

NOVATO HISTORY MUSEUM



# The Novato Historian

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Novato Historical Guild, the Novato History Museum,  
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*Preserving Novato's History*

## Feature Section

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# Chinese in Early Twentieth Century Novato

By John A. Trumbull

*Novato did not have the concentration of Chinese families, as were in San Rafael, San Francisco, and the East Bay in the first half of the twentieth century. We did have at least three families living here; however, representatives of the Dep and Louie families are still residents here. This is their brief history.*

**The Louie family:** The patriarch of both the Dep and Louie families was Wing Louie. He emigrated from Canton Province in China first in 1908 for three years to the United States where his father was working, and he moved here permanently in 1920.

Arriving in Novato by way of Sacramento, San Francisco, and San Anselmo, Wing Louie settled his growing family about 1926 a mile southwest of Atherton Avenue in the area now occupied by parts of Lea Drive and McClelland Drive.

He bought five acres on the south side of Olive Avenue with the Gnos and McClelland families as neighbors to the west and with the Nunes family and the Deer Island flood plain to the east.

Wing Louie supported his growing family by raising chickens as a one-man operation. He had two children born in China (one of whom was Joy Louie Chan, who became Josie Dep Beal's mother) two more born in the U.S. before he came to Novato, and there would be four more children born in Novato.

Walter Louie, the middle son, is not sure why Wing Louie settled in Novato. There was a distant relative in the San Rafael Chinese community at the time who ran the 751 Café there, but Walter doesn't remember the families being especially close.

In 1941, when Walter was entering high school, WWII came along. Wing enlarged his operation by buying 21 acres across Olive Avenue from the Bessie family. He moved the family into the Bessie house on the hillside, and

changed the operation into a Peking duck farm. It is this Louie Duck Farm, with its population of between 4,000 and 5,000 ducks in their pens, that our old timers still remember.



*The first Louie home on the south side of Olive Avenue.*

The Louies raised ducks for meat, and to sustain their flock, and sold them through a wholesaler to the United States Navy. Walt, then in high school

market, because the Reichart operation was so much larger than the Louie farm.



From the left: Wing Louie, Walter Louie (son, in Wing's lap), Annie [Wong](daughter seated) Joy Louie Chan Dep (the eldest daughter, standing), Warren Louie (son), Pam [Brundage] (daughter now deceased, standing), Mary [New] (smallest daughter), Ng Shee Louie [Wing's wife, seated at right] with Jack Louie (now deceased, on her lap). This picture was made about 1930 after Joy's marriage to Chan Dep. The other daughter born in China, May Ping, is not in this picture.

in San Rafael, was in charge of the duck processing, from slaughter through scalding and defeathering by a machine with a rubber-fingered, rotary drum, to the final hand defeathering operation. Josie Beal participated in this final operation, which was necessary to remove feathers the machine missed. Walt did not have to disembowel the birds, as the wholesaler did that. This operation was cycled every nine or ten weeks.



Josie and Walt in 1948

by the relocation of the large fresh duck operation run by the Reicharts from their 1940's location in San Bruno to a farm in Petaluma. Walt says there was no competition for the Chinatown fresh duck

After the war, Wing Louie altered his business plan to produce Peking pressed duck. He was motivated in part

Making "Peking pressed duck" is an operation in which the duck carcass is split, pressed flat, dried and then preserved in oil for sale as a delicacy in the civilian China town markets. (Peking duck is a breed of duck, such as is a Muscovy duck, but is more prized than the latter due to its superior flavor.) This operation terminated in the early 1950's.

Walt served in the Army as a processing clerk in Marysville for a year and a half after high school. He then went to Sonoma State and U.C. Davis for two years each to get baseball out of his system. (He was a shortstop.)

In 1952 he married Meimei Wong whose family operated a laundry in San Rafael, moved to Oakland and started his career in the U.S. Postal Service. In 1956 he moved Meimei and his then two children back to Novato, after which he had two more children and served in our post office until his retirement in 1984. He has relieved his retirement by serving a short stint as a messenger for the late Bank of Novato, and by helping his daughter, Brenda Kondrasky start her day school business, Small Miracles, in Cotati.

In retrospect, Walt does not remember experiencing discrimination during his years in Novato or at San Rafael High school. He recalls that the railroad did divide the town, which developed most rapidly on the urban West side, but he had friends there even though he lived on the rural East side. It was because of his good memories of his youth in Novato that he elected to return from Oakland to raise his family here.



PFC Walter Louie





*The Louie family in 2009, from the left: Robert Louie (Walt's eldest son), Lori Redholtz (Walt's daughter), Aaron Kondrasky (Brenda's spouse, standing with hat), Shawn Louie (Lori's son, in front in the light sweater) Cindy Louie (Shawn's wife, with baby Liam) Brenda Kondrasky (Walt's daughter, behind Cindy), Megan Kondrasky (Brenda's daughter, with the long black hair), Meimei Louie (Walt's wife, seated on couch), Norm Redholtz (Lori's spouse, standing in grey sweater), Walt Louie (next to Meimei), Elena Delgado with her father Eddie Delgado, in the foreground with Jeaneen Delgado (Walt's daughter) on the extreme right and Jenny Kondrasky, leaning on the couch with the grey hat.*

**The Dep family:** Joy Louie Chan (Wing Louie's eldest daughter) was born at Tai Shan City, Canton Province, China, on November 18, 1908. When she was 12, her father, her step-mother and her baby half sister emigrated to America, leaving Joy in the care of her grandfather who had returned from America. (Due to U.S. immigration peculiarities, Wing Louie could only bring Ng Shee, his wife and May Ping, Joy's baby sister).

Joy was educated at Christian schools from the age of 9, and considered becoming a missionary. However, when she was 18, an uncle in America sent her a picture of Dep Chan, [aka Dep Chain] who had been born in a poor family also in Tai Shan City. Then aged 26, he had



*Joy Louie Chan at age 19*

been in America for the preceding 6 years. Joy prayed about the future, and decided to become his wife. She came to the US, and married Chan on October 20, 1926. Eight months later they bought 10 acres near the intersection of Atherton Avenue and School Road in Black Point. It is probable that Wing Louie's presence here was a factor in this decision, since Chan Dep had been working near relatives in Pennsylvania prior to his marriage.

Between 1927 and 1957 Chan and Joy raised four children (Wilson, Barry, Josephine and Victoria), and lost a daughter in a tragic accident.

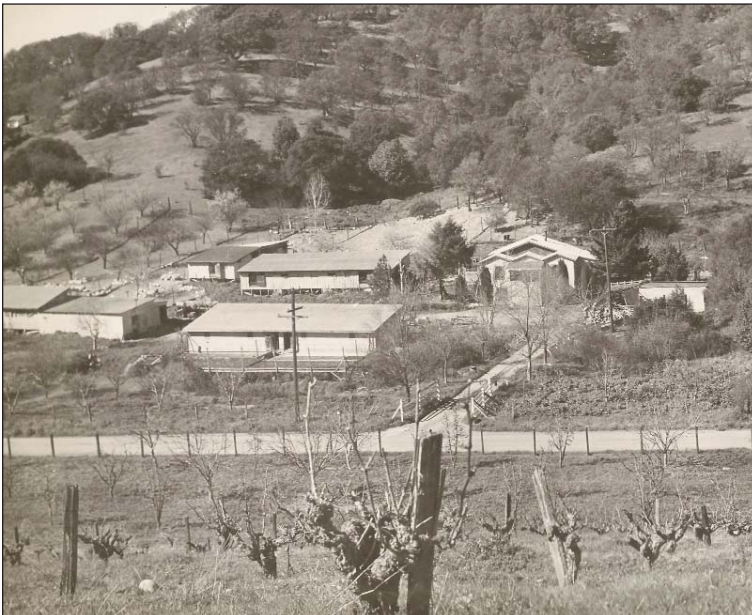
The source of their income was 6,000 laying chickens kept on the property. In 1957 they closed down the egg business and Chan com-

menced a ten year career as a custodian at one of our Novato schools.

*[Josie has graciously donated a translation of her mother's diary, which was originally written in Chinese, to the Novato History museum. It is available in the family history section of our archives.]*

The Dep residence, which still sits on half of the property still retained by the family, is a noticeable modification of the original house designed and built by Chan Dep himself.

A man without wealth or much formal education, Chan's design anticipated that of the Terra Linda homes built with much fanfare by Eichler. It was originally a single story building with a flat roof, an interior courtyard and several fish ponds



*The second Dep house and the chicken houses*

(one of which would later prove fatal to one year old Betty Jean Dep). Chan got his materials and advice locally, a tribute to Pini Hardware and its personnel. After the drowning of little Betty Jean, the residence was modified by eliminating the ponds and adding a second story. (The picture above is of its configuration after 1930.) Joy and Chan lived on this property until their deaths. Chan passed away on December 6, 1989. Brothers Wilson and Barry Dep are also now deceased. Josephine (more widely known as Josie) still lives in Novato, and is the mother of three children. The youngest Dep daughter, Victoria Lee, lives in Bakersfield, California.

Josie's story is remarkable in its own right. Diagnosed at age three as having congenitally shallow hip sockets, she spent the next four years as a resident of the UCSF hospital encased in plaster from waist to toe on one side or the other – one

operation per year for four years. Between the lack of transportation and shortage of funds, she rarely saw her family during that time.

She returned home in 1940 and, thanks to instruction from the UCSF staff, she was able to start in the second grade at the Black Point school across the street from her house. In time she became Mrs. Bonnetti's aide for the youngest children in that one-room school. Chan Dep started his contact with the school district by bringing the water used by the school from his house in buckets.

Josie has some good memories of growing up at Black Point. Fishing was both a recreation and a source of food, and Chan Dep was an avid fisherman. Unfortunately, as Hamilton's air field became more active, it impacted the water quality and the fishing declined, especially in the Bel Marin Keys area.

She remembers peddling the grindstone at the blacksmith shop where Dr. Insomnia is now located



*Josie, Wilson, Joy, Vicki, Barry and Chan Dep in 1946*



*Chan and his catch 1947*



so her father could sharpen his tools. She recalls riding her bicycle over to the Louie duck farm on Olive Avenue where she earned 25 cents for each duck she defeathered.



Chan and his chickens.

She has many pictures and fond memories of her days riding Billy the plow horse, of attending San Rafael High School, of driving her papa's orange army surplus truck and the mishaps she had with it, and of partying with the Novato Deps and Louies and the San Rafael Wongs and Youngs , especially the night beach parties at China Camp.



Josie, Wilson and Barry

In 1952 she met and married Harold Kwan. After two years at San Luis Obispo while Harold was in college and the next couple of years in Oakland where Shari was born, Josie returned to Novato. In the house on Lobo Vista which they bought for \$14,000 she bore son, Mike in 1957 and daughter Denise in 1961. This marriage dissolved after 18 years, and in 1971 Josie remarried. She

still lives in Novato with her husband, Pete Beal.

After her family had grown, Josie started her own business in 1986 on Grant Avenue in Novato – “The Wrinkled Fruit.”

She handmade dried fruit and nut gift baskets for sale. Later she added hard yogurt by the scoop augmented with candy and fresh fruit and also Hawaiian shave ice for the walk-in trade. She ran this business until 1991 when she sold it because her hips required further operations.

Joy Dep was both a very devout Christian and a very active traveler until her death on May 12, 2005 at age 96. The picture, on the next page, depicts her showing us her favorite picture of riding a camel in Egypt.



The fishing was good in Hawaii!

In 2002, Josie Beal and her family vacationed together in Hawaii, where they enjoyed fishing among other activities.

The third Chinese family mentioned in the introductory paragraph ran a laundry (previously a French laundry) located at the corner of 3rd Street and Vallejo Avenue, but I have no information regarding them.



Chan and great-granddaughter Amy ca. 1988.

There were also Chinese cooks and laborers on the Trumbull ranch for many years prior to the dissolution of that enterprise in the first quarter of the 20th century. If you can fill some blanks, please contact the Guild.

Toni Redding, one of the DeBorba family, recalls that her grandfather, Antoine DeBorba, recruited Jimmy Lock,





*Joy Chan Dep with her camel riding picture.*

a young Chinese cook who attracted his attention in San Francisco. They opened Novato's first Chinese restaurant in the addition that was build onto the DeBorba saloon on Grant Avenue. After awhile Jimmy left to seek his fortune, and the cooking was taken over by his father, Sid Lock. A number of years later, Jimmy returned to the kitchen, taking up residence in the house directly behind the bar where there is now a parking lot. Both Locks were facile with both Chinese cuisine and American comfort food preparation, making DeBorba's a popular venue for the construction tradesmen from the 1940's into the 1970's.

Jimmy Lock died in 1974, ending an era. Subsequently the restaurant franchise at DeBorba's has been leased out several times to independent contractors rather than run by the DeBorbis in conjunction with the bar, and for a time Chinese restaurants outnumbered Mexican restaurants in Novato.



*From the left: Josie Dep Beal, Bridget Raack Kwan (Mike's wife), Evan Clover (grandson), little Erin Kwan (granddaughter), Tim Clover (son-in-law), Cami Kwan (granddaughter, standing on the chair in the back row), Amy Clover (granddaughter, in front row), Shari Kwan Clover (Josie's daughter, in profile), Vicki Lee (Josie's sister, in the stripped tank top), China Kwan Clancy (Josie's daughter, with her son, Max Clancy, on her knee), China's husband, Kelly Clancy, was not present), Mike Kwan (Josie's son, behind Vicki), Sherman Lee (Vicki's spouse, in white shirt) and Pete Beal (Josie's husband, on the extreme right side).*