

Published: 07.23.2006

Marana's Kais

They came from China to amass great wealth — and endowed their community

By Erin White / Arizona Daily Star

John Kai Sr. was a patient, persistent man. He fought racism and the raw desert and used his family's success to boost the Chinese community in Tucson and influence the development of Marana.

When Kai first came to Marana in the early 1930s, the struggling town was home to a handful of farming families. When he bought his first parcel of land in 1935, the town didn't even have a grocery store. He built a commissary, saving the farmers a trip to Tucson for fruit and vegetables.

Today, Marana is a booming suburb whose population has rocketed from about 2,100 in 1990 to more than 26,000 in 2005, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

But the town's rapidly increasing subdivisions belie its origins. Contractors and businessmen didn't build Marana. Farmers did. Families with names like Gladden, Aguirre and Honea, now names on roads and subdivisions, helped found this town and strode through its past.

Kai would eventually farm more than 4,000 acres in Marana. With the help of his whip-smart, charismatic wife, Mamie, he added his name to the list of the town's pioneering families.

But before Kai carved out a home in Marana, he peddled groceries to the few farmers there from the back of an oversize truck.

The farm families formed a small, tight-knit community well into the 1970s, and back in the early '30s they already knew him by name. A few even tried to introduce the personable Chinese immigrant to their daughters to make up for a lack of potential mates in the tiny town, says John Kai Jr., the oldest of the couple's three children.

Despite the polite interactions, because he was Chinese Kai Sr. struggled to find someone who would sell him land.

He kept pushing, though. Some called him the "crazy Chinaman," John Jr. says, because of his incessant inquiries about buying land and growing cotton in the desert.

Finally, a farmer relented — with a catch. Kai could buy 2,500 acres, if he could come up with \$10,000 in cash in the next two days. Kai didn't know if the land had water, but he and his brother Bing K. Wong bought it anyway. Wong, also a successful Marana farmer, took three-quarters of the acreage and Kai got the rest.

With an intuition about when to sign a deal and a fearless approach to acquiring property, Kai and Mamie turned that first plot into real-estate holdings across the country — and a sizable fortune.

Building a fortune in the desert

John and Mamie Kai lived classic American Horatio Alger stories.

Both immigrated to the United States from Canton, China. John arrived around 1915. He gave up his family name, Tsang, and adopted his new one to match his fake birth certificate, bought from a Chinese family whose son had died. Mamie came in 1922, at age 7, on a first-class boat ticket to San Francisco, where her father was a tailor.

The two met in 1943 at a mah-jongg game. Mamie, already 28, had come to Tucson to visit friends, and they introduced her to John Kai.

He proposed the next day. After going back to San Francisco to ask her mother, who was furious at Kai's presumption, she returned to Arizona.

"He needed a wife, and women were pretty scarce around here," John Jr. says, mostly joking. "But my dad was pretty charming, too."

Kai's aggressive business sense and his wife's knack for accounting and detail formed a powerful team.

"If Dad thought it was the right thing to do," his younger son Herb says, "he'd do it. She'd say, 'Well, let's look at this one more time.' "

He handled the farm and pushed to expand the family's holdings. She fine-combed the deals and kept track of the books.

The pair started with next to nothing. By the early 1950s, Kai had borrowed nearly a million dollars — on a handshake and his word — from the old Valley National Bank, now Chase.

Cotton yielded excellent profits then, and Kai paid back the loan in less than two years. Then he started buying more land.

Marana Mayor Ed Honea, whose family goes back five generations in the town, says the Kais are "absolutely" one of the groundbreaking families.

"They've been integral," he says.

He doesn't get into specific numbers, but he says the Kais long have been the top land-owning family in Marana.

In the early '50s, Kai developed a couple thousand acres of farmland in Avra Valley, drilling 39 wells. He bought it, John Jr. says, because it had large, healthy mesquite trees.

"He told me that meant there was water on the land," John says. The elder Kai used that insight over and over to decide about purchases.

Eventually, his acquisitions would lead the family to politics.

In the mid-1950s, Kai bought a 30,000-acre ranch near Three Points. The next day, the Arizona legislature outlawed drilling wells for irrigation.

"That was when Dad decided you needed to be connected," Herb says.

The family developed deep political relationships — with the late U.S. Rep. Morris K. Udall, former U.S. Sen. Dennis DeConcini and other members of his family, and former Gov. Bruce Babbitt. Today, both John Jr. and Herb contribute regularly to Arizona candidates on both sides of the political fence.

While the senior Kais crafted the right connections, they poured their earnings into more land. It wasn't all farmland.

"We didn't go camping. We went and looked at township corners," John Jr. says, recalling trips into the desert he'd take with his father to appraise the bits of land where townships came together.

Instead of looking for a quick profit, Kai took the long view, banking on Tucson's expansions. He had the boldness of the most successful investors, his sons say, and he bought up street corners in spots like Kolb and Pantano roads and 80 acres on La Cañada Drive near Orange Grove Road.

By 1957, the couple tired of not being able to find a place that would rent to Chinese when they visited San Francisco, so they decided to build a motel. Mamie persuaded Kai to open Villa Capri near that city's busy Lombard Street. The motel still brings in income for the family.

The couple had a lucky streak, too, says Greg Wexler, who guided the Kais in expensive real-estate ventures for years. After Mamie, against the advice of her husband, bought a street corner off Lombard

Street to advertise the hotel, the International House of Pancakes called. The company wanted to lease the corner for a restaurant.

Currently, Herb and John Jr. are working on rezoning land their father bought in the '50s. The brothers have spent much of their adult lives managing their parents' prosperity, and it is they, their sister, Lorena, and their children who most tangibly reap the benefits.

Particularly in the early years, the senior Kais lived frugally so they could build up their bank account. But even late in life, after they had accumulated expansive assets, they spent money sparingly.

Wexler recalls sitting with Mamie, talking her through a multimillion-dollar deal. A man popped his head into the room, asking where to buy light bulbs.

"She told him where he could go to get 10 cents off," Wexler says, shaking his head and laughing. The couple built such a strong financial reputation that "Mrs. Kai would write me a check for \$100,000 on a napkin, and I could take it to Valley National, and they'd figure out where to take the money from," he says.

The couple never built an extravagant house or bought shiny new cars. After Kai died in 1984, Mamie lived in a one-bedroom apartment in the family's mobile home park, preferring to stay with her friends rather than move into a new home.

Still, Mamie didn't want her family to be land poor.

She wielded considerable influence for a wife of the 1940s and '50s. From time to time, she persuaded her husband to sell some of their holdings, Wexler says.

Her husband had the final say, but "if she thought he should do something, he would always look into it," Herb says.

John Jr. remembers his mother sitting up late at night at the kitchen table, punching the adding machine, keeping track of the family's finances. She didn't miss much.

Years ago, Herb talked his father into buying an airplane, Wexler recalls. The family didn't tell Mamie — she thought airplanes were too dangerous — but she discovered the purchase on the tax return and chided her family for thinking they could fool her.

Mamie, who outlived her husband by more than 15 years, became the icon. She helped rally the Southwest Arizona Chinese community to rebuild a cultural center, and she made the multimillion-dollar land decisions that continued to increase her family's wealth as her husband's health failed.

She also encouraged her family to stay involved with politics, pushing Herb to run for the Marana Town Council, where he has served for a decade.

As Marana has exploded, Herb has guided his hometown as the council's water guru and vice mayor. He recently set off a conflict with Tucson by getting the inside scoop about extra water in the Flowing Wells district and nearly beating the Old Pueblo to the purchasing punch.

John Jr. travels often to Phoenix, lobbying the Legislature to use effluent water for agriculture to conserve fresh water and haul sludge to fertilize area farms.

Other longtime Marana families lease most of the Kais' farmland, but John Jr. and Herb hung on to enough to keep their hands dirty.

Their sister, Lorena, lives in California with her husband. But the two "boys," as old-time Maranans call them, say they'll never leave the town their parents helped build.

And they continue to give back to the town, Honea says.

"They have the Kai Foundation, which donates money to charitable causes in the community. They've been good citizens," he says.

The importance of Chinese culture

The Kais' foresight in holding on to what would become valuable land is a deeply Chinese trait, says Esther Tang, a matriarch of Tucson's Chinese community. While the Kais embraced American politics and farm life, they never let go of their traditional culture.

If friends or family got sick, Mamie appeared with Chinese teas and remedies. And deals, business partners say, often took place over a meal or snack, just like in China.

The couple used their affluence to embrace the Chinese community, making contributions to numerous projects, including a sizable donation to the Tucson Chinese Baptist church on Fort Lowell Road. After Kai died, his wife built a library in his home village in China, and committee members say Mamie helped immeasurably in getting the newly opened Tucson Chinese Cultural Center built.

The Kais instilled a sense of "being Chinese" into their children, as well. The three children, at their mother's insistence, didn't speak English unless they had visitors.

"She was always on us. 'Speak Chinese! Speak Chinese!'" John Jr. says. Now his 2-year-old daughter has a Chinese nanny. She can chat easily in Mandarin and eats traditional dishes with chopsticks.

But the Kais did more than keep up Chinese traditions. They worked to share them and pass them on to younger generations.

"Mom said, 'If you give back to the community, you know where the money goes. If you let the federal government have it, you don't,'" John Jr. says.

Mamie's pecan pies were legendary, but Elinor Barnett, a member of another longtime Marana farming family, remembers her fried rice. Others brought mashed potatoes and fried chicken to potlucks, Barnett says. Mamie carried a bit of China.

More than 10 years ago, when Larry Leung and Richard Fe Tom, with the help of others in the community, started pushing to revive a cultural center for Tucson, many in the Chinese community reacted initially with skepticism, particularly the older generation, both Leung and Tom say.

But Mamie encouraged the committee members and made phone calls soliciting donations and support. For more than five years, she attended regular meetings on the project.

When Mamie could no longer drive, Tom chauffeured her to the meetings. They'd sit in her driveway afterward, fine-tuning plans and discussing her dreams for the center.

"She wanted to have a strong identity to acknowledge that Chinese people had pioneered this community," Tom says. Her lobbying persuaded the planning committee to include a full Chinese kitchen.

Within a few years, community support had exploded. When the sparkling new center, 1288 W. River Road near North La Cañada Drive, opened in October, it was two-thirds larger than originally imagined.

Tom and Leung stop short of saying the project wouldn't have gotten off the ground without Mamie. But she provided inspiration and legitimacy, they say.

Her seal of approval and reputation for seeing projects through "lent a strength to the movement," Leung says. "It's very simultaneous when I look back. There's always the desire, but everyone is sitting back waiting for it to happen. It takes some leadership."

Mamie was the bridge, they say, who brought the young and the old together. After her death, in 2000, her children and grandchildren donated \$1 million in the names of Mamie and John Kai Sr. to the project. Pictures of them hang in the foyer of the building, part of which bears the names of John and Mamie Kai.

The center's opening was emotional, Tom says, because Mamie, who had devoted so much energy so late in her life, didn't get to see it.

"One of the promises, I'd made during one of our get-togethers," Tom says, "is that we'd get this facility built. In the opening speech I said, 'Mamie, we kept our word.' "

Tucson Family histories

On StarNet: Find previous installments in this series at [http:// go.azstarnet.com/ foundingfamilies](http://go.azstarnet.com/foundingfamilies)

- Contact reporter *Erin White* at ewhite@azstarnet.com or 807-8429.