

CHAPTER

5

Founding of The Old Frees' Association, Singapore

HOW IT ALL BEGAN



An Old Frees' dinner in Singapore, 1950.



Old Frees in Singapore, 1950s.

The Old Frees' Association, Singapore (OFAS) has a long history. According to a report on 22 October 1952 of *The Straits Times*, an inaugural dinner of the Old Frees' Association was held on 21 October.

AW Frisby, chairman of the Public Services Commission and a former teacher at Penang Free School was elected as its first patron. Voting was also held for office bearers. Tan Ah Tah was elected president, Arthur A Sandosham vice-president, Chan Kok Chin secretary and Khoo Sian Wah treasurer. Committee members voted in included Ibrahim Basham, Chee Swee Leng, Lim Ewe Hin, Leng Yin Choo and Yeoh Bock Choon.

Three years later, in 1955, Tan Ah Tah was to become the first Asian to be appointed to the High Court in Singapore. He had won a Queen's Scholarship in 1924 at Penang Free School to study law at Cambridge University.

Vice-president Arthur Sandosham was then chairman of the Department of Parasitology at the King Edward VII College of Medicine, the forerunner of the medical faculty of the University of Singapore and later the National University of Singapore.

OFFICIAL REGISTRATION TAKES PLACE

Although OFAS was first launched in 1952, certified records show that it was actually registered as a society only some 10 years later on 9 May 1962.

It is interesting to note that Tan Ah Tah who was serving as president then was re-elected at the annual dinner held on 21 October 1962 to mark the OFAS's formal presentation.

Recalling the occasion,

lawyer Kok Weng On said, "The president, Justice Tan Ah Tah, called the formal gathering to order and separated the Old Frees from their spouses and guests. He then addressed the Old Frees and thus began the annual general meeting of The Old Frees' Association, Singapore. The AGM was over in less than an hour with the new committee voted in."



The Straits Times, 22 October 1952 (left) and 28 October 1966.

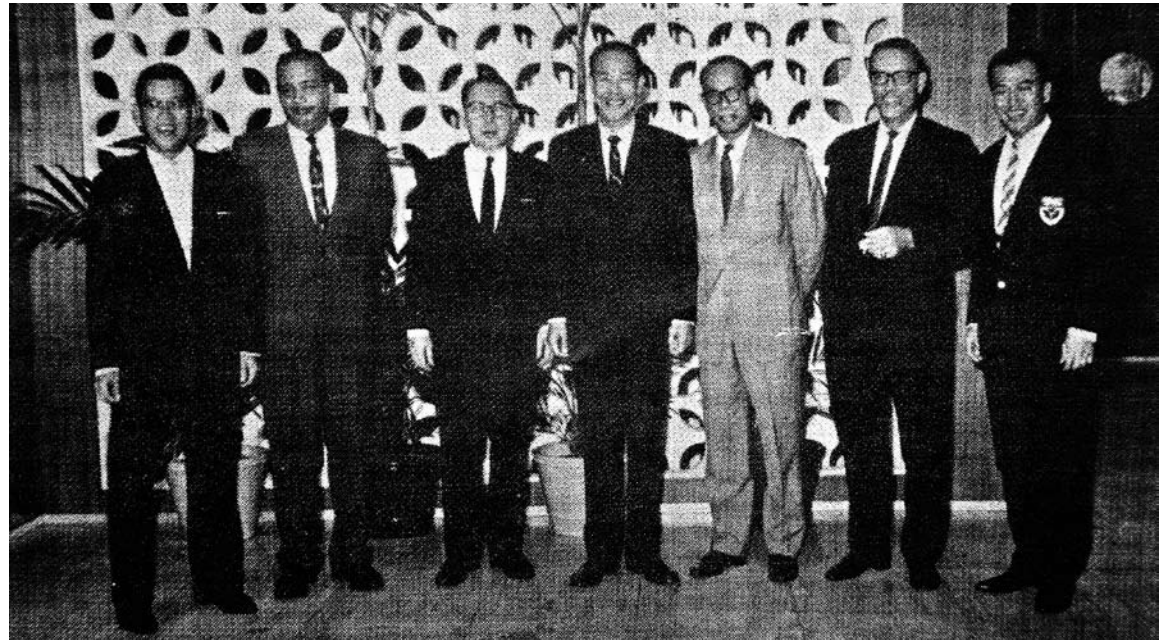
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Thus, it is likely that in the interim decade between 1952 and 1962, OFAS had been informally holding their annual general meetings and having get-togethers.

Members of OFAS in its early days comprised many prominent members of the Judiciary. They included High Court Judge JWD Ambrose, a Queen's Scholar in 1928 and AV Winslow, then Solicitor-General and Queen's Scholar in 1934.

There was also Wee Chong Jin who became the first Asian to be appointed Chief Justice in Singapore in 1963, which was a break from the tradition of appointing British Chief Justices. He continued to serve as Chief Justice when Singapore became independent in 1965 until his retirement in 1990, making him the longest serving Chief Justice in the Commonwealth.

Weng On and Neo Kim San have shared memories of the early days of OFAS in vividly written essays which are reproduced in the next chapter.



The 1966 Committee, The Old Frees' Association, Singapore. From left: Heah Hock Meng, Justice AV Winslow, Justice Tan Ah Tah, Dr GK Lim, TQ Lim, Ernest Clark and Kok Weng On.

BEACH OUTINGS AND FORMAL CEREMONIES

Another Old Free who also treasures his ties with other Old Frees through OFAS is pioneer optometrist Lim Eam Khoon, better known as EK.

“Almost every year from the time I came to Singapore in 1971, I have attended the OFAS reunion,” he remembers.

“At our first gathering, Tan Boon Teik (Attorney-General since 1965) was there. I remember the beach gathering we had at

a government bungalow by the sea. This would take place once a year with 50 to 60 Old Frees attending, some with their families. We did not bring our children as they were still very young.

“It was a whole day affair and people would swim apart from catching up with one another. It was a pot-luck occasion and my wife would make Penang laksa, which was very popular among all present!”

Through OFAS, EK met Tan Ah Tah who was the brother of his science teacher Tan Ah Fee when he was a Standard 8 student.



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Lim Eam Khoon, "EK"

Retired optometrist

Another Old Free who recalls the gatherings well is architect Tay Lee Soon. He said, "Attending the first Free School dinner was like attending a Cambridge dinner. It was like harking back also to my college days in Melbourne when students had to wear gowns at formal dinners presided over by the principal.

"At our Old Free dinner, we had Ambrose, Tan Ah Tah and Wee Chong Jin occupying pride of place. Many were Queen's Scholars."

For him, the pomp and ceremony accompanying these formal Old Free dinners was befitting of the elite reputation and image of prestige so long associated with Penang Free School.

OFAS GOES CASUAL

Over the years as society became more casual, the proceedings at OFAS's annual general meetings adopted a similarly relaxed tone. Gone were the ties, for instance, that

all Old Frees had to wear previously and members were only required to turn up in smart dress.

Alas, a long-standing tradition of OFAS – the get-together by the seaside – also bit the dust when the bungalows in Changi were demolished to make way for reclamation and the building of a new international airport.

After that, apart from the annual general meeting cum dinner, lunch meetings were held on the last Friday of each month at the now defunct Hotel Phoenix on Orchard Road right into the 1990s.

Annual general meetings were usually held at various function rooms of hotels. In 1988, the introduction of a Penang

food buffet spread at King's Hotel signalled the start of another tradition that is still ongoing today.

Except for one occasion, every annual general meeting has since been held on 21 October at King's Hotel on Havelock Road without fail. It is well attended by Old Frees for whom the lure of tasting true-blue Penang cuisine is too good to miss.

On 21 October 1991, OFAS commemorated the 175th anniversary of Penang Free School with a special dinner at the Concorde Hotel, preceded by its annual general meeting. It was presided by Dr Oh Siew Leong, the then president. The guest of honour was then Chief Justice Wee Chong Jin who was accompanied by

his wife. Speaker of the evening was Dato Haji Zainal Alam bin Haji Zainal Abidin. A commemorative souvenir programme was also produced to celebrate the occasion.

OFAS DEEPENS ITS PENANG CONNECTION

Since the 1990s, OFAS has reached out to its members and also to its alma mater in other ways, such as organising sporting tournaments like hockey and golf with other alumni associations in Penang like Chung Ling Alumni and St Xavier's Alumni, holding joint talks and activities with these alumni groups in Singapore, sponsoring book prizes to be awarded to its best students, hosting Penang Free School (PFS) students arriving in Singapore to take part in various activities and holding talks/seminars by prominent Old Frees.

In June 2014, OFAS sponsored a PFS team of six boys accompanied by Abdul Said, Co-Curriculum Head to Singapore



OFAS sponsored the PFS team to the Singapore Mathematics Olympiad in 2014.

to take part in the Singapore Mathematics Olympiad (SMO) 2014. The Olympiad is an annual event that brings together talented students in Mathematics from Singapore and the region to compete.

The PFS team, which entered in the Open Category, was awarded a SMO Certificate for their participation. A welcome dinner at the Singapore Island Country Club was held for the boys on 4 June giving them an occasion to mingle with OFAS members. OFAS also hosted the PFS Olympiad team to a day of sightseeing on Sentosa island as

part of its four-day trip.

In a nod to the Internet age, under the leadership of Dr Alex Ooi as president, OFAS launched a website in 2010 with the help of Jeff Yeo Nai Kwang and Yeoh Kheng Hock and overseen by then Vice-President Jeevendra Kanagalingam as part of its efforts to extend its reach to Old Frees and expand its database.

A quarterly Penang Dialogue was introduced after its first successful launch on 3 June 2010 featuring then Penang Chief Minister Lim Chong Eu.

COMMEMORATING 50 YEARS OF ITS FOUNDING

2012 was a particularly active year. To fete the 50th year of its formal founding, OFAS organised an anniversary gathering on 21 October that was attended by more than 70 Old Frees. The occasion was worth celebrating for another reason – the speaker at the function was Jalil bin Saad, an Old

Free who had been appointed as headmaster of the school after many years of its administration in the hands of non-Old Frees.

Earlier in the year, on 19 May, OFAS took the initiative to organise a lecture on Wu Lien-Teh at Wawasan Open University in Penang. As one of Penang Free School's most illustrious Old Frees, Wu Lien-Teh is recognised world-wide as the doctor who helped to wipe out the plague in China in the 1930s when he was based in Harbin.

The purpose of the lecture was to lay the groundwork for an international gathering in Harbin in January 2013 co-organised by OFAS in honour of Dr Wu and for Penang to map out a possible Heritage Trail in memory of the good doctor's days in Penang. The talk was also attended by Professor Ye Tian of Harbin Medical University where Dr Wu was attached.

The event, which attracted a crowd of 200, was inaugurated by Penang's Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng.



JMB Hughes addressing a gathering of Old Frees on one of his visits to Singapore.

The OFAS' 50th anniversary commemorative calendar ended on a high note with the Harbin trip of 18 to 20 January 2013 to learn more about Dr Wu Lien-Teh's life and work in China and its relevance in coping with modern diseases.

Later in the year, aspiring doctors in Singapore were introduced to Dr Wu's work. They comprised the Lee Kong Chian (LKC) School of Medicine's inaugural cohort of 54 undergraduates at its campus on Mandalay Road. The presentation on 27 September 2013 was presided by Old Free Dr Jeevendra Kanagalingam, Senior



President of OFAS Alex Ooi (centre) with John Hughes (left), son of JMB Hughes at the launch of the book "The White Crocodile's Tale; My Memoirs" by JMB Hughes, with Jeyaraj Jayarao on 21 October 2014.



First meeting of members of the Adjudication Panel to decide on the contents of The Old Frees' Association, Singapore coffee-table book, Live Free.



OFAS committee members at a dinner held to welcome Old Free and former tennis coach Tan Poh Seng at the Singapore Island Country Club.



OFAS' 50th anniversary ended on a high note with a trip to Harbin to learn about Dr Wu Lien-Teh's life and work in China.

House Tutor of the Wu Lien-Teh House, one of five Houses on the campus named after key medical figures.

LKC School of Medicine was also presented with a copy of the documentary on *Wu Lien-Teh Plague Fighter* produced by MediaCorp and a copy of his book, *Memories of Wu Lien-Teh* presented by the Wu Lien-Teh Society.

Greater awareness of Dr Wu's work continued with an international conference and exhibition held a year later at the Singapore Chui Huay Lim Club on 5 April

2014. Organised by the Singapore China Friendship Association (SCFA), Wu Lien-Teh Society and LKC School of Medicine together with OFAS, conference speakers included various doctors. Among the guests were Singapore's Minister for Health Gan Kim Yong, Duan Jielong then Ambassador of China to Singapore and Professor KK Phua, President SCFA.

FETING THE 200TH YEAR OF PFS

At its annual general meeting in 2013, OFAS announced its intention to publish



Dr Jeevendra Kanagalingam addressing a conference on the life and work of Dr Wu at Chui Huay Lim Club.

a coffee-table book to commemorate the 200th anniversary of Penang Free School's founding and the 54th anniversary of the formation of the association. The launch of the book in August 2016 will coincide with the introduction of several celebratory events that will culminate with a grand dinner on 21 October 2016 to be held in the school field of Penang Free School to be attended by Old Free alumni groups from around the world. ■



Management Committee 2014/15

President: Dr Alex Ooi Koon Hean
 Vice-President: Mr Cheah Hock Leong
 Hon. Secretary: Mr Gabriel Teh Choo Thok
 Hon. Treasurer: Mr Khaw Teik Kooi

Members: Dr Jeevendra Kanagalingam
 Mr Jeff Yeo Nai Kwang
 Mr Ooi Oon Tat
 Mr Steve Foong Ther Hoei
 Mr Thanneermalai Lakshmanan
 Mr Yeoh Kheng Hock

Hon. Auditor: Dr Tan Yew Oo

Management Committee 2015/16

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 Mr Jeff Yeo Nai Kwang
 Dr Lee Eng Hin
 Mr Steve Foong Ther Hoei
 Dr Tan Yew Oo
 Mr Yeoh Kheng Hock
 Mr Alfred Foo Keat Jeng
 Mr Lim Chong Hoo

Hon. Auditor: Mr Philip Ling Soon Hwa



Old Fries and guests at a Chinese New Year gathering in February 2016.



At the event were Old Fries Khaw Teik Kooi, OFAS Honorary Treasurer, Simon J Pragasam and Lee Eng Hin.



Doing the traditional Prosperity Toss or lo hei.



OFA Singapore Management Committee 2014/15. From left: Yeoh Kheng Hock, Jeff Yeo Nai Kwang, Ooi Oon Tat, Cheah Hock Leong, Alex Ooi Koon Hean, Gabriel Teh Choo Thok, Khaw Teik Kooi, Thanneermalai Lakshmanan and Steve Foong Ther Hoei. Not in picture: Jeevendra Kanagalingam and Tan Yew Oo.