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LOCAL NEWS

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Second generation keeps Ah Sam blooming

By PAUL D. BUCHANAN
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY JOURNAL

The phrase "Ah Sam" has become familiar to San Mateo residents and flower lovers for nearly seventy years.

The Cantonese greeting has beckoned to local passers-by from the venerable family flower shop on El Camino Real, since 1933. The Leong family conferred the name to honor their father, Shun "Sam" Leong, who worked as a door-to-door vegetable and fruit salesman in Hillsborough. Said to be the Cantonese equivalent of "Yo, Sam" in vernacular English, Ah Sam is the name of the longest continually operating flower business on the Peninsula. It is known worldwide for its efficiency, attention to detail and service.

Last weekend, the Leongs hosted their annual Holiday open house. An event nearly fifty years old, the open house gives a chance for the local public to appreciate the Ah Sam operation first hand. Few failed to be impressed. "What most don't realize about Ah Sam," says co-proprietor Shawn Leong, "is the depth of the operation — the inventory, the physical plant. Most flower shops simply aren't like Ah Sam."

The story of Ah Sam is by now the stuff of local lore. Shun Leong and his wife Wong Shee immigrated from depressed Can-

culturist, but also a skilled mechanic and electrician. Mable, considered the heart and soul of the flower shop, quickly established herself as one of the best known florists in the country. Her serene personality made her the perfect liaison with the flower shop's burgeoning clientele. Lincoln directed the public and industry relations aspects of the shop. Finally, Howard Arthur Leong, also known as "Art," actually gained recognition as an artist, a master floral designer.

During the first two decades, Ah Sam steadily grew in both physical size and commercial viability. In 1939, Gordon and Lincoln personally built the family's first glass greenhouse. By 1944, more greenhouses, warehouses, the customer parking lot, and a two story residence for the Leong's had been added. They constructed the main store at 2645 El Camino Real in 1950, while the Leongs acquired another 2.5 acres of work space by 1953.

By the 1960s, Ah Sam had grown into one of the most successful companies on the Peninsula. Clients included Stanford University, Bay Meadows Race Track, Burlingame Country Club and, in particular, wedding parties throughout the Peninsula. On one storied weekend, Mable reportedly presided over the floral productions for 23 separate weddings.

Over the years, Ah Sam has

catered to clients of the most celebrated distinction. Queen Elizabeth of England, President and Mrs. Ronald Reagan, entertainers Ray Bolger, Shirley Temple, and Liberace have all numbered among the elite patrons who have enjoyed flowers by Ah Sam. Nevertheless, while Ah Sam has provided floral arrangements to everyone from Princess Grace of Monaco to billion dollar companies like Microsoft, Shawn said they strive to reach all markets, especially the grassroots neighborhood customer.

"We insist on no minimum purchase," he said, "because we want to be known as a community oriented business."

The children of Howard "Art" Leong purchased Ah Sam Florists, Inc. in 1986. Like the original Leong generation, the Ah Sam operation has been divided among the siblings, who rotate their duties. Shawn, 39, runs the greenhouse, administration, accounting, and marketing. Scott, 44, is in charge of sales and design. Stacey, 36, heads gift buying, while Steve, 47, guides the purchasing.

The second generation Leongs quickly introduced computer capacity to the expanding business. The delivery fleet numbers at least eighteen vehicles, while the year round staff includes more than ninety workers. Both numbers rise dramatically during the lucrative holidays. Business in December is so rampant.

for example, it can account for 12 to 15 percent of the entire year's commerce.

Actually, for 15 years Ah Sam also operated a flower stand at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, until the stand closed in 1994 when the hotel changed owners. This has been the only diversion from the San Mateo operation. At virtually the same plot of ground where the bucket stand developed into the original store, the Ah Sam plant now encompasses 4.5 acres. The floral complex stretches from El Camino Real to the CalTrain railroad tracks, from just north of 27th Avenue to within a few doors of 25th Avenue. The operation includes the contemporary store, plus three warehouses, the fleet parking lot, and twenty greenhouses.

Lincoln Leong, who retired from the business in 1988, is the only one of the original generation remaining. Howard Arthur died in 1980, while Mable passed away in 1986. Gordon, the original founder of Ah Sam, died earlier this year.

"Certainly, my father's generation could not have served such a large area, from San Francisco to Oakland," said Shawn. "But the first generation gave us such a great organization to build on. They really set the standard. We would enjoy running the business if we were making nuts and bolts."