

Yorkton Stories

The audio version of this and all other podcasts can be found at www.yorktonstories.ca and on all podcast directories.

This transcript was produced using voice recognition software, which is not perfect. It has been edited for clarity, to correct misspellings and to delete duplication.

Life of Lai and later

Published 23 June 2023

Dick DeRyk

For the past hundred years or more, Chinese restaurants have been ubiquitous on the prairies. Every small town had at least one, serving mostly Cantonese-style food as well as Canadian dishes. Many remain, often being one of the last businesses still operating before a village disappears from the map.

In Yorkton, the Broadway Restaurant, commonly also called the Broadway Cafe, was one such local institution on the north side of the main street between Second and Third Avenues. It was operated in the early days by Joe Mack, himself an immigrant from China, who had come to Canada with his younger brother to work as cooks for the crews, expanding the railroad westward. The younger brother had left his wife and three sons in China when he came to Canada. They had stayed in their ancestral village of Oong Voo in East Lake in what was then Canton province, now known as Guangdong. The middle son was named Lai Fu. Lai Fu never really knew his father, who came home to China but died soon after. But Lai Fu was a favorite nephew of Joe Mack, Uncle Joe, who would play a major role in his life.

The story of Lai Fu's early life is told in a book called *Life of Lai*, written by Carl Mark, the second oldest son. It recalls in detail the story from the time Lai was 13 years old and entered the military college in Beijing in the pre-communist years, and his rise to being selected for officer training and becoming an officer in the military police. But it was wartime. First World War II, then the Communist Revolution in China, and his family, Uncle Joe in Canada in particular, didn't want Lai involved in war. He arranged for his immigration to Canada, which took a considerable amount of scheming and some nefarious means, all described in great detail in the book, which ends when Lai arrived in Canada in 1950.

Lai came to Yorkton to work with Uncle Joe at the Broadway restaurant. But by now he was no longer Lai Fu. He was Bob Mark, who for the next 43 years operated restaurants in Yorkton, then in Hanna, Alberta for eight years, and then back to the Broadway Cafe in Yorkton, and later Bob Mark Chop Suey House. Bob and his wife Sally, who he had married on a trip back to Hong Kong in 1955 when she was known as Sinn, retired to Richmond, BC in 1993. Bob died there in 2019 at the age of 91.

The book is available on Amazon.ca in paperback or the Kindle e-book format. It is a fascinating read of 143 pages, complete with family photos going back to 1940 in China. The author, Carl Mark, attended school in Yorkton, graduated high school here, attended university and became a

successful entrepreneur in the high tech industry, and now lives in Whistler. We talked to Carl about writing the book, about Bob and Sally, and about the family's life in Yorkton after Lai.

Tell me the story of why and how.

Carl Mark

The main reason I wrote this book was out of love for my dad really. When he passed, I started talking with my two daughters, Tessa and Taryn, and all their cousins, so my nieces and nephews. It dawned on me that all these stories that I know so well and my sister and my brothers know so well because we sat with my dad and he told us these stories and we listened intently and were fascinated by them. But my daughters and the nieces and nephews didn't know these. They didn't have the pleasure of sitting with my dad and having him tell these from his lens. It dawned on me that it was best to record these, just to write them down, archive them in some way to have our next generation be able to reference these at some point. And then COVID happened, the world shut down and I was looking for something to do because businesses all really shut down for awhile. I thought why not put this into a book and so I started to piece this together. I used my sister as a sounding board. She read them and said change this, change that. And she made one remark to me that was game changing for the way I did approach this.

She said, You have a certain writing style. And when I read the way that you wrote these, it seems like you're trying to convince me of something. It seems like you're trying to sell me something. And, you know, I was in professional sales. And she said, you know, you don't have to convince me. You just need to tell the story. Why don't you tell it the way dad told it? And I thought, well, geez, you know, that's telling it from a first person standpoint. I actually had no idea how to do that. All I've ever really done was written business plans and business proposals and product releases and things like that.

I reached out to a friend of mine who wrote fiction books, specifically first-person point of view fiction books. Jason Martin is his name, and he 's a good friend located out in Toronto. And I asked Jason, in your book that was written through the eyes of a young boy, just giving him a plug. The name of his book is Father Sweet. He wrote his book through the eyes of an 11-year-old boy. And that's exactly what I wanted to do. And I asked Jason, how do you do this? How do you get your head into this space? He mentored me on the entire process that I have to get into. He gave me a list of things to do to get my thoughts down and get into the practice of writing dialogue and expressing through dialogue as it would have and may have happened at the time.

So that's how I went about it. And it became a project that was very challenging and very fulfilling during this period of COVID, where the world as we know it and knew it shut down for a period of time. And frankly, I had time in my hands, and I liked this because of the mental stimulation and the challenge that it provided. You know, I have to admit, I was still grieving my father, and this helped me get through that. I also was required to spend a lot of time talking with my mom, asking her about that whole period of her life and my dad's life. I believe, I want to believe, that it really helped her too with her grieving process because no one, none of like myself or my siblings, really expressed interest in that sort of thing to that level of detail before. And I was asking her specifically about how she felt about things. And she was saying, Where's this coming from? You never asked things like this before. Where's that coming from? And then I told her, you know, I'm

gonna write this book, mom. And she thought, well, that's good. I hope you know what you're doing. I said, No, I have no idea what I'm doing.

Dick DeRyk

What has been your mother's and your siblings' reaction to the book? I'm assuming they've all read it.

Carl Mark

They all read it. Yeah, yeah. My mom doesn't read English, and so I went chapter for chapter, sitting with her and talking about what I wrote. She really enjoyed it. She said, I didn't know you could do that. And so it's been rewarding from that standpoint, with both my mom enjoying that this book was written, and my siblings liking it to the point of encouraging their friends and the the cousins and grandchildren to all embrace the book as well.

Dick DeRyk

Do you have any indication of what the sales have been like? I mean, you did it as a personal project, I'm assuming, and more of a family project. Has the book sold? You're on Amazon, you're on various other platforms.

Carl Mark

That's the surprising part, I have to admit, Dick, that I did this not to make money, really. I did this for the reasons of recording, you know, the stories and my dad's legacy and all that. But I wanted to share it with my friends, my family, and whatever else might happen out there. Much to my surprise, it sold a few thousand copies.

Dick DeRyk

A few thousand copies.

Carl Mark

I don't have a few thousand friends, let me put it that way.

Dick DeRyk

But a few thousand copies in Canada makes it a bestseller. I mean, the bar isn't very high for bestsellers in Canada.

Carl Mark

Yeah, well, here's a really funny story on the whole labeling bestseller. I got an email from Amazon or Kindle Direct Publishing one day, which is where I self-published it on Amazon. And they said, You have a number one bestseller. And I said, Oh, that's wonderful. The numbers don't seem that high. Why is it a number one bestseller? Well, you're number one in your category. Oh, that's great. How many books are in that category? Oh, it's just you. You're in alone. Oh, okay, okay. I'm number one in a category by myself. That's good. So anyway, I always have a chuckle about that particular one because they have all these different categories. But I published it and put it out there with the Yorkton This Week newspaper article, with CTV showing this in many markets across Canada with that clip. It got picked up by a lot of independent people that were not necessarily known to me. These people bought it, read it, and frankly, they liked it because if they didn't, they probably would have told me so as well. And some of the reviews that were written

were amazingly good, saying things like his writing style is great, his grammar is impeccable. My old English teachers would love to know that some academics actually thought that. And so it got picked up and you know made perhaps a little bit of viral stuff, and where equal amount of sales in both Canada and the US took place.

Dick DeRyk

Have you heard from any other families who came from China, either kids or the original immigrants about the book? Has there been any kind of reaction from people who might have had similar types of experiences?

Carl Mark

I have heard from a fellow named Chuck Kwan, who himself wrote a book called Have You Eaten Yet? And his book was a compilation of stories about Chinese immigrants to countries around the world who started restaurants. And he got in touch with me about my book because he wrote about a different family in Outlook, Saskatchewan, and he enjoyed my story about the evolution of my dad's restaurant, the Broadway Cafe in Yorkton. And he expressed that if he'd have known about this back in the day, that would have been a restaurant and family and story that he would have written about because it was fascinating. It fit with the whole historical perspective of how and why that restaurant and that family structure ended up in Yorkton and that sort of thing. So he reached out because it was of interest and similar to many stories about family settlement in provinces across Canada and states across the US. So that was a very interesting conversation that I had with Chuck, and we continue to exchange dialogue on on how things are going and you know what the next project is and all that sort of thing.

Dick DeRyk

Here's a question because it's something I've always been curious about. Chinese restaurants in western Canada, at least, tend to be Cantonese operated, as you mentioned, but there's always been this kind of thought that the Chinese food we get in Canada at Chinese restaurants is not the same as real Chinese food. So my question is this: what did you eat at home? Was the cooking at home for dinner, you know, that the family had different from what we typically consider to be Chinese food that is served in restaurants?

Carl Mark

The short answer to that is yes and no. We ate all the same food as well, mainly because we liked it. It was actually really good food, both the Chinese food served in the restaurant and the Canadian food that was also on the menu. Because there's five kids in our family. We're very Canadian, we're very westernized, so our palate wanted that sort of thing. And so my parents appeased that. But at the same time, they wanted to introduce us to all of what you described as the Cantonese dishes, the very authentic Chinese dishes, that they would never put these things on the menu in Yorkton. I don't know if it's still this demographic Ukrainian, you know, this stuff wouldn't fly, this stuff would never get ordered. But they wanted us to have the cultural experience of having tasted and grown up with all of these dishes.

For me, since I moved to the big city in Vancouver, the large Chinese population there, these dishes are actually sold in the restaurants. And I can go into these Chinese restaurants in Vancouver and order all this, all these things that my parents went out of their way to cook and expose us to. So it's kind of both. And so what we ate at home and what was on the menu at the

Broadway restaurant, at Bob Mark Chop Suey House was the same as well as different, if that makes sense.

Did you kids help out in the restaurant, either in Hanna or in Yorkton? Was there an expectation that you would help out?

Carl Mark

It was, it was. And the encouragement was for us to be enterprising, for us to create the good habits of making some money when we were kids, so that we understood a little bit more about what my parents go through on a daily basis. And frankly, they didn't believe in allowance. If you want some money, you know, you gotta work for it. They had myself and my siblings all working in the restaurant from a fairly young age, I'd say starting as young as grade six and grade seven, doing both back of the house and front of the house stuff, helping the chefs to prepare certain things and then front of the house, what front of the house restaurants call bus boys, and you know, just cleaning things up and helping the servers and then becoming a server. We all did that. And that was all part of the life lesson thing that both my mom and my dad firmly believed in.

Dick DeRyk

You and I think Danny made a trip back to China to the the ancestral village. When was that?

Carl Mark

1986.

Dick DeRyk

What prompted you to make that trip?

Carl Mark

It was really initiated by my mom. She hadn't been back since her marriage to my dad, that I wrote about in the book. And then the communist regime came in and all of that stuff that happened. She just believed that was a time, it was due for her to go back and visit. And she still had quite a bit of family back there in the villages where she came from. And so it was my mom that instigated it. My brother and I, the timing worked out for us because we were both in between jobs, and so that's what took us there. And then the experiences in hindsight helped me immensely to be able to write about this because I actually walked those villages and touched those buildings and that school and all those things that I wrote about. It made for a more realistic description of what my dad would have seen and done back in his day there.

Dick DeRyk

I was fascinated by the story about your parents contributing to the rebuilding of the school in Oong Voo. That was back in the 60s, it would have been, because I think the school was finished in 1966.

Carl Mark

Yes.

Dick DeRyk

I'm not sure whether anybody, you know, outside the immediate family knew that they were involved in that.

Carl Mark

And in fact, growing up, I used to see these airmail envelopes sitting on top of the TV addressed to something in China. And it would be every couple of weeks. I was always a nosy little kid. And so I would go and I would look at this and you know take note of the address, and it's both in English and written in Chinese on the envelope. But it always seemed the same. I had no idea that they were writing checks being mailed to the village for the building of this school that took a number of years, and the legacy that that provided. As I got older, I would actually ask my dad about it. That's when the story came out that when he, you know, I'll voice it from my dad actually saying it. My dad said, When I left the village, I made myself a promise that someday I will make life better here for everybody that had to stay, because I'm lucky enough to be able to leave right now. They can't. He kept that promise.

Dick DeRyk

That was a very private thing, because I mean, that was until I read about that. No idea. But I mean, you also mentioned his involvement in sponsorships locally in Yorkton here.

Carl Mark

Right.

Dick DeRyk

That wasn't all that well known either. To me, your dad always seemed as a fairly unassuming man.

Carl Mark

So the trip that I took back there with my mom to visit the school, because this is the first time that she was at that school since it was built 25 years prior. My mom visited the school. We went and for me, having gone through the public school system in Yorkton, you know, I'm used to seeing portraits of the queen as you enter the school. We entered the foyer of this school, lo and behold, portrait of my parents. This is getting weird. And because we really didn't know the extent to which they were a major contributor.

The school was brought out into the schoolyard, and these little girls came out with bouquets, presented them to my mom, and the village elder continued to say things, things about the wonderful people that your mom and your dad are, and all these things. And the sense of enlightenment came over myself and my brother. It was really eye-opening. That's something special that took place on that visit related to the building of the school and what that school evolved into. And then bring that full circle into unassuming nature that my dad had in regards to the Yorkton community and the charities. Yeah, he believed in just being a part of the community and giving back any way that he can. And he didn't like showing off. He didn't like to really have any emphasis on status or status symbols or anything like that, because his enjoyment was the enjoyment of the participants, the enjoyment of who he was able to help, and watching the pure joy that they have or had in what he was helping with. You know, that was a really important part of my dad's, I guess, belief system and his moral compass.

Dick DeRyk

The move to Hanna was an opportunity, I'm assuming, for them to have their own business because prior to that they were working for Uncle Joe.

Carl Mark

That's right,

Dick DeRyk

Joe Mack at the Broadway in Yorkton.

Carl Mark

Yes. As per a number of chapters in my book, I described my dad, Bob, the apprentice, wanting to learn every aspect of the business because he was a very intelligent young man. And that that level of learning never ever left him. It also drove him to want to do the whole thing. That opportunity was not going to present itself at the Broadway in Yorkton. At the time. Broadway Cafe was so entrenched with business partners. Like, I think that at one point there were probably eight to 10 partners in that restaurant that all had some percentage share ownership of the restaurant. And he would have been the young guy coming in, the low man on the totem pole, and he wasn't going to be able to do that. So that's why the pursuit took place.

And Hanna, of all places, Hanna, Alberta, identified as a place where there was an opportunity for a restaurant, where there really wasn't a restaurant yet, and the town seemed really nice and that sort of thing. And there were relatives nearby in Drumheller, which I believe was like 15 minutes away. So that's how the sequencing kind of moved towards Hanna, Alberta.

Dick DeRyk

How long were they there?

Carl Mark

My brother Danny was born in 1957 in Canora whilst they were on their way to Hanna. And they stayed in Hanna. 1957 would have been when they were enroute to and starting the business. And then I was born in Hanna, and we moved back to Yorkton in time for me to start grade schools. So I would have been five, so that's 1965. So yeah, so eight years. They were in Hanna for eight years.

Dick DeRyk

They came back to Yorkton to take over, or or were they becoming another partner in the Broadway?

Carl Mark

An opportunity to become a partner at the Broadway took place. And specifically, what that partnership was the retirement of my Uncle Joe. My dad, Bob, was his favorite. He wanted Bob to come back and you know buy out his shares and be the prominent percentage owner of the Broadway Cafe in that year, in 1965. And so when my dad came back to Yorkton, there still were probably close to eight partners at the Broadway Cafe. And I had to call every single one of them uncle something, even though they weren't really uncles.

Dick DeRyk

When he came back, Uncle Joe, that he took over from, had been instrumental in bringing your dad to Canada to start with. Because the stories that are told in the book are that there were somewhat nefarious arrangements made to get the proper papers, and that Uncle Joe was instrumental in all of that.

Carl Mark

Yes, my dad's full Chinese name, spoken in the way that Chinese names are, you say the last name first, so it's Muck Lai Fu. And my dad's English name was Bob Mark. And the reason that that name was chosen, you know, a lot of people would think, my friends come up to me and say to me, Oh, you know, he chose Bob because it's a nice name, you know, back in the day. And I said, Well, no, it had nothing to do with that. It had everything to do with Bob, sounded a lot like Buck. And it was actually a combination of funds available from my uncle Joe, together with Ong Mark and Clara Mark. Ong was the back of the house lead chef and his wife, my aunt, Clara. They, by circumstance, fortunate circumstance, when Clara was coming over to Canada, she was able to acquire some immigration papers on the boat, on the ship. And the name was specifically a fellow named Buck, Buck Sim, I believe it was. And so that's how my dad chose Bob because it was pretty close to Buck. And the whole reason things like that were done was to try to slip through Canadian immigration as smoothly and as stealth-like as possible without drawing attention, because these immigration officials held an enormous amount of power because you know there were no such things as computers or internet or anything like that for them to be able to communicate with anybody. So they made decisions at the moment on the fly. And so anything that they could do to circumvent the situation, they did. And so for my dad to be able to have those those papers, even though those papers were not his own, that was the best and easiest way for him to enter Canada.

Dick DeRyk

He had also made a commitment when he left that he would bring other members of the family to Canada. And eventually he did. His mother, two brothers, I believe. His mother in 1966, his brother Park in 1968, and his brother Yin in 1974. Did they all come to Yorkton?

Carl Mark

They all came to Yorkton. Yeah. So obviously that all happened in my lifetime. And I remember when each one of them came over specifically, because it was a big deal. They came over and they lived with us for a while. It was a big ordeal in our house, it was a big ordeal in the restaurant, and there were these distant family members that were coming over basically in our lives. So it was a disruptive thing for us as kids in the house.

Carl Mark

But at the same time, the excitement that it had for my dad and for my mom, we liked all the positive energy and the amount of effort and everything that took place. And so yeah, they came over, they went to work at the Broadway Cafe at the time and settled and started to build a life for themselves in Yorkton.

Dick DeRyk

Park ended up involved in the Broadway Cafe as well. I remember him from front of the house.

Carl Mark

Yeah, so Park and his wife Helen both worked at the Broadway. Park was front of the house. Helen was working in the back as a chef. Park's interest was very much on the people side of front of the house because of what he did in Hong Kong prior. He was actually a barber in Hong Kong. He had a love for it. He even left the Broadway for short periods of time to dabble in it again because he missed it so much.

My dad just wanted him, the same way that my dad has always encouraged, you know, myself and all my sister and my brothers to pursue what we like, to pursue what I guess you could say your passion is. And Park's was cutting hair. You remember the Stag Billiards that was across the street from our restaurant. There was a barber shop in there. Park did a stint, he was the barber. I'm not sure what the exact sequence there was, but I think the Stag started to diminish because of the ownership there, and then he just came back to the restaurant.

The other large family that you will also know, you will know Willie, William Mark, you know, Logan Stevens Construction. And Willie was the eldest in their family of, I believe, eight kids. So that was Ong and Clara. Mark's Groceteria on Fifth Avenue. That was Ong's brother in Chinese. In Chinese, we always addressed them as the number sequence of where they are in the family. So let's say Ong was the eldest, the brother that had Mark's Groceteria was the number two son. And so we called him second uncle. And then across the street from them, the youngest son in their family, Terry Mark, had the other grocery store. So they were right across the street from each other.

Dick DeRyk

So when Bob started Bob Mark's Chop Suey house across the street, kitty corner, was he out of the Broadway at that time or was he running two restaurants?

Carl Mark

He was out of the Broadway. What took place there, you've got brothers, so you're gonna understand this. It's a love-hate relationship. You'll do anything for your brother, but you know, it's not all smooth sailing all the time. So that was the situation where it was just time for that split to take

It was around the time that I graduated from high school, 1978, 1979 kind of time frame. My dad just decided, you know, being a partner and having to report and cooperate and collaborate on all levels, even though it's his brother, you know, it was still something that he felt he was one to get away from and get back to 100% ownership on his own.

And so that's how the Bob Mark Chop Suey House was spawned. I still remember when he came to us and said, you know, I want to call it Bob Mark Chop Suey House. And we thought, well, okay, you know, but why not just the Chop Suey House? And he says, Oh no, it's gotta have Bob Mark in it. And, you know, people have to know it's me. I said, okay, all right. Park remained running the Broadway on his own.

Dick DeRyk

Well, when did they retire? And how did he view retirement? Was it a welcome thing or was it reluctant?

Carl Mark

I think it was a combination of a few things. When the retirement finally happened, it was a conscious decision, but it started as a sequence of events that took place related to health in '92-'93. My dad had a heart attack while he was golfing at Deer Park. They brought the ambulance down, you know, down to like I think it was the third or fourth hole. They had to rush him to one of the hospitals in Regina, Plains Hospital, yes. And so my dad considers himself lucky to have survived that. He had I believe a couple of full blockages in his arteries. And he was a smoker. He smoked a pack a day. You know, now that we know all this stuff about secondhand smoke, you know, I pretty much smoked through my childhood because he smoked everywhere in the house.

That heart attack was a wake-up call for him. He quit cold turkey. No more tobacco, no more pipe. He changed a lot of things in his life because he came very close to death. That's when he decided that he wanted to slow down a bit. Heard that he shortened the working hours at the restaurant. And so eventually he started to move towards full retirement, and he was always interested in moving out to the coast to where he eventually settled in Richmond.

Dick DeRyk

So after he made that change and retired, I mean he lived to be 91 years old. So it obviously had a positive impact, the changes that he made in the retirement.

Carl Mark

Yeah, he enjoyed Richmond a lot. From a topographical point of view, it's a lot like Saskatchewan, it's very flat. And also all of his friends also retired and moved out there. And so you remember the part in my book where I described how the Chinese community in the province of Saskatchewan, and all the prairie provinces for that matter, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, you know, they all settled in various towns and villages, but there was a sense of community, and they all supported each other and they all kind of knew each other, did know each other.

Surprising to me, it's not surprising to them. When they retired, the numbers of them that all moved out to Richmond, BC, you know, there's a lot of them moved to Richmond, BC. And so there was a sense of community there. Now instead of driving distance, now they're all walking distance. They had a lot of friends. You know, in retirement, that was a very special thing that they wanted that. My mom and my dad were very social people, and they liked having these lifelong friends and of course you know new friends they made, but all within a very short walking distance where they could do all the things on a daily basis that they enjoyed doing.

A number of people that interviewed me, including Calvin and the the lady from CTV, they both asked me, You know, is there going to be a sequel? And I have to say that many of my friends who really enjoyed my book said to me, Why did you end it so soon? Why and abruptly? There's obviously a lot more to tell. You know, so I had to figure out why and I did figure that out after a while. It didn't come to me, but I think subconsciously it was always there. I ended it before my parents had children, because I couldn't put myself in my dad's shoes through the time of his life when he had children because of the emotions he would have gone through and the unconditional love that he has for every single one of his kids and what he would have gone through with that.

So I felt that it'd be best to have that stuff be written about eventually, but through my eyes as the first person, because I can fully express all emotions and all knowledge from my own perspective. And I didn't think that it would be fair to try to make up some of that stuff up because frankly, I didn't talk to my dad about that stuff. And so that's why the book ended where it was, and then I just talked about kids being born in the epilogue.

Dick DeRyk

And an epilogue to this podcast. Sally, Bob's wife, now lives in Edmonton, where she has family. Danny, the oldest son, was in high-tech sales in Calgary and now retired. Shirley was a radiology technician at the University of Alberta Hospital in Edmonton for 30 years and is retired. Carl, the author of the book, still doing high-tech entrepreneurial type work in Whistler. Edwin is a lawyer in Kamloops, and Gary, the youngest, is a doctor of Chinese medicine in Calgary.

The Broadway Cafe and Bob Mark Chop Suey House are no longer in Yorkton, although there are several Chinese restaurants still operating here.

Yorkton Stories is presented by



GRAIN MILLERS

Supporting sponsors

MICCAR Group of Companies

