

10-16-2012

Interview with Carolyn Chavez

Carolyn Chavez

California State University, Monterey Bay

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/ohcma_chinatown

Recommended Citation

Chavez, Carolyn and California State University, Monterey Bay, "Interview with Carolyn Chavez" (2012).
Chinatown Renewal Project. 1.
https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/ohcma_chinatown/1

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History and Community Memory Archive at Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chinatown Renewal Project by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csumb.edu.

CSUMB Oral History & Community Memory Archive

Chinatown Renewal Project

Interviewee: Carolyn Chavez

Interviewer: Nursal Matsu

Date of Interview: October 16, 2012

Duration of Interview: 27:23

Nursal Matsu 00:06

So, Ms. Chavez, good morning. I'd like to ask you if we have your permission to record today.

Carolyn Chavez 00:12

Yes.

Nursal Matsu 00:13

Okay, thank you. Today is October 16, Tuesday. My name is Nursal, and my partner is Guadalupe, and I am interviewing Ms. Carolyn Chavez here at her house in Salinas. So, Ms. Chavez, could you tell me a little bit about your family and how they came to Salinas?

Carolyn Chavez 00:33

Well, my grandfather's name was [unclear] and they were living in Colorado near Lamar, and my mother was the oldest of seven girls, and then two brothers were off working. And he decided in the beginning of, let's see, 1929, that he should come to California because he had seven girls and they weren't going to make very good farmers. And they traveled and then they ended up in an LA area—Ontario, California. And my mother being the oldest, she had just graduated from high school a couple of days, and my father followed her, and they were married in Ontario. And sometime in the early 30s, they came to Salinas, and his family, the Leforces, were working in the produce, and my mother actually learned to trim lettuce. And after nine years, they had me, and only one daughter. And so, I've been born in Salinas, and I'm now a grandma, and I'm still here. And I love Monterey County, and I'm not going anywhere [both laugh]. I know what beauty is.

Nursal Matsu 01:47

Yeah, your background really, really fits with Salinas' agricultural background as well. Could you share with us how was it to grow up in Salinas, your memories of Salinas?

Carolyn Chavez 01:59

Well, I lived out in East Salinas, which was called Alisal, and in the 30s was the Depression, and a lot of people came from other states. And the ones that came from Oklahoma were called Okies, and I lived in a very safe neighborhood. It was called Acacia Park, near El Sausal and Fremont School, which I went to from the third grade to the middle of the eighth grade. And we moved here, in South Salinas, and I went to El Sausal when it was one year open, and I danced in the hall because the floor was still wet [laughs] with, you know, being finished. I went to Washington, and I went to Salinas High, and some Hartnell, and I had a daughter, and I had a son. And I've lived in Salinas, in South Salinas, most of the time. And I have three grandchildren. My daughter has a son, and my son has a son and a daughter.

Nursal Matsu 03:02

So, what were some of the things that you did as a family for fun? How was it to live in Salinas back then?

Carolyn Chavez 03:09

Well, my father did work six days a week at a tire company. And so, I spent a lot of time on Main Street, waiting for six o'clock, to pick him up. So, I actually was on Main Street when World War II came to an end. I was, however old I was, not too old, and it was very interesting—ticker tape came out of the buildings. And I thought it was, this was—when I saw it on New York later, I thought, well, we did it during that day. You know, they were celebrating the end of the war. And there was a 50s restaurant. And we would—mother's favorite candy was peanut brittle. So, we'd buy a little bag of peanut brittle and wait to go pick my father up at six o'clock. And we did go to church on Sunday. And so that's pretty much—fun was going to grandma's in Ontario. At Christmas time, the sisters and their husbands would come down to grandma's house. My mother would make pies and candy—See's Candy was always around—and waiting for my cousins, which were a lot younger, and there weren't very many cousins. All those seven girls, only a few had two children and lost a couple. So that was the most exciting thing of the year—it was going to grandma's in Ontario, California to be with all the relatives.

Nursal Matsu 04:35

That's great. Could you tell a little bit more about your educational background, schools you went, friends you had?

Carolyn Chavez 04:43

I went to the local schools. I went to Lincoln—kindergarten, first, second. I went to Roosevelt a little bit in third. Then I went to Fremont, and then I went to El Sausal. I went to Washington Junior High, and Salinas High was the only high school in 1956. North High I think came a year or two later. So everybody—I found it interesting that the leaders in El Sausal had to blend when they got to high school with the leaders of Uptown School. And it was very interesting when they got to high school. You had two sets of leaders. You had the train kids from Alisal, and you had the uptown kids. And I remember thinking even at that young age, we're blending two cultures in one town.

Nursal Matsu 05:32

So how different was those two cultures?

Carolyn Chavez 05:35

Okies, my mother told me there were lean-tos. There were women living in lean-tos. It was so poor during the Depression, and a lot of those, what they call the Okies or Alisal people, they all went on to get professions, and they're some of our best leaders—produce people. And they're seniors now, but they did the hard work in those days in the sheds. I never had to work in the sheds, but I found girls that were my age that did work in the sheds. So, I was the lucky one. I was an only child and lived in South Salinas, and I didn't have to go there [laughs]. But a lot of young people worked in those days.

Nursal Matsu 06:23

Did you work yourself when you were in school?

Carolyn Chavez 06:25

I went to work down wrapping presents at the Penney's on South Main when I was 15 and a half, maybe. Then I babysitted for the vice whatever—assistant manager. And then I got to go to work. And I worked—in those days, they didn't have the way we do it today. They put price tags on and bent the pins and your fingers hurt a lot. But I also was here—you're gonna ask me about, what I know about—the Bracerios, or Braceros, would come in, and I would help them choose material to send back home. So, I'm not even 16, and they're probably not much older than 16. I didn't know Spanish, but somehow we would come to an agreement on a piece of material, and I would measure it for them and say, "Yes, this is good." Bueno, Bueno [laughs].

Nursal Matsu 07:18

So, what are some of your memories of Braceros? What did they—

Carolyn Chavez 07:21

They were just sweet young guys, and I get along with sweet young guys [laughs]. Now that's on camera, shame, [laughs] you cut that one.

Nursal Matsu 07:23

[laughs] Did you communicate with them?

Carolyn Chavez 07:33

Oh, yeah. I was already going with a Hispanic, [Nursal laughs] so that's nothing new to me [laughs].

Nursal Matsu 07:39

Did you speak Spanish?

Carolyn Chavez 07:40

No, I took a class and I should have continued, but I didn't. And I didn't hear it. I wasn't around it, you know. My husband spoke Spanish on the phone to his mother and they would come over on Tuesday nights, and I would make a chocolate cake for my mother-in-law [Nursal laughs] and my sister-in-law, and they would read the newspaper. [laughs] Wasn't too much communication, but that way I never got in trouble with my mother-in-law [laughs].

Nursal Matsu 08:04

[laughs] Well, great. So, were you part of any political movements? Or, during that time, there was a lot of political stuff going on. What were your thoughts on some of the things that were going on?

Carolyn Chavez 08:17

Well, I actually—when we bought our home in South Salinas, I worked with a lady in girl scouting. I was her assistant, and her husband was the head of agriculture. And she asked me if I would like to walk in protests, and I said, "Not with a name like Chavez." I just made a joke. I got out of it. But she actually said, "Don't you want to march for—?" one of the names I won't say. And I go, I just made it, I just said

that because I thought I didn't want to do that. But I have done lots of little things through the years. They know me. I helped save Natividad in the late 70s. I walked, I marched, I held signs, I rode with the Brown Berets, and so I'm kind of happy that Natividad is so nice now. You went there the other day—it's nice, right?

Nursal Matsu 09:07

Yeah, it is very nice.

Carolyn Chavez 09:08

Very nice.

Nursal Matsu 09:09

So, you really did contribute to Salinas history. Thank you for sharing that with us. And this is really exciting. I know that your mother-in-law, actually owned a restaurant on Chinatown. So, can you describe the bar? Actually, it was a bar.

Carolyn Chavez 09:25

It was beer only.

Nursal Matsu 09:26

Okay.

Carolyn Chavez 09:27

And it had a counter as you went in on the right. And then the left-hand back corner was her kitchen. And she had several tables leading up to the front. They had a little corner that they had bands, and I have talked to somebody and he said, "Oh yes, I played in a band there." So, they actually had dancing, and I never went there. I was not married, and I was, you know, wasn't of age to go anywhere. Well, there's beer, and it was family. I went for the food. It was like a Sunday afternoon. We'd go down and have chili marinade. And I still love chili marinade [Nursal laughs]. It was good.

Nursal Matsu 10:04

So, it was a bar in the restaurant.

Carolyn Chavez 10:05

It was a bar in a restaurant—beer, beer bar.

Nursal Matsu 10:08

Beer bar?

Carolyn Chavez 10:09

Yeah, just beer at that time.

Nursal Matsu 10:10

What did it look like? Could you describe some of—

Carolyn Chavez 10:13

It was just a normal size building. I found that building in Chinatown had little rooms in the back. I was always curious [Nursal laughs]. What were those little rooms in the back for? [laughs] We never talked about it because I can't speak Spanish [laughs]. But I can imagine. But it's now part of the mission. It's the bedroom of the mission. So that's a better—in my view, that's a better use of that building [laughs].

Nursal Matsu 10:36

Do you remember some of the people that—

Carolyn Chavez 10:43

No, because I just went on the daytime. I did not go at night. But I know that a lot of people in the older generation know the El Faro, and they knew the Chavezes, and I know that she did some good. She helped a lot of people in different ways. Gave a young guy that came here—he said, "Oh, I work for your mother." So, I know she had friends and she helped.

Nursal Matsu 11:10

Could you share with us some of your memories of the Chinatown? How was it back then? Things people did on there?

Carolyn Chavez 11:19

Well, you know, I can tell you that when we moved here, the neighbors were Ahtye. She was a dentist in San Francisco. She was an aunt to Sydney Ahtye. And there was a sister-in-law, and I knew her as Momo. And my friend said she was called [unclear]. And in her writing, she says they came to see her from far away, like Monterey. And she had red lips. I remember her as having long hair. She went right outside my bedroom, and seeing her combing it down below, you know, her waist. And she also played cards across the street. I asked my friend, or someone, "What was across the street?" I don't remember going past a Chinese restaurant. And she said, "Well, across the street was a pool hall where the Chinese played cards." Well, Momo would come home in a taxi at three or four in the morning because she loved to play whenever they played, you know. So, I know Momo—I think she went down there to work one rodeo season and stayed, and became part of the history of Chinatown.

Nursal Matsu 12:32

So., what was your favorite thing on Chinatown?

Carolyn Chavez 12:36

Then or now?

Nursal Matsu 12:36

Favorite memory of Chinatown.

Carolyn Chavez 12:38

You know, I didn't go down further.

Nursal Matsu 12:40

Okay.

Carolyn Chavez 12:41

So, you know, somebody will tell you more [laughs].

Nursal Matsu 12:46

So, Ms. Chavez, I know that your last name comes from being married to a Hispanic origin male. How did it feel to be a white woman in the Hispanic community back then?

Carolyn Chavez 12:58

When I was in junior high, there were twins, and their name was Castro. And they were beautiful. And she's still beautiful. And I thought that was a cool name. I thought, I like that name. So, who knows what's in a young girl's mind? So, Chavez to me wasn't so far from that name Castro, and I knew his brother at Roosevelt, and maybe at Lincoln. So, I already knew of his brother. And so, it was just natural somehow. The Chinese next door and Hispanic man, you know, I'm an international person [laughs]. I started really young. I wanted to be a missionary at 13 and go to Africa. So, what do I know [laughs] about being a [unclear]? Being brought up a Christian I think has helped in that area. Love your neighbor.

Nursal Matsu 13:56

That's a very good view of Christianity. That's great that you took that aspect of it. What were people's reactions to your marriage to Mr. Chavez?

Carolyn Chavez 14:06

[unclear]

Nursal Matsu 14:08

People's reactions, like your family, your neighbors. Was it difficult for people—

Carolyn Chavez 14:12

I remember my mother's sister, one that doesn't always speak well. She says, "Can we say he's Spanish instead of Mexican?" [laughs] That was kind of—and they lived closer to Mexico instead of California. I thought that was kind of an ignorant statement. But, you know, that was that generation, you know? I don't know, it's really cute. I saw my classmates Saturday, and one of the girls actually gave me a baby shower, and they were teenagers giving me a baby shower. And I was so young— younger than them because I was always young in my class. I was born November 25th. And I told them, I says, "Can you imagine? You girls were giving me a baby shower." And actually, somebody made little tiny shirts. And I said how nice they were. And they were—she was an Okie. They lived out on Williams Road. I remember the baby shower. So, I think they accepted it, you know? They were good too.

Nursal Matsu 15:21

Okay, so did you and Mr. Chavez face any prejudice as a mixed couple?

Carolyn Chavez 15:29

You know, I remember—I didn't, I just, I don't—no, because we really didn't do much. I went to church, and he didn't. And I was busy all week. He worked, and I was a girl scout leader, I was PTA. And that was what I did for my fun, you know.

Nursal Matsu 15:50

Okay, so—

Carolyn Chavez 15:51

And I took care of the house. [laughs]

Nursal Matsu 15:53

So, I'm gonna go back to Chinatown. How different is Chinatown today?

Carolyn Chavez 15:58

I went down a year or so back to volunteer at Dorothy's. And so, I went about three times. I peeled five pounds of potatoes one time [laughs]. And I decided that some of those healthier looking men could do that. And now it's a culinary school. I love people. And it's not hard for me to talk to anyone. And so, I had fun handing out cake to some of the people—men—and I'd say happy birthday because it was happy birthday cake. Oh, my birthday was yesterday or my birthday is in a week. And I—that's where I, you know, hospitality is kind of what I've done forever. And I like to make people feel better than they are feeling, I hope. And I, and I think—and I went down at the at-risk, and I helped set up for some kind of artist. And I thought, painted over all the graffiti, and then he put up his beautiful paintings, and he was someone very important. And I don't know his name, but the people down there—I think he gives up his time, even though he's a great artist, has interesting, sort of like Greek paintings. I remember one, he's standing on a mountain with a bow and arrow, so somebody will know who that artist is by that description. So, I have been down there recently, but after my car got bumped—I parked across the street, and the motorhome guy, who I've talked to. So, I paid the \$500 deductible, and I thought, I can't afford to go down there and volunteer anymore. So that's why I haven't been back. But I have—I take things, I've always taken things to the mission. Not afraid—I went into the mission and went with church group and played the piano and sang and talked to them. And so, I'm not afraid to go anywhere. But that's the one thing, most people are afraid. Not Carolyn, not Carolyn. They're just people, and I have taken things to Dorothy's Place. They have women sleeping there at night, and they need things, and anything—clothes that, you know, I think, and I give scarves. I've gone down to the Methodist Church. There's a lot of churches doing a lot of good, just down by the Steinbeck Library. They house them in the daytime and feed them. And I talked to the minister, and I said "Your church is going to be blessed because you are healthy." And he said, "Well, it's away from Chinatown." So that tells us it's safer. No drugs, hopefully—uptown. But the lot that's on the corner where the garden is—I don't think my daughter knows, but my mother-in-law owned that—Mrs. Chavez. And I think they must have sold it when they left Chinatown. They moved to, their business to Gilroy. So, I think that's kind of interesting that the part—the lot where the garden is, was Mrs. Chavez's. And she had thought of having a drive-thru taco place, you know. So, I think I have a few little roots. I just—I'm not afraid of it. That's the thing. I'm not afraid. I go where angels fear to go [laughs]. Don't you think so?

Nursal Matsu 19:33

That was great. You love people, and you're a very helpful person. You like to contribute to your community. That was really great. So how different it is today? Like, could you compare your memories to the past today? Was Chinatown always a place for people that—where people weren't safe?

Carolyn Chavez 19:54

Well, the restaurant, the Chinese restaurant was frequented by everyone in town. The people from the courthouse I think went down there. And there was no fear. And I had no fear either. You know, it had little booths, and it was a nice restaurant. And Momo was the waiter [laughs] and Sydney's mom and dad lived above the restaurant. If you look at the building, it has sort of like a little balcony over the restaurant. They lived up there. So, you know, since I knew the—Dr. Ahtye next door—her name was [unclear]. I was comfortable. You know, I went down there with their daughter. So, it was just what life was, but I'm sure my mother didn't know exactly where I was going [laughs].

Nursal Matsu 20:49

I've noticed that Momo had an impact on your life. You were impressed by this person. So why do you think Momo left such a big impression on you?

Carolyn Chavez 21:02

Well, just the fact that I know that she was [unclear] her hair and it was long and black, and I could see her doing that. And then when she came home, I really didn't know her. I didn't really talk to her, but Mrs. Ahtye or Dr. Ahtye or Mrs. [unclear] I did a lot of things. I polished her silver. I did her Chinese hair, which is different—it was [unclear]. I actually put it in buns. I don't know how I knew how to do that. But I did. So, we were very close. Our houses are very close. So that—and she gave me a piece of jade, and my mother and I passed it back and forth in a little envelope. And when my grandson was born, I took it and I had to put it in a setting, and I asked him what that little stone was worth, and he said \$1,000. My mother and I had no idea what we had been given. And I did lose it. I had a grandson, and I used to have a lot of kids—boys. And one day I think they thought it was a pretty green ring. [laughs] And I'm sorry, I wish I had it today, but I'm still looking for another jade. So, I think we were pretty close. You know, my mother was the one that, you know, liked my husband. Didn't mind me going with him. So that's all I can say. [laughs]

Nursal Matsu 22:27

So, Ms. Chavez, as a community, what are some steps that we can take on current problems on Chinatown?

Carolyn Chavez 22:36

Well, if they're—I was in Seattle, and I took a picture of their Chinatown, and I didn't—it's not, it's not like our Chinatown. It had an entrance sign like San Francisco [unclear]. I went to one meeting with the developer, and I learned later that he really wasn't thinking of making it a street where there could be cafes. He was just going to put apartments, and I didn't know this, and I was at his table, and his wife was writing down what I was saying. And I said I like Santana, the street Santana, in San Jose, which is across from the mall. Have you ever been there? It's like going to another world. It's even across the street from the mall, and it's, like, beautiful. I love Santana. So, I'm visualizing Santana Chinatown. I

said—and they just, like, okay, this lady [laughs]. But that's what I told them. And it didn't go through. I wonder why [laughs] they didn't do it. They had no intentions of developing it. It was going to be just housing. This was going to be apartments, and I didn't know that, but Sydney Ahtye told me later, after the meeting. And so, I'm glad I said what I said. I'm always sometimes at the right place, that God gives me the right things. I don't even know I'm getting myself in trouble [laughs]. But that's what I visualized. You know, why can't we have a Santana Chinatown? We don't ever call it Santana. What's another name? We'll think of a pretty Chinese name, but I mean it should be cleaned up. And if they want apartments, put them behind, above like Santana and have cafes. And if they need a place where people who are on drugs to go in and stay dry. I don't know where, if it has to be away from there. But the people that are living on the streets, and people who are still dealing and buying drugs down there. They just let it exist. The prostitution was always there, I understand. We should stop it. I called—I was on a street over by—wherever. And I called. I saw one prostitute. And then I saw one over here on John Street. I got on the phone and called 911, and I said there's too many prostitutes. I'm watching them. I want them out of here. I live in this neighborhood. I live in Salinas. This is my town. Get 'em! And they said, "Okay." And then I was on Main Street, and my friend told me the day before, she saw this younger woman, who looked younger, and the guy was taking her money. She had been standing on the corner. So, the second day we pull up, and she goes, "There's the couple." I get on 911, and I call them, and I tell them, this is going on, on the corner of such and such. So [laughs] can't keep me quiet.

Nursal Matsu 25:47

No, that's great. So, you're telling us that as a community, we need to do something about it. Renew it, fix it up, clean it, and that's great.

Carolyn Chavez 25:58

This is the largest Chinatown between LA and San Francisco, is in Salinas. So, what are we messing around for? [laughs] You know, if somebody was willing—I think they were only going to put 3 million, and the rest would have been a grant. I think that's why. So, if we can come up with 3 million, and we get a grant, let's make it Santana with a Chinese name. But that's my, that's my story. That's what I think.

Nursal Matsu 26:28

Ms. Chavez, is there anything else that you would like to share with us that I haven't asked you?

Carolyn Chavez 26:33

No, I just have a daughter that went out there and graduated from this class that you're in. And she volunteered me, and I wasn't home, and I just didn't call her because I thought, I don't want her to say, "Mother, don't say this, don't say that." [laughs] So I just—I winged it. So, I hope that you can use what I have to say. And I'm gonna give you somebody's name that really lived down there, and maybe that'll be more in depth about what Chinatown was like.

Nursal Matsu 27:05

Ms. Chavez, I want to let you know that the information that you have shared with us today is really important and meaningful for our project. And everything you said is really, really helpful, and it's been great. Thank you so much for sharing with us your stories.