

## **Bill Soo Hoo: Oxnard's Native Born Mayor**

*The spring of 2016 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bill Soo Hoo's selection as the mayor of Oxnard. The following history is presented to honor Bill's family, political career, and contributions to the City of Oxnard.*

William [Bill] Du Chun Soo Hoo was elected mayor of the City of Oxnard in 1966. He was the first person of Chinese descent to hold the position of mayor in California. This extraordinary accomplishment occurred just 23 years after the repeal of Chinese exclusion acts, a set of harsh laws that limited Chinese opportunities and restricted immigration to the United States. A further highlight of Bill's career is that he was the first native-born Mayor of Oxnard.

Bill's family lived in Oxnard for decades before he became mayor. The Soo Hoo family, Yee Tom and Jung Hall, also known as Mama Soo Hoo, arrived in Oxnard's bustling Chinese community in the early 1920s. Their young daughters, Dorothy, Mary, and Rose accompanied their parents. Another daughter, Irene, and sons Bill, Bartley and Edward were born after the family settled in Oxnard.

The Soo Hoos opened a small store called Wing Chen Lung Company located on Oxnard's China Alley. Although the store sold provisions, Mama Soo Hoo cooked for residents of Chinatown. Her reputation as an exceptional cook grew over time. While the store remained in business in Oxnard for seven years, the family opened a restaurant on China Alley in an area referred to as Old Duck Pond.

The Soo Hoo children attended local schools, and excelled in athletics, leadership, and academics. Bill was very athletic and participated in several sports. He lettered in basketball, track, and tennis. Bartley Soo Hoo's name appeared in the newspaper in 1944, when he was elected president of the high school Scholarship Society.<sup>1</sup> Edward received the *Oxnard Press-Courier* annual scholarship award when he graduated from Oxnard Union High School in 1947.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxnard Press-Courier* September 20, 1944.

<sup>2</sup> *Oxnard Press-Courier* June 12, 1947.

Bill entered the Army on January 7, 1943. He served in the Second World War where his superiors sent him to university to learn Chinese, much to his mother's delight. He later served in Europe and worked with the occupation army in Germany. While overseas he earned two battle stars. Bill returned to Oxnard in 1946 to find three new military bases and a population explosion. During his absence, the town had grown from 8,000 residents to 13,000 residents.

In 1949, the Soo Hoo family continued in the restaurant business and opened a new location on Oxnard Boulevard called Mama Soo Hoo's Orient. The business was situated downstairs, and the living quarters were situated upstairs. The Soo Hoo family lived and worked together sharing the responsibilities of a family business.

Bill's journey into politics began when he experienced institutionalized discrimination, face to face. Upon his return from the Second World War, he wanted to own a home. He purchased a house on Deodor Street in Oxnard. Bill described the events that followed.

[The land owner] called me up two days later and he says, "Bill, you can still buy this but I just found out you can't live there." I said, "What do you mean I can't live there?" He said, "There's a clause in here that says 'Caucasians only', but there's no law against you buying it, but you can't live there. . . . I said, "What you're telling me is I'm good enough to go out and fight for my country, and possibly die for my country, but not good enough to live in it."<sup>3</sup>

After experiencing the impact of discriminatory laws, Bill was determined to make changes in Oxnard. His public involvement began when he served on the Grand Jury in 1956. He was the first man of Asian heritage to serve in this capacity. The City Council was the place where Bill decided to start his political career. In 1960, he made his initial run for the ruling body among a field of twelve candidates. He placed third, yet only two seats were available. He was undeterred and in 1962, Bill ran again for City Council, and that time he was successful.

His ascent in politics continued, and in 1966 he became "Oxnard's Native Son Mayor." With only sixty people of Chinese ancestry in the city, and perhaps only ten who were registered, Bill appealed to the greater population in Oxnard. The new mayor was catapulted into worldwide fame. Chinese newspapers in the United States carried the news, and Bill made headlines in Canada and Japan. Television and wire services clamored for more information while the Governor of California, Edmund G. Brown a fellow Democrat, rode the wave of Bill's

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Soo Hoo Oral History.

raising star.<sup>4</sup> Bob Lagomarsino, state senator, honored Bill further when he authored a resolution in the Senate commemorating Bill ascension to office.

Mayor Soo Hoo was forty-two years old when selected for office. He loved politics and he had big plans for the city. Bill knew that his business acumen, at the time he was the owner and manager of Mama Soo Hoo's Orient, would be an asset to the city. One of his goals was to entice new industries into the area to promote opportunities for Oxnard's growing population. He wanted to work closely with the Division of Highways and improve relations between the cities of the Port Hueneme and Camarillo. He was the most proud of the development that took place in the city while he was mayor. These included the building of the inland harbor, the Cultural Arts Center, and additional fire departments.

Midway through his mayoral term, Bill decided to get married. He found his match, Angela Lee, in San Francisco. After a courtship, and to the delight of both families, Bill and Angela were married in 1968 at Stanford Chapel. He was forty five and she was thirty five. Many people came to the wedding from Oxnard, and Greyhound buses were filled with friends and family from San Francisco. After a short honeymoon, the bride and groom returned to Oxnard. Angela was instantly the first lady of the City of Oxnard. Their only child, Brian, was born in 1969.

After leaving political office Bill sought new endeavors. He heard a visiting official from Washington D.C. say that Port Hueneme needed a customs house brokerage. Bill and Angela decided to open Soo Hoo Customs House Brokerage to serve the Oxnard Harbor District. They also opened the first Chinese customhouse brokerage in the Los Angeles Chinatown.

Bill experienced heart troubles beginning in 1973. In October 1990, when he was 66 years old, he suffered a heart attack and died suddenly. Always devoted to family and community, before his death Bill attributed much of his success to his mother. Mama Soo Hoo's philosophy was that to be of service to anyone you must be strong in mind. Bill said, "What I am today, I owe to my mother and the fine reputation she established in this community."

Today, Brian and Angela operate Soo Hoo Customs Brokerage. Brian attended USC and married Linda Szeto of Thousand Oaks in 1992. Together they have four children: Brandon and triplet daughters Ashley, Melody and Neomy. Angela's grandchildren are the delight of her life.

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<sup>4</sup> *PC: The Weekly Magazine of Ventura County*, "Meet Bill So Hoo." May 1, 1966; *Star Free Press* August 14, 1966.

The story of the Soo Hoo family is one of struggle, determination, and success. Bill was the first man of Asian descent to sit on the Grand Jury in Oxnard, and the first Chinese American mayor in California. While the lives of most Chinese pioneers in America are unknown; Bill Soo Hoo's life and accomplishments are written in history books. He stands as a symbol of triumph for his family, his city, and his countrymen.