

We are standing in the ruins of Mr. Lee's home.

Mr. Lee built his home without sawing boards, without piercing nails, without pounding a hammer.

It was built in silence and without violence.

His home - a fantastical creation of carefully chosen treasures from the streets of this city, all lovingly knotted together with brightly colored ribbons and cloth - was not simply his shelter from the elements. It was his spiritual sanctuary, his temple.

Every morning he began the day with a meditation upon his temple. He was often seen sitting on his roof painstakingly retying, rearranging and adding to the visual feast of images, speaking all the while in a mixture of Cantonese and Spanish.

He would write Chinese characters in volumes on the skids and cardboard and mattresses that graced the outer walls of his temple.

Names, many names, invitations to queens and messages to beholders were the occasional translations.

Once satisfied with his work, he would leave to return again at dusk.

He always carried with him a bag of precious belonging -- dozens of snapshots of smiling people, religious symbols, remnants and discards from the lives of others, and five hand-made, hand-written passports speaking of hundreds of wives, thousands of children and many more grandchildren.

Mr. Lee had no family here that we know of. We learned from him one day that he was born in China, grew up in Cuba and fled to this country during the revolution. Did he have to leave his family behind - mother and father, wife and children? Did he dream of the day he would be reunited with them? Was his heart full of them?

We were his neighbors here. We came to the Hill as artists wanting to erect a memorial to those massacred at Wounded Knee and to the disenfranchised of today.

We had come to learn and to explore our own lives within a structure that was also both home and temple to a people once. A people whose body of knowledge and wisdom was so great that it should have saved the world. Instead, it was decimated by the lethal combination of arrogance, greed and ignorance.

And it just never ends, does it?

Mr Lee, you taught me the meaning of the word artist. I will strive all my life to incorporate what you have taught me about patience, purity of purpose and devotion to the truths we carry with us somewhere in our hearts.

The knots you forged extended far beyond the confines of your temple. The power of your bonds brought the three of us and others together. It united your other neighbors who were proud to show off your creations to the many people who shared the fascination with your incredible home and wanted to know the man who built it.

You quietly created your own world amongst your neighbors here on the Hill - possibly the only community anywhere that was able to welcome and coexist with an extraordinary soul such as you.

Nick Fracaro
Margaret Morton
Gabriele Schafer



THEY REMEMBER: Teepee poles frame mourners for Yo Poi Lee.

JIM HUGHES DAILY NEWS

Shantytown family honors one of its own

By DANIEL HAYS

Daily News Staff Writer

Occupants of the shantytown beside the Manhattan Bridge bade farewell to a dead resident yesterday with a memorial as unusual as the place he lived.

The ceremony for fire victim Yo Poi Lee, as he was sometimes known, was staged by an artist and photographer standing on the ashes of the hut where Lee died. Their tribute came as authorities charged a second man in his death.

Lee was celebrated by documentary photographer Margaret Morton as an artist in his own right. She remembered him for building a novel dwelling, "a temple," bedecked with messages in Chinese characters and knotted together with string.

As residents stood in a circle, artist Gabrielle Schafer, one of the builders of a teepee that stands in the shantytown, placed three oranges and a rock from Crazy Horse Mountain on the charred ground.

"We've got to keep family together and we'll all find gold," she urged residents of the area known as The Hill.

Schafer, who calls her teepee a tribute to native Americans and "disenfranchised people," had announced she would commemorate Lee by burning the teepee. Advised that it was part of a crime scene and could not be destroyed, she canceled the plan.

A spokesman for the Manhattan district attorney's office said Gerald Fossen, 31, of Catherine Slip, was



Yo Poi Lee

charged yesterday with murder and arson for allegedly directing another person to torch Lee's dwelling May 29.

On June 1, a convicted drug dealer, Nelson Diaz, 24, of Mott St., was charged with setting the fire. No motive was given.

Residents said Lee was an innocent victim whose home was torched by drug dealers with a grudge against another Hill dweller. Police said the investigation is continuing.

Lee was also remembered at a service in Brooklyn at House of the Lord Pentecostal Church led by the Rev. Dr. Melvin Walker.