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Interview with Wellington Lee

Wellington Lee

California State University, Monterey Bay

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Chinatown Renewal Project
Interviewee: Wellington Lee
Interviewer: Rina Benmayor and HCOM 350S
Date of Interview: October 3, 2008
Duration of Interview: 1:22:17

Wellington Lee 00:01

She was born in 1919, in San Francisco. But in 1925, the whole family went back to China, because the mother, my grandmother, didn't like it here. She said there was too few women. So, you knew who the boss in the family was, because they all moved back to China, and she never came back. But my mother came back, and she married my father, who is this man right here. So, I just wanted to let you know something about my—where I came from. And all of them were born in the southern part of China, in the Toisan district, Guangdong province, in China, so—

Rina Benmayor 00:55

I think we will actually get started.

HCOM 350S Student 00:59

Your mother is still alive?

Wellington Lee 01:00

Speak louder.

HCOM 350S Student 01:01

Your mother is still alive?

Rina Benmayor 01:06

Your mother's still alive?

Wellington Lee 01:08

Oh, yes. My mother is she's—eighty-nine years old, and she is still living in Salinas. And she's definitely resting up from all her hard work. That's the mother—she was a housewife.

Rina Benmayor 01:26

Okay, so I think we're gonna get started. Today is October 3, 2008, and I'm interviewing Mr. Wellington Lee, who is from Salinas, from Chinatown, in Salinas. And we're at the Confucius Church in Salinas. And I'm Rina Benmayor. I'm a professor at CSU Monterey Bay. And Wally, I would like to ask you, do we have permission to record this interview?

Wellington Lee 01:58

Yes, you do.

Rina Benmayor 01:58

Okay, thank you. I just want to explain the format of the interview. I'm going to start out first by asking you a few specific questions about where you were born and when you were born and things like that, and about your family, sort of the vital statistics. And then we're going to go into talking about specific things about your memories of Chinatown. Okay. And then at the end, we'll end up with asking the students who are here to ask some questions as well. So, let's begin. First of all, Mr. Lee, where were you born?

Wellington Lee 02:34

I was born in Salinas, Chinatown, at 12 1/2 Soledad Street. And that was December 18, 1944.

Rina Benmayor 02:42

Oh, so you're gonna have a birthday soon. [laughs] And how about your parents? Where were they born?

Wellington Lee 02:50

Both my parents were born in the USA. My father was born also in Salinas, Chinatown, at 29 Soledad Street, in 1917. And my mother was born in San Francisco, in 1919.

Rina Benmayor 03:05

And how about your—who were the first people in your family to come to the United States?

Wellington Lee 03:11

My great grandfather on my father's side. He came as a merchant. And he also became an immigration interpreter. So, he came to San Francisco, and he stayed in San Francisco. I don't recall them telling me that he ever came to Salinas. So, he was always in San Francisco.

Rina Benmayor 03:33

And how does his wife come over?

Wellington Lee 03:35

His wife did not come over. [clears throat] Excuse me. My great grandfather's wife did not come over.

Rina Benmayor 03:40

Oh, so he came by himself?

Wellington Lee 03:42

Right. Yeah, he summoned my grandfather to the US of A—

Rina Benmayor 03:47

I see.

Wellington Lee 03:48

Yeah. That was in 1892 that my grandfather came.

Rina Benmayor 03:55

And what did your grandfather do?

Wellington Lee 03:56

He came as a merchant's son. In those days, they were able to come because he was a merchant's son. The merchants were able to bring their family over. So, he came as a merchant's son, but he was only nine, ten years old. And so, he came, and he learned the ropes of the merchant trade.

Rina Benmayor 04:16

And so, they lived in San Francisco?

Wellington Lee 04:17

Lived in San Francisco.

Rina Benmayor 04:18

And so, he met your mother—your grandmother in San Francisco?

Wellington Lee 04:21

No. He came in 1892, then he returned to China in 1902. Then, when he stayed in China, he married my grandmother, and he came back in 1904, but he left her there. I don't know quite why he left her there.

Rina Benmayor 04:45

But eventually did she come over?

Wellington Lee 04:47

She came to Salinas in 1914.

Rina Benmayor 04:51

Did the people that came at that time, they came through Angel Island?

Wellington Lee 04:56

Yes. He had no problem. There was—I haven't heard any bad stories about his stay at Angel Island, even my grandmother's story. My mother stayed for three days at Angel Island when she came back. But they did they did stop over at Angel Island, yes.

Rina Benmayor 05:15

And so, on your mother's side, who were the first people to come?

Wellington Lee 05:19

Her father and her mother. Now that, I couldn't pinpoint the time, but that was at least by 1919. That was the year of birth of my mother. So, they were here by 1919.

Rina Benmayor 05:35

So, your mother was actually born here?

Wellington Lee 05:36

She was born here in 1919, in San Francisco.

Rina Benmayor 05:38

Does your mother speak English?

Wellington Lee 05:39

She speaks English a bit. But since she returned to China at the age of five, she stayed in China all that time until she was about eighteen. So, she spoke Chinese most of the time. And of course, when she came here, settled here and raised a family, she did have to learn a bit of Chinese. But we still talk Chinese to her. She doesn't speak English much. [laughs]

Rina Benmayor 06:08

So, obviously, the language of your household was Chinese?

Wellington Lee 06:10

Yes, yes.

Rina Benmayor 06:13

And could you explain what part of China your ancestors come from?

Wellington Lee 06:18

They come—it's the southern part of China, and that's where most of the early immigrants came from. It was the—they had the various clan villages, like the Lee clan village, and the Lu family village. And from that village—that village was in the Toishan district in the Guangdong province of southern China. So, that's the area. And that's where a lot of the early immigrants came from.

Rina Benmayor 06:51

So, how did your parents actually—who was the first to come to Salinas?

Wellington Lee 06:56

The first—my grandfather, my father's father, Shorty Lee. He came in 1908 to Salinas, after the—he experienced the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco. But he did come here in 1908. He settled here in 1908. So, it's been a hundred years this year. It's a hundred years this year.

Rina Benmayor 07:17

So, he was—he started a store here? Is that what he started?

Wellington Lee 07:20

He started working for a relative at one of the stores on Soledad Street. He didn't own—run this store yet. But eventually, very soon after that, he did finally manage the store, and he's lived there ever since 19—around 1908.

Rina Benmayor 07:40

So, let me ask you a little bit about your own family, your siblings. How many were there?

Wellington Lee 07:44

Okay. I come from a family of thirteen children. I have ten sisters, and two other brothers. And all the sisters start with the letter M, and all the brothers start with the letter W. Don't ask me to [laughs] remember them.

Rina Benmayor 08:04

[laughs] And are you the youngest?

Wellington Lee 08:07

I am the oldest son, and I'm the fourth oldest in the family. I'm the fourth oldest, and I have three older sisters who used to beat me up all the time. And then I have—and then the rest are scattered.

Rina Benmayor 08:23

And just a little brief fast forward on your own life. What did you do for a living?

Wellington Lee 08:31

I was a writer at Bank of America for twenty years. I retired from Bank of America. And it was after I had some other little jobs with the publishing companies and the State of California. I went to school at Sacramento State. I got a journalism degree there. But my career was in writing, and I settled for staying at Bank of America for twenty years. Yeah. [laughs]

Rina Benmayor 09:01

And do you have children?

Wellington Lee 09:03

No, I am not married, and I'm so lonely. No, I'm just kidding. [Rina laughs] But no, I've never married. I've just been too busy, and that's my only excuse. [laughs]

Rina Benmayor 09:15

Very good. Well, now let's—I want to sort of go into your memories more. And I wanted to ask you about your house, your home.

Wellington Lee 09:26

Yes.

Rina Benmayor 09:26

That home there. And I was wondering if you could describe the inside of the home?

Wellington Lee 09:31

Oh, sure. I mean, it's amazing how, after all these years, I can remember it like it was yesterday. I mean, in the front, you will see that there's clapboards that cover those big windows. Every night, every morning and night, we had to open and close those clapboards. And it was a chore. It was one of the chores. And the door window was a board that we had to push out, in and out. But we had to do that. And then you see the little mailbox up there in the middle. And then—but anyway, to enter, when you enter, it's a storefront. My grandfather's store was there. There was a counter, and there was—in my day, when I was there, when I was growing up, the cash register was under the counter. And there was a huge black safe, and there was shelves with crocks, jars, and packages, tied-up packages of I don't know what. But it was left over from long ago, because by the 1950s, the store was not working. It was not in operation. So, the storefront—there was a storefront. And then from the storefront, there was the living room. And in the living room, we had rows and rows of family portraits. So, most of these pictures are from that—from those pictures that hung up in the living room. So, from the living room, there was my grandfather's office and his bedroom. And then there was a hallway that led to the kitchen and the dining room, and then through a porch and into the back yard. And upstairs were, like, four bedrooms. It was like a mansion. I mean, compared to where I'm living now. It's—I mean, it's like a mansion. So, it was very handy for our large family. So, that's how it was.

Rina Benmayor 11:21

So, you had thirteen children in those four rooms?

Wellington Lee 11:25

Not all of them—I think half of them—let's see, who was there the last? Oh, there was only one child that wasn't born to have time to live there. But the rest of us did live there at some stage of our lives. And most of the older children did live there till they were teenagers.

Rina Benmayor 11:51

And could you tell me a little bit about your chores? What kind of a household did your mother run? What did you have to do as a child?

Wellington Lee 11:57

Well, as we grew older, we had to have a schedule—washing dishes, helping my mother wash clothes. I remember visitors. I remember talking in a later year, a lady would tell me, says, "Yeah, I remember, you were the family with all the little kids scampering around." And then also, she would see all the diapers on the clothesline—clothes diapers, cloth diapers. And so, our chores when we grew older, we did have to—we did actually have a written schedule of who would wash dishes, who would set the table, and it was—it's just something we had to do, because there was so many of us, and we had to help out our mother, because she—that's all she did, is to clean the house, mop the floors, everything. So that was—

Rina Benmayor 12:44

And so, you obviously had meals together.

Wellington Lee 12:47

Oh, yes.

Rina Benmayor 12:47

Sat down at the table and had meals together?

Wellington Lee 12:48

Yes. Yes.

Rina Benmayor 12:50

And what kind of cooking did you eat?

Wellington Lee 12:51

It was—well, dinner definitely was Chinese food. It was definitely—my mother has—it's unbelievable what she has done. To this day, she still—I've watched her cook. And you can see her when she works on the—when she cooks something, she knows exactly how much water, how much salt to put in. It's unbelievable. But it's because with years of cooking for us kids, that's how she knew. You know, she can do it like it was nothing. But yes, we ate Chinese food. But we did have—we had our lunches, the American lunches to go. She made it all. We didn't do it. But we did do it—as we grew older, we did it ourselves. But when we were smaller, she did all—

Rina Benmayor 13:35

And you took sandwiches—

Wellington Lee 13:36

We took sandwiches. We had the milk that was offered at school. And we had lunch. It was—either it was noodles or American lunch. Yeah.

Rina Benmayor 13:50

And do you remember any particular moral lessons that your parents taught you in the home? Sort of, the values—

Wellington Lee 13:59

Well, I think the big—the value—the most important thing was to work hard. I mean, looking at my mother and thinking about my mother, I mean, that was the basic—that's the basic rule of the whole family. Work hard and, you know, good things will happen or you'll be, you know, you'll be able to continue in your life if you work hard, and that's the main thing that I've carried with me all my life. Yeah, working hard.

Rina Benmayor 14:24

What was your father doing at this time? Where was he working?

Wellington Lee 14:26

Well, he was a merchant. He helped my grandfather manage the various businesses. And but then later, he ended up being a dishwasher. But, I mean, you know, that's how it happened. And then he had some kind of ailment. So, he retired early. So, that's—

Rina Benmayor 14:48

And your grandfather, you have told me, was kind of the nominal mayor of Chinatown?

Wellington Lee 14:49

Yes.

Rina Benmayor 14:50

Can you talk about that? How—

Wellington Lee 14:56

Well, it's amazing. I have to tell you that, you know, I only knew him—he died in 1945, and that was, like, a few months after I was born. So, I won't hold it against him, [laughs] but it's just that as we all grew up, there were pictures of him. We used to honor him at Chinese festivals. His big picture was in his office, and we would have a ceremony for him on special occasions and everything. So, all I knew about him was in a picture. But as I grew older, I would hear stories. I would—in researching some of the history, they talked about a mayor of Chinatown, and my mother has talked about him. My father has talked about him. And so, then I started to have a great interest in finding out what he did. So, yes, he was known as the mayor of Chinatown. As the mayor of Chinatown, it was a, you know, unofficial kind of a thing, but it's just because he was able to speak English, and visitors to the area or the club to the tongs, if they needed some interpreter, or if they needed some need some help, he was there. And he helped introduce people to other people, that kind of a thing.

Rina Benmayor 16:16

Do you remember any particular stories about him?

Wellington Lee 16:18

Well, it was one thing that happened in China. When he went back to China in 1930, and when he was visiting, he stayed there for a year. When he was visiting there, he held a banquet. And at the banquet, the men sat at one table, the women sat at another table. And he saw that, and he insisted that all the women come join the men, because the men were getting the fresh food first. And so, he said, "This is ridiculous. Come on, in America, the women sit with the men." And so that was kind of a great story that my father told me, but it was hard to believe, because he was—I've heard stories about him as being the lord of the house in Salinas. Nobody would eat dinner or lunch without him. They had to wait for him. So, that was kind of a contradiction on his actions there. But that's one of the great stories I hear about him. Yeah.

Rina Benmayor 17:19

And I was wondering if you could, after describing the inside of your house, if you could sort of think back and—how did that house make you feel?

Wellington Lee 17:28

It made me—it was home. In spite of the area, it was a great home. It was—I mean, even the toilet—the toilet was in a separate room. The sink was in a separate room. The bathroom was in a separate room. So, it was a safe—it was my home, although it was in Chinatown across the tracks, the railroad tracks. But it was just a home. It was a very comfortable home. The best we can do with it.

Rina Benmayor 17:56

That's good. Are there any funny stories that your family tells about you?

Wellington Lee 18:01

About me?

Rina Benmayor 18:01

Mm-hmm. Or any funny stories that are told in your family about other members of the family?

Wellington Lee 18:09

Well, not that I can recall. I mean, there's, you know, we—

Rina Benmayor 18:13

Teasing or—

Wellington Lee 18:13

Teasing? Oh, well, yeah, my sisters always teased me. [laughs] But I mean, no, I don't think so. I think it's a matter of, you know, we just live day to day, and we played, and we helped our mother if we could, and we celebrated birthdays and what not, just the usual thing, but I don't know anything funny or any hilarious thing that I can recall.

Rina Benmayor 18:38

Were there any particular celebrations other than birthdays that took place inside the home?

Wellington Lee 18:43

Yes, the main thing was the traditions that my grandmother always kept alive. On special occasions—Chinese New Year's, the Moon Festival, and honoring my grandfather on special occasions. And the thing is, there's that ceremony that we have, what I call Bai San, and it's where we place food on the table, fresh food, fresh cooked food, and we would burn incense and put out fresh cups of tea. And then we would kind of kowtow to my grandfather's picture. And that's just to honor our ancestors, honor him, and respect for our elders. And we would do that inside his office and outside in the backyard. I couldn't believe it. When I think about it, it's unbelievable. We did it both inside and outside of the house. And in the office, where we did his ceremony, we would put whiskey on the rug. And that room smelled like whiskey all the time. [Rina laughs] But it was just part of the ritual. It's just part of honoring him, giving him respect. But it's just amazing that we did that. And we also burned paper money to him too. And we did that inside the house too, believe it or not.

Rina Benmayor 19:58

In a wooden house. [laughs]

Wellington Lee 19:58

Yes, inside and outside. But that's one of the rituals that we did. And of course, my grandmother, during Chinese New Year's—before Chinese New Year's, she would have two, three weeks of preparing all the food, all the pastries, and everything for the celebration. So, it's just—those are pleasant memories.

Rina Benmayor 20:18

How about—let's go out to the street now, outside your house. And I was wondering if you could describe how Soledad Street felt for you as a child.

Wellington Lee 20:27

Oh, okay. I happen to have a sheet of—a picture. It's a photocopy of a picture of Soledad Street. I want to pass it around. If you can pass around, thank you. But this was taken in 1957. This picture is from the Salinas Californian, and it captures the street as I remember it, with all the buildings, most of the buildings intact. And you see that lot at the left? That's where the garden is now. But it captures—Soledad Street—I used to wake up to Mexican love songs and soul music, because, you know, the restaurants and cafes would blare them out on a Saturday and Sunday, especially a Sunday morning. That's—I woke up to it. And then, you know, you would smell Mexican food, soul food, Filipino food. It's just—I just could remember it like it was yesterday, because it's just so vivid.

Rina Benmayor 21:38

When you were—obviously you were in school, so you wouldn't see the street during the week very much—

Wellington Lee 21:44

Right.

Rina Benmayor 21:44

—but how about on the weekends? What happened on the street?

Wellington Lee 21:46

Well, you know, on Saturday mornings, it's pretty quiet. But then Saturday night, we had to make sure that we hurried up and shut the clapboards, because by the time it got dark, the cafes, the bars, the pool halls, were jumping. You have Fort Ord soldiers. You have braceros. You had the Filipino laborers. They were all going to the bars and everything. And, of course, I didn't know what was going on. All I knew was that there was a lot of people on the streets. And it was very, very busy.

Rina Benmayor 22:21

How about commerce? I mean, was there a lot of shops? Were there—

Wellington Lee 22:27

Yeah, there were, like, three hotels. There were, like, three Chinese restaurants. There were, like—a lot of the old Chinese businesses were boarded up, closed up, but they were still standing. And some of them were being used for—in the back side, in the back rooms, they were used for residences—some of the gentleman bachelors that lived in those buildings.

Rina Benmayer 22:50

What years are we talking?

Wellington Lee 22:51

We're talking about the 50s. And I remember that's the most years I can remember. And there was cafes. There were the pool halls. There were the bars. And when business was slow during the summertime, I did go into them. It was—because I knew the people who ran the bars and the pool halls, and they had TV. We didn't have a TV. So, I was—I got a chance to watch TV. [laughs]

Rina Benmayer 23:21

[laughs] All right. So then, in terms of your friends on the street, who were your friends?

Wellington Lee 23:30

They were the, like, the Filipino cook. There was a Filipino cook, and there was the owner of the pool hall. I mean, and then there was the gentleman bachelors. I don't know if people—you're wondering what I mean by gentleman bachelors. These were elderly Chinese men who were bachelors, who didn't have their families here. And they lived in the back rooms in some of the old buildings. And they were, you know, they were very nice to us children, because they didn't have a family of their own. So, I considered them my friends. I mean, there was a gentleman next door that we called [unclear]. He was so wonderful. He would—when we'd go visit him, he would give us candy and everything, and we would watch him eat dinner. And I think he gave us candy just to tell us to leave, I guess. But he was just a very gentle and kind person. And there were a lot of gentlemen like that, and those I would consider some of them friends. And, like, the Filipino cook, I remember he used to wiggle his ears without using anything. I mean, you know, it was just for us, entertain us kids.

Rina Benmayer 24:39

How about your friends of your own age?

Wellington Lee 24:42

Well, you know, I didn't have—they didn't come—some of them did come to visit, but they were just Chinese kids that either went to Chinese school and they were nearby, and if they visited us. But that didn't come very often. I guess you would say we're isolated, but it wasn't—I mean, I didn't think nothing of it.

Rina Benmayer 24:59

Were you the only family on the block that had children?

Wellington Lee 25:03

In the later years, yes. And every now and then, there was there was some newer kids, but they didn't stay long. They didn't stay long. But yeah, as I was growing up, our family was the most—the biggest family there. There were families that were—if they were living there, the people were older and—

Rina Benmayor 25:25

Their children were grown up and—

Wellington Lee 25:26

Right.

Rina Benmayor 25:27

So, how about with your brothers and sisters?

Wellington Lee 25:29

Brothers and sisters—oh, yeah.

Rina Benmayor 25:29

What kind of games did you play?

Wellington Lee 25:31

Oh, we played—we had the swing. We had two swings in the back. We played in the alleyways. It was just a usual Indian Cowboy games. I mean, it was just—I mean, it was an extra kind of play, because we had the big, empty lots that we had used to throw rocks at the bottles and that kind of stuff.

Rina Benmayor 25:51

So, lots of boys, so you had lots of fun with your brothers.

Wellington Lee 25:53

Yeah.

Rina Benmayor 25:56

Could you talk a little bit about the gambling houses?

Wellington Lee 26:01

By the time I was growing up, I didn't see a lot of the gambling activities that were illegal that my grandfather ran in the 1920s and 30s. I mean, it was going strong in those days. But as I—as my father has told me in other interviews I've had, they were illegal, and they had raids by the police. But it was kinda, like, a way to appease the [unclear]. So, that once they were raided and they paid their fines, it happened again. So, and these kinds of gambling was like Fan-Tan games, Chinese lottery, pai gow. They'd use chips and buttons, or whatever. It was just amazing. I still have a lot of stuff, some of the leftover gambling paraphernalia.

Rina Benmayor 26:55

So, by this time, the sort of illegal things on the street have sort of died down?

Wellington Lee 27:02

Yes. And the only gambling—the legal gambling, you know, the card games at the pool halls and what not. Yeah.

Rina Benmayor 27:10

How about the tongs? What role did they play?

Wellington Lee 27:12

The tongs? Well, you see, this is the Bing Kong Tong. It's one of the two tongs that were in existence, at least when I was around in Chinatown. This was right next door to our house. And both my father and grandfather belonged to the tong, so I was able to go into the clubhouse. And they were, I mean, by the time I was growing up, they were pretty—everything was pretty slow. They would have their occasional Chinese celebrations and dinners. And they would also do—play mahjong games also. So—

Rina Benmayor 27:51

And what was the role of the tongs?

Wellington Lee 27:53

The tongs were—a lot of them were for the men that were here. Yeah, it's just, like, helping each other out. It's a gathering place, the clubhouse.

Rina Benmayor 28:05

And there were two on the street?

Wellington Lee 28:06

There were two on the street, yeah. This one was on this one side, on our side of the street, and there was another one, the Suey Sing, that was on the other side. And they also had another big building on Lake Street too, the Suey Sing tong.

Rina Benmayor 28:17

Did they ever get together or were they—

Wellington Lee 28:19

I think they got together only when they had banquets. Only when they had banquets. And they had their separate meetings and their special dinners.

Rina Benmayor 28:32

Okay, do you remember any dramatic things that happened on the street while you were there?

Wellington Lee 28:37

Well, I remember—the only things were some of the fights on Saturday nights. I mean, it was scary to me, of course, but it was just part of the scene. [laughs] People were drunk. There were a lot of drunks around. There was—there was a lot of fights. There was police. I just finished reading a couple of books on the Salinas Police history, police department. And they were talking about Chinatown and all the crimes that were occurring. I says, my gosh, it was during my time, and I don't remember all that. [laughs] So, a lot of things did happen, but I didn't see all of it. [laughs]

Rina Benmayor 29:13

Did you witness any changes over the years in the street?

Wellington Lee 29:16

Well, it was much slower. I know by the time I was growing up, the street was changing. All the Chinese were leaving, and a lot of them were dying off. And then there was, like, just one Chinese, big Chinese restaurant left, the Republic Cafe. I mean, that was—but it was still my Chinatown. Still my Chinatown. Yeah.

Rina Benmayor 29:40

So, you really saw other nationalities coming in?

Wellington Lee 29:44

Yeah, they were there. They were scattered there as I was growing up. But then as I grew older, most of the Chinese things had gone.

Rina Benmayor 29:56

So, let me ask you about school, your memories of school—your elementary school and then later on your high school.

Wellington Lee 30:02

Well, I went to Lincoln School for six years, and I was on the traffic patrol. We were the best traffic patrol corner selected by the police department. I remember that. And then I went to Washington Junior High School. I was the editor of the Roundup Newspaper. And then I went to Salinas High School and graduated from there in 1963. And I was a student [unclear] officer there. I was an assistant editor of the newspaper. So, I enjoyed my school years. I really did. The teachers were wonderful. The students were generally very friendly. I didn't have any kind of racial discrimination upon myself. I just never had that problem.

Rina Benmayor 30:49

Any favorite teachers that you remember?

Wellington Lee 30:50

Oh, there were a bunch of them. I mean, it's not that they paid close attention to me, but they were just—they were very civil and very friendly. So, I think that's—they taught their lessons.

Rina Benmayor 30:54

They were mostly American teachers?

Wellington Lee 31:07

Yes. In fact, I had my fifth grade teacher—was my father's teacher also.

Rina Benmayor 31:12

Really? [laughs]

Wellington Lee 31:12

Yes.

Rina Benmayor 31:15

How did you get to school?

Wellington Lee 31:16

Since we were on the other side of the tracks, there was a bus. We did ride the bus, but not all the time, because I remember as I was younger, I remember my grandmother bringing me over to another family in Chinatown across the street from us. And then that mother would take her children and myself to Lincoln School. So, I didn't ride the bus all the time, but we did ride or walk.

Rina Benmayor 31:43

And then for high school?

Wellington Lee 31:44

For high school, we—let's see, for high school we walked, as I recall. We walked. Yeah.

Rina Benmayor 31:51

It's kind of far, isn't it?

Wellington Lee 31:53

Well, see, when we moved out from Chinatown, then we did ride the bus, because we moved out to the Alisal.

Rina Benmayor 31:58

Oh, so—yes, okay. What year did you move out?

Wellington Lee 32:03

In 1961.

Rina Benmayor 32:04

Okay, so you had two years before you graduated.

Wellington Lee 32:08

Yeah.

Rina Benmayor 32:09

Okay. Now, I know that you were recently involved in putting together a book for your reunion—

Wellington Lee 32:16

Yes.

Rina Benmayor 32:16

—your high school reunion. And did that bring up any wonderful memories for you? Or did you see your friends in the reunion?

Wellington Lee 32:25

It was wonderful. It was my forty-five year reunion at Salinas. We had it at the—what was it?—Embassy Hotel Suites in Seaside. It was a dinner dance. We also had a school tour. And not much—not many showed up for the school tour. It was free too. But the dinner dance was—it cost seventy-five dollars per person. It was a smaller crowd than usual, and we figured it was the economy and things going on. But I told everybody, I says, you'll never know what's gonna happen tomorrow. So, if you can make it, come on down. But it was wonderful to see—some of these classmates never came to a reunion. They came from Idaho, Illinois. It was wonderful to see them. It was wonderful.

Rina Benmayor 33:16

Were there many Chinese students at the high school?

Wellington Lee 33:17

No, there was only one Chinese—we have about a half a dozen Chinese students in my class, and every time I see them, I try to—I harass them. I says, "Are you coming?" But they're just not interested. I don't know why. But what I do—there was one other Chinese student that came and was always nice. She always comes, and it was nice to see her. Yeah.

Rina Benmayor 33:39

So, who were your schoolmates? I mean, were they—from what ethnic groups?

Wellington Lee 33:45

You know, it's amazing, we only had one black student in our class. One. You know, nowadays, there's more than that. But it was just amazing to us. And so, he's, you know, he's a great guy. But we had—we did have a Spanish, a Latinos, mostly white. And then, like, a half a dozen or so Chinese, and maybe about a half dozen Japanese also. And a few more Filipino too. Yeah. But it was a mixed class, but it was a pretty good class. We had about 409 students in our class. So—

Rina Benmayor 34:23

That's a large class.

Wellington Lee 34:24

Yeah. And it was really—it was a lot of fun putting the book together, but it was a lot of hard work.
[laughs]

Rina Benmayor 34:32

So, can you tell me about how you felt about in your home? How was education stressed?

Wellington Lee 34:38

It was always stressed.

Rina Benmayor 34:39

Would you have to do your homework when you came home?

Wellington Lee 34:40

Oh, yes. You know, I went to Chinese school also. So, we had—I don't know, unfortunately I only attended Chinese school for three years, right here in those classes back there. And—but I didn't think nothing of it. It was just a routine. And so, after American school, we attended—I think it started about six o'clock, 6 pm, and lasted for a couple hours. And the thing is—it's amazing when I think about it—it was just a matter of constantly repeating all the words and writing all the words over and over again. And that's how we were taught. And, you know, maybe presently they teach them something about culture. They talk about it, but I don't remember that at all. All I remember was just having to write the words, the characters, and memorizing them and being tested on them. So, so I had Chinese school after the American school. And that was—it was just stressed that, you know, education is a good thing.

Rina Benmayor 35:53

So, you'd come home and maybe have supper and then go to Chinese school?

Wellington Lee 35:57

Yes. And at that time, we were living here in Chinatown, so it was just a block away. Just a block away. So, it was no problem. Actually, I guess that's why it went so smoothly.

Rina Benmayor 36:06

So, did that help you in retaining Chinese? I mean—

Wellington Lee 36:10

I think so.

Rina Benmayor 36:10

—I assume you spoke it at home, so you knew it fluently.

Wellington Lee 36:12

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Rina Benmayor 36:13

But how about the writing?

Wellington Lee 36:14

The writing was very difficult, because they taught in a different dialect. I mean, it was close to my dialect, but it was a little different. It was more scholarly, but it was—so I kind of—it didn't confuse me too much. When I think about it, I enjoyed it. [laughs]

Rina Benmayor 36:37

So, now do you write Chinese?

Wellington Lee 36:38

I just remember a lot of the words, the characters, but I couldn't read a whole newspaper article if you asked me.

Rina Benmayor 36:46

But you can carry on a conversation?

Wellington Lee 36:48

Yes, I think I can, if it's very simple. [laughs]

Rina Benmayor 36:54

So, what about the community cultural events? Were there cultural events that took place here?

Wellington Lee 37:00

Yes. There was the Chinese school that was active, and so they would have Chinese public—Chinese New Year celebrations, and Double Ten celebrations for China's independence. Yeah, that was a celebration they had all the time. And they would have a weekend celebration. So, that was a cultural thing.

Rina Benmayor 37:23

I noticed that here in the room they play ping—have the ping pong table set up.

Wellington Lee 37:27

Oh, yeah.

Rina Benmayor 37:28

Was that—

Wellington Lee 37:29

They had that in my days, too. They only had one or two tables instead of all this. Yeah. So, we played—they used to have a backyard of swings and merry-go-round out here, but they don't have that anymore. Yeah.

Rina Benmayor 37:45

Did you ever visit China?

Wellington Lee 37:47

No, unfortunately. Two of my sisters did, and they discovered that my grandparents, both sets of grandparents, their houses are still standing. I couldn't believe it. So, they took pictures, and even a ninety year old man remembered my grandfather. So, I mean, I hope I can make it there. But the houses are still standing. Yes.

Rina Benmayor 38:09

So, tell me, in terms of cultural events, did you also participate in quote unquote, American cultural events? I mean, dances and—

Wellington Lee 38:20

Yeah, I think if you talk about, let me see—

Rina Benmayor 38:24

Your prom?

Wellington Lee 38:24

At schools, yes. At school, yes. At school, there was the dances. In my years, I did, especially my senior year, I was the student [unclear] officer as a commissioner of publicity. I did a lot of the signs and banners for the dances. So, that way I would participate, but I didn't do a lot of socializing. But it was just—because I worked after school at the grocery store too, at [unclear] Market on Monterey Street. Yeah, it's closed up now, but I used to work there for a couple of years during my high school years. And so, that that kept me busy. And so, I didn't do much socializing, and my participation in the school activities was making signs and banners for the various events.

Rina Benmayor 39:12

I've seen some photographs of Chinese dances, kind of like proms, but everybody was Chinese, and I was wondering if that was something that took place here, or—

Wellington Lee 39:24

There were groups that had dance clubs before my time. I mean, they were older Chinese students. And I didn't, you know, I didn't have occasion to associate with them. But they had those at those times. But in my days, we had a Chinese youth group that the Chinese American Citizens Alliance put together. And we did have dances and things, but it wasn't—we didn't—it was just during my high school years that it occurred.

Rina Benmayor 39:55

About what time here in Salinas was it possible for Chinese families to buy property outside of, or to move out of Chinatown?

Wellington Lee 40:06

I don't know if it was after the war, after the last war. I don't know if that—because since we lived in Chinatown all the time, I didn't have to deal with it. [laughs]

Rina Benmayor 40:18

[laughs] Okay. So what happened after high school?

Wellington Lee 40:23

After high school, I went to Sacramento State. And I told you, I think I told you, I got a degree in journalism. I did take a leave of absence, and I was immediately drafted into the Army, and this was, like, in 1965. So, I didn't finish at Sacramento State quite yet. And so, I got drafted into the Army for two years. I had basic training at Fort Ord, and then I went to Alaska for two years. [laughs]

Rina Benmayor 40:53

What was your job in Alaska?

Wellington Lee 40:54

I was—I don't know if you—do you know—who's that guy on MASH, the clerk, the company clerk? Radar. Yeah, I was the Radar for my company in Alaska. [Rina laughs] So, I worked with the commanding officer, and I did all the clerical work and everything. So, that was for two years—

Rina Benmayor 41:17

So, you didn't see any fighting or anything?

Wellington Lee 41:19

No, thank goodness, because it was at that time during Vietnam. Yes. Yeah, we were sweating to see where we were going to be appointed, where we were going to be stationed at. So, lucky me, I was in Alaska. But then, so after that, after coming out of the Army, I did return to Sacramento State, got my degree, and then moved to San Francisco and worked various jobs and finally settled at Bank of America.

Rina Benmayor 41:48

How did you get that job?

Wellington Lee 41:50

Oh, I just applied for it, because I was working at the [unclear] publishing company for about four years. And I, you know, I thought I'd try Bank of America, and it's been a wonderful experience. I did manuals and guides and wrote weekly updates. It was—they do help the employees. That thing I have to tell you. It was a wonderful experience.

Rina Benmayor 42:15

And it's still standing.

Wellington Lee 42:17

[laughs] Yes. And it's still in business for now.

Rina Benmayor 42:23

So, how did you feel when you left Chinatown and went off to school?

Wellington Lee 42:28

Well, you know, I was, you know—I think I was a little young, but I still have a nostalgia. I mean, I still felt something about—gee, I'm gonna kind of miss this place, because, you know, I grew up here. It was—but, you know, that one day I did come—I was working at [unclear] Market one day, and I came back here where they boarded up the house. And I came back to the house, and it was all empty. And I went into my grandfather's office, and I got spooked, and I ran out of there. But I just had a—I had a kind of a desire to go back to see the old place, and that one day, that was the last. They tore the building in September of 1961. It was just completely demolished. We just couldn't—we just couldn't repair it. It was beyond repair, because it was all wood. Everything was deteriorating. And there was, you know, there was mice and everything all around, so we had to get out of there.

Rina Benmayor 43:30

That was the reason that you moved, because of—

Wellington Lee 43:33

Yes. It was part of the safety and health boards urban renewal program. It was a city program. So, we had to move out after they inspected the place. We tried to—we painted the place to try to make it halfway decent, but, you know, it just wasn't—it just couldn't stand, because it was just too—it was leaning and it was, you know, things were [unclear] up and everything.

Rina Benmayor 44:00

Did it have termites and things like that?

Wellington Lee 44:01

That I know of, we didn't. We had cockroaches, and we had mosquitoes. We had fleas. [laughs] So, but—

Rina Benmayor 44:10

So, then when you came back from college to visit, it was to another place?

Wellington Lee 44:14

Yeah, when I came back from college, I settled in San Francisco. Yeah, so I wasn't far from home, but I settled there, and I lived there for over thirty years. And so, and I returned to Salinas too.

Rina Benmayor 44:26

So, tell me about that. Why did you—

Wellington Lee 44:28

I thought that my busy days are over, but they're not. I thought that I can come back here and settle down and do a lot of history and writing. But I am doing that, but I have [unclear] too in the Chinese community. And I'm enjoying it. I think that's amazing. I'm enjoying it, but it's a lot of work. And it's still keeping me busy, so I haven't had the time to relax, I guess.

Rina Benmayor 44:57

Okay, so I wanted to ask you what the significance of this Chinatown project that we're all involved in is for you?

Wellington Lee 45:05

Yeah. Well, you know, you have to realize how—just think about it. Here, I grew up in this area, and now they're thinking of renewing it. How are they going to renew it? And how is it gonna be like? It's just an amazing project, and I think the best thing that might come out of it, at least where I'm concerned, is that we're going to be able to preserve a lot of the history in writing and displaying and sharing all that history. I think that's the thing that really is excellent. It's an excellent opportunity with this project. It's going to take time, and they're talking about low cost housing, businesses, developing businesses, but, you know, how long that's gonna take—it's gonna take a while. It's not going to be overnight. But along the way, as they do all this, hopefully we can develop all this history and ensure—because there's just a lot of history.

Rina Benmayor 45:14

And you have wonderful writing skills that you can lend to this.

Wellington Lee 46:13

Yes, that's what I want to do.

Rina Benmayor 46:15

Well, I'm sure there are other things that I could ask, but I want to—oh, yes, there is something else. I want to know really about the—Chinatown has always been talked about, and you yourself have mentioned how many different ethnic groups there were here—Filipinos, Mexicans, Japanese. Did those communities ever intermingle in a public way, or is it just over business that—

Wellington Lee 46:43

It was really over business, because I don't recall—they may have come to some of the gatherings, maybe to banquets. I know I've seen some Filipinos, but I don't know how often that was, but at least in the big celebrations that I've attended, I haven't seen them present.

Rina Benmayor 47:06

Where was Chinatown, I mean, Chinese New Year celebrated? Was it here on the street?

Wellington Lee 47:09

Here. Yeah. The public—yeah, no it was in the building here. Yeah, it was—essentially what it was, I think there was some entertainment. There was—they showed movies. They showed Chinese movies, and they had food. They served food. And I think—

Rina Benmayor 47:29

Fireworks?

Wellington Lee 47:30

No, not that I remember. Maybe in recent times. They would have dances, lion dances, but not recent. Not during my days. We didn't have any of that. [laughs] I think in my grandfather's day, they had celebrations like that, but not during my time. I don't recall that. [laughs]

Rina Benmayor 47:47

So, you actually, in the 50s here, probably experienced much more assimilation than—

Wellington Lee 47:52

Yes.

Rina Benmayor 47:52

—people in earlier decades did.

Wellington Lee 47:55

Yes. Yes.

Rina Benmayor 47:56

And so, does that—how do you consider yourself? Chinese American? Chinese? How do you—

Wellington Lee 48:02

Well, I do consider myself as an American, but I also am a Chinese American. I think I'm very proud of it. I think because of the background, the history, the culture. It's wonderful. It's wonderful.

Rina Benmayor 48:20

When you were going to school, did they ever teach you anything about the Chinese in this area?

Wellington Lee 48:24

Yeah. Well, I did take the—in the late 1960s, when they had the ethnic group classes, I did take those.

Rina Benmayor 48:36

Oh, in college?

Wellington Lee 48:37

Yes, in college.

Rina Benmayor 48:38

But not in high school?

Wellington Lee 48:38

But not in high school, no. In high school, there was hardly mention of—

Rina Benmayor 48:39

And yet the Chinese—

Wellington Lee 48:39

That's right.

Rina Benmayor 48:39

—are responsible for the whole agriculture around here.

Wellington Lee 48:44

That's right. See, that's an amazing thing, and I think that brings us to the point where I say this would be just—this renewal project is a great opportunity to bring this subject up, because it's something that people should know about. Because, yes, at least—maybe they're doing something—they're saying something in the classes today in the local area, but in my days, there was no mention of it. I don't recall any of it.

Rina Benmayor 49:15

Did you know about the history from your family? Did you know about people—

Wellington Lee 49:18

Yes.

Rina Benmayor 49:19

—coming in early?

Wellington Lee 49:19

Yes. And it was—I read on my own. I read things on my own and, you know, what my parents told me, and what I experienced here, and the gatherings.

Rina Benmayor 49:34

Okay. Well, is there anything else that you want to add to this before we ask the students for their questions?

Wellington Lee 49:40

No, I think it's a—I think it's just a great opportunity to share this history, any kind of history, in the local area so that people will know about it. I think it's just a great opportunity.

Rina Benmayor 49:56

Well, I want to thank you very much for taking your time and for bringing all of these photos and for educating our class and helping jumpstart them on this oral history project.

Wellington Lee 50:06

I hope so.

Rina Benmayor 50:07

Yeah.

Wellington Lee 50:07

Thank you.

Rina Benmayor 50:08

So, I'd like to turn it over to students who might have some questions.

HCOM 350S Student 50:11

My ears perked up when you talked about—when you talked about how many siblings you had—

Wellington Lee 50:20

Yes.

HCOM 350S Student 50:20

—and all the chores that you had to do. I also have seven brothers and three sisters. I want to know, the kinds of chores that you and your brothers had to do, were they different from the kinds of chores that your sisters had to do?

Wellington Lee 50:39

No. No.

HCOM 350S Student 50:40

You both had to—

Wellington Lee 50:41

We did. We had to. We had to close the claps—either one of—whichever was available did that. Washing dishes, drying dishes, hanging up the clothes, taking down the clothes. So, we all did it. We all did it. As long as we were old enough to do it, we did it. Yeah. So—

HCOM 350S Student 51:00

Did you do any cooking?

Wellington Lee 51:02

No, you know, the funny thing is, no, I didn't do any cooking. And if I recall, my sisters—see, my mother did at all. It's just amazing. She was the boss of the kitchen, so I guess—but then I see my sisters, to

this day, they're doing a lot there. They're excellent cooks. They're excellent cooks. Big bakers, and everything. But I think—it seems that my mother did all the cooking, but we did all those other chores. We did take turns. We had to take turns.

HCOM 350S Student 51:06

And did anybody complain?

Wellington Lee 51:33

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. You know, I says, "No, I did it two days ago." You know, that kind of a thing. But we actually had that schedule pinned up on the wall in the kitchen, and we did do it. It was, you know, it was just part of the flow. It was just part of the flow that we had to do it, because—my poor mother. [laughs]

Rina Benmayor 51:56

Did you have to take care of younger—babies?

Wellington Lee 51:59

Oh, yes. I changed their diapers, and when I tell them to this day, they're so embarrassed, you know. So, yeah.

HCOM 350S Student 52:07

I was wondering, was there any special responsibilities or privileges for the oldest son in the family?

Wellington Lee 52:13

As being his oldest son? Well, I think with my father, he died in '82. There were things I had to take care of, the house and whatever, but, you know, we try to—in most instances, we tried to sit down and talk about it and decide what we want to do. So, I only remember one thing when my father died. I did have to do a lot of things myself, but other than that, in most cases, we try to sit down and talk with each other and decide on something. So—yes.

HCOM 350S Student 52:54

You mentioned your grandfather's store. What type of store was it and why did it—had it already closed by the 1950s?

Wellington Lee 53:02

And what was the last part?

HCOM 350S Student 53:03

Why was it closed by the 1950s?

Wellington Lee 53:06

Oh, okay. It was a general merchandise store, so it was like candy and tea and whatever, dried tea and that kind of a thing. The reason—it just died down. You know, the Chinese started leaving, and, you know, I saw, although there were the usual characters that stayed there, the gentleman bachelors that

were there, it was pretty transitory, I thought, because as I grew up, people were leaving. I mean, I didn't see that person, or that person again. So, the reason the store died. It was just—there was no need for it. People didn't need to use the store anymore.

HCOM 350S Student 53:55

So, the customers [unclear] mostly Chinese?

Wellington Lee 53:59

I'm sorry?

HCOM 350S Student 53:59

Were the customers mostly Chinese when it was in business?

Rina Benmayor 54:03

Were the customers mostly Chinese?

Wellington Lee 54:04

Oh, yeah. I assumed that was it, because it's been in existence even before 1908. It's been in existence for a long time. In fact—oh, I forgot to tell you there was an incident in that store. In my research, I couldn't believe that that happened there. But in 1912, it was part of the tong wars. And my grandfather had a two thousand dollar price on his head. So, he was the target of assassinations from another tong. And so, in this building, before our family was living—this is 1912, before my father was even born. But in 1912, there were people playing cards in the back room, and these assassins broke the door down and started shooting. And my grandfather was there, but he hid under the counter, because he was so short, and he survived. But in that storefront, they said it was riddled with bullets. And so, after reading all of that, and then, of course, by the time I read about that, the building was demolished already, so I couldn't, but just thinking about it, that I, you know, we played in that storefront and we lived there. And I couldn't believe that that happened there, but it happened there. So, that's just—I forgot to tell you about that.

Rina Benmayor 55:25

Is that why your grandfather was named Shorty Lee?

Wellington Lee 55:28

Well, no, because he was short. Yes. Yes, really. Yes. Because he had his own—he had two Chinese names. His Chinese name was Lee Yin, or Lee Yong Nom, but they called him Shorty. Yeah, so that was very convenient.

Rina Benmayor 55:41

Why two Chinese names?

Wellington Lee 55:42

Well, one was his original name, and another was, like, since he was a married man, they added another name. They always—it seems that's a custom. It's like once he gets married, he gets another name. [laughs] Yes.

HCOM 350S Student 55:59

You mentioned how your great grandfather summoned over your grandfather to come meet him—

Wellington Lee 56:03

Yes.

HCOM 350S Student 56:03

—nine or ten. Did he come alone or was he, like, traveled with family?

Wellington Lee 56:07

He traveled with somebody from the village. Yeah, he did—so, I guess he was alone. I mean, he didn't have my father—his father—with him. Yeah, he did. And so, he was able to pick up everything. I mean, he learned the ropes. It's amazing. And, you know, he spent most of his time in America. If you realize—he was born in 1887. He came in 1892. Then he went back in 1903. Then he came back in 1904. Then Then he stayed here. And then he just went to visit in 1930. So, he stayed most of his life here. But he was still a child. He was an alien. That's what they call him. But so, he couldn't own property, but he leased the property, and he managed the property and whatever.

Rina Benmayor 56:59

Did he speak any English?

Wellington Lee 57:00

Oh, yes. My father—I don't know if I can believe it—but he said he didn't have an accent. So, I don't know. Because I think that's how he got along with a lot of people. So—yes.

HCOM 350S Student 57:12

You said that your sisters beat you up?

Wellington Lee 57:17

Oh, yeah.

HCOM 350S Student 57:17

What kind of things—

Wellington Lee 57:18

Oh, it was just a regular—just regular thing, you know.

HCOM 350S Student 57:21

Like what?

Wellington Lee 57:21

They said, "Don't do that. Don't do that." That kind of stuff. It wasn't violent. I mean, well, it was violent at that time, but, you know. [laughter] Yes.

HCOM 350S Student 57:31

I want to know how did you pay for college back then? You said you went to Sacramento State? Did they have grants for minorities, or—

Rina Benmayor 57:37

How did you pay for college?

Wellington Lee 57:39

Oh, well, I won a four-year scholarship at the high school, from the Salinas Valley Optimist Club. So, that was—participating in school activities helped getting that scholarship. It was a great opportunity, because my parents couldn't help me.

HCOM 350S Student 57:59

You said that you guys moved out, or the Chinese families moved out in the 60s from Chinatown, but you had went to—during the time you're living in Chinatown, you're going to school, like, junior high school and high school?

Wellington Lee 58:10

Yes.

HCOM 350S Student 58:10

While you lived in Chinatown?

Wellington Lee 58:12

Yes.

HCOM 350S Student 58:13

So, I was just wondering, as you were growing up, is that where most of the Chinese families were, in Chinatown? In Salinas?

Wellington Lee 58:18

Were there—you're saying that—oh, no. Most of them did not live in Chinatown at the time I was growing up.

HCOM 350S Student 58:27

The ones that lived in Salinas, they lived out [unclear]?

Rina Benmayor 58:28

Where did they live?

Wellington Lee 58:30

Oh, they lived in the various residences in South Salinas. So, they were scattered all over Salinas. So, by that time, by the 50s, most of them did not live in Chinatown. Yeah.

HCOM 350S Student 58:43

So, was Chinese school to help you guys keep your culture, since you're going to American schools and learning American—

Wellington Lee 58:49

I'm sorry, what was that?

Rina Benmayor 58:49

Was the Chinese school in order to help you keep your culture, since you were going to American schools and everything?

Wellington Lee 58:54

I guess it was part of it, but it wasn't actually told to me that, you know. It was a education kind of a thing, but it wasn't to keep your cultural alive. They didn't exactly say that, but you can assume that that's what it is, because certainly my parents couldn't teach me on their own. So—yes.

HCOM 350S Student 59:00

I was just curious. Did you guys own a car?

Wellington Lee 59:21

Own a car? Yes, my father did. And, oh, my grandfather owned a car, but he had a chauffeur. [laughs]
And he had a—

Rina Benmayor 59:30

Was he a bodyguard too?

Wellington Lee 59:31

Yes. Well, because he had a revolver in the back of the floor of the car. Oh, yeah. Because in his days, it was—he ran the gambling houses. And it's amazing. [laughs]

HCOM 350S Student 59:44

Like, was that car passed down to any of your, like, older siblings?

Rina Benmayor 59:49

Was your family car passed down to any of the older children?

Wellington Lee 59:51

Oh, no. No.

Rina Benmayor 59:53

When is the first time you had a car?

Wellington Lee 59:55

Oh, I didn't. I never did. [Rina laughs]

HCOM 350S Student 1:00:01

What was your favorite food that your mother would make for you? Was there anything in particular? Any Chinese dish of food that was your favorite?

HCOM 350S Student 1:00:08

Did you say—

Rina Benmayor 1:00:08

Your favorite food that your mom made.

Wellington Lee 1:00:11

Oh, the favorite one was—I don't know if [unclear]—it's steamed pork. It's chopped up. It's chopped up, but she would use different ingredients for different kinds of chopped up. It was a steamed pork, and it was chopped up, but then she would use different ingredients in it. And it's just out of this world. It was just wonderful. But she had different—she had a whole selection of different steamed pork dishes.

Rina Benmayor 1:00:43

With different vegetables or what?

Wellington Lee 1:00:45

She had vegetables in it. She had [unclear] things in it. She had sausage, Chinese sausages in it. And she had bean curd in it. I mean, it was just amazing. To this day, she can still cook it. Yeah. It's amazing.

HCOM 350S Student 1:01:01

When you went to high school, was there any mixing of cultures or ethnicities as far as dating went? You said there were about fifteen Asian Americans.

Rina Benmayor 1:01:10

Was there any interethnic dating in high school?

Wellington Lee 1:01:16

You know, I don't recall anything. I don't recall even for the people that I knew. I don't recall that at all. There was not—

Rina Benmayor 1:01:26

So, Chinese kids stayed with Chinese—

Wellington Lee 1:01:27

Chinese stayed together. Yes. That's the god-awful truth. I don't remember. You know, it's not like it is today. No, there wasn't—I can't recall anything like that. That's amazing.

HCOM 350S Student 1:01:43

During your time when you were training at Fort Ord for the Army, did you ever go into Chinatown as, you know, many of the soldiers did during that time period, to go to the bars and the other places?

Wellington Lee 1:01:56

[unclear] to come over here. [Rina laughs]

HCOM 350S Student 1:01:59

Or, did you as an adult in the Army, when you were training at Fort Ord, did you ever come to Chinatown and go to the bars?

Wellington Lee 1:02:06

Oh, no. Oh, gosh, no. Knowing what I knew, no. [laughter] But, you know, by that time, at one point they didn't want the Fort Ord soldiers to come here, because there was a prostitution problem, and gonorrhea problem, I think. Yeah. And so, they had to stop. They didn't want the soldiers to come near here, because this area was notorious for that. And it's been a cycle of things that have been happening here in this area. It's amazing.

Unknown 1:02:40

I need to change tape.

Rina Benmayor 1:02:42

Go ahead.

[cut in recording]

Unknown 1:02:43

I'm also dating his younger sister. [laughter]

Wellington Lee 1:02:45

Oh, yeah. So, that's—[laughs] No, the Exclusion Act—I don't know—I had never had any encounter with that. All I know is that the Exclusion Act allowed my grandfather to travel back and forth, because he was a merchant. And—

Rina Benmayor 1:03:14

He was exempt from the exclusion?

Wellington Lee 1:03:15

Yes. Yes.

Rina Benmayor 1:03:19

Aiden, you had your hand up.

HCOM 350S Student 1:03:22

The last time you visited your grandfather's office before it got torn down, did it still smell like whiskey?

Rina Benmayor 1:03:29

Did your grandfather's—did the front office, the last time you visited it, did it still smell like whiskey?
[laughs]

Wellington Lee 1:03:40

I don't know. You mean that one day I went in there? No, because it was just empty. It was just—it was really scary. It was daylight too, but I just felt a chill, because there was ghost stories that I remembered.

HCOM 350S Student 1:03:55

Was that because of what had happened in the 20s with the attempts on your grandfather's life?

Rina Benmayor 1:04:01

Were the stories, your memories, was that because of the attempts on his life in the 20s?

Wellington Lee 1:04:06

No, that was before I knew about those, the shooting. I didn't know this about him until much later.

Rina Benmayor 1:04:16

So, what were your ghost stories?

Wellington Lee 1:04:18

Well, the ghost stories were amazing. I guess I can tell you one. Well, my grandmother, my father's mother, she one day had seen—oh, she had a dream about a person who had been hit by a car on Market Street. And it actually happened. But she happened to dream about him that one day. So, the next day, she had asked me, in reality, asked me to go to the store and get something. And when I went to the store, I was crossing that street that accident did occur. And I did get hit by a car. [laughs] And so, my sisters came to the hospital. I had to stay at the hospital. I think I got a scar on my hip or something, just from the car. And so, my sisters came to the hospital and told me about that story, that my grandmother had seen the ghosts of that person who had been killed at that same street long ago. And so, when they told me that, I couldn't sleep for the longest time. And I was just, like, eleven years old. But that's one of my grandmother's ghost stories. She would see these ghosts. [laughs] Yes.

HCOM 350S Student 1:05:50

I was in a beauty shop with a lady that was getting her hair done about two weeks ago. Her husband picked her up. He was going to a reunion. He was the only black that was at Salinas High. Was that reunion you're talking about a couple of weeks ago?

Wellington Lee 1:06:02

I'm sorry, what was that?

Rina Benmayor 1:06:03

Was your reunion at Salinas High a couple of weeks ago?

Wellington Lee 1:06:05

We had a school tour at Salinas as part of our reunion. Yeah, we did have a school tour.

HCOM 350S Student 1:06:10

About two weeks ago, like, almost—

Wellington Lee 1:06:11

It was—yes.

HCOM 350S Student 1:06:12

Yeah, about two weeks. I met the only black guy.

Wellington Lee 1:06:15

Oh, Charles? Charlie?

HCOM 350S Student 1:06:16

Yeah, his wife was getting her hair done to go to the—

Wellington Lee 1:06:19

Oh, yeah. I can't tell you—they still look the same.

HCOM 350S Student 1:06:22

And he told us the story how he was the only black in the school. That's how I know the story.

Wellington Lee 1:06:27

Small world.

HCOM 350S Student 1:06:28

And I have one more question. When you were young, did you identify as an American or as Chinese? Now you feel like you're a Chinese American. But when you were young, and since you were living in Chinatown, did you identify as a Chinese then?

Wellington Lee 1:06:46

I realized I was Chinese. But, you know, I never experienced any bad things. Nobody—I think as I got older, in other towns, I would hear people call me, like, ching chong Chinaman. You know, that kind of stuff. But I never had that kind of encounter here in Salinas. Now, I don't recall anything like that. And I've been able to get along with all my classmates. It's—yeah. But you said you met Charlie?

HCOM 350S Student 1:07:22

Yeah, he was picking his wife up. She was getting her hair done [unclear]—

Wellington Lee 1:07:25

He doesn't look like he's sixty-three.

HCOM 350S Student 1:07:27

Oh, no. He looks very—

Wellington Lee 1:07:30

His wife is the same. His wife looks [unclear].

HCOM 350S Student 1:07:32

[unclear] his wife really likes [unclear] lady, black lady. He was telling us a story in the beauty shop how he went to Salinas High. He was the only black, and he had some stories that he didn't—he didn't experience any racism either out there. And I asked him, I said, "How was it? You were the only black in the school?" He was going, "Oh, it was okay." So, maybe Salinas High was—

Wellington Lee 1:07:55

Yes, that's the one. Yeah.

HCOM 350S Student 1:07:58

I'm just curious—you didn't talk very much about your father, and I was just kind of curious about his role in the family. Was he not there very much because he was working all the time? Or was he, you know—was it the, like, loving dad thing? Or was it authoritarian? Like, when—

Rina Benmayor 1:08:20

What was your father like?

HCOM 350S Student 1:08:22

What was that like?

Wellington Lee 1:08:23

The discipline came from my mother. She would use a stick. I mean, it's not that she would whip us silly, but she used that stick. It hurt. It really hurt. I can feel it now. [laughter] But it was her—she was the disciplinarian. She was the one in my—yeah, my father just, you know, he was—whenever he was around, you know—there was too many kids. [laughs]

Rina Benmayor 1:08:50

So, he wasn't the—

Wellington Lee 1:08:52

No.

Rina Benmayor 1:08:53

—pants of the family?

Wellington Lee 1:08:54

No.

HCOM 350S Student 1:08:56

Did you say it was your father's mother who had the dream?

HCOM 350S Student 1:09:00

Mother and father what?

Rina Benmayor 1:09:01

Your father's mother had the dream?

Wellington Lee 1:09:03

Yes.

HCOM 350S Student 1:09:03

And is she the woman with the bound feet?

Rina Benmayor 1:09:07

Is she the woman with the bound feet?

Wellington Lee 1:09:09

Yes.

HCOM 350S Student 1:09:09

I just wanted to hear a little bit more about that.

Wellington Lee 1:09:11

Yes.

HCOM 350S Student 1:09:12

When you knew her, did she tell you the ghost story herself, and what kind of lessons did you learn, or stories did you hear from her or others about how that was difficult for her?

Wellington Lee 1:09:27

You know, she would sit in the living room, just sit there all day. And she took care of us kids. She was a great help to my mother. But she was the one—she was the boss of the family. I mean, she was the one that held everything together, because of the Chinese customs. And she was the one that relied on us kids to help her walk. Everywhere she went—if she were to visit somewhere, we would be there to help her. In fact, I did a lot of it with her. And I had a chance to visit with a lot of the Chinese families, and that's how I still remember a lot of the Chinese families here in Salinas. But she used to visit them.

And, you know, they would gossip and all that, and whatever. But it was—she was a woman that had oiled her—her hair was oiled, and she wore earrings and bracelets, and she was like a [unclear]. She was just, you know, she just sat there, and my mother had to serve her a lot, because she was the oldest woman. She was the mother-in-law, you know. But she was—but on her foot, it was just amazing, because the toes were on top of each other. And they were—if you look at this, the slippers were very small, so she had the toes fit right into the slippers. And so, but when she came to the USA after she had—she gave birth to my father—she took off the bandages. And so, it was difficult for her to walk ever. So, every time she went, she had to have a cane. She had us children to help her walk. And she, you know, she was, like, five four. That's pretty tall for a Chinese lady. And she was much taller than my grandfather. My grandfather was only, like, four foot eight. So, that was how she managed to walk around with that toe.

Rina Benmayor 1:11:46

Was it painful for her?

Wellington Lee 1:11:49

Yes. She—because—yes, it was. I mean, she had to have that cane. She had to have a cane.

HCOM 350S Student 1:11:55

And so, though she was, like you said, the head of the family and very respected, did you guys also feel sorry for her? For her feet?

Wellington Lee 1:12:03

No, not really, because she was the—she was just the main lady of the house, I guess. I don't—trying to—you know, it wasn't that—well, anything she said, you know, we had to do. My mother had to be dutiful to her. She had to serve her breakfast and everything. But it was just part of the scene. It was part of the custom. Yes.

HCOM 350S Student 1:12:29

Given the matriarchal relationship with your mother, mother's mother-in-law and all that, did it shape along your values how you looked up to women in your society, or as you went out into the world and have a big impact?

Wellington Lee 1:12:44

I apologize. I'm sorry.

Rina Benmayor 1:12:47

Did the fact that you came from a household that was really run by women, matriarchal—did that impact your relationships with women afterwards, when you left and you went to college?

Wellington Lee 1:12:59

Uh oh. Now we're getting psychological. Now you're getting psychological.

Rina Benmayor 1:13:02

Is that the question?

HCOM 350S Student 1:13:03

Yeah.

Wellington Lee 1:13:04

No, not really. No.

Rina Benmayor 1:13:07

Did it teach you to respect women?

Wellington Lee 1:13:09

Oh, absolutely. I mean, I had to know who's boss and who wasn't, you know. Really. No, you know, there's really something to it that women are, you know—they're the gathering force. They're the one that gives birth. They're the ones that, you know—they're the glue. And just seeing my mother do all that, I mean, it's amazing.

HCOM 350S Student 1:13:30

I just wanted to add on [unclear] to that. One of my uncles, he was raised by a lot of women and all that stuff. Not in the same situation, but he's single now, and it's out of choice because, I don't know, I guess he got sick of being bossed around when he was younger, when he was, like, a kid. [unclear] bossing around, but he seemed to have chose his lifestyle out of that respect. You know, he still has respect for them, but he just wanted to be by himself, because he, you know, he had wait for six, seven sisters. He had to wait, you know, for everyone to do everything before he could actually get his stuff. He was always last [unclear]—

Rina Benmayor 1:14:10

It's really hard to hear you.

HCOM 350S Student 1:14:12

Sorry. I was saying I have an uncle. He had six sisters, a wife—not a wife, but he had a couple of aunts, and basically the household was run by women. And later on in life, when he went to have a family, he had his family, and then afterwards, you know—they had the main house, and then he moved out in the side house. So, just to have his peace and quiet. I was just—I guess that was kind of my question, if that kind of shaped how your household is now? I mean, or—I'm not saying any [unclear] disrespectful, but I'm saying that, did it change how you wanted to have your life? You know, get married, have children. Was it that type of effect? Just curious.

Rina Benmayor 1:15:02

I think—

Wellington Lee 1:15:03

I don't quite understand.

HCOM 350S Student 1:15:05

I'll come over there.

Rina Benmayor 1:15:05

No, that's okay. That's okay. I guess the question is—I understand the question. [laughs] What made you decide not to have a family or—

Wellington Lee 1:15:19

Oh.

HCOM 350S Student 1:15:20

Was it in relation to [unclear].

Wellington Lee 1:15:22

Oh, no.

Rina Benmayor 1:15:23

Have anything to do with the way you were brought up?

Wellington Lee 1:15:24

Oh, no. Had nothing to do with it. No, that's—I mean, no. That never even crossed my mind. Really. I mean, it just—I don't understand what the—

Rina Benmayor 1:15:25

Yeah. Okay.

HCOM 350S Student 1:15:37

Thank you.

Wellington Lee 1:15:38

Yes.

HCOM 350S Student 1:15:38

Your father had a car?

Wellington Lee 1:15:40

Yes.

HCOM 350S Student 1:15:42

Did you as a family ever go in the car?

Wellington Lee 1:15:45

We had to pick names. [Rina laughs] If he went to a movie, and he wanted to take the children, we had to pick names. And I was so mad when my sisters got it, you know. But no, there was too much of us. He couldn't bring all of us to a movie or to the carnival or to whatever. So, we had to pick names.

Rina Benmayor 1:16:08

Did you ever have other people living in your house with you?

Wellington Lee 1:16:12

We did have a family that [unclear], but they moved out.

Rina Benmayor 1:16:16

How long did they live with you?

Wellington Lee 1:16:17

I'm not sure if it was—from the early 1930s to the early '40s. So, it was just a—it was a few years.

Rina Benmayor 1:16:27

But it was before you were born?

Wellington Lee 1:16:31

Well, yeah. They were—let's see—yes. Yes. They were out by '44. Yeah.

Rina Benmayor 1:16:42

In the back.

HCOM 350S Student 1:16:42

[unclear] you were talking about the dream that your grandmother had—

Wellington Lee 1:16:47

Oh, yes.

HCOM 350S Student 1:16:48

[unclear] hit by the car. Were dreams culturally important to you and your family? And if so, were there, like, any other examples of that. Like, I know my family, we kind of have this [unclear]. My mom and I have had dreams that came true, kind of. And so, it's kind of part of our family culture. Is that part of your—

Wellington Lee 1:17:10

I think it's part of—I think it's part of, like, superstition. It's part of that kind of area. People, you know, [unclear] be superstitious. And I think it's the way [unclear] brought up too. I know she had a lot of time on her hands. She would think of things, days gone by, and I wish I had the know-how to actually ask her a lot of things, because she died in 1965, and I was just really kind of growing up by then. But she—I know she had a lot of stories to tell. And I'd just hear stories from my father and my mother

about what happened in some of her activities. But, you know, the days that I spent with her was when she sat around taking care of us or visiting with her. And that's the extent of it. But she was, you know, she was the queen of the household.

Rina Benmayor 1:18:17

Okay, I think we have one last question.

HCOM 350S Student 1:18:19

I just wanted to know, was it [unclear] you had seven sisters?

Wellington Lee 1:18:22

Ten.

HCOM 350S Student 1:18:23

Ten sisters. Was it okay for them to marry outside the culture?

Wellington Lee 1:18:27

Oh, yeah. I think at one point—I think one time my father, I think, in a—that was just my father. He got upset. He said, "Okay, I'm not gonna walk down the aisle." Because one of my sisters was going to marry a person of Filipino descent. And I don't know why—I don't know if he had, because of his relations with Filipinos at the gambling houses or pool halls or whatever. But he got a little upset that she was gonna marry a Filipino, and kind of burst out and said, "I'm not gonna walk down the aisle with you." But he did. He ended up—he did. I mean, you know, it's—I think he saw the reasoning of it. You can't stop it. Can't stop love. [laughs] Yeah.

Rina Benmayor 1:19:12

Okay, well, I think we've come to the conclusion of the interview, and I want to thank you so much for giving us part of your story and your life and sharing those memories with us. And we feel really honored and want to thank you very much.

Wellington Lee 1:19:27

Thank you. [audience claps]

Rina Benmayor 1:19:35

And if you'd like to come up and see the photographs in detail, you may please do so.

[cuts to footage of Wellington Lee talking about his family photographs]

Wellington Lee 1:19:48

These are my paternal grandparents. This is [unclear]. He was an immigration interpreter and merchant in San Francisco. This is his wife, Liong Shi [?] Lee, and she was a housewife, and she lived in China. She never came to the United States. And this is my grandparents, and this is Shorty Lee. His Chinese names were Lee Yin and Lee Yong Nom. And he was known as the mayor of Chinatown in Salinas. And this is his wife, He Shi [?] Lee. And this is both my grandparents when my grandmother arrived in

Salinas, and this picture shows her bow feet. And that's my grandfather Shorty Lee. And this is my maternal grandparents. And his name is Lou Ho [?], or He Moy [?]. And this is my maternal grandmother, and her name is Li Shi [?] Lu. And this is my parents. This is my father, Albert Lee. He was born in Salinas in 1917. And this is my mother. She was born in San Francisco in 1919. My mother's name is Daisy Lee. My father's name is Albert Lee. And this is the Hop Hing Lung store at 12 1/2 Soledad Street. This is my grandfather's general merchandise store, and the Lee family lived upstairs and in the back rooms. And this is at 12 1/2 Soledad Street. And also, this is the Bing Kong Tong building. It's right next door to Hop Hing Lung, and this is at 12 Soledad Street. This is the Bing Kong Tong clubhouse in Salinas Chinatown.