

11-16-2009

Interview with Albert Fong (2009)

Albert Fong

California State University, Monterey Bay

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/ohcma_chinatown

Recommended Citation

Fong, Albert and California State University, Monterey Bay, "Interview with Albert Fong (2009)" (2009).
Chinatown Renewal Project. 10.
https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/ohcma_chinatown/10

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History and Community Memory Archive at Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chinatown Renewal Project by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csumb.edu.

CSUMB Oral History & Community Memory Archive
Chinatown Renewal Project
Interviewee: Albert Fong
Interviewers: Greg Tomashevski and Elizabeth Warner
Date of Interview: November 16, 2009
Duration of Interview: 42:11

Albert Fong 00:02

—downtown Main Street. It's gone now. I think there's a parking lot there [laughs]. You know, it's right across from Maya Theater. That's where my business is.

Elizabeth Warner 00:19

Okay, hi. So I'm Elizabeth Warner.

Greg Tomashevski 00:21

I'm Greg Tomashevski.

Elizabeth Warner 00:23

And we are interviewing Albert Fong on November 16, 2009. And Albert, if we could just get you to sign that interviewee release form, giving us permission to put this in our archives.

Greg Tomashevski 00:54

Thank you. So we'd like to ask you first, how did your family end up coming to Salinas?

Albert Fong 01:09

My father immigrated to the United States in 1918. And he was about 18 years old at the time. And he worked in the restaurant business for about two years. And later on, he went to work as a ranch house cook. And I think, later on, he went back to China, married my mom. But my mom did not come to the United States until late 1940s. So there's a kind of big generation gap between my mom and myself and my siblings. Another interesting thing is when my dad married my mom in China, they did have another child, which is my sister.

Elizabeth Warner 02:08

Oh, before they came back here?

Albert Fong 02:09

Before my mom came to the United States.

Elizabeth Warner 02:15

Okay.

Albert Fong 02:15

My dad never went back to see her until she immigrated here, way back in the 1960s.

Greg Tomashevski 02:25

And did he continue to work in the restaurant business when he came back?

Albert Fong 02:32

My dad worked for Hansen Farms for about 40 years up until 1979. And he retired at that time.

Greg Tomashevski 02:46

What are your memories of the area as a child?

Albert Fong 02:54

Growing up in the Salinas Valley, there was, like, a lot of rural areas. And as kids, my brothers and sister and cousins, we kind of just roamed all over Salinas, probably in a radius of about five miles. So at times, when we were a little older as teenagers, we did walk to the ranch house, which was between Old Stage Road and Alisal Road. And it was about an hour and a half walk.

Greg Tomashevski 03:28

What would you guys do when you got there?

Albert Fong 03:32

Most interesting, fun thing to do is just visit my dad, because my dad lived on the ranch. And he worked on that ranch, like I said, for 40 years. And because he didn't have a car, he stayed there. And the only time that we had an opportunity to see him was when we went out to the ranch and visited him. And my mom—on weekends or Friday nights, we would either take a taxi or my cousins or uncle would give us a ride to the ranch and drop us off. And then the following, on the following Sunday morning we would come back to make it to church and Sunday school.

Elizabeth Warner 04:19

And can you tell me how many people lived on the ranch?

Albert Fong 04:24

There wasn't that many people living on the ranch. It was just the Hansen family—the parents, the son. And there were—there was one interesting person that lived on the ranch other than the ones I mentioned and my dad, was that they did have a caretaker of the ranch, and I was told by my dad that he was the dairyman—he'd milk the cows—but when we were growing up as kids, he must have been up near his 70s or 80s. And I remember when were kids visiting him in his housing and his house was probably no more than an 8 by 10 room.

Greg Tomashevski 05:15

Do you remember his name?

Albert Fong 05:17

His name was Gus. We only knew him by his first name.

Elizabeth Warner 05:24

So can you tell us a little bit about the Hansen family? You said that—what kind of a farm did they have, or ranch?

Albert Fong 05:34

Actually, this farm was a very large farm. They had animals, cattle ranching, and we just know that when we were kids, we could just roam all over that ranch. And you would see cattle and agriculture because I remember, they grew potatoes, alfalfa—it was just a huge ranch. And later on, more of the land was converted to agriculture. And when we were kids, I remember the Gabilan River running through the ranch. And I think the ranch was probably, had a length of about five miles. And when we were kids, we would go to the stream and my dad would tell me that you could actually go fishing. And when he went fishing, it wasn't with a fishing pole, he used a pitchfork. So the trout would come down to stream there. And my dad used to go upstream, up towards the Old Stage Road, where there's the Garlinger Ranch, [unclear] Ranch, and just, like, the [unclear] ranches. He would go upstream just to harvest the watercress for soup, which is what the Chinese like in their food.

Greg Tomashevski 07:02

Were there a lot of other Chinese workers on the ranch?

Albert Fong 07:05

Actually, my dad was the only Chinese worker that I even knew of at that time. I heard that my uncles had similar jobs, but they were just for a short time. My uncle Moon worked on a ranch off of Highway 68. And it's across from Laguna Seca—big white house there. I think it's still there. But I didn't know the family. And what was interesting on the ranch that my dad worked on was that he would cook lunch for just the foremans, and there were anywhere from eight to maybe twelve foremans, and in the morning, he would get up really early and he would cook breakfast for the owners, the Hansens, the Hansen men, because they were the ones that were going to do the day work. And then he would go and cook the breakfast for the Hansen family, like somewhere around nine or 10 in the mornings. And then at noon time he would cook for the foremans, then he would do a lot of other things in between, like he would go to gather the eggs, because they had a hen house, where they had about, maybe about a hundred to 200 hens and eggs. The chickens would lay the eggs and my dad would go gather the eggs. And he would also feed the pigs. But there were only two or four pigs on their farm at that time.

Greg Tomashevski 09:05

And when you went with him, did you help him with these tasks?

Albert Fong 09:07

Yeah, that's interesting, because what was really funny about gathering the eggs was that we would—I would help my dad gather the eggs in the morning, and then in the afternoon, we would open the drawers in the chicken house there, and we would gather the eggs and we'd do that twice a day. And for a long time I thought hens lay two eggs a day [Greg and Elizabeth laugh]. So but anyway, after taking biology, I found that maybe they only laid one egg a day [Greg and Elizabeth laugh]. But another thing my dad did was that in the evening, he would cook dinner for the Hansen family, so it was kind of like around the clock cooking. A lot of interesting things—we watched the stuff that he cooked, so I kind

of learned to cook some of the foods, but there were simple foods like roast beef or stew, things like that.

Albert Fong 09:30

And what sort of involvement did you and your family have with Chinatown in Salinas?

Albert Fong 10:21

Because belonging to the Chinese community, there are a lot of events that took place in Chinatown. Like they had the organizations like Suey Sing Tong, and there's Bing Kong Tong, and the buildings are still there. And I think they're still fairly active. There's still some social activities there. And we weren't members, but we kind of knew the Chinese in the community. And I got more involved when I started working and helping my cousin at the Republic Cafe. I started helping when I was about 13, and then later on they needed me more. So I ended up working there on weekends. And I started off with just helping a little bit, waiting under tables and doing janitorial services with my two brothers, Denny and Gilbert. And I guess I got promoted and started helping with washing dishes. And later on, when the employees got a little older, I was kind of helping a little bit with cooking some of the simple dishes in the restaurant.

Greg Tomashevski 11:42

So was that your first job that you had?

Albert Fong 11:45

No, actually, I started working since I was five. I worked in the packing sheds, in the onions, because that's what my mother did. And back when we were younger, we were allowed to work. And it was interesting, because there was Mr. Wong, and he's very well known in the community, but he's passed on. And he actually brought the onions, the green onions, to our home. And the Chinese people in that neighborhood on Market Street would gather and come to our home, and we would bunch onions. And I remember back in those days, I was making as much as a dollar a day. And later on, we continued to work in the onions, but it became more convenient to work in the packing shed. So we ended up going to work for a Eddie Iwamoto, Iwamoto Farms. And I think that became part of Uchida Farms. And that was right off of Madera. And as kids, we all went out there to bunch onions. And then it became a higher paid job. I think we got as much as 10 dollars a day or maybe even more. But I had a lot of other jobs. Besides that I worked in the fields picking strawberries. And I would make with my friends, we would make as much as 50 dollars a day. And that was a lot of money back then. And what was interesting was, my friend and I, we were only 15, but the farmers wanted us to work because we were hard working. And they would let us go on to the Bracero buses, and we would be trucked out someplace in the fields to work a 12 hour day. We got pretty good money from that.

Elizabeth Warner 13:46

How old were you?

Albert Fong 13:48

I was about 14, 15. And back then, my family, my siblings all worked out there, too. My younger brother, Gilbert, worked out there and we were all under the age of 16. So we had to work by piece

rate, whereas my older brother, and he was 16, and my sister, she was about 17, and they would not necessarily have to work piece rate. They worked and got an hourly wage of a dollar-forty an hour. And back then in the freezer berries we were paid a dollar a box. And for my younger brother and I, we would have to pick as many as 18 boxes to make 18 dollars, and my older brother and my sister would pick two boxes a day and get almost the same wages because they were, I guess—the required that they would get paid a dollar-forty minimum back then. So later on I guess the companies like Driscoll Berries didn't think it was very profitable to let young people, so they stopped that program. And that's when I ended up working for Ogawa Farms [unclear], and we were working piece rate. And I remember working in the market berries, and it was 65 cents a box, but you could pick as many as 50 boxes a day. So we got pretty good money for that.

Greg Tomashevski 15:29

So it really paid off to be out there working really hard. You got what you, you earned what you were working for then.

Albert Fong 15:36

Right. We did, but living in the Chinese culture, when we got our paychecks, we gave it directly to dad. But it all works out because he helped me when I went off to college, and helped with some of the expenses when I was going to college.

Greg Tomashevski 15:59

So then your job in the cafe, what types of things do you remember seeing or doing there?

Albert Fong 16:08

I did—I remember wearing a white apron, because I had to do dishes. But you would have to do things like preparing some of the foods, like peeling the sweet pea pods and peeling the shrimp shells, that there are a lot of things like it was a restaurant where we didn't have a lot of business towards the end. So I would have to do a lot of other things like wait on tables and cash, doing the cashiering. But when I first started, there was a really robust business. And I remember one time my cousin closed the restaurant, like really early. He closed it at 7:30 in the evening. It was because it was so busy. We just ran out of food supply. And that restaurant was full of customers during that time.

Greg Tomashevski 17:16

It was very busy?

Albert Fong 17:17

Yes.

Elizabeth Warner 17:18

Was it mostly families that went to the Republic?

Albert Fong 17:21

There were family but they were like a lot of individuals. Like we had a lot of the Filipino field workers. They were usually irrigators. And they would come there and eat regularly. And there were families that

came in and ate there too. Because it was known to have the most authentic Chinese food around. And it was really—I guess the price was very reasonable too.

Greg Tomashevski 17:49

Were there special days during the year, like holidays, where it got really busy there?

Albert Fong 17:55

They were real known for banquets. People would have big celebrations, like wedding banquets. In fact, my own wedding banquet was there in 1972. But there were like people that would organize dinners, like Dr. Chun and Dr. Dong would get all their doctor friends together and have a banquet there. And the restaurant could hold as many as 200 people. And there were, I think, like 160 people downstairs because the Chinese dinners are usually organized with round tables and 10 per table. So that's 160 downstairs, and they would have four more tables if it was needed upstairs. So that was an additional 40 people. But some of the things that that restaurant hosted were—when they had the Chinese New Year's celebration with the Suey Sing and the Bing Kong Tong, they would have several meals a day there, and I remember as many as five or six meals a day. And if you have 200 in each of the meals, that was a lot of dishes to wash [Greg and Elizabeth laugh]. And I remember we would work from about 10 in the mornings—and I was not the earliest one there—and we would work until the next morning about four, sometimes three in the morning, just washing dishes and preparing for the next day. Because the celebrations usually lasted the weekend, both Saturday and Sunday.

Elizabeth Warner 19:48

Was the cafe open seven days a week then?

Albert Fong 19:52

We were closed one day a week. We were closed on Tuesdays. That was the day where my brothers and—my two brothers and later on my nephew Parker helped us where we did some of the janitorial services like cleaning the restrooms and mopping the floors and things like that, and sweeping.

Greg Tomashevski 20:17

The inside of the restaurant, what was the setting like? Was it dark? Or were there decorations?

Albert Fong 20:23

You know, that's a real interesting question because it started off with—there were side booths. And they actually, these booths, the whole wall could swing. And you can swing them back where you'd open up the whole restaurant where you can put the Chinese—have the Chinese banquets. But during the regular weekday, when they had the normal family businesses, you would have the booths. And each booth would have a table. And you can have as many as six people on a table. And they would have dividers, and there are some tables in the middle. And they would be enough for just two people. And I remember towards the back, on the left, there are two roundtables that if there were larger families of six to 10 people, you can probably sit, or seat, 10. And when we had the banquets with as many as 200, we would have to bring the tables out and put the big round boards on them. And I think these boards were about, maybe about six feet in diameter. That's usually how the Chinese banquets were set up. And later on, what was interesting was, these boards were solid hardwood, and I think that

they weighed probably as much as 300 pounds. So when my brothers and I had to dismantle these boards, it was so heavy—especially the center ones, they were really heavy. And finally, Mrs. Ahtye, she decided that it was best that we would just leave it dismantled, at least the ones in the middle, because they were very heavy and having to move them in and out into the storage was a lot of work.

Greg Tomashevski 22:29

What was the downtown or the area like outside on Soledad Street in the Chinatown area? What did that look like at that time?

Albert Fong 22:42

Back when I first started about 13, it was very busy, because there are a lot of bars. There are pool halls. But I guess I didn't frequent them because I wasn't of age. But just out of curiosity during the day times, my brother and I, when we were doing a janitorial service, we would kind of, you know, try to look into some of the places there. And we just—there was a bar to our right that was closed for some years and later opened, and the bar that was on the right side of the Republic Cafe was called the Lotus Inn, and later I think it was the Marion's Club. And I remember down at the end of the street, on the north end, was Leon's Club. There was Lord Luther's Winner's Circle. And when we were kids, we just went—my brother, my two brothers and I, we kind of visited some of these places just to see how they were, but there was usually no business during the day hours. But at nighttime it was very busy. I mean, lot of people, lot of—nightlife, that's what it is. And I know that there was a little bit of social gambling they played across the street below the—I think the place was called The Green Gold. They would have, like, pool tables, but they would play, like, social card games like Pan. I don't know how to play the game, but I just know there's a lot of cards.

Greg Tomashevski 24:32

What changes have you seen over the years since then?

Albert Fong 24:39

One aspect was that I was very familiar with the Victory Mission. Because I as a kid, you know, I went to Calvary Baptist Church, and our church supported the Mission so I was familiar with Victory Mission since I was, like, six years old. And over time, Victory Mission is still there. And also, there's, I know there's, like, the Dorothy's Kitchen. And I know Bob there because the church that I belong to, we had missionaries that actually did tours around the world just to support the homeless in the areas that they did the singing tours. I think over the last few years, it seems like there's just no viable businesses there like it did in the past.

Greg Tomashevski 25:51

And you also said you worked at a furniture store, or are you—

Albert Fong 25:57

I actually—I graduated from UC Berkeley in bacteriology and biochem. And that was during the 1973-74 recession and jobs were scarce. So I started helping my father-in-law in his used furniture store, on the corner of Main Street and Central Avenue. And after about a year, he decided that he wanted to

retire, and he said that if I wanted to just take over that I could. And I stayed there for about six years. That was just right there in downtown, right off of Central Avenue.

Greg Tomashevski 26:41

And that building had some sort of historic—

Albert Fong 26:45

I was told that that was an auto sales business at one time. And at one time, when there was a movie—the miniseries East of Eden, that was filmed in Salinas—I was told that building was used for selling cars. And I think later on it became a mechanic shop for repairing the trucks, because the way they repaired or serviced trucks back then, they didn't elevate the trucks or vehicles. They actually had the big holes in the ground where you can get in those holes and service underneath the trucks. But I was told that building was John Steinbeck's uncle's business, and I don't remember the uncle's name, but he sold cars there, or some kind of vehicles.

Greg Tomashevski 27:42

And what church was it that you attended with your family when you would come go to church on Sundays?

Albert Fong 27:49

We would go to Calvary Baptist Church on Lupin Drive behind Sherwood Gardens. And then later on, after I came back from college, my wife and I attended the First Baptist Church. And we attended that church because they had the Chinese Mission Church in room 222. And from there the church kind of got outgrown, and we later on became an independent church. And for a long time, we tried to rent different buildings all over Salinas, and finally ended up at this building here, across from Salinas High School, which is 701 South Main Street. And today, this is called the Salinas Chinese Christian Church.

Greg Tomashevski 28:43

So you've had a lot of involvement with the church since growing up?

Albert Fong 28:49

I think I have.

Greg Tomashevski 28:50

[laughs] So in 2005, you became a chair of the Chinese American Cultural Alliance?

Albert Fong 29:04

Actually, in 2005, the Chinese American Citizen Alliance hosted the convention here in Salinas, and I was the convention chair. And it was kind of a fun activity because I got our whole Chinese community involved, and all the other organizations, the Chinese organizations, and our opening dinner was held at the Steinbeck Center. And we had a really nice dinner there with Mayor Anna Caballero. She attended. And our closing dinner was held at the aquarium in—Monterey Bay Aquarium in Monterey. And we had other events at the Chinese Community Center right on 1 California Street. And we also had a huge barbecue at the Sheriff's Posse grounds.

Greg Tomashevski 30:06

So what are your—what are the goals or projects that you do, or that the Chinese American Citizens Alliance does?

Albert Fong 30:16

I think having a Christian background, our goal is trying to just bridge people together. And to me, God's the most important thing, but I think education is very important. And that's one of the reasons that I'm helping out with coaching at Alvarez High School. I coached tennis, both boys are actually assisting in the boys and girls tennis there. And I'm actually on the Hartnell Foundation Board, and I've been on the board for the last six years.

Greg Tomashevski 31:00

What do you think it was, maybe experiences earlier in your life, that are—what would you think that gave you this kind of sense of community and this, like, motivation to be involved, like you are with the community?

Albert Fong 31:18

I think the most important thing I can think back at is that I remember people were always just good to me. And when I was growing up as a kid, some of the most important things is someone gave you like a nickel or a dollar. And we valued that and we appreciated that. So I just remember a lot of things, like when I was growing up in my family, because my mom was, didn't—both my parents did not drive and they did not speak English. So I was asked to help with a lot of things regarding finance and repairs and things that would go wrong. They couldn't even—my mom couldn't even read anything. So I remember, as kids, when you need an excuse for something in school, we actually had to hold my mom's hand just to sign her name. And as kids, we thought that was kind of strange, because we could write anything we want. So I mean, just appreciating a lot of things that people have done for us. I remember things like my—when something went wrong with our electrical or plumbing in our home, I would just run to the hardware store like Hicks Lumber. And there were people there that were willing to help me and give me advice and just to let me know how to repair things, whether it was plumbing or electrical. And it was just really nice to see that. And nowadays, it seems like it's a little harder to get advice unless you paid for it.

Greg Tomashevski 33:10

When you went to school as a kid, did you learn Chinese in school too? Or was it only English?

Albert Fong 33:18

You know that's a real good question, because my parents wanted us to learn as much as possible. And I think they just kind of threw it out at us that we needed to go to school. And I remember that, if anything ended at school, my parents wanted us to go. So if it was Chinese school, Sunday school, if the opportunities were there, we would go. And I was just thinking back that I started going to Chinese school since I was, like, six years old. And up through high school, we were still going to Chinese school. But we learned a lot of things, like a few words in Chinese. I'm not that literate in Chinese. I can speak Chinese, but the Chinese language have so many different dialects. There's two major dialects

to Cantonese and Mandarin. But there's a lot of sub dialects, and my parents are from Guangdong, China. So we speak one of the village dialects, which is Toisan, which is a lot of people in this community speak. And my wife actually speaks another sub dialect, which is [unclear]. But she was fortunate that she came when she was 11, and she was able to retain the Chinese language. She can still read and write Chinese. And she's actually one of the interpreters in our church.

Greg Tomashevski 34:49

Did she also grow up in Salinas, or—

Albert Fong 34:52

She actually came to United States and lived in Los Angeles for about a year, and then her dad decided that Salinas was just a really nice place to live, especially the weather because he didn't like the hot weather. So he was kind of, like, semi-retired, but he bought a little grocery store on the corner of Laurel and Sanborn. And he worked and owned that grocery store for a while. Until later on, he went to the secondhand store.

Greg Tomashevski 35:32

How did the two of you meet?

Albert Fong 35:33

I met my wife when I was about 11. My sister and her were good friends in, I believe it was junior high. And back then I remember that, as kids, we would just roam around Salinas, and Coca Cola had a interesting giveaway program. If you would collect all the bottle caps, all 50 presidents—not 50 presidents, 50 states—you could get a Brownie camera. And of course, we knew how that worked. They would have a lot of the bottle caps for many of the states, but they would not have so many of the other ones. So, but some of our friends were able to get a lot of cameras. And since my wife's family had the grocery store, they would have these Coca Cola sodas where you would open the bottles and the cap would just drop into this container. And we would look through them just to get these caps. And I met her then, and later on we actually went to school together. We both went to El Sausal Junior High. And we went to Alisal High together. And we had a good relationship. She helped me with my homework. And that was good times. She actually went on to be a nurse in nursing school.

Elizabeth Warner 36:01

Did you guys still date when you went to college in Berkeley?

Albert Fong 37:24

We were good friends through junior high and high school. And dating was kind of on and off. Later on, I think we decided to get married and Ashley was already married when I was in Berkeley. I was married in my—right after my junior year at Berkeley.

Greg Tomashevski 37:50

You're—[Greg and Elizabeth speak at same time]

Elizabeth Warner 37:50

Sorry.

Greg Tomashevski 37:57

Go ahead.

Elizabeth Warner 37:58

I was gonna say, I understand your mom is still alive and she's a hundred years old.

Albert Fong 38:03

Yes.

Elizabeth Warner 38:04

Can you tell us a little bit about her?

Albert Fong 38:07

My mom's a very simple person, but I think she's very wise. Although she doesn't speak English, she seems to know what to do. She told me when I was younger, and I—she doesn't hear that well anymore. But I remember when she told me when she first came to the United States, she worked on the farm, on Hansen Farm and she used to—her first job was plucking the feathers off of chickens. And she would get 15 cents per chicken. And that's how I learned to pluck chicken. And the way to do it is you need to dip the chicken into hot water, and the feathers come off a lot easier for some reason. But my mom's a really caring person. Because we know that when she worked in the packing shifts, she would, in the mornings, run back home just to make sure that the four children—my sister and my two brothers—were fed with some simple breakfast and that we were off to go to school. And I remember that the first year that each of us were going to school, like, in kindergarten, my mom would take us the first day.

Greg Tomashevski 39:42

And your father just passed away in what year?

Albert Fong 39:47

My dad passed away in 1979.

Greg Tomashevski 39:50

Okay.

Albert Fong 39:53

He was 79 years old at the time.

Greg Tomashevski 39:57

Did he ever tell you stories about what it was like growing up in China?

Albert Fong 40:07

I think my mom told me more of that. My dad immigrated here at a young age. I believe he was like 17 or 18. And he was the youngest of four sons. And the reason why he ended up coming here was because they asked my uncles if they wanted to come. And I remember for different reasons, they did not want to come to the United States. So my dad ended up coming here. I remember just vaguely simple things. My mom had mentioned that my dad had to clean the smoke stacks in the ships. And I didn't know too much about that. But I guess he was pretty young. And neither my mom or dad really had an education. But for some reason, my dad was still able to read some Chinese because I remember one of the things that, regular things that he did was that he subscribed to the Chinese newspaper, and he looked forward to reading the newspaper just to see what was going on in the world. And my mom, I remember her telling me that she only had like a second grade education in China, and back then that might not be a whole lot of learning. And she knows some Chinese words and things like that, but I don't think she's that educated.

Greg Tomashevski 41:43

Alright. Well, is there anything else you'd like to share with us before we wrap it up?

Albert Fong 41:49

There's probably a lot of things, but I can't think of anything right now.

Greg Tomashevski 41:58

Alright. Well, it's been great talking to you. And I really want to thank you for sharing with us.

Elizabeth Warner 42:04

Thank you very much, Albert. We appreciate it.

Albert Fong 42:06

Okay, thank you. Thanks, Greg. Thank you very much, Elizabeth.

Greg Tomashevski 42:06

Yeah.