

Steamy Chow dies at age 90

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By JOHN BURNETT

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Robert Yet Sun “Steamy” Chow, local historian, storyteller and the grand old man of Hilo town, died Thursday of heart failure at the Hospice of Hilo’s Pohai Malama facility. He was 90.

The Hilo-born Chow, who was declared a Living Legend by Hawaii County in 1999, was a nephew of the late Hiram Fong, a businessman and the first Chinese-American elected to the U.S. Senate. He became one of the town’s most familiar faces as a paperboy in the 1930s, and was hired as a motor patrol officer at age 21 in 1943 because Hilo at that time needed a policeman who spoke Chinese.

“He lived a full, good life,” Chow’s wife of 62 years, Lily, said Saturday. “He just loved people. He just loved to work with people and he loved children, too. In his career as a policeman, he kept a lot of young people out of reformatory school.

“He was very concerned about a person’s life and how he could help them to help themselves.”

Lily Chow said she was attracted to the strapping, 6-foot-1 Chow because he was “tall, dark and handsome.”

As a cop in Hilo, Chow’s brushes with danger came more from encounters with nature than clashes with criminals. His first day on the beat, May 1, 1943, a whirlwind hit the Shinmachi neighborhood, ripping roofs off homes in the former community on the Hilo Bayfront.

On April 1, 1946, Chow encountered folks shouting “tidal wave” at him, to which he replied: “Yeah, April fool.” He learned they weren’t joking when he saw waves covering the Wailuku River railroad bridge and buildings washed off their foundations onto Kamehameha Avenue.

“The railroad depot was completely demolished, like a bulldozer ran through it,” Chow told the Tribune-Herald in 2008.

The next wave passed under Chow’s car with him sitting inside.

He also escaped the 1960 tsunami uninjured, but his police career came to an abrupt end in 1964 when a driver ran a red light and slammed into his police car, injuring him.

“It didn’t bother him that they placed him in areas that either you come out of alive or dead,” Lily Chow said. “And it happened with all the tidal waves that he was assigned to. And it didn’t bother him, because all he could think of was how he could save lives.”

Steamy Chow became a claims adjuster for The Hartford and Pacific insurance companies. In the 1990s, he managed the Kress Building and later became a kupuna and a resource person for Connections New Century Public Charter School, which is housed in the historic downtown Hilo building.

He was also a founder of the Pacific Tsunami Museum and its historian. Donna Saiki, the museum’s director, described Chow as “an excellent storyteller” and his stories as “vivid

recollections of old Hilo town.”

“He told me that as a little boy he had a paper route,” Saiki said. “So he knew where everyone lived, upstairs, downstairs, all the businesses. Everything was still very fresh in his mind. He could always tell you a story about any place.”

A number of Chow’s stories are preserved for posterity in “As I Recall: Recollections of Hilo,” compiled with the help of staff and students at Connections and published in late 2008. The final paragraph of the 60-page book seals his legacy as a spellbinding storyteller: “I can still taste the crispy pork skin from Tung Ching’s meat market. I can still remember Auntie Mabel of American Bakery giving me that day-old pastry and telling me that I was a good boy today. I can still feel in my heart the Aloha Spirit that pervaded the community of Hilo.”

Asked how her husband came by his colorful nickname, Lily Chow recounted one of his stories.

“He said he was playing ball when he was young, and he was quite chubby,” she said. “So when he reached for the ball, he fell, and somebody yelled ‘*kau yuk*’ — which is ‘steamed pork’ in Chinese. And that stuck with him ever since.”

She described her husband’s storytelling ability as “not a gift so much as it was a blessing.”

“With a gift, you lose it after a while,” she said. “But it was a blessing that just continued and became deeper, and I believe that’s why he was able to share so much history that accumulated over the years.”

Lily Chow said her husband had been ill for about a year and entered the hospice’s new facility less than a month ago.

“He was admitted Oct. 7 and on the 10th was our 62nd anniversary, so the staff went out and got a cake for us,” she said, praising the hospice staff for the care they gave him.

In addition to Lily Chow, his survivors include: sons, Allen Lee (Andrea) Chow of Honolulu and Lindsey Clay (Susan) Chow of Independence, Mo.; brothers, Leonard (Gertrude) Chow of Hilo and Donald (Ethel) Chow of Honolulu; sisters, Margaret Mochizuki of Los Angeles, Blossom Lee of Las Vegas and Bette Chow of Honolulu; four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren; plus nieces and nephews.

A memorial service is scheduled for 1 p.m. Thursday at Dodo Mortuary Chapel.

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