

TV shows Asians' role in Idaho heritage

By VERA WHITE
Staff Writer

As Idaho prepares to celebrate its Centennial Tuesday, there is much emphasis on Native Americans and white explorers, settlers and pioneers.

Little is said about other races, including Asians, who played an important role in Idaho's history: working mines, building railroads and cultivating farms in this rugged and beautiful country.

Television viewers will have an opportunity to learn about those early days tonight, when a show called "Other Faces, Other Lives — Asian Americans in Idaho" airs at 8 p.m. on Moscow's Cablevision channel 8. The show runs again at the same time Thursday.

Featured in the hour-long documentary is Marie Lee Lew of Moscow, who came to the Palouse as a child in 1926. She was the first Asian to graduate from the University of Idaho, and her family was the first Chinese family to settle as permanent residents in Moscow.

Her father, Yee Lee, was an herb doctor in Spokane, said Lew, who lives in a comfortable home west of town. The family was preparing to move to New



SHELLY HANKS PHOTO

FAMILY WITH HISTORY: An extended Moscow family is featured in the film "Other Faces, Other Lives," which shows tonight and Thursday at 8 p.m. on channel 8. The film explores Asian-Americans' contributions to Idaho. Pictured here are (from left) Michael Chin, Debbie Chin, Merry Lew, Marie Lew, Claire Chin, Leonard Chin, Michelle Chin, and Susan Chin.

York when they decided to drive down to the Palouse for some sightseeing.

They never made it to the east coast. Instead, Lew's father pur-

chased the old Huff's restaurant at Second and Main, and settled his family into the community.

"He went into the restaurant to buy my sister some cookies

and ended up buying the restaurant as well," Lew recalled.

The Lee family operated the first Oriental restaurant in Moscow and although they bought the building, they were unable to own the land until many years later, when federal laws were loosened to permit Asians to own property.

The Lees were the only Chinese family in Moscow at the time, said Lew, who will soon celebrate her 80th birthday with her five children and 11 grandchildren at a family gathering in Pullman.

In 1931, the young Chinese girl married Mi Lew of Walla Walla, then a student at Washington State University. The couple operated the family restaurant, which by then had become the Grill Restaurant in the spot on North Main now occupied by the Old Hong Kong restaurant.

"In the 1920s, gaining the acceptance of the white community was difficult and to this day, the Lews and Chins (Lew's son-in-law) face occasional prejudice," said Lily Wai, a documents librarian at the UI who served as the film's project su-

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pervisor/administrator. "But Marie and her family have found that their Chinese values of strong family unity and hard work have helped them to find a true home here."

Two of Lew's daughters are teachers — Merry Lew at Pullman and Claire Chin at Deary. Claire's husband, Lennard Chin, oversees rental properties in Pullman and Moscow.

Lew, a feisty woman, says she didn't "have a bad time" growing up in Moscow, but her husband faced discrimination, including being unable to get a haircut or having to sit in special sections at shows.

In turn, Mi Lew was adamant that his daughters date only Asian boys.

"We didn't even get to date until we were juniors and seniors in college," both girls remembered. "Mother was a little more tolerant in these matters, but our father ruled his family."

And according to Lew's 18-

year-old granddaughter, things haven't changed much.

"Dating Chinese boys is a priority that my family has drilled into me since the day I was born," said Debbie Chin, an 18-year-old education major at the University of Idaho.

Lew, who didn't become an American citizen until 1947, said she was eager to tell her story when asked to participate in the film sponsored by the Palouse Asian-American Association (PAAA) and the Ethnic Heritage Committee of the Idaho Centennial Commission.

"I wanted to let people know my ideas about living in the Chinese and American cultures and getting the best of both," said Lew, an international traveler and according to her family, "professional mall walker."

Joining the Lew and Chin families in "Other Faces, Other Lives..." are several Japanese and Filipino families from south Idaho.

One poignant segment centers around Seiji Hayashita of Nampa, brought to Idaho during World War II when he was ordered from his farm in Bellevue, Wash., and

relocated in the Camp Minidoka Internment Camp.

"For many years Seiji did not speak of his experiences at the camp, but now he feels it is important that the story be told and remembered," says film narrator, Loreca Stauber of Genesee. "We seldom talk about the fact that in 1943, the eighth largest population center in Idaho was Camp Minidoka, in the desert north of Twin Falls.

"Certainly Idaho has been richer because of the contributions and hard work of its Asian Amer-

icans," Stauber says. "Obtaining acceptance and recognition has not been easy for them."

Others assisting in the "Other Faces, Other Lives..." project include Jeff Mio, PAAA president and professor of psychology at Washington State University; and Joann Muneta, manager of Festival Dance, who helped with the script and conducted some interviews. The film has been more than a year in the making.

One hundred and fifty copies of "Other Faces, Other Lives..." will be distributed to public and school libraries in the state.