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Interview with Susan Aremas

Susan Aremas

California State University, Monterey Bay

CSUMB Oral History & Community Memory Archive
Chinatown Renewal Project
Interviewee: Susan Aremas
Interviewer: Jeshe Wiggins
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Duration of Interview: 47:24

Jeshe Wiggins 00:00
So, we are here. It is November 4, and we're at Salinas, California, interviewing Susan Aremas. Or Is it Aramus?

Susan Aremas 00:12
Aremas is correct.

Jeshe Wiggins 00:13
Okay. And do we have your permission to record the interview?

Susan Aremas 00:17
Yes, you do.

Jeshe Wiggins 00:18
Okay. So first, I'd like to start out by asking you about your family and how they came to the area.

Susan Aremas 00:26
Well, I'm—my father came here in the early 20s, from the Philippines. And he, I guess, survived working in the fields. He went up to Alaska, and was in the salmon and fishing industry and was like a migrant worker, because in those days, it was during the Depression, and it was very difficult to get any job. And he came as a young man, very little schooling. And, you know, just worked to survive. And then finally in—right when the war broke, World War II broke, there was an opportunity for the men who had migrated here from the Philippines to join the US Army. And they were inducted here in Salinas, and they formed the first and second regiments of the US Army. And so, they were in the war theater in the Philippines. They were sent to the Philippines and Australia. And so, my dad was a staff sergeant, and he was assigned in Tacloban, Leyte, which is, I don't know if you remember, where MacArthur landed and brought the troops in and fought against the Japanese at that time. But he was sent—he was assigned there to be kind of the supply officer and oversee rationing to the locals. And so, my mother happened to be a—she wanted—they needed helpers and people who knew the community, and she was there as kind of a clerk to oversee, you know, how much—how many in the family, and where they were located. And all this, you know, all the war going on. And they met there, because he was offering the supplies and she was, you know, giving him the lists of rations that they needed. So, they met and they grew to like each other. And my dad—it was, you know, just very, war conditions and very little conveniences at that time. And so, they—he proposed to her and got married. So, he was later—he came back to the United States and then sent—was wanting to bring her over. So, he went back to pick her up. And then they came—she came—they came over on the USS General Meigs. And it was kind of like a cargo ship, because they had to separate the—the men had one deck and the women had another deck, and they didn't—they just got together, you know, during the social time. And

then they let—they stopped off in Honolulu, and then they came directly to San Francisco. Then so from there, my dad had a friend from Salinas who picked them up, and so they came directly to Salinas and started their life together here. So, along came Susan, a year later. I believe—they came in July, and I was born in September of the following year. And so, I'm a Salinas native. And that's how we got over here.

Jeshe Wiggins 04:48
Can you tell me about yourself, like, your earliest childhood memories and just, kind of—

Susan Aremas 04:56
Earliest childhood—we—when my parents moved here, there was very little housing, and my dad was working in the fields. And there was a labor camp and we stayed there. Two house—there were two houses on what's now Davis Road, on the outskirts of Salinas, but that's the main thoroughfare now, but it's still—the house still exists. And I don't think it's the same barn, but that's where I—that's where we lived for about four years. And we shared a house with another family, also field workers. And that's kind of—that was kind of the gathering place for a lot of Filipinos who were—who had also migrated to Salinas. And as aside, Airrion, Airrion's grandmother was on that same ship. And she was heading to Salinas. So, they only met—they didn't meet on the ship. But they met when they landed in San Francisco. And they met each other. My mom and his grandmother said, "Oh, well, where are you going?" And his grandmother said, "Oh, we're going to Salinas." "Oh, well, we are too." And from then on, we became, you know, very close, almost like family. So, there are just a few families who came from that kind of a background and kind of a situation. And our families are now intertwined. You know, his grandmother is my godmother, and my mother is his aunt's—you know, we're all one family, and they had to do it in those days. There was no—really, they left their families in the Philippines. So, and here, when I was growing up, there were a lot of men who didn't have families. And so they were kind of, like, my uncles, and my, you know, grand—or, kind of like my extended family. So, there was a group of families that kind of—we grew up together, the kids went—we went to the same schools, and we're—and to this day, we're still pretty close.

Jeshe Wiggins 07:53
So, would you say that it gave you a greater sense of community? Do you think that they had to kind of create their own community away from—

Susan Aremas 08:03
Yes, they really had to do that, because there were no babysitters, you know, and the women had to stay home and take care of the kids. The men were, you know, hard-working, you know, working in the fields and trying to, you know, support their families, and later on, they were able to, you know, save enough money to buy homes. And that was one really big concern of theirs, because they didn't want to live in the—on the labor camp, you know, in the camps anymore. So, there was an opportunity for them to buy homes. And we kind of all—I think there were four families that were within four blocks of each other. But one of the first—we were one of the first families in East Salinas, and it was the Alisal area at that time, not connected with Salinas. It was just a community that was—I don't know what the term is, but kind of like Prunedale. I don't know if you're—

Jeshe Wiggins 09:29
I'm in San Juan Bautista.

Susan Aremas 09:30
Oh—

Jeshe Wiggins 09:30
I know about—

Susan Aremas 09:31
Yeah, kind of like the suburbs in those days, but we weren't in the city of Salinas at that time. So, when my parents applied to, you know, to buy a home there, the neighbors were quite concerned and petitions were sent out, and they were trying to get neighbors to sign a petition to keep us out of there, not be able to buy a home. But somehow, we plugged, you know, we stuck to it. And there were several other families who were interested in, you know, more affordable homes. And in that region, the Alisal area, were the people from Oklahoma, from the Dust Bowl. So, they settled there first, and so when they saw some non-whites coming in, they were a little concerned. But after that, you know, after the first family came in, there were several others, and his grandparents moved a couple of blocks away, and then there was another family that was a block away. And so, we had to gather together and kind of pull for each other and support each other. So, it was kind of difficult for them, but they struggled through that, and they were good citizens, you know, from then on, and contributed to the neighborhood. And let's see, to this day—well, we moved out of there, but we were there for a good 30 years.

Jeshe Wiggins 11:26
You mentioned that there was some problems with—the neighbors were a little adverse at first. Were there any, like, altercations or any big events between the neighbors or any kind of overt discrimination other than that?

Susan Aremas 11:49
I don't recall of any. We all went to the local schools. There was a neighborhood school. And I think there was a good mix. Some Hispanic families started moving in the late—probably the late 50s. But before then, it was mostly Filipino, and there were a few Chinese too, as I recall. So, it was kind of a mixture. It was a multiracial mix. And now it's mostly, in that school, is mostly Hispanics. And the thing is, I got my first job at Fremont School, and I attended kindergarten there. So, that was kind of a homecoming. I was—I knew some of my teachers were still teaching at that time. And they kind of—they welcomed me into the teaching community, and although I felt, well, I can't call them by their first name yet, you know, and so I got over that. But I taught in the community that I lived in. So, to me, that was, you know, very important, and it also—I was also understanding of any, you know, any migrant child or anyone of, you know, Hispanic background that, you know, I could relate to them. So, as far as discrimination, I didn't feel any after that, after we were in the community and in going to school, I really didn't.

Jeshe Wiggins 14:03
Do you have any other significant events in your life that you'd like to talk about?

Susan Aremas 14:11
Well, significant. Not so much. It was a pretty uneventful kind of a, you know, my schooling was—I went through all of the schools here, went on to San Jose State and got my credential. And then teaching—teaching was very difficult. Although I, you know, I love teaching, but the—it got more and more difficult as—in the later years. It was struggles with the community, with the kids, and at-risk children, and I had to go through gang problems, you know, that the kids would bring to school, and I remember one of my toughest years was—I was teaching fifth grade, and it was really hard to separate, because there were the northern gangs and the, you know, Norteños and the Sureños. And these kids were coming from the surrounding neighborhoods. And so, I would—we would get stories like, oh, you know, Ms. Aremas, we had—there was a shooting at our house, you know, yesterday or last night, and I'd just be so amazed how these kids can come to school, you know, and still, you know—what was I to say, okay, you know, you have to study these multiplication facts, you know, when their home life was just in such turmoil. And I remember so many times that I was teaching at Fremont School, and we would have so many lockdowns, because the kids were—there was a shooting in one school, and they have to alert all the other schools. So, it got kind of tough. And teaching was kind of a side, you know, activity, because we had to really work with the kids and with the parents. And a lot of the more—I remember one class, 1/5 of my class, their parents were in prison. So, I thought, wow, that's a large number and—but it was very rewarding as far as helping the kids and, you know, in elementary, that's where you can make the most impact. I don't think I could have gone through high school, teaching high school, because I—that's really rough. But teaching the elementary was, you know, it was, at that time, was fun. And I was always eager to go to school. And it was different every day. And that's the kind of the good thing about teaching, and then there's vacations. That's another [laughs] good thing. But I enjoyed my career as a teacher. But, you know, in the end, it was just—teaching was just a chore, and it wasn't fulfilling anymore. So, I'm kind of sad that I had to leave, but I left at the right time. Yeah.

Jeshe Wiggins 17:51
I'm gonna backtrack a little. Do you have any stories and memories of the Chinatown, because we're doing this for the Chinatown Renewal Project?

Susan Aremas 18:06
Right, I have just a couple of memories. I had a couple of friends who lived in Chinatown on Lake Street. And they owned a store, I remember. And some of them—some of the other friends who were—lived around Chinatown, had restaurants or they were cooks, you know, in the restaurant. And, but the one memory I have is that—remember these families that came over kind of at the same time, we would gather, maybe on a Friday night, or it had to be a Saturday night. We would gather at—I think it was the Republic Cafe, because I remember that they had booths with curtains, and I remember the kids kind of running around and hiding behind the curtains. And we would meet regularly about, I would say, every weekend, if we can gather together, and have dinner there. And so that we caught up with each other, and they could relax and the kids could enjoy. But I remember sitting in a highchair somewhere [laughs], you know, and having dinners there. So, that—the other association that we have—that I have with Chinatown—is the Filipino Community Hall, the cultural center, is located on

Calle Cebu, and that used to be Lake Street, I believe. But it was built there as a center for the Filipino families to come in. And my parents were active since its beginnings, and now I've carried on their work, and I'm a board member of the Filipino community. So, they're just a—we're just a stone's throw from the Asian—from the Confucius Church and the Buddhist Temple. So, it's just been lately that we've kind of grouped together in this Chinatown Renewal Project, and we're getting to know each other again. And we're—they're finding that, yeah, the Filipinos were—have been in Salinas for, you know, since the early 20s, probably. So, that's my connection with it. And I'm working on the Asian Festival Committee. And we've been doing that for four years now. And so, we try to bring more people to come and realize that we do have a center, and we're trying to, you know, trying to give them some—a bit of culture. Let's see, I've been active in teaching cultural classes, Filipino cultural classes, for the younger generation, and we teach language, Tagalog, and we teach song. I teach the songs and help out with the dances. And we have a team of people who sponsor it, and the Filipino Women's Club, and the Filipino community. And we're just trying to involve our—more Filipinos and have them aware and—about the existence of Filipinos and how, you know, the people who, the Filipinos who came before us, you know, how they set the tone of more families moving in. So, the recent arrivals really aren't aware of what had happened in the 20s, and what happened to the—we call the manongs, the men who came over and really sacrificed their lives to, well, perpetuate our culture. So, that's a big task. And this is what this committee is trying to, you know, do.

Jeshe Wiggins 22:46
Growing up, were you ever really involved in the Filipino community?

Susan Aremas 22:51
Always. From the time I was probably walking, they would have some of the organizations that were in existence at that time. They were trying to—they had events, dinner dances, or they would have queen contests, and I remember I have a picture of me holding the train of one of the queens, you know, who won the contest. And mostly they were popularity contests, just to gather, you know, more people in a social occasion. And all throughout my childhood, I was always involved in learning Filipino dances and learning about my culture. Let's see—and I'm still doing that. Now I'm teaching some of the kids in dances. And yeah, I've always been connected with that, either my mother in the Filipino Women's Club—we would do—we'd have group dances and fashion shows and things like that. And my mother was a dressmaker in the Philippines, so she brought that skill to here and whenever the organizations had a dance, say, and all the women had to have their Filipino dresses, and they didn't know how to sew it, but my mom knew how to sew those costume, you know, those elaborate dresses. And so, she was the dressmaker for the group and would sew everyone's, you know, everyone's dress for that event. And then somehow, I kind of, through osmosis I guess, by just hanging around her, I learned how to sew. So, now I've carried on and she passed on some of the patterns that, you know, are quite elaborate costumes. But she passed on that—the patterns on to me and I took it, and I sew the costumes for any of the dance groups. So yeah, I learned it through her. And she was always telling me about, you know, the Philippines and what their traditions were, and so I'm just trying to—I don't have any children, so I'm passing it on to the next generation.

Jeshe Wiggins 25:47
You mentioned the queen contest. Were you ever more directly involved in those?

Susan Aremas 25:54
They tried to twist my parents' arms, but we just didn't, you know, we didn't feel that that was suitable for me. But finally, I got into one queen contest and—yeah, okay, just because they've been asking us for so long. So, I was in one only, but not until I was probably in high school. Yeah. So, those are the things that they—the organizations brought over from the Philippines. You know, they would have their town queen—you know, they'd have their town fiestas, and they would vote for the queen. And so, they brought that over. And that was one way, in the days, like, in the 30s—because there was a ratio of, I think, someone told me there was a ratio of 40 women to one man, so that this was one way to kind of divide their attention, you know, with the men around, because they weren't allowed to really, you know, date these girls, but they were allowed to dance with them, you know, at the dances. So, they would have to take turns, and they would have to bid to dance with the girls. So, that's where the social box came in. They would bid on a certain candidate. They would pay for her box for the privilege of just dancing with her. So, that's how some of the men were able to socialize at that point. But when I was the—joined in on the queen contests, it was for fundraising only. And it was a little older, and we didn't do that social box kind of thing. But, you know, that's kind of a part of our history that we brought over. Oh, did I win? No. [laughs] I was just a princess. [laughs]

Jeshe Wiggins 28:12
So, tell me about the significance of cultural heritage in your life.

Susan Aremas 28:21
Very much, you know, almost 150%. I've always kept studying. I'm a student of Philippine culture, and different cultures also. But I have—I kept—in San Jose State, we were able to put together Filipino studies, and then those days, it was the, you know, this—the late 60s, and it was all about identity and, you know, trying to—where are you from, you know, what your roots are. And so, there were a group of us who got together and said, well, we need a Filipino studies. And so, we established that. But even before then, I was still interested in my parents' culture. My dad is from the north of the Philippines, in Pangasinan. And, in fact, your grandfather was—-Airrion's grandfather was from the same province. So, you know, that's the attachment there. So, I knew all about their, you know, them growing up and their culture. My mother's from the south, from the Visayas, which is the same places as his grandmother. And so, we were—since I was the only child, and kind of the only one from both families who was able to be here in the United States. So, I was—they always told me about, you know, their relatives at home. And so, I just have been a student of Filipino culture. I learned, well, I understand my dad's dialect, and I understand my mother's dialect, but their means of communication was English or Tagalog, and they learned Tagalog here, so there—that was a mixture, so when they talk, it was a mixture of Tagalog, English. And, you know, I learned—I could understand my parents when they spoke, and I knew the difference of the different dialects. So, with—if we're with my dad's family, they're speaking one dialect, and my mom and I are kind of sitting there going, okay, but I can—no, I can understand. I can't converse with my dad's relatives, but when my mom has relatives, I can understand when they're talking. And so, I just kind of have a little bit of an ear for language. I majored in Spanish, because they didn't have any Filipino language there. But I learned to speak Spanish going through school, and with friends, and just have an interest for language.

Jeshe Wiggins 31:44
How close to Spanish is Tagalog?

Susan Aremas 31:48
Very, very close. If you have—if you don't have a word for it in Tagalog, just try a Spanish word, and you could be understood. So, it's very closely related. My mom's dialect is very Spanish, has a Spanish background, plus my grandmother was part Spanish, from Spain. Yeah, so I think mama, I think she could speak Spanish. But I didn't meet her until I was in high school. So, I only know of her as my grandparents. But yeah, Spanish has a lot of influence in the Philippines. It was the language, dances, a lot of the songs are Spanish background. So, I kind of—it's melted into my background. Yeah.

Jeshe Wiggins 32:57
Have you ever been back to the Philippines? Or have you ever gone to the Philippines?

Susan Aremas 33:01
I've gone there, let's see now, a total of three times. Once when I was in high school, my first time, and my mom and I went, and his grandmother and his aunt. And we all went—so that was in '65. So, that was my first experience in the Philippines. But up till then, I had already known kind of what to expect, and both families live in the provinces and in the country and live the island, you know, island life, and it was—it wasn't such a cultural shock, because I had already—I already knew that they weren't, you know, well off, and kind of what to expect. So, the second time I went was 2000, 2003, and it was to be a godparent to a friend of mine's wedding. So, we all went over there and they had the wedding over there in the Philippines, so and we got to, you know, go around the area. And the last time I went, I went with my cousins, and that was a really—we had a really good time. So, we just went from—we went to—visited a lot of places, both north and south. So, had a good experience. Maybe at a later date, we'll go and do the tourist thing, because usually you have to go and visit relatives and stay with relatives, but I like, you know, going through the country and learning, you know, seeing the sights.

Jeshe Wiggins 35:11
How do you feel that the community there differs from here, if it differs at all?

Susan Aremas 35:20
The community—

Jeshe Wiggins 35:22
The Filipino community.

Susan Aremas 35:25
Oh, that's kind of a hard question to say, because it's a different lifestyle there. And the—some of my relative—or, you know, the country is kind of, I hate to say this now, but the government is pretty corrupt. But it's—a lot of the culture now is copied from other cultures, you know. They—it's a—it's mostly—you can see the American influence, US, you know. Everything US is, you know, is held in high esteem there. And just the—now everyone has a cell phone, of course, and everyone texts, and I don't know if it's all for the good, but it's brought them into the world. They emulate Americans, they

have to, you know, wear things that are American, and really, not too much of their culture is left, you know. Everything has an influence on their—on the younger generation. And the older generation kind of—is kind of lost, you know, because their—all their kids have, you know, they've gotten to be so Americanized, you know, and so I think that's the difference. So, whenever we, you know, families go over there to the Philippines for visits, say, for Christmas, they have to load up on all American goods and, you know, which is mostly from China, but, you know, they bring over their coffee, and they bring over American goods. So, that's their present when they go there. And anything that's, you know, trendy, or designer, or they have to—you know, that's what they ask for, and they couldn't afford that over there, but we can't either, but, you know, they make an effort to bring American kind of goods. So, you know, that's kind of the influence. And when you watch their TV, even if you can't speak Tagalog, you can understand because it's mostly in Taglish, and English, and I'm so disappointed sometimes, they copy all the, you know, all the shows from American shows, and I said, "Well, what's the point of watching these, you know." They have their American Idol, they have their, you know, Most Talent—Philippines Got Talent, and they're all the same, you know, so there's really not too much of their own culture that's—that they're holding on to, so I'm kind of disappointed in that. And, of course, I have an interest in the schooling, you know, and I'm so—I feel so sorry for the teachers, and that they have—they still have to supply the kid—or they don't have any supplies. The kids have to, you know, bring their own pencils and their paper. And I looked in—I visited a couple of schools over there, and their libraries are just so empty, there's nothing there. And the kids have to still copy from the board, and they don't have textbooks. They might have to—one textbook for every five kids, you know. This is in the province. But I'm just—I feel so sorry for the—oh, sorry—the teachers because they're not paid very much, and still they have to keep up with the, you know, teaching large classrooms. I mean, there are class sizes like 40 or, you know, sometimes 50 in the classroom in it. I couldn't survive there. Although teachers are held in high esteem there, it's just that they don't pay them—same as here, but they don't pay them enough, you know, but those are the career teachers who would teach, even though, you know, they don't get much money. But to go to school there, it's very expensive and, you know, you have to pay for your uniforms, and you have to pay for your supplies, and it's very limited there. So, I—once in a while will—one of the organizations will send over, like, a care package, or notebooks, and paper, pencils, and whatever we can do. And I've sent over some books, you know, for the library, and they're just so excited, you know, to have a book in their hand, which, you know, I feel so bad because when I was teaching, we were discarding books, you know. We were throwing away books that could have been sent to, you know, the Philippines or something, you know. Such waste we have here. Yeah.

Jeshe Wiggins 41:13
So, what would you like future generations of Filipinos to know about the Filipino community in Salinas?

Susan Aremas 41:19
Woah, that's a lot. And that's kind of what I'm into is trying to preserve that—not really carry the Philippine flag or anything, but just to let them know, where they came from, what were the influences in that culture, a little bit of history. What I want most of all for the Filipinos here in the United States, here in our local community, is to know how we got here, and what sacrifices those people made in order for the new generation to come in, or the new generation that's being born. It wasn't all that easy. Yeah. There were lots of laws that prevented the first Filipinos from marrying, from owning property. And so I'm kind of, I don't know, I'm kind of frustrated with the newcomers, you know, who come in and

they move right into a house, and they have a car to drive, and their kids can go to school, and they don't even stop to think, you know, how did we even establish ourselves in this community, or think about the first Filipinos who came, and how they had to endure some, you know, prejudice and political movements to prevent Filipinos from succeeding. And so, we're trying real hard to surpass that and get people into, you know, finishing school, you know, going into the different professions. And now the newcomers also come with—you know, they're already educated in the Philippines. And so, they should stop and think that Filipinos weren't even allowed in, you know, certain professions, because they hadn't gone to school here. So, I want them to remember the sacrifices made by the previous Filipino, the first Filipino.

Jeshe Wiggins 43:54
Is there any family legacy that you would want to leave behind?

Susan Aremas 43:59
What I just said. [laughs] So, I want my relatives to know what the struggles were and the importance of maintaining that culture, not to abandon it. And one of my biggest frustrations is that my generation, the first one born here, or the first one raised here, we lost our language, totally wiped it out, because they're very—I can't even name among my friends, my generation, who can speak the language or to know their, you know, their dialect. And that was my biggest disappointment in my generation. And it wasn't anyone's fault. It was the parents had to assimilate. Fathers were in the military, so they had to go with the, you know, military discipline in their families. And they were—the parents were afraid that if they spoke their dialect with the kids, that the kids would have accents, and when they went to school, they would be ridiculed, and they would be isolated. So, the philosophy was, if we just spoke only in English, that we would have an easier time assimilating, so that's one of my disappointments and frustration. And I tried very, very hard to understand my language, or to have some kind of knowledge of the different dialects so that—

Jeshe Wiggins 45:48
So you can pass it on.

Susan Aremas 45:48
So we can pass it on. And I—my advice to the new families, if they're coming over from the Philippines, don't stop talking to them in their Filipino dialect. You can mix in English and kids are, you know, pretty good about separating that, but to continue that and tell them about their life in the Philippines, and to relate that to their, you know—tell their story to their kids, and not to just put it aside and be ashamed of it or, you know, aren't proud of telling them about their culture. So, that's my hope for the future. [laughs]

Jeshe Wiggins 46:41
Okay, well, that's actually all my questions that I have.

Susan Aremas 46:44
Great.

Jeshe Wiggins 46:45
Thank you.

Susan Aremas 46:47
Well, thank you. This is an honor to be included on this list. Of course, I asked to be put on there. [laughs] But my goal is to let other generations know about our life in Salinas, and that we're proud to be from the, you know, Philippine culture, and I'm willing to share anything that I know.