

JENNY WONG
Norfolk Noodle Company, Norfolk, VA

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Date: May 22, 2014

Location: Ms. Wong's home, Virginia Beach, VA

Interviewer: Sara Wood

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: Forty-seven minutes

Project: Tidewater Virginia Yock

[Begin Jenny Wong Interview]

00:00:03

Sara Wood: Okay, so it's Thursday, May 22, 2014. This is Sara Wood with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm sitting here in Virginia Beach in the home of Miss Jenny Wong. And Jenny I'm wondering if you could start by saying hello and introducing yourself?

00:00:18

Jenny Wong: *[Ms. Wong is reading from a prepared introduction.] Hello, my name is Jenny Wong and I was born and raised in Norfolk, Virginia in January 1951. My father's name was Park F. Wong and he was born in Canton, China in 1911. My mother's name was Soon G. Eng Wong and she was born in China also. My parents married—cut that. Okay, here we go again. Let's just start over.*

00:00:44

SW: Okay.

00:00:46

JW: *Hello, my name is Jenny Wong and I was born and raised in Norfolk, Virginia January 1951. My father's name was Park F. Wong. And he was born in Canton, China in 1911. My mother's name was Soon G. Eng Wong and she was also born in Canton. My parents married in China and had three sons. They immigrated to the United States before I was born. After they arrived, my father invested in real estate. He bought and sold buildings. One of these was the Sam Lee Noodle Factory of 1919 Church Street in Norfolk. It opened in 1906 selling a variety of handmade Chinese noodles including yock-a-mein. The original owner also owned a restaurant*

next to the noodle factory called Sam Lee Restaurant. This was where Sam Lee first sold yock-a-mein as a dish.

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My father was not able to find a buyer for noodle factory so he decided to go into business himself. He renamed it the Norfolk Noodle Factory. My father kept the original noodle line including yock-a-mein. Yock-a-mein is a type of noodle made up of water, salt, and flour. Yock-a-mein translated from the Cantonese dialect, it means one order of noodles. Yock—means one, a—means of, and then mein—means noodles. When a waitress went into the kitchen to place the order she would yell “yock-a-mein” for one order of noodles. And over the years that was shortened to yock. Yock is prepared by using a Chinese takeout box with cooked yock noodles in the bottom. The noodles are covered with broth.

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Then you have a choice of chicken or pork for your meat and some people like to add ketchup, soy sauce, onion, hot sauce, hardboiled egg, or a smoked sausage or anything your taste desires. Yock became popular in the African American neighborhoods because that is where many of the Chinese immigrants opened their restaurants. Pizza in Italy is very different than the pizza in the United States, but everyone knows that pizza originated in Italy.

00:03:16

Yock is originally a Chinese dish but it has been given a new identity by the African American community where a new ethnic twist has evolved. In 1958 the Norfolk Noodle Factory was moved to a larger site at 313 Reservoir Avenue. The factory also made egg roll wrappers, wonton wrappers, chow mein noodles, fresh egg noodles and of course the yock-a-mein. Because

of this expansion my father could sell not only to Chinese restaurants in Southeastern Virginia but also to buyers in North and South Carolina and Georgia.

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My parents worked in the Norfolk Noodle Factory for over fifty years, retiring in 1990. They sold the factory but the new owner closed it down shortly thereafter. One of my brothers, David Wong opened his own noodle factory called Sun Noodle in Chesapeake in 1991. That business was sold in 2011. As for me, I'm no longer involved in the food business. After raising my two children I became a watercolor artist. My artwork is in a couple galleries in Norfolk and Virginia Beach. You can see my artwork on www.jennywongart.com. Thank you.

00:04:40

SW: Okay, I—I'm wondering Jenny if you know how—why did—why did your—can you tell me about your father coming to Norfolk and why he came to Norfolk from Canton.

00:04:52

JW: Actually my father came over here when he was sixteen years old. My grandfather had a laundry business back in 1934 called Wong Hong Laundry on Bute Street in Norfolk, Virginia.

00:05:10

SW: So your grandfather was here before? He came—was he the first to come to Norfolk?

00:05:17

JW: Yes, uh-hm.

00:05:18

SW: Do you know why he came to Norfolk particularly?

00:05:21

JW: A lot of the Chinese immigrants back in China they wanted a better life and for them to have a better life they decided to come to the United States. But as far as coming to Norfolk, I don't know why. But I do know that a lot of the Chinese immigrants went to San Francisco and then I think that because there's too many people going to San Francisco they decided to go somewhere on the East Coast and Norfolk was the place.

00:05:54

SW: So your grandfather came first and your—was your father, he was still in Canton and then was it just your grandfather who was here first and then he sent for the rest of the family? Is that—?

00:06:05

JW: My grandfather came over here having a laundry business, but he came over—. [*Ms. Wong asks to cut the tape off so she can read something.*]

00:06:19

SW: Okay, I'm recording. Can you try not to read it because it sounds so much better when you're not—?

00:06:29

JW: Okay, all right. Um, my father, Park Wong was born in 1911 in Canton, China. He was fatherless during most of his younger years because his father had moved to Norfolk, Virginia. And he was not able to arrange passage for his family because of strict U.S. immigration laws.

00:06:48

My father lived in Canton until he was able to travel by himself to the United States when he was sixteen. He lived with his father, who ran a Chinese laundry in Norfolk, Virginia. He attended Ruffner Junior High School in Norfolk. He studied electronics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology but he never finished because he returned to China in 1940.

00:07:14

My father stayed there long enough—

00:07:17

SW: Can I ask you a question on that? Do you know why he returned to China in 1940 after one year at MIT?

00:07:22

JW: Well first I—my father—they didn't have enough money to continue his education. And at that time my grandmother that was in Canton, China, she wanted my father to meet this lady in Canton. Back in those days they had matchmakers. And my grandmother liked this lady which is my mother. And so told my father about her, actually sent a picture of my mother to my father and because they did not have a ruler or some type of measuring stick to see the height of my

mother, in the mail there was a picture and a piece of string the height of my mother. And so when my father saw the picture and realized that she was not taller than he was he decided to go back to China and meet her.

00:08:24

SW: So they sent the string of how tall she was?

00:08:26

JW: In an envelope, yes, uh-huh.

00:08:29

SW: Wow. Now I'm wondering, I don't know if you know those photographs that you showed me of your parents were those the photographs that they sent or were those taken after they had—?

00:08:37

JW: Those were taken after, uh-hm, yeah.

00:08:39

SW: Do you know if that was—that was a standard practice when people couldn't—when they didn't have a measuring, like did other people send string like that and measure people?

00:08:50

JW: I don't know, but my—my grandmother did and so my father saw the picture and fell in love with my mother and so he decided to go back to China and they met one time and then the second time they were married.

00:09:05

SW: And then they had—and they were—in China they had three sons. Is that correct?

00:09:12

JW: Yes, uh-hm.

00:09:13

SW: And what are their names?

00:09:15

JW: Arthur, Edward, and David.

00:09:19

SW: And so how long were they there after they married before they moved to Norfolk, do you know?

00:09:25

JW: After my brothers were born my father came back to the United States and because of the strict immigration law he had to wait almost ten years before he was able to get my mother, my three brothers, and his mother to the United States.

00:09:44

SW: So he was here but everybody was back in—?

00:09:47

JW: Uh-hm, for about ten years?

00:09:49

SW: Were they in Canton?

00:09:49

JW: Canton, yeah uh-hm, yes [*Ms. Wong corrects interviewer's pronunciation of Canton*].

00:09:52

SW: I'm thinking of Canton, New Jersey [*Pronouncing it like Canton, New Jersey*].

00:09:52

JW: Oh no, no, it's Canton.

00:09:55

SW: Okay, I apologize for that. Wow and so—they—did your mother or father ever tell you about what that was like for them to be apart for ten years like that?

00:10:05

JW: My mother said it was very difficult and they—you know she struggled quite a bit in China. And then of course then you have the time when Japan was getting ready to invade China, that was very difficult. She had to run for her life with my brothers.

00:10:23

SW: Do you know where she went?

00:10:24

JW: No.

00:10:27

SW: Do you know what year she finally—your brothers and your mother and your grandmother finally were able to come to the states—how long?

00:10:34

JW: In 1950 they came over.

00:10:37

SW: They endured the war?

00:10:37

JW: Uh-hm.

00:10:39

SW: The whole time?

00:10:40

JW: Right, so they came over in 1950 and then a year later I was born.

00:10:45

SW: And you're the only girl?

00:10:47

JW: Yes, uh-hm, the baby.

00:10:49

SW: What do you remember about growing up in Norfolk? [*Ms. Wong is not sure how to answer the question, so the interviewer re-phrases the question.*] Can you talk about—okay I'll—maybe I'll ask more specific questions. That will be helpful. You were telling me when I arrived what it was like to work in the family business. Can you tell me about some of your memories of helping the family out with the noodle business and what you're—what you did and what it was like? Can you describe it?

00:11:16

JW: When I was growing up I remember at the—at the noodle factory, as soon as I could learn how to count change I had to wait on customers. And I guess I was thirteen, fourteen. I don't remember that far back. But anyway I do remember that I wrapped a lot of noodles. I would put

noodles into the—the yock noodles on the scale. And then with a brown paper bag I would roll it back up and tape it on each side and we'd make one pound, two pounds, and five pounds of packages, and get a red stamper with the yock-a-mein logo on it and on the brown paper bag.

00:12:03

SW: What was—what did the logo look like?

00:12:05

JW: It just says “yock-a-mein” and it had the ingredients and basically that was it.

00:12:12

SW: Can you talk a little bit about just the process of making the noodles? You were talking about it with the—just describing it in the photographs and your father—. And actually if you could talk about that in any way or how, how it changed when your father invented the machine?

00:12:34

JW: Um, the yock-a-mein noodles are mainly made of water, salt, and flour. In the beginning they used to put egg white but then they have stopped that. And they put it in a dough maker where they grind up all the—they put all the ingredients together and then once it's like a thick dough then it's—then it goes to another machine where it goes back and forth until it's flattened. And once it is flattened to a particular size and then it goes to a noodle cutter and it comes—comes out like a string of spaghetti noodles and it's hung in with a stick and then it's put into a dry room and it dries for maybe—I don't know—maybe two or three days or so and then after

it's completely dry then it's put into a noodle machine cutter. And it's cut to fit in a certain size box and once it's fit into a certain sized box then it's shipped to different places.

00:13:49

SW: And I have a couple questions about the neighborhood where the business was. In terms of Norfolk, I was talking to some people who grew up in African American communities and people were talking about how during segregation everything was you know that the city was pretty segregated. I'm wondering did your family—was there a large Chinese American community near the business or where you lived. Did you live near the business with that?

00:14:16

JW: No, everybody was scattered all over the place. There was not a Chinatown like San Francisco. We do have a large sized Chinese community here but we don't live next to each other.

00:14:31

SW: Do you know—somebody mentioned this to me and I just wanted to know if you knew and I'll pause it—. [*Interviewer pauses the tape to ask a few preliminary questions to allow interviewee to know where the question is headed.*] Okay, I have just—can you tell me about some of the customers that your father—the business had, the noodle business had and who he sold to?

00:14:47

JW: A lot of customers were Chinese restaurants in—in the Tidewater, they call it the Hampton Roads area, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Virginia Beach, Newport News, Hampton. And also we had a retail business at the store on Reservoir Avenue. My father imported Japanese, Korean, Philippine Islands goods and so he sold it to them too. It was a wholesale and retail business.

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SW: And why did he move the business? Was it getting to be big? Can you talk about that?

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JW: The original building was on 919 Church Street and it got—grew too small so that's when in 1958 my father moved to a larger site which is on Reservoir Avenue in Norfolk.

00:15:41

SW: And how did that—do you know how that changed the business at all if it did?

00:15:45

JW: Oh it changed because it grew and we had more people working there and it was a better location.

00:15:54

SW: Can you tell me any particular memories you have of the first or the second location growing up and if there's something that really stuck out to you or stayed with you in terms of

maybe the process of making something or a customer or another employee? [*Ms. Wong does not want to answer the question.*]

00:16:12

Can you describe for someone who has never had yock-a-mein what is yock-a-mein?

00:16:17

JW: Yock-a-mein, it almost tastes like spaghetti noodles without the egg ingredients. It's not as sweet. Yock-a-mein is just—it tastes just like I would say chicken noodle soup but add all the ingredients you know whatever your taste desires.

00:16:39

SW: Was—did your family eat yaka mein when you were growing up?

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JW: Not that much. I guess when you see it all the time you don't want it. [*Laughs*]

00:16:47

SW: And so just so I understand just to make sure I have this right, your father when he bought the business it was already a noodle business. And so he took over—

00:16:55

JW: Yes.

00:16:57

SW: —and then he was selling noodles to the restaurants who were making it, the one next door?

00:17:00

JW: No, he was—when he took over—yes, he was selling to the restaurant next door too. And then when he moved to the other location that's when he supplied to practically all the Chinese restaurants in town.

00:17:17

SW: And they were already making yock-a-mein?

00:17:19

JW: Yes, uh-hm.

00:17:20

SW: Were they—were the restaurants selling—was it all kinds of customers? Was it customers from like the black community, the white community, do you know like who the customers were?

00:17:30

JW: Um, when you sell it to the restaurant they decide what they want to do with that dish. But not only was it yock-a-mein noodles it was also fry noodles too and that's where chow mein noodles came about.

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SW: And those are basically the same noodles but fried?

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JW: Yes, uh-hm.

00:17:53

SW: I'm wondering—I'm just trying to get a gage on the history of the dish itself and so by the time your father came to the noodle business yock-a-mein was already being made and sold into the restaurants?

00:18:07

JW: Yes, correct.

00:18:10

SW: Can you talk about—I mean was it—so your family didn't eat it too often but was it a dish that was prominent in the Chinese community, the yock-a-mein?

00:18:21

JW: Uh, yes.

00:18:22

SW: Was there—do you know if there was ketchup in it at the time?

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JW: It's a personal taste. And I think it was and do you know ketchup is originated in China?

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SW: I did not know that.

00:18:34

JW: You Google that. [*Laughs*] Yeah.

00:18:37

SW: Can you tell anything about it?

00:18:38

JW: No.

00:18:40

SW: Okay, so I guess I'm—I have a few more questions but I want to look at my notebook.

Okay, so I just want to go back and do a little—I want to go back and backtrack a little bit about the—the noodle company. When your father started the noodle business do you—who was working for him? Did he have many employees or was it mostly the family?

00:19:07

JW: It was mostly the family. I had my brothers working there and—and he hired a couple of workers there, too, to help with the—making the dough and—and yeah.

00:19:23

SW: Do you remember what it looked like for the dough to be made? Were they like in big—when you were making—when they were making the dough was it made in like big industrial sized—or did somebody do it by hand?

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JW: All the water, salt, and flour were all put into this huge bowl and there was a dough maker where it would run and it would—

00:19:52

SW: Like a big mixer?

00:19:53

JW: It was a big mixer and once everything is mixed well together the—the thickness is—was important and then finally they'd roll it back and forth into a machine to flatten the—the noodles and then—which is right here, flatten it out.

00:20:15

SW: It looks like they were—it must have been heavy.

00:20:17

JW: Yes, it was heavy, uh-hm. And once it flattened out to a certain thickness then it would go to another machine and it would actually cut to a certain thickness also and then would be rolled into a room where it would be dried. And there's actually a fan was blowing in there to dry the

noodles and once that was done, probably about two days or three days and then it would go into a cutting machine. And after it's cut, it's boxed and shipped to wherever it needed to go.

00:20:56

SW: And where did it go? Can you talk about some of the places where the noodles went?

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JW: Well besides going to the local Chinese restaurants in Norfolk, Portsmouth, Hampton Roads area, it also went to southeastern parts of Virginia and South Carolina and North Carolina and Georgia.

00:21:18

SW: That's a lot of places. Can you talk about—I know you said a little bit about this in the beginning but can you just talk about like you know you talked about your job of rolling up the noodles in the paper and—and weighing them. I mean what was that job like, can you describe it for somebody who has never done it?

00:21:37

JW: Oh when you were little you know you always—instead of playing my mother told me, said, “Well, help me with this.” And so I would put the yock noodles on a scale and I would measure it either one pound or two pounds or five pounds, and I had a sheet of brown paper. And I would weigh the noodles and put the pound of noodles on the paper and just wrap it up like you're wrapping up a Christmas gift. And then tape on each side and—and then get a stamp with the yock-a-mein on it and roll it around the noodles and that was it.

00:22:16

SW: Can you talk about the different like the noodles can in different thicknesses and is it just for people's preference?

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JW: Yes, it was. The noodles came in three different sizes, especially for retail business. For restaurants it was usually the medium size but for retail they came in fine, medium, and large.

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SW: And you know we were talking about preferences like it's just people tastes, like however they wanted the noodles that's—the thickness.

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JW: It was just a personal taste, yes.

00:22:57

SW: And I know you mentioned this earlier Jenny but I just wanted to like make sure that it's here. *[Laughs]* Your—your father invented a machine or patented a machine that cut the noodles. Can you talk a little bit about that and I mean if you don't know dates that's okay but just did he—do you know if he made the machine just out of necessity?

00:23:16

JW: Originally when he bought the noodle factory there were machines there already. But as he learned to make the noodles he actually improved and designed and patented some of the new

machines. One was the deep fryer for the chow mein noodles. He designed that and then also there was no such thing as a noodle cutter at that time. And I remember him having a little small scale of a noodle cutter and he got somebody to come over and told this guy exactly what he wanted and shortly thereafter he—he got this noodle cutter and it was perfect. And I cannot tell you what year it was.

00:24:03

SW: Did that speed things up a little bit in terms of the business?

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JW: Oh yes, definitely.

00:24:08

SW: Yeah, do you—and I'm not trying to stump you here but in terms of you know any given week how many noodles the factory—no? Okay, okay I'm just curious or—um, I guess I'm also interested in talking about how important your father's company was to providing noodles for these—the dish and specifically talking about yock-a-mein. I mean if your father's business wasn't there would these restaurants have been able to make yock or any of the dishes that are—
?

00:24:47

JW: No because my father was the main supplier of the Chinese noodles here in town. But if they wanted just noodles the closest place would probably be D.C. and New York and they have factories up there that could probably make that.

00:25:03

SW: So your father's noodle business was the only one here in the—in the area?

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JW: Yes, uh-hm.

00:25:08

SW: And do you know when—okay when did he get out of the business? What year was that again?

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JW: Close to 1990, that's when he retired.

00:25:19

SW: And then he sold it? It wasn't yet your brother? Your brother started his own thing, right? Can you explain that?

00:25:26

JW: Um, when my father retired in 1990 he sold it to a Korean guy and I think he had a go at it for about three years and then he sold that place. But my brother in 1991 he opened up his own noodle factory called Sun Noodle and in Chesapeake and I think he sold it in 2011.

00:25:53

SW: Was the business—do you know at the time like for your brother was business still busy for him in terms of supplying and—?

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JW: Oh yes. It was very busy at that time for him, too. And he had a—a wholesale and retail business at his store.

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SW: And—and I wonder if you want to talk about and if you don't that's okay—if you want to talk about when your father sold it to the Korean gentleman that you designed the box of that—?

00:26:24

JW: Yeah, when my father sold the business to the Korean man he—we had a talk and he said he wanted to design a box for the new yock-a-mein and I told him that I could do that. And that's what I did.

00:26:40

SW: We have a picture of it but can you describe the process of making it like did you think about it for a while—?

00:26:47

JW: Well usually when you see something Chinese you see the bamboo so I decided to use the bamboo look for the Chinese yock-a-mein.

00:27:02

SW: Can you talk—and I'm just asking out of curiosity—can you talk about the significance of bamboo? [*Ms. Wong shakes her head no.*] Okay, I just thought I'd try. Okay, can—and can you

talk a little bit about like the immigration pattern of where people came from and what your father told you about Chinese people immigrating to this particular area, the Tidewater Region or Norfolk?

00:27:32

JW: I recall my father had told me that there were a lot of people from the southern part of China which is Canton—that's where my father is from, they immigrated to this area and when I say area I'm talking about the Norfolk, Portsmouth area. A lot of them went to San Francisco but because there's so many that went to San Francisco in California they decided to come over to the East Coast. And that's where my father—my grandfather in 1941 had a laundry business called Wong Kong Laundry on Bute Street.

00:28:15

SW: And so your father went into the business with your grandfather?

00:28:20

JW: He was in business for a while until my father actually came over here when he was sixteen years old. And so—I should say—that's when it picked up here—. [*Ms. Wong returns to her prepared script.*] Okay we can pick it up now okay. Oh yeah—yeah my father lived in Canton until he was able to travel by himself to the United States when he was sixteen. He lived with his father and ran a laundry business on Bute Street in Norfolk. He attended Ruffner Junior High School and then he studied electronics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. But he never finished mainly because he said they were out of money and so he had—that's when he returned to China in 1940.

00:29:21

SW: Can I ask you a question about MIT?

00:29:22

JW: Sure.

00:29:23

SW: Did your father ever tell you about like what it was like to be there, like was he—I mean he was at MIT so that’s amazing. That’s one of the best schools in the country. I mean did he love going to school? Did he ever tell you any stories about MIT?

00:29:37

JW: Well he there only for a year but at that time they said they couldn’t afford for him to stay another year so he had to quit.

00:29:45

SW: It must have been heartbreaking for him.

00:29:46

JW: Yeah, but he studied enough where he knew quite a bit about—became an electrician and he actually was in the navy for a while and then did some work there. And then he realized that he really couldn’t make a living working in the navy so he got out of it.

00:30:04

SW: And that’s after he came back from China, he was in the navy?

00:30:07

JW: Um, yeah—

00:30:11

SW: Do you know what he did with the navy like what his job was? No? Okay, so he got out of the navy. Okay and let me back up here. He went to—back to China after MIT and then eventually came back here after your parents married, is that correct?

00:30:33

JW: Well—

00:30:35

SW: You told the story earlier.

00:30:35

JW: Yeah, I told the story, yeah.

00:30:38

SW: And then so—

00:30:39

JW: I don't want to get the date confused—

00:30:41

SW: Oh that's okay.

00:30:42

JW: —because my parents was—they got married in 1934 but according to that they said he was—he returned to China in 1940 so that’s kind of confusing right there.

00:30:54

SW: Because they were apart for ten years?

00:30:59

JW: Yeah. I’ll just say that well he returned to China because my grandmother had a picture. He sent my father a picture of my mother and a string the height of my mother in an envelope. And so when my father saw the picture he fell in love with it and he said, “Yes, I’ll go back to China and get married.’ So my mother and my father met only one time and then after that the second time they were in their wedding outfits and got married. I have that upstairs, a photo of it. And then yeah they got married in 1934 and they had my three brothers. And then my father came back to the United States and he tried to get my mother and my brothers over here but it took them—because of the immigration law it took them a while. And finally—

00:31:56

SW: Do you know much about the immigration law at the time? Has your dad told you—did your dad tell you anything about it?

00:32:02

JW: No, I don’t know too much about it. But I know that my mother came to the United States in 1950 and a year later my brothers and my grandmother came. And then I was born.

00:32:14

SW: Did your mother ever tell you what it was like to come here for the first time, because your father had been here before, but for your mother had she ever told you stories about what it was like to come to the states?

00:32:25

JW: No, she never did. She said it was really a hardship because she couldn't speak English and it was—it's a cultural adjustment. I mean she came from the village in Canton.

00:32:43

SW: Did your parents tell you stories about what it was like to grow up in Canton?

00:32:47

JW: Not much at all.

00:32:50

SW: You were saying earlier and I think this is where we decided where we were going to pick up a second ago that there were many people from Canton who came to Norfolk.

00:33:01

JW: Yes, there were a lot of people that are from the southern part of China that came over—came over to—to Norfolk.

00:33:10

SW: And can you talk about if you can speak to this at all—if not, you know we'll just move onto the next question, but you know you—you described what yock-a-mein means. And I'm wondering was this a dish that was popular in Canton like have your parents—did your parents ever tell you like was it something—a staple that people ate weekly or—do you know?

00:33:35

JW: Well in China mostly the staple was rice and noodles.

00:33:43

SW: So we were talking about the different ways that yock has changed a little while ago and so do you know anything about like how yock was—like the dish what it would have been like in Canton before your parents came—either one of your parents came to the states? Had they ever talked about like growing up with it? [*Ms. Wong shakes her head no.*]

00:34:04

Can you talk about I want to get back to your father and the noodle business, but since I asked this question I'm wondering if you could talk about your experience with yock. I mean what does it taste like? You said it was sweet.

00:34:21

JW: No, yock was—yock noodles was just very plain and you have to add some flavor to it. I remember my mother put a little bit of sugar in it and I liked it and—and I guess maybe sometimes I'd put a little bit of soy sauce and—but now when you make yock it's all about

personal taste. And so a lot of people can put hot sauce, ketchup, soy sauce, boiled egg, pieces of meat, chicken, pork whatever your taste desires. So there—there is no set recipe as far as yock is concerned. It's just a personal taste.

00:35:04

SW: I think that's really interesting and I'm wondering you know from your memory I mean there—there wasn't—was there an egg, was there meat in it, or that all came as it evolved?

00:35:14

JW: Yes, eventually it evolved from that but my mother never put eggs or sausage or any of that stuff. It's probably pieces of chicken or pork and that was the beginning of it, and especially chicken broth. I think that was the main way of making yock.

00:35:31

SW: Do you know if she put—did she put onions in it or anything like that?

00:35:35

JW: Not in the very beginning.

00:35:38

SW: And there was something else—vinegar?

00:35:42

JW: No.

00:35:43

SW: Just curious because I was thinking of the things and I also wanted to ask you—hold on. I'm going to pause. So your dad was doing real estate after the laundry business and then working with the Navy. He got into real estate. And he bought the noodle factory and he couldn't sell it so he stayed with it, right?

00:36:03

JW: Right.

00:36:03

SW: So why do you think I mean I'm sure that he might have you know maybe he—I'm just so curious as to why he stayed with the noodle business and how you think that changed him?

00:36:14

JW: When he first got into the noodle business he did not even know anything about how to make the noodles. But as he uh—*[long pause]* as he got into the business he—he was more probably interested in making improvements especially in the machines he had acquired. So he had designed and patented some of the machines and he also hmm— *[long pause]*. Well he actually designed and patented the deep fryer. That was for chow mein noodles. And eventually he did the noodle cutter because there was no such thing as a noodle cutter back at that time. And he designed and patented it.

00:37:21

SW: And you said that you think that he stuck with it all that time because he actually started like he found that he enjoyed the business?

00:37:28

JW: Yeah, he stuck with the business because he probably eventually found a passion to make it—make the business—make it a go.

00:37:39

SW: And can you talk a little bit, you said that he you know the business was very—it was a family business, so you were in there helping and everybody was together. What was that like and I wonder if that you know—how that influenced the business as well as having the family—your close-knit family there working alongside. [*Interview pauses the tape to clarify the question*]

00:37:56

JW: Oh I wasn't sure, yeah. Yeah, he stuck with the business because you know the whole family was involved. And my three brothers they all did their share. We—somebody would make delivery and somebody would make the dough and somebody would there just—odds and ends jobs at the factory. And as for me I was fairly young. So I—when I could count change and I ended up waiting on customers and I've also used to wrap a lot of noodles. We have a scale and I put the yak noodles on there and I would wrap one or two or five pound noodles in a brown bag.

00:38:50

SW: And I'm wondering if you—if you—you don't have to but there's a photograph of you that you showed me of you as a baby sitting in the—on the scale. Can you talk about that photograph?

00:39:04

JW: Well that's the scale that my mother first—my parents—well let me start over, okay. Yeah, that was a scale that my parents put me on to see how much I weighed and I was sixteen pounds. I was probably oh six—five or six months old or whenever I could sit upright and that was the scale that has been used in the family for a long length of time. We always used that scale to weigh the noodles before it's wrapped.

00:39:37

SW: And you were sixteen pounds?

00:39:39

JW: Yeah sixteen pounds. *[Laughs]*

00:39:41

SW: And are there any other stories that you want to share about the noodle business in terms of your memories growing up or anything in particular that really stayed with you in terms of working there or watching people come in and buy—or watching your father work with machines or—?

00:40:00

JW: The fond memories that the family was always there working and helping each other and I got to meet a lot of people and to this day I still have connections with some of my friends, not the father/mother, but the daughters or sons of some of the people that used to be involved with the noodle factory.

00:40:21

SW: Can you expand on that?

00:40:23

JW: Believe it or not I have this one girl that contacted me through Facebook and her father used to sell the flour to my father. And my father and her father were really good friends besides being a business—business friend. They had a lot of things in common especially cameras and they would just besides business it was also personal, too. And she just contacted me about oh a couple of weeks ago and we actually met for lunch last week.

00:40:58

SW: Wow, how long had it been since you had seen her?

00:41:00

JW: Probably about thirty-five years, uh-hm, because I met her through her dad at the noodle factory so it's been a long time.

00:41:11

SW: Now did her dad—he sold the flour—?

00:41:12

JW: No, he sold the flour to my father. In fact it might be longer than thirty-five years. I think it's—yeah it is longer.

00:41:18

SW: And do you know his name or—?

00:41:19

JW: Yes, his name was Morton Ronick and the daughter is Joan.

00:41:26

SW: What was that like to have lunch with her after all that time?

00:41:30

JW: Um, it was quite interesting. It's—we shared a lot of stories and she always told me about her father would always talk about my father and vice-versa.

00:41:44

SW: I think that's really sweet. And especially after all that time to still have that connection.

00:41:51

JW: I think it's like—I have to say longer than that. I would say forty-five years ago.

00:41:58

SW: I know I asked you this earlier but I just want to make sure because we were sort of—it was sort of segmented but in terms of you know you said your father sold wholesale and retail. So in terms of the customers coming in was it sort of a mix of customers like white customers, black customers, Chinese customers—everybody bought these noodles and it doesn't matter where you're from?

00:42:21

JW: Well see my father had a retail business also. And we—we had a lot of customers and they were like—they were Japanese, Korean, Filipino, and blacks, whites.

00:42:37

SW: Everybody?

00:42:37

JW: Everybody.

00:42:40

SW: And so what do you think—okay I'm going to pause it. [*Interview clarifies the question for the interviewee*] So for the—for the retail aspect of the business can you talk—I mean we've talked so much about noodles but what else—what did your father sell in the retail store?

00:42:54

JW: Well besides my father had goods from Japan, Korea, and the Philippine Islands and my father also had fresh vegetables and he would have like bok choy and some of the bok choy and um, also fresh tofu and that was available. And so we had different customers like Japanese, Chinese, and Korean and Filipinos and blacks and whites—it was like an international place for a while because all kinds of people came to buy goods from my father.

00:43:32

SW: Okay.

00:43:34

JW: I guess the reason my father picked that location because it was near a railroad track because when we had—when he ordered flour they would come in a truckload of—I would say a carload of flour. And besides it had a huge warehouse and everything and it was the right location for the business.

00:44:02

SW: And I wanted to go back to the tofu thing, I mean I'm wondering like before your father was importing and selling tofu here was it even—was it here?

00:44:10

JW: Yes, it—yes actually my brother was making tofu at that time.

00:44:16

SW: Was he really?

00:44:17

JW: Fresh tofu, yes, uh-hm.

00:44:19

SW: Where would he get his ingredients do you know?

00:44:23

JW: No, it's just basic ingredients and he made it from scratch. I remember watching him.

00:44:29

SW: Would he make it at the shop?

00:44:31

JW: Yes he did, uh-hm.

00:44:33

SW: And that—so your brother made the tofu?

00:44:35

JW: Yes, uh-hm.

00:44:36

SW: Which brother?

00:44:36

JW: My second brother Edward Wong.

00:44:39

SW: Wow.

00:44:40

JW: There's a picture of that too.

00:44:41

SW: Of him making—?

00:44:42

JW: Yeah, but I got to—yeah.

00:44:45

SW: I know you've done so much work to—. And—

00:44:49

JW: If my father did not have the noodle factory here I think that a lot of the restaurants would be going to DC or New York to get the noodles because that would be the next closest place to get these types of noodles.

00:45:08

SW: When your father retired was he ready to retire?

00:45:11

JW: My father chose to retire in 1990 and by that time he was close to eighty-some years old. He did not want to retire. His whole life was the noodle factory. He enjoyed it so much because he went to work and that was his passion. And I think when he stayed at home he got bored and he didn't have any other hobbies, but—but—.

00:45:43

SW: Was your mother still helping him at the time?

00:45:46

JW: Yes my mother was, uh-hm.

00:45:48

SW: Can you tell me like what kinds of things she did in the business? You were talking about your role and some of the things your brothers did but what—did your mother have like some—some certain things that she was doing in the store or the shop?

00:46:01

JW: My mother um, actually my mother, her role was she was always helping around making the noodles, boxing the noodles, wrapping the noodles and she would even wait on the customers. And she always helped my father. She was always—they were together 24/7.

00:46:31

SW: And I guess I don't have any other questions for you about the noodle business, but is there anything else that you want to add that you think is important for people to know that I didn't ask you? And you can think about that and then—.

00:46:48

JW: No.

00:46:49

SW: Okay, Jenny is there anything else that you want to add that you think is important or something I didn't ask?

00:46:54

JW: No, but thank you.

00:46:56

SW: Well thank you for doing this. I really appreciate your time.

00:46:59

JW: You're welcome.

00:47:00

[End Jenny Wong Interview]