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Interview with Byron Chong

Byron Chong

California State University, Monterey Bay

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Interviewee: Byron Chong
Interviewer: Kirsten Bauer
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Byron Chong 00:07

She got rid [unclear] sold a business for somebody. I guess they [unclear] business, sold some property for somebody. And it was a restaurant, so he gave her that as part of the pay.

Kirsten Bauer 00:22

Oh, for, like, kind of like for her work? What does she do?

Byron Chong 00:26

She's in commercial real estate.

Kirsten Bauer 00:28

Oh, okay.

Byron Chong 00:29

She sells commercial real estate businesses.

Kirsten Bauer 00:32

Just to begin, my name is Kirsten Bauer, and I am here interviewing Byron Chong about his oral history of growing up in the Salinas community. And thank you very much for giving your time for this purpose. And kind of how the whole interview or the whole thing goes is, you know, first, we can just talk about just kind of like the background stuff, like you were telling me over the phone about, you know, what you know about your ancestors, and who came over here first, and just kind of like the background basics information. And then if we could, you know, start talking about your memories growing up and that kind of thing, or even just your experience in the community. And just kind of go from there covering a couple of those types of topics. Does that sound pretty good?

Byron Chong 01:31

Yeah.

Kirsten Bauer 01:32

Okay.

Byron Chong 01:33

Well, first thing, I know a fair amount about my family coming over. I grew up with my grandparents, my father's parents. My mother was a graduate student, taking training to be an eye surgeon. So I was raised by my grandparents in Berkeley, while she was working in San Francisco. So as a result, you know, they spoke Chinese in the house, so as a result, you know, I speak Chinese as a first language. In that—in the neighborhood, we grew up it was a mixed-race neighborhood. We had some black kids

in the neighborhood, a lot of white kids and, a little bit later, there were some Japanese kids, but I suppose that they were—we didn't know at the time, they were in internment camps until they came back to Berkeley. There isn't much to say about growing up in Berkeley, and when you're a kid, you have no sense of—in a mixed-race neighborhood, no sense of white, black, Asian, because it's just your friends. The—we came to Salinas in about 1948. We lived on Market Street. Now, my mother's brother was a pharmacist here and then went to medical school, became a doctor. And actually, he's an osteopath, and it was here he had a fair amount of land on what's called Alisal. He had 10 acres out there. One of my cousins said that they tried to buy a house across the street from my uncle's place, but some people wouldn't sell it to them, land owner wouldn't sell it to them. And I've heard some of the discrimination problems that my parents, my father's parents, experienced when they went to move to Berkeley. They had a—the landlord rented to them, and the people had an anti-Chinese rally out front, and the landlord told them go to hell, and he was gonna rent to this family anyway. Somebody apparently—some hooligans apparently tried to throw some tomatoes at the house, and two of my uncles grabbed these guys and beat them up. At least that's the way the story goes. On my father's side, my great grandfather was the first guy to come over in the 1880s. There wasn't any immigration in the 1880s at the time. The boat showed up. In San Francisco, he got off the boat and you're here. In about the mid-80s, you know, they had the exclusion laws, and it was tough for people to get in. So my grandfather knew a lot of people. He became a Christian and was working with the Chinese Mission. And so he knew some pretty influential people in the Presbyterian Church, which at the time was the highbrow church where all the rich folks went to church. And they helped sponsor my grandfather, it was my dad's father, into the San Rafael Academy to learn English. We went to the archives in Burlingame and looked at the papers and we saw all the letters that people had written letting him in. He learned a little bit of English and was working in Stockton. And so my great grandpa, who was at a pretty good position as head gardener in a giant estate, bought shares in a store—bought the other people out. So he was a merchant. Now, this is pretty important, because if you're a merchant, you can bring over your wife. Laborers couldn't do this. So they brought over grandma. People on Angel Island really had a tough time. If you read the story of Angel Island, they would question these people like crazy about their homes, because they were trying to catch these people who were, weren't really their children, but they were—they were coached in how to say, like, "Well, I grew up in this house." Well, if he asked me about the house that I grew up in, I couldn't answer all the questions either. But Grandma only stayed at Angel Island for just a short time. The immigration people were able to go to San Rafael, which is close by, and they could tell other people wrote letters saying that—the bankers wrote letters saying that they knew he was a merchant. Dad was the first Chinese baby in San Rafael, and I don't remember hearing a lot of stories about anti-Chinese discrimination, because there weren't a whole lot of Chinese in San Rafael anyway. But he said that other places in Marin County, they wouldn't let Chinese live. That people could work there, you know, the houseboys, the laborers, but they had to go to San Rafael or someplace like that to live. Ross Valley, for example, wouldn't let Chinese people live there. But they didn't—he didn't say much about anti-Chinese discrimination growing up. My grandmother never could vote until she became a citizen and Chinese couldn't become citizens until after World War Two. So they told us a lot about the history about this, and we had to be vigilant for civil rights and discrimination problems. Now, by the time I came along, in Salinas things weren't that bad. As near as I can tell, my other cousins who grew up here said things weren't that bad either. My mother and father are specialists. And they sort of had an advantage over some of the other doctors in town. They were the only eye specialists, and he was the only ear, nose and throat specialist in town. So

people would come to them because they were specialists, and ignoring the fact that they were Chinese. My mother got a big help. People—the rich folks in town were used to going to San Francisco to get their medical care. In the 1940s, Salinas was kind of the backwater of everything. And if you wanted specialty care, you went to the city. And there were very few specialists at the time. So the people used to—doctors would say, "Well, why are you up here? You've got Emma [unclear] in Salinas. You don't have to come up here anymore." So they would refer a lot of patients to her, and so that was helpful. My father was a very, very busy ear, nose and throat specialist here. Since they were fairly prominent people in town, after about only four years, we moved to this part of town here. They bought a big house from one of well-known agricultural people. There was another Chinese family that was living just a short distance away, just three blocks away. So we didn't have any trouble with any housing discrimination. We grew up in—in school, we look at the pictures, and there was maybe one other Asian family there. There were a few Mexicans in school. And but mostly—it's mostly white. Now one of the Mexicans who grew up about the same time I did said that there was a fair amount of anti-Mexican discrimination. They put them on a low expectation track. Although I never figured that out. People wonder about immigration, immigrants, and how well they do in school when they're Chinese or they don't have the language spoken at home. Well, neither one of my grandparents on my mother's side or father's side spoke very good English. And so Chinese was what they spoke at home. And on my—all four of the siblings on my father's side were university graduates. Two optometrists, one physician, and one teacher. And they're all Cal grads.

Kirsten Bauer 10:21

You said your father's siblings?

Byron Chong 10:23

Okay, yeah, there are four of them in the family. On my mother's side, my grandfather came over. And it was a big—he was treated to a anti-Chinese reception when he got off the boat. And instead of being a goldsmith, he wound up being a houseboy for a wealthy Mexican family in Gonzalez. They found him a job being a houseboy. He saved some money and bought himself a store catering to the Chinese laborers, and bought Chinese food, and whatever stuff. He wound up investing in some businesses here in Salinas, real estate in Salinas or real estate in Pajaro, which is still in Monterey County. He wouldn't go back to get a wife, because his seasickness was terrible. He had lost 25 pounds coming over on the boat.

Byron Chong 11:12

My mother's family, yeah. So they became—so they put the word out and showed him a picture of this 16 year old girl. He was 42 at the time, showed a picture of the 16 year old girl. He says, "Looks good to me." So she came to Watsonville, and they had a three day wedding. It was the biggest thing they'd ever seen. And the first time he saw her was when they said, "I do." And he pulled open the veil, and there she was. Anyway, they had 11 children. Two of them didn't make it to one years old. So nine survived.

Kirsten Bauer 11:12

Where was your mother in the scheme of the—

Kirsten Bauer 11:12

This was your—

Byron Chong 11:42

She was number eight—number 10, I guess, but eight of the surviving nine. There were two children who didn't survive, just a little bit older. But since they died as babies, you know, no one knows anything about them. They just died as babies. Of those nine, two of them went to business college, and the rest of them graduated from Cal. And four of them became physicians. And one of them become a dentist. The youngest one is a dentist. So, and they all spoke Chinese at home. They all spoke Chinese at home. So if you talk about first generation immigrants who have sort of a language handicap at home, it didn't seem to slow our family down either. If you got two doctors as parents, you're fairly likely to have a good dose of intelligence genetically. And people say there's a lot of environmental influence. Well, everyone expects you to get all A's in school, and everyone expects you to go to college. We were all expected to go to college. And even through grade school, by the time we got to fifth grade, sixth grade, I'd always figured I was a top student in class. And in junior high school they find out real fast who the top students are in these classes. They start tracking people. They start tracking people.

Kirsten Bauer 13:41

You were in junior high school here in Salinas?

Byron Chong 13:43

Yeah, went to Washington. It was junior high at the time—three year—it was '79, and three years high school. They start tracking people. So pretty soon you'll see the same people in class, and you figure out who these people are. Now, about the time, the first time I figured out that there was a little bit of racial discrimination, was we had—about the time you start having girl-boy parties. We used to—they used to have parties and all the boys would get together. I was always invited to all these parties. They start having girl-boy parties, and I didn't get invited anymore. However, my mother was a big cheese in the couple of women's organizations around here. A lot of the mothers got together and had a dance club, teach the kids how to dance, equal number of boys and girls. And I was the only Chinese guy in there, in the group. Of course, there weren't that many Chinese in the town anyway. I didn't feel like we had any problems with the dance club. I had my favorite dance partner.

Kirsten Bauer 13:58

Who was that?

Byron Chong 14:56

Well, her name was Margaret Gilbert, and I still know who she is, and I still run into her in town. But I guess everyone has a favorite partner that you sort of feel comfortable with. You know how she's moving, if she knows where your feet are gonna be, and you know where her feet are gonna be, and stuff like that.

Kirsten Bauer 15:21

And what year was this?

Byron Chong 15:22

I think we were in the seventh grade or eighth grade—seventh or eighth grade.

Kirsten Bauer 15:26

That would have been, like, the early 60s?

Byron Chong 15:28

Early 50s, mid 50s. Otherwise, I didn't have any—about the time here in high school, I started figuring I'd—maybe I should look at Chinese girls, and there were few to choose from. There were actually only a couple to choose from. One of them I thought was kind of pretty, but I was a little bit too shy to ask her out. And so I took the other girl to prom a couple times, the Chinese girl to prom a couple times. I guess by about the time—that time we figured out that, you know, Chinese people are supposed to go out with Chinese people. Although, to back up, one of the first interracial marriages was my mother's brother. He had a Chinese wife, and he was a doctor. He became stricken with one of his, by one of his patients. A young, much younger woman. And she was beautiful. I mean, till the day she died, she was beautiful. She was really beautiful. And they couldn't get married in California. They were, what was the—what's the word? Miscegenation? Is that the word? Where it was racial mixing or something like that. And they had to go to Reno to get married. So just like if you want to—gay marriage, you have to go to—one of my sisters, one of my daughter's friends had to go to—lived in New York, had to go to Massachusetts to get married. And so they had to go to—maybe gay people have to go to Massachusetts [unclear] in California, who knows? But anyway, they had to go to Reno to get married. I remember as a—I don't remember this, but they told me that. I couldn't figure out if she was my aunt, because she wasn't Chinese. And I think I was eight or so and I said, "What are you doing here?" You know, she says, "Well, I'm your aunt." I couldn't figure out, because you're not Chinese. Anyway, so that was the first interracial marriage. And that was in—I don't know what year. I think it was about 19—in the early 40s, maybe late 30s or 40s. It was—she worked hard to fit in, and she learned Chinese. And she had a Chinese maid so she could learn Chinese. My brothers—[unclear] sisters. That's my mother [unclear]. They didn't like the idea.

Kirsten Bauer 18:26

What about her? What about your brothers? I mean, your uncle's parents or grandparents?

Byron Chong 18:32

I don't know anything about that. I don't know anything about that. Grandpa had died by that time. He died in about 1930 from pneumonia. But I don't know—I have no idea what grandma thought. All I know is the sisters didn't like it. But she worked hard to fit in, and I thought all the years I knew her she was very, very nice. I just got sort of got the idea that, you know, she's Auntie Millie, you know. And so mixed race was—we had a firsthand experience with that, you know. Our cousins were mixed race, and they were cousins like everybody else, you know. And they're both nice. And my cousin Colleen was just a year or so younger. She's very, very pretty. When we were at Cal, I said, "Darn, too bad she's my cousin." [Kirsten laughs] I couldn't date her. Now a funny thing about the Chinese, there's—they have sort of marriage customs where you can't marry someone with your same last name. I figured this out when I started dating this girl in college, and I was living with my grandparents in Berkeley. And they

said, "Well, you want—" So, I said—or they invited me to bring her home, because they knew I had this girlfriend. And so we brought her in for dinner.

Kirsten Bauer 19:56

These are your father's parents?

Byron Chong 19:58

These are my father's parents, because I grew up in the same house. They're staying in the same house, and I was staying at their house when I went to college. As an aside, I learned adult Chinese about that time, because, you know, when you're five years old you speak baby Chinese. And so I associated with their their friends. We'd play cards and went to church, and so I picked up a fair amount of adult Chinese. So we come home and we find out that—my grandparents find out that she has the same last name. In fact, she knows how to write Chinese, and we both do Chinese the same, and my grandparents were very polite. I brought her home, and my grandmother let me have it. She says, "Don't date this woman anymore." You know, so she read me the riot act about not marrying someone with the same last name. You can't do this.

Kirsten Bauer 20:55

And why is that?

Byron Chong 20:56

Well, it just, you know, it's just like you can't marry your sister or your brother, you know, or your—but strangely enough, since my mother and my brother had two different names, I could marry my mother's brother's daughter. So if I dated Colleen, my cute cousin, my grandma would have no objections. Now my mother would have a problem with that, [Kirsten laughs] but my grandma wouldn't have problem with that. She wouldn't have a problem. She said, "Oh, no, you don't have a problem with that."
[unclear]

Kirsten Bauer 21:37

Is that something that came from—

Byron Chong 21:40

That's Chinese.

Kirsten Bauer 21:40

—a custom in China?

Byron Chong 21:41

That's China. That's Chinese customs. Well, we digress too much. Anyway, so I didn't have any really close girlfriends in the sense that—I guess the main problem was that you have to have a lot of money to go on dates. And I didn't earn enough money picking strawberries to go out on dates and that.

Kirsten Bauer 22:16

So that was your job at some time in high school, or—

Byron Chong 22:19

Yeah, I did. I spent two summers picking strawberries.

Kirsten Bauer 22:26

Here in the Salinas Valley or—

Byron Chong 22:28

Yeah, here in Salinas Valley. I learned that you don't want to be a strawberry picker. It's not a good job. And all these guys, all the Mexicans are out there [unclear], you know, working hard at picking strawberries. I know what they feel like. My back knows exactly what they feel like. Even as a high school kid and you go out, and you think your muscles are pretty tough and adapt, but for the first three weeks of summer, that back didn't feel good. That back didn't feel good.

Kirsten Bauer 23:00

And what year was that?

Byron Chong 23:03

I was between my junior and senior years in high school, and after my senior year in high school. So I picked strawberries to make some money.

Kirsten Bauer 23:12

And who else were the other strawberry pickers? Were they other Chinese people or Mexican?

Byron Chong 23:18

Mexicans and Filipinos at the time.

Kirsten Bauer 23:21

There weren't even, like, contemporaries or friends from school or were you just the—

Byron Chong 23:25

No actually the way I did it was my mother had a patient who owned a strawberry farm, and she got me the job. It was hard work. It's hard work. So I earned some money, but maybe I was too shy. Who knows? I had a couple of friends who were—I knew in high school, and there was one lady who was a little bit—one year ahead. And she went to Chicago to the University of Chicago, and she was just kind of a lonely, shy person over there. And so, we carried on some correspondence through the year, and, you know, when you share things that—I used to have pen pals, by the way, as an aside, international pen pals and we shared a lot. And so I was used to writing a lot. Writing letters every, you know, to the pen pals frequently, so I wrote [unclear], so she became sort of a pen pal. You know, she'd talk about what's going on. I talked about what's going on here and stuff like that. But she and me were really good friends.

Kirsten Bauer 24:47

Was she Chinese?

Byron Chong 24:48

No, white. So she was my first real good girlfriend. Okay, and she was the person—first person, first woman I became physically intimate with. Okay, lets leave the term at that [Kirsten laughs]. But no sex, okay. But anyway, so she was my girlfriend for a couple of years. And I was absolutely devastated when I went over one day, and she says, "Well, I got to talk to you." I says, "What?" She says, "Well, Larry asked me to marry him, and I said yes."

Kirsten Bauer 25:35

Larry? [laughs]

Byron Chong 25:37

Yes, she had been two timing me. Anyway, [Kirsten laughs] she was two timing me. Anyway, it took a while to get over.

Kirsten Bauer 25:44

Is this when you were in college or—

Byron Chong 25:46

Yeah, I was in college. I was in college.

Kirsten Bauer 25:46

And you were in college at Cal as well?

Byron Chong 25:50

Cal.

Kirsten Bauer 25:50

This is when you were living with your grandparents?

Byron Chong 25:52

Yeah. So I had a couple girlfriends at Cal. And so I gravitated toward the Chinese student club, and so when they allowed Chinese students. There were two kinds of Chinese at Cal. There were the American born Chinese that are referred to as ABCs. And the foreign-born Chinese, that we refer them as FOBs, that's fresh off the boat. Actually, it's not FOB anymore. Its JOJ, that's just off the jet. You know, and I know that they refer to the Mexican born people as wetbacks. But they called us ABCs, and we call them FOBs. And so, they spoke a lot of Chinese, and their culture was different, because we're Americans, you know. We're like what they call bananas, you know, yellow on the outside, white on the inside. Because you grow up here with a white culture. And although we had a fair dose of Chinese culture, we, you know, we went to Chinese school. We went to Chinese school, but we were terrible students. We were terrible students. My Chinese writing, reading and writing, is very, very primitive. I don't think I got out of the first grade.

Kirsten Bauer 27:15

How long did you attend Chinese school?

Byron Chong 27:16

Oh, you know, maybe three or four years, but I don't think I ever got out of the first grade as far as skills are concerned. We had some—there was a little Chinese youth club where you could see the other Chinese kids, you know, socialize with other Chinese kids. But yeah, but it wasn't, you know, greatly active, and I didn't make a lot of friends with the other Chinese kids. I was more of an athlete in high school, and more of my friends were socially, you know, a lot of athletes and I attended church a lot. So it's a lot of social activities with church. And a lot more of my friends were church friends. To digress in church, we went to the Presbyterian Church, because my father's family were Presbyterians, having been with a Presbyterian church in San Rafael. My mother's family were—they're weak Christians, although they all went to the Methodist Church. But they're all weak—they're all pretty weak Christians, but they didn't have Christian upbringing. So that's that social, you know, that's social life and—

Kirsten Bauer 28:35

And there was more of a mixture of races, probably more white people and—

Byron Chong 28:41

Well, the Presbyterian church was lily white, except for us. I don't remember any other families that were not white. The church is—our church, the Presbyterian church, which I still go to now has morphed substantially. And there's a substantial Hispanic presence there. A lot of people—you know, we have Spanish translation. And we have quite a few black families in the church. So it's not what it was in the 50s. But we never felt—we had—the youth group had a couple of Filipinos in there. But no one ever—there never was any [unclear]. No, no, in the church's group. But I never felt like it was any—there was anything like it. It's like discrimination, you know, because I think—I suppose that there's discrimination when there's enough people to cause trouble. And if there's just one or two of you around there, you're not causing any trouble, so that people don't worry about that. If I digress a little tiny bit, I heard a story about—actually there was a talk at the Rotary Club about some black family that was here. And there were a lot of places on Main Street they couldn't go. They can, you know, they could shine shoes, and they could be maids in there, but they couldn't—a lot of restaurants wouldn't take them. They wouldn't let them in some places. I was told that this was the situation for Chinese people earlier, but when we were growing up, there's only a couple of good places to eat in town anyway. So our family always took us to the restaurants and hotels, which were the only good restaurants to eat at the time.

Kirsten Bauer 30:56

Do you remember the names of those restaurants?

Byron Chong 30:58

Yeah, one was the Cominos Hotel. And the other one is the Jeffery. Cominos Hotel is gone now, and the Jeffrey is a bank building now. Bank building. But we went there because they're the only good restaurants. I think the pub was around. It was a good restaurant at that time. But I remember my parents taking us to the Cominos. It always looked kind of a little bit rundown to me. They had a couple of sleazy things in the neighborhood. They had a gallery arcade, where they had a lot of games and

shooting gallery somewhere next door. I always thought that was kind of sleazy. Then they had a sleazebag movie theater. There were three movie theaters in town. And one in town was the one across the street from the Cominos called the Crystal. Crystal—that's where the Maya is now, and the Crystal was always known as a fleabag. And I never once went there. I was afraid. They said it was full of fleas, and I was always afraid to get [unclear]. We also went to—the good theater in town was the Fox.

Kirsten Bauer 32:14

Did you ever—the Chinese school, is that where you went to—the one right near Soledad Street, in that area?

Byron Chong 32:22

Yeah, it's the same one. It's the same building.

Kirsten Bauer 32:24

And so every day you had school—

Byron Chong 32:25

—same classroom. No, on Saturdays.

Kirsten Bauer 32:26

On Saturdays?

Byron Chong 32:27

Saturdays. You had to learn how to write Chinese and—

Kirsten Bauer 32:30

And your [unclear] just kind of goofed off?

Byron Chong 32:32

Well, I just wasn't a good student.

Kirsten Bauer 32:35

[laughs] You were a good student in other ways!

Byron Chong 32:36

I didn't learn much. The motivation wasn't there to learn that. So you had to learn to recite things in Chinese and tell stories, and it wasn't—I wasn't really good at it because the reason for recitations was to be—develop your verbal skills. So you had to tell a story, then you could speak it, you know, decently. And I guess I'd been out of—I hadn't spoken Chinese much for a couple years because my parents didn't speak Chinese at home. And my sisters didn't speak Chinese. I was told at five years old that, for a five year old, I was very fluent in Chinese. For a five year old—much has changed. [unclear] five year old talking in any language. So, but I remember recitation time in Chinese school as being a very painful event, trying to tell stories about something.

Kirsten Bauer 33:40

And to go backwards a little bit, both your parents are doctors—

Byron Chong 33:45

Yeah.

Kirsten Bauer 33:46

—and it seems like you've talked about how very successful all they're all this first generation was that was born in America. What are the sort of—what do you feel are the kind of foundations of your grandparents that kind of pushed your parents to all achieve so much in that first generation? Do you think there's—are there any distilling values? Or is it part of the, you know, them just seeing the opportunity of America?

Byron Chong 34:10

You know, it's hard. I wasn't there, so I can't—I really can't say. I know that Asians always—Chinese always valued education. And I know that the parents always encouraged the kids to study hard and do their homework. My mother said that she was always sort of a self-starter. She said that she just loved reading and studying hard no matter what. And so it wasn't—I don't think she needed her parents to flog her and say, "You will study," and stuff like that. She's remembered as being a bookworm and enjoyed reading a lot and studying a lot. She was the valedictorian of her class.

Kirsten Bauer 35:00

And then she went to Cal?

Byron Chong 35:02

Cal, yeah.

Kirsten Bauer 35:03

Is that where she met your father?

Byron Chong 35:05

Yeah. There is a little discrimination story that you've reminded me of. One of her older brothers went to Cal and was at the medical school at Cal, and the first year of medical school was still at Berkeley. And one of the professors made some anti-Chinese remark in class, and my uncle wouldn't stand by that, and I can't—there was some verbal altercation, although it may have been a physical altercation, and he was invited to transfer to Stanford. So, he went to Stanford Medical School and graduated from Stanford Medical School. And since he graduated from Stanford, and maybe had a rotten experience at Cal, and had a good experience at—he encouraged his baby sister to go to Stanford. Now the story goes that at the Cal-Stanford football game, she saw this cute guy in the Cal band and transferred to Cal just to go there [Kirsten laughs]. Although I think it was a matter of money—you know, Stanford costs more money than Cal, so she transferred over there. And she was behind one year in medical school, and being in the Depression and things like that—I guess they were friends in medical school. But they didn't get married until right after the war started.

Kirsten Bauer 36:43

And did—were your parents, like, paying for school themselves, or your grandparents, or working through school? Do you know?

Byron Chong 36:50

My grandparents weren't very well off. I know my grandmother paid for their education, although they worked summers to pay for their—help pay for the education too. My grandmother remembers picking shrimp every night to help put the kids through school. The older brothers—my oldest brother, my oldest uncle, was the pharmacist in town, worked hard to put his siblings through school.

Kirsten Bauer 37:23

And how much older is he?

Byron Chong 37:24

He was 13 years older than my mother. 13 years older. And so he was able to help make money, went to pharmacist school and made a decent living. He was here in Salinas, on the end of Main Street—Main and Market.

Kirsten Bauer 37:32

And your grandparents on—or your great grandfather was a merchant, correct?

Byron Chong 37:53

Yeah, my grandfather was a merchant.

Kirsten Bauer 37:55

Your grandfather was a merchant, and your grandmother was—came over because that's the 16 year old that he saw, or was that the other—

Byron Chong 38:04

No, the 16 year old is my mother's side. She was actually born in America.

Kirsten Bauer 38:10

Okay.

Byron Chong 38:10

She was born in America. So, one of the few people born in America at the time. Her family came from Marysville. They were Marysville people. And she had several brothers. They were farmers. They were in the orchard—they were in the orchard business. I visited the family a few times, but I know very little about the Marysville family. But the—so I'm the third generation born in the country. Third generation born in this country. So, like I say, we've been away from China a long time. So we're basically, you know—I tell people I'm not really Chinese, I just look like one.

Kirsten Bauer 39:03

So, because also your parents didn't want to speak Chinese in the home?

Byron Chong 39:08

Well, more so than English.

Kirsten Bauer 39:09

Did they have other—were there certain cultural traditions that they did keep up with in the [unclear]?

Byron Chong 39:16

Not really.

Kirsten Bauer 39:17

Not really, wasn't—

Byron Chong 39:18

No, except for food. Except for food.

Kirsten Bauer 39:21

Was your mother—did your mother make a lot of the food?

Byron Chong 39:24

You know, mom did more cooking than dad did. My father's cooking skills can be described as primitive [Kristen laughs]. She had a very eclectic style of cooking. I mean, she loved looking at cookbooks and getting recipes on a lot of different things. But at dinner time, there wasn't a question. There wasn't a question of what we're having for dinner. It was rice every night and—every night's rice. There are a few, you know, Chinese vegetables. A favorite lunch was wonton. And she'd make up the filling, grind up the pork and filling. And we'd import the wrappers from who knows where. And so the kids had to wrap the wonton. So I probably wrapped up several thousands of them or something like that over the years. We had more American food than Chinese food, I would say. But we still liked Chinese food.

Kirsten Bauer 40:36

And you definitely feel like your, like, either musical or political interests or anything like that growing up were very much influenced just by being an American kid.

Byron Chong 40:45

Just an American kid, yeah.

Kirsten Bauer 40:47

And what sports—you said you played sports in high school, but what sports did you play?

Byron Chong 40:52

Well, my father and his brother were heavy duty football players. Now, you say, you're not very big [laughs]. My father was taller, and he was about 160 pounds, and he could play guard at the time, in the 1920s. I played—I grew up fast, and so I was a pretty big boy. I was the poster child for childhood

obesity. And I saw I could play line like my father. He was a lineman, and he taught me how to play line. So I was always a lineman in football. Then my sophomore year, we went off of practice in football. And I'm not too sure what happened, but I had a severe knee injury. And that was the end of my football career. So I did cross country, track, and wrestling.

Kirsten Bauer 41:49

And did you go on to do any of that at Cal or—

Byron Chong 41:53

No, I wasn't good enough. I wasn't near good enough to do any of that stuff at the college level. College level, these guys are really tough. So I couldn't do any of that, but I maintained an interest in it.

Kirsten Bauer 42:11

And so, just to go back kind of chronologically again to—so you went to Washington, you went to grade school—

Byron Chong 42:19

Lincoln School here.

Kirsten Bauer 42:20

Lincoln school here, and then Washington for junior high, then Salinas High. And what year did you graduate Salinas High?

Byron Chong 42:27

'61.

Kirsten Bauer 42:27

'61. And so that was kind of—let's see, that was '61—and then you went to Cal? And you graduated from Cal in—

Byron Chong 42:35

I went to Cal medical school.

Kirsten Bauer 42:37

And so you were there for—

Byron Chong 42:38

UC medical school in San Francisco.

Kirsten Bauer 42:39

Okay. And so then you were done with school entirely, and you were—you're an [unclear]?

Byron Chong 42:45

Well, not really. When you go to medical school, it's a—people say, well, with four years of medical school, you sure learn an awful lot. Well, you do and you don't. There's so much to know that four years of medical school doesn't—is basic. We call it basic. After that, there's some additional training. At that time—or they still do it—yeah, it was called an internship, where you play doctor for a year and seeing patients and taking care of patients who were usually sick in the hospital, but it can be a lot of outpatient care. And then if you—then, if you want to do some family practice or general practice, usually it's a couple years after that, where they have an integrated two or three year training program. Ophthalmology, to be an eye specialist, is three years. So after medical school, which was four years, I took another four years. Then I did plastic surgery training, which is another year. So, it's five years of training after medical school. So it's a long time.

Kirsten Bauer 44:13

That's a long time.

Byron Chong 44:14

And people who were thoracic surgeons or that, they might take seven, so—after medical school. Seven years after medical school. So when these guys are—make a lot of money—it's because they spent 11 years after college and gotten paid not very much.

Kirsten Bauer 44:39

And so were you always kind of planning to come back to this area to practice?

Byron Chong 44:44

Well, the opportunity was there—opportunities here. You know, my mother says, well, Salinas is a good place to raise kids, and you can have my practice.

Kirsten Bauer 44:55

So you took over your mother's practice?

Byron Chong 44:56

Yeah.

Kirsten Bauer 44:57

And what year was that?

Byron Chong 44:58

1975. Although she stayed on for another—she stayed on for another six years, and sort of retired after that.

Kirsten Bauer 45:11

And where—when did you meet your wife?

Byron Chong 45:15

Where you meet your wife is always an interesting story. It's always interesting. I love hearing other people's stories. We were at this Chinese students club, and she was in with a sorority, and we wanted to have a booth for the carnival. It was a carnival. So someone came up with the idea of trying to pick up marbles with chopsticks, okay, in a bowl full of soapy water [Kirsten laughs]. Now, you don't use chopsticks very well, so you can imagine how difficult that would be. It wasn't easy for us either. And we're experts at using chopsticks. I mean, I've eaten with chopsticks all my life, and we tried it out and it wasn't easy for Chinese. So, you figured, if it wasn't easy for Chinese, for other people it would even be worse [laughs]. So she worked on it, and I worked on it. And I met her, or we met each other. But I didn't—I didn't date her. Now, so I worked on the humor magazine called Pelican.

Kirsten Bauer 46:26

It was at Cal?

Byron Chong 46:27

Cal, yeah. And so I think she was on the watch out for me. She would—I'd go out and sell the magazines, and she'd be lurking out the place where she knew I'd be selling the magazines. It wasn't hard to figure out the main exit from campus. It's where you catch people. So there's a gate out—there's a gate back there, and I think she just hung out the gate. And then she'd smile and show up with a quarter and buy the magazine. She probably threw the magazine away as soon as she got it. But she just wanted to want to be seen. So I finally dated her—

Kirsten Bauer 47:06

She wore you down?

Byron Chong 47:08

Yeah, she's pretty. She was pretty. And so I said, well, we'll invite her to one of the dormitory parties. Besides, one of my girlfriends had just cut me loose, so I was looking for somebody else.

Kirsten Bauer 47:26

[laughs] And so then you guys—when did you get married then?

Byron Chong 47:31

We couldn't get married until I finished medical school. She went to nursing school at the same time, which is—and I always thought she was more aggressive than I was in chasing me. But we got married right after medical school.

Kirsten Bauer 47:47

And what year was that?

Byron Chong 47:48

1968.

Kirsten Bauer 47:48

1968. And where did you get married?

Byron Chong 47:51

San Francisco.

Kirsten Bauer 47:52

Oh, but then you had a reception down here?

Byron Chong 47:57

Well, they—Chinese always have a—the wedding reception is always a big deal. You're gonna invite your whole family and your friends. And it can be pretty expensive. So we had a big wedding reception in Chinatown—a big dinner in Chinatown.

Kirsten Bauer 48:22

So what did that consist of, and where was that?

Byron Chong 48:25

Well, it's a lot of tables. You got Chinese—you haven't been to a Chinese banquet? Okay, Chinese banquet is a table for 10 people. And then they have a number of dishes, main courses they have out there. The main courses can be a lot of things, but there's sufficient food so everybody can take—can have a decent serving of the food. But you know it's gonna be a lot of food, so you don't want pig out on not just one dish. Typically, you have some sort of soup, could be a vegetable soup. It could be chicken or it could be a seafood soup. The expensive food—soup—is shark fin soup. Another expensive one is bird nest soup. Or you can have other expensive soups if you want. They like to have an appetizer plate these days, which can be some sliced up cold barbecued meats, cold duck, jellyfish, and other things. Other courses can be duck, chicken, stir fried—different kinds of Chinese vegetables with mushrooms. Steamed fish is always a favorite. You can have shellfish, lobster, and all these dishes can be cooked in many different ways. But a typical banquet would have eight dishes, not including the rice. Sometimes they'll give you a fried rice, and many times they give you white rice, and if you ask for it. But in a banquet, people sort of looked down on rice as sort of a filler food, and they didn't want you to fill up on the rest of the—on the good stuff. Typically, the last dishes are big steamed fish. If you want to pay a lot of money, you can have a couple—you can have lobsters and shark fin soup. And we had a ban—we recently went to a banquet, and it was \$560 a table, so there was—that's plus—then you add tax and tip on top of that. And that's for 10 people. That's ten—that's per table, no matter how many people you sat there. And we have six people at the table. So that was a big—they had a lot of people there.

Kirsten Bauer 51:09

Just different group—what kind of group was that?

Byron Chong 51:12

It was a wedding reception.

Kirsten Bauer 51:13

Okay, then a wedding reception?

Byron Chong 51:14

It was a wedding reception.

Kirsten Bauer 51:15

And so your wedding reception—how many people do you think were there, and where was it?

Byron Chong 51:19

It was in San Francisco at a place called the Four Seas, and I don't know how many people were there. I couldn't—it'd be difficult to hazard a guess, but at least a hundred, at least a hundred. In 1968, I think four dollars and half was a lot of money per person. Forty-five dollars is a lot of money for a table. It was about four dollars, four dollars and a half per person. That was a lot of money in 1968.

Kirsten Bauer 51:23

And who prepared—who would have prepared all the food?

Byron Chong 51:56

The restaurant.

Kirsten Bauer 51:57

Oh, the restaurant?

Byron Chong 51:58

Yeah, they throw a big banquet. Yeah, the restaurants are capable of throwing big banquets. Who knows how hard that is, but they could do it.

Kirsten Bauer 52:08

And what's, like—what type of—or from that time period, like, what other sorts of celebrations are there in regards to the—

Byron Chong 52:18

We didn't have much. That was the end of that for us.

Kirsten Bauer 52:21

But were there, because your family—some of your family was in Berkeley and some of your family was here, so did everybody go up to—

Byron Chong 52:27

Oh, everybody goes up there. Everyone goes to San Francisco for the party, and everybody goes to [unclear]. If you have a—these days if you have a party—well, at least in our in our family—if you get married someplace else, you'll still have a reception here. You still have to have a reception and invite all your friends and family to the big banquet.

Kirsten Bauer 52:48

So did you have a reception in the Salinas area too?

Byron Chong 52:53

My wife mentioned this story to you off camera, but I'll tell it to you. When I came to town, they wanted to—my parents wanted to introduce us to the older generation that was here. So we had a party at the Republic Cafe, which is one of the few good Chinese restaurants in town. The Republic is in Chinatown. We had several tables back there, and I don't know who was there—a lot, mostly probably doctors and some of their friends from the rotary club or something like that. So we had the reception there. Chinatown at the time was—had a rough reputation, rough reputation. It was off limits to the soldiers of Fort Ord because of the gambling during World War Two, because of the gambling and other evil things that were going on there. I had a really ugly experience. We were going there, and there was this old prostitute. And now she was scrawny, and she was old. I mean, she was really old [Kirsten laughs]. I was 25 at the time and she was probably in her 50s, and lived a hard life, because her face looked like hell. And she had more makeup on than Bozo the Clown. And I'm not kidding. She was scrawny and she had a mini skirt on and stuff like that. And so, she said, "Seasoned meat is the best." I almost lost my appetite. [Kirsten laughs] It was awful. It was awful. I mean, I couldn't imagine how she could possibly get any customers. [Kirsten laughs] It was terrible. Anyway, but the food was good. But the food was good. You sort of had to ignore the evil surroundings—the evil surroundings in the—

Kirsten Bauer 55:02

So that was just right there at the New Republic, but that was kind of some of the only times that you ever went to that area for those kinds of events, or—

Byron Chong 55:10

Oh, restaurant, that was the only time we—we went to the Republic a number of times to eat out. You know, if my parents wanted Chinese food to eat out, we'd go to the Republic.

Kirsten Bauer 55:20

Do you remember anything about that restaurant in particular—anything that you liked, or what it looked like?

Byron Chong 55:24

Well, a lot of Chinese restaurants in those days were kind of dark and dank. One of the—they used to have semi-private rooms, a lot of restaurants, where they would have—it'd be curtained off. They'd have a bunch of rooms off to one side. And they had partitions between the tables, and a little curtain, so that when you ordered the table that it was your table, your family was there, and you couldn't see anybody else except the waiter running in and out, and that was all. And so the Republic was kind of dark and dank and had typical Chinese tables there. And I don't—but it was too small and it was kind of dark and dank. I don't think it was very wide. No more wide than this room.

Kirsten Bauer 55:28

And you went there as, like, a kid as well?

Byron Chong 55:52

Yeah.

Kirsten Bauer 55:53

Just growing up older?

Byron Chong 55:55

Yeah, growing up we went there.

Kirsten Bauer 55:56

Did you see any sort of, like—was it different when you were a younger kid as opposed to when you were being approached by prostitutes at 25? [laughs]

Byron Chong 56:35

Well, I never went down to Chinatown very much. We lived—we only lived a couple of blocks from Chinatown, but I never went there. Soledad street, I never went there. I lived up there from the time I was five to about nine, but I never went to Chinatown. There were some other Chinese kids that were in there. But I never went down there to play with them. There was some other Chinese kids that were across the street, and a couple of blocks the other way. So I played with them. I never played with—I never actually went to Chinatown. Never went to Soledad Street. I don't remember it.

Kirsten Bauer 57:11

How come you think that is, living so close? If that was part of where the Chinese community was, or your Chinese school was a block away too, right?

Byron Chong 57:18

Well, we would go to the Chinese school, but there's nothing on Soledad Street. There's no attraction for the kids like when—I wouldn't go down to Main Street, for example, because nothing for a kid to do on Main Street.

Kirsten Bauer 57:30

Right.

Byron Chong 57:30

You know, there's some stores there. There's some stores here, but nothing to attract a kid. Nothing to attract a kid to Chinatown either.

Kirsten Bauer 57:38

And so do you think that you had more, like, Chinese around you when you were like a younger kid, because you were going to Chinese school—

Byron Chong 57:38

Yeah.

Kirsten Bauer 57:38

—and then as you kind of grew up or went to different schools, that it got less and less?

Byron Chong 57:51

Less Chinese, yeah.

Kirsten Bauer 57:54

And to kind of skip on forward again, or skip kind of backwards, are there any, like—even though that you have—obviously you're third generation American here, is there any, like, sort of values or cultural traditions that you really feel still exist in your family today that were from, you know, your parents or from your grandparents or that are really from the Chinese tradition?

Byron Chong 58:22

Boy, that's sure hard. That's sure hard to say when your part—it's part of you, then you can't figure out—it's hard for me to separate out what was there. I feel more of a Chinese identity than—feel closer to, you know, to China, or something like that. We socialize with a lot of Chinese people. You know, there's a China—my wife and I are both active in the two major Chinese associations. We have a lot of Chinese friends and acquaintances and that. So, I guess I—but, you know, other social things we do. Like, well, my wife's in a tennis club. We're both active in church. And so these are not necessary—these are non-Chinese organizations. We feel quite comfortable with either way. So we've got one foot in with the Chinese and one foot out. There's no problem.

Kirsten Bauer 59:21

Do you feel kind of that maybe—

Unknown 59:22

I'm gonna go ahead and switch the tape.

Kirsten Bauer 59:24

Switch the tape? Okay.