

**Susie Jeu Tonymon**  
**FPP Interview Summary**  
**February 17, 2019**

**Intro**-Cody Besett interviewing Susie Tonymon on February 7, 2019 in her home in Fayetteville, Arkansas and this is for the First Person Plural Project.

CB Beginnings of family in United States?

ST Father [Kay Gin (Chong Wah) Jeu] processed out of Seattle about 1913 and worked for a few years. Father went back to China in 1918 and married mother [Ng Gam Toy Jeu] . Father came back and Chinese Exclusion Act's quota so low. It took until 1926 for mother to be admitted. She brought over oldest brother, Nachon Jeu, but we called him Buck. In 1927, my brother Jack was born. His Chinese name is Na Hum Jeu.

ST I was born in 1928, between Mississippi River flood and Stock Market Crash. Youngest brother, Gum, born in 1929. That completed our family.

CB Earliest memories of area?

ST After (1927) Flood, industries destroyed, or Depression destroyed them. Lumber left Arkansas City.

5 min in

ST Sharecroppers and landowners. Distinct difference. Chinese didn't belong to either society. Father had general merchandise store and fur buying business on side. He also traveled to trade pecans.

CB When did you start work in stores?

ST 5 or 6 years old. Sold candy

CB Clientele for store?

ST Store was more high-end for country town. Items sold on credit to farmers. Regular people in town.

CB Did you hire or have help in family?

ST Usually had cousins lodging with us that could help, mother, and the children

10 min in

ST General store divided into canned goods, dry goods-mother managed that. Back was the meat market

CB Was the store open 7 days a week?

ST Open 7 days a week, but closed at noon on Sunday

CB Anything else you remember about store?

ST Long hours. Store opened about 5am. Cotton choppers came in to buy lunch. Father came on later and stayed until about 10pm.

ST Mother said if studying and reading, we didn't have to work in store.

CB I didn't get your mother's name.

ST Gum Toy. Gum means gold in Chinese.

15min in

CB Can you tell me about your early education and that of your siblings?

ST School was a three-story building that housed all twelve grades. Always in class with one of my brothers. Brother, Buck, didn't know English and was put in closet to keep him quiet! It didn't take him long to catch on (learn English).

ST We didn't want to speak Chinese at that time because we were with our American friends. We had to speak Chinese at the dinner table.

CB How were your experiences in school during that time?

ST We didn't have any trouble in Arkansas City. In Dermott, they were a little late letting Chinese attend school there. Father was good friends with sheriff and doctor of community. We didn't have trouble with discrimination against us. It was the laws already in place. I remember in junior-high, I would see the black professor bring over students. They would get our old schoolbooks. That was how they were discriminated against. We would be called names, but it didn't bother us.

20 min in

CB Were you involved in school activities?

ST Whatever activities in a small school. We didn't have much. I was too small to be very athletic, but we participated in whatever the school offered and whatever time we had. We were expected to go home after school and work in the store.

CB What did you do for entertainment during that time? You can bring up those dances that I've heard about too, if you'd like.

ST In high school, with fellow students, we could go to movies. I was not permitted to date. We would go as a group to the movies. We had our class play and a little prom, but nobody dated back then. As far as my social life with the Chinese community, that's where we had organized some dances with the surrounding towns.

CB Did you go to the ones in Mississippi?

ST Yes, my family started it. We had one at the VFW in Dermott, Lake Village, Pine Bluff, and Marianna. Places where there were several Chinese families. Finally, Mississippi decided to do it too. I have to take a little credit for Arkansas being the leader.

ST We had a drive that was called the China War Relief. The Chinese families in Arkansas established the Chinese Merchants Association of Arkansas. My father was the first president of that organization.

CB Did you have any family members that served?

ST Yes. My brother Buck was old enough. He served in the Navy. That's where he got his citizenship. Chinese that came in as immigrants were not permitted to be citizens of the United States until 1943.

25 min in

CB Do you have any other notable recollections during the World War II era?

ST My brother Jack went into the Merchant Marines. Mother died in 1944 and that changed things in our family. In 1946, I graduated from high school in Arkansas City. I was the only one of my family to graduate in Arkansas City. All the others went off to school somewhere.

ST I went to the University of Arkansas in 1946. I didn't have any trouble gaining admission. As a sophomore, I applied to room with a Caucasian friend of mine. When I came to Fayetteville, I was not placed with my American friend, my Caucasian friend. I was placed with another Chinese girl. I think that was the first discrimination that I found at the college level.

30 min in

CB How was your college experience and living here in Fayetteville at that time?

ST We had an influx of veterans. The housing was short. I had a lot of classes with the veterans. I remember I helped a lot of them in accounting.

CB What was your degree?

ST Had a degree in business, but only attended two years at the University of Arkansas. Transferred to Indiana University for my junior and senior years.

CB What made you go that route?

ST Curious about the rest of the world. Brother graduated from Purdue. Indiana was only other state that I knew about. Knowledge of world was limited.

CB What did you do after graduating?

ST I went back and helped my father. He was by himself and the school was short of teachers. Principal came and asked if I would teach. I was not trained to be a teacher. Teaching is not my forte.

CB How long did you stay there?

ST A couple of years.

CB Did his business close at some point?

ST He stayed in it and turned it over to my brother.

CB Do you go back to that area? (Arkansas City)

ST I went back in 2006 and was so disappointed. We had brick buildings reminiscent of European style and hotels and banks. When I went back in '06, they'd all been torn down. You see just barren land now.

35 min in

CB What did you do after Arkansas City?

ST Back in those days, a woman would get a college degree. If you didn't get married after college, you'd work a couple of years and get married. That was the expectation of my generation. I was lucky enough to have a family and be a stay-at-home mother.

CB You're living where at this point? Are you in Arkansas City?

ST I was married. My husband [Daniel Tonymon] practiced medicine in his home town of Marvell, Arkansas.

CB You are a stay-at-home mom and your husband is practicing medicine-

ST I did the financial part for the family.

CB How would you describe that part of your life?

ST It was a busy time. You'd make house calls. You had a twenty-mile radius from the center of town. You'd make farm/house calls as well. People would expect you to answer the phone 24 hours a day. After about 18 years, we moved to Ft. Worth, Texas. We lived there about forty-one years and now we're in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

CB How many children?

ST Two. A son, Kenneth, a neurosurgeon. I have a daughter, Phyllis, retired as an IT specialist.

CB How did they grow up? Differences from you growing up in Delta area?

ST They had a more privileged life than I did. They attended public school in Marvell. Civil Rights Act affected us in Marvell. Schools desegregated alright, but white citizens formed private school. Son sent to boarding school in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Daughter attended public school until sixth grade. Transferred her over to private school for a couple years and enrolled at Hockaday School in Dallas (Texas) for four years.

40 min in

CB How did your husband, being a doctor, influence your son going into medicine?

ST He is a kind, compassionate person and went with his father on house calls. Ingrained to follow in his dad's footsteps.

CB How about your daughter? Interests growing up, experiences including generational expectations?

ST To have a career. She was interested in exercise health. She decided not to teach or do research. She changed careers.

CB Moving up to Fayetteville, when did that happen?

ST About a year ago. Husband has health problems. Easier for son to take care of us.

CB How have you adjusted to change since you last lived in Fayetteville?

ST I miss friends and active life in Ft. Worth (Texas). Worked with political consultant. Had experience organizing and implementing campaigns. Led to position with Senator Jane Nelson in Texas. I was very good at electing my candidates. Here, I'm not going to do anything that requires a lot of physical energy. I'm just going to enjoy life.

45min in

CB Any areas of your life that we haven't discussed, that would be beneficial?

ST Family's assimilation to American culture has been good. Only vestige of Chinese was the food.

CB Can you tell me about the food?

ST Mother didn't have time to cook much. We grew up eating beans with rice, instead of cornbread. Cooking expanded with television. Knowing techniques of cooking Chinese food, easy to add ingredients and new dishes to menu.

CB Kind of like my dad with his Italian ancestry. His mother and grandmother made these dishes, but he didn't learn how to cook them all and that knowledge sort of died. I didn't know if that was something you experienced?

ST Yeah, could be. My father tried to teach me how to cook after my mother died. He was critical and I didn't like that. He made me stand by him to learn the technique. Once you learn technique, it's easy to do. I try to cook Chinese food for my family a couple times a week.

CB Any other get togethers or reunions of Delta friends or family?

ST One friend lives in Pencil Bluff, Arkansas. We keep up through email. He remarried- childhood sweetheart. They came up for my ninetieth birthday party.

50min in

CB So Buck took over grocery?

ST No, Jack, my second brother.

CB Is the grocery still around?

ST Sold to a customer. Had electrical fire and didn't restore it to how it looked in front. We had lived upstairs over store. Father built in 1932, during Depression

CB Impressive able to do that during the Depression.

ST Chinese not allowed to own property because of Chinese Exclusion Act. Friend of sheriff and doctor helped with that.

CB Any other point that you'd like to mention?

ST Never thought family well off. Lived simply. No easy chair to sit in. All we had was straight back chairs until she died. Sat on kitchen table or chairs. Reinforced apple crate—that was your chair. Clothes two sizes too large and then two sizes too small. We were better off than tenant farmers, gave credit, had truck and car.

CB Going to college primarily paid for by father?

ST Oh yes. Didn't work in college, but worked my way up to it. Money there when you get ready to go to college. I knew I was going to college. Many in generation had to get married because family couldn't afford to send them to college.

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