

Mable Suen Owyong
FPP Interview Summary
March 14, 2018

Intro - Jo Blatti interviewing Mable Owyong at her home in Dermott for First Person Plural project, March 14, 2018

JB Downtown, brick business block?

MO Gazebo wall, empty lot next to department store, liquor store, another Chinese store

JB Anchor stores

JB How family got here – grandfather on railroad

MO Grandfather died in China

JB Returned to same village in Canton [province]?

MO Larry [husband, Larry Owyong] bring me that frame on the wall, Daddy's [Yu Gow Suen] history/eulogy
James [Suen] my brother wrote both histories, my mom's, too

5 min in

Reading

Didn't Daddy join his brother that had a store here?

JB Your dad's steamship record Angel Island [California port of entry], came with another man, Dates are right

MO My oldest brother [Chester] used the family name Yee, came from China with my mother
We ended up as Suen [pronounced Sun] because the names transposed upon entry into the U.S.
All the boys gave their sons Yee as middle name

JB Your mother [Chang aka Mary] and oldest brother [Chester] came separately

MO Daddy came first, came back to get her

JB All grew up in Dermott, large family

MO Nine of us

JB Age spread?

MO Two years difference

JB Stair step

10 min in

JB All of you in the grocery?

MO As soon as you could work a cash register

JB What do you remember about working in the store?

MO Mama would say: 'get up '
Stock food, groceries
Principal customers, ladies in town, delivery service
Make out orders, deliver

MO Had a truck , a man, black man did the deliveries

JB Looked like the store was on the railroad track, was that a dividing line – white & black sections town?

MO Yes – now all black neighbors
We're minorities
Our nephew's children still live here

JB How big is Dermott?

MO Maybe 2000

JB When you were growing up ?

MO 1000, but really bustling, couldn't walk the streets on Saturday
Stopped growing cotton

JB I saw two big gins on the way down

MO Closed

15 min in

Lot of cotton past year, lot of corn

JB Most people in agriculture?

MO No – Retired, teachers, prisons, I taught 15 years in juvenile detention

JB Public service

MO A lot work in other towns
A lot of rain, high water, flooded

JB Problem north central Arkansas in spring, marooned?

MO No, the fronts angle up above us

JB I noticed the elementary school

MO High school, too

JB Family history you shared – you brother walked to another town

MO Went to boarding school [Cleveland, MS] still prejudice then
We were the only Chinese, I was salutatorian, Girls' State, sent another girl

JB Did you talk about that with your family?

MO Let it go, no use making
Knew it wasn't right

JB All of you got college educations

MO Parents sacrificed a lot
Daddy was for women's
Elisa Pang from Dumas, her father didn't believe in girl's having education

22 min

JB You all came up at a time when not everybody got a college education

MO We were just thankful
I went to California
My oldest sister had one baby
She needed help
After the next baby, I transferred

25 min in

We married w/ two kids

JB Did you finish your education in California?

MO X-ray technician, part-time, taking calls
Went back & got education degree in Monticello
Retired with 35 years
Had boys in San Jose [California]

JB How met husband?

MO Marysville, California

JB How feel moving to Arkansas?

MO They [parents] retired when we came back

We opened a restaurant in McGehee

JB How balance the kids?

MO 1970s – different directions
Montrose, Dermott private schools

MO Older son Jeff insurance mayor McGehee

JB Met ages ago on telephone – story of Japanese internment research

MO Other son in Little Rock, heart transplant team, runs heart-lung machine
Daughter, Lake Village, has two daughters

30 min in

JB Did you all date?

MO We went to Cleveland & Greenville, Mississippi dances

Our family - Dermott
McGehee
Dumas
Lake Providence

We met each others' kids

Like Elisa [Pang] our families grew up together
They had one for one of us
All of us girls worked in the store

JB Encountered the complaint that 'everybody related' hard to find partners

35 min in

MO Memory of China, relationship
Parents from Shanghai area
Mommy and daddy went back to town
No conveniences
My mother was diabetic, they took her medicine, took her clothes
She came back sick

MO We went back [to Chin] with a tour
Just about everybody had died out

JB Who wrote the family history you shared with me?

MO My daughter. She had to write a paper, interviewed my dad.

JB The history mentions Mississippi, Louisiana for a haircut
MO Went away for just about everything
Most of the time, she [mama] just got things out of the store
JB Could you shop anywhere?
MO Sure, friends with the department store [next door], they were Jewish
JB Go to the hair salon?
Mo Couldn't – too poor

40 min in

Exchange follows about family haircuts

MO This was my mother's [statute of female figure] thought about getting it appraised
JB Goddess of mercy?
Participation in Cleveland, Mississippi reunions among Delta Chinese families?
MO My husband [Larry Owyong] in chemo[therapy]
Went to China with two sisters [get names _____]
All Chinese nice
JB Study Chinese?
MO Momma, Chinese school – not very good at it
Spoke with parents

JB Language spoken at home?

45 min in

MO Cantonese
Mother spoke pretty good English
Daddy 8th grade
JB Father's World War II draft registration found on-line
Beautiful signature [Yee Gow Suen], very literate
MO Second name [Raymond Lee], our uncle

Mother had driver license, got nationalization with Elisa's mother [refers to Elisa Pang's mother in Dumas]

JB The family history refers to a store bombing

50 min in

Family stories about that event?

MO I don't know. Not sure I was born
Could be when Daddy moved the store. Barbecue place there now.

Brief discussion follows of commercial block, Jewish storekeepers and neighbors in Dermott and Dumas

JB Your family and religion?

MO Methodist. Their house two blocks from that church.
He [father] went every Sunday. We went to Sunday school.

JB What about your mom? Confucian?

MO No

55 min in

At home on Sundays – working ? [**check this passage**]

The boys didn't have to work in the kitchen & wash dishes
Other than store work, the boys didn't do anything
We always thought they favored the boys

Momma had a kitchen in the store as well as the house

JB I found some Dermott school pictures 1955

MO Mary in Hawaii, retired, over all the teachers in Honolulu
James, a freshman in high school
I would have been a senior [high school]

JB Particular friends?

MO [Looking at page] Several of these are gone...

JB Football, U of Arkansas Little Rock and Monticello

MO That's the playboy [Gene]. Took several schools

60 min in

JB Get to know the customers much?

MO Same old thing
All groceries, regular grocery items
Whites, we delivered
Lot of blacks, they'd get groceries together and we'd take them and groceries

The ones that had the money supposedly
Lot of these upstanding, they'd pay \$100 and the bill would be \$200

JB The British aristocrat model –

MO Vegetables were there

JB Most of the grocers making money?

1 hr. 5 min in

MO Daddy sent \$100 a month to me in college

JB Physically between the black and white community
White church/school
Who play with?

MO Not much free time
School/homework
I played basketball
Parents always there

JB Part of community?

MO Yes, feel that in community
Now surrounded by blacks
Only people who can get loans

JB Also large per centage of the population regionally

MO Go Little Rock, shopping, doctor appointments

JB Helps to have doctors in the family –

1 hr. 10 min in

JB Volunteerism?

MO Hospital auxiliary when that here

JB informal network grocery families –

MO Describes changes in chain stores, effects on the Delta Chinese groceries

JB Anything you'd like to add?

MO When we moved back here from San Jose - a big place
More intimate

Ex – our grandson in hospital, we can help our son & daughter-in-law

All our children married people of German descent

1 hr 15 min in

Story of granddaughter, people can't tell Asian heritage

JB Family connection to Chinese American life?

MO Who knows?

JB We've talked a lot about your father – what about your mother?

MO My mother pretty independent person, got the delivery man to teach her to drive
My dad didn't.

JB Raised daughters –

MO I remember her carrying one of us around on her back. Wanted to know where we were all the time.

1 hr 18 min

OFF