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Interview with Sonny Wun

Sonny Wun

California State University, Monterey Bay

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Interviewee: Sonny Wun
Interviewer: Berenice Rosillo
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Duration of Interview: 27:39

Berenice Rosillo 00:00

Today is Wednesday, October 29th. It is 12:18. And I am interviewing Son—a pre-interview for Sonny Wun. I'm sorry. Do I have your permission to tape this pre-interview—record this pre-interview?

Sonny Wun 00:16

Yeah, go ahead.

Berenice Rosillo 00:20

Okay, and first of all, I just want to know what your profession or your job is.

Sonny Wun 00:25

I'm retired now.

Berenice Rosillo 00:26

What did you do before?

Sonny Wun 00:28

Postal employee.

Berenice Rosillo 00:29

Postal employee?

Sonny Wun 00:30

Mm-hmm.

Berenice Rosillo 00:30

And I just want to touch on some of the subjects that we will be interviewing you about. So, we just want to know about your origins—how your family came to be here. So maybe, was it your grandparents or your parents that came here first? First, my father was here first. He came over at age 15, 16, somewhere around there and went to school in Salinas—didn't graduate, I believe junior high at all. But in the meantime, he was either a housekeeper at one point. And then he ended up in the—working for someone in the restaurant. Then he got drafted. Oh, really? How long did he serve for?

Sonny Wun 01:36

The duration of the war [laughs]—World War II.

Berenice Rosillo 01:40

And—

Sonny Wun 01:50

Then, after the war, he—this is a subject matter that I recently got—was he came home to California to Salinas, and he had choices—either go home to bring his wife over from China, or stay here and have a new wife. [laughs]

Berenice Rosillo 02:16

Oh, wow. [laughs]

Sonny Wun 02:18

And I've met that lady before—I met that lady too. So, he went home.

Berenice Rosillo 02:24

He went home? Brought his wife?

Sonny Wun 02:25

He went home and brought his wife here. And so, it was—it was hard. It was hard, you know, as he came here without any education, no money, no backing. You know, it's—everyone has that same story. But, you know, some make it and some don't.

Berenice Rosillo 02:48

Mm-hmm.

Sonny Wun 02:50

But he came back to Salinas and got a job at a restaurant. I forgot the name of it right now. But eventually, he got backing and opened up his own place. But in the meantime, we were residing in lower Soledad. What they call Chinatown, but when you say Chinatown to me, it's not Chinatown.

Berenice Rosillo 03:25

Right, it's not the Chinatown that's there right now.

Sonny Wun 03:27

Yeah, it's—it's not the same. So, we were at 10 Soledad street. And I remember the sunburnt wood, and just old timber as a house, and it was cold because I remember being bundled up all the time. Weeds all over the place. But whenever I had a chance—I remember my mom used to get mad at, you know, after me. I shouldn't say mad, but after me, because I escaped the house, and I roamed the streets. [laughs] You know, playing—that was my playground.

Berenice Rosillo 04:13

At the time were there other children to play with?

Sonny Wun 04:18

I don't recall playing with—'cause I pretty much kept to myself. I had a younger brother, but he wasn't able to get around yet. So, I would go into bars—and you probably interviewed one of the gentlemen that had a bar on the end of the street next to the gas station. And I used to go in that bar a lot. And there was a young lady back there that—you know, she entertained me, we played pool. You know, my eyeballs reached the rail, and I'd just reach over and push the ball. Sawdust on the floor. The smells. And like I said, that was my playground. You know, I think about—I think about the way it was, you know. And knowing what it looks like now, it's not the same. It's not home. But in hindsight today, knowing the reasons why I lived there—you know, back in early 40s, or in the 40s—why we lived on this side of the tracks. And it hurts me to find out that we couldn't live anywhere else. We couldn't live anywhere else. And we had to live on this side of the tracks. But eventually, we moved a block away. And I have short term memory of that, because we didn't stay there that long. And then we eventually moved further south away from here, you know, as times permitted they let, you know, foreigners escape into the city. You know, we moved out. So, but as far as, you know, lower Soledad. You know, I smile when I think about it, because it was fun. Because you didn't have to worry about anyone bothering you. I—No one laid a finger on me.

Berenice Rosillo 04:56

[laughs] So, the neighbors, did they like all look out for each other, or—

Sonny Wun 06:52

Mm-hmm.

Berenice Rosillo 06:52

How did that work out?

Sonny Wun 06:54

We all—they all knew you and they all knew each other. You know, we all knew each other. And as far as the general public that migrated in—you know, Fort Ord, on Friday night, Saturday night, when Fort Ord cut loose the GIs. I mean, that place was like, you know, a rose parade right down the middle of that street. That's when my mom locked me up. Because it was just crazy.

Berenice Rosillo 07:19

She kept you inside?

Sonny Wun 07:20

Yeah.

Berenice Rosillo 07:20

[laughs]

Sonny Wun 07:21

She kept me inside. She locked up. And she made sure I didn't go out and wander around. And I remember that, because she really scolded me good. Because, you know, because—

Berenice Rosillo 07:35

Did you ever sneak out?

Sonny Wun 07:37

Oh, not on a Saturday night, no. But, you know, every night was a party night, but it just got slower and slower through the week—just Friday night, Saturday night were the best nights to be wandering around, you know, those—I think those would be, that'd be a neat time to go back to. But, you know, street people. The term street people. It's—it was far and few in between. I don't, you know, I must have been blind or something, but I didn't see that many people hanging around out on the street, you know, looking for handouts. I mean, you know, there were a lot of drunks but they get up and somehow they managed to go to work. You know, I learned that later on in life, that some of these drunks, I mean, somehow they managed to get up to go to work.

Berenice Rosillo 08:41

What did your—what did your father do for a living? Or your mom?

Sonny Wun 08:46

My mom was a housekeeper. You know, I mean, maintained us. Because by that time there was me, my brother, and then my baby sister come along. And then she had to manage us. So, my dad was in the restaurant business. And back in those days, the more hours you put in, the more money you're supposed to make. So, we never—we hardly saw our dad.

Berenice Rosillo 09:25

And school—did you go to public school, or did you go to—? How did you receive your education?

Sonny Wun 09:34

School. If I had to do it all over again [laughs], I wouldn't go to school. [laughs]

Berenice Rosillo 09:40

[laughs]

Sonny Wun 09:40

Because that's—I don't know if I want to add this [laughs]. We got, we got an asterisk around that, because to tell you the truth, you know, I hated school.

Berenice Rosillo 09:55

Was it just hard for you, or—

Sonny Wun 09:57

It was hard for me.

Berenice Rosillo 09:58

To—?

Sonny Wun 09:59

No bilingual.

Berenice Rosillo 10:00

Right.

Sonny Wun 10:01

I mean, I remember I—first day of school. I was supposed to—you know, I know all of this now because it's been told to me, and my brother and I, we weren't twins, but we ended up in the same class together. So, I was the oldest one, reason being is that if he was in kindergarten, might as well keep me in kindergarten. Because we didn't speak a lick of English. Because that's all we spoke was Chinese. When we moved to our last residence, the neighborhood kids and the older teenagers—you know, I guess we were like a novelty item or something. But they come by and they say "hello," so we learn "hello." And then we learned the words "goodbye," "How are you?" Those were the only words I knew. But I didn't know what they were.

Berenice Rosillo 11:06

So how old would you say you were when you actually did start to learn English?

Sonny Wun 11:15

I guess right after my first year of kindergarten. It was fast. But it was hard.

Berenice Rosillo 11:21

And this was the public school?

Sonny Wun 11:24

Mm-hmm. I mean, I put no blame on the school. You know, don't get me wrong. I don't blame the schools. You know, part of the blame is me probably. And it was hard. It was hard going to school and grasping the language of English and then I just built up a wall that it just couldn't—I just couldn't comprehend English. I may be conversing with you okay, but I have to think about it before it comes out. But, you know, I made it through life and I've retired, you know, true. But it was hard. School was hard. I wish I could have done better at school and then more with my life.

Berenice Rosillo 12:23

You're saying that, I mean, you had trouble because of your limited English. Now was this just your experience, or do you think that's how other Chinese children thought at school as well?

Sonny Wun 12:33

It's just my experience—my experience. Because if you use my family as an example, you know, they're all spread out doing different things. You know, they all went to four-year school, you know, majority went to four-year school. I never went—I never got to go.

Berenice Rosillo 13:02

And then growing up in Chinatown, what kind of holidays did you guys—

Sonny Wun 13:07

Holidays?

Berenice Rosillo 13:08

Did you celebrate any holidays?

Sonny Wun 13:11

None.

Berenice Rosillo 13:11

No? Not even like New Year's?

Sonny Wun 13:13

Louie and I were just discussing that outside earlier. I never knew what Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's—[phone rings]

Berenice Rosillo 13:22

I think that's you [laughs].

Sonny Wun 13:26

Oh, is that me, or—

Berenice Rosillo 13:28

Oh, that's not you? It's not me [laughs].

Sonny Wun 13:30

That's not my phone.

Berenice Rosillo 13:32

Oh. Oh, here. [unclear]

Sonny Wun 13:32

Is it over here?

Berenice Rosillo 13:37

Yeah.

Sonny Wun 13:38

[unclear] is in that jacket. Okay, but I never knew what Christmas, Thanksgiving, New Year's, birthdays. I never knew what those were until I went to school. Never. And we come home and question mom or ask mom is—what's Easter? You know, she had to go out and find out what Easter was, you know. So, all I have—like, let's say Christmas. Just picture just come to my mind. The only Christmas picture I have of us is one picture. And that tree was sparse. And presents were hard to come by. Because there was—not at Chinatown. Now, I was growing up, and we were at the last house. And it was seven of us.

So, then dad wanted to save money, so it was tight. It was hard. Hard growing up. I don't know if you want to use that in your [laughs] deal, but if you want to stay on Chinatown, that's fine. It was giant houses. Boy, if the street can talk.

Berenice Rosillo 15:24

Did anyone ever—when you were living in Chinatown, did anyone other than anyone of Asian descent ever go into Chinatown other than the soldiers, on Fridays and—?

Sonny Wun 15:35

Oh yeah, field workers—the Filipino field workers. You know, whoever, you know, whoever was working on the fields that were there all the time. You know, on Friday nights too. That's majority where the fights came in, you know, soldiers against field workers or whatever. So, the Filipinos—back then it was majority Filipino workers, and some Japanese, and some Chinese.

Berenice Rosillo 16:05

What about children of different ethnicities? Never? Really? I know you said you played—you basically kept to yourself. But were there like enough children to actually play together?

Sonny Wun 16:25

If we did, we didn't, you know, play too long. You know, just hang out and that's it. You know, just little—little guys [laughs]. That's all I can remember.

Berenice Rosillo 16:36

So, when you—when your family moved out of Chinatown. Yeah. Was it Watsonville that you said you moved to?

Sonny Wun 16:43

Pardon me?

Berenice Rosillo 16:43

Where did you say you moved to? Eventually?

Sonny Wun 16:46

Oh, well, seven, eight blocks south of here. First time was a block away. Then that—seven blocks away.

Berenice Rosillo 16:55

So, where did you go to high school?

Sonny Wun 16:57

Salinas High.

Berenice Rosillo 16:58

Salinas High. What class did you graduate with?

Sonny Wun 17:06
[laughs] Class of '67.

Berenice Rosillo 17:08
67.

Sonny Wun 17:11
Well, we already know how old I am.

Berenice Rosillo 17:12
[laughs] No, it's just [unclear]—just little material so that I can think back and actually ask some more specific questions. What about religion when you were in Chinatown? Did you guys go to church? None?

Sonny Wun 17:28
None. None.

Berenice Rosillo 17:30
Not even in your family?

Sonny Wun 17:31
No.

Berenice Rosillo 17:45
And then this question might be too personal. But growing up, whether it be Chinatown or just growing up in the Salinas Valley, did you ever feel personally discriminated against?

Sonny Wun 17:57
Yes.

Berenice Rosillo 17:59
Was that a big issue growing up?

Sonny Wun 18:00
Big Issue? Yes. I don't know if I want that on tape. [laughs]

Berenice Rosillo 18:06
Okay, no, that's fine. I mean, this is what it's for.

Sonny Wun 18:09
Yeah. But that's a big yes. That's why—that's why when I was on a backpacking trip in Europe, I met up with—I kept in contact with my junior high—not junior high—but my junior year and my English teacher. She taught Spanish in Madrid. So, I was discharged, and I had her address and went straight to the address. And we sat there, had a good long talk about life in general. And her last statement to me was

if I had to do all over again, would I go back to high school? And I told her no. And she wanted to know why, and I told her, I says—and she says, you know, she was surprised that that happened. I said, you know, back in the 60s, still, back in, you know. I think I'm stuck in a rut, because I'm a 60s person. And I like the 60s, but—like one case scenario that happened in gym class. All these guys on Monday morning would be talking: "Did you go to this guy's party? Did you go to this guy's party?" And then you look, and they look at you, "Did you go to this party?" I looked at myself—I'm not gonna answer that because they never asked. You know, we were left out of a lot of things. You get stuff, you know, snide remarks. You know, you just put up with it, because you're too small, and they're too many of them. But I do run into a few people once in a while. When I was working in the post office I worked on the counter. So, I see people every day. I see them every once in a while. But no, I wouldn't go back to high school. Because, you know, the discrimination. And there was. You know, people say no, but there was, because you don't have to—you don't have to be discriminated against. You can feel it, you can taste it. You know when something's wrong, that's when the hair on the back of your head just sticks up and you just got to bite your tongue.

Berenice Rosillo 19:40

You said that you backpacked through Europe. So, you served in the military as well?

Sonny Wun 20:57

Hm-hmm.

Berenice Rosillo 21:01

How long was that for?

Sonny Wun 21:03

Two years.

Berenice Rosillo 21:03

Two years?

Sonny Wun 21:04

Yeah. I was invited into that party—drafted. [both laugh] I call that an invitation.

Berenice Rosillo 21:25

What made you decide to come back to the Salinas Valley?

Sonny Wun 21:27

To tell you the truth, I wasn't going to come back. My father—my father's last letter to me was about 20 pages long. Overseas, telling me the reasons why I gotta come home. And he just talked me into it. It was other circumstances, and I just don't need to relay that. So, I came home.

Berenice Rosillo 22:15

Once you did come back, where did you work? What did you do after that?

Sonny Wun 22:20

What did I do? I come home, I stayed home, drew unemployment for one month. [laughs] And went to Hartnell, took 18 units, I think. And then right in the middle of it saw that prison called me and the postal service called me. So, I had choices. My mom made the choice for me [laughs]. She said you're not going to be working [laughing] at the Soledad Prison—Soledad Prison.

Berenice Rosillo 22:59

Was that for correction officer?

Sonny Wun 23:01

Hm-hmm. [unclear] you're not going there. Do that one. So okay. I thought I was—I thought I was going to be there just for part time. But it ended up being full time and stayed there my whole career. So, you know, it paid the bills. So, in the meantime, after I got hired in the middle of my semester—that was hard. But somehow I made it on the dean's list [laughs]. First time ever in my whole life. Because I'm not, you know, I'm not good at school. You know, like I told you in the beginning. But I was proud of that moment. So, not too many people knew that.

Berenice Rosillo 23:55

Did you ever marry?

Sonny Wun 23:57

Yes, I'm married.

Berenice Rosillo 23:58

Are you still married today?

Sonny Wun 24:00

Yes.

Berenice Rosillo 24:03

Do you ever—did you have children?

Sonny Wun 24:06

Yes. One son.

Berenice Rosillo 24:07

When he was growing up, did you ever wish that he could have had the same experience you did living in Chinatown? Just the community and the culture, I mean.

Sonny Wun 24:19

I promised myself if I had any kids, I wouldn't do the same things my parents did to me—raise me strict. And I guess all parents did it, I don't know. You know, threaten you, throw you out on your ear. But it did happen with my brother—you know, get thrown out. But, you know, so it does happen. You know, in all families, and it doesn't make any difference who you are. But as far as living in lower Soledad, he—

knowing him now as an adult, as a family person now, he didn't have to go through what I went through. You know, because I verbally told him about stuff. You know, how life was—you know, "oh, come on dad"—but he takes it all in. He likes—he likes life history. And he didn't have to go through what I went through. I promised myself that I wouldn't do the stuff that my parents did to me. You know, they didn't beat me or anything like that. I don't mean that. He just—the head games.

Berenice Rosillo 26:07

Like, you said your mom—she was a stay-at-home mom. So, did she cook a lot?

Sonny Wun 26:16

Oh, did she cook a lot.

Berenice Rosillo 26:17

Did she cook? Did she make a lot of Chinese dishes? Oh, yeah. [laughs]

Sonny Wun 26:19

Yeah, all the Chinese holidays, I guess. I know as we go on, we know about, you know—she does make all the great food for the holidays. She's a great cook. And she didn't use recipe cards. You okay? [laughs] I don't want you to—

Berenice Rosillo 26:43

Yeah.

Sonny Wun 26:44

Do it here. [laughs] She was—she was a good mother. No, but I shake my head to this day. I don't know how she did it. Manage seven kids. And then, you know, dealing with my father at the same time, so. I remember the house would smell and—

Berenice Rosillo 26:50

[laughs] What did it smell like?

Sonny Wun 27:18

Food all over [both laugh]—every room. I mean, if you were napping or whatever, you can smell it [door opens]. [speaking to person who has just entered room] Hi, Uncle Jack. [recording stops]