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Big Isle 'living legend' recalls old Hilo

Profits of Robert Chow's book will benefit a charter school

[By Rod Thompson](#)

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HILO » When Robert "Steamy" Chow, 86, was a Hilo newspaper boy in the 1930s, he'd roam up and down the main street of the town, stopping at his father's shoe repair store; at Takeuchi store, where freshly made raincoats hung over the sidewalk; and at the back-alley dance hall where women danced with bachelors for 10 cents a dance.

Much of that was washed away by the tsunami of 1946, and more by the tsunami of 1960.

Chow's memories were not washed away.

"I have something like a gift," he said.

After years of friends urging him to write a book, Chow has created a children's-style memoir of those days with the help of teachers and students at the Connections Public Charter School housed in the old Kress Building downtown.

The title is "As I Recall: Recollections of Hilo."

Profits go to benefit the school, where Chow now serves as a kupuna and "resource person" after serving as Kress Building manager during the 1990s.

Chow's early memories cover the 1930s -- the Great Depression, but there was nothing depressing for him about life in Hilo.

"I was a happy-go-lucky kid," he said. "At that age, you don't know national trends or even local trends. You're just selling newspapers."

"I started selling newspapers between 7 and 8 years old -- only on Sunday, because my parents thought I was too young to cross the streets," he said in interviews with Connections literacy coordinator Kaholo Daguman, who put Chow's words in written form.

The book is richly illustrated with childlike drawings by students from the school art classes of Grace Chao.

"Steamy" Chow got his name from his plump childhood appearance, making him look like a piece of steamed pork.

He was a sharp observer of the many ethnicities of Hilo, people who lived in friendship but who were still sometimes separated by the languages of their mother countries.

His book praises the sales abilities of a Mrs. Shirakawa at the Aloha Fish Market.

"She could speak Japanese, Filipino and a little Chinese and Hawaiian," Chow said. His own Chinese father spoke "some" English.

Chow sold newspapers through his teenage years. Then at age 21 in 1943, he was hired by the Police Department because they needed a Chinese-speaking policeman.

His first day on the job, a "twister" blew the roofs off houses in the Shinmachi part of town.

On April 1, 1946, people shouted "tidal wave" at him, and he answered, "Yeah, April fool." Then he saw the railroad bridge over the Wailuku River partly underwater and buildings lying in the middle of Kamehameha Avenue.

Another wave came, passing under his car as he sat in it.

He escaped the 1960 tsunami without injury, but in 1964 a motorist ran a red light and hit him in his police car, ending his police days.

He worked as an insurance adjuster and then manager of the Kress Building. Hawaii County declared him a Living Legend in 1999.

Chow's book can be bought from the Connections school for \$30 plus a \$3 mailing cost by contacting 961-3664 or cpcs5@aloha.net.

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http://www.starbulletin.com/news/20081229_Big_Isle_living_legend_recalls_old_Hilo.html

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