



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

George Ow Sr. started out with \$2.

# George Ow works for America's future generations

By JONDI GUMZ

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SCOTTS VALLEY — At 83, his memory is starting to fade. Still, the story of George Ow Sr. is nothing short of amazing.

It's the tale of a boy who grew up with very little, and came to America looking for a better life.

He didn't speak English well. Most business owners wouldn't hire him because the laws at the time made discrimination against Chinese people legal.

So he went into business for himself — and became one of the most prosperous entrepreneurs ever in Santa Cruz County. He started shopping centers in Capitola and Scotts Valley that spawned many other businesses, busi-

**'If you work hard, you will succeed. It's the only way you will get ahead.'**

GEORGE OW SR.,

IMMIGRANT, MILLIONAIRE

nesses now run by his children and grandchildren.

When he got involved in the Exchange Club, a group that sponsors activities for youth and promotes pride in America, he recruited so many members that he was elected president, first of the Scotts Valley chapter, then of the national organization. He was the first man of Asian ancestry to hold that post.

The year Ow became national president, the traditionally all-male organization voted to admit women — and the Scotts Valley club was one of the first in the nation to do so.

It's no wonder Ow calls America "the land of opportunity."

Sitting in his eldest son's home, a well-appointed Victorian with a garage full of books, Ow is a most unassuming character. You would never guess that this diminutive Chinese gentleman, wearing a 49ers cap and white sneakers, is worth a million twice over.

He is not talkative. He is a man who learned much by listening to his elders.

"If you work hard, you will succeed," Ow said. "It's the only way you

Please see **OW** on **Page A10**



After World War II, Ow was discharged from the Army in 1945.



# Ow

Continued from Page A1

will get ahead."

Tonight, the Scotts Valley Exchange Club will honor Ow, recognition that is long overdue, according to club president Laura Kuhn. About 125 people will attend, including the national president, who lives in Macon, Ga.

Ow is the only remaining charter member of the Scotts Valley Exchange Club. He is so respected everyone stops talking when he has something to say, Kuhn said.

"It's really nice to honor someone who has given so much to the community," she said.

## Born in China

Life was hard in China when Ow was born. The exact year is difficult to pin down because he was adopted and the records are missing, but it was about 1919.

Warlords were fighting each other, and people were starving to death. Ow's parents decided to let another family adopt him at age 6 and take him to America so he would have a chance at a better life.

Chinese people called America "Golden Mountain" because of the storied wealth that awaited them there.

Once they arrived, they discovered the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prevented them from becoming naturalized citizens with the right to vote or own property. That law wasn't repealed until 1943, after China became America's ally in World War II.

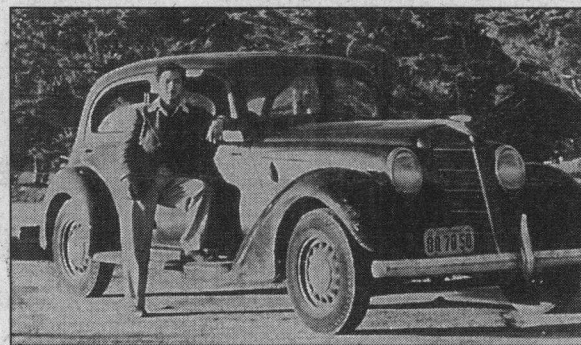
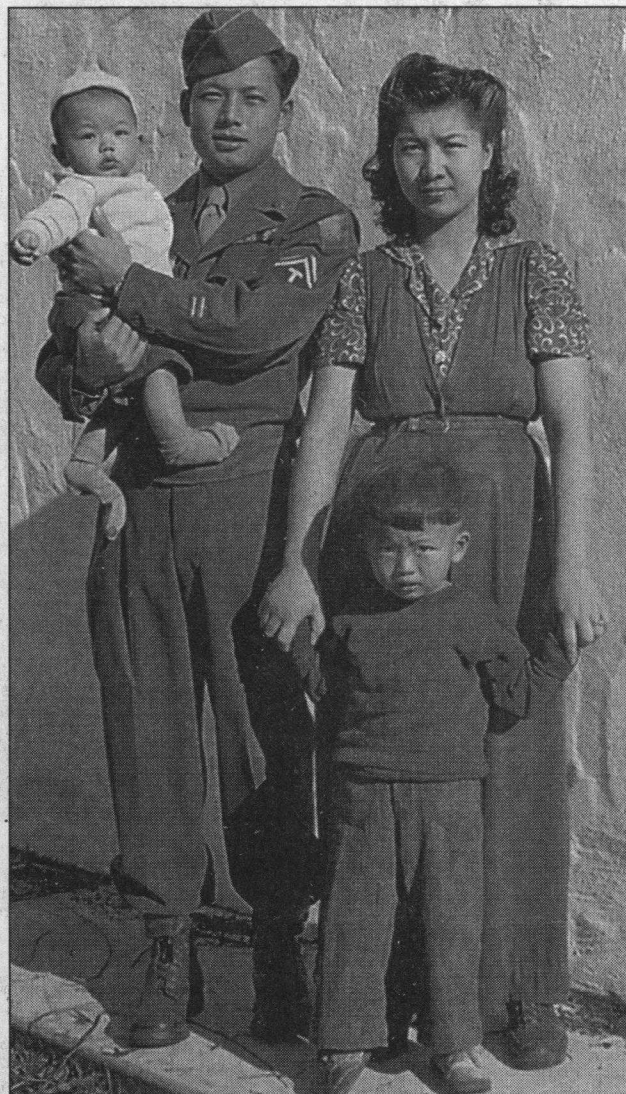
Ow's adopted father started an apple-drying business in Aptos and opened the first Chinese restaurant in Santa Cruz. But he found it difficult to enjoy his prosperity because of anti-Chinese sentiment, so he returned to China with his family in 1930.

When the Japanese invaded Shanghai in 1937, Ow's adopted father sent him back to America by himself, aboard a steamship.

He arrived in San Francisco at 17 with \$2 in his pocket. He made his way to Santa Cruz, where his uncle owned the Canton Market, a Chinese grocery on Pacific Avenue.

Ow worked in the market, watching the butcher and learning how to cut meat, and attended classes at Mission Hill Junior High School.

With the credits from his schooling in China, he graduated from Santa Cruz High School with the class of 1940 — the first group of students to have their commencement at the Civic Auditorium. Only 363 Chinese people



**FAR LEFT:** George Ow with wife, Emily, holding baby David and George Ow Jr. in 1945. **ABOVE:** The Ow family gathered in 1963 to celebrate December birthdays. **LEFT:** Ow got his first car, a Hupmobile, after graduating from Santa Cruz High School in 1940.

lived in Santa Cruz County at the time, less than 1 percent of the population.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Ow was drafted into the Army even though he wasn't a U.S. citizen. Before he left, he married Emily Lee, who was two years behind him at Santa Cruz High School.

He served two years and came home by Christmas 1945, wondering how he would support his wife and two children.

## Going into business

He learned that a grocery in Monterey was for sale for \$7,000. He had saved up his pay while on duty, and he asked his uncle for a \$3,500 loan for the rest.

Ow's store became popular with customers despite his inexperience as a manager and competition from other markets. He repaid his uncle within a year.

As his family grew — he and Emily had seven children — all the

youngsters worked in the store.

"If we weren't in school, we were working," his eldest son recalled.

Ow chalks up his success to a simple strategy: "Always smile. Always say thank you. That makes a world of difference."

As times changed, Ow changed, too. He was a visionary.

He sold that grocery because he couldn't buy the property and bought the Avenue Market, where he was able to buy the land, too.

In 1952, he jumped at the chance to buy two lots next door. He saw customers were no longer walking down the block to the store, but driving cars. So he built a larger market with a parking lot, the first in the area.

In 1960, when another Chinese family built a modern supermarket nearby, he knew he needed a bigger place.

He had read that intersections make good commercial property, and that the best location is the first intersection off a freeway cloverleaf.

"Four corners give you good drawing power for customers," he said.

He looked all over Monterey, then Salinas and San Jose.

Finally, he bought property in Capitola that was nothing more than a cow pasture, turning the fields into what is now King's Plaza shopping center on 41st Avenue.

He did the same in Scotts Valley, acquiring a dairy farm next to the airport to create the King's Village shopping center.

As Ow expanded his businesses, he rarely took time off.

"He worked all the time, six or seven days a week," said his eldest son, George Ow Jr. "His customers were his socializing."

## A new direction

In 1969, a customer changed Ow's life.

Dr. Allan King, who had retired to Scotts Valley, wanted to start an Exchange Club, and he wanted Ow to

become a member. He sat outside Ow's office, and he wouldn't leave until Ow agreed to join.

The following year, Ow turned over his business operations to his eldest son, who had earned an MBA and completed his tour of duty in the Army.

He put all his energies into the Exchange Club.

The club emphasized community service and good citizenship. Members established "Freedom Shrines" to display documents from American history in public places such as Scotts Valley City Hall. They also sponsored youth talent competitions and started an annual recognition event for Scotts Valley police officers and firefighters.

Following the example set by King, Ow recruited new members for the Scotts Valley organization — attendance in its heyday was 70 to 80 — and started seven new chapters.

David Hodgkin, who joined the club in 1979 and often drove Ow to meetings, said he discovered Ow's secret: "Just ask."

As Ow moved up in ladder in the club, his speaking ability improved.

"He would practice over and over," Hodgkin said. "He was always prepared."

Ow had only a high school education, but the family business he started has awarded scholarships to help dozens of students attend college and

## George Ow Sr.

**AWARDS:** Exchange Club tribute, 2002; Scotts Valley Chamber Business of the Year, 1998; Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce Man of the Year, 1988.

**OCCUPATION:** Grocery owner and entrepreneur; developed King's Village shopping center, Scotts Valley, 1968; developed King's Plaza, Capitola, 1965; built King's Market, Capitola, 1962; expanded Avenue Market, Monterey, 1952; bought New Monterey Market, Monterey, 1946.

**COMMUNITY SERVICE:** Joined Scotts Valley Exchange Club, 1969; president, 1972; district president, 1976; installed as national president, 1985.

**EDUCATION:** Graduate of Santa Cruz High School, 1940.

**MILITARY SERVICE:** U.S. Army, 1944-1945, helped liberate Philippines.

**FAMILY:** Wife Emily died in 1995; four sons, George Jr., David, Terry, Richard; two daughters, Mary and Jeanne; many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Son Tom died in 2000.

realize their dreams. It's his way of ensuring America remains a land of opportunity for yet another generation.

Contact Jondi Gumz at [jgumz@santa-cruz.com](mailto:jgumz@santa-cruz.com).