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Interview with Vernon Benet

Vernon Benet

California State University, Monterey Bay

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Interviewee: Vernon Benet
Interviewer: Ryan Nitz
Date of Interview: October 24, 2013
Duration of Interview: 31:33

Ryan Nitz 00:00

So, today I'm here. It's October 24, 2013, three o'clock, down here on Soledad Street in Salinas, here on Chinatown. My name is Ryan Nitz. I'm here interviewing Vernon, Vernon Benet, also known as Duke. And if you can explain to them why they call you Duke.

Vernon Benet 00:23

Well, I had a brother here, living here working in their produce. And they called him Big Duke. And so, he was older than I, and then so they just decided they would call me Little Duke. So, I went with that name Little Duke. And they didn't—I didn't tell them my real name. So, they stuck with Little Duke for all those years.

Ryan Nitz 00:56

And how old was your brother?

Vernon Benet 00:57

How old was my brother? He's four years—he was about—let's see, I was twenty-three. He was twenty-seven. I think he was about twenty-seven. Yeah, he was [unclear]. So, I got out of service here in '53, 1953. And I got discharged in '53, honorable discharge. And then I stayed here and worked at a little garage for a while, and then I applied for a civil service job at Fort Ord. And then I started working there, orderly work. Do you know what orderly work is?

Ryan Nitz 01:50

No, sir.

Vernon Benet 01:51

That's take care of patient. I started working there for a year, and then after that, I wanted to go into food service. Then I went into food service the rest of the time. A year later, I went to food service and stayed there in food service until I retired. I went from the old hospital—they had [unclear], you know, here at that time. I was here when they made that movie Soldier in the Rain. That was Jackie Gleason, I believe, made that movie. You know, I watched it from the inside of the building some of the time—whenever I had that little spare time, you know. I would love to see them make it rain, you know, and it was cold too. [laughs] And so, I would stay there. I worked from the old hospital to the new hospital. In '73 they built Silas B. Hays hospital, and then we moved there, and I worked in a kitchen there for all the rest of the years, until 1987. But, let me back up. Before that, I got in a truck accident. A guy rear-ended me in the back, and I hurt my neck and my back. So, I worked about six months after that, and I couldn't hardly—well, I could walk, you know, but I would bend over, you know, walking. Couldn't work too good, you know. Muscle spasm would hit me pretty bad, you know. And so, I just said, well, it's best that I just go ahead and take early retirement. And so, I went for the early retirement. And so, after I

take the early retirement, and right about six months after that, my wife, she deceased. And I had two sons was already born. And so, I stayed on here, bought a home, and stayed on here, and then I went to our— a guy was wanting me to help him drive dealer trade cars. Of course, at the time, I didn't know what it was, but I soon found out what it was, and so I started driving dealer trade cars for [unclear]. We would drive to Watsonville every day and go different places. We would go to auction and pick up cars. Take cars up there, and also certain days, we would go back up there and pick up some. And then on certain days, we would deliver cars to different dealerships, brand new cars, and then pick up brand new cars. Just about anywhere in the state of California, we would go. As far as I've been was Eureka. That's north. And as far south I've been to pick up a car was Temecula. You know what I said?

Ryan Nitz 05:31

Yes, sir.

Vernon Benet 05:32

Yeah. So, all along the 405, I picked up quite a few cars. The name of the lots, I don't recall. But I recall Kramer Motor. That's one big one I can recall, Kramer Motor. we picked up quite a few there, but all those other places, I just cannot name them, you know, but they're dealerships, you know. But I liked it. But I still suffered with my back then, you know, but not as bad. You know, I had medication to take for it, you know, and everything. I was under the doctor's orders, you know, to take certain medication. And we would be gone all day. We'd leave in the morning time, and we'd get there at night. Sometimes they would be closed, and then we would have to stay there until they opened up the next morning. And then we would pick up the car and come back. It'd be late in the evening we'd come back, and then we'd come home and rest. And we had to go right back the next morning. We wouldn't stay up there all night. We would come home from San Jose. We would come home from Santa Cruz. We would come home from Watsonville, you know, in the evening time after we'd make our delivery, and just right back the next day. But I would always come down to Chinatown and patronize the food that they have. You know, the kind of foods they have that I like to eat, which was Filipino food, which was adobo, chicken adobo, and not much Chinese food, but I would eat some, you know, and everything. And then I would go to the bar and have a beer or something like that, maybe one shot. But I wouldn't stay too long, you know, because I had to get my rest, because we had to travel quite a bit the next day, you know, and everything. And so, I was looking forward to that, because you can make it with one job, but, you know, if you want extra money, you had to have two jobs to really pay for a home and take care of the boys while they go to school and everything. And so, I enjoyed doing it.

Unknown 08:17

Can we stop for one second? All right, I'm rolling.

Ryan Nitz 08:22

Now before we start again, I just want to make sure if we have consent for recording and videotaping this interview?

Vernon Benet 08:30

Pardon?

Ryan Nitz 08:32

Before we start again, if we have your approval before we start, so we can record and videotape this interview.

Vernon Benet 08:39

Sure.

Ryan Nitz 08:40

Okay. Yes, sir. So, you know, to continue—to start about you, can you tell us, like, when and where you're from?

Vernon Benet 08:48

Oh, I was born in Arkansas, Carthage, Arkansas, and I came in the Army in '51. And that's when I left Arkansas, '51. Came into service at Camp Roberts, California. Take my basic training there and everything. And after I stayed with—I was enlisted for two years, and I spent a year and a half down there before they closed Camp Roberts. They close Camp Roberts, and I was transferred to Fort Ord, and there at Fort Ord is when I got discharged. And then that's when I started—I worked at a service station here for a little while, and then I had applied for the civil service job out there. And when I was hired out there, I was hired permanent, because of the points I had, you know. And so, I was hired permanent, and so I was there for over thirty-seven years straight time, no broken time.

Ryan Nitz 10:21

Going back to Arkansas, because I remember you telling us you had a brother, do you have any other siblings?

Vernon Benet 10:25

Oh, yeah, I had—there was seven of us in the family. I had three sisters and three brothers. And the oldest one, he left Arkansas in '42 and came to Richmond, California. What kind of work he was doing, I don't know, because I was too young then, you know, to ask questions. And so, but as I grew older, well, I learned, you know, that he used to work out here in California. What county, I don't know. Well, I've worked in a—well, Kaiser had their—mostly I was working for Kaiser plant. You know, they had a lot of women doing welding jobs on those ships, because a lot of men folks was in service. Not all the men, but—and then the women folks had to do a lot of welding. And they worked here until the war was over with, and then a lot of them got sent back to where they was from—Mississippi, Arkansas, Texas, and Oklahoma. And then some of them had made enough money to buy their own home, buy land, and buy their own home, so I was told. And so, they stayed on here. They raised a family, and so a lot of them stayed here the rest of their life until they deceased. And they had kids, you know, children. And they stayed over here, which some is here, I know. I know, and I don't know [unclear] have some relatives here. I know—I've heard about, but I don't know them. And so, I liked it here because of the job. That's why I stayed, because of my job, what kept me here.

Ryan Nitz 10:34

And I remember you telling me with the involvement in the military, you know, you were with Fort Ord.

Vernon Benet 13:04

Yeah.

Ryan Nitz 13:05

And can you, like, you know, explain a little bit of what you used to do and how that was?

Vernon Benet 13:10

Well, I was doing orderly work, which is working on a ward taking care of patient, you know, taking care of the patient. And then I worked there for a year, about a year. And then I went from there to food service. And then I worked in food service with special diets. So, special diets, that's people on bland diet, liquid diets, you know, and all that. And so, I done that, you know. I did that while I was in food service, which I enjoyed. We'd start at five o'clock in the morning and fix breakfast, deliver breakfast to the patients on the ward. And then after delivery, we'd pick up their food trays, and then we'd bring them back to the kitchen, and we'd have people wash the dishes. And while they was washing dishes, we were preparing the other food for the noon meal, and then we would deliver that, which we had another shift coming on for the afternoon shift, because we would get off at 1:30 in the afternoon and go home. And in the meantime, sometime—this was before I retired—I would go and get a permit to sell some oak wood, because I had a fireplace, and I liked to burn the wood in the fireplace. Not that often, but my wife and the kids, they liked to sit by the fireplace, and I raised a little grandchild that I would keep, you know, over there and help raise. And she would like to sit with her back to the fire, which we would tell her, don't sit too close with your back to the fire, your back will get hot. We would always tell her to move to the side. The wife and I would go do something else, and the next day, we look up and she's sitting right back in the middle of the fireplace. [laughs] We laughed about it, you know, and everything. Never hit her. Never did spank her. Didn't have to spank her or talk mean to her or anything. And she stayed with us quite a while. And she growed up, and then she starts to live with her mother after a certain age. What age, I don't know. I don't recall. But she enjoyed it. Now she's still live here. And she have two children of her own, a boy and a girl. So, I met him twice. I met the boy and the girl twice. One is eight years old, and one—the boy is eight, and the girl is six years old. So, they—I don't want to say it, but I guess I will—she can't discipline those two like I disciplined her. I didn't have to do much discipline to her, talking to her not to do something, don't get into this and everything. But they seem to get into every little thing they want to. [laughs] And she would tell them, don't do that, but that didn't do any good. So, they only went to my house twice, at the age of eight and six. Of course, I guess they have a birthday coming up soon, which I don't know. I'm not that close to them anymore. Says she married, you know, and everything. And so, I just let her raise her own family, you know. That's about it.

Ryan Nitz 17:39

And I know you told us that one of the reasons you came here to Chinatown is because you had an older brother that was here. Can you tell us, like, the year you came to Chinatown?

Vernon Benet 17:50

What year?

Ryan Nitz 17:51

Yes, sir.

Vernon Benet 17:52

In '53, 1953, when I got discharged out of the Army. And then I came here and decided to stay, and I worked, just like I say, I worked at a service station for a while. And then I applied for a job out to Fort Ord, and finally I got a call, so I went to work out there. And I stayed there until—for thirty-seven years, and then I retired, you know, out there. And so, that's what kept me here at Fort Ord. That's the job that I had. I liked it.

Ryan Nitz 18:43

Yes, sir. And how was, like—so, how was Chinatown back when you first came?

Vernon Benet 18:48

When I first came? Oh, it was full of people. Maybe every day, when I was around, or every night, it was full of braceros. You know, they would—they was coming from Mexico every year, a certain amount of months, you know, and they had them working here, and they was living at a camp. Most of them lived in a camp [unclear]—I cannot recall the camp name. And then some of them was living at home with peoples, you know. And, but they still was working in the field. And I was working at a field too sometime, topping carrots for Howard [unclear]. He run the business topping carrot. And I topped carrots until they invented the carrot machine. And when they invented the carrot machine, well, couldn't top carrots no more. The machine took over.

Ryan Nitz 20:10

And so, can you explain, like, what you used to do in Chinatown?

Vernon Benet 20:16

Walk up and down the street looking, and just talked to friends, you know, and everything, when I was around. But like I say, I would take off when I learned how to gamble. I would gamble here. I would be on the inside of the building. What the people was doing in the street, I didn't see much of that, you know. Well, I saw some of it, you know. And then I would go to Seaside and gamble at the poker places over there. The name of the gambling game was lowball, what we played. Then I would—when the game would get small or I didn't like the game, I'd go to Monterey and gamble. If the game looked good and I thought maybe I could win some money or lose some money, whatever, well, I'd stay there and play. Of course, now I recall one night in Monterey [unclear]—well, they served sandwich there, you know, and I bought a sandwich in the wee hours of the light—in the wee hours of the night. And I ate the sandwich, and I came back and sit down and played poker, and then two o'clock come, and I lost my last hand, and that's when I got hungry. When you get broke, you get hungry. Although you may have, you know, just ate some food, you know. And I got hungry, and I walked—the buses wasn't running. I walked from Monterey almost to Salinas, all night. That morning, I had a girlfriend that had my car. That was before I got married, and I couldn't call her, because they wouldn't answer the phone after a certain time at night. And finally, I got a ride next morning, and made it home and went to sleep.

Ryan Nitz 22:46

Do you remember, like, the names of the buildings that used to be here in Chinatown when it was open for business?

Vernon Benet 22:54

Well, the Golden Dragon was on the corner, Golden Dragon. And the Lotus Inn had food—you could eat food in there—and they had a bar. And then a place on this side of the street—I don't recall the name—that's where I would go and eat some Filipino food. The reason why I didn't like to—I don't know if I should mention this—some poker games I would get into, if everybody was speaking English—I got in a poker game once, and they spoke only Filipino. Is that—you think that's all right for the record?

Ryan Nitz 23:52

Yes, sir.

Vernon Benet 23:52

And so, I made a good hand. They used to have rails, you know, you stand on, you know, around. And so, I drew several cards and made a good hand, and I crimped—you know, you kind of crimp your cards up—and I made four of a kind. And so, I put [unclear] out there to bet, and so I crimped my hand. And so, one of the players was going to call me, and someone made a statement on the rail, because he [unclear] my hand. He made a statement on the rail, and so the guy didn't call. He had a [unclear] in his hand, and he take them back. And when he take them back, well, I politely turn in my chips and cashed out, and walked out. I didn't play there anymore, because I only like to play at games where they only speak English. Now they have a [unclear] club here, I believe, in Salinas, right up here on the corner. I never played there because they don't speak all English, and that's the place I don't like to play. Oh, sometime after two o'clock, we would go and eat food at the Rex Cafe on Main Street, and the Central Cafe. If the Rex was full, we would go to the Central Cafe. And if the Central Cafe was full, there was a place around the corner named the Star Cafe, and we would eat there, and then we would go home. We would call it a night.

Ryan Nitz 26:04

Now, talking about all these cafes. Now, the Republic Cafe was open when you first came here?

Vernon Benet 26:14

Yes. Yeah, the Republic? But I wasn't eating there too often, because I would—they had [unclear] here, and that's where I would eat. It was named—they called it the C&M [?] Cafe. And so, they had the kind of food that I like, you know, and I would eat there, you know. And then sometimes, not always, but whenever we would go over to Monterey, well, we would eat over there at those restaurant. The name of the restaurant, I forget, those places, you know.

Ryan Nitz 27:09

And then, what do you think of the idea of the Republic Cafe becoming, like, a museum?

Vernon Benet 27:14

Well, I think it would be nice. It would be great. It would be great. Of course, I'm eighty-three years old, so [unclear] in my lifetime, but it would be nice, you know. The younger people, they will remember me, you know, if my picture's there. They would remember me.

Ryan Nitz 27:45

This interview is going to be there.

Vernon Benet 27:48

Hm?

Ryan Nitz 27:49

I said this interview will be there. So, not only a picture. But, you know, back in Chinatown, because there's a lot less people, obviously, here than there is today. Back in Chinatown when you first came here, was it just, like, Filipino people and Asian people? Or was it just a mix?

Vernon Benet 28:05

It was a mix. Mix of Filipinos, Mexicans, black, and Japanese. And I didn't see too many—there wasn't too many Chinese down here, you know. But the Chinese owned the buildings, so I understand, and everybody was renting from the Chinese, which I didn't know for a long time, you know.

Ryan Nitz 28:45

Now, with all these people, was it mainly, like—was it segregated? Like, certain races stuck with certain races, or were people—

Vernon Benet 28:52

No, it was a mix. They just mixed. I'm not saying that there wasn't prejudice, you know, but they still mixed.

Ryan Nitz 29:18

So, now obviously, can you explain, like, how Chinatown is different today than how it used to be when you first arrived?

Vernon Benet 29:25

Well, there's no restaurant open, and not that many people here. You know, it's a few on the street, and they're doing their thing, whatever. But I just walk by and look and sit in my car, and truck, and talk with friends, you know, and everything. And then after I get through, you know, talk a certain length of time—well, I have to go home, because I like to watch TV.

Ryan Nitz 30:20

And then, because I know Chinatown, it offers different services here like Dorothy's Kitchen and different other ones. Now, can you explain, like, the different services they do have here?

Vernon Benet 30:35

Well, [unclear] twice a day. [unclear] serve breakfast. I'm never down here for breakfast, but I'm down here for lunch and I eat, you know, if I like what they have. I'll eat that, you know. After that, well, I'll sit and talk with friends. And then after that, I'm going home, watch TV with my son, you know, and everything.

Ryan Nitz 31:05

And how far do you live from here?

Vernon Benet 31:08

Oh, on the other side of Hartnell, about two or three miles.

Ryan Nitz 31:15

Okay. Yes, sir. Definitely I appreciate you. Appreciate your time and doing this interview.

Vernon Benet 31:22

Yeah, I enjoyed it, getting you to interview.

Ryan Nitz 31:28

Yes, sir.

Vernon Benet 31:29

No hard feelings?

Ryan Nitz 31:31

[laughs] None at all.