

# Wong Runs Largest Asian Owned Electrical Company in Silicon Valley

March 23, 2009

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Third generation Chinese American, Steve Wong grew up in a Santa Clara Valley which had few Chinese families living in Redwood City and Milpitas where he was raised. Of his life on the farm, he recalls, "It was fun with so much space to play in, but when my sister, Alice, brother Lester, and I got to junior high, we were expected to work on the farm after school and on weekends alongside our parents. We never took summer vacations because the summer crop of chrysanthemums had to be tended and picked as they came to bloom."

Although Steve doesn't recall exact dates, he thinks his grandfather came to the United States around the turn of the century and entered into some kind of business. Steve's father, Mike Wong, was born in the US in the 1920s, but was sent to China for study.

Upon his return, he married, chose farming as his livelihood and was admired in his business and flower growing community. Steve remembers his dad this way: "He was truly an honorable man in his dealings with business, family or friends. He lived his life well respected by his peers with his code of honor being honest with everyone." Steve says this legacy his dad gave him has helped him in his own business as he tries to hold onto those standards in working with his own clients, big or small.

No doubt through his father's example, Steve Wong acquired a strong sense of work ethic although Steve says his parents, Mike and Jik Yuk, like all the Chinese farmers, were so busy trying to eke out a living for their families, they didn't have much time to give much guidance or assistance to their kids. Luckily for Steve, following high school, a friend got him a job at Amdahl, then a growing electronics company. There, they had such confidence in this bright, young man, the company offered him college tuition while working there. Thus began his next years working swing shifts while attending San Jose State University where he obtained his Electrical Engineering Degree.

Continuing to work in electrical design at Amdahl, Steve was able to interact with contractors and saw a potential in going out on his own and opening his own electrical company. In 1978, the 22 year-old Wong got his contractor's license and started his company with 2 employees while maintaining a part time position at Amdahl.

"The timing was right," says Wong. "I had a customer base with my family's flower growing friends as they all were expanding and needed electrical work done just as I had done for my own family's farm. They trusted me because they knew my family and could communicate with me because I spoke Chinese. There were few skilled Chinese electricians at that time so the field was wide open for me. After 6 months, I was able to quit my Amdahl job to expand my own Wong Electric, Inc. in San Jose."

Following the development booms in Santa Clara Valley in the 1980's, a decade ago Wong moved his offices to Palo Alto with over 65 employees. As he looks back, he recalls, "Our Bay Area during the late 70-80s was growing rapidly and the Asian population was growing even faster. Chinese were starting their own businesses in retail, high tech and food industries, and when Wong Electric, Inc. came around, we were the perfect fit for them to do business with, as they felt comfortable working with an Asian-owned company. In the old days there was some prejudice against Asians in the contracting field thinking we were all unskilled, uneducated labor, so we all had to support and work together. One of

my father's flower growing friends and at one time, our teen age group counselor, Gordon Chan, was my mentor who always encouraged me to go on my own and make the most of the opportunities given to my generation.. I will always be indebted for his sound advice.”

Today there are Asian Americans in all construction fields and competition is stiff as new immigrant companies cut costs and fees to win contracts. Steve Wong, however, through the years, has gained the respect of the total contracting industry in the valley, so his client base runs the gamut from Fortune 500 companies to smaller developers with only about 25% of his business now Asian based. He advises all starting businessmen to remember that one must not always depend on just one segment or ethnic community.

Only 53 years old and raising his 12 year old son, Tyler, with wife, Kathy, who works part time as a pharmacist, Steve is realizing different values of living and says that he hopes in 5 years to retire and spend more time with friends and family relaxing with his favorite hobbies of travel and golf. He combines both, he admits, at least a couple times of year to China with friends, and smilingly added, “through the generosity of my in-laws, Dr. Ken and Esther Young, our family has been around the world on annual 13 member family trips which has kept the family bonds strong among the third generation of their 5 grandchildren.” Right now, Steve and his son are bonding close to home, studying with a private tutor the intricacies of learning to speak Mandarin.

A very young man at heart, Steve is a straight shooter much like he calls his dad. What he counts most important in his life is to savor and enjoy time with friends and family. He recalls his father continually striving to succeed by moving his farms to bigger and better prospects and locations, taking chances so that he could provide better for his family. As Milpitas developed with the influx of the high tech industry, his father was able to retire early off the profits from his farmland holdings, which now house some of the biggest Asian shopping centers in the valley. He recalls proudly that his father was always very interested in helping his fellow Chinese Americans when he saw a need. Steve continues to

want to do the same, and one non-profit group he continually supports is the Self Help for the Elderly agency, which has brought senior housing and services to the South Bay. He said, "Money isn't everything for happiness, and what better way to live is to be able to give to those who haven't been as fortunate as I have."

Written by Gerrye Wong/Asian Week Newspaper