

Eileen Loo

1932 – 2022

Eileen Loo was born as Chan Oi Leen on 6 July 1932 in the small rural island village of Har Gee, China. Eileen was the third daughter to Chan Fat Bow (aka Peter Bow) and Low Sai Ying.



Photo: Melanie Tollemache 2015

Har Gee is part of Jung Seng county and Guangdong province. Geographically, Har Gee lies about 43km away from the city of Guangzhou and 145km from Hong Kong.

The Chans of Har Gee had a historical connection with New Zealand dating back to the 1890s when the first men from the village arrived in New Zealand to work and send money back to their families in China, travelling between the two countries, and relying on New Zealand re-entry permits.

Peter Bow left his wife and his two oldest daughters Gee Har and Seel Foon in Har Gee to do the same, working in Masterton (where his eldest sister lived), Ohakune and then settling in Rotorua, where he opened his own business, in partnership with the Kai Fong family.

Peter returned to China to spend time with his family and Eileen was born in 1932 followed by her brother Chan Jing Kong (aka William Bow) in 1934. Peter then travelled back to New Zealand to work again.

Due to the discrimination against Chinese immigrants in New Zealand at the time, it was not possible for Chinese men working in New Zealand to be joined by their families due to both the poll tax which had increased to £100 (around one year's earnings) and also restrictions on the number of Chinese who could land (only one Chinese immigrant was allowed for every 200 tons of cargo).

Things changed, however, when Japan invaded China in 1937. Due to the second Sino-Japanese war and successfully lobbying by the Chinese in New Zealand, the New Zealand government agreed in February 1939 to allow for the temporary (two years) bonded (£500 with an upfront deposit of £200 required) entry of the mens' wives and children under the age of 16.

Eileen was therefore able to leave China for Hong Kong (walking at night in order to avoid the Japanese war planes and soldiers) and then travel to New Zealand (via Australia) as a 7-year old war refugee together with her mother (who suffered bad sea sickness) and her younger brother William. Unfortunately, due to New Zealand's age restrictions, Eileen's two older sisters Gee Har and Seel Foon had to remain in China. Eileen reached New

Zealand on 10 October 1939 on the ship Westralia, reuniting with her father Peter.

Due to New Zealand immigration and paperwork mixing up the first and last phonetic Chinese names of her father Peter Bow (rather than Peter Chan), his family was also given the Bow surname and so Eileen became known in New Zealand as Eileen Bow (rather than Eileen Chan).

The Bow family settled in Rotorua where they lived in Peter's new house on Amohau Street (across the road from the railway line) and where they had a fruit shop on Tutanekai Street.

A couple of years after Eileen's arrival in New Zealand, her youngest sister Lily Bow was born, with whom Eileen shared a room and developed a very close bond over the subsequent years.

Initially, the New Zealand government allowed Eileen, her mother and brother a two-year visa. But, as the Sino-Japanese war persisted, time passed and the temporary visas were renewed, New Zealand eventually decided to allow the Sino-Japanese war refugees to become permanent residents. The Bows were granted permanent residence in 1947; but it wasn't until 1952 that the New Zealand government once again allowed Chinese immigrants to become New Zealand citizens.

Despite having to learn English, Eileen did very well at school. She graduated from Rotorua High School with high honours, which was a remarkable achievement for a new immigrant. However, after leaving school, due to the lack of tertiary education options in Rotorua, Eileen worked in her family's fruit shop until she relocated to Auckland when she married Kong Chew Loo (aka K.C. Loo or Colin Loo) on 12 September 1953 at the age of 21.

Eileen and Kong were married by Rev. Owen Baragwanath at St. David's Memorial Church in Khyber Pass. They had their wedding reception at the Farmers Trading Company followed by another big dinner in a marquee at Shick Lung Loo's (Kong's father) market garden the next day. Lots of friends helped with the cooking and providing equipment.

Eileen joined her husband in operating his fruit shop business that became known as the iconic K.C. Loo Fruit Centre which was, and remains a mainstay, of Mt Eden village. The fruit shop was initially located at 429 Mt Eden Rd (in one half of the building now occupied by Barfoot & Thompson – the Loo family lived upstairs for a while), moved across the road when the Loos were able to purchase their own premises at 442 Mt Eden Rd in the 1960s (previously a branch of the BNZ) and it then moved again in the 1980s to the corner site of Mt Eden Rd and Stokes Rd (previously Gordon J. Rich's grocery store) which it currently operates from at 436 Mt Eden Rd.

Mt Eden was very different when Eileen first worked in the Mt Eden fruit shop. The area was a bit shabby – the tram service had just come to an end – and there were no cafes. In the 1960s, there were three fruit shops in Mt Eden village which were owned by the Loo family, the Chin family and the Wong family. The Hing's superette also sold fruit and vegetables.

K.C. Loo Fruit Centre operated five and a half days a week, which included a late night and Saturday morning. On Saturday afternoons in the 1970s, the Loo family would go out for a late lunch – usually to the Wun Loy café on Hobson Street. On Sundays, the Loo family would be at home in Mangere where they had built a house at 138 Coronation Road on land subdivided from Shick Lung Loo's neighbouring market garden property.

Eileen was a good cook. The family enjoyed her fish balls and egg rolls. The family mostly had white rice and soong for dinner, but she did regularly make chow mein, por me farn and roast dinners. Eileen also baked for the family, including big banana cakes and steamed Chinese sponges.

Eileen and Kong had four children: Richard, Marlene, Frances and Glennis. She considered seven to be a lucky number and so she insisted that all of the children have 7 letter names.

During the working week, Eileen would drive a Volkswagen pickup truck early on Monday and Thursday mornings down to the wholesale fresh produce markets in Auckland's Viaduct Basin to collect the fresh perishables and anything that was urgently needed. Eileen's little red truck became so well-known to the traffic officer that he would hold up the traffic so that she could make her way through Fanshawe Street.

Business became very tough for Eileen and Kong with the opening of Foodtown in Three Kings in 1968 – sales dropped by a third – and as supermarkets expanded, things were never the same for local fresh food businesses. Eileen and Kong worked hard and continued on. However, the deregulation of shopping hours in New Zealand and strong competition meant that by the time the business moved to its present location in the 1980s, the business was operating seven days a week. When most people would have retired, Eileen was often at work from around 8 in the morning until after dinner, finishing at around 9 or 10 at night, and this was seven days a week.

Eileen did go overseas on holiday several times, including to China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Disneyland (California), Fiji, Hawaii, Noumea, and Sydney. But, in general, she wasn't a great person for going on holiday. She said that holidaying was harder work than actually working. Eileen also wasn't much of a window shopper. While she didn't mind shopping for something specific, wandering around a shop "just looking" bored her, and she would be done and out waiting at the shop door in a couple of minutes.

Eileen had a strong sense of duty and loyalty. When COVID arrived in 2019, Auckland went into lockdown. This came as a total shock to Eileen who was used to working 363 days a year. She was very upset, because she didn't want customers to be inconvenienced or unable to source their fresh produce. Eileen insisted that her daughter phone Jacinda Adern to explain why our fruit shop should stay open. Her daughter had to explain that people couldn't just phone the Prime Minister, but that she was trying (unsuccessfully) to get through to the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE).

Eileen became more relaxed about the lockdown situation as a few days passed by and the family found out that we could supply our dairy, superette and hospital customers and that we could also do contactless home deliveries. Eileen was still concerned, however, about the reports of long queues at the supermarkets and reports also that people were struggling to get their fresh produce from the supermarkets. She was especially concerned about the elderly. When Eileen was taking phone orders for home deliveries, she said it was just like the "old days".

While work took up most of Eileen's life, family connections were also important to her. She had an annual tradition that, if family were available, they were invited to a big yum char lunch at Hee's Garden that she hosted on Christmas Day and she did this until she was physically unable to in 2022.

Eileen was an amazing and unassuming woman with a strong work ethic. She was married for 63 years (Kong died on 10 October 2016), served the Mt Eden community for almost 70 years and worked as a fruiterer for around 75 years. Eileen enjoyed good health until her final couple of years when she experienced a number of serious health issues, but she kept working and interacting with customers until past her 90th birthday. This probably helped keep her mentally sharp.

Eileen passed as she wanted, peacefully in her sleep at Auckland City Hospital on 26 February 2023. She had originally wanted her ashes to be scattered off Mt Eden/Maungawhau so that she would return to mother nature. However, this is not allowed by the maunga authority that manages Mt Eden. So the compromise she made was that her ashes would go to Eden Garden (which is situated on the eastern slopes of Mt Eden) so that she could be with the local community that she served for so long.

References:

"Farewell Guangdong" by Lily Lee

"Har Gee Chans in New Zealand" by Har Gee Chans Reunion Committee
2014