



Historic Bakersfield and Kern County, California  
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## Playing at the Mandarin, 1935

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By Gilbert Gia  
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**N**ine-year-old Carlyle Nelson decided to become a musician after hearing a five-piece band play at a silent movie house in 1920. By the 1930s Nelson was married and a struggling musician who was taking work wherever he could get it. During WWII Nelson joined the Glen Miller Army Band, and later he played with Chick Floyd's Orchestra. Still later Nelson was with Harry Owens' Royal Hawaiians, and from the early 1950s to the early 1960s Nelson toured with the Hilo Hattie Show. In Nelson's autobiography *Somewhat the Way It Was*, he described all those times, but what follows is his story about the mid-Thirties when he played at the Mandarin, a Chinese nightclub in Bakersfield, California.<sup>1</sup>

Nelson's story begins: *In the 1930s everybody was scrambling for work. My wife and I lived in Visalia where I taught violin, but I played where ever a job was available. Occasionally I was in Bakersfield to play for a couple of days and then maybe play a day in Taft. I was able to find work, but the times were hard on some people. One of my music students owed me three dollars for back lessons.*

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<sup>1</sup> Author's 2004 interview with Carlyle Nelson. *Somewhat The Way It Was, Autobiography, Carlyle Nelson* by Carlyle Nelson was privately published in 1987. Copies are held by the Kern County Beale Memorial Library and the Los Angeles Public Library.

*She told me she would have to stop lessons, but a little later she came in with the money. I found out that her uncle gave it to her, and he got it by working out on the Tagus Ranch for ten cents an hour. My one-dollar fee for a forty-five minute lesson was a lot of money for him, but he wanted his niece to have her music.*

*Other families had almost nothing. I recall along the Kern River seeing adults and children living in shelters made out of rubbish. Life was awfully hard in those days, but musicians got by.*

*Considering Bakersfield's size and general character, the town was very active musically in the 1930s. Many piano teachers here had never played in public but were excellent musicians. Bakersfield was not as lean as most other towns for music jobs because there were so many places hiring us. There wasn't a lot of money floating around, but professional opportunities for music jobs were more plentiful than they are today. In those days almost all the restaurants and hotels in Bakersfield had live music. I can't think of one that's operating today.*



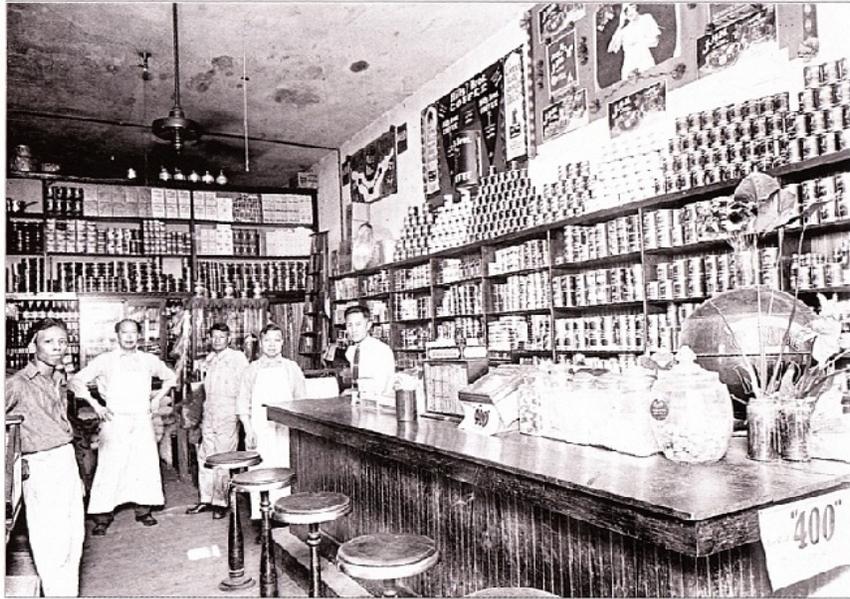
*Carlyle Nelson, \_Somewhat The Way It Was\_ pg 146*

*"In 1935 in the depth of the Depression, Bakersfield came to my rescue with employment when I landed a full-time job at the Mandarin Café and Night Club...on the north side of 20th between K and L Streets. Laurence "Laurie" Foster was a high school teacher who headed the Mandarin's regular, four-piece orchestra. One night I happened to be at the Mandarin doing an occasional job, and Jack Issacs and I were waiting for Laurie's group to finish up before we went on. Well, that night something happened with Laurie's unit, and because Jack knew Laurie, Jack suggested we work together. Laurie hired both of us to play in his group.*

Nelson landed the job about a year after the Mandarin opened. Its owner, Earl Q. Wong, was born in China, married Alice Mar in 1919, and in the early 1920s the family came to Bakersfield.

In 1923 the Wongs bought a residential lot near today's downtown Bakersfield in the Hudnut tract near 27th and O Streets. Alice Mar was

born in Weaverville, California, and property title describes her as a "native born Chinese woman." The phrase had no accompanying interpretation, but after she had married Earl Wong the US Government voided her US citizenship. In 1934, she regained her citizenship through a lengthily naturalization process.<sup>2</sup>



Lincoln Market (owner Earl Wong with tie), 1923.

*Delbert Wong*

*\_The Chinese of Kern County, 1857-1960\_, pg 58*

Earl Wong's son Delbert recalled that by 1926 his father was "just getting started in his Lincoln Market." "I have a vague recollection that the reason my father went into the night club business was that he had extended credit to the previous owner, who was a customer of the Lincoln Market, and my father had to take over the Mandarin when the customer was unable to pay."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Wong's Certificate of US Citizenship shows her former citizenship as "American". A copy appears in *The Chinese of Kern County, 1857-1960*, pg 40. ISBN 0-94350-17-6

<sup>3</sup> Dec 15, 2004 letter from Delbert Wong to the author. About 1931 Earl Wong, KC Choy 1881-1966), and other Chinese businessmen opened the Mandarin restaurant and nightclub on 20th between K and L streets.

The Wongs maintained close ties with relatives in China. In winter 1935, Earl and Alice Wong and their sons Delbert and Ervin were in China, where the boys attended the Christian College of Canton. In November, after a four-month visit, Earl Wong, "one of the San Joaquin Valley's leading Chinese merchants<sup>4</sup>," returned to Bakersfield. The newspaper article said his brother-in-law was president of the Canton National Railway and a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley.<sup>5</sup>

In 1934 Earl Wong bought the Lido Café from Joseph Cinelli and Angelo and Julia Pierucci, changed the name to the Mandarin Café,<sup>6</sup> and with his wife went into the nightclub business in 1935. Their silent partner was 54 year-old L.C. Choy who opened the City of Fuchau Department Store in Bakersfield in the 1920s.

Nelson continued. *"After I was hired, my wife and I left Visalia for Bakersfield. Of course before and after that there were other occasional jobs, but the Mandarin was seven-days-a-week, my first permanent job. I was there about a year-and-a-half. During this time Laurie Foster and I also taught out of studios near the Beale Clock Tower that were operated by the Phillips Music Company, and we both played once a week in Taft. Later on I had enough of teaching and I let that go. With the full-time job, I could afford to just play a few casuals for extra money.*

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(*The Chinese of Kern County, 1857-1960*, pg 77)

<sup>4</sup> According to Delbert Wong, his father operated the grocery store "for over forty years." (Letter to author of Dec 15, 2004)

<sup>5</sup> *Bakersfield Californian*, Nov 4, 1935, pg: 9, col: 8. Delbert E. Wong graduated from Stanford Law School and in 1959 was named State Deputy Attorney General. He was later the first American of Chinese descent appointed to the United States judiciary. For detailed biography of Delbert E. Wong see [www.chineseamericanheroes.org/why/bio\\_pop\\_home.asp?bid=240000112&t=heroes](http://www.chineseamericanheroes.org/why/bio_pop_home.asp?bid=240000112&t=heroes)

<sup>6</sup> Today, 1322 20th St is a parking structure east of the Learning Center, 2020 K Street.

*"When I started at the Mandarin, Earl was busy with his grocery stores, and his cousin Frank Wong then managed the club. Earl's wife was sometimes there at the cash register. The financial secretary was Papa Choy.*

*"The Mandarin was not in the café-society league. In the Thirties, Bakersfield was basically a town of oil and railroad men who were not much for the elite side of society. The Mandarin had a matron and big bouncer who had to occasionally take someone by the forearm and walk him out. If customers wanted high-class, they went to the Padre Hotel, El Tejon, or Motel Inn.<sup>7</sup>*

*"We played seven nights a week from 9 PM 'til two, plus a Friday afternoon show rehearsal. Our four-piece orchestra consisted of a trumpet (Laurie), piano (Mike Richmond), drums (Gifford), and me on the sax, and I doubled on the violin. Word of what to expect in music at the local clubs circulated among show performers, and we had an excellent reputation. We were also popular with the local dancing customers, and although the dance floor was small, it saw a lot of action. The floor was painted in a spider web motif, and in the center of it was a glass lens that had a spotlight under it.<sup>8</sup>*

*"The mistress of ceremonies was a more-or-less permanent girl who had a taste for alcohol and who could sing as well as "M.C". Besides her salary, the club gave her a discount on the drinks she consumed. This girl was just like a couple of other woman who came in for the*

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<sup>7</sup> Bakersfield Inn was first called Motel Inn.

<sup>8</sup> The image of a black widow spider was painted on the glass. The club's booths and tables, placed around the dance floor, made the light the focal point of the room. [Author's interview with Nelson]

*drinks--they could have several scotch-and-sodas and look like nothing happened.*

*"The dancing customers always kept the floor busy, but the draw was our three shows a night-- really two shows, because the first and the third were duplicates. These acts changed every week. Edgar Bergen-Charlie McCarthy was one of the big names that played, and we had many acrobats, roller-skating and dance acts--lots of variety shows."<sup>9</sup>*

*"A good many of the performers came in on the bus from Los Angeles for just the week. Their pay was \$35 --a little higher than ours. My pay was okay at \$28 a week, and we did make extra money in tips, maybe 50 cents a night. One customer made an impression by giving us a \$10 check. It bounced.*

*"Mr. Choy tried to use Chinese waitresses, but Bakersfield customers were too rough on them, so he hired White waitresses. One of them was Lillian [known as Lillie], an ex-professional wrestler. Although she was only about 120 pounds and very nice, you couldn't get fresh with her. She was more than a match for any rough customer.*

*"The mandarin was a good place to work. The bartenders and cooks were Chinese. The cooks--who lived in the basement--were pleasant but would tolerate no outsiders in their kitchen. At first Mrs. Wong would get coffee for us, but later they put the coffee urn where we could reach it ourselves without bothering the cooks. If we wanted to eat at the club, we could get it for half price. The menu had a limited variety of American dishes. One specialty item was a rib steak for 50 cents, 25 cents to employees, and I always got that rib steak.*

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<sup>9</sup> Delbert Wong: "During that period, Dad became interested in magic acts and learned from the performers [at the club]. He ultimately became an amateur magician and joined the Magician's Guild." [Letter to the author Nov 20, 2004.]

*"The last show started about one AM and the club closed at two. When the door finally shut, three or four of the kitchen help came out and swept up the floor and usually found money that people dropped. Money, or rather the lack of it, was a big issue, and one time the kitchen help got very upset over wages. Many of these people had very close ties to China. I don't suppose they were making much money then, but Japan had recently invaded China, and Chiang Kai-shek's wife--who was a money artist --had come to town to drum up funds for Chinese relief. It turned out that some of the staff was sending a good part of their money back for their families. I learned most of this after the fact."<sup>10</sup>*

*"Japan's invasion of China was a blow to Bakersfield's Chinese community in many ways. Some had invested in a bank in China, and in 1937 it went broke. Even though all the news coming out of Asia was terrible, our band was simply clueless about what was going on. One night without giving a second thought to it, we played the old song 'Japanese Sandman'. And that was the last time we ever played it. I remember another situation when a Japanese auction group came into town and rented a nearby empty building. The Chinese picketed in front of the building so much that the Japanese left. Bakersfield's Chinese were not much more forgiving to a couple of Chinese businessmen who came in from out of town and moved into a vacant store on Chester Avenue. They were gone inside two or three months.*

*"I was involved in music here in many different ways, but I'll mention just a couple of other jobs I had. I was member of the Musicians' Union for some time, and in 1939 I became secretary of Local*

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<sup>10</sup> Earl J. Wong spoke at the Six Companies building, 2110 L St., during memorial services in honor of the late Dr. Sun Yat Sen. (*Bakersfield Californian*, Apr15, 1925, pg 11)

263. *I had played occasionally on KPMC radio with a no-name country music group. They called me Zeke. This early radio station belonged to the Schamblins, the same people who had Pioneer Mercantile hardware store. Their broadcasting company came under some kind of nationwide rules about hiring musicians, so they had to take a specified number of guys from the Musicians' Local whether they liked it or not. Anyway, Mr. Schamblin resented having to do this at first, but he got acclimatized. Later on, I also played at their TV station."*

After December 7, 1941 paranoia ran high in Bakersfield, but five days after the Japanese attack, Kern County High's newspaper the *Blue and White* counseled students, "We should not feel unfriendly toward the Japanese in our own country. Remember, Japanese citizens are just as loyal Americans as we are." On the same page was a loyalty oath signed by "Bob Simpson, president of the Student Body, and George Kinoshita and Ervin Wong representing the Japanese and Chinese in school."

In 1942 Ervin and Delbert Wong enlisted in the Army Air Corp. American flags emblazoned Earl Wong's businesses. Corporal Ervin Wong became a B-26 radio operator. He was killed on a training flight prior to his scheduled departure for an overseas assignment. Flight navigator Delbert Wong flew 30 B-17 combat bombing missions over Europe.

Carlyle Nelson described events in Bakersfield after Pearl Harbor. "In 1942 the *Haberfelde Ford Garage*<sup>11</sup> closed down because Ford stopped making cars. The Johnson family from Los Angeles then leased the building. Four of the brothers scraped together some money and were able to refit the place as a dance hall. They called it the *Granada Ballroom*. Things were so tight that two of the families lived right there in the building. The Johnsons hired an orchestra out of our Union

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<sup>11</sup> The garage was just south of today's Bakersfield Police Department building.

hall, and when I played there the Granada was open two nights a week-- Tuesdays and Saturdays. As the War went on, the Granada Ballroom closed, too. I was soon called into the army.

"The Mandarin was a big, busy club but it wasn't profitable for the time. I became aware of that problem when I was at a banquet there once. The Chinese food at the Mandarin was ordinary, except for twice a year when Earl threw a party for employees. I think it was a matter of pride for the kitchen to show what they could produce beyond the common fare. I remember the management talked about tough conditions, but they said ignore them because we are going to operate anyway. Still, in the next six months they were really struggling to make ends meet, running movies along with the music, and it did not go over.

"After I left the Mandarin, Al Kern<sup>12</sup> came back to town and took over. The business lasted for a while longer, and then Earl sold the Mandarin to a man who continued to run it for a while as a club but then converted it to a hardware store. Al moved on and worked up a larger dance band for shows at the new Union Avenue Plunge dance floor.

The Mandarin Café and Night Club closed in 1938 but reopened in 1939 under new ownership as Club Cathay. In later years it was the Nanking Café. Today a parking structure stands where dancers once spun under a "cobweb" ceiling. Also gone today is a word that was at one time commonly understood. When Carlyle Nelson showed his granddaughter the location of the old Granada Ballroom, the little girl looked puzzled. Nelson recalled that she turned to her mother and asked, "Mommy, what's a ballroom?"

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<sup>12</sup> A bandleader