

RAYMOND WONG
Greenville, MS

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Interviewer: Jung Min (Kevin) Kim, Swarthmore College
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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Project: Chinese Grocer in the Arkansas/Mississippi Deltas

[Begin Raymond Wong Interview]**00:00:01**

Kevin Kim: This is Kevin Kim for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Wednesday, August 25, 2010. I'm here in Greenville, Mississippi with Mr. Raymond Wong; Mr. Wong could you please state your name, place of birth, and date of birth for the record please?

00:00:16

Raymond Wong: My name is Raymond Dwight Wong. I was born in--November 4, 1952; I was born in Drew, Mississippi and after two years I came to Greenville.

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KK: All right; Mr. Wong, could we start--could we start by talking about your parents' history here to the United States from the beginning? You were telling me that your father served in the Military?

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RW: Yes, during World War II; now he stayed in Mississippi because I think of course the War was over before he was able to go overseas which is good. And--and he went back to Drew, Mississippi. My parents came as a pair in 1948; they--they came by way of the USS Wilson. And--and then they came straight to Drew pretty much and--and stayed there for a little bit. But they pretty much decided to open a grocery in Greenville, Mississippi. And they came to Greenville for I think a couple of years; went back to Drew, where I was born, and then--then two years later came back to--again back to Greenville--Greenville.

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KK: And you were telling me they went through Angel Island, the famous Angel Island on--near San Francisco?

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RW: Yes; right. Now I'm not sure of the timeframe on that though but I know my father went through--through Angel Island. Now I don't know if my mother went through there or not necessarily, come in--maybe the first time he had to go through, yes.

00:01:58

KK: And you were telling me that your father was from Canton?

00:02:04

RW: The Canton area, more specifically Tai Hong.

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KK: The village in the Province?

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RW: The village, I don't know if that's a District or a particular village. It could be just a village but I'm--I'm not sure.

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KK: And your mother, was she from the same village as well or--?

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RW: Not the same village but surrounding villages, somewhere pretty close 'cause they pretty much had to walk everywhere you know. So a mile away is probably pretty far but there was several--I know there's several villages in the area that I knew of. One was a Pang village, we had--we were the Wong village and--and the other one is a Lum village. My mother is a Lum, okay.

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KK: So during the years, so when they first opened the grocery store in Greenville do you know what the name of the grocery store was?

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RW: I really don't know. I think it was like Cash Market or something like that but I'm not sure. They--that opened--that was only there for two--two--a couple of years; it was on Nelson Street in Greenville.

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KK: And then when they moved to Drew did you say they opened up another grocery store there or worked in another grocery store?

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RW: No; they were working at my aunt's place and that's--all I know is a Pang Market I believe. And then they came back. I think my--my aunt's husband got sick and so they moved back to help--that kind of thing and then they came back to Greenville.

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KK: And so do you remember the name of the store in which you grew up in? I guess that's the second time around.

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RW: That was--well that is Wong's Food Store, yeah. *[Laughs]*

00:03:46

KK: And where was Wong's Food Store located?

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RW: In 19--19--wait, 925 St. Charles here in Greenville, Mississippi, uh-hm.

00:03:56

KK: And can you sort of describe a bit about the store, what they sold?

00:04:04

RW: It's--I guess it would be called a very basic store 'cause we--we grew up in the grocery store and a lot of our friends had grocery stores, too. And ours was I guess not a big store but a moderately-sized store. I--I'm--I'm guessing at least three shelves--free-standing shelves around the walls and it seems like it was bigger than that but I'm not really sure. We had our own of course meat market and then we had our counter, that--that kind of thing. It was in a predominantly black neighborhood or African American neighbor--neighborhood. But my father was real--got along really well with the clientele and the people that he associated with other than Chinese and that's what I guess his success was, because I know that we had--he had some people that would come into the grocery store from clear across town and that's not as--that's not as--. In

those days that was--that was pretty tough to do because you don't have the transportation we have today.

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KK: And so you said that they had a meat market. Did your father do the butchering there as well?

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RW: Mother and father, they always worked, you know pretty much together. And we also hired someone to help as--as well, so normally had another person that would come in to help after school or--or maybe part-time.

00:05:52

KK: And how do you think your--your parents learned the ins and outs of the grocery store business? Did they--I guess you said you had an aunt that also had a grocery store?

00:06:01

RW: Yes; so I imagine they probably learned by pretty much rote, you know just watch other people do it and things like that. And of course, being an Asian they pretty good--had pretty good fundamental as far as math and things like that. So basically when you're in another country most of the time you can at least count and if you have some communication skills I mean that's very helpful.

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KK: And because the reason why I asked was because you know something like butchering and you know it takes practice and it's a skill and so I'm wondering how your father you know got to acquire those skills and you know maybe it was mentoring you had said?

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RW: That's--that's what I would think, watching somebody else do it and just--just learning. If you have--pretty much if you have a desire to learn you can--you can pretty much learn a lot of things, you know. I mean that's the key to--the desire to learn and watch other people and then it--it makes it a little bit easier and asking a lot of questions. My father was always very you know--asked a lot of questions and things like that.

00:07:13

KK: Well I guess that sort of answers my next question was how did your parents sort of know what to stock in the grocery store? And you said he asked a lot of questions and--.

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RW: I would think--I think that would be the--the question, I mean most--most of the things. I also remember my mother when that--there was a program on TV. Now back then you know they didn't have a whole lot of TV that--that would air at about 6:00 in the morning. And I remember that she would--it was a 30-minute program I believe but it taught English, ABCs. And I remember she would get up every morning to try to learn her ABCs, so when she became naturalized you know she--it helped a lot, you know already knowing the language and things like that. And so I remember just--we had a--a reel-to-reel recorder and she would help practice on things as well.

00:08:09

KK: Now you said you grew up in the back of a grocery store.

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RW: Uh-hm.

00:08:13

KK: So did you have the store in the front and the house in the back?

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RW: Pretty much; yeah it was, yeah. Yeah; looking back we had--I remember when we didn't even have any air-conditioning back then but everybody had fans and things like that and you're right. That's the way I remember all that. And but it was just you know you just do what you do and happy where you are. I never--I never thought one way or another about it; I thought that's the way everybody grew up [*Laughs*] pretty much.

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KK: So did you have any sort of non-Chinese friends come over to play at your store because that was--because when I was talking to Mrs. Quon she said that you know back when she grew up in the back of the store, she would only basically have Chinese--her Chinese friends come, because you know they grew up in the back. They had a house--

00:09:12

RW: Right, right; in fact we were--we were good friends of the--well called the Min Sang Seu(s) so we knew them real well. We would go visit them. Now as far as socially, yeah; pretty much. I couldn't--as far as back then yeah; we pretty much just hung around with the Chinese pretty

much. Now I had some African American friends but that was sort of separate 'cause I also went to the Caucasian school, see.

00:09:52

KK: Uh-hm; so I guess you were telling me that you didn't really think twice about you know having the store in the front and the house in the back?

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RW: No; of course not, because we felt like--. Now I knew that some people had a house, too, and eventually after so many years we did finally get--we finally got--built a house in the back of the store. I mean that was separate; so we had the store and a house. We thought that was pretty neat. *[Laughs]*

00:10:22

KK: Well so going back to the you know to those days when you were growing up in--you know growing up in the grocery store, how--could you sort of describe some of the things that your mother would--would cook in the back?

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RW: Yeah; I mean my--pretty much my mother did the cooking and but they all--everybody worked in the grocery store. And I just know that when we were able to start counting we worked--worked in the front or we helped go to the front and watch other people and make sure that they're--no pilferage I guess is the best way to say it. And so yeah; I just pretty much grew up in the grocery store. We just--that's just part of what we did, you know--not that we loved it. You know growing up you always have--you--things you have--already know--know about you

just go--you just know you have to do it. And we also knew that we didn't have other things like going to play baseball and things like that. No, we always had to go work in the grocery store.

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But we also understood that, too, and I think that--in hindsight that was a--a good way to grow up.

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KK: So I guess in the back you know could you sort of--do you remember what the kitchen looked like in the back?

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RW: Sure; well just basically it's the walls were paper. I remember that; they had paper with a wood-grain looking look. So in other words, our walls were covered. And one you could--you just walked there and then you'd have like a little--I guess you would call it a living room or a den or whatever you want to call it but that's right next to--to the kitchen. And --and that would face another side and then right next door to there is the--the bathroom. The bathroom and I remember we had to step up to that and then that was our living quarters right on the side and there were two living quarters.

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KK: Did your--in the kitchen, the one sort of common thing that I see throughout all these sort of Chinese American grocery stores is a wok. Do you remember your parents having a wok back there?

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RW: I don't remember believe it or not if we had a wok because I remember my mother always cooking with basic skillets and then things like that. I think a wok was kind of fancy for us [Laughs] you know because you have to have a contraption to be able to cook off of that wok; you know a more wider area and things like that. We--we didn't have that much luxury but we didn't know what was a luxury. We just knew--all we knew was it was time to eat [Laughs]. And we didn't have really what I call choices; whatever my parents or my mother made for us that's what we ate. And you know some days we'd have special things like hamburgers you know but of course all those things--it was right in the grocery store. I didn't have my first hamburger until I was probably in the--maybe fifth or sixth grade. You know somebody said do you want a hamburger? I said hey; that would be kind of neat. And then--then after I got one my--my father would say now, why you have that for? We can--we have it in the--in the--in--in the grocery store, but of course it was neat to have somebody else cook it and stuff like that, you know--some more traditional things for everybody else.

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KK: So growing up did your mother cook strictly Chinese food or both--both Chinese and American food?

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RW: Yes; in fact for me I didn't have a distinction growing up because to--to me it was still food. I mean you--we were taught when we cook, you eat the food pretty much you know. Of course my parents would try to--mother try to--would cook things that we liked of course, you know. But--but I remember some days we had like--fried chicken was a special day. You know that kind of stuff, or to have hamburgers was kind of neat. That's really different you know; so but again I didn't know--. I don't think I even knew there was a distinction until I was--that same age time about fifth grade or something like that.

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I remember one of the things that we--that I've always enjoyed eating of course is chicken. We had a chicken coop in the back behind--behind our store, too. And of course you would have to--mother would have to skin the chicken or you know prepare it and everything but it was very fresh. And most times my mother would prepare it with--with just what's it called? It's called bak jamgai but basically what it was is just--oh steamed chicken. But I didn't realize that most the Caucasian people and the African Americans only had fried chicken. I knew--had no idea about that and I was--and I mentioned it to somebody and said man, that—bak jamgai is really good. That's what I like; you mean what kind of chicken is that--steamed? They had no idea it was such--such a thing at that time.

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I remember that was the first--my realization, maybe we're eating--we're eating different food [*Laughs*] you know. Of course you go to a cafeteria and things like that but you just--you really--I didn't really pay attention growing up at that point you know like the big distinction that we had.

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KK: And--and how old--how old were you?

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RW: At that time that realization I'm guessing was around the fifth grade or something like that. I remember I was pretty much you know I mean I just remember knowing--I could have been in the fourth grade; I'm not exactly sure at that time. And then as--as you get older it's when you start having more--at that time everybody just mingles, I mean all people or--and then as you get older then you start having your--I guess your prejudices and your--your other types of things that are--identification things like that.

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KK: So I guess do you remember other than the steamed chicken any other Chinese dishes that you--that you liked or that you saw your mother preparing?

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RW: Well there was several things but believe it or not at that time we--I was--we were not in the restaurant business. And we didn't have different--certain names, things like egg foo young had no clue what and egg foo young was until somebody showed me. And I said well we eat that--that all the time you know. **[Laughs]** So there was some different items that--that we--we had but I didn't--like I said I didn't have a distinction. I never knew exactly what the name was like shrimp and lobster sauce, so I've always liked that but I didn't know what it was called, you know until they said well this is what it's called. I said oh; all I knew it was--for me it was just a dish, food and you know that kind of stuff.

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KK: So you mentioned you--that your parents raised chickens in the back. Did they also raise vegetables?

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RW: Yeah; my mother had a garden and things like that. In fact, I do have some footage of a lot of that kind of stuff that I have. The chicken coop, the garden; we had a big garden. A lot of times if you--you--that's where you raised all your bok choy and things like that. And--and--and within our group of people a lot of people would come into share or you know say hey you know--. A lot of times when--when the people--people, the Asians got together they always had something to bring. You know and a lot of times when the garden was good and plentiful they would--they

would have you know foo qua , which is bitter melon. Have you ever heard of dong gua? It's another big melon. I mean this is a big old melon.

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KK: I think I've seen it in Chinese supermarkets.

00:18:56

RW: Yeah; yeah, yeah, and beans, some kind of--it's not snap beans but it's--looks stringy anyway. I didn't know some of the names of those either. **[Laughs]** My mother did all that kind of stuff, so--.

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So that's where some of the--the vegetation came from of course you know.

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KK: And do you know how she got the seeds for that? Did she order it?

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RW: Now that I don't really know but I know she prepared and so I assume if you didn't have it at first you either ordered it or of course there's a network of people that you know they would share and things like that.

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KK: So I guess, so you--you know so your parents or your mother raised vegetables now. Do you--do you know how she got ingredients, other sort of specialty ingredients from--? Did she, because I know there are a lot of people who would get together and order things in bulk; I'm wondering if your--if you remember any of that?

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RW: I really don't remember that but I know again until later that I realized some of our spices were a little different than the--the American spices and--and like the bean cake and things like that. But as far as--all I did was eat. **[Laughs]** I didn't really know where anything--anything came from actually.

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KK: And do you know if your mother wrote down any of the recipes or did you see any written recipes that she had or is it all--was it all in her head?

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RW: Pretty much because if I had it, it would be in Chinese anyway, so it's no way I could have read it. **[Laughs]** So you know--

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KK: Well you also mentioned that your--that your mother on occasion would--would cook American food as well. How do you think, do you know how she learned how to cook American food?

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RW: That I really don't know. Like I said, all she did was prepare it and we sat down and ate it. It was neat to have fried chicken sometimes or hamburgers and--and on occasion we had French fries. That was kind of neat. **[Laughs]** But that was--that was not that often, you know. And she did fried fish; I remember that and--and those kinds of issues--I mean dishes.

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KK: But she did make an effort to try to learn how to cook American food?

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RW: Yeah because--I guess because the--she would--she would do a lot of things that--that pleased us I'm sure. Again in growing up you don't think about that, but as--as you look back she--well she didn't mind experimenting. My father was the same way. We would experiment. But remember, my father also was a cook; that's what it was. He was a cook in the Army, so I'm sure that--that taught him somewhat and he probably just old my mother how to do this or that.

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KK: That's interesting.

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RW: So you know when you start thinking back I remember that part of it that he was a cook, so--.

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KK: So--so growing up when did you--sorry; actually so growing up you mentioned there were other Chinese families. Could you sort of talk a bit about the Chinese community back when you were growing up here in Greenville?

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RW: Well yes; there were several--well quite a few Chinese families around. I mean every--every major street probably had a couple of stores--stores and things like that. Of course we had Wong's Food Store, Min Sang, there was a Pang Food Store, there was another Pang group.

Actually there's two more that I can think of that were Pangs and they were different places in town. And those are the people that we got to know pretty well. And I remember we would go to Drew at--my uncle was there. We would go there at least every two weeks, I mean religiously pretty much, and sometimes it was--it was every week. And boy that was--for us that was--that was a great thing for us because they had other kids that pretty much was our age. So that was like--hey let's get together; okay, all right we're--you know.

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And--and but I know that--I remember my parents would sometimes go visit at least twice a week as soon as the--the grocery store closes. They would go out for a few hours with the kids; I remember that you know. And that was always a lot of fun [*Laughs*] for us because that was our only social I guess ways to go compete--communicate with other people.

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In fact I just got back from San Francisco, just a couple of days ago and one of my friends, there were Pang that grew up here and they--they left in like in the '60s but we always came--. We--we're like--almost like brothers; we were that close you know, and so that--that--you start valuing those friendships. There was another guy that I went to visit and this one is in San Francisco; another guy was from San Jose but that was just maybe four blocks away and on occasion we would go there to visit at--at night--that kind of thing, so--.

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KK: So do you think that you know with so many Chinese-run grocery stores in the area did your parents ever see it as competition or were they all just sort of a part of one big community?

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RW: I--in--in hindsight I see it more of the--more of a community kind of thing. Now again remember that I had mentioned my father had--had customers in several other places in town that

to me was--it would be harder for them to come to our store, but they liked my father, so they-- you were trying to trade with people you knew, you're comfortable with. Of course we did a lot of credit at that time, too--credit business. But that--that tells me a lot that you know it's more--it was more than a grocery store. It was more of a community kind of thing. And we also for past-time my folks played Mahjong and a lot of people had Mahjong sets. And we would have--they would have marathon Mahjong games and we--I know sometimes we--in the back of a store we would have as many as four tables. That's a big--big crowd and that was pretty regularly. I mean that was like every--every week, you know every week especially on Sundays for instance you know if we didn't go out of town or if they went out of town and they'd come back early and they'll still have the Mahjong games and things--and things like that.

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And pretty--so that's pretty much how it is socially. Now we also--we were involved with the church and that was a big influence in my life, because accepting Jesus Christ and--and those--those kinds of things. And but it was a--it was a very community kind of thing. We would have--you would have church almost every week. Well we would have it every week; you know if we didn't go out of town we would go to church. It was just--that was the way it was. You either go to Drew or you go to church [*Laughs*] one or the other. And we had Sunday schools and things like that. And then they had a lot of--they had a lot of functions as well because we were pretty much accepted. There was a Chinese mission that was part of the First Baptist Church and there was a man by the name of D. Y. Young that is the one that welcomed everybody there. I don't remember the politics of all that actually but I just remember going to it and that was just part of what we did. That's why I know you know Frieda and all them; we always went to church, see.

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KK: And were the services in English or Cantonese or--?

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RW: The services predominantly were in English. So a lot of people couldn't understand it for-- the older people at that time. But every year generally they would bring in a missionary or another person from California that spoke Cantonese. You know and--you know for a revival and things like that; uh-hm.

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We--now Cleveland had a Chinese minister; we never--we never had one that I remember, okay.

00:27:36

KK: So there was Mahjong and so for the people who don't know what that is can you sort of briefly explain what Mahjong is?

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RW: It's sort of a--it was--it's played with tiles. But it's pretty much sort of like a gin-type--gin-type game. You have--you have pairs; you know you've got your bonuses and things like that. And at--I just know if you go to China a lot of people play that. That's--but it is a tile game and it has four people; each group is four people you know, the--each side and that's it basically I guess. Any other questions on that? **[Laughs]** I didn't--I actually didn't--I didn't--I didn't play it very much myself you know. All I did as a kid just was stack them 'cause they were tiles. **[Laughs]**

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KK: So in addition to Mahjong can you think of any other traditions or customs that you had when you were growing up? Did your parent--did the community get together say for Chinese New Year's or for Mid-Autumn Festival or anything like that?

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RW: Not really. I don't remember doing Chinese New Year's. I mean my mother would--there's some special dishes that we would prepare and they would take it to each other sometimes, during Chinese New Year's but I never knew when the Chinese New Year's was here [*Laughs*] until my mother prepared certain dishes you know like the ritual black-eyed peas. There's some other dishes that are Chinese dishes that are--I guess it's not black-eyed peas but it's symbolic of good life and things like that--prosperity and those--those dishes as well.

00:29:20

And what was other question on that?

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KK: Well I was wondering if you could sort of think about any other sort of customs and traditions?

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RW: Well no; well because of the church now we did have annual picnics, annual Christmas parties and things like that, too. So that was I guess just--that's American I guess--American. Now during Easter of course we respected our elders and we--they--one of the customs we used to do is I remember going to you know--I don't know what all of it is called but you know where you pour the whiskey on the ground but it's--it's symbolic of something. We'd bring the duck, a duck out, chicken out and--and put it on the front in that area. But I think that's more--more of a Buddhist-type ritual. And then as we become Christians we--we didn't do that after--after that. I realized, I mean I remember that; so I guess it was a mixing of cultures but I didn't know it then.
[Laughs]

00:30:29

KK: Well so that sort of mixing of culture, did you ever see that in--in the way that your mother would cook food or for--so for example, you know I think Frieda was telling me about how--how during Christmas dinner that she would--they would make a traditional Christmas dinner you know with the turkey and the dressing but there would always be one or two say Chinese dishes on the table as well? Do you remember any of the times when those two sorts of cultures mixed at--at the dinner table?

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RW: The only--the only one I really remember because most of the time we just had Chinese food, but we did the traditional turkey and dressing--and like I said everything was mixed together. The only--only one I remember is the one I mentioned earlier about the--the seaweed soup and things like that--that we don't normally get except during New Year's. I'm not sure of the name of it but it's a black--kind of black soup but it's good. All I can tell you it's good *[Laughs]*.

00:31:29

KK: So--so growing up did your parents ever try to teach you the language? Did they ever try to teach you Cantonese or have you instructed in it?

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RW: Not really. Now we--now the story I've--I've heard and that I remember my parents telling me was that I grew--when I was--all I did was talk Chinese until I was five. And then when you went to school it started changing. My--my parents would talk to me in some Chinese and some English but it was all co-mingled, but you know your mind just I guess receives it and you--you don't look--. You don't go well this is Chinese, this is that; you--it's altogether. And I remember growing up like that pretty much.

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Now I did--I do speak Cantonese somewhat because my cooks at the restaurant that's all they could talk and there was some, like my grandmother, she doesn't speak English. So you have to talk to them. And so that helps some, but you know I think you also deal with identity situations especially back then when there was much more I guess separations of different you know things so you tried to adapt to where--where you are, you know.

00:32:55

KK: So I think I'd like to talk a bit about your personal history; so you grew up here in Greenville. And you said you grew up in the grocery store until how long?

00:33:05

RW: Yes; well we--the--the restaurant opened in 1968, so we stayed in the grocery store business until 1970 pretty much or '71--when we got out of the grocery store business. If historically at that time, there in the late '60s when the Civil Rights issues came about, and because of that things were getting more--were tougher as far as making a living in--in our area as far as safety. So because of that--you can remember James Meredith; I don't know if you remember those names but they're--they're the freedom I guess you would call them freedom fighters and people were coming in, but when some of that--those things happened I remember having a brick thrown through our--where we lived--things like that, just people acting up. I guess they were identifying with their newfound freedom which they probably didn't have--had a tough time adapting to is my thinking.

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And that's where the idea came that you know maybe it's not as safe as it used to be, so my--my--my father started thinking about another avenue because he had been in the grocery store business now almost 20 years, almost. And--and I did--and then he--another thing that's

easy for--for most people to do of course, open a restaurant you know. You're still dealing with retail and you're still dealing with counting, you know retail and--and so that worked. If you can count money you can run a grocery store or you can run whatever you know.

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And so he looked around and--and thought about going--living--going to Atlanta, which would have been a major move but he was ready to do something different I think because of the situation that--that he felt like we were--were--that was beginning to happen. And then some of the--the Caucasian salespeople--now, keep in mind that he got along real well with all these people and when--when they came in they were like good friends coming in every week. That was your outside contact you know; you're--you're--and they would sit down and talk and stuff like that. It wasn't just making orders. Oh here--here is Henry; hey, good to see you--that kind of stuff.

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And then one of them--several people said why don't you open it in Greenville? Well at that time there was--there was no Chinese restaurants in the State. Well, there was one and Camille knocked that out. That was a big hurricane or--or--was it a hurricane or--?

00:36:17

KK: I think it was a hurricane.

00:36:17

RW: Yeah; and that was in the coastal area so that was a tourist area. But after that happened they didn't reopen, so there were no Chinese restaurant. You got to think about the timeframe. That was before Nixon went--went to China, so and--and most--most of the people that had come over in our group had escaped, so those are different timeframes of understanding how all that works together.

00:36:47

Anyway so he said well for us it's such a big gamble because of our family and everything like that. It wasn't like oh we're doing great; we can just go you know. So that--that was a big decision, and they finally--he finally decided, he said well--why don't you open--do a Chinese restaurant here? And then everybody was saying--and people are worried about--I think some of these people are scared of Chinese food. They might think it's going to kill them or something. And then some would--would talk to him, and remember; some of these people, you know every--when people came to the store pretty much especially salesmen, everybody was welcome in the front or back and they would sometimes offer them something to eat, you know so they'd get more accustomed to the food and everything else.

00:37:31

And they said well, why don't you open a restaurant here? It--we--we should--you know I think it could--it could work. So he finally decided to do that 'cause at that time there were only a few Chinese restaurants in the South. There were two in Memphis that was it; there was one in Birmingham; there was two in Atlanta I believe. Now I didn't know what they're--on the Louisiana side, I think there was one there in New Orleans. So to show you how few there were at that time.

00:38:06

So by the time he finally opened though you know somebody said well you're only--you're opening a takeout; why don't you add a few tables, you know at least three tables? So eventually it kept--kept developing. So when he opened we ended up having I think nine tables. It was just pretty much an overnight success. I mean--but it was--it was--part of--a tremendous amount of it was my father--personality but more than that it was the right time. It was the right time. So and that's--that's what really you know made the difference. And now of course they're everywhere. They're a dime a dozen. In fact, now sometimes when you reflect on Asian food as far as I guess Caucasian is concerned it's more of a cheaper type of food. But some of that has

not--but it's not necessarily true. The reason they--they do that now because the ones that are coming in is another group of Asians and their--their focus is low--low cost. So most of the time you're going to have just chickens and a little beef and things like that, a lot of veggies and things like that; a lot of these--what are called super buffets. So I guess you've been to some of those, okay. *[Laughs]*

00:39:30

But you can eat a lot and--and the cost is not very much. But--but if you go--when I go places like San Francisco, other places, or even Atlanta, I normally go to a--where it's cooked and not a buffet at all and you get better dishes. Of course you're going to pay more; you know that kind of stuff.

00:39:52

KK: So how old were you when--when your parents opened the restaurant?

00:39:56

RW: I was in the tenth grade, so whatever that would be, 16 maybe--15, something like that. And because I was in Band and I loved Band but then when the restaurant opened up we had two businesses and my father said you have to work at the restaurant. *[Laughs]* So that--that's how that went, so we--I was pulled out of Band and my Band Director was not happy with that. I remember that. But that's--that's the way it was you know.

00:40:27

KK: And where did you go to high school?

00:40:29

RW: I went to Greenville High. I went--first I went to Ella Darling Grammar School. Then I went to EE Bass Junior High and then I went to Greenville High. And I graduated in 1970 and that was the last year of any segregation.

00:40:49

KK: And these were all public schools or--?

00:40:52

RW: Public schools; that's all they had. Well there was a--a--St. Joe see. Oh as far as education is concerned, two summers at least there was some--there was someone that came in when I was like in the, I guess third grade or fourth grade that taught for two weeks at the Chinese Mission. So that--and so I--I learned some Chinese as far as the written part. I never knew the written. So I know some very simple--simple characters. *[Laughs]*

00:41:27

KK: So going back to those early years at the restaurant and first of all I--can you tell us the name of the restaurant and where it was first located?

00:41:38

RW: It's How Joy it's--it was on well it was closer to the center of town than where it is now and--because the--the building is now been demolished and rebuilt. But it's closer--closer to Colorado, okay and we stayed there in '68 until I think '76 and then we went--moved into another restaurant and where How Joy is located--is now. And now--at that time I think we sat about maybe 120 people at the initial restaurant. Well the initial one was only nine--nine tables but then we enlarged after a couple of years and then we went up to about 120 people. And then we enlarged again; we sat up to 400 people you know. And that--that was in '76. And then that's

when Greenville was still doing real well. But then with Jimmy Carter coming in--that's politics, the—the tow boat business went crashing. And that was a big part of our business because they would have--when they had parties they had big parties. And so that started the downward turn of all--everything, the economy because there was a lot of--that was about grain and things like that, so it went--it went to a halt. And a lot of the people in that business went broke and at one time there were--several of them were worth millions and then all of the sudden they went to nothing. I mean that's a big crash because of politics.

00:43:29

KK: And so when you first started the--so when your parents started the restaurant do you know what happened to the grocery store that they had?

00:43:38

RW: Oh we eventually sold it. We--we kept on it; we had it for a while and then eventually it was sold to--well it was--it was rented by some Caucasian and that worked for about two years and he went broke, pretty much, and--and another Asian family bought it. And there's--there's an Asian family there now. So it depends on--it depends on how you want to run it you know.

00:44:06

KK: Do you know the family that has it now?

00:44:08

RW: I've been there believe it or not because I would bring other people to show where I used to live. I don't know their names. I wish I--I knew their names.

00:44:19

KK: So--so going back to the early years of How Joy, do you remember--so--so I guess first off you know it must have been a big gamble for your parents to open up a Chinese restaurant here in Greenville. How did they go about starting it? Did--how did they get the chefs; how did they get the people who worked there?

00:44:41

RW: All right; the way it first started because the idea was there already. But my father had a real good friend who had a grocery store. Well his brother had come to the United States as a cook at--in Memphis--Joy--Joy Yung. And I think he was getting a chance to--a distant chance, so he wanted to open his own--you know my father and him, he--he would come and visit and he said because--remember, the population wasn't that great. So to visit other people that was--that was a tremendous thing like going to Drew was tremendous for us.

00:45:15

Well the guy said well--my father said why don't we open our own restaurant? And the guy decided hey let's do that. And then eventually though he was--they were going to be partners but toward the end he--he chickened out. He said I will just work for you because he didn't want to be pinned down every day and you know. And that's how it started. So we--so we had--so we had somebody to already work the restaurant that knew about dishes and knew a lot of stuff. And--and that's how that started. And then--then eventually he was the major cook.

00:45:52

Now my mother knew how to cook, too, but she--he didn't--she didn't really know how to cook necessarily institutional-wise. But in--in our area before we had restaurants people would get together and have big parties you know so you have to cook for more people you know. And--and that was--that's actually--people get--come together from Clarksdale, Cleveland, Greenville, places like that and maybe even Greenwood. You know so here's a part where everybody would help each other kind of stuff. And but with that help as far as the institutionalized portions and

things like that he helped initially and my father just learned from that and then started hiring other cooks after he left.

00:46:40

Now initially I remember we didn't have stuff like bok choy and things like that. That normally came out of San Francisco or Chicago. Now you can--you can--you can order it from a lot of different places. In fact, there's also a lot of Asian outlets that trucks will come even now from Atlanta or Memphis, New Orleans--places like that. But at that time there were none. So you have to--they would have to fly it in to keep it fresh and things like that.

00:47:10

KK: So--so your parents flew in a lot of the ingredients that they use?

00:47:18

RW: Yeah; I remember things came from Chicago and of course there was truck routes, too, but if you have the truck route of course it's--it's not perishable things.

00:47:28

KK: So do you remember what some of the things that appeared on the first menu back--back when the restaurant first started?

00:47:37

RW: Yeah; shrimp in lobster sauce, green pepper steak, butterfly shrimp, moo-goo gai pan, all kinds of names I had never heard of [*Laughs*], so it--but when I saw it I said wait. That's only this you know. And we had American dishes as well, rib-eye steaks and fried shrimp and things like that. Of course at that time, the traditional that everybody knew was--was chop suey even

though it was not--it originated in the United States [*Laughs*] and we had the fortune cookie, too, yeah.

00:48:12

KK: So yeah; I mean the--the history of chop suey is quite fascinating.

00:48:18

RW: Oh it is; it is, uh-huh.

00:48:20

KK: Now do you remember how the chef there prepared it?

00:48:22

RW: I don't know 'cause I mean--I mean he just basically--bean sprout yeah; it's still--still traditional. They're all the same pretty much. But you have you know bean sprouts. You have bok choy and you can add other dishes and things in there as well, you know. It's just--you know pretty much it's a hodgepodge of veggies really, you know.

00:48:52

KK: So I'm wondering how your parents decided to name the restaurant. Does How Joy have a special meaning?

00:49:02

RW: Yes; it does. One day my father got a call and he said something about well, good luck. Good luck- how joy means how choy which is if you try to make it English it's good luck and how joy means good luck, the good luck building pretty much. And that's how--I'm sure there's

very few How Joy but there are--there are some and that--because most--most names you're going to have is going to be Golden Dragon, Hunan this, Hunan that. I mean if you go to every city you've got a Hunan. Every city has a Golden Dragon or--those are traditional names that you're going to have you know. Asian Garden; now it's Peking this. We have a Peking Restaurant here but it's--but the Peking Restaurant is really more--it's not real--it's not the northern dishes.

00:50:01

When I think of Hunan or Hunan dishes I'm thinking of North China, real hot and spicy. Even the restaurant here is traditionally--it's not like--initially I think it may have started that but the ones that most people are familiar with is the regular Cantonese food, the more everyday food and occasion when I go to San Francisco I--sometimes I go to New York--we would eat the--the--the Hunan dishes. But we know if we do that it's going to be hot. **[Laughs]** You know but generally if we have a banquet it's always just Cantonese food, something that's easy on your palate.

00:50:39

KK: So you were telling me that the restaurant was a success from the beginning?

00:50:48

RW: Yes; it was. I think again we hit it at the right time at that point. It was real successful; things started slowing down after--you know in the '90s. That's when things were getting tough especially--economic everywhere but especially here in the Delta, you know. And--and it--I mean and we eventually closed it in--a couple years ago so you have to do the Math on that and but also I had an illness and that--that changed a lot of things as well. My wife had to run it and--by--by herself pretty much. And I also had another business which is my--I do screen printing too and which is tee-shirts and things like that. So that kind of divided my time and then all of the sudden

I had a stroke, and when that happened I mean it just--it went--it went--it's--it went to--stop--I mean everything just stopped. I had to relearn everything and I'm doing much better now but I still have issues, but I'm just so happy to be able to be here and be able to talk to you [*Laughs*].

00:52:00

KK: I'm glad, too. So you were telling me that you--that your parents hit it at right--the right moment. What exactly do you mean by that?

00:52:11

RW: I mean it's a combination of--of because--it was a combination timing-wise, the right time. Of course things were getting more--easier to--the Nixon trip--that helped a lot, I think as far as opening and it was--they were ready for something I think different. They were starving for something different in this town 'cause we didn't have anything very much I mean besides just regular American food. And I think--and I still believe and when I go back to hindsight a lot of restaurants opened after several years after we did. In fact, Jackson opened one a year after us. And then I remember the next three restaurants opened in Jackson and different parts of town; my cousin opened one, the House of Wong. But when I look back as--as I start looking at successes and things like that I think one of the main ingredients that helped our business continue success was because of my father and mother, because--and--and I remember when my father was getting older we tried to close and he didn't like that at all. He would say now where are my friends going to come and see me if we're closing?

00:53:36

So and--and I never treated it much as just work; it was--for me even for myself it was--it was more like welcoming people to your house, so when you're there you're so excited that they're there and it's--but it's kind of an interesting feel, because people will always say, but you're working so many hours. Well you got to do something. You know it depends how you

look at it; of course you miss a lot of things like some of the ballgames and things like that and-- you know because when you have to work you have to work and a lot of times people get--go out and when they go out it's when you need to be working.

00:54:18

You know so I used to also have an--an airplane and--but I had--I had a farmer as my partner and it was perfect. Now the reason I mention that is because he only flew either on the weekends or when it was--when it was raining. Those are the times I didn't want to fly. The only time I wanted to fly was a real nice day where he had to farm, remember; so he couldn't go **[Laughs]** or on the weekends I had to work. So it was kind of--it's interesting; you--you just look at those--those variables, so--.

00:54:57

As far as personally other things I have done, I have--like I've said I've talked about the screen print business but I also did TV for four years doing a morning show with a co-host. Now also I do still do a little TV now but it's a weekly show. And it's called *The Delta Dialogue* and it's about people making a difference in our community. When--when I had my stroke pretty much I couldn't talk or do anything and at--at one time they were--they were--you know they didn't think I was going to really recover very much at all. And--and I remember when I came back home after several--you know a couple months and I was in wheelchairs and things like that and--and somebody was just being nice. And at the TV station well everybody is asking about you; why don't you come back and do something? And I'm going now I can't even talk and they're asking me--of course, they were just being nice.

00:55:58

But then I started thinking about it as--as I started developing after a few years, you know if I ever can do any of those things again I'm going to try to do it. I said always go for the everything; go for the gold because you never know when it's taken away from you or it's time for you to different something different because of health issues or whatever. So I'll tell

everybody now if you can sing in a choir, go for it; whether you can sing or not it doesn't matter because you're trying to rejoice anyway. And so that's part of my philosophy.

00:56:30

And anyway--anyway--any other questions?

00:56:34

KK: Well I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about 1987 and the big reunion that you helped organize.

00:56:45

RW: Okay; growing up here eventually and being in more of a high-profile situation as far as the restaurant is concerned, I think that helped a lot as far as the Asian community. And eventually I was invited as I started knowing more people in--in the business area more socially, being invited to different things; eventually I was asked to be on the Chamber Board, okay. And then eventually I became involved in the--the--our Delta Center Stage which is a theater group and eventually I became President and things like that.

00:57:31

And as I started thinking about the things that--that were--were happening, at that time a lot of times when we had different parties my mother was always--you know my mother loved them because she got to see all the kids again and you know everybody has grown up and all that. So I came up with an--the notion and I asked--I talked to some other people about it and I said why don't we put together an event where we celebrate us being American--American--Asian Americans? And that's basically what--how--how it came about.

00:58:08

And I said you know growing up we always had salesmen coming in and we always got things--I mean we purchased things from it. I said why don't we go with another angle; why don't

we--we've never done this before. Why don't we ask for their donation for this event, you know that kind of idea? And that's how it--it started and I grouped several people involved and said would you help because I wanted it to be a collective thing.

00:58:38

Now when--once this got started and I told them--told them what I wanted to do it's just basically let's have a party that's--that is separate from a wedding and a funeral. That's where everybody gets together; just people that want to come home and let's brag on Mississippi and show what Mississippi has or how things have changed, 'cause back in those days I remember there was several people that could not standing coming back. They said oh, I've been to Mississippi; I grew up in Mississippi. I'll never come back. And I wanted to show them that things are different now--economically, well I don't know--economically or socially, maybe socially. And that's where that came. And now when I mention it to some other people certain salesmen say oh yeah; yeah we'll help you. You know like people that we bought from instead of always giving out donations we're going to do it in reverse. And it just worked out. But my goal is also there's not a lot of Asians that organize at all and again--now that was 20 years ago I guess or more--and that's why I wanted to--my goal is to get everybody to work together and of course that's--that's a major chore too. You know now some of the people are retail. Some people are--one was a chiropractor, a doctor and stuff like that. And everybody had their own part. My goal was to coordinate everybody to be a collective thing.

01:00:03

And--and then at one time because I went to Mississippi State, I went to school at Mississippi State--not Ole Miss--that they tried to make it a competitive situation. I says, it's not a--for me it's not competitive, because we--we got to go to school somewhere. So the main thing is you know let's get together. But see, back then the Asian--there's a group called the Lucky 11 and that's where all the--the Chinese got together that--but it--that group was from State because at that time while I was at State, that's where more of the Asians were. And they had--and every--

every year they would have a party and a big dance. And people would come different places, predominantly around the Delta, but they came from New Orleans if they heard about it, you know 'cause you're looking for--you're looking for an opportunity to meet other Asians as well.

01:00:58

And but so I used that as the--sort of a catalyst, a Lucky 11 Reunion but it really wasn't that; it was more than that but we--you've got to have a reason why you're giving a party. Well we--we got to call it something. So we said it was a Lucky 11 kind of reunion. And then because of that some of the people from Ole Miss didn't want to participate. And I'm going but that's not the purpose. So it's--it was a lot of convincing too and my goal at that time was if we have 200 people I'll consider it okay. But our goal was 200 people and if we have 400 that's pretty good. Well it ended up being at the end 600 people, so we felt it was real successful. And the thing that was most heartwarming for me was some of those people that said you know I brought my--my grandchild here and I wanted to show her where the cotton field was. But--or where it was and where it was and where I grew up but I'm so glad you did it because I thought I would never come back to this place--because some--there is--. I remember there was one situation where in Itta Bena where this guy became--had a very successful restaurant in Chicago but he--he's from Itta Bena as far--he had a grocery store. But when he went to try to get a haircut they wouldn't cut his hair--those kinds of issues.

01:02:26

Now we--we look back at it but I look at it, from my perspective I see it as a rite of passage. It's that you know we're not the only ones that were ostracized--the Italians, the Jewish people, you know so there's a--every--you know even with the--the blacks now for instance I think a lot of people like to use that as an excuse to--to separate, but everybody is here. Everybody--everybody can make it if all--if they have the drive to do it. Now you might have issues for excuses but those are only excuses to me, you know, but anyway--. **[Laughs]**

01:03:07

KK: Well--

01:03:08

RW: Philosophy anyway.

01:03:10

KK: Well you mentioned that you know a big part of that event was to bring people back from all around the country, back to the South.

01:03:18

RW: Okay; well I was going to mention people came from Hawaii, New York, around the South of course, at Augusta, do you would say it went all over the country pretty much. And the way--right; we didn't know how to advertise it so we did a lot of word of mouth. I had one guy by the name of Art CW Sydney. He was an older group. He was one of the--one of the founders of the Lucky 11, but he--he helped with the older group 'cause I was--at that time I was more of the middle group. And then the--there's another group at Ole Miss that we thought we could not get; they were the younger people, because we also had a dance after. We had a nice meal, a dance, and a big presentation and stuff.

01:04:08

And--and I made it--made it a price tag where I mean it would cost you--I didn't want it to be a cheap thing. I wanted it to be catered where you could also dress up in a tux if you want to. I wanted it to be a nice event. You know we're always you know I guess never thought anything; everything is a second thought. This--I said I want to focus on this so I got different coverage. It was also advertised, written up or advertised in the San Francisco paper and stuff like

that to say this is what's happening. If you're interested let us know. I'm sure there's a lot of people we missed as well, you know but--but I felt real good about that.

01:04:56

And we had a--a big production and--and for me it was--it was a learning experience as well to though. To me as long as I'm learning I love doing those kinds of things.

01:05:07

KK: Well I was trying to get the question of why you decided to stay here in Mississippi and not go out of state like some of your friends did or some of the people that you knew?

01:05:17

RW: It just naturally happened because I like the restaurant business but I was--I guess I would be--I was the one that was pretty much selected to not actually say you need to be the one doing it, but I was--it just--it kind of just fell in that position where I was--you know I wanted to stay home with my parents in a way. It's hard for me--how--how hard it is; it's hard for me to explain that to you because my relationship with my--with my father and--was one of those not real open you know. But I knew that when it's time to go somewhere that he goes. And I'm--I do the other. And if he knows I'm going to go somewhere he just did it. We didn't say okay; now on this day we're leaving. We just knew we would--we would verbally say we're going to do this but we didn't say well, can we--it's not like a--what's the right word--hard plan you know. I just--so I was the one that always stayed home so if everybody comes home you come back here. You--you kind of understand that in a way?

01:06:32

KK: Yeah; I do.

01:06:32

RW: But I have a brother in San Francisco in Berkeley. He works in San Francisco. I have another brother that's an--my brother is an attorney in Houston. I have a sister in Jackson and everybody came back for that event, too, so--. **[Laughs]** And there was some people that--that was really--I was so surprised that they would even donate some. There was one guy; I don't want to mention his name at this point that normally he's just very, very frugal. But when this event happened, he pretty much--I said it's going to be--he has five in his family. It's going to be \$55 a piece. He said okay. I went huh; I was--I was expecting him to--to you know--. But I also made it a point that if you couldn't make it I would--we would figure some ways to--to--they could come. I didn't want anybody left out.

01:07:31

And we also had underwriters that we didn't have to do but I had to have--I had--I wanted to have about \$10,000 worth of underwriters. Now what's an underwriter? If it doesn't happen you might have to pull it out of your pocket a little bit and again one person, I think it was either North Carolina or Tennessee, he said I heard you're having problems financially, so I want to donate. And that was after the event. And I'm going **[Gestures]** wow. But we didn't need to, so I didn't--I didn't ask for that; okay.

01:08:06

KK: So do you--so I guess along those lines would you consider yourself a Southerner then?

01:08:14

RW: Well I am definitely a Southerner, maybe even a redneck, I don't know. **[Laughs]** No; I like it here. I enjoy it here. I have tremendous friends. You know I've told you I had a stroke. Well right now I don't even drive but every time--if I can go to any store I hang around a little bit--a little bit, somebody will give me a ride you know and that's--that's virtues of small towns I

think. Even though we're about 40,000 but I've done a lot of those like I said--those issues you know. So yeah; I like it here and--and I have a group that I get together every--every week. we call it the Roundtable; all we do is hash out events, but we're--we're--we're kind of a hard-nosed group that we can argue pretty--pretty much during the--the time and then when it's time to go we go, we go well who is going to movies and who is going to do this? In other words, we don't harbor resentment with different views. And I love that part of it because I've always--I've always been the one to be fairly opinionated but I always tell everybody, I may be opinionated but you can convince me to change my view. And I love that, too. You know I tell everybody--make a decision. If you do the wrong decision just change it but don't say I don't know; I don't know; I don't know. You know make a difference you know in whatever you do.

01:09:47

KK: So well we've--it--it's a little over an hour now, so I think we're going to start wrapping up. I was wondering if you could introduce a bit about your family, your wife Cathy?

01:10:01

RW: My Cathy--Cathy is from Arcola, or originally Hollandale and we actually met after--well we--I kind of knew who she was but we met right after I graduated pretty much. And we've been together for about 30--I'm guessing now--33 years [*Laughs*]. And but--and she has--she's working now in a couple little different things. And I have three kids. I have Brent, who is the oldest, and he's about--he's 30. And I have another child that's either 28--27 [*Laughs*] and that's Meredith; she's a nurse. And my son is working with me right now and he's still in--going to school but he's 26 but he's--he's actually working with me at the screen printing business. I can--myself--myself is because of my issues, I can do--I can--I can't read very well and I can't do numbers very well but I can still do artistic things. So screen printing you have to--you know you

have to design and things like that, so at least I can still do that. And I don't go in necessarily every day; I used to but if he can cover for me I let him do that pretty much.

01:11:33

KK: Did you ever--did you ever have plans if you still had the restaurant to hand it down to your son?

01:11:39

RW: That was initially the plan. That was initially the plan but--but then at--at--in hindsight and looking right now none of my kids really felt interested in doing it, so all that you can do is provide and then it's up to them if they want to do that or if they don't want to do it, you know.

01:11:58

Now I have this other business that if he's interested in--in pursuing on that at least he has an avenue if he wants to besides working for somebody else, but some people may be more comfortable to do that, so it--it--. Basically it's--it's provided if it's there for them, but if they don't want it then you have to understand that's okay, too, so--.

01:12:22

KK: Well before we end I just have a few short questions. The first question is--this is something I end with--a lot of my interviews--do you have a favorite Southern meal?

01:12:34

RW: [*Laughs*] Favorite Southern meal--hmm, there's a lot of good stuff like neck bones. I like cow tongue [*Laughs*]. I guess you have fried chicken. I do eat fried chicken occasionally, pork chop--

01:12:55

KK: Popular answer--fried chicken and pork chops.

01:12:59

RW: Yeah; yeah, well that's why we're probably the--some of the largest people in the nation is--is in the South because of that fried chicken. And let me see what else; you know and again that--that's kind of a funny question because when I--I was in LA for a while. Well for about three months, and I--I became a good friend of a black person that's a magician, so I used to be real big in magic. And when he knew I was leaving I said I'm going to take you to eat at a soul food place. I said that would be great; I've never eaten soul food. And then I went there and ate it and it was neck bones and--and ribs. And I said is this Southern food? I'm used to this; this is nothing. So I guess again it's your perspective, you know how you look at things--or black-eyed peas and things like that; yeah.

01:14:03

KK: And also do you have a favorite Chinese dish or Chinese meal?

01:14:09

RW: The ones I like the best still is I love curry dishes, curry chicken or curry beef. And I love shrimp and lobster sauce. And now I like green pepper steak, too but I like egg foo young too. You know so I guess--and as far as the traditional things I like that, too. I love duck. You know Long Island duck, which a lot of people here are not familiar with; but we've--at the restaurant we have served as many as 900 people. So and I love the big ones because it's just a matter of coordination. It depends on how you approach it, too and the people have said well why do you cook so many? Well you know it's just all about planning; you know you just increase your portions, so--. **[Laughs]**

01:15:01

KK: Did you have a particular dish that you were particularly proud of at the restaurant?

01:15:07

RW: The--well I'll tell you what our--our most popular dishes are. There were two; one was called the How Joyt steak and a How Joy steak basically was a rib-eye or a sirloin steak over a ton of veggies and also had oyster sauce on top. That was the most popular dish. And butterfly shrimp was the next one and the butterfly shrimp is bacon and the shrimp being butterflied. Are you familiar with that; that means you just open it up? And then also it's in a batter and--and the--on a bed of onions; uh-hm.

01:15:49

KK: Well on that delicious note is there anything else you'd like to add for the interview?

01:15:53

RW: No; just ask me more questions if--if there are areas you want to talk about.

01:15:59

KK: Well--

01:16:01

RW: I'm glad--I'm glad to talk to you.

01:16:03

KK: Well I think that's about it for my part, so if you don't have anything to add I thank again--
thank you again for having me in your home.

01:16:11

RW: You're welcome.

01:16:13

KK: And thank you so much.

01:16:14

RW: [*Laughs*] Good luck.

01:16:15

[End Raymond Wong Interview]