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## EAST-WEST CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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# Ted Lee Interview Narrative

8-7-2009 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

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The **East-West Center Oral History Project** strives to capture the Center's first 50 years as seen through the eyes of staff, alumni, and supporters who have contributed to its growth.

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## Ted Lee

8-7-2009 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

### **Personal Background**

I was born in 1932 in Stockton, California. My mother was born in Stockton, California.

So that makes me third-generation. My mother's father ran a restaurant in Stockton.

My father was born in China and came to the United States around 1918. And he grew up on a farm. Had no education. But he came over to the United States and learned to be a butcher so he owned a meat market and small grocery stores.

My mother had six children. She was a homemaker.

I went to Stockton High School, which at that time was the only high school in town. So one high school.

There were like 70,000 people in Stockton. That's my recollection. I went to high school, and I worked hard, but I did all my homework in school. Because after I got out of school, I had to go and help my father at the grocery store.

I was the eldest son. So when I applied to Harvard, one of the questions I still remember is, "Put down your typical day -- what you did." And I put down, "I went to school, I did all my homework, and then I worked with my father". I'd work until 10, 11 o'clock at night helping my father. And I think that may have played a role in my admission because, when I think back on my own life, that must have been difficult. But, I guess it was expected. That's how our family did things.

Then, when I went to Harvard, I didn't know where Harvard was, because I was the first member of my family to go to college. And my family didn't know one school from the next.

I was working at my father's grocery store, and a young Chinese person, whom I did not know very well, walked up to me and asked, "Where are you going to college next year?" This was my senior year. And I said, "I don't know." And he said, "Where have you applied?" I said, "Nowhere." He said, "Where are you going to apply?" I said, "I don't know. What's the hurry?" I didn't know you had to apply to go to college. Because I had gone through elementary school, high school, and everything -- just showed up, enrolled, and went to school. I didn't know you had to apply.

So, he said, "You should apply to Princeton." I said, "Why?" He said, "That's the best school in the country." I said "OK." And, "Are you sure you're going to apply?" I said, "OK." He came back a week later, said, "Have you applied?" And I said, "No." ... "Good. Because you should apply to Harvard instead."

And I said, "Why should I apply to Harvard?" He said, "Because it's the best school in the country." I said, "Why?" "Because it has more Rhodes Scholars." I mean, you know -- the reasons we gave for applying to certain colleges didn't make sense at all, but we didn't know better. (laughter) When I told the college admissions advisor that I wanted help in applying to Harvard, he told me to "forget it." So I applied without any help from the advisor. But when I first applied, I got a letter from Harvard informing me that I was too late. It was after the deadline. I thought then that maybe the college advisor was right. But the next paragraph said that if I wanted to, I could apply anyway. I wasn't sure what I was being told, but I immediately took the SAT's and submitted a typed application.

And so then I went to Harvard. I had a difficult time my first two years, because I was able to go through high school without studying. So I had no idea what it meant to

prepare for a class, to study, to outline a course. I learned all these things later -- but not during my first two years.

I went to see a friend, who is of Chinese ancestry from Phoenix, Arizona. And I went to visit him, and he was taking notes on his reading, and I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Taking notes to read. Don't you?" And I said, "No!" He said, "What do you do to prepare to study a course?" "I just sit in lectures." And then he says, "Oh, no, you've got to --" And so, he taught me how to study.

And so for my last two years, my academic record is, you know, not bad. When I went to grad school... I changed. I learned to study. When I was an undergraduate I never had a full night's sleep before an exam. This is even when I was studying. But I then learned that you've got to have a good night's sleep. Once I learned that, I never took an exam without a good night's sleep.

## **Life Before EWC**

### ***Joining the Army***

*[Editor's note: Lee attended Harvard from 1950-54. He received his B.A. in 1954.]*

I went into the army. I was sent to Camp Kilmer in New Jersey to get ready to be shipped to Germany. I was appointed an acting platoon sergeant in charge of discipline and daily calisthenics for a group of about 350 men. In the group were about 25 blacks. After a few days of calisthenics, the blacks refused to jog and insisted on simply walking, which I could not allow. So I selected the biggest member of the group to be my assistant. He did not want the responsibility but had no choice. He originally refused the position claiming his friends would get mad at him. My response was it was more

important that he got along with me than with his friends. I reminded him that his situation with me was temporary.

After that I was shipped to Europe. When I went to Germany, I expected the Germans to show racial hostility towards me. After all, the Germans had mistreated the Jews and were known for racial discrimination. That did not turn out to be the case. When I brought this observation up to other Americans, it was suggested that the Germans thought I was Japanese. Japan had been an ally of Germany.

I served as an army inspector, travelling around Germany and France, going into army facilities and reviewing their supply records and the way they stored inventory. And I was only a private, but I had this job.

On my second day in Germany, they had an alert, and a cleanup -- in other words, everybody had to clean up the barracks. I was cleaning latrines, and the first sergeant said, "It's a pleasure to see someone who knows how to work."

Because I was scrubbing latrines. And I said, "Sergeant, I don't mind working, I just hope it can be something that's more responsible than cleaning latrines." And he said, "What would you like?" "What do you mean?" He said, "What kind of job would you really like?" I said, "A job that takes me to travel all around Europe, and gets me into the cities, so I can visit cities in Europe." And he said, "There is such a job." I said, "You're kidding." "There is such a job."

And, so the next day, when I was interviewed for assignment -- The sergeant in charge of personnel said... "What job would you like to have?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You can have any job on the post you want." And I said, "Why is that? You're

kidding me.” And he said, “Because there’s only one person that has the same academic record as you do. And he’s the commanding officer.”

And he says, “You can’t have that job.”

And so I said, “How about this job that takes me around Europe?” And he said, “How did you hear about this job?” And I said, “Well, is there such a job?” He said, “There is such a job.” “Can I get it? You said I could have any job that I wanted.”

So, he handed me my personnel record and told me to go see the colonel who approved my getting this job. So I spent 18 months traveling around Europe. And I had never traveled before because, you know, my family, we never traveled. We just worked. So that was a wonderful opportunity; I was very lucky.

### *Law School*

As I was completing my two-year tour of duty in Germany and France, I had no idea what my future would be. I had been accepted to law school at the University of Pennsylvania on the G.I. Bill, but I decided to also apply to law school at U.C. Berkeley. Fortunately, the dean granted me admission in August of 1956, the month I was discharged from the Army. So, I finished law school at the University of California at Berkeley but those were the days that, if you were Asian, you could not get a job.

And I remember going to see the assistant dean and saying, “You know, I haven’t had an interview.” And he said, “Ted, I’ve tried real hard. I have to admit, I can’t get anybody to give you an interview.” But they had this program at Berkeley where they sent five students a year to someplace in the world to study law. And I applied for that. And I got it. I got one of the five.

### *Studies in Singapore*

I wanted to go to Asia, because I'd never been to Asia. So I went to the University of Singapore. And why the University of Singapore? They taught in English. It was a common law system -- in other words, law similar to that of England and the United States.

After taking the California State Bar Exam during the summer of 1959, I left for the University of Singapore to study whatever I wanted. I wanted to learn as much as I could, but didn't have any intention of staying there.

After I arrived in Singapore, I met David Marshall, a one-time prime minister of Singapore, who offered to help me in my studies in Singapore. He suggested I study "the constitutionality of Singapore's detention laws." Even though my strengths were in the subject of business law and taxation and not constitutional law, Mr. Marshall's offer was attractive. When I told some Singaporeans what I planned to do, I was advised that it would be too foolish to get involved in local politics and that David Marshall was using me for his political purposes.

I decided that my choice of subject matter was a mistake. I decided to research a subject that was non-political and one for which I had an aptitude. I considered taxation.

After four months of self-directed study, I was preparing to return to the U.S., a little disappointed in my lack of accomplishment. I personally had learned a lot, but it was not apparent. My lack of accomplishment can in part be explained by my inability to find an appropriate area to study.

As I was getting ready to return to the U.S., the founding dean of the Law Faculty, Lee Sheridan, approached me to write a chapter on taxation for his forthcoming Laws of the

Commonwealth. He needed it done in 30 days. I told him, “Impossible.” He responded, “Just try.” I responded, “No promises.”

I finished a draft on time but without any opportunity to rewrite and he accepted it without asking me to make any changes!

I used to be very sensitive that I did not write well. That experience gave me the confidence to write. It really made a difference in my legal career. This accomplishment did wonders for my self-confidence. It also led to my being offered a position on the faculty as a junior lecturer. I accepted the position and stayed another eight months in Singapore. I taught taxation, company law, estate tax and social welfare.

At the end of the year, I was appointed one of two internal examiners responsible for determining who graduates. Many of my former students became business and government leaders.

## **Life at EWC**

### ***Institute for Advanced Projects, 1962***

Then, when I left Asia I passed through Honolulu and interviewed at six law firms. I got an offer from all six. Now you compare that with the kind of reception I got in California. I had to give it a try while I had the opportunity. And so I worked for Fong Miho, you know, Senator Fong’s law office?

I worked for his law firm for a year and a half. And one of my clients was the East-West Center. Alex Spoehr [*chancellor of East-West Center*] asked if I would do some legal work for him. So I said, “When do you need the work done?” And he said, “As soon as possible.” You know, what does that mean? He said, “Well, the last person I asked to do

the work still hasn't done it and that was six months ago. So I don't know how long it has to take, but would you do it as quickly as possible?"

I said, "I'll have it done by tomorrow."

That was in 1962, and after I finished the work, he asked "Would you consider working at the East-West Center full-time?"

It's really interesting, that we all have periods in our lives where we want to change. At that time, I was working so hard. I was working seven days a week. But I was very happy. But, well, first, in those days, the East-West Center was a better job than being a lawyer.

You made a lot more money. You got 30 days leave. You only got one or two weeks vacation a year as a lawyer. Working at the East-West Center, you got a month. And also, they promised me that I would have an interesting job that I would be in charge of cultural programs -- you know, they used to have the festival of music and art. We brought people like Toru Takemitsu and John Cage. We brought famous artists -- painters as well as musicians -- to Hawai'i. So in other words they told me that I would have a good time working. And that was very appealing.

*[Lee was assistant to Ed Weidner, who was in charge of the Institute for Advanced Projects. The EWC annual report from that time reported that Dr. Weidner started working at the Center in July 1962. The purpose of the Institute for Advanced Projects "was directed toward an understanding of national growth and development in the Asian-Pacific area on the one hand, and to the nature of cross-national and cross-cultural context on the other hand."]*

Katherine Ferguson helped Alex with administrative matters but I helped him with projects, such as seminars, which I ran pretty much on my own.

Janice Parrot was Alex's secretary. She was from Hawai'i. She went to Punahou, then Wellesley, then got her degree from Berkeley. And I was working at the East-West Center, so I recommended her for the job. John Kyle was with the *[East-West Center]* Press. Ray Nunn, the librarian.

### ***Institute for Advanced Projects Programs***

So I did conferences, cultural affairs. And I was given the opportunity to go to Southeast Asia because I was interested in Southeast Asia.

We might hold a conference -- we wanted to show off the East-West Center because it was new. So we invited leading Asian scholars and they all wanted to come to see what the Center was like. And it was fun. I met a lot of people.

The Institute of Advanced Projects co-sponsored the Festival of Music and Art of this Century with the UH Music Department. Marian Kerr of the Music Department planned the substance of the programs and I facilitated logistical and budgetary support from East-West Center.

I'm not exaggerating when I say that I did many of these projects by myself. I even picked up everybody when they arrived by plane. I had a car to pick them up at the airport.

They stayed at the Princess Kaiulani Hotel in Waikiki. I made a deal with Pan American Airlines to provide free leis for our guests and got a special room rate from Sheraton Hotels at the Princess Kaiulani.

### ***The Friends of EWC***

When they had legal questions, I might be asked to help out. Being a lawyer in an organization without an in-house lawyer leads people to call for advice. But that wasn't part of my job.

For instance, Chancellor Spoehr asked me whether I could quickly prepare the paperwork to form "The Friends of the East-West Center," which I did.

Soon afterwards, I learned that the Friends wanted to put on the first East-West Center Christmas party at the Pacific Club. I didn't think the location was appropriate due to its membership policy at the time and wanted the location changed. When I couldn't get it done, I went to see the president of UH, Tom Hamilton, who agreed the location was inappropriate and should be changed.

I then organized the staff and Friends to put on the Christmas party in the East-West Center cafeteria. Staff and friends, including Robin Loomis, who served in the Community Relations Office as Reception Area Manager in Jefferson Hall at the time, provided the entertainment.

### ***Life After EWC***

#### ***Career in Urban Renewal***

The exciting part was getting things going. I couldn't see myself doing this the rest of my life. So I started saying, "What am I going to do?" And then I heard of urban renewal.

Well, at that time, the government under Secretary of Housing and Urban Development George Romney started planning to rebuild our cities, especially the urban core areas of our cities. And I thought that sounded exciting. So I applied to Berkeley for an M.B.A.

with a focus on real estate and urban studies. And there was no such program -- I created the program for myself. At Berkeley, they let you create your own program of study. At that time, they didn't have urban planning departments in universities. This was a brand new field.

And I was older than most college students; I was 32 years old. So in class, sometimes a student would ask a question and the teacher didn't know the answer. And they would say, "Let's ask Ted. Do you know, Ted?" Because, you know, I was 32 years old. The other guys were 25.

I made a lot of friends, because a lot of the faculty became friends. It took me 12 months. I went to school for 12 months straight -- to get my M.B.A. with a specialty in real estate and urban planning. When I finished, I didn't know how I was going to get started in my new profession. I started a company called Urban Land Company and called myself an urban consultant.

I organized racial minority group non-profits to petition the government for allocations of land to develop for the use of their communities. Early on, I learned to use local community leaders to provide leadership and visibility. In San Francisco, I helped organize Japanese to develop a Japantown (Nihonmachi) and the black community to participate in economic development in San Francisco. In Sacramento, I organized the Chinese community; in Stockton, the Filipino and Hispanic communities. By 1969, I had more work than I could handle.

Justin Hermann, the executive director of the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, offered me the position of general counsel to the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency. I could not accept the offer and still keep my credibility with the community. Later, I

would help Justin Hermann organize continuing community support for his different projects, including the Chinese Cultural Center in San Francisco. All the help I gave Justin Hermann was without compensation because no money was available.

It occurred to me that the law could be changed to provide compensation from HUD for professionals working for the community. I then went to Washington D.C. to lobby for a change in the law to provide payment to professionals providing services to the community. This change was adopted by L.P.A. 456 but I did not benefit from the change.

### ***Work in Private Sector***

About that time, a very famous shopping center developer, Ernest Hahn, hired me to do a lot of his real estate law work in Northern California. I worked for Ernest Hahn for about a year but had to quit because the workload was just too heavy.

Around the same time, the city of Garden Grove hired me as its real estate attorney to review and approve all new projects. I did this for about a year. I had full rein to approve all projects. I helped the city to set up an expedited permit approval process to attract investors. I encouraged the city to devote a section of old buildings in town to be a center to sell used furniture. This center thrived and about two years ago I visited the location and two of the buildings were still used as used furniture stores!

Sometime after working for Hahn and Garden Grove, I received an unsolicited call from someone at the Clark County Business Licensing Department and was told, "I'm calling to let you know that you own a very valuable asset that you probably don't know you own. You own an unrestricted gaming license that comes with your ownership of some land which you are leasing to a casino operator. Whatever you do, don't lose the license

because it's very valuable." Since my wife and I both come from families that did not want to get into the casino business, I did not know how to take advantage of the information and did nothing.

About three years later, the tenant using the gaming license gave up the lease. In order to avoid losing the gaming license, I had to keep the casino open. I originally contracted with United Coin to run the casino. After a year without profit, United Coin returned the operation to me. I then operated the casino personally. Not having much experience running a casino, I did not know what action to take to improve business. Being a real estate developer, my instincts were that action needed to be taken. Something had to be done.

Since the gaming license was so valuable, I decided to tear down the existing building and build a new one. I ended up building a new casino without being closed for a single day. The whole project took a little over six months to complete. Instead of simply replacing the old building with a new one, I built a new building around the old building. The old building provided the scaffolding needed to build the new one and sped up construction substantially.

After the new building was completed, we tore down the old one piecemeal, starting first by tearing down only what we could not use -- all the plumbing, drains, and utilities were placed largely in the new expansion. The old building was demolished from inside and carried out the front door. People driving by the construction started watching and wondering what the new building was going to look like. As a result, business remained steady during construction and foot traffic increased substantially. Everyone wanted to

see what we were doing! Once we understood the business, we built a second casino 10 years later in Mesquite, Nevada.

## **Ties That Last**

### ***EWC Foundation/EWC Board of Governors***

I come here to Honolulu once a year. At one point, Danny Lau tried to get me to support the University of Hawai'i.

He's chairman of Finance Factors. And he's on the University of Hawai'i Foundation.

But because I had worked at the East-West Center, I had more interest in helping the East-West Center than I had in helping UH. Though, you know, I taught business law at UH for a year. Shortly after that I was asked to serve on the *[East-West Center]*

Foundation board, which I have done for the past three years. And then I was appointed to the East-West Center Board of Governors and have served on that board for the past six months.

My wife and I support education. We enjoy it. We're heavily involved in support of education. My wife is a trustee of the Berkeley Foundation. And then our son went to Harvard. He's on the UNLV *[University of Nevada, Las Vegas]* Foundation Board. I served on Harvard's Board of Overseers for six years. I was the president of the Alumni Association for Berkeley Law School in the mid-'80s.

I've been very impressed with what the East-West Center has been able to accomplish with limited resources. When I first came here, you know, we had, I think \$10 million, and that was in 1960-something. Half the money went to scholarships for students.

*[Dr. Lee was asked how he would like people to remember him.]*

Simply said, I'd like my family to be proud and satisfied at how we have conducted our lives.