

ON JULY 18, 1965, WHEN I WAS 12 YEARS old, my Aunt Ada called from Hong Kong, where my father was on a business trip, to break the news that he had passed away. The next day, telegrams flooded our home, and my dad's picture was on the front page of every Chinese and English newspaper in Hong Kong and North Borneo (now a state of Malaysia), where we lived at the time. The headlines read: **TENNIS GREAT GORDON LUM BO WAH DIES OF HEART ATTACK.**

Thirty years later, I found myself wishing that I had copies of those condolences and newspaper articles when my son, Lester, was assigned a high-school research project on his fam-

Wimbledon, and the other competitions were true.

My hand and heart stopped when we reached Page 333. There we found a listing under "Second Round, 1928" that read: "USA d. China 5-0, Kansas City: G.M. Lott d. P. Kong 6-0, 6-0, 6-0, and d. G. Lum 6-3, 6-2, 6-0; J.F. Hennessey d. Lum 6-3, 6-4, 6-0, and d. Kong 6-1, 6-0, 6-1; W.T. Tilden-W.F. Coen d. Kong-Lum 6-2, 6-1, 6-3." Here was evidence that my dad had indeed played—and against the great Big Bill Tilden.

"Wow," the kids said. "Granddad was famous!"

I leaned back in my chair. Tears welled up in my eyes. "Yes, he was," I whispered. "Yes, he was."

When we returned home, I decided to find out more about my father's tennis past. I dug up some old black-and-white photographs, one with my dad and a playing partner in tennis attire. Was the other player Bill Tilden? No, I later determined, but my quest had merely begun.

During a visit I'd made to see my mother in Vancouver, B.C., I found that she had saved many photos of my father. In one shot, he was standing next to Vinnie Richards, an American who won seven Grand Slam doubles titles. Richards, the boy wonder of his era (he played with Tilden in the

U.S. Nationals when he was 15), died at age 56 in 1959, the same year he entered the Tennis Hall of Fame. My father, too, was in his 50s when he died.

Although a stroke limited my mother's ability to talk to me about Dad's accomplishments, she had written a chronology of his life several years earlier. This helped me learn a lot more about him, for my memories, while vivid, were limited. I recalled

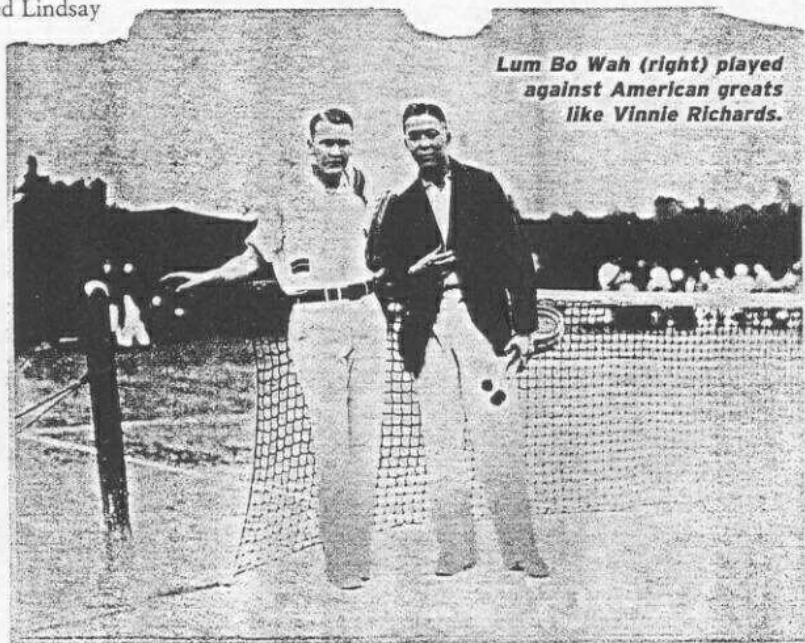
MY DAVIS CUP DAD

Long after her father's death, a daughter revives his memory—and his proud tennis legacy. By Lillian Lum Tsai

ily history. Though I had previously told Lester and his younger sister, Lindsay, that the grandfather they never knew was a famous Chinese tennis player, our Beaverton, Ore., home displayed little proof of it. My mother had saved neither trophies nor clippings, and the few photographs in my possession weren't sufficient to validate my claim. Plus, I had never expressed much interest in Dad's career.

The night before Lester's report was due, he asked Lindsay and me to go to the library with him. We weren't hopeful of finding anything about Gordon Lum (his Westernized name). After all, it was so many years ago, he wasn't from this country, and he wasn't exactly an international household name.

We scanned the library computer for tennis books. Perhaps there was one on the history of Davis Cup; it seemed a logical place to start. Lester ran a search that produced *The Story of the Davis Cup* by Alan Trengove. We found the book, and the three of us snuggled into a study desk. Before I started flipping the pages, I calculated that Dad would most likely have played Davis Cup in the late 1920s. With my teenage children peering over my shoulder, I pored over the book, looking for any mention of China or Lum. As we neared the end of that decade, I put my hand over Lindsay's while she carefully traced each line. I began to tremble. Perhaps my father had exaggerated his past. I started to wonder whether all of the stories he and my mother had told me about Davis Cup,



Lum Bo Wah (right) played against American greats like Vinnie Richards.

serving as a ball girl for him at a club in North Borneo, and how he taught me to write in English, using a stick to trace words in the sand on a beach. I remembered that when he was on a business trip (as he often was), he sent letters to my mother, brother, and me. They began, "Darling Lillian, Kai Ming, and Mommy, . . ." My mother never let me forget that my name always came first.

GORDON LUM BO WAH WAS BORN IN Melbourne, Australia, in 1906. His parents had migrated Down Under to publish Australia's first Chinese-language newspaper, and that's where he learned tennis. International Tennis Federation records show that he played in the 1926 and '27 Australian Championships, reaching the quarterfinals in the latter year.

It was around this time that my father met Lee Wei Tong, a touring Chinese soccer player who would help initiate Dad's move to China. During the next decade, Dad captured every major tennis championship in China.

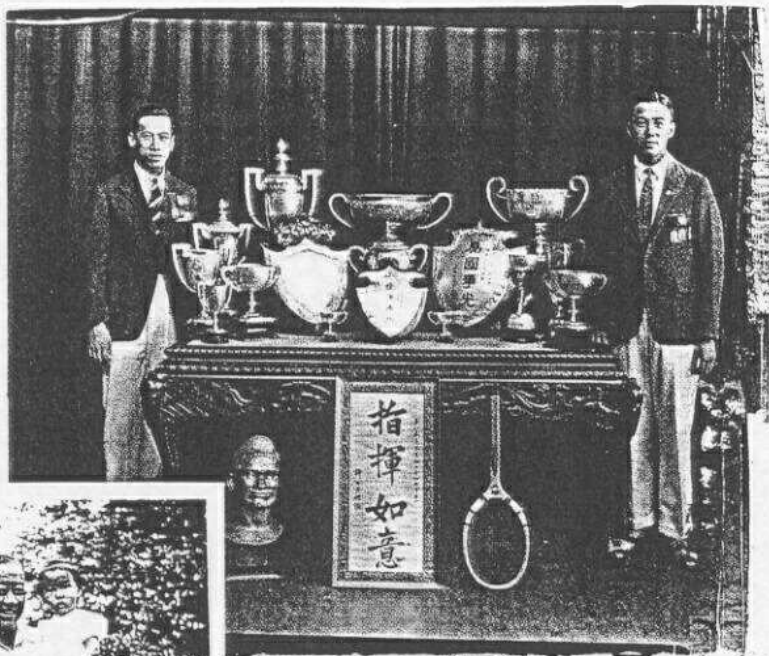
As my children discovered at the public library, their grandfather also competed on the 1928 Chinese Davis Cup team. Eight years later, at the age of 30, he played in his first Wimbledon, losing in the first round in singles and the second round in doubles. No shame there: The 6-1, 6-2, 6-4 doubles defeat was to the U.S. team of Jack Crawford, winner of six Grand Slam singles and seven Grand Slam doubles titles, and Adrian Quist, who during one particularly fruitful stretch won 10 consecutive Australian doubles titles.

Dad befriended many famous Chinese people when he and his first wife, May, lived in Tientsin and Shanghai. He also reportedly played tennis with the last emperor of China, Pu Yi. (It's not as far-fetched as it might seem: In Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*, there's a scene in which Pu Yi plays mixed doubles on a red clay court in the Forbidden City.)

Tennis saved Dad a lot of suffering, and perhaps even his life, during World War II. His best friend was tortured by the Japanese—forced to drink gallons of water until he was severely bloated, after which soldiers jumped on his stomach—but a Japanese general spared my father the same fate because he wanted to learn how to play tennis. Dad later fled penniless to Hong Kong, where May died of cancer, leaving him alone to raise their son, Raymond.

While playing tennis at the Hong Kong Chinese Racquet Club, Dad met my mother, Isobel Choi, an avid player. She, too, had been widowed. It was at this club several years later that my father taught me how to hold a racquet. He made sure that I had the best coaching available; he also took me to compete in track-and-field races, timed them, and checked my form as I ran and

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Lum Bo Wah (above right, with a Davis Cup teammate) was one of the premier players in China during the 1920s and '30s, and a loving father to Lillian (left).



jumped in bare feet on the soft grass.

Dad had to stop playing tennis once angina settled into his chest. I was too young to understand the seriousness of his illness,

although I do recall nights when he would slip a pill into his mouth and stand in front of the air conditioner. At those times, it was my job to bring him a little hot tea and sit near him until he felt better.

In a letter dated June 15, 1965, Dad wrote that he had gotten some more medicine and was feeling stronger. But just a month later, I flew to Hong Kong to attend his funeral.

After Dad's death, my mother encouraged me to play tennis with her, but I refused. Tennis—my father's first love—was too vivid and painful a reminder of his absence.

"After Dad's death, I refused to play anymore. Tennis—my father's first love—was too vivid and painful a reminder of his absence."

But finally, at the age of 30, I decided to take some lessons. Once I started hitting again, Dad's early instruction came rushing back to me. I haven't put the racquet down since. Through tennis, I've discovered that I'm fiercely competitive. I captain my own 4.0 USTA league team and volunteer at local tennis events.

Lester and Lindsay took up tennis at ages 8 and 6, respectively. Neither was excited about the game initially, but at 12, Lester caught the bug. He started taking private lessons and worked his way up to the No. 2 singles position on his high school team. Lindsay initially preferred soccer and basketball, but after suffering a knee injury, she turned to tennis during her freshman year of high school. She was a natural, making the varsity team just two months after getting into the game and eventually earning the No. 1 spot on the squad and a sectional ranking. She even wrote a poem about the sport, declaring that "the love of tennis has to come from your soul."

My sentiments exactly. Tennis great Gordon Lum Bo Wah never met his grandchildren, but I believe his spirit lives within them. And it once again resides in his Darling Lillian. ●