

Bill Lee

In many ways, Bill Lee's story is a common one. It is the story of an immigrant who arrives in Canada with little education or English. Then, through sheer determination and hard work he turns a small business into a thriving enterprise.



It is in the details, however, that the remarkable spirit of Lee is revealed.

Lee was the leader of a group of eleven men from China who started the Tien Hoa Inn at Bridgeport Road and Weber Street in Waterloo in 1962. It quickly became a popular eating spot and, over the years, a landmark in Waterloo before closing its doors in 2004.

In 1982, Henry Koch, a newspaper columnist wrote about Lee:

“For the first couple of weeks, the Lees and other partners worked 21 hours a day and slept three hours in a large rented house on Lincoln Road once owned by the Seagrams and used for years by the exercise jockeys and horse trainers.

The famous Seagram stables were located in that immediate area and the exact spot where the restaurant now stands was once a pond where racehorses stopped for a drink.

After the first couple of weeks, Lee and his partners reduced their work weeks to 105 hours.”

When the restaurant opened it served everything from egg salad sandwiches to chicken fried rice. A dinner for two went for \$3.60 and dinner for six was \$10.50. Lee gradually improved his English by speaking with his customers.

By the time Koch was writing about Lee in the 1980s, he was down to a 50-hour work week and was taking at least one week of vacation every year. He had also opened a take-out restaurant in Kitchener and Miami, Florida while running restaurants in Cambridge, Elmira and Guelph.

Lee, who came to Canada in 1953, began working at his uncle's restaurant in Burlington and then Oakville. After moving to Waterloo in the early 1960s, Lee eventually bought a home for his wife Leah and growing family of four boys. By the time he was in his 50s, Lee was known as the “undisputed king of the Chinese food business in this area.”

While Lee was the leader of the original investment group, his many cousins and relatives were heavily involved in the operation of the restaurants. When the Tien Hoa Inn shut its doors in June of 2004, Lee's distant cousin George Lee, one of the original investors, was the owner.

Lee was admired for his ability to keep the growing restaurant empire running smoothly over many years. "What's unusual in this day and age is that all of the partners are still together working harmoniously under the leadership of Lee, a personable man who chain smokes and is one of his own best food customers."

While some were skeptical that a Chinese restaurant could survive in a small community like 1960s Waterloo, Lee soon discovered that the large German population appreciated Chinese cuisine. "During the summer when German people come to visit here, most of my old German customers entertain here," he said. "People are more cosmopolitan and adventurous. They're willing to experiment more."

When asked his secret for success, Lee once said his work ethic and versatility helped the business flourish; ". . . the boss must be a plumber, electrician, heating expert, carpenter, chef, dishwasher, floor sweeper, troubleshooter and general handyman . . ."

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