

Sheila Chin Morris
Narrator

Sherri Gebert-Fuller
Interviewer

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Waseca, Minnesota

SGF: It is Tuesday, October 1, 2002. This is Sherri Gebert-Fuller and I'm in Waseca, Minnesota, talking to Sheila Chin Morris.

All right, Sheila. Now, it's your turn after interviewing your dad several times. This morning I'm wondering if you could tell me about your childhood in St. Paul and I have a number of topics that we can cover. But, can you, please, start by telling me a bit about your parents?

SM: My mom was from a small town in Minnesota, Winnebago, Minnesota, and you already know about my dad coming from China. They met in a Chinese restaurant in downtown St. Paul. She was working as a waitress.

SGF: What was the name of that restaurant?

SM: I think it was the Port Arthur or it might have been... I think there was one called the Canton.

SGF: Yes.

SM: I'm not sure which one it was. It's the same restaurant where she met—which became friends for life—Donna Kee and Harold Kee. I don't believe they were married yet, Donna and Harold. Also other friends were Catherine, or Cookie, and Eddie Fong. It seemed like after my parents were married... I remember when I was little all of our good friends that we got together with for dinners and Sunday afternoons and some holidays, all the daddies were Chinese and all the mommies were white. My mom was from German decent. Donna was very Norwegian from way up north in Thief River Falls and even Donna's sister married a Chinese and Donna's neighbors...

SGF: [unclear]

SM: Yes. They were a Chinese and American couple. So that was our social system pretty much, until I was about ten years old when we moved to Roseville and then, of course, we were in a new neighborhood. We were very close to our neighbors.

SGF: So, was it a change then if you were in a, say, surrounding of Chinese daddies, as you said, and mothers that were Caucasian...? Did it change at all when you moved to Roseville? As a child did you sense the difference?

SM: In how we celebrated things or...?

SGF: Just, say, the other couples in the neighborhood.

SM: Well, we were just very close to our neighbors on the one side, the Stewarts because they had little kids. They just became very good friends. Howie and Bev were very interested in Chinese culture. They *loved* my dad's cooking.

SGF: Of course.

SM: I mean maybe the greatest draw is that they just loved to come over on Sundays when my dad was making some sort of fresh chop suey or roasting something. Howie would eat anything my dad cooked.

[Laughter]

SM: We had a garden, so there were fresh things. I remember on Christmas Eve, we always spent Christmas Eve with Bev and Howie. The kids were very little and I was baby-sitting age, so, you know, like Rog [Roger, her brother] and I took care of Mitch and Laurie a lot when the four of them would go out. My dad would always make beef, green pepper, and tomato chop suey because it was red and green and it looked Christmas-y. My mom and Beverly loved that. We had a good time for a long time. I loved to baby-sit their kids. But, Sunday afternoon was probably... It wasn't always, but that's when the guys were off. Usually they were cooking on Saturday. Most of them were in the restaurant business, so Sundays we'd get together as family and the guys would cook.

SGF: Mmm.

SM: They would just sit around and talk. I didn't think that we were very different than anybody else. When we lived on the East Side on Wells Street [St. Paul], I remember—maybe I was six or seven—going over to my friend Sharon's house, just two houses over, for supper and other people's cooking was very different. [chuckles] I had my first cauliflower with butter only on it and thought, 'Gee, what the heck is this? Where's the gravy?'

SGF: [Laughter]

SM: And, her mom gave me a sugar sandwich, which I understand is very Swedish, a piece of white bread with butter and white sugar sprinkled on it, which I would not touch now. I think that was a Swedish thing. Yes, I thought everybody cooked their broccoli and cauliflower and vegetables stir fried and have a little gravy and rice with it. That was very different when I first started, you know, socializing with friends in their houses.

SGF: Sure.

SM: I had my first taste of not Chinese American foods.

SGF: But, you had a nice mix then.

SM: Sure. And, I thought it was normal that my dad cooked. He didn't cook, you know, all the time. It depended on what stint he had at the restaurant, but my dad cooked a lot when he was home for the evening and certainly on Sunday, he always cooked, even the pot roast. My mom was sort of the second fiddle.

SGF: From my understanding here, he loves to cook.

SM: Yes. I've come to understand through the years that that's how he can express himself and that's how he can give of himself to other people. He can cook for them. That's his gift. He knows that. I have allowed for that. Now that he's older and he's close by and he wants to relate to me in my busy lifestyle now, what he can do for me is cook for me, so I let him.

SGF: I would, too. [Laughter]

It's a wonderful gift. What do you remember, say, about your elementary school or middle school, high school? Any experiences that stand out?

SM: Well, I enjoyed school for the most part. I just remember certain lessons. I remember studying about the explorers and I can just about remember what every one of them did. I remember that lesson. I must have had a very good teacher. But, it was a little... There were some mixed things. My mother left my dad when I was about four years old, about to enter Kindergarten, so that year my brother and I lived with Donna. We lived with her friend Mickey. At each place, it was like for a couple of months, because she was gone for about nine months. She went to New York to stay with her brother. So, I went to three different Kindergartens. We stayed with Donna Kee. I just remember that being kind of odd and also kind of difficult. By the time I was twelve or thirteen—I had known that I had been pulled out of school and had to go to another school—I was very sensitive to new kids, the ones that would come to school and I knew they were new. I knew exactly how they felt.

SGF: Yes.

SM: It had happened some more in other moves. I knew what it was like to be new.

When I was about ten years old, my dad tried running his own restaurant. He bought Twin Towns Take-Out on Lake Street near the Mississippi River and the bridge to Marshall [Avenue]. It wasn't very successful. We moved from the East Side of St. Paul where I was very comfortable, where I'd always known those kids. I knew everybody on the block. It was very comfortable. It was all I knew. We moved from there to South Minneapolis, in Richfield. My

mother moved from a place where you had coffee in your housedress over the back fence to a place where you put on nylons and a hat to go to coffee. That was one thing I remember my mother telling me that was different, not that she couldn't do that, but it was just different.

Then, we went to the Sister Kenny School. There were different rules that we didn't know about. Like, on the very first day of school, my brother and I didn't know the school guard rules for crossing the street and we crossed against what the guard had to do. Anyway, I know we did that and we were called out of school on our very first day, out of our classrooms.

SGF: Oh, really.

SM: I was horrified. We had to go see the principal and they explained the rules. Wouldn't it have been nice if they had done that before we went to school?

SGF: Before, right. Now, was that a public or a private school?

SM: It was a public school, Sister Kenny School. I made a few friends, ones that were closest to the house. I think her name was Sandy Larson. I had a very good teacher, but I did have one or two negative experiences that year and they were my very first. You know, nobody had ever called me names or put me down for any reason. But, there was a little boy named Lyle in that class and when I think back, it was only ten years after World War II but people were still sensitive about Japanese. So, this little boy just would act very unkind standing in line, when we had to get in line to go lunch or something. I remember him really hurting me one day when I was in line with him. He couldn't be next to me. He had to move so that he didn't have to be right next to me. Then, when he did, he quietly said to the other boy or person, "Oh, you have to stand next to *her*." You know, it made me feel very hurt and I started to think that there was something wrong with me. I started to look at myself in the mirror and wonder why he didn't like me, not that I really wanted to care whether he liked me or not. [Chuckles] I felt still new. When I think back, it was only a few months in that school.

But, I had really positive things, too. My teacher, Mr. Sirotiak, was just terrific. He had me involved in lots of things. I was in a play that year and I played a little Dutch girl, because I am awfully Dutch.

SGF: Oh, that's great.

SM: German.

SGF: Yes.

SM: I thought that was curious, but I went along with it. Then, we had to move again. As much as I thought I didn't like it, I didn't want to move again because I was afraid.

SGF: Sure.

SM: Then, we moved from South Minneapolis to Roseville and, then, had just the opposite experience. Nobody ever treated me like that little Lyle did. I went into Fairview Junior High School. I remember the first day of that school and I remember the two little boys that I had a crush on for the next few years getting up and letting me have their seat, so I was really confused at that point. [Laughter] By the time I was eleven, twelve, I was pretty confused.

There was only, maybe, one other negative experience. I was up on Larpenteur [Avenue] and I think I had gone in a store and my mother was in the car. These two little boys came around the corner on a bicycle. I started to think that maybe they wanted to talk to me or that they thought I was pretty or they were going to make a pass or something. All I remember is that they were mumbling and, then, I heard, "Yes, you Jap." There I was, my spirit starting to lift with some attention from some boys and what it was like was like you're floating in a balloon and somebody cut your string and you're soaring to the ground and you hit. It really is like being hit on the side of the head or stabbed or whatever. It's very sudden and it's very, very hurtful.

Yet, it left me with a sensitivity for anybody who's a little bit different. Anybody who feels a little new and insecure, I immediately have feelings for. It doesn't matter, you know, that it was fifty years ago. It could be a meeting where I know everybody, but somebody new comes in, I always wonder how they feel and if they're feeling okay and can I help alleviate that?

SGF: Yes, well, that's a pretty wonderful lesson to fight the hurt.

SM: Yes, so despite the hurt, I'm glad to have that sensitivity. Actually, I'm very proud of that.

SGF: Interesting.

So, from what I gather thus far, you moved a lot. You met a lot of different people. Sundays were set aside to get together with other families. In connection with that, I'm wondering did your father speak Chinese or Mandarin or Cantonese?

SM: Cantonese.

SGF: At home, were you expected to learn the language? Did you attend any language schools?

SM: No, I never tried to learn Chinese formally until I was an adult and, then...

SGF: Then it's tough.

SM: Yes, pretty rough. I found out later that my mother didn't want my dad to teach us Chinese. She seemed to embrace Chinese culture. She loved Chinese art. I remember she always sparked to a painting that had bamboo in it. She loved the Chinese things that my dad gave her or that they acquired. She had a *Kuan Yin* statue. That was the goddess of mercy and became kind of significant for her. In every other way, she embraced Chinese things, but she didn't want to be left out of a conversation between my dad and us kids or else she felt left out enough when his friends would come over and they would speak Chinese.

SGF: Right.

SM: My dad would always, if we asked, “What did Savvy say?” or “What did Uncle say?” he would give us some interpretation of it, so he seemed to be ready that way. Or I wonder why my mother thought that she couldn’t learn, maybe with us, a few phrases, but she didn’t. I think it’s more likely that she didn’t think she was capable of learning it, not that she really didn’t want to. I knew that because that was the discussion later in the family.

SGF: It’s a challenging language.

SM: Yes. But, I’ve heard that in other Chinese-American families that the wife didn’t want the kids to learn Chinese, [unclear].

When I finally went to visit my sister in Philadelphia, I was only with her for a few days, but she immediately stated teaching me a few words and I was surprised at how quickly I got some of it. I thought, gee, if I stayed here long enough I could probably catch on. I wouldn’t be able to write it, but I could understand maybe people in conversation. Even to this day, I can tell when somebody says they like something. The word ‘ching-jeh’. I don’t even know if I got that right. Then, I like to say, ‘yong-jah-mong-kah.’ That means two pieces of shrimp.

[Laughter]

SM: That’s all I remember.

SGF: Do you eat it that often?

[Laughter]

SM: I remember that from my sister’s lesson because she was cooking when she was teaching me. She was cooking shrimp and then she... ‘yong-jah-mong-kah.’ It’s sounds Chinese, doesn’t it? [Laughter] I can impress my friends. I can say, “*Gong Xi Fa Cai*,” which is Happy New Year, and I can say, ‘veng-jah-lung-pah’.

SGF: Well, speaking of Chinese New Year, you mentioned earlier that you had attended a number of them with your father.

SM: Yes.

SGF: Could you just share a few experiences about those gatherings?

SM: It’s very nostalgic for me now because they don’t happen anymore. But, for me, it was immersion in the Chinese side of the family. When we were at home, we would have pot roast on Sundays or roast chicken or something Chinese, barbeque ribs. But, when we went to the On Leong Chinese New Year’s dinner, it was a lot of Chinese, a lot of Chinese talking, a lot of,

“What did he say, Dad?” There were huge round tables, a banquet table with ten people. My dad would see friends. He was so happy. My dad was always so happy when he’d go there because he would see old friends and he could talk Chinese and they would catch up on news. I’m sure there was some exchange about what was happening in China and everybody’s relatives and if they were okay and if there were new ways of helping each other because it was kind of a support group for them. They all had relatives in the old country, so if they were helping each other in any way, a new contact or something, you know, to help get money or get news or send something or get something from China, then that was an exchange. It certainly wasn’t just on New Year’s Day, but it was one of the social times where they would see some people that they didn’t ordinarily.

SGF: The On Leong was an association of business owners?

SM: Well, you know, you probably know more about what it was than I do. I was told it was like a Chinese labor union, Leong. It was an informal/formal support system that happened to come [unclear] On Leong. I don’t know if the Leong part was related to my dad’s village, Taishan, because there is a Leong Family Association and there was a Hip Sing Association.

SGF: Right.

SM: I honestly don’t know. My guess is that it’s associated with another part of Taishan, but it’s definitely a Cantonese system.

SGF: All right.

SM: I’m sure they started way back during the railroad days when Chinese were coming over to work the mines or the railroads and there was no American help system to help them if they were starving or if they needed assistance with immigration or whatever.

SGF: Did they have their own building or did the Chinese New Year take place in someone’s restaurant?

SM: There was the On Leong Association Club. It was rented. It was upstairs over... I don’t know if that was a restaurant. It probably was a restaurant at one time, a Chinese restaurant, and then it became other businesses and they just kept renting the upstairs, several rooms. Like I had mentioned before, you’d go up the steps and you’d come into the main room, which had a lot of Chinese teakwood furniture and an altar with a Buddha. On New Year’s certainly, there would be incense burning and oranges and the boiled chicken for the statue. My dad didn’t spend much time explaining that to us at all, so I didn’t learn anything more about it until I asked some questions and, even then, he has like a child’s learning of that, what his grandmother told him.

SGF: I see.

SM: But, you know, he left China at seventeen and never really practiced that again until when my stepmother, Yuet, died and we were at the gravesite and my dad...no, it wasn’t then. I’m

sorry. It was when we went to visit my grandfather's grave in Chicago. My dad's father died in Chicago. He was buried in a Chinese section of one of the large cemeteries there. We were on our way out to Philadelphia, actually, to visit my sister in the early 1970s and my dad wanted to stop in Chicago to visit my grandfather's grave. We found it, all Chinese characters, and a four-digit number.

SGF: The four-digit number represented...?

SM: The grave number.

SGF: Okay. All right.

SM: He and my stepmother brought the oranges. We stopped at a Chinese restaurant and got a boiled chicken with the head on and the feet and everything and some Chinese whiskey and some incense. There is a thing that they do: the chicken and the oranges are in a certain place and the three shots of whiskey are at a certain place and the incense is lit. I saw my dad get down on his knees and do the prayerful bowing to the ancestors and I'd never seen him do... That was the first...most Chinese thing I ever saw my dad do and I was twenty-eight at the time, I think. When they were done, they brought the chicken back to the restaurant with his friends and we ate the chicken. We poured the liquor in the grass and cleaned everything up and went and ate the chicken with his friends in China Town.

But, back to the On Leong upstairs... You'd go down a hallway and one side was the big kitchen and there were volunteer cooks every year. I think my dad cooked maybe one year, but there were certainly enough Chinese cooks. There was always somebody who would volunteer to cook. Then, on the other side, there were various rooms that you could go into. I think there was some gambling afterwards in one of these rooms. I think, from what I understand from what I read later, that this was also a place for immigrants, new immigrant Chinese men, who would come over or the sons came or something. If they had absolutely no place to go on their first night, they could always go and get a bed there before they would find another place for them to stay. They could get some information. I don't know if the officers had office hours in the old days. It didn't seem like this place was open any other time than when they held their meetings and, then, when they had the banquet. Or it was rented for a Chinese bride and groom, maybe.

SGF: So, it served many purposes.

SM: Yes.

SGF: Maybe my memory isn't serving me, but did you say in the past Harold Kee was an interpreter for a number of things?

SM: Yes, I know that he was available for the immigration service, to help work as an interpreter for new immigrant Chinese, to facilitate their processing or he helped them if they needed to find whatever services: doctors, dentists, lawyers. He helped them find a house or find an apartment or a job.

SGF: All very important, especially if you're new to the United States.

SM: Yes. Harold was college-educated. There were very few of all of these Chinese... In fact, as far as I know, in my childhood, Harold was the only one that was actually college-educated. He had gotten a degree in electrical engineering back in the 1920s.

SGF: In the Twin Cities?

SM: I don't know where he went to school for that, but he could never use it. They wouldn't hire a Chinese engineer—he told me that—when he went to try to get a job or else engineering wasn't in big demand. So, he had to go into the restaurant business.

SGF: This was after World War II then you're talking about?

SM: No. If you're talking about when he got his degree...

SGF: Right, in the 1920s.

SM: He was born in 1899.

SGF: Okay. What I'm wondering is do you think the job market improved after World War II when Chinese-Americans could become citizens? I don't know if you recall him talking about that at all? So, he stayed in the restaurant business his whole life?

SM: Yes, and then he helped with immigration. I'm sure he was paid when he did specific things for the immigration, but I think the other things, he kind of just did to help people.

SGF: Sure. Why do you think that Chinese New Year's aren't celebrated in the same way that you recall when you were a child?

SM: Oh, that one incident back in the late 1970s... I'm not sure exactly when it was, but I'm pretty sure it was before I was married. David Fong was a wealthy Chinese restaurateur and his family had been in Minneapolis for many years. His father had a place, the Moy Café on Broadway [Avenue] for many years before that, his father and his uncle, I think. Anyway, David did very well and his mom and his sister were terribly proud of him. Actually, he was very active in...

[tape interruption]

David was very well known. He was very personable. He had a beautiful family. Anyway, at this one Chinese New Year's dinner, David and his wife and family were all there, as were hundreds. We'd get maybe 150 people and fill up that room. Afterwards, my dad told me the next day or I guess I heard it on the news, too, that David and his wife had been robbed at the dinner after most of the people had left. I think there was some gambling or mahjongg playing or something.

Because David was well known and thought to be carrying some money, they were robbed and even, I think they were assaulted. It really scared the Chinese community. It was just very sudden and very violent and the next year, they didn't have it. I was waiting for it to happen. I asked my dad, "When is the On Leong dinner?" and he said, "Oh, they decided to not have it this year because of that trouble with the robbery." They may have had one or two, but it was never like that. It was never up at the On Leong Association.

SGF: I have not done any checking. Do you know if that association even exists anymore?

SM: Maybe informally, yes.

SGF: Did your mother work outside the home at all?

SM: No. My mother was stricken with arthritis when she was about twenty-nine. She had worked pretty much only as a waitress when she was working. But, then, she had me and Rog right away. She did work for Harold when he opened up a take-out place, Kee's Chow Mein, in St. Louis Park. She worked on maybe it was Saturday and Sunday afternoon, because I know that she learned about football working there. When they weren't busy, there was a football game on and Harold taught her the rules of football and my mother was an avid Vikings' fan.

SGF: Oh, really.

SM: What she did do in later life... Let's see, when I was in college, I think she started volunteering for the Red Cross as a driver and she enjoyed that a lot. My mom loved to take care of old men and I think it had to do with the fact that her father was much older. He was well into his forties when she was born, so I just think it reminds her of her being with her dad.

SGF: Sure.

SM: She had nursed a friend of the family, who was in his late eighties and nineties, when he was failing and she did that just because she cared about the family. She went over and took care of "Unc," you know, just about everyday until he died. I think it was after that that she went down to the Red Cross and volunteered and they told her that she could drive people, you know, take them to their doctor's appointments and things. So, when she got her own nameplate and she got a uniform to wear, which is a little nurse's hat with the stripes on it, and a blouse and it had the Red Cross insignia on it, she was really proud of that.

SGF: Yes, and she should have been. One other thing before I move to the next topic is I know your dad worked at a number of different restaurants.

SM: Yes.

SGF: Are there any restaurants or memories of going to visit him that stand out?

SM: Yes. My first memories of visiting my dad at work was when he worked at the Snelling Café on Snelling [Avenue] and Selby [Avenue in St Paul]. Generally, we were going to get the car, you know, or bring the car back for him to get home. I don't know how we got there, if we were with friends or if we took the bus or something, but I just remember appearing at the... We'd always go to the backdoor of the restaurant, which was a screen door. It was summertime. And, my dad was always dressed in white and he had his long apron on and his cook's hat, which I just loved, the puffy chef's hat. He'd be glad to see us and he'd say, "Well, what's going on, here? Who are these little kids?" We'd come in the kitchen and it was so hot! It was so hot and greasy and, of course, when I was little, the stoves were high and you didn't want to touch anything because everything was hot or greasy. He'd show us how to get through the kitchen to the dining room and, then, he'd have us sit on the stools at the counter and ask us what we want. He'd generally get us a dish of ice cream or maybe a Coke or something. He and my mom would talk and, then, we'd be on our way. It was always a big deal. I always loved it, because the other cooks were always glad to see Harry's kids or, you know, any kids. So, they would maybe slip us a quarter or do something or tell me how pretty I looked. [Laughter]

SGF: Sure, those are all good things when you're a little kid.

SM: I was always curious about what they were doing, you know. Harry—the other cook's name was Harry at one time—would be carrying something out of the cooler. The door to the cooler would be open and you'd see all these things full of raw meat or celery. To make chow mein, you had to make a huge amount of chopped celery and it used to be in these big tin carry-alls that were just huge. I bet that you wouldn't believe...it was this huge amount. Maybe my dad would show me what he was cooking or maybe he was stirring a wok full of chow mein. I just thought my dad was the best. He was so strong. But, I'll never forget the heat of that kitchen, because when I'd sit on his lap when he got home, it was always so toasty and it would be wintertime. I'd just feel so warm and cozy on his lap, but I figured that his body just soaked up all that heat of the kitchen and it kept him warm *all* winter long.

[Laughter]

That was my child's logic and I believed that always. Because he had to carry things... I remember when I worked with him when I was a little older at Kee's Chow Mein, we'd work together on Sunday afternoons.

SGF: How old were you?

SM: I started working there when I was about thirteen for a four-hour shift I'd do with him on Sunday and I'd get five bucks to do that. When he was cooking chow mein, the wok was about... What is that? About twenty-four inches in diameter?

SGF: Yes.

SM: Maybe thirty inches in diameter. It was huge. So, he'd bring out a big bin-full of ground pork and put that in with the oil and he'd stir fry that and, then, he'd add a big bin-full of celery

and I don't know if there was onion in it and to stir it, you've got to use both arms going one clockwise, the other one counter clockwise at the same time, stirring all of this stuff. Then, you'd have to get it up to a boil and you'd add all the soy sauce, salt, sugar, and in those days MSG [monosodium glutamate]. Then, you'd thicken it with cornstarch and you'd have to make a big bowl full of cornstarch. Then, when it was bubbling, then you'd put in the cornstarch. You'd have to stir it really fast so it didn't get clumpy. So, my dad had very strong shoulders. I notice now that he's eighty, because he hasn't been working like that for fifteen years, that he's kind of mushy now, his arms. His muscle is gone now, but he used to have very, very strong shoulders. He'd come home from work and, for years, I would, at the age of about ten, eleven, twelve, rub his feet with alcohol because his feet would be burning when he'd get home from work at night.

SGF: He stood how many hours? He worked long shifts, right?

SM: Right, right. When he worked at the Snelling, he'd go to work at five-thirty or six in the morning to get all the American food, the roasts and chicken, whatever, going early in the morning. Then, he'd come home at three. He would nap for an hour, go to Kee's Chow Mein at four and work till eight. He did that six days a week and every other Sunday, he worked an afternoon at Kee's. Occasionally, he'd ask me to rub his back and he'd stretch out on the floor in front of the TV and I'd sit up on top of him and just give him a really good backrub with some alcohol. He appreciated that.

SGF: Now, your dad also worked at Nankin?

SM: Yes. He started there after 1970, after my mom died. I think Harold sold Kee's Chow Mein. He must have done that about that same time because, for a while, Dad was working at Kee's full time, I think during the 1960s. Then, he got this job at the Nankin. I thought that was pretty cool because I knew about the reputation of the Nankin. So, I just thought that was kind of a nice new life for him.

SGF: Yes.

SM: Plus, it was always fun to tell people that my dad worked at the Nankin because they always knew where that was.

SGF: And, it's the one restaurant people always ask me about, for some reason, so it must have really had a reputation.

SM: Then, when I'd go and visit him... By then I was all grown up and I had my own business in the IDS Center.

SGF: Your own business was?

SM: Sheila Chin Design, graphic design. I was doing cookbooks for Pillsbury and corporate logos for new businesses, posters. I was kind of a broad service graphic designer. But, I was independent and I enjoyed that a great deal.

During those years, I loved to go over and go see my dad at the Nankin. If I was staying late or working late, I'd go over for dinner and if I could get in there and let him know I was there, then he'd treat me. [Laughter]

SGF: Even better yet.

SM: Again, I could walk in the front door of the Nankin and Howard Chinn... I think some people get my dad mixed up with [him] because of the last name, but Howard spelled Chinn with two 'n's. He looked like a sumo wrestler. He was a great person in size and in generosity. He was kind of a bouncer for the place, too. He didn't let just anybody... Anyway, he was very gracious to me when he finally met me and knew that I was working downtown. My dad was very proud of me. If he saw me, he'd say, "Ah, Sheila, Sheila, come on, I bet you want to see your dad." He'd say, "You go right through there. He's right in the kitchen right there. Do you want a table? I'll find you a table." He would find me nice quiet little table and he'd get me a drink or something and, then, "Did you tell your dad what you want? Okay." He always took such great care of me. I missed [him] when he retired. It was not as much fun to walk into the Nankin.

SGF: Right. Well, and it just sounds like there was a sense of community within the restaurants themselves.

SM: Yes. If they were proud of their kids, it was known and, of course, they all shared that, too. That's a great, actually, a Chinese characteristic, I think: pride in your children and, then, racking up your grandchildren and showing them off and success. Their children's success meant that they were successful, no matter what they were doing at the time. It goes back further, too. Getting to this country meant that they seized that opportunity and the family is successively successful, so that is a point of real pride.

I know that I went to college... I was very aware that when I did go to college I wanted to go because my friends were going, but when I got there and it was hard and I had to decide whether I was really going to finish or not, getting the degree meant, for me, being the first one on both sides of family to get a college degree. So, I wanted to do that for both my parents, because neither one of them went past the eighth grade. I especially wanted to do it for my dad. He couldn't send me to college. I worked my way through, but whatever money he had, both my parents told me, would be reserved for Roger, my brother, to go to college and he chose not to finish.

SGF: So, did you benefit from that or...?

SM: I think I benefited from the motivation, because I had to decide that that's what I wanted to do and that's what I wanted. I had a good job at school that allowed me to do that. Kids nowadays don't have that opportunity. If they wanted to work through their way through, it's virtually impossible without loans and then having that heavy debt in their early work life. I

knew at that point, too,... Maybe I could have gotten scholarships but I was too afraid of not getting a scholarship. [Laughter]

I thought it's a lot safer just earning the darned money, so I never applied for a scholarship. I wanted to go to art school, but that was way out of reach, so I went to the University of Minnesota and I was able to work my way through and I was able to have jobs that paid me enough so that I could do that and both jobs helped me in my career as a graphic designer. One was in Publications and the other one was doing poster artwork for the Student Center.

SGF: Oh! for the Student Center?

SM: Yes. It was great. They were great jobs.

SGF: You were at the University of Minnesota in the 1960s?

SM: The 1960s.

SGF: That was the same time that, I believe, there was a growing activism among a number of what they would call minority students. Something I recently read... Linda Wong Hohman, started a group there with Chinese-Americans and students from China. Were you involved in anything like that?

SM: No. I don't remember that name. I don't remember that at all.

SGF: I know they protested the Vietnam War.

SM: Yes, I was very aware of that. I graduated in 1969, a half a year late. I got involved in one protest for the war, marching down University Avenue to the Capitol. It was just getting really strong when I was graduating. One of my last little flyers that I did—I don't remember who I did it for—was a little flyer to hand out over some protest at Morrill Hall. I remember doing a graphic that had like a... what do you call them?... putting up an obstruction, so people couldn't get through. That was my graphic with these black 'x's. It was something to do with Morrill Hall. I don't remember now. I thought, geez, you know, I didn't believe in the war, but I didn't want to be involved in this either. I wanted to go to work. I remember finally graduating and I just wanted to get away from school and get into a work life, so I left that behind.

SGF: Sure.

SM: Then, there were some awful things that happened before the war was finally over with. I remember thinking it was taking so long and the Vietnam War was such a drag.

SGF: Yes.

SM: When it finally was done, I just... man, that was incredible.

SGF: Wanted to move on, yes. Yes.

SM: Let's be positive. [sigh] Yes, it was a hard time.

SGF: Let's tie that with another challenging time in your life. This is something you've talked to me about before and it occurred in the 1960s when your father received a letter from the Federal Government. You learned something about your father's identity for the first time. I believe that was called the Forgiveness Act. I looked it up on the computer.

SM: Really? What year was that exactly? Do you know?

SGF: It was the early 1960s and it came about because... I can't remember the individual's name, but it was post-[Joseph R.] McCarthy and he started getting a little radical about all the Chinese that were in the United States and can they be trusted. This is where the "Paper Son" issue came up and, fortunately, Congress said, "Okay, we've had enough of the McCarthy years. Let's not redo that again. Let's provide this..."

SM: But, the Chinese Communism was a giant, giant force and the whole idea of dealing with Mao Tse-tung and what were they going to do with Mao Tse-tung? Was this going to be an enemy that we were going to promote as another war and everybody was afraid of World War III.

SGF: Yes, so as a result a number of people received letters and you told me that...

SM: I was born in 1946, so I remember being at the age of about thirteen or fourteen when my mother told me that Daddy might get deported. I think she just told me; I don't remember Roger being there. It was just frightening. I was Daddy's little girl and I know that and I probably still am. I adored my dad. I was just appreciating at that age, when I was about eleven or twelve, or even be curious about my dad's history, where we came from and why and how were we and why were we and all that stuff and so I kind of fell in love with my dad at the age of twelve because I started to fully grasp what he did to get to this country and why—at the age of twelve, you can count all the things you don't have—we had all that we had, you know, which was a lot. So, the idea of my dad being deported was just terrifying to me. It didn't seem like the fear lasted very long. Mom told me that I think for her own fear. I think she had to talk to somebody. I don't remember her being in tears either—there were still a lot of unknowns—but I'm sure she was frightened, too.

It didn't seem to be very long before we learned that President [John F.] Kennedy or Congress or whatever, had said that if you just go through naturalization again, tell us the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth now, you can stay and you'll be automatically forgiven and allowed to stay. I know that was because they found out how many families, American families, were going to be absolutely uprooted and destroyed if they actually tried to deport all these fathers. I'm sure that would have been a large dent in, I don't know if the overall US economy, but certainly many local, and whatever... I'm sure most of the Chinese were in business. If they weren't being hired in American business, they were working for Chinese-American businesses

and they were entrepreneurs as happens in every wave of immigration. If they aren't being hired, then they have to find a way to support themselves and so they go into business.

SGF: So, it was at this time that you discovered a couple of things, that your father's name, Chin...

SM: Was really Leong. I always knew, when I had to fill out forms for school and everything, my dad's name was Harry Gee, G-e-e, Chin. Okay? That's what I grew up, until I was fourteen, with. Then, at some point I knew that his Chinese name was Chin Hong Gee. That's where he got Harry Gee Chin. Okay? That was the Chinese version of Harry Gee Chin. So, I got used to that for a while.

[Laughter]

Then, at fourteen, I find out that his name is really Liang Cheung You, so that was a real bolt from left field. Oh, geez, another name. Then, my dad had the choice of going with his real name, Liang, or staying with Harry Chin. My dad doesn't like to make waves. He doesn't like to upset things. You know, he likes things nice and... I guess it was more important for him to just keep the order that we had had in our lives. The mortgage was in that name. Their marriage certificates were in that name. Our birth certificates were all in that name. Why go through all that change and so he let our name be Chin.

That would be a second regret that I would have—he didn't teach me Chinese—that he didn't let me have my real Chinese name when he had the opportunity to. I grow in reverence knowing that I have that name, but I never actually got to use it. You know, the only way I got to use it, Sherri, was when I was creating a new logo for myself. When I moved into the IDS Center, I decided I needed an uptown identity and I could afford to by that time get an embossed... I always wanted a blind embossed letterhead. So, I took the Chinese character for Liang and did a graphic version of it so it fit into a nice little square box and blind embossed it on the letterhead that said, "Sheila Chin Design." But, here was Liang. If somebody wanted to know about it, they could ask me. Many people did ask me, "What does that character mean?" Then, I would say, "Well, it's our real Chinese family name." And, I would quickly tell them about the "Paper Sons." I won an award with that design.

SGF: You did?

SM: Yes, at the Art Director's...

SGF: Do you still have a copy or example of it?

SM: Yes, yes, somewhere, I do.

SGF: Okay. I'd be interested in seeing that.

[tape interruption]

I just asked Sheila if the time that her father received the letter was also a time when she discovered something about her father's family in China.

SM: Yes, I'm not sure which came first, the announcement about his name or the knowledge that my dad had another family. That was probably...it *was* more impactful, of course. The other was just my dad, man of mystery. [chuckles] That was just an incredible time to find out that my dad had another family. I wasn't grown up yet, by the way, I was fourteen.

SGF: A vulnerable age in itself.

SM: Yes, it was. But, grown to the age of fourteen as the oldest and, then, find out that you're the middle child, that was *extremely* interesting.

What happened was that one summer when I was fourteen, my mother said that a cousin was going to come to visit from China, that she had just gotten married, that she was Uncle Johnny's daughter—Uncle Johnny was my “paper uncle,” the pretend brother, from Milwaukee and his daughter was coming from China; she had just married a Chinese man and they were going to come and live in the United States—and that this daughter wanted to visit her Uncle Harry. That's what we were told.

When she arrived, here was this beautiful Chinese young woman. She was only twenty-one. She had beautiful dresses and my mother told me that she hand stitched these beautiful dresses, taffeta...I mean hand stitching the work that would have been done with the sewing machine. They were beautiful. She was very pretty. Her husband was kind of strange looking. He was a lot older than her. He was very thin and not very good-looking. I wondered why they were together, you know, another question. Anyway, when I saw her, I immediately thought, my god! She looks a lot like my dad. She doesn't look very much like Uncle Johnny, but she sure looks like my dad. But, dut, dut, dut... But, of course, he's her uncle. I was very nice to her. I was very curious. I thought she was really special.

She seemed to like me right away, and my brother. She asked lots of questions, but she spoke no English, so it was all in translation. They stayed overnight with us, and the next morning, she was crying on the phone. She wanted to talk to my dad, so my mom dialed the phone. He was at work. She was crying and she was talking in Chinese and I didn't understand what was going on.

Part of this is kind of in and out. I don't remember what happened exactly next, except that I don't know if it was that same day or if it was months later but, eventually, I was told that she was my sister and not my cousin and when she was staying with us that time, it was because she had just come to this country and that she had grown up in Hong Kong with her mother, who had been married to my dad before he left China and that he left China when she was only two months old and she had never seen her father and that her mother in Hong Kong had matched her with Ben, her husband, because he had American citizenship and he had a business in Philadelphia, and that he could bring her to the United States so she could see her father and she could live in the United States. So, she was not in love with Ben. She was forced to marry Ben so

that she could come. Then, she is brought to America, meets her father, and then so what? He's got a whole other family. How was she going to be in his life? Yes, how was she going to be in our lives?

Right after she was with us in St. Paul, they went to live in Philadelphia where Ben's relatives were and he had a business. I think the next year my mom and dad flew out to Philadelphia to visit Susan, because I think she had had her first baby by then. [sigh] I don't know what went on between my mom and dad over that issue. I never saw or heard fighting or actually, I don't remember seeing any tears either. I remember my mom trying to embrace the situation and make the best of it. I think Susan was polite. I think it was very difficult for her, because her mother was still alive and living in Hong Kong at this time. I think my mother was assured that that wasn't going to be a problem. But, of course, it did become a problem. I only heard about Susan... I suppose I talked to her on the phone a little bit. She was learning some English, just to say, "Hi." I know that my dad talked to her on the phone. Then, there were grandchildren coming: Donald, Stevie, and Sue Ann, the first three. She had three kids in two rooms over a restaurant: I know that.

Then, it was when I was college that Susan's mother came to the United States. This is something that's going on between my parents and I'm just hearing bits and pieces of it. But, I understand that my father's first wife's name was Yuet, Y-u-e-t. She came to the United States. I'm sure she came to Philadelphia and visited with Susan. Then, she came to Minneapolis. When she came to Minneapolis, she wanted to see my dad. She just wanted to see him, I think. My Uncle Fred and his wife, Lucille, facilitated that. When my mother found out that they were doing that, she never talked to them again, ever. She was staying at their house and my dad saw her a few times and tried to send her away. "Go live with Susan or go back to Hong Kong or whatever, but I can't be with you." I don't know if he gave her money or what. But, I try to understand everybody's part in this and I have compassion for everybody, including myself.

SGF: Yes.

SM: Probably most of all for my dad, because I think he was really trying to take care of everybody.

SGF: That's a difficult place to be.

SM: I think if you stretch yourself out that thin, you end up not taking care of anybody. I think he was trying to be diplomatic. I think he was in his own way trying to be direct. I just think it was incredibly hard for him. I think he tried to tell both my mother and Yuet what they wanted to hear and I don't think he could follow through. She did go back to Philadelphia for a while, but she would come every once in a while and stay at Fred's and want to see my dad and I would know it after the fact.

SGF: I'm trying to calculate this in my head. So, Yuet hadn't seen your father for how many years before coming to Philadelphia?

SM: No, my dad was always in Minnesota.

SGF: Right, but he left when he was seventeen, correct, left China?

SM: Yes.

SGF: So, how many years then had it been since his wife in China had seen him?

SM: Oh, twenty-two, twenty-three years.

I wondered if there was any relationship there and I think my mother probably thought, how can there be any relationship there? They hardly knew each other. They were teenagers.

SGF: Was that an arranged marriage?

SM: Yes, it was arranged.

When they finally did get together after my mom died, I was really curious about whether he was going to be happy and that's part of how I came to accept her is because she did make my dad happy. They only had six years together, but he was much more social. He was social when he was with my mother for a while. The get-togethers I talked about, eventually if we were over to Bev and Howie's next door for supper, the conversation would go in such a way that my dad just either couldn't keep up with it or it didn't interest him anymore or it was too tiring or what... Howie and Bev and my mom would talk about football or politics or the neighbors or the kids or something and my dad would eventually drift into the other room by the TV. That was pretty regular.

When I saw my dad with Yuet, they went to Las Vegas and gambled. They went out to dinner, and would go visit Chinese friends. I think he introduced her as his number one wife, first wife, which always has priority and automatic reverence, respect for the first wife. No matter what's happened, I'm sure that was there. My dad wore suits. I never saw him in a suit before. They'd invite my brother and I over on Sunday afternoons and I had a boyfriend then and they'd always cook. She'd just revel in cooking for us.

Then, every time there was something new that my dad had forgotten about, she brought the old ways with her when she came. She brought stuff that he hadn't thought of doing for years. There would be these funny little steamed cakes or dumplings and he would show it to me like it was a new artifact, you know. He'd say, "It's Yuet's. Sheila, I haven't seen it since I was a boy in China. Look at this. This is called 'bun ga min' in China, in Chinese. This is when we used to make these when something..." I don't remember the specifics, but I just know that they'd be doing something new, but it was the old.

SGF: Right, so it was like a full circle of leaving China, adapting to...

SM: And, she loved to mahjongg, so they played mahjongg with George and his wife every weekend. They'd stay up all night playing mahjongg.

SGF: Really?

SM: Really, I mean literally, they'd come home at four or five in the morning.

[Laughter]

SGF: Then, through this, you now had a new relationship with Yuet and a sister, and do you still maintain that relationship?

SM: Yes, I do.

I finally did meet Yuet at the Nankin. My mother had been dead for a year. I didn't want to have anything to do with Yuet at that time. I was living by myself in an apartment on Lagoon and Humboldt and I was working at Autographics. The only way I could visit my dad was at the restaurant. I didn't want to go to his apartment, even though they were inviting us all the time that first year. So, I got tired of just visiting him at the restaurant. Maybe it was after the first anniversary of my mom's death, because I remember pointedly going to the phone, calling my dad, and I said, "Okay, I miss you. If you want me to come over for supper next Sunday, then tell Yuet, tell her I will come." He said, "Well, maybe, we should meet at the restaurant first." Actually, when I met Yuet, it was up on the mezzanine level of the Nankin at the top of the steps, the very top of the steps. There was a long table there. My brother came with me. My dad and Yuet and my "Paper Uncle" Johnny, who was visiting from Milwaukee...so he and, I think, his family were there as buffers. I was so nervous. I was just shaking. I didn't know what I was going to feel, what was going to happen. But, I got up there and the look on her face was that she loved...god! [Sheila begins to cry]

[break in the interview]

She knew she was the first wife, but she claimed...I mean, I learned as I got to know her and I knew that she really did love Rog and me, too, and I knew she really loved my dad. She claimed us as her own children, so she treated us as her very own children. It wasn't that she had to cultivate us as a second wife might have do in other blended families. But she claimed us. That was that.

SGF: When you say, "She claimed us"...by her actions, by her words, by just everything?

SM: She spoke in broken English. I had to have my dad translate most of the time, but she was trying. It was just automatic. There was nothing held back, although she was respectful of us. We were young people. We were young adults. But, if we gave her any opening whatsoever, she was there with a hug. She wanted to touch us. She wanted to hold my hand. She wanted to put her

arm around me and she did when we became closer. In fact, we became *extremely* close over the years, so all was forgiven, because she had the situation, too, you know.

I felt bad that she only got six years with my dad because they were very happy. That would have been just lovely if they could have had many more years together. When she died...she got lung cancer and she didn't smoke. [sigh] That was really curious. She started coughing up blood one day and it was diagnosed and I helped take her to the doctor sometimes in Minneapolis. When she got very ill then, she wanted to be by Susan, so they moved to Philadelphia and moved in with Susan. She had room. We went out there for a couple of visits, but then my dad called me and she was in the hospital and dying. By the night that she died, my brother and I got out there and we went to visit her in the hospital and she died that night. It was like she waited for us to get there. If they could have gotten outside of their circumstances, my mom would have liked her, too. Yet, my mother would have cared, but that was terrible circumstance to be in.

When I first heard about another family, I thought oh!... I didn't think it had happened to anybody else but, of course, it's happened—it's a heart wrenching situation to be in—hundreds, maybe thousands of times to a lot of these Chinese men who were not stranded, but they were stranded in America and where they wanted to be, but they couldn't be reunited with their families during the whole Communist era. So many of them started new families, so I know I'm not the only one. But, there aren't too many more "paper sons" anymore.

SGF: No.

SM: I'm glad this kind of thing...I hope it isn't happening to other people.

SGF: You've just described an incredible range of experiences being the daughter of Harry Chin. I'm wondering how these experiences have impacted who you are today, your sense of identity. Do you ever think about that?

SM: I appreciate everything that ever happened to me. I've learned that the negative stuff is probably, in some cases, better than all the good stuff that happens to you, because without the negative stuff, you don't know what that good stuff is.

SGF: Right.

SM: And, I've had a lot of good things happen to me, too. I just feel that being the daughter of Harry Chin has given me an incredible depth that not everybody gets to experience. When I was a little girl, there were sometimes when I just hated being Chinese. I didn't want to be different. I just wanted to have blue eyes and light hair. I wanted curly hair. I just wanted to blend in. I just wanted to be one of the kids on the block. In some cases I was, but then in some cases, I definitely was not. When I went to school, I felt very safe going to Ramsey High School, but I didn't do anything. I didn't have a social life. I didn't date. I didn't know what to expect when I went to college.

When I went to college, I met a whole other set of people and it was the first time that I felt pretty. It was the first time that I started to date, but I was scared silly about boys' motives and why were they looking at me? [Laughter] I started looking at myself in an entirely different way. It was unbelievable. Even to this day, I love to tell my husband how I can't believe he still chose me or he still loves me after all these years. What did you see in me? [sigh]

I know I have a giant heart, but I keep it under control. Like I said, I still have big sensitivity. I always felt pretty naked and pretty raw, but not anymore. I feel like it's a sensitivity that's good and my artistic ability and my leanings toward abstraction in thought and in visual is part of...it's my uniqueness and I've learned to celebrate my uniqueness. My story is pretty unique, so I'm trying to document it in any way I can. That's part of allowing you to do this is documenting that part, but I'll find other ways to express [unclear].

I grew up with some fears. You know, I grew up with being afraid of people, not knowing whether they were going to love me or if they were going to, when I was a little girl, call me a name. Even when I moved to Waseca in 1980, I thought, this is a small town. I was thinking about the stereotypes, you know. I'm a Chinese person. Are they going to like me? None of that materialized. I've learned about getting involved in communities, learned about communication. I was chosen to be part of the Blandin Leadership Program and that was a wonderful experience. I'd already been involved at the Art Center and learned about being a board member and how to volunteer and what kinds of skills are needed. So, I just feel like I've come absolutely 180 degrees from the person that I thought I was—a finished grown-up person as I was getting married, to a mature woman who is involved. I enjoy people and I love to listen. I've been told I'm a good listener. I don't have a lot of opportunity to tell this story. This has been very special for me. And, I think I've done a good job with my kids and I know I have a great marriage. I love my husband very much and we have great communication. I don't have a lot of money, but I *know* I feel like I'm a very successful person. If I die tomorrow, I'd die happy.

SGF: What a wonderful conclusion. Anything else you'd like to say before we finish this interview today? That's it? Ok, thank you very much.