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By BY CINDY SCHUMACHER - | Sep 8, 2023



Dr. Busaba Yip, cultural director and docent of the Wo Hing Museum, Society Hall and Cookhouse, stands in front of the 858 Front St. museum in this file photo. PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. BUSABA YIP.

LAHAINA — Dr. Busaba Yip, cultural director and docent of the Wo Hing Museum, Society Hall and Cookhouse, is brokenhearted. She says the devastation in Lahaina, with the loss of lives, property, businesses and livelihoods, is beyond anyone's imagination.

“It’s very, very sad to see what happened,” said Yip. “The first few days I cried and cried. I looked at photos, remembering how much I loved being at the Wo Hing, and now it is all gone. The kitchen, the stove, the pots and pans, are still there. Also, the two poles in the front of the building are still standing along with the two Foo protection dogs, and the walks are still there. Many memorable items are but a shell; nonetheless, I recognize them. When I look at every inch of the land that burned down in Lahaina, I visualize exactly how it all used to be. Truly, there are no words for such a great loss.”

Luckily for Dr. Yip (and the whole community), months before the fire, a friend from Microsoft came to Wo Hing and backed up all of

her documents and research. *“I had no idea at the time how fortunate this would be,”* she explained. “I lost my computer, phone and all my contacts to the fire; although, needless to say, I am thankful for my life.

“People from all over the world have been sending me videos and pictures of their visits to Wo Hing. I did not realize just how significant Wo Hing was to so many, until now. They have been sending messages about how much they enjoyed and learned while visiting. We played a significant role in teaching the history of the Wo Hing Society and the Chinese in Lahaina. We also showed our visitors the significance of the past and how it applies to our future generations.”

Around the turn of the 20th century, Lahaina’s Chinese formed the Wo Hing Society, a benevolent social, cultural and religious organization. In its early years, the society provided members with a sense of community and mutual support.

The earliest Chinese on Maui came on merchant ships. They helped build tunnels and irrigation systems in the mountains. Between 1852 and 1898, thousands of Chinese, primarily men, were brought to Hawaii to work on sugar cane plantations. Hundreds lived and worked in Lahaina. A group of these men in the early 1900s formed the Wo Hing Society. By the 1900s, they constructed a second and larger Wo Hing Society Hall and cookhouse at the same location on Front Street.

The upstairs was the temple for religious celebrations, and the ground floor was a social gathering place. The cookhouse was the community kitchen where members would cook for special events.

Throughout the years, most society members had moved away or died, and the building began to decay. In partnership with the Wo Hing Society, the Lahaina Restoration Foundation (LRF) restored the building in 1983 and reopened it as the Wo Hing Museum in 1984.

“The Wo Hing Society Hall had a collection of Chinese artifacts along with memorabilia and the history of Dr. Sun Yat-sen and his elder brother Sun Mei on Maui,” Yip recalled. “The cookhouse displayed the old cooking woks, steamers and other utensils used by society families. Inside, locals and visitors viewed the film ‘Finding Sandalwood Mountain’ featuring Wo Hing Society members, as well as the story of Dr. Sun Yat-sen in Hawaii.”

Through the years, the Wo Hing Society and LRF conducted the Chinese Lunar New Year event, the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival, the Kite Festival, and many other celebrations that the community loved to attend.

Remarkably, a sizable collection of the society’s old documents was discovered at the Wo Hing Society Hall in 1983 when the LRF restored the buildings. The work on those records started in 1999.

With support from the Hawaii Council for the Humanities, the County of Maui, the LRF, and Wo Hing Society, the work continued

to preserve and translate them. The collection comprises 2000 documents, besides 103 traditional Chinese booklets, and is part of the research material that was archived months before the fire.

“We hope we can recreate and revamp what Wo Hing used to be,” Yip concluded. *“The work that we do, preserving history, is still there to do. We are optimistic that we can organize it and continue to share it with the world. We will invite people to come and join different research platforms, continue to do the translations, and help us interpret the message our ancestors would like us to share. We want to continue to bring knowledge and wisdom to the community and the world.”*

Yip reflected, “During my years in Lahaina, I have seen how people were touched by the history of our community and the work that has been done to preserve it. Now, I must trust in the future. We hope, when the time is right, we can rebuild.

“So this is a good time. I am allowing tears, coming from my heart, to help in letting go; and transforming the sadness towards positive energy of hope for the unknown future. With trust, everything will be coming together at the right time in a good way. My journey brought me here to Lahaina, and now, at 70 years old, I wish to be able to continue my work here for the rest of my life. I send prayers to all of the Lahaina community and Maui to come together to rebuild our beautiful community.”

