

# Patchwork of Lives

## Sunnyvale artist records poignant tale in exhibit at Smithsonian

By BILL GIBSON

Every day for the past 33 years, Ed Wong has recounted stories of his childhood to his wife, Sunnyvale artist Flo Wong. "Ed is a master storyteller," Flo says. "And over the years, he has nurtured and romanticized his childhood memories."

At family and social gatherings, her husband engages his listeners with his tales of growing up in Augusta, Ga. After hearing one of these stories, a good friend of the Wongs told the artist, "It's time to do a work based on Ed's stories."

The resulting work is *Baby Jack Rice Story*, which is now on exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

In *Baby Jack Rice Story*, Flo pays tribute to the boyhood friendship of her husband and two African American brothers, Boykin and Cush Cade, in a neighborhood of segregated Augusta in the early 1940s. The name "Baby Jack" was the neighbors' interpretation of *be he jai*, Cantonese for "baby son," the name given to Ed by his mother.

*Baby Jack*, a work-in-progress, contains 27 pieces, eight of which are at the Smithsonian. Each piece is a cloth rice sack, silk-screened with archival photos and adorned with sequins and text sewn around the edges. The photos are of Ed and his family, Boykin and Cush, the Cade family, the Wongs' grocery store and Ed's father's village in China.

"It has been fascinating to explore Ed's story in its tricultural framework," Flo continues. "It's a story of two distinct cultures that bonded within the whiteness of America."

The Chinese were "honorary" whites according to Augusta law, allowing them certain liberties not available to the blacks, such as going to white schools and theaters. But the Chinese families' poor economic status restricted them to the poorer black neighborhoods, where the two groups worked and socialized together, Ed says.

Flo began work on *Baby Jack* last year while she was artist-in-residence at Headlands for the Arts in Sausalito.

Originally from Oakland, Flo



Photograph by Bill Gibson

Sunnyvale artist Flo Wong works on a piece to "Baby Jack Rice Story," a work that pays tribute to her husband's boyhood friendship with two African American brothers in Augusta, Ga.

describes herself as an installation artist.

"I create an environment by using fine art to 'decorate' a room," she explains. She often makes uses of all parts of a room, including the ceiling and floor.

She became an artist 15 years ago, but it was not until 1983 that she found a sense of direction.

"I began doing art based on culture, family and storytelling," she says.

Her husband's story presented her with ideal inspiration.

In researching *Baby Jack*, the Wongs traveled to Augusta three

times in the past 18 months. Boykin and Cush's sister, Alma, supplied the couple with family photos that have been instrumental in Flo's work.

Flo received the invitation from the Smithsonian in June after Flo and Deborah Willis, a curator for the Smithsonian, met and spoke briefly during the Women's Caucus for Art Conference in New York City.

Flo mentioned her work to Willis, who was immediately interested. Once back in Sunnyvale, Flo sent Willis slides of *Baby Jack Rice Story* and with-

in a month, Willis had written back.

*Baby Jack Rice Story* was exhibited last year at Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito and the Cambridge Multicultural Center in Massachusetts; it will be shown at the Atlanta College of Art Gallery next January.

*Baby Jack Rice Story* will be on exhibit in the Arts & Industries Building at the Smithsonian Institution until February 1995. The piece is part of *Imagining Families: Images and Voices*, the inaugural exhibition of the National African American Museum Project.

## 'You gotta be brave'

By BILL GIBSON

Ed Wong's father, Wong Yet Choy, came to Augusta, Ga., from China in 1920 and opened a grocery store in a black neighborhood called Wrightsboro Road.

Ed's mother, Sue Shee Wong, followed in 1930, accompanied by her brother and oldest son. By 1936, the Wongs had four more children: Rachel, Larry, Ed and Ginger. That same year, Wong Choy left for San Francisco on business. He was never to return—he died in San Francisco in 1941, Ed reported.

Sue Shee and Larry Wong were left to run the grocery store. With a long wooden bench and a shady elm tree in front, the store became a local gathering place where the black and Chinese neighbors played checkers, told stories and enjoyed refreshments. This is where Ed, 7 years old at the time, first met Boykin and Cush Cade, who were regulars at the store.

"I was impressed by Boykin's charisma, sense of humor, his leadership [qualities]," Ed recalled of the 12-year-old.

With Ed's brother, Larry, and Boykin's brother, Cush, the boys formed a group of four curious, sometimes devilish, adventurers.

Being older and more boisterous, Boykin was able to influence the younger boys into mischievous play. When the younger boys would hesitate or refuse to participate, Boykin used the phrase "You gotta be brave" to spur them on.

Boykin would lead the group as they ventured out of the poverty-stricken Wrightsboro Road neighborhood. They explored the cotton fields, fished in the brick-yard pond, picked wild berries—simply creating their own recreation. During these formative years, Ed was influenced by Boykin's strong sense of self.

"[Boykin] didn't let the fact that he was a segregated black person in a Southern community affect him," Ed remembered. "He conveyed this confidence to others."

Ed's family moved to California when he was 14 and subsequently lost contact with the brothers. But the experience has lived with Ed ever since.

"That phrase ['you gotta be brave'] and Boykin's insistence of not letting others control him, have been lifelong lessons for me," Ed observed.