

A Visit to City Lore's Archives

BY SETH ORREN SCHONBERG

In September 2022, City Lore, located in Lower Manhattan, had a visitor who told us that she believed we might have a photograph of her mother in our archives. The image that she was looking for showed her mother working at their family-owned vegetable stall in New York City's Chinatown, shortly after her parent's immigration from Hong Kong in the 1970s. Fortunately, she knew who had taken it.

In the City Lore Archive, there are three long, lateral filing cabinet drawers dedicated to the *Ethnic USA Collection* of photographs

taken from 1971–1983 by Katrina Thomas (1927–2018). Thomas was an independent photographer, who in 1968, was hired by New York City Mayor John Lindsay to capture the initiative, “Streets in Play.”¹ In 1971, she returned to photographing New York City life, this time covering ethnic communities through the lens of cultural and religious events. She documented a range of festivals, parades, religious ceremonies, street scenes, family and holiday celebrations, and folk music and dance performances. The collection provides

evidence not only of the diversity of neighborhood, ethnic, and immigrant life in the City, but is also an important documentation of the rise of ethnic identification and heritage celebrations that took place across the United States in the 1970s. The communities captured in these images were in the midst of an expansion, thanks to the Hart–Celler Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which inaugurated a new era of immigration from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean. Thomas generously contributed the collection to City



Mother of family working at the family-owned vegetable stall on the corner of Mulberry & Canal St., Chinatown, NY, in April 1976. Photograph by Katarina Thomas, *Ethnic USA Collection*, City Lore Archive.



Daughter with father and mother during their visit to City Lore, viewing slides in the Katrina Thomas *Ethnic USA Collection*. Photograph by Seth Orren Schonberg.

Lore in 2002, before she retired, and we have stewarded it ever since.

However, the collection consists of 5,000 color slides (in addition to a number of prints and many more negatives), approximately 550 of which are dedicated to the Chinatown community. In order to find the photograph in question I needed more information to go off of!

Remarkably, our visitor told us that she had discovered the photograph in question while reading her third grade social studies textbook! While sitting in class at Transfiguration Catholic School in the mid-1980s, she turned to page 35 of *Holt Social Studies: Communities* (©1983 Holt, Rinehart

and Winston, Publishers) and saw the photograph of her mother. She has held onto the textbook this entire time, knowing that at some point she would want to find out more. In our visitor's own words:

My parents are now in their late 70s, and I am in search for everything to document their amazing journey. Everyone has a great immigration story somewhere in their history. I am fortunate enough to be generationally close enough to this story to have heard first accounts of the myriad of trials and tribulations that bring them to today.

Our visitor shared with us her family's journey to New York City:

Growing up in Communist China on the wrong side of politics, my mom's side of the family was left starved and persecuted. She found herself swimming from China to Hong Kong to escape and to find ways to feed her starving family back in China. My dad sailed the seven seas to find the place where he would set roots and make his money. With just \$11 and the clothes on his back, he left his coolie job behind on a merchant ship in New York City. Amazingly, these two were childhood sweethearts back in China but were only able to communicate through letters throughout their 10 years apart. I have every single one of these letters and have treated them like my precious treasures.

Since the image in her textbook was credited to Thomas, she found out about a photography exhibit at the Arsenal Gallery in New York City's Central Park, entitled "Streets In Play: Katrina Thomas, NYC Summer 1968," which ran through the summer of 2022. There, she was pointed in City Lore's direction and, after checking our web page, came to us.

With a photograph of the textbook page in hand, I was able to confirm that we did have that image in our collection, and better yet, it was one in a series of 10 of her mother and their vegetable stall on the corner of Mulberry & Canal Streets taken in April 1976. We scheduled an appointment, and she returned with her elderly mother and father. In City Lore's gallery space, I set up a light table and brought out to the family three slide pages (each page holding 20 slides) for them to peruse.

Looking over the slides through a magnifying glass, the father found photographs of himself working alongside his wife at their vegetable stall, and after a moment

the elderly couple, with their daughter's help translating, were excited to point out to me a photograph of their daughter as a baby, no more than a year old, strapped to their mother's back! Across another slide page, they found six more images of their family working at their stall. It turns out that these additional photographs were taken later the same year, in August 1976, when Katrina Thomas stopped at their stall on her way from photographing the Chinatown Cultural Festival, in Manhattan's Columbus Park.

Despite the long and dangerous paths that brought this family from China to New York City, the inspiration behind an intrepid photographer's wandering through Chinatown, the various connections and serendipities that led to a captured moment being shared and rediscovered, and ultimately the location of the photograph here at City Lore, the story is not yet over. Following the family's visit, they asked me to digitize the slides so that they may be printed and hung on the elderly couple's

apartment walls. We were happy to comply, and I expect these images will now help share the family history for years to come. I am honored to have played my part in their story and, after all, this is what archives live for. ▼

Note:

1. "Streets In Play: Katrina Thomas, NYC Summer 1968." <https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/central-park/events/2022/08/23/streets-in-play-katrina-thomas-nyc-summer-1968>

Seth Orren Schonberg is Archivist at City Lore where he helps catalog and preserve the New York City urban quotidian. He has a background in music archiving and exhibit curation, and is currently pursuing his MLS at CUNY Queens College. Photo courtesy of the author.



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