

# Yo-yo champion, with strings to Victoria

BY JOHN MACKIE, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MARCH 14, 2009

Harvey Lowe: taught yo-yo to a future king.

**Photograph by:** Ian Smith, Canwest News Service, CanWest News Service

They called Harvey Lowe a Chinatown legend, but that was something of an understatement.

Lowe had Canada's first Chinese radio show, was a nightclub fixture from the 1950s and '60s at clubs like the Marco Polo and the Smilin' Buddha in Vancouver, and a restaurateur who was involved with Chinatown hot-spots like the Bamboo Terrace, the Kingsland and the Asia Gardens.

He was also the doorman at one of Chinatown's gambling dens, taught Julie Christie how to smoke opium for the movie McCabe and Mrs. Miller and was once a regular on the Smothers Brothers TV show.

But his main claim to fame was as a yo-yo player. In September 1932, Lowe won the World Yo-Yo Championship in London. He took a \$4,600 prize, and did yo-yo exhibitions around Europe.

He visited the Eiffel Tower so often the guards would let "the little China boy" in for free. His manager insured his hands with Lloyds of London (as a gimmick: his hands were insured only for a day), and he taught the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII) yo-yo tricks.

"Somebody has a picture of him playing yo-yo with me, the royal

photographer," Lowe said in a 2003 interview. "We tried to get that picture, but damnit they wouldn't give it to us, because we wanted to use it for advertising."

Lowe died Wednesday at St. Paul's Hospital. He was 90.

Teaching yo-yo to a future king was a far cry from his childhood in Victoria, where he was born on Oct. 30, 1918, the 10th child of Lowe Gee Quai and Ming Yook.

His father was one of three brothers who set up tailor shops on Government Street in the 1890s. Through a bizarre immigration mix-up, all three were given the same English first name, Charlie, but were given different last names: Lowe, Hope and Wu.

Lowe's father died when he was three, and his mother supported the family by sewing. He was largely brought up by his father's concubine or mistress, who lived in the same house as the rest of the family.

"The Chinese want sons, so [my father] had a concubine," he said, noting that his mother had eight girls but only two sons.

"Imagine, both of them were living under the same roof. But they got along good. The concubine was the one that looked after me. The first mother gave birth to 10, and I had one brother from the concubine, so I was number 11."

Harvey's fortune changed during the continental yo-yo craze of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1931, Lowe bought his first yo-yo for 35 cents, and was soon winning local contests.

He was so good, promoter Irving Cook offered to take him to London,

England. Lowe won the World Yo-Yo Championship on Sept. 12, 1932 at the Empire Theatre in London. At the height of his yo-yo powers, he figures he could do 2,000 tricks with his Cheerio yo-yo, which is now in the National Yo-Yo Museum in Chico, Calif.

In 1934, he returned to Victoria and high school. But his mother sent him to Shanghai in 1937 so he could learn to write Mandarin. He lived through the Japanese occupation during the Second World War, but in 1949 left China when Mao Tse-tung's Communists took over.

Back in Vancouver he got a job as a doorman at the Dye Ning gambling club. In the early 1950s he opened the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret on Hastings, and in the 1960s he was stage manager at the Marco Polo, one of Vancouver's top nightclubs.

In 1995, he had surgery to deal with a brain tumour, "like a small golf ball." Taking the tumour out was deemed too risky, so doctors "cleaned up" his brain the best they could in a 10-hour operation.

The surgery was successful, but left a lingering problem -- memory loss. Lowe coped with it the best way he knew how: by doing yo-yo tricks. And after a month, his memory returned.