

Mary Yee Interview Summary
First Person Plural
10 March 2018

JB Jo Blatti interviewing Mary Yee on Saturday March 10, 2018 for the First Person Plural project at the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies in Little Rock. Could you say your name and give me a level?

MY Mary Yee

JB Your story starts in Missouri, I understand

MY Laundry in St Louis. Born in St Louis. When I was 14, mother married again. Stepfather was in grocery business.

JB Were you in the city of St. Louis?

MY 1921 South Broadway

JB Living in the East – hand laundries were important

MY Most were Chinese. Mother didn't speak English, Cantonese

JB Were most of the families from the same area China?

MY Cantonese, mostly
Quite a few when I was coming up

JB Did your mother continue the laundry when widowed?

MY With the help of a cousin

JB St. Louis is a long way from Helena – how make she and your stepfather make the connection?

MY Cousin in West Memphis introduced

JB What was it like to move?

MY Really different

5 min in

JB How?

MY Saw more Chinese in Arkansas. I went to Catholic school in St. Louis, public school in Arkansas – senior high

JB Work in the grocery store?

MY In the laundry – I took in clothes, make packages

JB Were you the only child?
MY No - sister and two brothers
JB Your stepfather inherited a family
MY I'm the oldest, then sister and two brothers
JB My sense quite a bit of variation in schooling possibilities for children –
MY Mississippi had it bad – didn't allow Chinese [in public school] Community built boarding school
JB Why Cleveland [Mississippi] such a center?
MY Greenville [Mississippi] alone 30-40 stores up & down the Mississippi River

10 min in

We had a reunion in October 2018, came from everywhere

JB How many Chinese groceries in Helena?
MY Eight groceries there – my stepfather's name was Kay [Wong Gar Kay; mother Mae Joe Kay]
More Joes, Chows than any, also Mrs. Pang, the Youngs, Lous doing business
Only time we got together was birthdays, parties

My generation generally 'ABC' – American Born Chinese
My husband was born in China; his grandmother brought him over
I tease some new friends – FOB – Fresh Off the Boat [actually the plane]

My mother real unhappy first two years here – hated butter – didn't know people

JB Cook Chinese at home maintain other traditions?
MY Parents never really learned English
JB Lead to issues when growing up ?
MY Translated for them
JB Who were principal customers?
MY Mostly black, in the city, close by
JB Thriving concern?

MY [Describes the spread of Chinese groceries that evened out competition] Some in West Helena
One down the street, Cherry Street, most spread out

JB Were there Anglo markets also?

MY Yes. We operated 8 am– 8 pm, closed ½ day Thursday & ½ day Sunday.

JB Your family go to church?

MY Not really
I've been going now

JB Family practice Confucian?

MY My mother did. Mother became Baptist when she moved to California, out in California with an
older community with friends from the Delta
[Notes surprise]

20 min in

JB Get to know customers?

MY Been too long

JB 60-year marriage – based in Mississippi dances?

MY Always had to cross the ferry

JB When? 1950s?

MY Husband with folks from Arkansas City

JB Big Chinese wedding?

MY Well, 200
Brother had 500 invitations. My niece did the multi-dress circa 1966 [Refers to the custom of the
bride marrying in a white Western style wedding dress and changing into an elegant Chinese
gown, usually red, for the reception]

JB What brought you to North Little Rock?

25 min in

MY Husband in service, offered liquor store

JB Did you help?

MY 1997 retired, 65

JB Liquor business –

MY Small, one person could handle

JB Who were customers?

MY Mostly blacks. All cash. Arkansas did not allow credit cards, changed so much.

JB Going back – three siblings
High school educations – Any to college?

MY Two brothers to college – pharmacy school

JB Parents emphasize education?

MY Father older than mother, she was second wife.

JB Same chores, girls & boys?

MY All helped out in the grocery, that's about it

30 min in

JB Caught in the middle of segregated society...

MY Mostly in Mississippi, Dermott that way – really bad, maybe Elaine
Don't know

JB My understanding, much of that changed with WWII alliance [with China]

MY Football Greenville [Mississippi]– would forfeit game

JB Similar stories African American students [see First Person Plural interviews Sloan & Tompkins
re: late 1960s Jonesboro]

When growing up, any dress shop?

MY Yes

JB Hair salon

MY No

35 min in

2011, country club membership in the area

JB Did folks date across color line?

MY Probably
Never dated a white

JB Did folks ever date blacks?

MY Couldn't

JB Been suggested that hard to date among local Delta Chinese – all related

MY More that knew each other too well in the first generation
My children second generation
Daughter married a Caucasian, second generation American

JB What happened to the store in Helena when your parents retired?

MY Closed when they retired, 1970s

40 min in

JB Any Chinese groceries left when your folks closed up?

MY They all retired – some in Mississippi
One or two in Greenville, Clarksdale, Cleveland

JB Anybody in your family in Phillips County?

MY Yes – eye doctor & dentist
Dermott used to have 4-5 groceries. Went down for a funeral

JB Mechanization of crops & leave-taking of manufacturing

45 min in

JB Two children –

MY California & Texas

JB Other places, other opportunities?

JB Think women's opportunities changed in your lifetime?

MY Open to more jobs, opportunities

JB Grandchildren?

MY Granddaughter in public relations toured a place my son had worked

JB Well on their way

MY Youngest wants to teach in college

JB Worked with husband – how balance?

MY Liked working with him
Describes family pattern, had babysitters

50 min in

JB Community activities?

MY No

JB Involved [Delta Chinese] reunions – network

MY Since 2000, I've been on four of them, every 2 years
First to Mexico, Bahamas, East Coast/Canada, Alaska
Haven't gone recently because of husband's situation [medical]

Mostly first & second generation
Some I haven't seen in 50 years

JB I've asked lots of questions. Anything you'd like to add?

MY No – I enjoyed

55 min in

Close