*Wok & Roll by Peter Kwong, (Frederic) Inter-County Leader*

**California dreaming again, 50 years later**

I can’t believe that it has been 50 years since I first set foot in California. I vividly remember that after an 18-hour flight from Hong Kong, I landed in San Francisco with my guitar and six pieces of luggage; just to find out that my final destination, Oceanside, was a long, long way farther south.

“So, this is the America that I have heard so much about,” I said to myself. “And I am in California, where the roads are paved in gold.” There was no one around the terminal, as all the passengers (students my age) were picked up by their families and friends and had been long gone.

Fifty years is a long, long time, but sometimes it just seems like yesterday. My sister bought the house after our parents moved away. Except for a little remodeling here and there, the house still looks the same.

I can’t believe this same home that is occupied by only my sister and her husband was once inhabited by nine people. Yes, my American mom and dad, me, and six siblings.

Looking out the back window then, all I could see was farmland with rows and rows of avocado trees. They are all gone now, replaced by homes that are packed 15 to 20 feet apart from each other.

Oceanside is about an hour’s drive north of San Diego (or two hours south of Los Angeles). The population was about 38,000 in the 1970s; and these days it is about 180,000; a pretty good-sized town. A quadruple increase in just 50 years, and the town is still growing. No, multiplying!

There are lots of fond memories that I have left behind in California — riding the boogie board in and out of the rolling waves; skiing on the diamond trails at Mammoth Mountain (where I got 12 stitches in my forehead from a downhill racing accident); catching my first bass deep-sea fishing; water-skiing for the first time; winning my first tennis match.

I enjoyed so many activities that I would never have done living in Hong Kong. I did not have many regrets when I left Hong Kong, but leaving California was grueling.

I took a drive to visit my old college, and was totally shocked by the new landscape. Instead of rolling hills of nice plants, shrubs and wildflowers, they are all replaced by townhomes, condos and subdivisions of homes.

The main administration building still stands, but the interiors have all been remodeled. A lot of new buildings have been added, but the old student center where I used to hang out is still there. Except for the few maintenance workers, the whole place was vacant because of the virus.

Even though everything happened 50 years ago, somehow, I remember all the details — my first day of school, the beginning of an unknown destiny, of a venture that I didn’t know what would take place next, and how it would end someday.

As I hadn’t found a place to stay yet, I carried everything I owned on my first day to school, (yes, my guitar and five pieces of luggage, as I lost one on the way). Then a miracle happened, the executive secretary of the president heard my pleading story and told me that I could stay with her family for a while till I found my own place. The miracle continues and continues to this day, California dreaming became a reality.

My family keeps asking me to move back to the area. I have to admit that the idea pops up quite a few times, but after living in the Northwoods, where the rainbow ends; who in their sane mind would want to do that?

I have to admit the weather in Southern California is very nice, and the bitter winter at home is unbearable sometimes (well, most of the time). But the quality of life in the Northwoods is beyond compare.

I am so used to driving for miles and not running into anybody; the traffic in California is worse than downtown Minneapolis. Being a turtle with no sense of direction, I always follow the speed limit; well, maybe 5-6 miles over the limit sometimes. I would be in panic mode when cars just zoom past me. What’s the hurry?

When I was living by the ocean, I used to get fresh-caught fish all the time, at a very reasonable price — mahi-mahi, yellowtail, swordfish, tuna, grouper and more. I just fired them on the grill, or saute them with garlic lemon butter. With a glass of Chenin Blanc or Chardonnay, that’s simple dinner at its best.

I never had to buy lemons, as there are lemon trees growing in the backyard, together with oranges, apples, avocados and plums … fruit trees love California weather. Apparently, a lot of folks feel the same, and all decide to migrate here.

New homes are sold while still in construction. Developers are busy searching for new land for more homes. Needless to say, that drives the prices of homes way, way up.

Depending on the area, the startup price for a standard home (three bedrooms, two baths) is around $300,000 to $500,000. I told my family that as much as I love them, and as much as I enjoy the California weather, even if we sold everything that my wife and I own and moved to California, we could only afford to buy a kitchen and a bathroom, and that’s it.

Plus, instead of waking up and looking at the lake and listening to the birds flying above, we would be looking at the neighbors’ homes. No, I am not interested in the neighbors’ conversation, or what they are wearing for the day. Moreover, I find it hard to believe that vegetables grown here in California are more expensive than in the marketplaces in the Northwoods. Unbelievable!

Yes, there are many activities that I miss about California, but, my wife and I are so spoiled living in the Northwoods. We can always hop on a plane and go for a visit, but the Northwoods is our home for a very long, long time. Yes, we can always dream about living in California, but we’d rather enjoy the precious moments of living in reality, where folks are warm and kind, and living is easy.