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Interview with Audrey Boutte and Agnes Tebo

Audrey Boutte

Agnes Tebo

California State University, Monterey Bay

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Chinatown Renewal Project
Interviewee: Audrey Boutte and Agnes Tebo
Interviewer: Sean Chase and Michael Silvia
Date of Interview: October 24, 2009
Duration of Interview: 01:00:28

Sean Chase 00:01

Okay, this is Sean and Michael and we are interviewing Audrey and Agnes? Correct. Okay. This is taking place on October 24, 2009, in I believe your mother's home, Audrey? In Salinas?

Audrey Boutte 00:22

Yes, Roseanna Boutte's house.

Sean Chase 00:23

Rosanna, Rosanna Boutte's house. And this is about their life stories and memories of Chinatown. And do we have permission to record this interview?

Audrey Boutte 00:34

Yes.

Sean Chase 00:35

Okay. All right. Well, let's go ahead and start with when did you first move to Salinas?

Audrey Boutte 00:45

Well, this is my cousin, Agnes Tebo. And she actually moved here first, and I'll let you tell her about the how she got to be—got to come to Salinas. Why don't you tell them about that? Because that's how you came to Salinas.

Agnes Tebo 00:59

Okay, I came in 1937. My father was here. He had been here quite a few years before, and he talked me into coming here. And I came in 1937.

Sean Chase 01:14

And what brought him here originally?

Agnes Tebo 01:17

Work.

Sean Chase 01:17

Work?

Agnes Tebo 01:18

He was in Galveston, Texas, and somebody said something about going to California. He thought he was going to the ends of the world, way back then in the 20s, early 20s. And he—and they had to drive too, and I'm sure they had all kinds of breakdowns. But anyway, they made it to Salinas, of all places, this small town after living in a place like Galveston. Galveston—fine, was always just fine. But anyway, so he talked me into it. I always wanted to come to California.

Sean Chase 01:53

Is that a big cultural change coming from—

Agnes Tebo 01:55

Oh, gosh, yeah.

Sean Chase 01:56

—something like Texas to California at that time?

Audrey Boutte 01:58

I guess it was, it was pretty big change, because one of your motivations was the wages. You know, my father was making something like 19, maybe 19 cents an hour, at a job that he had in Louisiana and so the wages were very low. So, coming to California, where the wages were a little higher. I think you had started working at maybe what, \$8 a day, or something like that,

Agnes Tebo 02:27

40 cents an hour, I think, no \$8 a day—

Audrey Boutte 02:30

In California.

Agnes Tebo 02:32

—California, 40 cents an hour. That's what I was making when I first came here.

Audrey Boutte 02:35

But that was still higher then—

Agnes Tebo 02:36

That went on for I don't know how many years, 40 cents an hour.

Audrey Boutte 02:40

And that was a lot higher than Louisiana, right?

Agnes Tebo 02:43

Well, I wasn't in Louisiana. That was Texas.

Audrey Boutte 02:46

I mean, sorry when you lived here. You made a lot more money than you did back there.

Agnes Tebo 02:50

Oh yeah, of course.

Audrey Boutte 02:53

And there were more opportunities.

Agnes Tebo 02:55

But yeah, I came here and was doing domestic work. And then I began to—I was called in from the—whoever hired me.

Sean Chase 03:06

Yeah.

Agnes Tebo 03:06

I was called in when she had dinner parties, to help whoever was catering. She had caterer, cook, somebody come in and cook and serve all the food, and then she'd call me to come in and help. And I just kept my eyes glued on this lady and I learned all this stuff. And then I became the only caterer in Salinas for I don't know how many years. [laughs] I said, you don't need to know too much to cook. So anyway I learned how to cook what these people like, and I cooked here for years. I did—I can't tell how—I did so many weddings till I did—I did a wedding one time in 19—20 years later I did the daughter. And two years after that a second daughter. I can't believe I did the mother and two daughters—weddings.

Sean Chase 03:51

That's customer loyalty. You must have been doing something right.

Agnes Tebo 03:53

Well, it's just—there wasn't anybody here to do it. That's another thing. But yeah, so anyway, I taught myself and I worked with caterers. And I watched. And I say, well, it's not that bad.

Sean Chase 04:13

Yeah.

Agnes Tebo 04:14

I would watch them. They didn't know I was watching them. Watching every step they made to learn to learn, you know, and then if something I didn't, like I say, I'm thinking I'm gonna try it this way, this way and that way, so I did my own thing. And like I said I did a mother. And then later on her two daughters 20 some years later.

Audrey Boutte 04:37

Well, the thing is that she was here by herself. And then she sent for my father. And she sent him a ticket and she told him to come out here and just look around and see if you know, he might like to live out here because there weren't very many African Americans here. So she was trying to develop a little

companionship, you know. So, my father did come out. And he could see that he could make more money and maybe—

Agnes Tebo 05:05

He was more interested in a Job! A job and they paid so much more.

Audrey Boutte 05:11

So, he thought he would go—he would come here. So, he went back to Louisiana to get my mother. My mother did not want to come out here, leave her family. She was the youngest of 13 children.

Sean Chase 05:22

Wow.

Audrey Boutte 05:23

And she did not want to leave that family and come out here. And—

Agnes Tebo 05:27

She did. But they didn't want to [unclear].

Audrey Boutte 05:30

[unclear] once said that, you know, at that time you went where your husband went. So, my husband, her husband wanted to come here and, you know, get better opportunities for the family. And so they came out and, you know, and we came to California. I was two years old when we got to California. And I remember my mother told me it was raining that day. It was just the rainy season in California, in Salinas. And we got to the train station, the same train station out here in Salinas. Yeah. Have you ever seen that? It's beautiful. Old, but kind of Art Deco station. And it was raining. And my mother thought, oh, no, you know. [laughs]

Agnes Tebo 06:09

It was five o'clock in the morning,

Audrey Boutte 06:11

Yes, five o'clock in the morning, raining and everything. So, she didn't have a very good impression at the beginning. And she didn't really want to come anyway. So anyway, but my cousin Agnes had a nice house, a beautiful house, here in Salinas. And when I say beautiful, it's because in Louisiana, we had the old houses with the outhouses.

Sean Chase 06:31

Oh, yeah?

Audrey Boutte 06:32

And she actually had a toilet in her house, so I thought she was really doing well. And we got a little cottage behind her house. And that's where we lived our first few years in Salinas, and we lived right by the classroom, Sacred Heart School. And they ended up going to school there. And all my brothers and

sisters went to school there, too, and we graduated, and then we continued in Palma, and we all graduated from Salinas High School. So, and we made a good life here in Salinas. You know, you probably have to go back to what the racial situation was during that time. Because there's a lot of discrimination and even in Salinas, but, you know, for the most part, we were accepted. And we had opportunities here that we probably would never have had in Louisiana at that time, in the 1940s, 1950s, you know. So, it was a good life for us here, and my brothers and cousins all were very successful in sports and made a name for themselves that way, and one of them even played professional football. And so, I was the homecoming queen at Hartnell College. And that was pretty much of a first for an African American at that time period, and since they're been others. But, you know, I have to say that just kind of indicates that we were accepted. And my cousin here, she was one of the charter members of the first and only NAACP charter, which, yeah, I think they're honoring her this year, because she's one of the oldest live members of the NAACP in the country. So, they're probably going to be honoring her with some type of event or an award ceremony.

Sean Chase 08:23

Congratulations on that. That's something to be spoken for. So, wow, well, does your family happen to have any memories? Did they ever talk about that train ride from—was it a train ride all the way from Louisiana, then to California?

Audrey Boutte 08:43

Yes. Well, I know, one of the things that my mother used to say is that, you know, at that time, the porters they were mostly all African Americans. So of course, there would be some kind of camaraderie or kinship. And they'd always watch over the black families that were traveling on the train, maybe give them special extra biscuits—

Sean Chase 09:03

Nice. [laughs]

Audrey Boutte 09:03

—or something like that. But there was that, and I've seen that on different train rides that I've gone to Louisiana, that they would always, like, watch out for us and, you know, just have special friendship or, you know, just being extra nice to us and things like that.

Sean Chase 09:06

Had a sense of comfort and security and—

Audrey Boutte 09:21

It was, yeah.

Sean Chase 09:22

And so that's exciting moving out to California, and during that timeframe.

Audrey Boutte 09:22

It was. It was very exciting.

Agnes Tebo 09:24

We didn't move then. I was in Texas [unclear].

Sean Chase 09:34

Yeah, and so you moved right behind the house that she had. At the time, what was—I know initially it was, you know, very exciting with the, you know, the bathroom and stuff like that. So, you'd say, like, your standard of living definitely improved once you moved out to California.

Audrey Boutte 09:50

Oh, yes, big time. [laughs] Well, because I can remember going to visit my grandmother in Louisiana, and I had to go out to the outhouse. I was terrified because I was afraid I'd fall in.

Sean Chase 09:51

Yeah.

Audrey Boutte 09:57

And [laughs], you know, and having a indoor bathroom, that was such a luxury at that time and it really made a difference. So, my cousin, I have a picture. I wish I had the picture, but it shows a picture of my mother and my sister and myself when we first came to California. And my cousin, she's just really sharp, like a city girl, you know. And my mother looks like a country girl. She has, like, country type clothes on. And we're just bewildered little children, you know. It's such a great picture. It really captures that moment in our lives.

Sean Chase 10:39

That's something you can't really—you don't just make out the truest form. Well, you were one of the first African American families in the area, correct? What was it like growing up, like, through adolescence, your elementary years with that around you? Like, did you—you said they were more accepting, like, when you like participated in the community and stuff. Were you accepted well, and what was it like growing up?

Agnes Tebo 11:11

It was slow. We just didn't give up.

Audrey Boutte 11:18

Well, of course, when I think when you think comparatively speaking to what was going on in the south, you know, with lynchings and, you know, a lot of other discriminatory practices. Of course, this was like coming to paradise, because, you know, I mean, people didn't, you know—there were—there was racism. And there were places where, you know, people did not necessarily want you to go, but all in all people were civil. And I think that's, you know, probably the least that you could expect this, like, you know, you could still feel alright about walking down the street and not being worried about, you know,

getting hurt or things like that. So, there was a sort of a comfort level of being able to be here and, you know, making strides here.

Sean Chase 12:04

Okay. And so, your family, your brothers, you said that—

Audrey Boutte 12:09

I had one brother.

Sean Chase 12:10

One brother.

Audrey Boutte 12:10

Yes. And I have about three or four cousins.

Agnes Tebo 12:13

And he was born here.

Audrey Boutte 12:14

Yes, he was born here.

Sean Chase 12:15

He was born here in Salinas?

Audrey Boutte 12:16

Yes.

Sean Chase 12:17

Okay, and—

Audrey Boutte 12:18

At a hospital.

Sean Chase 12:19

At a hospital.

Audrey Boutte 12:20

I was born in the house. My sister and I were born in houses. We were delivered by relatives, midwives. And so, there was a big change in the lifestyle [laughs] when we came here.

Sean Chase 12:32

Definitely. Now, how much younger than you was he?

Audrey Boutte 12:36

He's two years younger than I am.

Sean Chase 12:38

Two years younger. So, you guys grew up relatively around the same age then?

Audrey Boutte 12:38

Yes. And my eldest sister is two years older than I am. We're all born around July.

Sean Chase 12:47

You were very close?

Audrey Boutte 12:49

Well, you know, there's always that sibling rivalry. So, we always had those little things. But I think basically, you know, we're close. Because I think you bond a lot, you know, when you have a common adverse situation. So, I think we're pretty close.

Sean Chase 13:08

What was Salinas High School like at that time?

Audrey Boutte 13:12

Well, I had come from the private, the Catholic school, and I had gone to Palma and that time, Palma was a co-instructional school where the boys had one part of the campus and the girls had another part of the campus. So, we weren't, really we didn't intermingle that much. Maybe we'd have lunch together. So, about the—my mother decided that she was going to send me to Salinas High at the 10th grade. And I was very excited about it, because then I could see boys. [laughs] There were boys in the hallway and all that, and they seemed to think I was kind of a nice-looking young lady. So, I was very accepted there. And I ran for the head—they call them pom pom girls, but I guess they'd be like, you know, cheerleaders. But at that time, the girls who did the songs, song girls, were separate. So, I was elected the head of that, and for two years, and so I enjoyed that part of high school. I wasn't a very good student, but I was a social butterfly. And really enjoyed the coed setting of the high school and had lots of friends and, yeah, just really enjoyed high school in Salinas.

Sean Chase 14:35

That's good. And then thereafter you attended Hartnell?

Audrey Boutte 14:38

Then I went to Hartnell. Yeah.

Sean Chase 14:40

So, you were the first African American to win Homecoming—

Audrey Boutte 14:43

Homecoming Queen. Yes. That was a shock. But it was really a nice experience.

Sean Chase 14:50

Now, did you participate in any pageants following that?

Audrey Boutte 14:55

Well, I did. In fact, they had recruited me to be in the Miss Monterey County contest.

Sean Chase 15:00

Okay.

Audrey Boutte 15:01

And I competed in that. However, there was another beautiful young lady named Pamela Gamble. And she was crowned Miss Monterey County. But she was so gorgeous. She went on to be Miss California. So, she had to abduct the throne, and I became Miss Monterey County. So, that was kind of exciting. And then I got to be in certain, you know, pageants and certain had to represent the county and, like, the Festival of Lights Parade and, you know, the Como—the Como Parade, Como Del Rey Parade, and things like that. And then after that, I was recruited to go to the Miss World California contest. And I went to Los Angeles, and I had such an experience there, because I didn't know that much about the world of beauty contests. It's quite an interesting scenario. In Los Angeles, it was in Los Angeles at the Biltmore Hotel.

Sean Chase 15:58

How old were you?

Audrey Boutte 15:58

I was, let's see, I was 19—no, 20. I was 20.

Sean Chase 16:04

So, everything you hear about Los Angeles, and you go down there at that age for your pageants and stuff, were you kind of, like, starstruck, like—

Audrey Boutte 16:12

Oh, definitely.

Sean Chase 16:13

Yeah? Hollywood and—

Audrey Boutte 16:15

Oh, yeah. [laughs] Well, I eventually ended up moving to Los Angeles to become a movie star.

Sean Chase 16:22

Really?

Audrey Boutte 16:23

Yes. And so I didn't quite become a movie star, but I did study at the Lucille Ball studio. And I studied acting, and that's when I found out that I might not be that great of an actress. But I did work at the Playboy Club. I was a Playboy bunny for a few months, and then I went on to work as a dancer, and various productions. And I started in Lake Tahoe and went on. I worked in Las Vegas and Puerto Rico, and I started traveling with my dancing. And so I did pretty well with that. And I developed an act. And I did Canada, and I just did a lot of traveling and dancing, and traveling and dancing. So, it was just a life that kind of opened up to me. And I produced a television show in Puerto Rico where I taught dance on the air and did a little comedy. And so, that was some of the fun things I did in the earlier part of my life.

Sean Chase 17:26

To see the world.

Audrey Boutte 17:27

Yeah. And I'm going to start seeing it again. [laughs]

Sean Chase 17:30

When did you return back to Salinas after your travels?

Audrey Boutte 17:33

I think that was 1987. My father became ill, and my mother asked me to come home and help her with his care. And I've never left since then.

Sean Chase 17:47

What was it that your father and mother did, like, when you were growing up, like their main careers?

Audrey Boutte 17:54

Well, my mother was what we call domestic technicians, or housekeeper. She used to do housekeeping work for other people. And mainly she worked for the Abramson family. And they have a law firm here, Abrahamson Stave, that was a law firm that was here for quite a long time. And so she worked for them for quite a long time. And my father, he was a bootblack, or a shoe shiner. And he did very well. And my cousin Agnes's husband, he was also a shoe shiner. And they did very well because we had the military base, the Fort Ord. It was—they brought in a lot of soldiers who needed their boots polished, and so he did very well in that business. So, that's what they did. And then later in life, my father worked at a Natividad Medical Center in the maintenance department, and he retired from there.

Sean Chase 18:49

Well, what are—do you have any personal memories of Chinatown? Were you ever familiar? Do you ever cross into the area at all or—

Audrey Boutte 18:58

Oh, yes, we do. Well, Chinatown, it was sort of, like, I guess our Cannery Row, you know, because it was like the nightspot, the place to go. They had a lot of—well, I was asking cousin Agnes what she remembered about Chinatown, but I remembered the neon lights, because they had like a lot of neon lights. And I guess neon lights were relatively new. But, you know, the little neon lights with maybe the

cocktail, like, design? And maybe the chop suey or, you know, they have different little neon lights, and they have, like, a lot of people there. And people—you'd see people on the streets and my father was part of the Golden Dragon, which was a nightclub there. He was part of their baseball team. They sponsor the African American baseball team. And that's the picture I want to show you today. But I haven't been able to find it, but I'm sure it will turn up. And so they played for them, and I think they were also at one time sponsored by another organization in Chinatown, the Lotus Inn. And so that was part of a connection with Chinatown. And my father and some of the African American men started a group called the Esquire club. And it was a social club for the African American men, and in which they would hold parties or my cousin said they just got over there to drink and carry on. But I remember one time, they had an event for the younger people, and they sponsored a dance contest. And I—my partner, Peter Savoy, and I, we won the mashed potatoes contest. So, that's one thing I remember. And it was located in Chinatown. I think it was at number 84 or 89 Soledad Street. It was just a little small door. You'd go in and then there's, like, a party room or something like that. So, and that was a memory I have. But even until my father's later years when he was, you know, really getting on and not feeling all that well, sometimes when we'd come home from the doctor's appointment—oh, I'm sorry [crying]. We'd go down to Chinatown just—oh, I'm sorry [crying]. Like memory lane, you know, because that was one of the things that he'd like to do. So, then we'd come back home from out of town or something, I'd say, "Well, do you want to go down to Chinatown?" So, we'd just drive down to Chinatown. It brings back a lot of memories from—you're going to cut this out, aren't you? [laughs] Okay, thank you. And he bring back a lot of memories from, you know, the old days, you know, there'd be Chinatown and I wrote something about Chinatown that—oh, excuse me, from Chinatown—and what I wrote was that it was like a social center for many minorities. As you know, they were not really accepted in some of the other social venues of Salinas. Chinatown had neon lights, colorful people and was a T-shaped magnet with Soledad Street being the long bar and Lake Street atop the T with some attractions of its own. Chinatown drew people from Fort Ord and surrounding areas to partake in the offerings of gambling, drinking, working women, Chinese food and social encounters. I remember an African American woman named Mamie Spencer, actually owned a bar in Chinatown, and I think it was called the Swinging Inn or the [unclear] or the [unclear]. I'm sorry, [sniffing] the bar was quite popular and sometimes at our house, you would hear—oh, excuse me, I gotta stop. Can you stop for a minute? I have to blow my nose [laughs]. I'm sorry.

Sean Chase 23:09

That's alright.

Audrey Boutte 23:10

I didn't think that was gonna happen.

Sean Chase 23:12

Five minutes.

Unknown 23:15

About 23 minutes,

Sean Chase 23:17

Okay.

Audrey Boutte 23:27

It was called the Duck Inn or the Swinging Inn or the Dew Drop Inn. And I don't know. I can't remember. It's a bar that was quite popular, and sometimes at our house, you would hear stories of what happened at Mamie's the night before. There would be tales of fights or someone getting so drunk that they told someone off really good. Or a man might be spotted with someone other than his wife. My dad used to like to drive down Chinatown just to see what was going on. And sometimes he'd leave, dad would say, "I'm gonna go downtown to Chinatown and see what's going on." You know, because it was a hotspot, you know, place for people to go and there was nowhere else to go to.

Agnes Tebo 24:09

Nowhere else to go [unclear].

Sean Chase 24:14

So, it was a main entertainment area of Salinas at the time, to say the least. So, you were here some years before, you know, her and her family. What's your personal memories of Chinatown?

Agnes Tebo 24:30

Same, the same thing. [unclear] well, the Fort Ord came in.

Sean Chase 24:35

Yeah.

Agnes Tebo 24:36

See, there was no Fort Ord when I came here. Then when Fort Ord started and the soldiers started coming into town and with their families, but—trying to think. It was just so long ago. [laughs] Just ask some questions. Maybe I—

Sean Chase 24:59

What was that—what was it like going from just, you know, agriculturally-based Salinas to all of a sudden having a giant military base and having that transition into—like, how did it change your—did it change your environment at all having that sudden population boost of all those—

Agnes Tebo 25:17

No, because see, the kind of work we did—I didn't—I did domestic work. And then I worked with cooks. And I learned how to cook. And I watched. I would watch them and watch them. And I learned how to cook, and I went and got my own business. Yeah. So, I was in catering here for years, years and years. I was the only one in town.

Audrey Boutte 25:43

Well, and one thing that happened is that, you know, we were asked to go out to Fort Ord with the USO, because they used to have these dances for the soldiers, and so they used to get the young women from the surrounding towns to go out and dance and socialize with them. And I can remember

going to those, and it was a beautiful—they had a beautiful officer's club right on the ocean in Fort Ord. It was recently demolished. But it was so beautiful. And we had so much fun there. And we met some nice fellows. And so I think USO did a good job in making those soldiers feel good about what they were doing and supported in that kind of way, so.

Sean Chase 26:31

Right, and that—and it was a big hangout in Chinatown for the soldiers.

Audrey Boutte 26:36

They used to like to go there, yes.

Sean Chase 26:39

Did either of you personally ever go into Chinatown really?

Audrey Boutte 26:44

Well, we would—I would drive them.

Agnes Tebo 26:46

Yeah, we'd go once in a while. But it was—by the time they came in, I was getting too old to be bothered with stuff like that. But we would go every once in a while and just sit and watch the young people.

Audrey Boutte 27:00

My father was—he would [unclear]. My father, my uncles, and yeah, there were places that they could go and just hang out and have a drink.

Agnes Tebo 27:09

One of two. One or two, yeah.

Audrey Boutte 27:13

And your father was there too, right?

Agnes Tebo 27:15

Oh, yeah. He was—yeah. [laughs]

Audrey Boutte 27:16

He used to go there.

Agnes Tebo 27:20

Yeah, he was something else too.

Audrey Boutte 27:23

And he was a manager of one of the baseball teams, her father was.

Sean Chase 27:27

Okay. Now, through the 1950s when the, you know, the Chinese Exclusion Act was lifted, and in some sense when Chinatown started to kind of dissipate, do you remember what that was like at the time? Like, did your fathers ever talk about it? Did they stop, you know, going into Chinatown maybe, like, once Chinatown started dying off—

Agnes Tebo 27:51

It just sort of died. It just sort of disappeared for some reason. There were only a couple of places—Mamie and [unclear]. But it kind of just died down. And then they—people began to get enough. There was enough cars around. They'd go to Monterey. They had places in Monterey. And then they'd go to San Jose on a weekend. And like I said, kind of—things here just kind of died.

Audrey Boutte 28:20

Well, I was away in my travels, but when I came back to Salinas, I just—I was so shocked to see what had become of Chinatown. You know, just mostly people who had a drug problem or, you know, down and out type people, you know. It wasn't like that before. You know, it was like, you know, kind of a exciting kind of place and mysterious, fascinating place, you know, for grownups to go to, but it had something, you know, and then when I came back, and I saw what it had become, it was just very sad.

Agnes Tebo 28:56

I think this was just a place if you just want to make some money and save some, you know, get some place, that's about it. Because they paid, you know, they paid more money here for anything, any kind of work, then most places. Especially in the city of San Jose and San Francisco, people would come here from there to get jobs to—because of the pay.

Sean Chase 29:05

What about the price to live? Did it compensate?

Agnes Tebo 29:14

[unclear] problem.

Sean Chase 29:17

Yeah?

Agnes Tebo 29:17

Yeah, there was a problem to get places to live.

Sean Chase 29:31

Because it was more expensive, or just—

Agnes Tebo 29:33

Well, and discriminatory. We had a problem with that.

Sean Chase 29:38

Yeah?

Agnes Tebo 29:39

Can you imagine dumps? It was dumps, and they had the nerve to—and I wanted to say, I don't want it. I don't really want it either, but I have no choice. But they were nothing but a bunch of dumps that they didn't want to rent to you. Anyway, we kind of overcame all that mess.

Audrey Boutte 29:58

Well, and we lived behind her and then my father decided he was going to buy a house. And he did buy a house. But we had to move the house across town because we couldn't buy property across the railroad tracks. So, we had to buy the property on this side of the railroad tracks. And that's just about where, you know—Chinatown, there's a railroad track that goes right through there. So, we moved the house—it's just a couple of blocks from Chinatown. And that's where that house is today. And she also—

Agnes Tebo 30:32

We had to find a lot. We had to find a lot. They were so prejudiced here. We had to find a lot. We had a hard time finding them—finding a lot. We bought next door to each other. My husband and—we bought lots next door to each other, and we had to buy houses, find some houses that people were selling, then we had to move the houses—

Sean Chase 30:35

Really?

Agnes Tebo 30:47

—to this property and put them on foundation and stuff. We had a hard time here in this little place, in Salinas.

Sean Chase 31:02

So, you would have to buy a house separate, and then move the house?

Agnes Tebo 31:07

Yeah, we had to buy the lot and see the lots we bought. Nobody wanted those lots. Nobody wanted to live—and it's nice there now.

Audrey Boutte 31:15

But that was, like, one block from Chinatown. So, we were in close proximity to—

Agnes Tebo 31:15

Yeah, but it was nothing. It was nothing to it then. But anyway, we were—

Audrey Boutte 31:25

So, that's where right now—I'm sorry.

Agnes Tebo 31:28

We didn't do well.

Sean Chase 31:29

Well, and it was that prejudice mentality that you say you couldn't get on the other side of the tracks? Was it because of that or—

Agnes Tebo 31:39

Well, I say tracks, but town—the other side of town. We couldn't—they just turned us down. They wouldn't sell us a home. They were prejudiced, just racist, that's all. They wouldn't sell us a home. So, what we did, we bought—we found some lots that nobody wanted those lots. I think—I forget how much we—like a thousand dollars, really cheap. We bought lots next door to each other, my husband and her father, and bought—found these houses. At that time they were—people were destroying the houses and putting up new houses. So, they were selling these houses. So, we bought a house and had—they bought one, we bought one, and we had the houses moved on this lot that we bought. And then that's how we got—we had a hard, we had a hard time. But, you know what, you don't give up. We couldn't give up. We're gonna fight this thing. We're gonna—I mean, we're gonna—we didn't put it that way, but we just hung in there. We hung in there because we didn't have a place to stay. So, we did—we did all right. We made it.

Audrey Boutte 32:42

Well, that's how we ended up living by Chinatown. And it was actually a very good—I really enjoyed the childhood that I had in that neighborhood, because it was a multicultural experience. Because when we moved into our house, we had—Chinatown was behind us. And then we had the Buddhist temple, and the next block from Chinatown we had the Confucius Church on the corner. And then we had the Christ the King Church across the street from our house. And then we had Snyder Park, which was like a mecca for all of the kids of the neighborhood to go to. And it was a really rich experience. And I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Agnes Tebo 33:24

And this nice—remember Mamie [unclear]? This nice old lady that ran the park, she didn't even have to work. She was loaded with money. She didn't have to work, but she wanted to do this. She came in and got that job. She got the job with the city and wanted that job to work with this type of people—Mexicans, blacks, and poor, other poor people. She hung in there with those people, and she did a good job.

Audrey Boutte 33:50

Well, in those days, they had—they hired women to be, like, park ladies. And, you know, they were just—she was just a really special one. But each park had a lady who was there to give you crayons, and teach you crafts, and teach you how to take the flag down and honor the flag, fold the flag properly. And, you know, she'd give—she'd have competitive races, and you'd get prizes or ribbons. And then we had a float in the Kiddie Kaper Parade that was representing Snyder Park. And, you know, there were so many activities that she was responsible for getting us involved in, so we just thought she was like a second mother to us, and she was just—

Agnes Tebo 34:01

—loaded with money, but she just wanted to do something for the underdog. And she did.

Audrey Boutte 34:42

So, it was a lot of people who did attend Snyder Park who would just, you know, honor her and honor her even through her retirement, because she was just a wonderful woman and, you know, I think it's such a good idea that they have these women, or these people in the parks. But, of course, parks aren't that way now. But it was good because it helped—the mothers could send their kids to the park, and they knew that everything was going to be okay. And then they were learning something and, you know, they were participating in something too. So, it was a good situation.

Sean Chase 35:16

A good environment.

Audrey Boutte 35:16

It was very good.

Sean Chase 35:19

Okay, well, I think I'm going to pass things over to my partner, Michael. He's probably got a couple questions he'd like to ask you as well.

Audrey Boutte 35:26

Okay. Well, that's good. Thank you very much.

Michael Silvia 35:31

All right, and you moved here to Salinas, did you have any family, friends, or friends that you grew to know that helped your transition from Louisiana that you can remember off hand, that made it easier for you, or did you have to completely work on your own?

Agnes Tebo 35:49

Well, my father was here. He came here from Texas. Somebody picked him up to come here to work. And he was—oh, he was way back in the early 20s, I guess. And he came to Salinas, and that's how I got here, by him being here. He came here. He sent for me, and I didn't like it here. But I said, the kind of money I can make here against what I was making in Texas, that was the name of the game, money. That's what kept me in Salinas. Otherwise—but I'm glad I stayed here, instead of going to what? Oakland and San Francisco, I would have hated those places. But I'm glad. I like Salinas.

Audrey Boutte 36:33

Well, you know, one thing that happened was that she asked us to come out, and we were here. And then my father sent for his brother. And then I remember my father had a trailer in the back of our house, and then one family would come from Louisiana, they'd stay in that trailer, and then when they get on their feet to get—another family would come, and I think last time when we celebrated her 90th

birthday, we figured out there was, like, about 59 people that came out in the migration that she started. And all those people had families. And, you know, so it grew.

Michael Silvia 37:08

So, you're the first one to set up camp here? [laughs] And it sort of expanded.

Agnes Tebo 37:13

And I didn't like it, but I'm thinking, well, that almighty dollar looks pretty good. So, that's what I bet was the whole purpose is you could make money here. And they paid more here than they paid in San Francisco for domestic work. Because that's all we could do.

Audrey Boutte 37:30

So, the thing is that each person that came, you know, they were supported by the people who were first here. So, you know, you got the support as you came out, and you got the opportunity to stay with relatives or, you know, live in the trailer or, you know, whatever. So, there was a little support group going there.

Michael Silvia 37:48

And how did you—the NAACP start here? Did you—were you the founder there?

Agnes Tebo 37:55

Yeah, one of the founders.

Michael Silvia 37:57

And what made you—

Agnes Tebo 37:57

My husband.

Michael Silvia 37:58

Your husband started that? What prompted that? Did you just—

Agnes Tebo 38:01

He said we needed it. We just needed it. We needed the NAACP, and—

Audrey Boutte 38:09

Well, she always tells a story about how there weren't enough black people to get a charter, so they have to get some white people to sign it. So, I think they had 13 black people, and they needed 25 signatures?

Agnes Tebo 38:21

I forget how many, but—

Audrey Boutte 38:22

And we got the rest were white people.

Agnes Tebo 38:24

But these white people had never even heard of the NAACP. NAACP, what does that mean? But they liked us. I mean, we were friends and we knew—I mean, we knew them well enough that they trusted us to come in and help us. And anyway, we did okay. I'm glad I stayed. I'm glad I didn't go to the big cities.

Michael Silvia 38:48

So, that helped you embrace the community a little bit more, and get you used to, you know, talking more—

Agnes Tebo 38:56

I get along with anybody. I don't care what—if you're crazy [unclear], be crazy, but I'm gonna—I came in here—I know what I came here for. That's what I'm here for.

Audrey Boutte 39:10

I'm sorry. I'm getting an allergy.

Agnes Tebo 39:12

Oh no.

Audrey Boutte 39:13

Excuse me.

Agnes Tebo 39:13

I'm glad—I didn't think I'd stay in Salinas. I don't know why. I know why, because I don't like the excitement in the big city. I came from where there was a lot—it wasn't that the city was all that big, but there's a lot of black people, and we were used to that. And to come here, there's none here? None? [laughs] That was kind of hard, but I was thinking of that almighty dollar. That was my purpose. Of course, I said, I can always move. And I'm still here. [unclear] 1937.

Michael Silvia 39:47

Did you bring any family recipes with you that they've never tried before, when you were catering?

Agnes Tebo 39:56

No, because I wasn't doing that catering when I came to town.

Michael Silvia 40:19

Oh, you learned to do it here. That's right.

Agnes Tebo 40:02

I learned here. I learned here. I worked with some caterers here. People needed extra help at dinner parties. They needed extra help, they'd call me. And I left—I don't know who I told it to, but so many

people knew that then I got to be known, where people would call me if they needed extra help, to come in and help the cooks. You know, and I would watch them cooking on—oh, I can do that. You don't even need recipe for that. And then I just sort of did my own thing. The first thing you know, I was the only one in town for I don't know how many years. The only caterer in town. And I did what—I did so many weddings here until I did a wedding one time, and 21 years later, I did the daughter. Can you imagine that? That many years I worked, did catering. But I enjoy that because I like people.

Michael Silvia 40:52

Are there any fond memories and funny stories that you have that you remember when it comes to doing the weddings here? Did you do a bunch of different families?

Agnes Tebo 41:02

My memory is getting so bad. That's my problem, is forgetting a lot of things. I should have made notes. [Michael laughs] Should have made notes because I've had some experiences, but I can't remember half of them. Oh, yeah. But I like people, so I could do that kind of work. You have to like people to be in this kind of—to do catering. You gotta like people, because, boy, they can get on your last nerve. But you have to hang in there. And I can do that. I can do that. Like I say, I did the wedding and then 20 years, 21 years later, did the daughter of that same bride.

Michael Silvia 41:52

Do you still talk to the family? The family that you did the daughter?

Agnes Tebo 41:56

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, I still see them and they have grandchildren. You know, the daughter—this girl, I did her, did the mother. And then 20 years later I did the daughter. I did two sisters, two daughters—weddings. And but I don't—I lost track of those people, because it's been so long. It's been a long time. They probably have grown children too now.

Michael Silvia 42:25

And for the Swing—talking back to the Swinging Inn and the Lotus, do you have any funny—

Agnes Tebo 42:30

The Lotus Inn?

Michael Silvia 42:30

Yeah, is there any memories you remember of—when driving down—

Agnes Tebo 42:33

I didn't go down there that much. I didn't frequent those places that much, because I thought, wasting my time here. You know, I just—I didn't. We once in a while would go down there. But just go and sit and drink and go home. There's nothing to do. Nothing to do. But it was something to do, better than just sitting home. Some people was down there every night. Every night for what? It wasn't my cup—it wasn't what I like to do.

Michael Silvia 43:15

And it was a bunch of different—it was Filipinos and Mexicans, and it was a bunch of different people. Were they all together, or were there different—separate bars for—

Agnes Tebo 43:22

They had their own groups.

Michael Silvia 43:22

Their own little groups?

Agnes Tebo 43:25

I don't know. For some reason, they never got to mingle with each other too much. Mexicans, Filipinos—Filipinos a whole different group of people too. They're so different from Mexican people. Really different type of people. So, they have their own groups, and they do their own thing their way. We do ours, our way. Well, we made it. Here we are.

Michael Silvia 43:25

Is that why the Esquire Club got started, just to center around your own community there, or how did that start? The Esquire Club?

Agnes Tebo 44:03

That was a men—I think that was a men's club, the Esquire Club. Just a bunch of men. They'd have parties, and then they'd get people from different—they'd have to get some from Monterey to come there to have a full house. And then Ford Ord came in. That made a difference too.

Michael Silvia 44:23

Do you think it hurt or bettered the community?

Agnes Tebo 44:26

Oh, I think it bettered. It didn't hurt anything. I think it helped. Don't you think, Audrey?

Audrey Boutte 44:36

Oh yeah, it was good for the economy.

Agnes Tebo 44:38

Yeah. And some place to go. I wouldn't want to go—all that kind, that much, all I wanted to do was work. It seems to me I had to be working all the time. I like that almighty dollar.

Michael Silvia 44:55

Mm-hmm

Agnes Tebo 44:56

Then I can do what I want.

Michael Silvia 44:57

And what did you want to do? [laughs]

Agnes Tebo 44:59

Everything. Like, now, I like—my goal was to do a lot of traveling, and I did. I have really traveled all over the world. That's what I wanted to do. [unclear] I love traveling. I like meeting different people, and you know all in all people are all the same. [unclear] where you go. You probably been places, don't you find that people, that they're the same. They just people. I can't say that this group—I went to different places all over the world—I can't say that this one is—I want to do what they do. No, I don't think so. I think we're all about the same things. Maybe it's just me. Don't you think so, people are pretty much the same?

Audrey Boutte 45:57

Oh, yes, I agree.

Agnes Tebo 45:58

They're just people.

Audrey Boutte 46:00

I just wish I could send everybody in the world on a trip around the world so they can see the different cultures and have a better understanding. And see that we're not really that different.

Michael Silvia 46:13

Mm-hmm. And when you were in Hartnell College, when did you decide that you wanted to go traveling?

Audrey Boutte 46:20

I always wanted to travel and see the world. I remember my brother, he was getting married right out of high school, and I said, oh, you know, you don't want to do that. You want to travel. But those were my dreams. He got married. He's still married. And I got to travel.

Agnes Tebo 46:39

Traveling is very—it's an experience. It's an educational experience, I think.

Michael Silvia 46:45

It definitely is.

Agnes Tebo 46:46

Oh, I wouldn't give what I've learned. Imagine going to places I never even heard down in the boondocks. My husband didn't like—and he went on a bad trip, because we had to go—we were in Russia and all these places, and he didn't want any part of any of it. He just—

Audrey Boutte 47:14

Tell him about the time you got to put him on the camel to take the pictures.

Agnes Tebo 47:23

Well, we were supposed to—we fooled him on a camel, in the desert in Egypt. And to take the—well, actually we were gonna ride. We had to ride quite a distance on that camel back, but he didn't know he was gonna be doing all of that. He was mad at me for a long time.

Audrey Boutte 47:41

They had to ride to the pyramids.

Agnes Tebo 47:43

Yeah.

Audrey Boutte 47:43

He didn't like that at all.

Agnes Tebo 47:45

The cars couldn't go that far. The cars would take you so far, and you get on horseback and go—oh, but I liked going there. I was a [unclear]. I like—I just like going. Never seen it before, and I wasn't even afraid of it. But I'm glad I did all that. I'm glad I did. [unclear] experience. And I'll tell you one thing. I can say one thing about all of this. We have the best country in the world.

Michael Silvia 48:20

We do.

Agnes Tebo 48:21

We do. We do. I go to all these places and I say, I expect to see something that would make me want to move there. You know how you go someplace, and I don't think really that—I won't go that far, but I say, you go someplace and you say, oh, I'd like to live here. I'd like to live here. No, not that. Didn't get that impression. But I'm glad I went to see how the other part of world, how these people live. It's kind of sad, some of it. Some of it is really sad.

Michael Silvia 48:52

And besides the money, what was the one thing that made you want to stay here? Because you said you liked to travel and you liked the people. What was the one thing besides the money that made you really like this area, this Salinas?

Agnes Tebo 49:05

I like Salinas. This is where—this is home. When I'm through with all this other stuff, I'm home now and I can relax and I can appreciate what I've seen in other places. I think when I come back, and when I get back home, then I really—I really did appreciate everything I saw. It was like going to school, especially in these countries where you how see these people live, conditions, the kids out of school, and I said, "How come you're not in school?" Guess what they—they got it all figured out. "It's a holiday, madame. It's a holiday, madame." They have these excuses, but they have to help support the families. Some of them are just eight, nine years old, hustling, selling stuff that you can't even use, but they

know you're gonna help them out. We have—we do. That's one thing that this traveling gave me. Teach me how to appreciate what we have here. We really have something here that these people would give anything to have.

Michael Silvia 50:14

And you appreciate your family, your home that's here?

Agnes Tebo 50:17

Yeah, my home. I appreciate this good 'ol USA. Good 'ol USA. There's no place like it, and I've been to many countries. There are no place like USA, in my opinion.

Michael Silvia 50:33

Because people are more friendly—friendlier here?

Agnes Tebo 50:35

Conditions.

Michael Silvia 50:37

Conditions.

Agnes Tebo 50:39

You see how these people have to scuffle and kids can't go to school because they have to help support the family. Like, there's little boys out there working to help support the family. Can't be more than 10, 12 years old. I don't know, 10 to 12 years old. I just sometimes wonder whatever happened to those kids. Whatever happened? Did they ever—finally get out of that situation. We have—have you ever done any traveling? Well, you know what I'm talking about. Don't you think this is the best place in the world to live?

Michael Silvia 51:16

Do you think that's because of your schooling? Did you have any good teachers that made you want to go to school?

Agnes Tebo 51:23

I didn't go to school that long or that much. I think I went 10th grade. I didn't finish high school.

Michael Silvia 51:31

And that was in Louisiana still?

Agnes Tebo 51:33

No, no, Texas. I didn't live in—she lived in Louisiana, but I lived in Texas. My family moved to Texas when I was small and I don't know anything about Louisiana, except when I'd go visiting. But she's the one that was born and raised in Louisiana. But they're all the same, Louisiana and Texas, their customs. They live—they're all the same.

Michael Silvia 51:56

And was that a different culture shock when you came here? Were there a lot of customs that you thought were different when you moved to Salinas?

Agnes Tebo 52:04

Oh, from Cali—from Texas, oh yes indeed. Everything was so much nice, so much better, well, because they had—you can earn more money too and do more. They paid you what, \$3 a week, and then you work six days, and over here, you can make that in one day. They paid 40 cents an hour. Never stops, here. When I came to town, that's what they paid in Salinas. 40 cents an hour. That was top money. Imagine, yeah. I'm kind of glad I went through all that. I learned a lot by going through the hard times. Went from hard time to good time, and hard time. Well, whatever. But I'm glad I went through all of that, because it taught me a lot and make me appreciate what I have more, and when I think about—I think about those people down there sometimes, especially in Egypt. That is a bad, bad situation down there, and the kids had to get out of school to sell stuff, to try to help the family survive. "How come you're not in school today?" "It's a holiday madame." [laughs] The teacher might have lied too [Michael laughs]. "It's a holiday madame."

Michael Silvia 53:36

In different languages too.

Agnes Tebo 53:37

Well, they speak English very well.

Michael Silvia 53:40

Yeah, they do.

Agnes Tebo 53:41

—it's amazing how well all over the world that is, speaking English. Really good. [unclear] I guess that's good for them.

Michael Silvia 53:49

Did you find that here, that there are a lot of different languages here? Is that more—a little bit more different in Texas as opposed to here in Salinas? Were you surprised at how many different cultures there were here?

Agnes Tebo 54:03

Yes. Yeah, there were more. There were—oh, yeah, a lot more. More people in Texas and Louisiana, you were born and raised and you stayed there, bring one generation after another and never could—was able to go no place. Where people left there then came to California like we did. A lot of people came. I bet there's more people out here now that wasn't even born here out in California because they didn't go back home. They didn't go back to the hard times. Anyway, I never regretted leaving Texas, because I didn't leave anything. [laughs]

Michael Silvia 54:48

So, when you bought the house right here in the lot, were you the first two houses at that certain lot, or were there other families around you? Was there other families around the area that you bought your house?

Agnes Tebo 55:01

Oh, yeah, yeah. There were people living across the street. Then they began to build. It's fairly new here. In fact, it's fairly new area there where I live.

Audrey Boutte 55:18

Actually, I remember that we were the only two houses on that block. And there was an empty field where the—

Agnes Tebo 55:26

When we bought the lots, there was nothing there. We bought the lots and had bought some houses that people were selling—buying old houses and selling them to build a better house. So, we bought the old houses and had to move. That's the house—you know, living in that city, had been moved from one part of town to another.

Michael Silvia 55:48

Do you have any family friends that helped you move, or did you have to move the house all by yourself?

Agnes Tebo 55:52

We had to have it done. We couldn't move the house. People were doing that so much, so they had businesses moving houses?

Audrey Boutte 56:02

I can remember looking down Front street and seeing the house coming down the block in the middle of the street. Yeah, we had this big truck. I mean, the houses—it wasn't, you know, a big house. So, it could be put on a big kind of truck.

Agnes Tebo 56:17

Well, they'd try to jack them up. They jack them up and put stuff underneath the road with wheels and move them.

Audrey Boutte 56:27

So, on the left side of the—of our house, on the—I guess it's called Calle Cebu now—but that was where the projects were, or they're still there. And so, there were a lot of, you know, neighbors in that area that we got to know. But our house, our two houses were the only house on that block for quite a long time, until an interracial couple, a Japanese woman and African American man, moved in next door to our house. And I think that's still the only two houses on the lot.

Agnes Tebo 57:02

—you had to buy lot and you had to find a house someplace somebody wants to sell and have it moved. This was a whole big empty block. We had to move it there. I think our—their—her family my family, we've moved around about the same time, and then the people next door. And then first thing you know, the block was full, buying houses and moving.

Michael Silvia 57:06

So, driving—

Agnes Tebo 57:09

You had to find a house that somebody want to sell, and move that house, have it moved. You'd see it coming down the street on big wheels. It was interesting to see.

Michael Silvia 57:42

Is that a fond memory of just having your own house finally coming down to—

Agnes Tebo 57:46

Yeah. Yeah. And [unclear] each other for years.

Michael Silvia 57:46

So, since you lived outside of town, was going into Chinatown or driving in there kind of a special occasion, or was it almost—

Agnes Tebo 58:02

Well, it was outside of town then, but right now it's in town.

Michael Silvia 58:04

Yeah. [laughs]

Agnes Tebo 58:05

The walk from my house to Chinatown is kind of a walk, but we don't, you know—at that time it was nothing but fields, and it became residential. Now it's nothing but houses on each side of the street where I live.

Audrey Boutte 58:23

I had to ride my bike, you know, across from Sacred Heart School to my house. And I'd have to pass by Soledad Street by Chinatown every day. And sometimes my brother and my sister and I would walk home, or I'd ride my bike. But yeah, we've always looked down Chinatown to see what was going on.

Agnes Tebo 58:41

It was an experience.

Audrey Boutte 58:42

It was curiosity.

Michael Silvia 58:44

Are there any little things that you try to pick out every day? Oh, there's that same person that's always—

Audrey Boutte 58:48

[laughs] No, not really. I remember one time, I didn't go home the same way. I went on the underpass. And they have a lot of what they call hobos at the time. And I remembered there was a hobo there, and I was by myself, and he exposed himself to me. And I remember running home and telling my mother about it, because I was, like, I've never seen anything like that before. So, I didn't go home that way anymore.

Michael Silvia 59:19

[laughs] That wasn't a normal occurrence, do you think? Or that was just that one time?

Agnes Tebo 59:23

Somebody had a few drinks, probably. Had a few drinks and didn't—

Audrey Boutte 59:27

They were people who would come in on the trains, and they'd just sort of hang around that area. They're pretty—they had a few of them around. Maybe about 10 or 12 of them around town usually.

Michael Silvia 59:39

So, that wasn't a normal occurrence? That was just that one day—

Audrey Boutte 59:42

Just that one thing, but it taught me a lesson.

Michael Silvia 59:45

So, always go home the one way?

Audrey Boutte 59:47

Yes.

Michael Silvia 59:47

[laughs] Are there any funny stories that you can remember that your dad or your uncle brought home from Salinas?

Unknown 59:58

We have about 30 seconds left.

Audrey Boutte 1:00:02

30 seconds left? Ta-da!

Michael Silvia 1:00:06

[laughs] Looks like we're done then. I don't know if we can wrap up in 30 seconds. [laughs]

Audrey Boutte 1:00:10

Well, thank you. I'm sorry I had an allergy attack—

Michael Silvia 1:00:13

Oh, no that's fine.

Audrey Boutte 1:00:13

—in the middle of everything but—

Sean Chase 1:00:15

Thank you for all your stories.

Audrey Boutte 1:00:17

It was good, yeah. She did good, huh?

Agnes Tebo 1:00:19

Who?

Audrey Boutte 1:00:19

You!

Michael Silvia 1:00:20

Yeah, you did great. Thank you.