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Interview with Cathy Chavez-Miller

Cathy Chavez-Miller

California State University, Monterey Bay

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Interviewee: Cathy Chavez Miller
Interviewer: Jessica Grijalva and Greg Tomascheski
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Duration of Interview: 00:40:29

Cathy Chavez-Miller 00:00

This is the only picture I have of the inside, and it's circa 1960. And there's Mr. Ahtye. [unclear] from Mr. Ahtye. And he remembers some of the—

Jessica Grijalva 00:20

Oh, we met him.

Cathy Chavez-Miller 00:21

Yeah, he's great

Jessica Grijalva 00:22

He's so nice.

Cathy Chavez-Miller 00:22

He owns the Republic Cafe and plus a number of buildings there. And so my grandmother [unclear]. So we got to go in, actually, and look in [unclear] the Republic Cafe. It was really good.

Jessica Grijalva 00:42

Okay, so this is Jessica Grijalva and—

Greg Tomascheski 00:46

Greg Tomascheski.

Jessica Grijalva 00:48

And we're interviewing—

Cathy Chavez-Miller 00:50

Cathy Chavez-Miller.

Jessica Grijalva 00:51

And we are—it's October 21, 2009, and we are at CSUMB in Rina Benmayor's office—Benmayor's office, recording the interview of Cathy's life story in Chinatown. So the first question that we wanted to ask you was, were you born in Salinas?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 01:16

Yes, I was. Actually, I was born here on Fort Ord Hospital. My dad and my mother are both from Salinas, and I was born here. He was in the military for a short while, in the army, and I was born here.

Greg Tomascheski 01:33

So what connection do you have with Soledad Street?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 01:35

I have a wonderful connection to Soledad Street. My grandmother, who was a migrant farmworker with my grandfather, and they migrated to different harvesting agriculture in mostly Southern California and then came up here in Central California. And after being in Salinas for a while, in the late 40s, my grandmother opened a Mexican restaurant and bar, in one other location close to Soledad. But then in the early 50s, she opened the restaurant, the El Faro in Chinatown, on Soledad Street. And my cousin thinks it was really early 50s, because she remembers being a baby and being taken there. And I started going in the middle 50s when I was born.

Greg Tomascheski 02:36

What are some of your memories with going to the restaurant?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 02:41

I remember it as—well, Chinatown looked like Old Town Salinas kind of looks now. It was very vibrant. All of the buildings were being used as businesses. I traditionally went on Sundays when oftentimes families went to Soledad Street. Soledad Street was where a lot of the Mexican Americans, Filipino Americans, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, took their families on Sundays. So, you know, we got kind of dressed up. People crossed the streets. You could park, you know, on one of the sides. I think you could park both ways. I think people went both ways. And there was parking. I go back to it now. The street looks so narrow. I don't know how we had parking everywhere. But I remember Mr. Ahtye's gas station that was on the corner. There's nothing there now. And it was just a vibrant place. I thought it had lots of Filipino and Chinese uncles and aunties because, you know, in our culture, our Mexican American culture, and I think a lot of ethnic American cultures, elders are referred to as auntie and uncle oftentimes. And so this is Uncle Tommy and Auntie Mary, and so I just thought I had a big extended family. And we could go down the street with 25 cents. There was a grocery store I remember. I always remember the big barrel out front with brooms and mops. You know, it seems like cleaning utensils or, you know, something that families need, and that's always outside the Mexican American store, and it was very clean, and people swept, and it was vibrant. And I remember there was an alleyway outside of the back of the kitchen in my grandmother's restaurant that us kids could play in a lot. And I had a great time there. My brother shined shoes, but girls didn't have to really work very much.

Jessica Grijalva 05:03

So you said that your grandma started the restaurant in the 50s, or in the 40s, and then you went in the 50s. Do you know how she came to acquire the restaurant?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 05:16

I have only learned most recently that she didn't own the building. Some of us cousins, because we went there for 20 years, just thought this is my grandma's restaurant. And so we assumed that it was also the building. And she had—she leased another building somewhere in East Salinas for a restaurant and then wanted a bigger restaurant. And I only learned in the last few years that it was Mr.

Ahtye's building there on Soledad Street. And initially, they had the El Faro, which was a pretty good size restaurant, and I only have this picture that was taken inside on a holiday. It looks like maybe New Year's, everybody's dressed up, and lots of little, you know, streamers and colored goodies. And what I remember is that a lot of the men kind of reminded me of, maybe what Desi Arnaz or Sammy Davis Jr., you know, in those kind of shiny suits. Because oftentimes, people did come dressed in the evening. And then, after about 20 years, my grandmother wanted to downsize a little bit. And there was just a bar next door called The Lotus Inn that, of course, was owned by Mr. Ahtye, but a Chinese family ran the bar. And so when my uncle, who had always been the manager and the main bartender, he decided that he wanted to stay in business when my grandmother thought she would retire. And so when he started to lease the Lotus Inn, then he changed the name to Mi Cantina, and that's what they are still in Soledad Street. As you can see, there's a sign, Mi Cantina.

Greg Tomascheski 07:23

So is your family then—were you all pretty close with the community there? And, like, what other sort of involvement did you guys have at the [unclear] restaurant? Was there anything else that you'd do together, like holiday celebrations or anything like that that you remember?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 07:41

Well, my dad is one of eight. And so, coming from a big Mexican family on that side, you know, it's somebody's birthday all the time. And I had, I don't know, 30 plus cousins. And so it was really fun to start off either at the restaurant, or my grandmother lived on—off of San Luis Street in Salinas—on West Street, actually. And so going to my grandmother's house was really fun, because she had a lot of the cases of soda in the garage, and so we thought that was really great. And so, I always had lots and lots of cousins. It was always somebody's birthday. And our biggest family gathering was Thanksgiving. And because my grandmother was open 365 days a year—and oftentimes immigrant communities, that's what they do. They just keep those 7-11s open all the time. And, you know, the restaurants are open all the time. And so on Thanksgiving, my mother claims—because I'm of mixed heritage and my mother's Caucasian, and she was an only child, and so she said that she loved going to my father's family because there were so many people and it was very loud and very vivacious—that she taught my grandmother, Virginia Chavez, how to cook a turkey. That was a part of, you know, what she had done with her family. So we would get there early in the morning at my grandmother's house on West Street in Salinas, and my mother would cook a turkey with my grandmother, and there were lots and lots of aunts and uncles around. And West Street is close to the Salinas Library, so we could walk around a lot. A lot of us kids, once we got older, we could walk to the little stores around there and spend a quarter, and that was great, come back with candy. And so my grandmother would not only cook the turkey with my mother, but there was also traditional Mexican food. There'd be tamales, and tortillas, and enchiladas. And so, she would cook all this food and people would come with lots of food and there was a big long table that the food would be set out on. And I remember the children were always served first. And so we filled up a really long table plus a little table for the little kids, about like this, and it was packed of kids. And then about after the time we were served as children, maybe that was two or three o'clock, then my grandmother would give us a hug, and she'd leave. And she didn't stay when the adults were eating, because she went back to the restaurant. And that's when she would, I think, you know, make a whole other meal, as well as whatever was on the menu, and make a whole other traditional meal as well. And so my memory of her was working very hard, and she only

spoke Spanish, so I would be very broken in my Spanish and English in speaking with her. But my grandfather had died when I was about in first grade. And so he always had another job. He always worked in agriculture and drove trucks for Spreckels when they harvested the sugar beets. There was a lot of sugar beets. [unclear] when the lettuce was starting to come in. So by the time that I really have a memory in first grade, you know, I really don't remember him very much. And then he really wasn't at all of our family gatherings, and my grandmother was following a tradition of—her mother and her auntie were entrepreneurs and had little stores in the Riverside area of California.

Jessica Grijalva 11:52

How did you spend your time when you were at the restaurant?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 11:57

Yeah, as girls, we didn't have to do very much. [laughs] I think if she probably would have kept the restaurant longer, we might have been included. But at that time in the late 50s and early 60s, all of my father's brothers and sisters took turns on the weekend. That was probably when it was busiest. And so there was always a couple of bartenders, and there were always some of our aunties that were the waitresses, and my grandmother was always in the back. So what I remember is getting a plate in the back of the kitchen and going like this, you know. Here, have some of this, have some of this, have some of this. What do you want? You know, and tortillas and then we could sit—we'd sit at a table. And then what we really wanted to do was sit at the bar, because we thought that was very cool and very grown up. And so one of the uncles—oftentimes my uncle Nick, who was my grandmother's right hand person, and oftentimes in ethnic families, some of the older daughters or sons stay with the parent. And that's—I had two single aunties and uncles, my uncle Nick and my aunt Josie. They never married, and they stayed within the home with my grandmother. And so every day, they worked the restaurant and the bar seven days a week. And then on the weekends, one of my aunties or uncles would supplement who was working there. So it was really fun to sit at the bar. I feel like a grown up. One of my memories—and I have a cousin, that we will share memories. She says that I have a memory for—I kind of embellished some of the stories, and she remembered that we didn't get to do that much. I remember—thought we got to do quite a bit of running around. She says, "No, we had to stay together. No, we weren't allowed to do that." I don't know. She mostly did everything with me. We were kind of like shadows, but I have a little bit more expansive memory. And right behind the kitchen was this really dark and danky moist, long brick alleyway that had another door at the end. And that's what they would stack because back in the day, most of the sodas came in glass bottles. And so they were in wooden crates, and those were all stacked from this high to this high along this kind of moist, danky, dark place. I thought it was so cool. You know, it just looked like, you know, we shouldn't be there, and we probably weren't supposed to be there. And I was—you know, we were playing there. And so I remember that. And I remember that some of the first Beatle music I heard was in Spanish, because they would get bands every once in a while. And I always liked music. And I remember that some of the young—you know, I mean, I now know they were really young men, but they seemed so mature. I'm sure they were in their 20s. They kind of dressed a little bit, and kind of their hair—Mexican young people with their hair kind of shaggy because that was the Beatles times, early 60s. And so they would be playing, and I knew from the radio that it was Beatles songs, but they were singing in Spanish. And I just thought they were the cutest guys I'd ever seen in my life. You know, they were probably 20-something, but when you're 10 and 11—they just seemed so sophisticated. And I love that there was oftentimes music,

whether there was, you know, mariachi music or there was, you know, any kind of Mexican rock. And I remember that back then there were jukeboxes, which the guy would come on the weekends, and he would pull out the string. And he would take out literally the 45s and, you know, take out the old ones and put a new James Brown and put in new Four Tops. African American R&B music—really popular in the Mexican community. It always has been. And so this is back in the 50s and 60s. And I remember that, what my first love really was, is R&B and soul music. And so although, you know, they put in lots of different kinds of music, when we were there as kids, that's what we played. And I also remember that they had old-fashioned games, you know, like you point a rifle and shoot at a bear that when you got it in the right place, it would stand up and growl, and then it would go back the other way, and you'd shoot it again. And so pinball machines and those kinds of games—we thought that was really cool. So we thought that we had one of the coolest grandmothers, and Sunday afternoons were fun.

Greg Tomascheski 17:14

So you said that your father was in the military?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 17:19

He was for a short while and was never transferred anywhere. He went from Salinas to Fort Ord, here in Marina, for two years. And then when he came out, he worked in Salinas, and he worked in the trades. He was a carpet and floor installer.

Greg Tomascheski 17:38

Do you remember seeing any other soldiers and stuff when you were over there at the restaurant? Did they come visit at all?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 17:46

Absolutely, because in the 60s—50s, 60s—I don't know how—this was an installation, maybe in the 40s here. And so Salinas, that was a big population. It was the military families and young men that came from all over the country to Fort Ord. And, you know, they were, you know, kind of the backbone. A lot of economics in Salinas, and they were around a lot, the young men.

Jessica Grijalva 18:24

Can you describe the setting of the restaurant? [unclear] I know you told us about the bar. What it was like to be inside?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 18:34

Well, it was always kind of dark. You know, I think you can see that, especially on this one, on this picture. And I know that this is my aunt Josie on our left, but I don't know who the other woman is. But it's great that at least it has a date on it. It has Aug, '69. And so I wouldn't, you know, have ever known that. So like a lot of bars, there were no windows. And that was also—led to the kind of feeling of mystique because every other place I would go with my parents for meals always had windows. So it had that kind of cave-like, dark, mysterious adult world feel to it. And my grandmother was the best cook ever. And because I mostly came on Sundays, you know, I think I know I have cousins that tell stories that were a little older than me, that they worked in the summers, and they washed dishes, and they swept and they cleaned and that's how they earned some summer money. But maybe my activity

level, and because I wasn't really bilingual, that wasn't going to lend itself very well to working. But my brother, who wasn't bilingual, was made to shine shoes out front, and he's a couple years younger than I am. So just a little bit different roles, you know, and expectations here, gender wise. But it just seemed like a mysterious adult world that looked very different than on Sunday mornings, when I went with my white mom and my white grandparents to a church here in Pacific Grove, where there were mostly white people, and a lot of servicemen from Fort Ord. But it was kind of like I moved in this world, where there was lots of mostly white people, which were great, and fun. And then in the afternoon, I drove to Soledad Street, in Salinas. And it was very much the multicultural world, where most people were brown.

Greg Tomascheski 21:04

What memories do you have, like, when you go back there today? What types of things do you observe? What changes do you see that are different? How do you feel?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 21:14

Well, for a while I cried, because it looks so different. You know, I've come to understand that, you know, everything kind of has its own—it runs its course. And, you know, this was an area really that the Chinese had to find, in order to find a place for them, to open up their businesses and their schools. And a place where they can build their community, because certainly Salinas, like many other Central California towns, were very racist, and their policies that they put in place in Salinas, as well as, you know, in the state and nationally, the anti-immigrant sentiment. And so although the Chinese were recruited and invited, you know, they had—the owning class had work in mind for that cheap labor. And so the Chinese and the Japanese and the Filipinos were looking for an area that they could be themselves without—with some dignity, and also some food that they could relate to. You know, how do you feel part of—not only is it language, but food. And as you were asking about celebrations and being able to be in a community where people understood what it meant to be an immigrant. So, you know, I remember in the 80s that—so it was in the 80s that my uncle closed the Mi Cantina. And then my grandmother, who had retired for a short while, went to Gilroy and opened a convenience store, liquor store. And so she worked again in her 80s and worked there till she died, when she was 96. And she just died a few years ago. So she never stopped working, I think. You know, she was stopped for maybe a couple of years, and then they opened the grocery store. And so, you know, I remember in the 80s, a lot of the drugs came, and stores were shutting down. The commercial businesses there were closing down. And so, you know, with the drugs and some of the homeless folks, you know, that was the next immigrant—wave of immigrants, was the homeless folks that were economically disadvantaged where, you know, it had been—ethnically and class wise, people had joined together to find a place. Now, they're still primarily African Americans and Mexican Americans there in Chinatown, but so when I went back just in the last few years, it just was really sad to see. What had been was gone, and it looks like new life is being breathed into this area, and I had a service learning class last semester with Lila Staples. She, as well as some other classes here at CSUMB and some other support, are looking at the Republic Cafe being remodeled for a cultural center and museum. And there's the homeless garden that CSUMB is involved in. And so some redevelopment funds, and I've attended the ACE, the Asian Cultural Encounter group, that meets at the Confucius church once a month. And so I try to attend those even though I'm not in the service learning class. It's touched my heart and I want to stay involved, and Mr. Ahtye was the land owner. And so it's been really fun to

connect with him. And he remembers some of my aunties and uncles there. So but it was really sad at first. I really had to cry a couple different times going there because it just looked so different. It looked like just abandonment and loss. And but I think it's gonna change with some money and support from the city of Salinas and the wonderful support from CSUMB.

Jessica Grijalva 26:29

So you have heard about the revitalization? You were talking about your grandmother's cooking—what was your favorite dish she made?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 26:35

Enchiladas. [laughs] That's pretty easy. My mom learned some of the cooking, some of the recipes that my grandmother made. My mother could make some pretty good tacos. But I don't think she ever quite perfected the sauce for the enchiladas. Those were my favorite.

Greg Tomascheski 27:12

So do you do still—do you have family still that you're able to, like, share these memories with and go back to, you know, what it was like back then? Or are there people that you grew up with that you still keep in touch with from Soledad Street?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 27:29

Right now, just probably about six or seven of my cousins. A lot of my cousins have moved away from the area, you know. Economically, people have had to move to the Bay Area. And some of them have moved even further away. And a lot of my uncles and aunts have died. There is only one aunt out of the eight, one aunt, and my father and his youngest brother. So I think my Aunt Marian was maybe the second or third born and my father somewhere in the middle, fourth or fifth, and then his brother, the youngest. And they are really not that interested in talking about the past. I think they had the experience of being hurt emotionally by their immigrant status, being Mexican American, working really hard, and not really being respected. You know, and as you probably know, you know, in the 40s and 50s, oftentimes, Mexican American children had their names changed right from the beginning when you're in school. So, you know, Roberto became Robert, and Anna Maria became Mary, you know. And so right from the beginning, I think a lot of young people that are immigrants and Mexican Americans are—that they're not okay. Their name's not okay. Their language is not okay. Their race is not okay. And it was always my feeling that in some ways, they were kind of embarrassed that their mother worked all the time. Although, she gave them a much better life, and she stopped migrating in agriculture, but nobody really wants to talk about it. And at one of the funerals, where we were at my grandmother's house, my uncle Nick actually passed away, and he died right in the convenience store, grocery store, in Gilroy. They didn't miss a day. And so, and they never went to the doctor. And so, he died of internal bleeding and fell on the floor in the convenience store. And so when we were at my grandmother's house getting ready for the funeral, and we were all there getting ready to go to the church, and they were raised Catholic. And so I had my little pad and pencil because I thought, this is an opportunity of a lifetime. Because oftentimes, it's funerals and weddings everybody gets together. So I had my little pad and pencil, and I was talking to my grandmother who still only spoke Spanish, but I was there with other cousins, other aunties, so they were helping me translate a little bit. And so I was asking, again, of the name of where she was born in the state of Michoacán, and I was asking again

about some landmarks, because I had this fantasy that someday I'm gonna get there. And then I was getting—trying to get some more details of what my grandfather did, and getting details of when she opened up. And the vibe, and the looks that I got from my aunties and uncles, and some of my older cousins—they made fun of me for asking. They made fun of me for not remembering, but I don't ever remember anybody really speaking about it. And they didn't want me to talk about it. They would tell me, "Grandma doesn't want to talk about that." But then every once in a while, she would answer a question of mine, but kind of ignore them sometimes. And they were really uncomfortable. And they didn't want me to ask questions. And I tried to, you know, be affirmative with, you know, what they were asking, or I said, you know, "I think it's so great that you worked so hard," or, "I wonder how long you work there. And I know that you went to beauty school, you know, auntie, and you know, Grandma must have been really proud of you. When did you do that?" And they would continually try to reroute what I was saying and not want to talk about a lot of history. And I don't know if it was just me, my timing, but they were just fixing my grandmother's hair. It was that time, you know, before people are going in and out and getting food, and I don't know if my timing was the greatest, but they didn't want to talk about it. So, consequently, I don't have that many, but I wrote all those stories down.

Greg Tomascheski 32:53

What kept you in the area? Like, what kept you—

Cathy Chavez-Miller 32:54

Well, I always wanted to move to Santa Cruz because I liked the beach. And so when I was 21, I finally got to Santa Cruz. And that's when I went to Cabrillo. And that's how I got married and had my son. And I always want to live in Santa Cruz. I felt like I was coming home. I found my tribe there and started surfing. And but it was—and I got my AA degree and certification in early childhood education and was a preschool teacher. And when I was looking for work, there was an opening in a migrant Head Start program in the Watsonville area. So now I live in the Watsonville area and was a preschool teacher and director for about 20 years. And then a few years ago, I went back to school, brought me here.

Greg Tomascheski 33:55

So what was the dream that you had mentioned that you're talking about? Did you say there was some sort of a plan that you had with the questions you were asking your grandma?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 34:02

That I thought that, you know, someday my sister and I—and my sister's a sister of my heart. We've been best friends since our 20s, and she's a bilingual kindergarten teacher. And we met at that migrant Head Start program. And so we both have a fantasy that we're gonna go look up where our grandparents were born. My grandparents came from the state of Michoacán. And so I tried to get as many landmarks as I could to go back and see that rural area. They're both very short and dark. So I know that the Spanish were everywhere, but I think because they were so poor, and they were up in the hills, that there's still a lot of Indian. There's a lot of Indian in my grandparents—very dark, short people.

Jessica Grijalva 34:51

You said that you wrote down all their stories [unclear]. Do you have a favorite one that you'd like to share with us?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 35:02

Just—really not that many. But the story that my grandmother told was that my grandfather grew up on the other side of a river called Rio Negro, and so that they knew each other when they were young, and then my great grandmother and her sister, and my grandmother, who was 12—you know, the Mexican Revolution in the early 1900s was just horrible. You know, it was both sides. It was the revolutionaries and the government there that were both just horrendous. [unclear] took what they wanted of resources and left the people without, and so people were starving everywhere. And so, in probably the early 20s, my grandmother, Virginia, and her mother and her aunt, you know, came across the border, and of course, you know, history that many Mexicans, you know, they came for, you know, resources and went back and hunting and fishing and everybody, you know, just went back and forth. They knew when it was good to leave and when it was good to come and where the resources were. And so they came across in probably the early 20s and made it just to about the Riverside area. And my great grandmother and her sister opened a little store, a little [unclear]. So, you know, they sold—so they were entrepreneur women. I mean, two women and a 12-year-old girl started a little store, so I'm sure whatever was being grown there, or whatever they could find, they started a little store. So my grandmother saw women working and, you know, the myth of, you know, women don't work—women always needed to work. And so to provide for themselves and their families. And so my imagination is that she saw how that, you know, they had to provide for themselves and provide for her, for a better life. And she never forgot that. And when she had seven children, seven, eight children, you know, she was always working. She worked in the fields, and then she opened a bar and restaurant. She always worked.

Jessica Grijalva 37:52

Do you feel like you inherited a little bit of that?

Cathy Chavez-Miller 37:59

Maybe the tenacity. [laughs] And my husband and I do have a strawberry farm. And so we started our own farm 16, 17 years ago. He's a third-generation farmer, so he knows what he's doing. And I've always been kind of a tomboy, so I'm willing to do anything, and I had horses growing up. And so I learned to drive a tractor 16 years ago, put in irrigation tape, drive a truck to the fields, load berries. I've loaded a lot of berries, fixed a lot of irrigation. My son and I drove the truck in. I've learned how to work with pesticides. You start at four o'clock in the morning, and then you sleep in your car when you're starting out. We got a loan. So, I guess so, because I'm—we're in business, and I know that what it takes is six days a week. But luckily, I don't work six or seven days a week. We've gotten enough—had enough success that I've been able to go to school. And my husband and I always say, well, I'll go to school as long as I can. You know, I might have to get a job or I might have to go work more, and that would be fine. But right now I have had the privilege of going to school.

Greg Tomascheski 39:31

I don't know if I have any more questions to ask.

Jessica Grijalva 39:34

You were really wonderful.

Greg Tomascheski 39:37

Yeah, you've been awesome.

Cathy Chavez-Miller 39:38

Thank you. I just thought I'd show you one last picture. This is what it looks like now. There is a mission there—the Victory Mission. It used to be the El Faro, and now it's the Victory Mission. So, you know, I guess that's what that area needs right now is that kind of spiritual revitalization. You know, it was a place that fed people in one way and now it's another kind.

Cathy Chavez-Miller 39:38

Thank you so much for coming to meet with us.

Cathy Chavez-Miller 40:14

Thank you.

Jessica Grijalva 40:16

You've just been amazing. I just want to thank you.

Greg Tomascheski 40:20

Yeah, thanks. It was really great.

Cathy Chavez-Miller 40:21

Yeah, thank you. I'm glad you're involved in this project. It's meaningful. Thank you.