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Interview with Walter Wong

Walter Wong

California State University, Monterey Bay

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Interviewee: Walter Wong
Interviewer: Jade Clark Wilson
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Walter Wong 00:07

Yeah, he was raised in Hawaii.

Jade Clark Wilson 00:09

Raised in Hawaii?

Walter Wong 00:10

Yeah, because whether he was born here or not—yeah, because don't forget, his mother met her husband, or his father, when they were both at University of Hawaii.

Jade Clark Wilson 00:21

Okay, well, a little introduction. I'm Jade Clark Wilson. I'm here with Walter Wong, and we are doing our interview. It is November 13, 2008. Okay, so to start off, I just want to ask, when and where were you born?

Walter Wong 00:42

I was born in San Francisco when my father was making one of his business trips.

Jade Clark Wilson 00:48

Oh, really?

Walter Wong 00:48

[laughs] But actually, my father's family had been lived in Soledad Street since the 1800s. And of course, we moved to this present house in the late 1930s. But I think that, you know, oftentimes because he was in business, operating restaurants and store, that he often traveled to San Francisco [unclear] and do business. And I think I was born in one of those trips.

Jade Clark Wilson 01:16

And your mother would accompany him to these trips?

Walter Wong 01:20

Yeah. [laughs]

Jade Clark Wilson 01:21

That's funny. Born on a business trip. And you were the fourth born?

Walter Wong 01:29

Yes, I'm in the middle. There's seven of us.

Jade Clark Wilson 01:32

Okay. And so, you lived in Salinas all your life, correct?

Walter Wong 01:39

Yes. All my life except when I went to school at Cal and University of Hawaii. And I did live in Modesto for one year when I first graduated from Cal. I worked in Stanislaus County for one year and then I came back here.

Jade Clark Wilson 01:56

And you said you had a house on Soledad Street, correct? You guys lived on 10 1/2 Soledad Street?

Walter Wong 02:04

Yes, we lived in 10 1/2 Soledad Street.

Jade Clark Wilson 02:06

What was life like then?

Walter Wong 02:08

Of course, I was quite young, but there are things that I can remember, so it means that I was here until I was—moved here up until, like, ten or twelve years old. But the things I recall was that—our houses was in back of the store, and I think up front was—for a while it was a gambling house. [laughs]

Jade Clark Wilson 02:09

Oh, really?

Walter Wong 02:10

Yes.

Jade Clark Wilson 02:29

While you lived there?

Walter Wong 02:34

Yeah, in the earlier days when the town allowed it, and I think there's also a little store in front of that. So, we lived in back, and then we had to walk through an alleyway. But it was mainly Chinese people, but [unclear] because of the, you know, the restaurants and other things. Oftentimes, you see a lot of people from downtown in the Chinatown area.

Jade Clark Wilson 03:04

Did a lot of—so a lot of people would come into Chinatown and go to, like, the restaurants?

Walter Wong 03:11

The restaurants, and walk around, I guess. And of course, you know, in those days, it was not far from Main Street, and people would walk a lot, so you oftentimes see a lot of people just walking down here for their stroll or something.

Jade Clark Wilson 03:14

And this was—what years did you live on Soledad Street?

Walter Wong 03:36

I lived there until—I think around somewhere around 1938, '39.

Jade Clark Wilson 03:40

'38? Okay, so did they have the Chinese school there?

Walter Wong 03:47

Yes, the Chinese school was not at its present location, California Street. In fact, it was right in the corner across the street from where I was. But they also had in those days, the Joss House as well. And one of the things that you recognize in those days was that most of the buildings were wood. And I think it was in the late '40s that it caught on fire. And that's how—I think there was some deaths. And that's when the city decided to tear down a lot of the wooden buildings. Now, if I was still working for the health department, I would have been involved, but at that time, I was still going to school. [laughs]

Jade Clark Wilson 04:27

Yeah. And so, you moved into this house right before the fires then?

Walter Wong 04:32

Yes, that's right.

Jade Clark Wilson 04:34

Did it—did you guys have a lot of, like, friends over on Soledad Street that had lost a lot of—everything of theirs, their property?

Walter Wong 04:46

I think that by the time the fires [unclear], most of them had moved out like we did. But they still owned the property. But however, you know, I was there you know working at the Republic restaurant, and that was the only Chinese restaurant in Salinas. So, a lot of people from all over Salinas came down and ate there. So, I worked as a full-time waiter from eighth grade, so I was fourteen years old. So, when I was fourteen until I graduated from Cornell College, so that's, I would say, seven or eight years that I was—spent most of my time there, because I used to have to go to work after school, which means I start work at four. On weekdays, I would work to ten. And then Saturdays, I would work till one.

Jade Clark Wilson 05:35

What was it like working at, like, fourteen years old? Was it just what you'd known or—

Walter Wong 05:42

Well, of course, you know, there's two things. One was to contribute to the family, but also, I was saving up money to go to college.

Jade Clark Wilson 05:52

Oh, so you had to—did you pay yourself through college?

Walter Wong 05:55

Yes, I did. [unclear] through college. So, in those days [unclear] I had a job. So, I was working full-time as a waiter, and for a long time. And that was also during the war years, where they could not find adults. So, that's how I started, and I ended up being there until I graduated from Cornell. But that was the difficulty, is that I think the difficulty—so it was mainly the owner's family, and then they hired me and the cooks then. Of course, you know, a lot of [unclear] people used to eat there, and I got to know a lot of them, in fact. When the health department came out to inspect, I used to talk to them. I never realized at that time I would end up running [unclear].

Jade Clark Wilson 06:42

Do you think now looking back that that's kind of what helped create your decision to go into the healthcare department?

Walter Wong 06:50

No, because, well, I was always planning to—in fact, as I mentioned, that I started out to be a doctor, but mainly because it would [unclear]. So, when I got to Cal, I switched over to public health, because it was only four years. So, I've always had a plan to go into the health field.

Jade Clark Wilson 07:11

So, you worked at the Republic Cafe? That's what it's called, right?

Walter Wong 07:17

Yeah, at that time—

Jade Clark Wilson 07:19

Did any of your brothers or sisters work there as well?

Walter Wong 07:23

Oh, no.

Jade Clark Wilson 07:24

Did they work at all, or was it just—

Walter Wong 07:25

Oh, yeah. My older brother was, I mentioned, was working. I think at that time he was working—when I was in high school, he was working at Tiny's Waffle Shop and then [unclear] restaurant, various different restaurants. He's always been a cook and chef throughout Salinas. So, he was working in

other areas. And of course, my younger brothers was going to school, and then my younger brother, you know, as soon as he finished Hartnell here, he went on to California College of Arts. After he graduated from there, he stayed up in Oakland and Berkeley. And my sister went on to, after Hartnell, San Jose State, so they moved on. So, mainly—I was there mainly because I used to—really as a—going to school and saving for college. [laughs]

Jade Clark Wilson 08:21

So, let's talk about your father's—he had two restaurants, right?

Walter Wong 08:26

Yes.

Jade Clark Wilson 08:27

And where were those located at?

Walter Wong 08:29

I think they were mainly around the Soledad Street area, or nearby, because I think in those days, often people ate in Chinese restaurants because they were cheap, and they gave good food. You know, with a counter and such. I think it was that type of restaurant, where they served mainly American Chinese food.

Jade Clark Wilson 08:52

Do you have any memories of, like, going in there with your dad, like, to the restaurant, or any memories of just hanging out at the restaurants?

Walter Wong 09:05

Not too often, other than the fact that I'd just go in there to eat something, or else just to see him.

Jade Clark Wilson 09:14

Yeah.

Walter Wong 09:14

So, because, you know, I was quite young when he had the restaurants, and then whether my brothers helped out or not, I'm not sure, because I was mainly staying home. I was in my—you know, very young.

Jade Clark Wilson 09:32

Yeah. How long did he have the restaurants for?

Walter Wong 09:36

That I can't remember, but I think in the—when we moved down here, he had already—

Jade Clark Wilson 09:42

He didn't have them anymore?

Walter Wong 09:43

No.

Jade Clark Wilson 09:44

Oh, okay.

Walter Wong 09:45

And he bought this place.

Jade Clark Wilson 09:47

Okay, let's go back now from the very beginning. And your grandfather was the first here in Salinas? Was that what you said, your grandfather?

Walter Wong 09:58

My grandfather, yes. I think he moved into Soledad Street, because he worked in the railroads in the north, many years before he came here, and saved his money. And then when he had saved his money, then he came down here and, you know, I never saw him, because he passed away by the time I—But what he did was worked for people, like, doing [unclear] farmers [unclear]. And I think he also worked in the food places, and he saved his money. And then I think— then my father was [unclear], but [unclear], I don't remember.

Jade Clark Wilson 10:41

Did your grandfather come from China?

Walter Wong 10:44

Yes.

Jade Clark Wilson 10:45

Oh, okay. And then so your dad was born here?

Walter Wong 10:50

Yes. My dad was born in California.

Jade Clark Wilson 10:52

Okay, where did—do you know where your grandfather met your grandmother? In China?

Walter Wong 10:58

Probably, yeah, I think they would have—

Jade Clark Wilson 11:00

China? And then brought her over here?

Walter Wong 11:02

That I don't remember, because I don't remember seeing him, because, you know, they—I think by the time I was old enough, I think they had died. So, I never saw them. I think my older brothers and sisters remember them, but I don't. [laughs]

Jade Clark Wilson 11:20

Yeah. Okay, and your dad was born in Salinas or somewhere else?

Walter Wong 11:28

I don't know that one either. I don't think I ever asked him.

Jade Clark Wilson 11:33

But he grew up in Salinas?

Walter Wong 11:37

Yeah.

Jade Clark Wilson 11:37

Oh, okay.

Walter Wong 11:39

And as I mentioned there, he was, for a while, the only California-born person in—

Jade Clark Wilson 11:45

Yeah, and only one under eighteen? Where did he meet your mother?

Walter Wong 11:50

That I don't know. [laughs] But I know that she's from the Monterey Peninsula.

Jade Clark Wilson 11:55

Yeah, she's from Pacific Grove, right?

Walter Wong 11:57

Yes.

Jade Clark Wilson 11:57

Okay. Interesting. And so, does—what high school did you go to?

Walter Wong 12:06

Salinas High School.

Jade Clark Wilson 12:07

Salinas High? Was that the only high school in Salinas, or were there—

Walter Wong 12:12

Yes. At that time, that was the only high school.

Jade Clark Wilson 12:15

Okay. And all your brothers and sisters went there?

Walter Wong 12:18

Yes.

Jade Clark Wilson 12:20

Did you go to Chinese school when it was open?

Walter Wong 12:25

Yeah, I went there. I mean, only up into the grammar school, because I think when I—by the time I was up to about six or seventh grade, I think I didn't go anymore.

Jade Clark Wilson 12:37

And they taught you to write in Chinese and—

Walter Wong 12:43

Read.

Jade Clark Wilson 12:44

—read in Chinese. Okay. Did your brothers and sisters go through it also?

Walter Wong 12:48

My older brothers and sister went through longer than I did, but my younger brothers and sisters didn't go.

Jade Clark Wilson 12:56

Okay, and then you graduated high school, and you went to Hartnell High School. I mean, Hartnell College. And you continued to work at the Republic Cafe—

Walter Wong 13:09

Yes.

Jade Clark Wilson 13:10

—until you transferred to Berkeley, right?

Walter Wong 13:13

That's correct.

Jade Clark Wilson 13:14

And you got your degree in—

Walter Wong 13:17

Public health.

Jade Clark Wilson 13:18

—public health. Did you know—obviously, you didn't know that you wanted to do it. You wanted to be a doctor before?

Walter Wong 13:22

Yes. [laughs]

Jade Clark Wilson 13:23

And then decided that was going to take too long or—

Walter Wong 13:29

Yes.

Jade Clark Wilson 13:29

Yeah. So, you did public health. And once you graduated with that, did you—you said you had one year in Merced?

Walter Wong 13:39

In Modesto.

Jade Clark Wilson 13:40

In Modesto?

Walter Wong 13:41

Yeah, I worked there one year. In fact, at the area that I worked was the south part of the county. In those days, they didn't have many people. So, my job was from—responsibility was from Modesto down to Turlock, into the Merced County line.

Jade Clark Wilson 13:55

Wow. And then, after one year, did you move back to Salinas?

Walter Wong 14:00

Yes. And, you know, in fact, it was one year after that when my mother died. And so, I decided to come back here and they had an opening. And so, I applied and I was hired, and so I came back to Monterey County in those days. And I ended up being responsible for all of North Monterey County and North Salinas. [laughs]

Jade Clark Wilson 14:21

Wow. Did How long were you here until you went to Hawaii to get your Master's?

Walter Wong 14:27

Then I worked eleven years.

Jade Clark Wilson 14:29

Eleven years and then you went to Hawaii?

Walter Wong 14:31

Yes. Then I applied for United States Public Health Service scholarship, full-paid scholarship. So, I was awarded scholarships. So, then I went to University of Hawaii. And I think I graduated and got my master's in eight months.

Jade Clark Wilson 14:47

Wow. That's pretty impressive. [laughs] What made you decide to go back to school?

Walter Wong 14:55

Well, you know, in order to move ahead—because once I came back, and three years later, I was appointed the director. In order to hold a higher position, you need a higher degree. So, I felt that I needed one to advance my career.

Jade Clark Wilson 15:11

What made you choose Hawaii?

Walter Wong 15:13

Well, one, it was a new school, and they were teaching a lot of the international health. And besides that, a lot of the professors that were teaching at Cal Berkeley transferred to Hawaii. So, I had quite a few the same professors I had at Berkeley.

Jade Clark Wilson 15:33

To start up, like, the new college that was—

Walter Wong 15:36

Yes, it was newly—it was a newly created public health college.

Jade Clark Wilson 15:40

Did that influence having old professors go there? Did that influence your decision on Hawaii?

Walter Wong 15:47

Partly. And mainly also because I wanted to get a different perspective of health, and see what they do in the Pacific area.

Jade Clark Wilson 15:55

And then, so after eight months, you got your master's. And right away, did you move back here?

Walter Wong 16:04

Yes.

Jade Clark Wilson 16:05

To get the higher position?

Walter Wong 16:07

Yes. Well, you know, I didn't leave Monterey County. I was on sabbatical leave. The county wanted me to come back. So, I was just actually on an educational sabbatical leave. [unclear] a year, but I came back earlier.

Jade Clark Wilson 16:22

So, they wanted you to come back?

Walter Wong 16:24

Yeah, so then I think it was when I came back, I got my first promotion up to supervisor level, and then the director's level person became the head of air pollution, so that became vacant. So, they had a statewide exam, and interviews. And I took it, and I was selected.

Jade Clark Wilson 16:44

Nice. So then, you came back and you were working in the higher position. Is that when you became, say, like, top of the public health?

Walter Wong 16:59

Well, actually, it's in environmental health.

Jade Clark Wilson 17:00

Oh, environmental health?

Walter Wong 17:04

Yes. Yeah, I became the director, which is the highest position in environmental health. And I held that job for thirty-one years.

Jade Clark Wilson 17:13

Thirty-one?

Walter Wong 17:14

Yeah.

Jade Clark Wilson 17:14

And you worked all throughout the county, right?

Walter Wong 17:16

Yes.

Jade Clark Wilson 17:17

And did you go to Soledad Street a lot to work there, or—

Walter Wong 17:21

Oh, yes, we, you know—myself, I went down mainly when there were, you know, difficult policy issues and such. But yes, I was involved in a lot of issues like health and safety, which means, you know, [unclear] housing, buildings, food facilities, and that type of thing. And so, yes, that was under my responsibility also.

Jade Clark Wilson 17:46

How was it seeing Soledad Street change from, like, your childhood to what it is now?

Walter Wong 17:53

Well, it's really went downhill. Because I would say is Chinatown would be what you're planning to do, is convert it back to a Chinatown where it's more of a tourist and people-oriented. Because as I mentioned, you know, I worked there seven or eight years, and during that period, it was still safe, because it was different populations in those days. Let's see, from '43 until '52, when I worked there, it was different. And then mostly the people you see there were the Filipino laborers, which is—

Jade Clark Wilson 18:31

That would go down to Chinatown?

Walter Wong 18:33

Yes, and eat. And then, of course, in those days, there were also Japanese stores in Chinatown as well. But that was where most of the dignitaries and the [unclear] people went to eat too, for the—so when I worked there, I met a lot of the—everything from mayors to police chiefs, fire chiefs. Because I worked in this restaurant, you know, the Chinese restaurant, most of the cooks really didn't speak that well English. And the only other persons were the owners. I think the two ladies that were the sisters of the owner was working with me, and they didn't come to work till after—later in the evening. So oftentimes, I had to do the translation.

Jade Clark Wilson 19:21

You were the only one—

Walter Wong 19:21

That spoke English. [unclear] talking to salesmans too.

Jade Clark Wilson 19:31

So, you became a pretty important part of the success of the cafe?

Walter Wong 19:40

Yeah. In fact, you know, so more or less in the dining rooms, oftentimes, like I say, it was just myself and the owner, even though it's a big restaurant, and during the really busy years, you know, they had people standing in line and everything. They would have three or four people waiting on tables. And we

had to hire more cooks. And then—but however, as you see that once Chinatown was changing, I think before they had to close the restaurant, and I was no longer there, the only person that was waiting on tables was the owner. And he had about, I guess, two or three cooks. And it's a large restaurant. And then the kitchen, they used to have about five or six people in there cooking.

Jade Clark Wilson 20:29

Back when it was busy and—

Walter Wong 20:31

Yeah. But also. in Chinatown those days, is where it gets rough was on Saturday night. There's always one or two stabbings where Filipinos would be fighting over something.

Jade Clark Wilson 20:44

Like with the gambling houses?

Walter Wong 20:48

Yes, whether they lose money or they get drunk or something. So, every Saturday, it was a lot of— oftentimes, police would come there because somebody had gotten stabbed or gotten into a fight.

Jade Clark Wilson 20:58

Oh, my goodness. [both laugh] So, was there Filipinos living on Soledad Street also or—

Walter Wong 21:07

No.

Jade Clark Wilson 21:07

No?

Walter Wong 21:08

Most of them were, you know, in agriculture and [unclear], but weekends was a time where they really raised hell. [laughs] They work long hours in the weekdays.

Jade Clark Wilson 21:22

Their party night? [laughs] So, do you know what year the Republic Cafe closed down?

Walter Wong 21:29

No, I don't.

Jade Clark Wilson 21:33

Okay, so Soledad Street was changing, and when you moved here into this house, this is the house you grew up in—

Walter Wong 21:44

Yes.

Jade Clark Wilson 21:44

—once you left Soledad Street, right?

Walter Wong 21:45

That's right.

Jade Clark Wilson 21:46

And your parents bought the house?

Walter Wong 21:49

Yes.

Jade Clark Wilson 21:50

Okay, and did they—I don't want to overstep my boundaries, but was it—did they get it for, like, a good price? Or do you know, like, how any of that—I mean, it was kind of out in nowhere land, right?

Walter Wong 22:10

That I don't know, [laughs] what the price was. But like I say is that this was the first house here. Right now, you see all these houses? This was the first house, and then, of course, you know, down the street, eventually the Chin brothers moved there.

Jade Clark Wilson 22:25

Oh, that's where the Chins moved?

Walter Wong 22:26

Yeah, the Chin brothers lived down there. Then next to them was the [unclear]. And then up the corner was the [unclear] Chins, you know, the farmers. So, they were all Chinese. Let's see, there's Chins, the [unclear], and then another Chin, and then across the street from me was another Wong family, because they were—in the old days, it was the American Meat Market, you know, on Market Street. I guess now—it became the alcohol center. That used to be the Chinese market there. So, I think the butcher lived across the street there, and then further down the street—so, what they did, a lot of them moved from Chinatown down to here.

Jade Clark Wilson 23:07

Yeah, they just kind of migrated that way.

Walter Wong 23:10

Then the other little green house down there was owned by the fella that—one of the partners of the Rodeo Cafe. So, but then, of course, directly across the street at that time was a Filipino labor contractor. And then that house there right now that's vacant, you know, that was also a Filipino labor contractor's. And this house in this corner that's closed right now, that burned down, was—Wenson Louie family lived there. And then right behind me in back here was Dr. Harry Chong and Dr. Emma Dong, was behind me. So, what it is, they moved from there to here.

Jade Clark Wilson 23:54

Do you think that led to maybe Soledad Street going down? Not as, like, popular then, just all the families moving out and—

Walter Wong 24:07

Yeah, I think they realized that, you know, growing up places, and also from the safety standpoint, because as I mentioned, is that they were all wooden structures. And, of course, at that time, the city had started closing down all the gambling houses, [laughs] and so it was no longer really a Chinatown. And what they—most of them did was to then start leasing and renting out the properties.

Jade Clark Wilson 24:36

Over on Soledad Street? What made the families move away from the Soledad Street? Do you know? Maybe bigger houses or—

Walter Wong 24:46

Yeah, mainly because the kids were growing up, and more Americanized, and want to really live in a home atmosphere. I think that's the reason why we moved was [unclear] residential home atmosphere.

Jade Clark Wilson 25:04

Get into a house where everyone can spread out instead of being in the little back—the behind of the—

Walter Wong 25:11

Behind an alleyway. [laughs]

Jade Clark Wilson 25:13

Yeah, more room. All right, and so once they started closing down the gambling houses, is that when, like, the Filipinos wouldn't come over as much, or people just kind of stopped—

Walter Wong 25:34

Well, actually, yeah, I think a lot of the—[unclear] and a lot of the lawyers and such. So, there was no longer—other than the restaurant, so that became the attraction was the Republic—you know, the Republic restaurant was just half of it. The other half was the Lotus Inn, the bar part of it. So, they were both tied together, same ownership. But so, people used to come out and eat and drink and such, but I think that once the—it was no longer a real Chinatown with gambling and all that. So, and most of the Chinese moving out, the restaurant became the major reason why they came down Soledad Street.

Jade Clark Wilson 26:23

And that's when you worked there, was—

Walter Wong 26:25

Yeah.

Jade Clark Wilson 26:26

Was the gambling houses closed when you worked there?

Walter Wong 26:29

Yeah, by the time I got to high school I think they started closing them down.

Jade Clark Wilson 26:42

Okay, so do you remember, like, growing—did you grow up with, like, the Chin brothers and the other, like, Chinese—members of, like, the Chinese community here right now? Do you remember growing up with them?

Walter Wong 27:09

Mainly, you know, the—of course, when I was small, I mean, I'd visit—I remember, you know, the Chins and the, let's see, the other family. Oh, let's see—oh, the Yee family is the other one that moved here. They were also across the street. I remember them, because they moved down here too. You know, both of them ended up being doctors, pharmacists, and such. But that was what has happened. Most of these people that, you know, I remember that started in Chinatown then moved out here. And since a lot of them ended up being doctors, dentists, and having their own business and such. And then they moved on to other areas.

Jade Clark Wilson 27:49

And a lot of families, or people who grew up here, left?

Walter Wong 27:53

Even here when they grew up is that—you know, once they started having their own business, and then they moved on to [unclear] businesses. So then, of course, then they started renting these houses, so I think the same thing happened in Chinatown. So, of course, then once it's no longer an attraction that was really Chinatown, then it started degrading itself, because you get a different population coming.

Jade Clark Wilson 28:21

Yeah. You have, like, the homeless community coming in. And so, what did you guys do—what did you do for fun when you were little? Like, how did you guys entertain yourselves?

Walter Wong 28:38

In Chinatown? Well, here it was easy. We have yards that we could—but I would think it was that—I guess you played. There was a little yard, I mean, you could play around with. But I think that—you stayed pretty close to the house. I mean, of course you do reading and things like that. Of course, then you—because we weren't allowed to be roaming around the street when we were small, because, you know, that was really—Chinatown was a gambling [unclear]. [laughs] So, we were told to stay near the house.

Jade Clark Wilson 29:12

Yeah, that's smart. [laughs] Did you guys ever—do you remember ever—I mean, you told me about the stabbings that would happen. Like, on Saturday nights, there'd always be something going on. Do you remember, like, witnessing any of that kind of—

Walter Wong 29:30

Not when I was a kid, but when I was working as a waiter, yeah. Not witnessing the stabbing, but I remember people—a couple times they ran right through the restaurant to escape. [laughs]

Jade Clark Wilson 29:43

Was there a gambling house right above the Republic Cafe?

Walter Wong 29:44

No. The owner lived up there.

Jade Clark Wilson 29:50

Oh, okay.

Walter Wong 29:52

So, but the gambling houses were mainly on the other end.

Jade Clark Wilson 29:55

On the other side?

Walter Wong 29:56

Yeah. So, that's when things were, you know, pretty wide open. But one thing I did find, other than that I remember kids that we—[unclear] with our parents, we used to walk up [unclear]. Sometimes Saturdays, my mother will walk me up to the Crystal Theatre to see a show Saturday. And so, it was safe really for people to walk around.

Jade Clark Wilson 30:28

Was that—what theater was that?

Walter Wong 30:31

Crystal. You know, on the 100 Block of Main, what's now that big [unclear] theater? That used to be the [unclear] Crystal Theatre. And there they used to have shows, and then they'd give out dishes, I know, on Saturday nights. So, my mother used to take me there and then—

Jade Clark Wilson 30:48

And just walk there?

Walter Wong 30:50

Just walk there, because mainly she wanted to get free dishes. [laughs]

Jade Clark Wilson 30:54

[laughs] Yeah. So, Chinatown started to disperse, like, when the gambling houses were shut down and families moved out. And do you remember—you said this part was—when you guys first moved in, it was kind of just, like, out in the open?

Walter Wong 31:26

Yes.

Jade Clark Wilson 31:26

So, you watched Salinas grow as a city? How was that? Was that—did it build really fast or—

Walter Wong 31:35

It started building fast, and I remember after I graduated from high school, back in '49, before that, you know, the main part was just Main Street. Because I remember the big thing was going down Main Street. And I think Pep Creamery was where a lot of the kids hang out. And [unclear], which is now Dudley's. You know, that's where people used to get their milkshakes. And then, of course, we're on the left side where you see the big drugstore, there's now—used to have a place called [unclear]. Some of the other places had, like, lunch counters and such. But other than that, you know, you didn't have even South Main, because the big thing was when they put Lucky Market, that's now the Presbyterian Church down there. The big thing that I remember was a big fight. Local business didn't want them to—allow them to come in, because they would ruin the Main Street business. So, that was the first movement towards, you know, other than Main Street. Other than that, for many years, and up until the 1950s, the only thing really was Main Street. You didn't have North Salinas like that either.

Jade Clark Wilson 32:53

Was that all fields, like, farming fields?

Walter Wong 32:56

Mm-hmm.

Jade Clark Wilson 32:59

Cool.

Walter Wong 32:59

Because I remember when I was going to Hartnell, other than Hartnell, [unclear] there's no houses [unclear]. So, it really is when they started building [unclear] it went real fast.

Jade Clark Wilson 33:15

So, you were working at the Republic Cafe during the war years?

Walter Wong 33:20

Yes.

Jade Clark Wilson 33:21

How—what was time like then?

Walter Wong 33:24

Well, the war years, I mean, the Chinese people had it good because, you know, most people were away and such, but those that had business like the Republic, it was really—and then you had Fort Ord, because not only did you have local people, you had soldiers and everybody coming down to Chinatown to eat. Because I remember, he was strict—you worked continuous. I would work continuous from four to twelve, where, you know, there was never any empty booths. So, it was really—

Jade Clark Wilson 33:55

It helped business?

Walter Wong 33:56

Business, yeah. It was kind of booming. They made a lot of money. So, not only the restaurant part, but the bar part of it as well. Yeah, so those are the days in the war years. And the difficulty was really not getting enough help. So, all you haven't was, say as an example, not only Republic, but I imagine the other businesses were the same thing, where most of the young men [unclear] in the service.

Jade Clark Wilson 34:26

Do you remember, like, any discrimination towards the Japanese at the time? I know they were put in the—like, the Rodeo grounds I think was an internment.

Walter Wong 34:42

Yeah, they lived—well, I remember they were really moved out quick, because prior to that, you know, the Japanese were quite prominent. And I remember on Lake Street was where the fish market and a lot of Japanese were living. So, they were doing well until—then suddenly, you know, they were shipped away. What I remember was right after the war, which was sad, because a lot of them I knew, you know, when we were kids. I remember a lot of them when they came back from the internment camp, they first came in very shyly and asked, "Can we come in and eat here?" So, I remember it was—

Jade Clark Wilson 35:24

It was, like, they—

Walter Wong 35:25

They were scared.

Jade Clark Wilson 35:26

—had been stripped from, like, who they were kind of.

Walter Wong 35:29

Yeah.

Jade Clark Wilson 35:31

Did you know any—did you just feel a lot of—did you see any discrimination towards, like, Asian cultures at that time? Or, like for you, the Chinese, they just didn't—you guys were not discriminated?

Walter Wong 35:46

I've never, because [unclear] I pretty well was able to mingle with—

Jade Clark Wilson 35:52

Yeah.

Walter Wong 35:54

[unclear]. In fact, I was vice president of my class in high school.

Jade Clark Wilson 36:01

Really? So, you've always been in top positions and ready to help out with whatever community you're in?

Walter Wong 36:12

Now, one of the things that's [unclear] is that, you know, the Filipinos that I mentioned? You know, they were hardworking people, and a lot of them I used to wait on that work in the field. Some they would even after work late at night, they'd come in and eat. It's a surprise they were healthy, because, you know, I remember about a couple years ago—you know, I was President of the Monterey County Historical Society for three years, and I used to attend different historical societies [unclear]. And I remember—this is about six or seven years ago, I went to one with Filipinos. A lot of those people, they remember the days they were on Soledad Street. A lot of those people that were attending there were people that were—I thought I was waiting on them in high school, and they didn't look any different than they—

Jade Clark Wilson 37:03

Really?

Walter Wong 37:03

Yeah. And right now I still see some of them. They must be really [unclear], because a lot of them are fairly old, but they look the same as they did when they were working in the ag fields.

Jade Clark Wilson 37:16

What's their secret? [laughs] So, now we'll go back to when you were Environmental Health Director of—what types of jobs would you do?

Walter Wong 37:35

Well, of course, you know, all the different programs. You know, of course, by the time I retired, they even put the land use planning enforcement under me. But the major areas that I was responsible for was, first, food. People are quite familiar with the food, you know, inspecting all types of restaurant, grocery stores, [unclear], and growing areas. You know, water, anything to do with the drinking water.

You know, the wells, the water systems, all of the sewage facilities, the septic systems. All the toxic waste disposals and such. And that was how I got involved with cleaning up Fort Ord. [unclear] all recreational, whether it's water—that's the reason why I ended up closing all the beaches in the peninsula. And some involvement, of course, housing, dangerous housing. And, let's see, also involved with agricultural farmworker housing and field toilets and all that stuff. And then investigating, you know, outbreaks of food poisoning [unclear]. And then garbage, anything to do with handling waste, whether it be landfills, or garbage franchises, or garbage companies, or solid waste. So, anything to do with that ends up affecting your health, I was—

Jade Clark Wilson 39:07

You were in charge of?

Walter Wong 39:08

Yeah. And then towards the end, you know, when they had Sally Reed there—just before I retired, because all the problems they had with the planning department—then they shifted all the zoning, planning, and all that enforcement under me too. So, I only had that for three years.

Jade Clark Wilson 39:27

And what year did you retire in?

Walter Wong 39:30

2002.

Jade Clark Wilson 39:31

2002?

Walter Wong 39:33

So, that's after forty-six years working.

Jade Clark Wilson 39:35

Wow.

Walter Wong 39:36

And thirty-one of those was as the director.

Jade Clark Wilson 39:40

And did you—when you came back from getting your master's, did you move into this house? Like, have you lived here the whole time?

Walter Wong 39:50

Yes. I've always lived here.

Jade Clark Wilson 39:53

And now you—are you the only one that lives here now?

Walter Wong 39:57

Huh?

Jade Clark Wilson 39:58

Are you the only one that—

Walter Wong 39:59

Yes, uh-huh.

Jade Clark Wilson 40:00

So, this is your house? Family House?

Walter Wong 40:02

Yeah, the family—because I inherited it, you know, when they passed. So, I felt it's also historical, so I felt I should just keep it.

Jade Clark Wilson 40:10

Yeah. And you have one sister, right?

Walter Wong 40:17

Yes, my sister in Palo Alto. But her husband's—her husband, however—both our family from Monterey.

Jade Clark Wilson 40:27

Oh, really? Did they meet here or—

Walter Wong 40:30

Yeah, they met here. But he was going to Hartnell when they met. She's working in—after he got out of service, he went to Hartnell for a couple of years before he transferred to Cal. So, that's when they met, when he was going to Hartnell.

Jade Clark Wilson 40:49

Cool. That's really—I love hearing about old families that are, you know, come together in this area. I love this area. So, awesome. I'll definitely read through all of these and get more information. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Walter Wong 41:13

Let's see, that's pretty well answered. [unclear].

Jade Clark Wilson 41:16

Well, thank you very much for meeting with us today.

Walter Wong 41:21

You're welcome. Oh, you got something I can show Dr. Chan? He was the one that was heckling me—"You better get an interview." He's the one, you know, my dentist. He was the one that wanted me to get an interview.

Jade Clark Wilson 41:33

He was?

Walter Wong 41:34

Yeah, he kept heckling me, "Have they interviewed you yet?" He's been doing that for years. You got something I can give him and say, "Hey, I got interviewed." [laughs]

Jade Clark Wilson 41:40

[laughs] Yeah, we'll—I mean, we got it all on tape. So, but that's really—that's funny. So, the one thing that we have, because we are going to be making this, and we're hoping, you know, as you know, trying to make the Republic Cafe into, like, a cultural museum. So, we wanted to use these, like, video camera, any kind of clips, or anything that was said in the interview. And what we need is a release form. So, this just has—and it's also for our CSUMB History and Community Memory Archive that we can put it in. So, you can just read through it. It's just saying that, you know, the legalities of putting any of the clips in. And whatever you don't want to include, you can just put it in. Of course, we'd love to include everything you say, because it's all important. [laughs]

Walter Wong 43:40

I have no problem with this. Did I say anything that I shouldn't have said?

Jade Clark Wilson 43:43

I don't think so. [laughs]

Walter Wong 43:45

I guess everybody knows about those gambling houses.

Jade Clark Wilson 43:48

Yeah. [laughs]

Walter Wong 43:52

So, where do I sign it?

Jade Clark Wilson 43:55

Right—interview signature, right there.

Walter Wong 43:58

Okay. What's the date?

Jade Clark Wilson 44:06

The 13th. November 13th, 2008. Thank you very much. Would you—do you want a copy of this? Of this sheet?

Walter Wong 44:18

Yeah, okay. Just—

Jade Clark Wilson 44:19

Just maybe, so you know. And then what we'll be doing, Stacy and I, we put together a PowerPoint of, like, the interviews that we do. And so, we put it together, and we show it to our class and our class will be choosing—how many? Like, five, maybe, I don't know, PowerPoints, and presenting them over at the Confucius Church, having, like, a community presentation, and we'd love for it, if you have time, to go and join us. And we'll let you know, like, when it is and everything.

Walter Wong 45:07

Okay. Are you students or are you—

Jade Clark Wilson 45:10

Yes, we're students. I'm going to [unclear] hopefully last year, senior year. [laughs] Yep. So, this is part of a oral history class that we're taking. Yeah, and part of also service learning. So, we're—service learning is trying to, you know, revitalize Chinatown. So, and it's been so interesting. I mean, like I said, I grew up here. I grew up in Pacific Grove. And I really had, when we started reading, like, Chinese Gold, I had no idea of the history of this area. And it was so fascinating to learn all of it.

Walter Wong 45:53

I know when I was still working at the health department, about the early 2000s, somebody from Pacific Grove school—I think a mother and son—wanted to interview me, because they were doing a project about Chinese in Pacific Grove. So, I guess they found out that my mother was from there, so they interviewed me.

Jade Clark Wilson 46:15

Did your mother graduate from Pacific Grove High School?

Walter Wong 46:18

I'm not sure, but she went to school there. And then she told me she used to go to the Presbyterian Church there in Pacific Grove.

Jade Clark Wilson 46:28

Yeah. Well, thank you very much for everything, and for taking time out and—

Walter Wong 46:37

Oh, I forgot about this. [laughs]

[cuts to footage of family photos]

Unknown 46:41

Maybe you can describe each photo.

Walter Wong 46:46

This is my sister at Yosemite, and that's the brain of the house, Kitty. [laughs] She died too. That's her mother and brother. That's my brother, Willie, who followed my father's—he was a chef. That's Judy at Lake Tahoe. That's my mother. This my younger brother, Wilford, with actor Eddie Bracken, at Circle Star Theatre, where he was acting in *The Teahouse of the August Moon*. And that's Willie catching his fish.

Unknown 47:17

And is Judy your sister?

Walter Wong 47:19

Yes, she was the youngest sister. She's the one that, you know, worked for San Jose Alumni Association.

Unknown 47:35

Thank you. And is there anything else you would like to show for the camera?

Walter Wong 47:40

Unless you want Leon Panetta's letters.

Unknown 47:42

What are these, like, plaques on—

Walter Wong 47:46

That's from Leon, saying—

Unknown 47:52

Thanking you for your help with the university?

Walter Wong 47:54

Yeah, he's—yeah, I was involved with him [unclear]. He had me testify before these congressional hearings.

Unknown 48:09

And what does his inscription there say?

Walter Wong 48:11

It says, "You did a great job." Let's see, I got to put on my glasses. "You're an outstanding public servant."

Unknown 48:23

So, not only—so, your involvement with Leon Panetta connects you to our school as well.

Walter Wong 48:28

Yeah. [laughs]

Unknown 48:31

And your diplomas from the University of Hawaii. Great.

Walter Wong 48:39

And that one there is when I was the Distinguished Alumni of the year for the University of Hawaii. And that was in '92.

Unknown 48:46

That's an accomplishment.

Jade Clark Wilson 48:48

Yeah.

Unknown 48:51

Very good.

Unknown 48:52

And then that one—the Medical Society. I was named as first non-physician to be honored by the Medical Society. That one there in the corner there.

Jade Clark Wilson 49:04

Cool. All right, well, thank—

[recording stops]