

April 20, 2005

Section: City People

Page: 1, 5, 8, 9CC

Edmund Woo

Abe Hardesty

Staff

The Greenville News= Final

Restaurateur loves hospitality business and growing up in America

By Abe Hardesty

City People Writer

Ahardest@greenvillenews.com

It's a common reaction. The decor of the **Saskatoon** restaurant makes visitors look for the big-game hunter who must be lurking nearby.

"About three or four times a year, someone asks me if I'm Eskimo," says owner/operator Edmund Woo, whose Asian heritage invites the query in a restaurant stocked with hunting trophies.

In reality, Woo has neither Eskimo nor sportsman ties. He grew up in Greenville and has lived most of his 46 years here, developing a strong work ethic and an even stronger sense of patriotism, so much so that he's uncomfortable with the term "Asian-American."

"It implies that I'm an Asian first," says Woo. "I'm a native of America, not Asia."

Woo's parents were among the first Asian-born couples to settle in Greenville 50 years ago. His mother, Wong Lok-Kam, has reminded him often in her 95 years that America is the land of opportunity.

Only 4 years old when he began working in his parents' New China restaurant on Poinsett Highway, Woo learned many lessons from his mother. Among them are that strong work ethic, and strong sense of national pride.

"If you choose to be in this society, what's the use of belly-aching about injustice? This is the Land of the Golden Mountains; this is where all the world would like to be," says Woo.

Woo was born in the United States because his parents came to Greenville in the 1950s and worked long, hard hours to make the New China Restaurant a success. They opened it in 1956, and for 14 years it was Greenville's only Chinese restaurant. As the youngest of four children, Woo grew up in the restaurant. By age 4, he was part of the team that sang birthday greetings to customers, and by age 6 he was part of a family crew that stood on empty soft-drink crates to wash dishes. As a teen, Woo, who was only 10 years old when a heart attack killed his father, was accustomed to doing his homework while working the cash register and answering the phone.

When he wasn't at Parker High School, Woo could usually be found at the family restaurant.

Even after Woo earned degrees from Clemson University and the University of Georgia, his lifestyle never changed. By his 35th birthday, the industrious and energetic Woo was the owner of four Greenville restaurants. He was president of a

company that had 130 employees; 14-hour workdays were the norm.

That began to change in 1994, when Woo took a trip to his parents' homeland, in Taiwan. Although he could speak the Cantonese language of his parents, he needed some lessons in the Mandarin language and enrolled in a course at Dan-Jian University to get them.

The instructor was a ball of charisma, laughter and energy named Renee Chang. She came to the United States and the couple married in October 1995.

If she didn't know that she had married a workaholic, Renee Woo had suspicions in the first few hours of marriage, as Woo drove the "Just Married" car to the **Saskatoon** restaurant "to see if everything was OK" before proceeding to the honeymoon.

"I'm a little myopic. I have the puritan work ethic," Woo admits. "Changing is not easy."

The marriage was the first for both, and it brought major adjustments for both. An economics major in college, Mrs. Woo soon found herself spending long workdays at Woo's Plaza Diner on Augusta Street.

"I had no idea what pancakes were," she says with a thick Chinese accent, "and suddenly I was making them at 6 in the morning. I don't think I made them very good."

Since the arrival of daughter Eryn in 1999, Woo has decided "to cut back." The couple has sold three restaurants, leaving them with only the **Saskatoon** to manage - - a full-time job in itself, but one that provides some time for outside interests.

"I wanted to focus more on my family. Life is too short," says Woo, who has since sold Woo's, Plaza Diner, and the Farmhouse restaurants.

"Now we can see what real people are doing at 8 p.m.," Mrs. Woo says with a laugh. Ironically, the restaurant business is one that Woo once decided to dodge. By the time he had earned a master's degree at Georgia, he planned a career in real estate. He pursued that career for the next three years in Atlanta.

But his work there lacked an element Woo had experienced from his earliest days in the restaurant business.

"I derive pleasure from giving hospitality. Service and hospitality are a big part of the restaurant business," says Woo. "When someone spends a couple of hours of their valuable time with us, I need to know they received good service.

"It sounds like a sales pitch, but it's true," Woo says. "You can find better ways of making money, but not be happy unless you feel like you're doing something that other people can enjoy."

By the time he decided on a restaurant career, there was no doubt where it would be. Woo began to consider Greenville as something special during his days at Parker High, and he's never changed his opinion.

In high school, Woo says, he was never aware of discrimination, even though, as the son of two Chinese-born Americans, his ancestry made him a distinct minority at the time.

He became more aware of that when he tried to join a Clemson University fraternity in 1978, when the social climate was very different than it is today.

"They said they were not ready for a foreigner," Woo recalls. "That was a shock to me. At Parker High, students looked at me as different, but I never had the feeling

they looked down on me. The Parker kids accepted me." In fact, they elected him president of the student body.

Falling in love with Greenville has also been easy for Mrs. Woo.

"I miss some family there, but I don't miss the big city. Taipei is very crowded.

Greenville is just right."

PROFILE

-- Edmund Woo is a Greenville native who as a child worked in Greenville's first Chinese restaurant -- the New China, opened by his parents in 1956. He is a graduate of Parker High, Clemson University, and the University of Georgia.

-- Renee Woo is a native of Taipei, Taiwan, and a graduate of Taiwan Chung-Hsing National University, where she earned a bachelor of arts in economics. She was a Chinese language studies instructor at Dan-Jian University in Taipei before coming to Greenville in 1995.

Cutlines:

GEORGE GARDNER / Staff

Edmund and Renee Woo met as student and teacher in 1994 on Edmund's trip to Taiwan.

GEORGE GARDNER / Staff

Edmund Woo and his wife opened **Saskatoon** in 1995.