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

**My 15 seconds of fame**

Would you believe it if I told you that I was actually in front of a movie camera once? Not just standing in front of the camera, mind you, I was actually being filmed.

No, I wasn’t the big-time movie star, but I was an extra in a commercial. Let me tell you that it was quite an interesting experience. I never imagined that there’s so much work involved in a 15-second commercial.

Years ago, I was working on a consulting project in Los Angeles. It was a Korean restaurant that wanted to fine-tune their operation systems so they could expand. My job was to help them finalize and standardize all the recipes and manuals and set up weekly profit and loss statements so the owner could figure out exactly how his cash flow was.

It was amazing that he had all these figured out in his head long before and had run the business successfully for years; now he realized that in order to grow and expand the business, he needed to have standardized systems and control programs so he could hire and train new managers and employees. I gladly obliged and the owner and I have become great friends.

While I was working in the dining room one day, a bunch of “talent searchers” came to the restaurant and asked to see the owner. In his absence, I boldly asked them just how I could help them. To make a long story short, they were actually looking for extras who were Asian and could speak English to appear in a commercial.

I think it was Delta Airlines that wanted to open a direct route from Los Angeles to Seoul and they wanted to create a commercial that would appeal to the Korean market. The shooting day happened to be my off day from the restaurant, so I told the agent that I would gladly do it. What the heck, for a six-hour working day, I would get $300. So, I was on my way to join the movie industry, ha-ha!

I reported promptly at 8 a.m. on the shooting day, wearing “some nice clothes” as instructed. Holy smokes, there were 20 or more people already at the location. All wearing nice clothes. But there were two gentlemen who were wearing suits and ties, looking like successful businessmen. I was told that they were the stars, and would get paid more.

The director showed up after we had breakfast (I was told that as a union rule, all meals should be provided for the workers). Being a “worker,” I sure took advantage of their hospitality. As extras, we were just background accompaniment and we could do whatever we wanted — read a book, chat with the neighbor sitting next to us, or take a nap. Act like you are a passenger, that what’s we were told to do (and that was the full script).

The setting was the same as in any movie involving airplanes — it does make you feel like you are inside an airplane, but it was just a stage. Ahh, movie magic. We were flying ‘first class,’ the only way to fly! I never knew a 15-second commercial would take so much time … and with so many people involved!

First, these two “arrogant businessmen” who acted like they owned the world; then the two “humble stewardesses,” one a blonde, the other an Asian woman; the camera crew, sound crew, lighting crew and tech crew; and of course, us extras. I bet there were 40 people or more on the set, each one ready to move when the director barked his order.

After 20 times of repeating the same line by the blonde stewardess — “Ahn yuen ha sae yau?” (“How are you?” in Korean) with a smile, we took a break for lunch and continued doing the same afterward. The director kept cutting without giving explicit reasons why. He was finally satisfied after everyone was totally exhausted, except us extras, as many of us started napping. Now I understand why even though the movie industry is so glamorous, it is indeed a rough and tough business. Especially with all the political elements involved.

I don’t think the commercial even showed my face. Who knows, I might have been taking a nap in the background. I don’t think the commercial was ever aired in the States, either, as it was an ad to promote the new air route in Korea. But hey, I hope someone in Korea did see me napping and snoring.

Would I do it again? You bet. Not only did I get paid for doing nothing (a new concept) but I also got to eat great food catered by a well-known chef. After that experience, knowing that it is the union rule, feed the extras, I would be flabbergasted every time I saw tons of people on the screen appearing on any movies — “Oh, my word, just how many extras are they feeding?” I would think. How much would it have cost? And no wonder the budget for making a movie keeps skyrocketing. Think of all the extras in “Lord of the Rings.” Lordy, it would take three days just to feed them before filming took place.

So, after a brush of fame with the movie industry, I’ll look for other ways for more fame, and hopefully, more fortune.

After all these years, I’m still looking.