, this is what they felt God wanted them to do. But it wasn't forthcoming and so they were given the option to have a little time in doing mission work here at home. And so, they were given this little church, in Garrard, Kentucky. And I think they were there for about a year and a half and I was the first of four children, and I was born then. That visa to India never did come through, but in the year and a half that they were in Kentucky, they changed their interest or felt that their interest had been changed and applied for a visa to China, and that came through very quickly. Even though we were on the verge of war between China and Japan at that time. It was still an open place for foreigners to go. So, when that visa came through then they left Kentucky and they went to San Francisco where they stayed with friends until the papers were finalized. And then when that visa did arrive, they went from San Francisco to Vancouver, and that's where they boarded a ship and sailed to Hong Kong from there.

³ <https://www.moody.edu/>

Interviewer: Did they have any apprehensiveness about going themselves and taking you know a young child?

Lee: They never spoke about that. I don't think so. They were one among many that were doing that. A lot of these graduates were going into different parts of the world. Many of them had time to wait and families were born. But I never remember them thinking twice about taking me and I had by that time turned two and my mother was pregnant again because shortly after we arrived in Hong Kong, about six months, she gave birth to my brother. But that was a three-week journey from Vancouver to Hong Kong. Obviously, I don't remember that part, but I have crossed the Pacific Ocean five times by ship.

Interviewer: Wow. Can you tell me sort of what their intentions or aspirations in going to China would have been?

Lee: Yes. They had a specific goal. And the goal was to work and to evangelize people who worked on these small boats called sampans.⁴ The 15 by 5 foot by 2-foot-deep boats where the Chinese people were born, they lived, and they died on these boats. They were called "sam" "pans" because "sam" means three-feet or something like that, and "pan" means, yeah, *yi-sam-se*. It was five boards. Sampan means five boards. And that's about all the boards that were in this little boat that they lived in. Long, and that wide. But yeah, they raised their chickens there, they had their little chickens there. They had canopies that dropped down at night for privacy or because of weather. And a lot of the rivers were just inundated with boat people because it was a cheap way to live. And they could maneuver and go up and down the river. And many of them sold wares, they sold ceramic ware or lots of food. And so, you could live on the river very well because shops came to you and if you needed to get from one point to another you had your transportation. So, there was huge colonies of these boat people as they were called, and the mission group that my parents went with was called the South China Boat Mission, and it was particularly to work with boat people.

Interviewer: What was the closest large city to where your parents were living and evangelizing?

Lee: Well, if I could just back up a little bit as to how they got there?

Interviewer: Sure.

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sampan>

Lee:

When we arrived in Hong Kong, we were there for a year and a half, and the primary purpose was to learn the language. You cannot go into another country and expect to start without having some way of communicating. You know? And so, they started their language course, and I was fairly well on my own and because of that I had what we called an amah. A servant lady who took care of me so that my parents could use their time learning the language. Well consequently, she was my best friend and a mother figure. I learned the language very quickly, much faster than my parents ever did, and the story is told of my parents when they would give like a menu for a day or a week and all, little Lorine would always change that because she preferred the Chinese food to the foreign food which was foreign to me. So, we had a lot of fun times because my mother and dad were just so amazed that I picked it up so fast. But I was with her, you know, twelve hours a day. So that was- and then when my brother was born, she of course took care of him. So, they were there a year and a half. And at that time Japan had actually already occupied Canton [now called Guangzhou].⁵ Canton is the southernmost city, southern and central, in China. And its right on the river, the Pearl River, and there's a large boat community there. And they already had mission workers there at that time, and my parents were going to come and join them. So, Japan had already taken over Canton, there were Japanese occupation there, but it was still very free. And so, my father would keep in touch with people who were there to see if it was really permissible for him and his little family to join them. Well in fact it was, so we left a year and a half later in 1939 and arrived there and were very happily situated. Now you'd find it interesting because when you think of boat work, the best way to do any kind of work is to get in and among the people. And so, the mission had built four different- actually five different house boats. Good sized house boats. I think our houseboat had four bedrooms; two large ones, two small ones. We had a dining area, a living area, a servant's quarter, and so we lived very comfortably. But these boats were anchored so that they faced each other. And then over the side was the chapel. And so, we sat- these fairly large house boats sat right in the middle on the river among the boat people. And that's how the contacts were made, because you lived right among them. Well between where my house- our houseboat was, was a very large barge which led to another barge which led to a manmade island called Shamian [Pronounced "Shameen"].⁶ And Shamian was the French and British concessions. They had their embassies there, and it was a manmade island that was just off of Canton. In fact, it was attached to

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Guangzhou>

⁶ <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/202636/lai-afong-the-english-settlement-shameen-canton-chinese-about-1870-1885/>

the city of Canton. And it had a beautiful area for playing and parks and lovely. And so, when we actually moved there, I had another amah, we didn't bring her from Hong Kong. She would take us onto Shamian island, the two of us, my brother and me, for most of the day while my parents were in language school. And so, we made great friends and learned to play "Kick the Can Across the Field" and I learned a little bit about English football and things like that which I loved, and still do. So we were in a very happy situation. And the Japanese were there, and they treated us very, very well. Now the Chinese that were around us, they were considered really second class but so far as the foreigners, particularly the missionaries and their families, they really did treat us very well. In fact, my mother tells me the story of officers coming and taking me as a four-year-old, blonde, blue-eyed, and taking me onto Shamian to their horses. Sitting me in front of them on their saddles and parading me through the streets of Canton. And when they brought me back, I always had a bag of cookies or some kind of goodies as a thank you to my parents. So that's all to say that we were treated very well.

Interviewer: So, they didn't interfere with your parents' work?

Lee: Not in the slightest, no.

Interviewer: And can you describe – I know that you were very young at the time, but maybe based on your mother's account -- what an average day for them would have been doing this work?

Lee: The average day would have been up early, and as a mission family they would always gather for prayer at the beginning of the day and followed by breakfast and then the language classes would begin. And then there was a break at lunchtime and then the language until the evening, and then we always had chapel serves in the evening where the Chinese were invited to come. On occasion, my father would have a little sampan that he had somebody row him around on and he would have a flip chart that he would- because he was learning to write, he would try and write, say the name of God or the name of the cross and gradually introduce himself as a missionary to teach them about who God was and who Jesus was and why they were there was to give them that good news that God loved them. So, on occasion when they weren't doing language study they were out really evangelizing. It sounds like a highfalutin name, but just getting in and among the people, introducing themselves, and why they were there.

Interviewer: And do you have any impression of what the peoples' response to it was?

Lee: It was generally very good, because like I say they were living right there among them. They weren't coming from off the main shore, you know, and trying to force something. They were actually living there. And they had two children. And my mother puts it this way: that I fit right in with the Chinese kids; I learned their language and I got their lice. And I still remember my mother taking me over by a window and snapping the lice between her nails on my head. And then I would have to take castor oil to get rid of the worms. So, I was very much involved in life on the sampans. My brother quite, two and a half years younger, he wasn't able to do that as much as I did. But my best friends were the Chinese children, and so I did everything with them. I lived on their boats with them during the free hours when I wasn't, you know, either in bed or having a meal or on Shamian, I was with the children all the time. So, they welcomed us, I think having a family was a big plus for them. There were—having said that, there were a number of single, lady missionaries who made themselves available in different ways; teaching them, knitting classes, or something or rather that would be of interest to them. But we were really part of the community.

Interviewer: I see. You were so young. Did you have any sort of classes at that time, besides – I mean were you too young to have any sort of education?

Lee: I really didn't go to school because I was just 6 when we left-

Interviewer: Right.

Lee: But I do remember some of the Chinese classes and I would sit in on them, but I got no education so far as a kindergarten, until we got back to The States.

Interviewer: Can you talk about – I know this is sort of a big topic – but why the Japanese were sort of in China? Why the tension, why they were spreading into China?

Lee: You know I wish I could. But I don't have that background to see what was going on there at the time. It was of course the very beginnings of the war, and we came into the war after Pearl Harbor. And then everything changed.

Interviewer: Right, so that's – let's transition. Tell me about the impact of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. How did this change things for the community, but most importantly for your family?

Lee: Well, let me tell you where we were when that happened. Because we lived on a houseboat, there was periodic times when it was put into dry dock, for repair. And this was happening in that time, that week of December 7, 1941. And because we couldn't live on the boat, my father stayed with our houseboat in dry dock near that area where they took it. But my mother and the two of us children were across the river into a compound where we stayed with friends. And we were there for about a week while our houseboat was being serviced. And my parents knew that it was a very crucial time in the war, because they got news, you know, via the radio and messaging that came in through Hong Kong and through their mission and everything. But nobody expected what happened on the 7th of December. So, my father was away from the family, but we were with friends on this compound. Now for those who might not know what a compound is, it is an area of land that is walled off and there's usually a home, garden, maybe a couple of homes. But these high walls with the gate are there for protection. And a lot of the groups, whether they be business groups or mission groups or whatever, lived in compounds for that reason. So our friends were in a house on the compound, and we had learned, I think, that Pearl Harbor had happened. We had no idea, really, how that was going to affect us. But the fact that we were separated from my father had some significance.

[Lee to the interviewer]: Can I take a drink of water?

Interviewer: Of course.

Lee: At that time there wasn't even communication by telephone that we had. Communication was via boats that would go back and forth with messages. But I remember the incident very well because I was old enough to remember that. But on the 8th of December we had come down for breakfast. My mother, my brother and I. And we had finished breakfast and gone upstairs into our bedroom to get ready for the day. All of the sudden we hear this enormous commotion, looked out the window and the compound was filling up with Japanese soldiers. Like an army of them in this small compound area. And they were bringing people out from wherever they were staying, from behind the house in the kitchen area, or over in the shed area. And they were just lining them up against the wall. Well as we were seeing all of this, we heard these heavy boots coming up the stairs. They didn't knock on the door; they broke the door down. And at some point, they pointed those guns at my brother and my mother and me and ordered us down the stairs and outside. And my mother said well can we take something? And they said no, no, not now. Just come on down. And so, we became one of the groupings that were lined up against the wall. And we were there for hours, my mother said hours went by.

And then we heard a truck that pulled up to the gate of this compound and a few more soldiers came out and they were the, evidently the officers or people who had authority to give the next command as to what to do with all these foreigners. And so, we were told that we had to board this truck, get on the back of the truck. And we were all – my mother and the rest of the adults were saying ‘well can we not get a few things to take with us for the children? Some clothes?’ No. they were not allowed to go back in the house. Not allowed to pick up anything. No food, no clothing, no nothing. We were just pushed into the back of this truck, any number of us I suppose; twenty or more children, adults, teenagers, whoever was there. And this was after hours of standing without being able to use the bathroom or anything in the house. There was one interesting thing my mother said: ‘the Japanese always loved children.’ And she said after a while – and I was very frightened, I was old enough to know what was going on, she said, ‘Lorine don’t be afraid, Jesus is with us and we will be okay.’ And that was enough for me, but my brother being younger, he and a couple of other children started playing around the trees and you know, hide and seek. And it softened the Japanese that were there, they got kind of interested in the children. So, whether that made any difference as to how we were treated I don’t know. But we were certainly forced onto the back of that truck. And then we were driven for hours out into the middle of nowhere. And out in the middle of nowhere there was a very large building. My mother does not know what it was, was it a warehouse, was it a stock auction place they didn’t know. But we were there for a long time. Now, I told you they came in at about breakfast time, we’re talking 7:30 or 8 in the morning. And we were herded onto this truck probably around lunchtime. And so, we were out in this building out in the middle of nowhere for any number of hours into the early evening. And the command came back that we could go back to our homes. So we never did, I don’t believe, go back to that compound. But – I don’t recall my mother telling us whether we did – but somehow, I remember my father and us were brought back together. But my father tells his side of the story that he could not get over to where we were. He was actually confined to where he was, there was no communication at all. He had no idea what was happening to us and he was frantic until we were actually able to come together again. So, then it was “what are we going to do?” What were the Japanese going to do with us? They gave us the choice of actually leaving them and going back to Hong Kong or going back to Macao. And our parents, my parents and some of the other missionaries thought no, they were going to stay there until the Japanese forced us out. And you know, it was the right decision because weeks later they learned about some of the things that happened to some people that went back to Hong Kong and particularly Macao. The women there were treated terribly. Japanese tortured them, raped them. I mean it was awful. Things

in Hong Kong were not much better; Hong Kong had also been bombed. So the people that were leaving where we were in Canton thinking they were going back to a place of refuge or a place of peace, found it anything but. So, we were there on our boat for another four months. We were not allowed to leave, nor was I taken on horseback again. And everything changed, because those who had been our friends were now our enemies. Where I stayed in our little houseboat, I had a window in my bedroom that looked out over this barge area and onto the shores of Shamian, this manmade island. And I saw some terrible things as a youngster as to how they treated the people that had become my family. It was heart breaking and mother said for many years afterwards I had nightmares. They would try to keep the children away from windows, but if you live among a community as we did of boat people, you couldn't help but see what was going on. But the Japanese were extremely cruel, I mean extremely cruel. And I won't go into what I saw, but it was enough to affect me for many years. So, we were confined to that boat, we were not allowed to leave. And so the question comes always, "Well, how did you live? Did money come through? What did you eat?" Well, when we first were confined to that after the situation over on that other compound area, the missionaries that decided to stay pooled all of their resources. So far as funds, so far as food, clothing, everything. And then we had these little boats, I said earlier, that would come by with their wares. So, we were able to buy, with the resources we had, some of the vegetables and the meat from these little moving shops. And then I think there was a time when money was able to get through and the Japanese did allow us to have some resource to buy food. But for the most part we were totally cut off from the rest of Canton, and literally from the rest of the world.

Interviewer: So, there was no contact with family or friends back in the States?

Lee: No, not at the time. The mission did know what was happening and that was through contacts in Hong Kong. But to get direct word to us was quite a while before we got any notification. I think my parents did hear about some of the foreigners that were being repatriated, coming through Canton. And we would hear through them what was kind of happening in the rest of the world.

Interviewer: What were your parents' expectations during that period of confinement on the boat? What were they expecting and wanting to do, or where were they wanting to go?

Lee: I think because they had made that initial decision to stay, that they were prepared to stay. And if the Japanese were gonna stay also, to somehow work with them so that they could be with the people that they had come

to love and work among. But now that Pearl Harbor had happened and America was very much involved in the war, America wanted all of the foreigners to come home. And so that came through to us, and after four months of being confined, we were literally told we had to leave and get back to the States. So that was a very difficult journey. Canton is about 700 miles, by river, from Shanghai. And we were put on a boat, like a launch, and made this journey that was many miles over several days and nights, up the river to get us to Shanghai. Well, there was no protection for these boats, and the Japanese were still bombing, the Japanese were still coming and going. And here was this group of international people – we weren't the only ones that were being repatriated up to Shanghai on this boat. And we would hear the planes go over head, there would be other boats that were passing us, there was a lot of piracy on these river journeys. And we had no idea that there was any protection over us, apart from what we believed, that God gave us that we were under his care, and the Japanese were not our protectors. So, we got to Shanghai, my mother was eight-months pregnant and was very, very ill on that trip. And as soon as we got to Shanghai, they put her into the infirmary. And my sister refused to budge; she was not born for another whole months after that, but at least my mother got the care that she needed. And we stayed in Shanghai. And this was now '42, we're talking about May of 1942. We got there in April, Carol, my sister, was born in May, and we left at the end of June. And I had just turned 6 by then. And a ship had come into the harbor there, it was an Italian ship, and it was called the Conte Verde.⁷ And it was an Italian ship that had been seconded from Italy to help with the repatriating of internationals. But they couldn't go all the way. We all got on the ship and we got to Singapore from there, I think leaving on the 29th of June we got to Singapore a week or so later. And we're talking about mid-summer and the ship had to dock outside of Singapore for 30 days. There was no air conditioning, no breeze, no nothing. Just tropical, equator heat. And the three of us, of the children now, got very, very ill. In fact, almost everybody got ill because of the heat. And children got something called impetigo in those days where their skin would break out in little crusty sores. We all had boils and it was a very difficult time. Well, we finally set sail from there after 30 days of being anchored in, I guess it would have been the China Sea, outside of Singapore. And got over to Mozambique; Lourenço Marques was a port in the northern part of Mozambique. And as we came in, another ship was coming from America. And as the Conte Verde, the Italian ship, came into harbor, the Gripsholm which was a Swedish ship that was a hospital ship that had been turned into a repatriation ship, was coming in from the other direction. And so,

⁷ <https://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?147962>

you – and that ship was full of Japanese prisoners being sent home to the Orient. So, you have at one end of this very large Swedish ship was a gangplank of 800 Japanese disembarking from the ship, and on this end you had 1500 U.S. citizens or other maybe European citizens. So here – and I still remember that, I still remember the gangplanks with the oriental folks leaving the ships and at the other end of the ship, the rest of us. And my mother recalls that as we all got on ship, the decks were loaded with food, I mean loaded with food. Some of the people that left Shanghai were actually skin and bones. They had come from the interior and the northern parts of China and they had been so emaciated and had suffered so much that they literally just had the breath within them to get on the ships. Well, when you see all this food that you haven't seen, a lot of them gorged themselves, and the whole boat was sick, everybody was sick because of all the food that was given to us. It was free, it was there, and everybody just indulged. And so, for days after we set sail, there was nothing but sickness on the boat because people had just overindulged in the food. But as a six-year-old that journey was very interesting, because we had a game that we played. Now this ship left Lourenço Marques and came down across the coast of Africa, and then across the south Atlantic and to the coast of South America, and then began the trek up the South American coast. Well during that time, you had a lot of ocean and we were on the ocean for a month. Well, we had a game, and we were told spot the mine. Because the Japanese had littered the ocean or at least the ocean where the traffic was, with water mines. And should a ship hit that mine it would do a good bit of damage. So, every morning you had the children, and we would get a candy bar if we saw a water mine. So that was the game that we played every day, is we were gonna look for water mines. And at the end of the day, how many had the most candy bars. They had entertainment, they had movies; it was a good life for a child of six. Lots of fun, met lots of friends. And so we get over to the Southern coast of South America, and the ship continues up northerly towards of course North America. But we were able to stop in Rio de Janeiro for three days, and that was the first time we had been on land. And I remember going up Sugarloaf Mountain to where the statue of the Christ is up on top and having a wonderful time. It was a great break for everybody on the ship. So that part of it was very, very pleasant I must say. And then it was another two or three weeks before we actually made out way up into New York harbor. What was interesting about that, and I will never forget it, but I think that we actually got there late at night and so the ship actually anchored out in the harbor, but it was first thing in the morning that the sun was rising and that everybody was up on deck and as we came around, [holding back tears] there was the Statue of Liberty. And people who had been through what they had been through, not knowing whether they were going to live or die, to all of the sudden see that statue, was like life began

again. And I shall never forget. People often ask me, “when you look back over your life Lori, and the significant things in your life” that is one of them. Even as a six-year-old because you had decks just lined with people; they were whooping, and they were hollering, and they were crying. Because here was home, here was security, here was the Statue of Liberty which meant liberty. It was amazing, amazing journey, amazing conclusion to that part of the journey. So, as a youngster I joined the rest of them as we disembarked there on the island. And of course, my father’s family was there, to greet us and to meet us. And interesting that about a year or two ago my granddaughter was looking up on ancestry.com with my name on it. And up flashed the boarding pass that had my full name, my age, where I had traveled from and the ports that I had stopped in as a six-year-old; it was that detailed. So, it’s true, everything that I’m saying is all on record. But that was an amazing journey.

Interviewer: Well, I want to talk about the war years when you were back in the States. Where did you live during that time?

Lee: We were living in Wisconsin. The mission that my parents had been with knew of a church in Wisconsin just outside of Lake Geneva called Genoa City and it was a small church, and they needed a pastor. Now the whole idea was to wait out the war years and then return. My parents didn’t feel their work was finished at all. And so, for those four years before my father returned, we lived there in Genoa City and he pastored a small church. He returned in 1946, the door it was open again, the war finished in ‘45 and he was able to get back to Hong Kong in 1946. But it has a little bit of a, what shall I say, a sad part to it because he was so keen on getting back, he thought nothing of leaving my mother and, by then, four children to fend for ourselves while he was gone. And so, we moved from the little house that we lived in in the church they provided. In those days it was called a parsonage, or we would have said a vicar’s home.⁸ We had to leave there and had this little, tiny house out in the kind of farm area. But we had really good friends. But my youngest sister was born when we were there. And so, she was barely a year old when my father left so, my mother was there with the four of us children for a whole year on her own and she had to make all the preparations of getting on a ship herself with the rest of us. So from Wisconsin she went back to friends in San Francisco and we boarded a ship and it was an ex-troop ship that had been turned into a passenger ship for taking people back across to Europe, you know the Orient, Asia, the rest of it. I remember the ship very well.

⁸ <https://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/explore/themes/religious-life-and-buildings/rectories-vicarages-and-clergymens-houses>

Getting back to your question about the war years, a lot of that had happened actually before we even got to America, it was in full force by then. And so then the few years that we were in Wisconsin during the war, other than just waiting for it to finish, for it to complete, before we had the opportunity to return.

Interviewer: Were you affected by rationing; you know these sorts of things that people on the home front were dealing with –

Lee: No.

Interviewer: -- up to that point?

Lee: No. My husband is British, and they went through a lot of that that we never did. We never had that problem.

Interviewer: And did you attend school or were you educated in the home?

Lee: I did. My first school was in New Jersey because when we arrived my father's parents met us from New Jersey, that's where they had settled when they had come over from Holland. And so we lived in Hawthorne, New Jersey for a year before this opening came for my father in this little church in Wisconsin. So, I did go, something very traumatic happened to me; I arrived that morning for my first day of kindergarten, but the language that I spoke was Cantonese. That was my language. And it wasn't long before I was in tears because the children were laughing at me because I was speaking a different language. And I guess you can say children can be cruel to other children, totally innocently, but I took real offense and when I arrived back home that night, my mother says I walked through that screen door and I stomped my little feet and said I would *never* speak Cantonese again. And they could not force me, cajole me, entice me in any way to continue to be bilingual, which is such a shame. But I had made up my mind. My peers and their opinion of me was far more important than what my parents wanted of me. So, we were there for a year and then of course I was in school in Wisconsin. And those were happy, happy years for us. We really did enjoy our life in Wisconsin. Always, always remember that.

Interviewer: So, let's transition to the post-war years and you being back in China. How did your parents' mission work change at the point?

Lee: It changed very dramatically because the mission that they were with decided that the work that had been done in Canton was changing very much. And a lot of the boat people had come out of Canton into Hong

Kong and a lot of them couldn't bring their boats or there were no boats available and so the British government at that time built a number of housing blocks called h-block buildings. And they were high rises, some as high as 40 stories and so you have accommodation here [makes parallel vertical motion with her hands] and then the crossbar along would be where the lavatories, or bathrooms were. And these boat people were being kind of resettled. Well, that's not really what my parents at that time were wanting to do. It was just the beginning of that happening. And so there was an opening or a challenge, shall I say, that the mission took to work with some of the boat people in the interior of China, up in Hubei province. And up in Hubei province and Hankou⁹ there's the big Yangtze River¹⁰ which everybody knows about. But we lived in a little – we were sent up there and were in a little housing area in a place called Wuchang which was across from the big Han river which fed into the Yangtze river. And there was a large boat population there. But now again you have the same problem, because its back to language school. They had learned Cantonese, my father had become quite fluent in it, but now you're working with a different group of people and in those days, Mandarin was more a northern language while Cantonese was more the southern area. So that year and a half that were there was primarily, again, learning another language. But I remember some very interesting – cause by that time I was 10 or 11, and living in this house, we would be educated through a correspondence course called, at that time, the Calvert Course coming out of Baltimore, Maryland. And we would get our supplies, and I had my school routine as did my brother and my sisters. But the fun part was the afternoon when we would go out into the village or not far from where we lived was a Chinese girls school. And I became friends with some of these Chinese students. And I remember sitting out on hot summer days and trying to teach them English, and they were trying to teach me their language. And so we had quite a rapport. But I remember a very funny thing that happened in the wintertime. We were there for a year and a half, so we went through the four seasons. Well one of the helpers, a Chinese lady had given birth to a baby and everybody was very excited about that. The Chinese in those days had a wonderful way of keeping their babes warm; they would literally swaddle them in like a bunting, like blankets that were filled with warm wool or whatever. But they would do their heads, they would do everything. They were just like little papooses; you know totally bundled up. And then they would – this lady had a little cradle, and she would put this baby outside to get some fresh air, but it was all bundled up and in its little cradle, so it was good and warm. We

⁹ Today known as Wuhan <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hankou>

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:Major_cities_along_the_Yangtze_River

were playing out there at the time when this little baby was there, and unbeknownst to us, my brother kicked this little cradle over, and the baby came rolling out and down this little road. We went over there in a panic and it was till sound asleep. It was so bundled it had not felt the impact to even wake up, and I remember the mother was so panicked and then just laughed, and laughed, and laughed when she picked this little bundle up and he was still sound asleep. One of the other things that I remember very, very starkly was the way, in those days, the women were treated. In those days, we saw women whose feet had been terribly bound when they were little girls. That was begging to change, but these women with little, tiny feet that were bound, you know, as infants their toes were crushed back into the bottom of their feet, and then they were bound because at that time that was seen as a sign of beauty, these small feet. So these women, we would see paddling along, and they would carry great loads on their shoulder with a domming pole¹¹ and the their baskets of fruit on these tiny little feet. And we all just felt so sorry for them because of the pain that it must have been. But the women were not treated as they are today, I don't think, the way they were in those days. And little girls were not so special as little boys, and I remember one night my father coming in, and nightfall had occurred, and we were just having supper, and he said that there had been an accident in the village. And he was going to go into the village to see if he could help. Well, what had happened was that a truck had struck a little girl on the road and actually had killed her. Ad so I accompanied my father to go into the village and saw the body of the little girl and saw the grieving mother with her back up against the wall, just beside herself. But the scene wasn't complete until I saw the father, who was berating the mother for being so upset because after all, it was just a girl. So that was the environment in those days in that part of China. And its lasting, you don't forget those things. You just don't. But then we had the hordes from the north starting to come down and it was the communists this time, not Japan. And so we were forced to leave again, the work that had hardly begun, and get back down into the Hong Kong area. And by that time, a lot of that h-block resettlement building was taking place. And so my father really got into that in a big way. And instead of working among the boat people on the water, he worked among the people that were now housed in these buildings. And the buildings were left flat on the roofs, so a lot of different groups bought up the flat roof areas and made them into schools. Primarily for the children that lived in that complex, and so that was very successful. My mother and father both did that, and a number of schools were built. But my father,

¹¹ Couldn't find anything on this but I believe this is what she's referring to:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carrying_pole#:~:text=A%20carrying%20pole%2C%20also%20called,being%20suspended%20from%20each%20end.

before he died, actually established eight schools. Not all of them on the rooftops, but he got into the education side of mission work, if you would, and not the evangelism side of it, and became well known in Kowloon and in Hong Kong. And the government was more than happy to have missionaries and other charity groups build schools for these people that were being landlubbed and off the water. So that was the work that they did then. But then it was time for my schooling, and it was in the summer of 1950 that a determination was made to send me back home. But it wasn't back to the States; I had two cousins who were living in Canada in a boarding school. Their parents were missionaries in Bolivia, South America and they had been sent to that school because it was a mission boarding school. Very strict. And we had heard, or my parents had heard good things about it.

Interviewer: Where was it?

Lee: This was in Canada, outside of Calgary. About 80 miles south of Calgary. So, at a very early age, having just turned 14, I was put on yet another ship. This time it was a Norwegian freighter ship and I was given into the care of a couple that my parents had just met, and asked to keep an eye on me. And so for three weeks I was virtually on my own again on this Norwegian ship. But the captain of the ship, and I became good friends. And many an evening he took me up to where he had to stay up on the bridge, and he spoke English enough that I could communicate with him. And he just enthralled me with his stories of being a sea captain, and the people he had encountered, and the kind of journeys he had made and all the rest of it. But for three weeks we ate nothing but Swedish Norwegian smorgasbord. And to this day, I still love pickled herring. Still love it. But it was an interesting journey. But then we had friends in San Francisco that met the ship, and I was with them for a little while and then I was put on a train and I was totally alone again, and for three days and two nights I was on a train going up into Alberta.

Interviewer: How did you feel about making that transition and leaving your family?

Lee: At the beginning it was exciting because I was on an adventure. Let me back up and say why it was so difficult for me to get schooling. Because where my parents were living it was an hour's journey by ferry – they were on one of the smaller islands outside of Hong Kong – into schools in Hong Kong. And it was very difficult transportation wise to get me over there and get me back. I did it for about a year, and I would leave home at 7 in the morning and not get back until 7 at night. I was up half the night doing homework, and then back on the ferry boat. And it just was untenable they just couldn't see a way around it. And meanwhile they had

heard a good report from my uncle who had sent his children up to this school. So they thought long and hard, certainly prayed about it, and felt that was where I should be. So, I arrived there and I was taken under the care of the school there. Very, very strict, boys could not talk to girls. We were in separate dining areas, separate hallways getting to our classrooms. If you looked at a boy or were in any way showing interest, you had what they called a detention. And I had a lot of detentions [interviewer and interviewee laugh]. It was very, very difficult just to come from a background – well any child would—into a regimented school like that. Very strict on how we dressed, couldn't have your hair cut without special permission. So, it was a lot of rules.

Interviewer: And you said the first year was fairly tough?

Lee: It was fairly tough but the journey leaving Hong Kong and getting there was a real adventure. But it wasn't really until the first year when things were tough at school that I really began to be very homesick and missed my life and my family. And that would be the first of four years where I had no communication with my parents or my siblings at all. Those were not the days of the telephone calls, or email, or even cassette tapes. It was just a letter once a week that I would get and which I had to write also. So, I was there for four years and did very well. My parents came back a month before I graduated. And I had earned a scholarship to a university there in Washington. I made that transition while they were still back for that year. And – or year and a half, whatever.

Interviewer: I wanted to ask you, did you always consider yourself, throughout all this period of travel, an American? Was that sort of unquestionable? Or, did you not really have a sense of nationality?

Lee: I never considered myself other than American, but I did not feel that I was anything special because I was American. I didn't ever have that feeling. You know? My early childhood was very happy on that houseboat and with the other children that lived on... And So, internationally I would say I was just an American. In those days it wasn't a big no-no to be an American as it might be today in some places. No, I didn't ever have that feeling.

Interviewer: Well, tell me about – you were at Seattle Pacific [pause] College –

Lee: -- College at that time, yes.

Interviewer: And that's where you met your first husband?

Lee: That's right.

Interviewer: Tell me about him and his background.

Lee: His background was that he was a Naval Academy midshipman. In those days, and I expect it's the same, they're very strict on the academics. All his life he wanted to be a midshipman, and his second year he failed calculus and he was out, because – and there was no second chance. But because of his background being there, the C.I.A. picked up on him, and he was sent over to Okinawa, in Japan area and served there for three years. It was while he was there that he met a group of Christian men from what is called "The Navigators". They're a group of generally military people, mostly naval, who did mission work among military people. And my husband Fred met them and had a sound Christian conversion. And at that time he knew God had a call on his life, that wasn't going to include the C.I.A. So he made a point, on his way back to the States from the C.I.A., compliments of the government, to stop in as many places he could to see what mission work was like in different parts of the world. So, when I met him at the college in Seattle, he had already gotten a good background as to what he wanted to do. And he wanted to replace one of the women in the mission field because there were so many women compared to how many men, and felt he wanted to replace one of those women. So because of my background and his more recent interest in mission, that's kind of what brought us together, yeah.

Interviewer: And you married, but why were you drawn to him? Why did you marry him?

Lee: Well, I wasn't certainly interested in marriage. I wanted to finish my college education. But my parents were in the States just for a fairly short time, I think this time there were there having been at my grad—no they must have come back. I can't remember the sequence of their visit, but they were back in the States at that time. And this was a year and a half after I met Fred and we knew we were going to get married. And what attracted me, to answer your question, was not only our backgrounds, but he was handsome, he was good looking, he was 7 years older than me, and he had a brand-new Chevrolet. So, all I could see was security, security, security. And because of the background I just told you about, my life had been anything but secure. And so, I think that was the attraction, besides we had fallen in love. So, we decided, since my parents were home that it would be a great honor to have them at our wedding. And I had just – we were married in December and I had just turned 19 in June. Very young. Very young.

Interviewer: And you had two children?

Lee: We had two children.

Interviewer: So, did you work at that time? Did you work in the home? What did you do?

Lee: Well, I continued my education until I finished my second year, and then we moved to New York because we were interested in doing mission work with the Presbyterian church. They required more education from my husband and so we came out to New York to a seminary there that fitted the bill. That was just what he needed to do. And our son Scott had been born by then, and so we were there for about a year while he got his degree. But while we were there, it was interesting, we had met another mission group, but a home mission group. And they were foreign students. A group that worked with foreign students came from abroad. And the mission was to meet these students, become friends with them, bring them into your home, and as things would progress in your friendship and your relationship, bring them into a Church situation and actually lead them to Christ. It was a mission based on a home situation. So, we met these people, and we were practically living from hand to mouth. We really were. And at that time in New York, we were very poor, we had very little. I think the fees at the seminary had been picked up by somebody there and I was not working. Oh yes, I was after a bit. I was doing home typing for one of the big insurance companies, and I was doing a lot of typing and filling in forms and all that. And I was working from home while I had the baby. But we lived in a community where English was the least spoken language, out on Long Island. It was a very multiracial community. But we had the opportunity once of inviting three immigration officials from Afghanistan into our home. They had come over to New York for some official business and this group, this mission group called International Students Incorporated, I.S.I., had met them and asked us if we would like to have them for a weekend. Well, the weekend turned into three weeks, and we learned a great deal about not only them and their family, but their work and came to love these people. We really did. Well, that wetted our appetite as to the possibility of doing mission work in America rather than going abroad again. So, that sat very well with my husband, but my concern as a mother was how are we going to live? Who supports this? What do we do? You know, we had three people for three weeks and we barely had enough to live ourselves. But different church groups found out about it and would help us, you know, it always worked out well. So, finally the decision was made that we would give I.S.I, International Students, a year of our time before we went abroad. Well, that year turned into about 11 years. And we were doing that, so that

took us to some of the major universities across the States. My daughter was born in Philadelphia while we were working with the university there. Met many, many, many people. Dear, dear friends of every nation that came to America in those days for schooling. In fact, when my husband died, the outpouring of love through cards and gifts came literally from around the world. So, my life started out internationally and, I would say, continued internationally.

Interviewer: Well, I do want to touch on your second marriage. And can you tell me about your second husband?

Lee: Very unexpectedly after my first husband died, and he died of cancer, we knew that he had it. He died in February of 1978. When he was feeling a bit better, we had made a trip, or a decision to take a trip back to Hong Kong; I had not been back since I left for those high school years, so it was a long time. And he was keen to go with me. Of course, he knew my parents, they were at our wedding and all, but we wanted to go back together. But he died very suddenly, so I decided to take the journey myself. So I had arranged, we had arranged to be there for six weeks, and we went back to one of the schools that my father had built, they had an apartment on one of the rooftop in their high school, which was one that my father had built. And I stayed there for six weeks with my parents. And at the end of the six weeks, or very close to the end, I was invited to attend a lunch party with my parents after church on a Sunday. And that was fine with me, you know, it was just another something to do and people to meet. Well on the way over to this dinner, lunch party which was in Hong Kong... For people who don't know Hong Kong or the area, Hong Kong is an island that's separate from the mainland. The mainland is Kowloon and the new territories that we would call the new territories. So, we had to go from the new territories by ferry, over to Hong Kong for this lunch. So we were with a few people and one of the girls who was there who was working in one of the schools turned to me and said, "Lori, I think you're gonna meet your next husband today." And I looked at her and I said, "Stephanie for goodness sakes, don't even think about it." I'd just been widowed three months, or something like that. So, we get to this lovely home. Hong Kong itself is inundated with high rises, because you have to build up. You can't build out. And there are a few single dwellings there owned by the very wealthy. Well, my husband, my now husband's friend from Glasgow University where he met him was one of the more high-ranking officials in the Hong Kong-Shanghai Bank. In fact, he was the top employer for them. So he had one of these single homes way up on the peak that overlooked the harbor and was magnificent. The perfect place to meet your next husband, although I didn't know that. So we were there and the first person that greeted us when we got there was Colonel

Derek Lee, and he was a friend of our host. And he brought us in and welcomed us and found out a little about me and so for the pre-lunch and the lunchtime we talked a little bit among other friends that were there. And there was three men from America who were at that lunch who I got to know. They had been there for a Christian businessman's conference in Hong Kong that had been set up by our host from the Hong Kong-Shanghai Bank. So, one of them took a real liking to me, and his name was – I don't know that I should say this. I don't know that he lives anywhere near here. But it was a distinctive name that I never forgot. Anyway, this gentleman gave me his card, and took a great interest in me. And Colonel Lee obviously saw this and so he made sure that when it came to lunch time that he was seated with me at one of the many card tables that had been set up around the swimming pool SO the idea of our hostess was that you would sit around a card table, man, woman, man, woman, and at each course of the five-course lunch the gentlemen would get up and move to the next table. Except this colonel never moved, he just stayed there and engaged me, and engaged me, and engaged me in conversation. Told about his amazing stories behind the iron curtain and how he was lost, and totally enchanted the group of women that were sitting there. So, at the end of the day he asked if he could see me again. And I said, "Well, I don't think so." And he said, "Well I really would like to take you to dinner." We were still seated at the table. And I was feeling very coquettish and excited, and it was just a wonderful day. So, when he asked me out to dinner, I looked at him and I said, "Well, Okay. I think I'll have a day when that might happen as long as you don't take me to some hole in the wall for dinner." Well, he reared back in his seat and he said "Madame, British colonels do not take their ladies to holes in the walls for dinner." Well that just captured my heart. So about two nights later we had dinner at a very nice restaurant. And then unknown to him and to me, we had both been invited to a yachting party by our host of that day which was a yacht that belonged to the Hong Kong-Shanghai Bank. So, we were both surprised to find each other on this yacht. Well, I've told you that many times I have crossed the ocean. And each time I was sick, I am not a good traveler on the water. Well, sure enough I got sick on this yacht and the sea wasn't all that turbulent, it wasn't. But the smell of the diesel, whatever, I just don't do well. So, they decided that they would anchor for lunch, not far off from one of the small islands. The Hong Kong area is full of islands, not far off. And so, they decided they would put me on shore for a while. But I shouldn't go alone, right? So, they asked Colonel Lee to accompany me to shore, and stay with me until I could catch my land legs again. So, we were on the beach for three hours. But the interesting thing was during that three hours, it was lunchtime, and so what our host did is he sent over a little boat with two Chinese sailors. One was rowing and one was seated on a little seat with a silver tray, with a

silver teapot with tea for two on the beach. Well, it was the most romantic occasion, I mean it should be in the movies, right? It was –

Interviewer: Were they trying to set you up?

Lee: Yes, they were trying to set me up. So anyways, that was how we met, and then for the next 6 – no 3 months, we kept in touch by cassette tape, and then he came over to California where I was living, met my family and my friends, and because he's British they thought because of his accent he was part of the royal family.

Interviewer: [laughs audibly]

Lee: He swept them off their feet, and I – he was there with us for three weeks. He didn't stay with me, he stayed with some friends of ours, but we did take some trips out of the California, Oakland Bay area to meet with other friends so I could introduce him around. And my son, who had just gone into the air force, thought he was the hottest thing around, but my daughter was not quite so sure; she had just lost her dad. So, we had three weeks together, at the end of which I was happy to see him go. We were so different, so very, very different. I'm a black and white person and he dwells in the grays; can't make his mind up about this, that, and the other and I've already been streets ahead of him in those areas. So, it was difficult. But while he was away, a number of things happened as we corresponded back and forth, and we really were in love. It was hard to see him go and over the next three months I felt that God was leaving us together. So, I went back to Hong Kong in February, I think it was, of '79, and stayed with my parents for a number of months. And because my son was in the air force, I had my daughter who came to live with us and worked over on Hong Kong side. And we got married in the officer's mess in September of 1979. And our first posting was Northern Ireland, and the first week we're there we lived behind barbed wire fencing. First, we were there this was at, pretty well, the height of the troubles they were having. The high street – we call it a main street, but they call it a high street – was bombed and we were confined to our barrack areas. It was interesting, that experience, because I'm a California girl used to sunshine and shores of beaches, and here I am in Northern Ireland, it rains every day. You live behind barbed wire fence, and you can't come or go in and out of a store without being searched. But I was the only American there so I kind of stood out. But I was known as Col. Lee's American wife, I didn't have an identity other than Col. Lee's American wife. So, being an officer's wife, I had a few duties that I had to attend to. And one of them was to speak at the Wives' Club. So, they came over to me one evening and said, "Would you mind speaking to our Wives' Club such and such a date?", and I said

“Well, what would I speak about?” and they said well, “what do you do?” and they saw some macramé, and it’s something my mother had done, this rope work you put plants in and all, “could you tell us about that?” And I said, “well, I didn’t do that, my mother did.” And then I thought for a minute and I said, “I would like to talk about color, and how important color is for people.” I had worked for a year and a half with a color consultant when we were in California, and his whole thing was taking colors – and I think the rage here at that time was Color Me Beautiful, and it was the “In” thing; you went and had your colors done as to what spoke best on you on what occasion. And so I said, “I know a little something about that.” And she said, “Oh that would be wonderful.” So, I went to this group and there were probably 80 wives, both officer and enlisted men. And I had my color swatches and all the rest of it, and then they asked me a little bit about myself. So, I told them how I had met Derek and all the rest of it, but they wanted to know what colors suited at the best of times. So, I got onto the romance side of it, and my parting words were, “Ladies, if you want to be good in bed, wear red.” Well, the house fell apart, you now, I mean you don’t have an officer’s wife talking like that. But here I am this American wife who could get away with it. Well, for weeks afterwards I had some of the husbands stop me and say, “You’re Lori Lee?” And I said “Yeah.” and they said, “Thank you so much” [laughs audibly] “for that talk you gave to the women last week.”

Interviewer: [laughs audibly]

Lee: So, I left having an identity. I guess that’s what I’m saying, I left having an identity. But that was the beginning of many years with the British Army. Several times in Germany, like I said Northern Ireland, a posting in England. My husband is a dentist, and he was a dentist with the military. So, he went to different places like Borneo and Kathmandu in Nepal, that I couldn’t accompany him. But it’s been a rich life, it has.

Interviewer: And can we just finish you’re – When did you move to Georgia?

Lee: We moved to Georgia 12 years ago.

Interviewer: And where do you live now?

Lee: We live in Marietta, East Cobb. The reason we’re here is because my daughter lives here. My first husband died in 1979 and four years later my son was killed in a mountain climbing accident with the military in Switzerland. So, I only had my daughter and wherever she lived is of course where I would end up being too. So, she had left California when Derek and I were married, and she returned from Hong Kong, met her

husband in Florida, and they settled in Woodstock. So, Derek had by that time retired, and we were in England for about, almost 16 years, no not that long. All over – 16 years after he left the military we moved back here, and I had begun to get some health problems and it was the time to move back to be with my family. And my husband had no immediate family at all that would keep him back I Britain. But we had a lovely life in Britain, a challenging and lovely life in the military. I ended up doing things that I never thought I would do. But I learned a lot, I've had a very rich life.

Interviewer: Well, thank you so much Mrs. Lee and we will conclude there.

Lee: Okay, thank you.