

Edward Wah (1931?-2008)

By Jodi Varon

Edward Eng Wah, D.M.D., practiced dentistry in both Portland and John Day. The great-grandnephew of Oregon herbalist Ing Hay (Wu Yunian; also known as Doc Hay), the proprietor and practitioner of herbal medicine at the Kam Wah Chung Mercantile Company in John Day, Wah spent much of his childhood in and around the Kam Wah Chung. His firsthand accounts of Ing Hay's medical practice and daily life are important to understanding the significance of Ing Hay and the Kam Wah Chung to the Chinese and EuroAmerican communities in John Day and rural eastern Oregon.

Family and historical records disagree about Wah's birthplace and date. Parents Bob Wah (Ng Bark Wah) and Rose Wah (Lee Shee) married in Har Ping village, Kwangtung Province, China. Bob Wah's Petition of Naturalization lists Edward Wah's (Ng Gim Wah) birthplace as Lewiston, Idaho, on August 10, 1933, while a personal history references Wah's birthplace and birth date as China on October 10, 1931.

The family moved from Lewiston to Orofino, Idaho, and in 1942 relocated to John Day to care for the ailing and blind Ing Hay. Bob Wah had practiced as an apothecary in the Kam Wah Chung and had apprenticed with Ing Hay as a pulse diagnostician.

Edward Wah revered his great uncle and observed the compassionate, friendly, professional manner Ing Hay used with his patients. He later remembered Ing Hay's tactile sensitivity, his successes in treating patients, and the bowl of Owyhee Kisses peanut butter taffies that Ing Hay kept for Kam Wah Chung visitors. He also remembered Ing Hay's gravity during World War II, as he hunched close to the large radio in the Kam Wah Chung, smoking cigars while listening anxiously to war reports.

By 1942, when Bob Wah moved to John Day with his wife Rose and his two youngest children, Edward and Henry, the community that had once been home to more than a thousand Chinese miners and laborers had witnessed the exodus of almost all Chinese inhabitants. In John Day, Edward Wah observed the family's healing traditions while enjoying the activities of a rural childhood in Oregon: fishing, hunting for ducks and deer, playing varsity football and basketball at Grant Union High School, and chopping wood. Upon his graduation from the University of Oregon Dental School in 1957, he returned to John Day to begin his dental practice.

In 1964, Edward Wah moved with his wife Muriel and their three children to Portland, where he practiced dentistry until 1998. A practitioner of modern Western dentistry, Wah also took stock in holistic practices and the use of dietary changes, nutrition, and supplements to encourage patients' overall health and to aid in tissue health and bone strength. He recommended vitamin therapies for pyria and hot/cold tooth sensitivity and the elimination of refined sugar to stabilize metabolism.

Edward Wah made generous contributions to the refurbishing of the Kam Wah Chung into what is now an Oregon State Heritage and National Historic Landmark Site. In 1985, the people of John Day honored Wah during its Kam Wah Chung Days celebration by naming him grand marshal and presenting him with a key to the city. Wah died on June 11, 2008, in Portland.

Sources

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