

Second-Generation Dilemmas (1930s)

Pardee Lowe

*George Cooper Pardee Lowe, born in 1904 in San Francisco, was named after the governor of California at the time. He has the distinction of being the first Chinese American to write a full-length book, *Father and Glorious Descendant* (Little, Brown, 1937). The autobiography introduced readers to Chinese American life by telling the story of the author's relationship with his father, whom he loved and respected. Good-humored in tone, the book nevertheless firmly criticized racial prejudice in America and recalled critical moments of anti-Chinese discrimination in this country. *Father and Glorious Descendant* was a commercial success and went through several editions. Lowe's work was also published in major publications, including *Asia*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Survey Graphic*, and *Yale Review*.*

Pardee Lowe had prepared well for his writing efforts. He graduated from Stanford in 1930, where he studied Chinese, English, history, and public speaking. He was a star member of the university debating club and completed a thesis on the history of anti-Chinese prejudice in the United States. After graduation, he went to Harvard, where he received an MBA in 1932. He also had many friends among college-educated Chinese Americans and was personally familiar with the Chinese communities because of the family business and his own church activities.

After finding that his MBA opened no doors, Lowe returned to San Francisco and began to conduct extensive sociological research on the Chinese community, completing a major study of its demographic, economic, social, historical, and cultural features. His efforts included extended personal interviews and firsthand reports of living conditions. He completed much of this work for the State Emergency Relief Administration, but his efforts were never published. He apparently hoped to include his work in a later collaboration with a Stanford sociologist, but it too never materialized.

The following "case histories," as he called them, are a few of the fascinating human-interest accounts Lowe completed as part of his research efforts. They offer poignant insight into depression-era Chinese American lives.

PULLMAN STEWARDESS

This is the brief case history of a second-generation American-born Chinese girl (1936).

1. Second-generation Chinese Americans who went to China during the 1930s for employment opportunities and/or nationalist reasons were generally well educated or trained in aviation.

She is born in San Francisco's Chinatown. Is about 28 years of age, with a high school education. Appears to have only a little formal Chinese education, although she speaks it well. Has no family and lives at the Chinese Y.W.C.A., considered to be the finest living accommodations in Chinatown.

She works on the Overland Limited railroad train of the Southern Pacific as a girl stewardess. She must wear Chinese clothes, namely jacket and trousers, but detests the idea. She makes \$80 a month, plus tips. Explains that her monthly total income varies between \$125 and \$150 per month. Finds her work not too distasteful. The cultured and professional American classes she finds very interesting and tolerant. Can't stand salesmen and their families. Their ignorance of Chinese-American ways antagonizes her. Says: "They always are so surprised to see me reading American books and magazines and exclaim, 'Oh! Do you read English too?' They also are amazed at my fluent English. As if we could not speak, read or write. It gets my goat!" Explains that she has very little to do on the trains except to manicure fingernails and give high-class maid service to the wealthy travelers who desire it. Is extremely well thought of by the train-crew who treat her with respect. Has little to do with the Pullman porters or dining-room waiters. While somewhat sorry for their racial plight, she expresses the typical American woman's aversion toward Negroes. Compares the situation of the Chinese in this country with them, realizes that there isn't much future for a native-born Chinese. Concludes, "My job is not bad at all. There aren't many girls who can make as much as I do and the work is not difficult. I am satisfied to hang on to it until I get married."

She is engaged to a native-born Chinese college student, who is majoring in physical sciences. Just as soon as he receives his degree they plan to go back to Canton and live. Feels that China is the only place for American-born college graduates to live. Admits that the adjustments will be terrific, but is willing to make the attempt. Since there are so many who have returned and made the grade, she feels that she and her fiancé should be able to do likewise. States: "In China, we can be somebody. We can even walk the streets, without being stared at. I understand that there is a feeling of 'belonging' that is absent in America."

Although she has never explained the reason, she does feel racial discrimination very keenly. Speaks very strongly on the point of intermarriages. "I hate the idea of Chinese boys marrying white girls." When pressed for the reason, explains that such unions, so she has read and believes, end "unhappily." Her attitude in regard to interracial relations, however, is not consistent, for in the next breath she speaks with pride of her American and Japanese friendships, mainly with boys of her own age. Does not hesitate to go out with them if they invite her. This was before her engagement. Since she has promised _____ to accept him, she has discontinued her old interracial friendships. Concludes, "I might still go out with some of my old

boy friends (regardless of race) if it were not for the fact that Chinatown gossips. The 'talk' is so bad that one gets a bad reputation immediately. It would never do for me to court disaster since my boyfriend is studying in the East and I would have no opportunity to explain to him in person why I accepted So-and-So's invitation. Therefore, I have considered it wisest not to go out with anybody except girls. I protect myself that way."

Despite an income of approximately \$150 per month, she finds herself almost broke every month. Explains, "Easy come, easy go!" "When I stop off at Chicago," she continues, "I go to all the best shops and buy presents for myself and my friends." Insists upon \$14 shoes . . . evidently because this compensates for her racial disadvantages. Maintains charge accounts at a number of the more exclusive shops in San Francisco and Chicago.

OWN COMMENTS: Typical native-born girl. Not exceptionally good-looking but has a very attractive, vivacious manner. Well turned out. Is extremely attractive in Chinese garments, which she detests. Her American clothes, however, err on the side of being a little too stylish. In other words, she, due to her opportunities of observing the wealthy society women on the Pullman trains, buys what they do, anticipating the style trend.

While stressing her Chinese background, herself, she is or gives the appearance, except for racial physical characteristics, of being just another American girl. In other words, her actions belie her claims. From the tone of her conversations, I gather that she would gladly remain in America and become an American if it were possible. Because of the advantage of money and travel, she unconsciously adopts a patronizing air toward the young people of her own race.

Have met her a number of times. Best opportunity for observation was when I made my last trip eastward. Observed that she kept very much alone, nothing much to do. Gather the impression that the Southern Pacific Company and the Pullman Company wish to exploit the Chinese atmosphere as much as possible. Even the bar stewards on many of these crack trains are Chinese, usually older men who are American-born. She had nothing to do with the bar-steward, explaining, "It's a better idea not to get too friendly with anybody—train crew or passengers—on a Pullman train. You never can tell what will happen."

Adds: "My best times on duty have been with well-to-do people of our own race, who are glad to have somebody to talk to. Also with cultured Americans, such as college professors, who seem to have a sympathetic understanding of our problems."