



Ever thirsty for knowledge, he plumbs history for tales

It is uncertain whether Alvin Yee is familiar with the works of British philosopher Alan Watts, although given the reach of Yee's curiosity, it certainly wouldn't be a surprise.

It was Watts, an early purveyor of Eastern philosophy in the West, who once opined that "the only interesting people are interested people." By such calculation, Watts would almost certainly consider Yee a most interesting person.

His unassuming professional life as an insurance salesman notwithstanding, Yee, 62, is a perpetual student of the world, a tireless gatherer of facts and the arcane stories that undergird them.

Yee, a graduate of Roosevelt High School and the University of Hawaii, said his interest in history was sparked when he spent a year during the 1970s working in U.S. Sen. Hiram Fong's office in Washington, D.C.

While there Yee met scores of people with connections direct and indirect to the historic movements of the day. He also spent much time immersing himself in the history of the city, even tracing the path of John Wilkes Booth's escape from Ford's Theatre.

More recently Yee visited Hong Kong, where he witnessed history in the making with the so-called Umbrella Revolution.

"Wherever I go, I like to observe and learn," Yee says.

One of Yee's favorite stories involves his father, a shipyard worker who had always insisted that the bombing of Pearl Harbor began at 9 a.m., not 7:48 a.m. as typically recorded in official reports.

Yee's father had the day

off and was buying a chicken when, right around 9 a.m., a police officer approached him, informed him of the attack and ordered him off the street.

Yee's father returned home, picked up his lunch pail and boarded a train to head to the shipyard. As the train passed the cane fields near Middle Street, the conductor spotted a Japanese plane and ordered everyone off the train. When the plane passed, Yee's father re-boarded, only to discover that someone had stolen his lunch pail.

"That's where he always ended the story — with someone taking his pail," Yee says, laughing.

Through his own research, Yee found out that local attorney and Speaker of the Territorial House Roy Vitousek Sr. had been flying an airplane that morning and had witnessed part of the attack. Vitousek flew to downtown Honolulu to alert police, who then mobilized — around 9 a.m. — to warn people like Yee's father to clear the streets.

He also figured out that the plane the conductor had spotted was likely piloted by Mitsuo Fuchida, the Japanese captain who led the first wave of attack and then circled the skies over Honolulu to assess the damage.

"It's the connections that make it interesting," he says.

These days, Yee continues his explorations into history through his weekend work as a docent for the Pacific Aviation Museum and regular visits to Hamilton Library.

It's a hobby," Yee says. "Some people collect stamps. Some people work on cars. I collect stories."

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