

Title: Valerie Mah Interview

Subject: Valerie Mah Interview

Author: Julia Lum

Manager: Aaron Jacobs

Company: MHSO

Category: Chinese Canadian Women, 1923-1967: Inspiration-Innovation-Ingenuity

Comments: September 22, 2009

Interview #1 of #1

Completed: June 22, 2010

MHSO Chinese Canadian Women, 1923-1967

Interview Transcript

JL: Julia Lum, interviewer

VM: Valerie Mah, narrator

JL: This is Julia Lum with Valerie Mah on September 22. [Speak about photos] This one... I mean, you're in it. What sort of context was this photo taken in?

VM: This particular photo, the one with me showing chopsticks to three people was in the Toronto Telegram. It was part of the United... they called it – before the United Way – it was the fundraiser that was a... precursor. So in order to raise funds we had tours of Chinatown, and we had meals in Chinatown – I think it was about ten dollars – we'd actually sell posters. So... while that was happening, we were having a tour, I was showing them how to use chopsticks, and the photographer took a photo.

JL: How did you get involved with the United Appeal?

VM: Just part of being in the community at that time. I think it was through the CCA, the Chinese Canadian Association, that we did some of these things. And I think these three ended up being school teachers... I don't know if you have the date. This tied in with the Geneva Park thing later on – do you remember the old couples met in Geneva Park? Because one of the skits I did, we did, I did a tour of Chinatown, I was leading people through – which I did, you would lead people through the herbalist stores and into the opera. And I pretended I was coming into this dark room and falling all over these chairs, because I really didn't know where I was going.

JL: So what was the money raised used for?

VM: United Appeal, generally through the whole city. And I think that's one of the first things that the Chinese did – well, the Chinese were always doing

fundraising, during the wars they raised money to buy airplanes. They sold... they had tag days, and they would go down Elizabeth Street with a big flag and people would throw money into the flag. But that was before my time, and before I came to Toronto. But they were always raising money. If it wasn't for the war effort, it would be for the community.

JL: So the people that you were giving the tour to, would this be the first time they went through Chinatown?

VM: It could very well be. Not as early as the days when my friend Dorothy Siu – her mother was a seamstress that sewed the costumes of the opera singers – and, you know, families didn't really go down to Chinatown, and it wasn't considered a safe place for your Caucasian friends. They didn't think of going down to Chinatown in those days. Dorothy went down because her mother was sewing the costumes of the opera stars. And when I interviewed her, she relayed some of those feelings to me. Those were the days before Chinese food became popular, so it was initiation of the food, and in those days you could have a good meal for ten dollars. It was the beginning of the banquet series that started... actually, Bill Wen, who started it, he went back to China, and he had a wonderful banquet in the great halls of China, and he got back the menu, reproduced it. It was actually better in Canada, because of the quality of the food. And he asked my husband to help him hold them, that's how those first banquets started. It was my husband's job to bring the press coverage, the media coverage, and he would send off letters. Some of the people – Christine Bently at CFTO, a number of these people who we used to have come to our banquets, it's kind of fun. And of course, then people went home and said "I had supper with Christine Bently", or "Andrian Clarkson was there last night", and that started them. And there were times that I was MCing banquets as much as three times a week. So, teaching school, and then getting hyped up to go down there and MC, that sort of thing. And it wasn't my idea to do that, he just said these things need to be done, and I asked who would do them and he said "you", and I thought oh, sh—you know, sometimes you're going down, driving down, and you say oh, why am I doing this, because you really have to be psyched up to be [something], and especially back in the old days.

JL: So is that how you started in the MC business?

VM: Yes, yes. And I mean... he was the one who coached me – I considered myself very shy – and, you know, you're a small Chinese girl growing up as one of two families in a small town. I came to Toronto because there were more Chinese here, whereas I should have gone to Ottawa to teacher's college, but my sisters were both here in Toronto and I came here. And it was quite an awakening to have so many Chinese people around, and my girlfriend came up, she came down to a dance and was the only Caucasian in the place, and she said "know I know how you feel in Brockville". I wasn't allowed to go to out of town football games, and I said to my mother "why can't I go?", and she said "some people let you go because they love you, and some people make you stay home because they love you, and that's what we're saying". [Laughs] So I wasn't allowed to go out of town.

JL: Were your parents stricter than others?

VM: I think so. We had a business, we weren't allowed to wear shorts in public. We'd walk down the street, and business people would say "oh, hi Miss", you know – tip their hats, for God's sakes. So it's... twenty thousand people isn't very big, but at least there's that recognition, and they all knew you, they all knew exactly what you were doing, so you couldn't really do anything wrong in a small town.

JL: And the restaurant, it had a reputation?

VM: A very high reputation. A lot different from some of the other restaurants, because we had white linen table cloths, and napkins, and we served more than just Chinese food. It was lobster, and [something] oysters, and Winnipeg oysters, and bear steak, and sturgeon, that sort of thing. It was pretty ambitious for a restaurant...

JL: On the subject of food, then, how do you think that food maybe bridged some cultural gaps, introduced non-Chinese people to Chinese culture?

VM: Not to the same degree it is today. In the restaurant, we had Americanized Chinese food. People were not... they were happy with the sweet 'n sour chicken balls, and the [something]. They weren't as interested in the [something] and the Chinese broccoli you have now. We had a mixture; people would come in, they'd have a steak, a broiled lobster, but they might order some Chinese food. It wasn't the same in those days. I think that came much later, but in the smaller towns... like, in Toronto, we'd come to Toronto because we wanted real Chinese food. And there was a time I would always want to eat in downtown Chinatown, Dundas and Spadina, Elizabeth Street and Spadina, because that's where you could get the real stuff. In those days, it wasn't in the suburbs. Now, you can get good food, sometimes even better food in the suburbs.

JL: Dora mentioned something about a chop suey sandwich...

VM: Oh! A chow mein bun.

JL: So what was that? [10:01]

VM: Well, my mother had this idea that... she decided to have this Chow Mein bun. Now, this was merely a hamburger bun that she put chop suey on, then they put the top on, then they put gravy on, then the fried noodles were placed on top. I don't know if they developed it, but it was the Chow Mein bun.

JL: So that was something served in...?

VM: It was served in the restaurant. As far as I was concerned... we couldn't eat the fancy stuff, and we were allowed, as part of the family, to order the meal of the day, be it stew or something, or veal cutlets, but I couldn't have the pork tenderloin. And then you have the hot chicken sandwiches with French fries, and then they developed this Chow Mein bun. Now, interestingly enough, Monda Rosie Bird, who was the food writer for Chatelane Magazine, that was her introduction to Chinese food. She had the Chow Mein bun at our restaurant, and then she... it was introduced. And then we, years later, had her actually go to the banquets, she was invited to the banquets, I can remember one time she didn't

make it, and we saved food for her, from each of the dishes, and then my husband and I dropped it off to her. She was really quite taken by the attention, because we thought she was coming, and then when she didn't come we took the food to the house.

JL: So was this a popular item, did a lot of people order it?

VM: A lot of people ordered it. I mean, it's like... when people come in and order the dinner for two, I'm thinking "oh, you know, that's the sweet and sour". But they think they're doing it. It's like... a friend of mine, I said "you should really go and have some real Chinese food", and she said "oh, [Valerie], I go every Saturday". And I said "where do you go?" thinking to name some of the better Chinese restaurants, and she said "I go to the Mandarin. Every Saturday night." And I thought "oh my god...", and then she says "and I always have the roast beef", so I'm trying to figure where the Chinese food is... whereas when I think of Chinese food, it's the stuff that your parents used to make. We say it's the old [Loaki] food, and we still go to some restaurants and ask for some of those things, like the hamburger [something], and have it with, if you really want to scare off other people, you have it with the smelly salted fish. The [something]. Or you just have it with salted duck eggs, or [something], big Chinese sausage. But that's more of the comfort food, and I can remember during a television show with [someone], the end of it, we talked about it, wherever she goes in Canada, whenever she feels like she's in a strange city, and she feels uncomfortable, she looks for a Chinese restaurant so she can have [something], and she'll go looking for [something] soup. So it's true, it's comfort food – we go looking for a place we can have [something] or noodles or... comfort food. People think... they called me in for an interview for a child in Ossinton and College, an Italian area. It was a new immigrant family, and they said "he goes out with his parents at 10, 11 o'clock at night, you know, to eat", and I said "well, that's natural", and they looked at me, you know. And then they do something else. But I said "that's very natural, it's typical of Chinese", you know, you go... we don't entertain at home, and we take people out for dinner, or go out for [something], a little bit of something late at night. You go into the Chinese restaurants at midnight and there are little kids there, so you wonder how they get up for school... but you don't think about it, because it's part of the nature of the culture. I think that, maybe not the new immigrants, or the immigrants that are coming from the educated, the earlier people, I mean, we didn't have fancy homes, we tended to have smaller quarters because we always knew we would go out and entertain because food was that crucial to us, so...

JL: What about in Brockville, did you go out and entertain? [14:48]

VM: Well, in Brockville you didn't go out, like my father ate with the cooks, at two and eight, and we were going to school, so we'd get something to eat and then do our homework at the back table. We didn't eat together very much as a family, except on birthdays, when he would come upstairs and we would eat up there, actually, we sometimes ate at home. My mother was not a good cook, but... you really didn't go out to eat at other people's restaurants, I mean, he knew them, and he would go there... no, I can't remember, other than going in with you father,

and he's having talking with the back, and they're having coffee or something, I can't remember going to restaurants. In a town like that there was one other family, it was an older family, their kids were much older than our family, and they have a laundry. And somebody said it was our grandfather that knew **Hong Toi**, and that's why he went to Brockville. And my father went to live with his father in another laundry on the main street, and then after that he opened a restaurant when he married my mother. But in between there's another marriage, so... my father came as a young boy to live in Brockville, they had... [something]. I love the picture, there's a first class picture of the laundry with all the guys in their white shirts outside. But my dad's not in it, so I figure that's the time he went back to China to find a wife. He found a wife, married her... she was expecting a child, and the child was born after he got back to Canada, 'cause if he didn't get back under the time frame he might not have gotten back in again. And that daughter was raised by – the mother died – and that daughter was raised by his brother and his wife, and he didn't see her 'til she was thirty-five. She had a dream that she would die before she was thirty-five, and so even though there was the closure, there was a special Order-in-Council by **Ellen Fairclaw**, the Minister of Immigration, and she was one of eighteen people allowed to come in, because they had this thing where she thought she would not live to see him. Anyway, he in turn came back to Brockville, corresponded with my mother – she was a Canadian born Chinese living in North Bay whose family had come via Philadelphia and Montreal – and she figured that if he was Christian he must be okay, so he married her in North Bay, and she came to live in Brockville, and he bought her a sable coat for the wedding, and that was the talk of the town, this sable coat coming.

JL: I think we have photos of her. So going back to the daughter he had in China, did they talk much? Did they send letters or...? [18:18]

VM: I don't think there was that much. I mean, his sister-in-law was of course more of a mother to the child. She eventually came, came a couple of times, came and went back. Her husband was a teacher, she was a teacher. They came over, didn't like it, came back... they have one daughter... no, the only correspondence I remember my dad talking about was... he was sent a letter by a relative, and the relative said "oh, we're having a wonderful time, everything is fine, I'm sending you this letter with a very special stamp", and when he steamed off the stamp it said "we're starving". It was interesting... and then there were pictures, my sister Ruth, she went back to China, and she went to the family house and what really freaked her out was that going on a raft, and going back to the family village and you discover – I mean, you're led to this house and told "this is your family house" and you go in, and sitting on the mantle is a picture of my older sister and me, sitting on the piano bench. And she said it just blew her mind to have gone all that distance... and I believe that there was time – they have collections of some of those letters...

JL: So there was correspondence... was there also remittances sent back, was your father able to send money back to China?

VM: I think he was. But I think Dora, at one time was doing some work in China or

Hong Kong, collecting these letters. Because they would tell fabulous stories, you know, and the only problem here is – I mean, I know **Jack Siu**, who was a real estate agent and he went to settle some laundry person's effects, and they just destroyed everything, they didn't think of saving anything, and you think, "oh, all those very precious things". I found a bunch of stuff the other day, report cards from my inlaws' side, but I didn't want to pass it out, you know, so I didn't know what to do with it. And for me, I mean, it's better, it would be better to come to some place like here.

JL: Because it's of historical importance, yeah. But we only see that in hindsight, I guess.

VM: Yeah, people think it's junk, and they throw it away.

JL: So tell me about this order in council.

VM: Yes, through Ellen Faircloud, who was the Minister of Immigration.

JL: What year would that have been?

VM: Oh, I couldn't... that was before 1967, but there was that period where nobody was allowed in. Somehow, the number eighteen keeps clicking. She was the eighteenth person that was allowed in by special order of council. You know, you have to get you MP to help, and all that stuff.

JL: And what was the reunification like between her and your father? [22:21]

VM: Well, I don't really remember. She was just a bit... her husband was just a bit older than my mother. And mum used to get very upset in the restaurant 'cause he would call her "mum" [laughs] and she didn't like that because he was just a little bit older than she was, when they came over. And here he had been a school principle in Hong Kong, and now he came over and was helping in a restaurant. It was a different kind of life, and Ruth said that when she went to China to visit them they'd be playing [something] to her all the time, so it was a different kind of life. But to come over to Canada, as many of them did, you brought your families over, and they'd start again, and some of them – I remember my cousin, he had been a teacher in Hong Kong, we sent him to bar school because we needed a bar tender, so we sent him up to Toronto to learn to become a bartender. And he got 100% on his certificate. He eventually left Brockville, left the restaurant, and came to Toronto and became a very successful real estate agent. So thank god he didn't stay there to that sort of thing. But none of us actually staying in Brockville to work at the restaurant. There were times where she got sick and I'd go back and look after the restaurant. When Ruth got married, Ian was just a baby, he wasn't even a year old and I was off. And I think "how did I run a restaurant with 30 people with a baby whose under a year old", but you know, you do these things. The staff used to say that I spent more time in the restaurant than my mother did, but I think that must have been just a carry over. She was a very hard worker, worked seven days a week, and you just do these things, you know, you have that responsibility. If you didn't do your work, they wouldn't have their schedules, paychecks wouldn't be written, those were things that had to be done.

JL: Did your mother ever talk about what it might have been like outside the

restaurant industry? Did she ever feel limited by the restaurant?

VM: Mm... no. I don't think she ever did that. She liked the people. She was a member of the community in the sense that she was on the executive, I think she was president of the scouting agency... the horticultural, she was very involved in the community after my father died, so that she picked up the leadership of making sure they went to the cemetery. They had a multicultural history, history or cultural events, the old days where you just had the display kind of thing. But it was a big deal in such a small town.

JL: So there would be a festival kind of thing?

VM: Yes, there would be a festival and different ethnic groups would have their display. And this was very unusual in Brockville because it was a very white community, there was a very old English community. The Fullfords, the Hardys, these people became senators and members of parliament, that sort of thing. But they were all... my parents were always friends with them. And I remember one incident during the war, where they said that they were going to string up George T. Fullford's cook, who was Japanese, and my father went to bat. That the community... they were going to take him out and lynch him, and my father supposedly fought to save him. At that time George was a member of parliament in Ottawa. But the nice thing about... the restaurant was very different, because it had white tablecloths, it was one of the few places offered during the war to officers in training. And when I talk to people, when I was teaching, I would talk to people who had been in the training camp there. And it was a good conversation, because if they had gone for officer's training there they probably would have gone to the restaurant. My first vice principle in 1958, he asked me one day if I was Christian, and I thought "yes! I mean, I did go to church and all of that", and he said "I remember being in your restaurant on... it must have been Christmas Concert, and you were standing behind the counter on a stool, you must have been about five". Giving change, you know, because my brother and I were taught, and we'd help with laundry. There were no dryers, so we stood on wooden pop cases, and we could count to three, so our job, at five years old, was to shake out the napkins and put them on this square, big container. And then the workman would hang them up on the lines. So were started early. And then being behind the till, and making change, that's how you get your math, right. Early days.

JL: Was it tough balancing schoolwork and that extracurricular activity, and working in the restaurant when you were a kid?

VM: One thing I did, with my brother Joe, who was a year and a half younger than I was, we worked in the restaurant more than the two older sisters. They waited on tables and so on. No, it was just an expected routine. You came home from school, you did your homework at the back table, when you were old enough you waited tables, and then when it was quiet you went back upstairs and finished your homework. It was just expected. Lunchtime, we usually came home, ate, and went back to school. There wasn't that same expectancy. The restaurant would close sometimes Wednesday afternoon, and my dad would take us fishing. It was open

seven days a week, so you never had family holidays. My mother took my brother and I on the [something] tour, but we never... I think maybe once, which is really strange now I think about it, my sister Laurie was born in '45. And we left her in the hospital so the family could go up to Toronto. Now, she says "they abandoned me"... it was just... there were four boys, four girls, and then a boy, and then my sister Laurie, and my brother sold her to the workmen for 25 cents that first day. And there's been a whole story about how she gave him back that money... but I remember he sold her to the workmen, and then he felt so bad about it, but the workmen wouldn't give him back the money... and he was very bad. [Laughs] Upset. But to think we left her in the hospital, and mom just had the baby and then we went off to Toronto, because going to Toronto was a big thing. And Gloria was born in April, so it wouldn't have been because of the Santa Claus Parade, I remember coming, it was a big thing: come to Toronto, go to the Santa Claus Parade. I remember I would stand on the steps of the YWCA, where my husband eventually came from, you know the church there. We'd go there and watch the Santa Claus Parade. We'd stay with a relative or we'd stay at the Ford Hotel, where my uncle was the family physician, and go to these opera things, I can remember going with our dad and seeing the opera being performed, and instead of an animal, you'd have a chair; they'd use a chair for that sort of thing. And being fascinated by the smell... being able to get all these special treats.

JL: So, watching the opera at that time, were the women played by women?

VM: No, they were men. They were played by men. As I can recall... I mean, I wasn't very old. But I mean, yeah, those were very interesting days.

JL: So, this photo... [31:42] Was this your Chun Sung, or was this something that was provided to you? [33:19]

VM: Oh no, that would be my Chun Sum, in those days I could fit in them, that's...

JL: In what instances would you wear the Chum Som? I mean, not on a daily basis...?

VM: New Year's and special occasions, and so on. I mean, for a young girl coming into town and having so many Chinese around. I mean, this was really something. You don't have boyfriends in a small town, and it's very interesting – I MC a lot of dinners, one day I was MCing a banquet, and a friend of mine was with some of my teachers, and he said "when Valerie came to town all the boys had the hots for her" and I said "Henry! How could you tell them that, oh my god..." To me, I was not a glamorous person, I was a very shy person coming from a small town, and prior to coming to Toronto, I came up for a church congress, and I met a young man who was going into the ministry from Vancouver, and what completely floored me was that he went back to Vancouver and broke off with a girl he was going with and started corresponding with me. And for a girl that had never had a boyfriend, let alone being Chinese, this was really something. Of course, nothing came from it, because romantics like that don't work when you're in different cities and you're trying to do that sort of thing.

JL: So in Toronto there were a lot more dating opportunities?

VM: Um... there were. There were a lot of guys, and therefore a lot of new females from the small towns... and interestingly enough, when I did my study of the 65 kids who were the offspring of the 13 families, not one of them married within that circle, which is interesting. So therefore people like us, coming into town, were looked upon as new bachelors, I guess.

JL: So you're talking about... there were 13 original families from Toronto...?

VM: Yup, I interviewed them. They were the ones who lived and grew up in the original Chinatown. It centered around the church, because that's where my connection was, through my husband's family. And by interviewing one member of each of those 13 families that's how I was able to come up with some sense of what the community was like; where they went to school, and I don't know how much of that I still remember. And it was really... to backtrack, when I came to Toronto there was very little written on the Chinese, and so that's when I started going to that group to find out what life was like. Things like interviewing Tom Locke, whose mother had the, whose family had the laundry, and the things that you remember. "Ma stood on a stool, over a hot stove, stirring the starch, and her feet had been bound" and now that I think of it, he said "I can't remember... I don't know how she kept from falling in." Or my first interview, when I started doing this sort of stuff was with a woman who had been a nurse, and her territory was really Chinatown, down around Dundas and Elizabeth, and she said "I remember going into a restaurant, going upstairs, and then climbing a ladder to the quarters to visit a TB patient." And when I got home I went to listen to it, and I had forgotten to turn on the tape, or put in the battery or something, and so I remember going into the bathroom and trying to remember all of that, so there is a recording of that visit to...

JL: That reminds me that I should check this recording... so... [38:03] You said the 13 original families, the 65 children didn't intermarry within that group. Why do you think that was? [39:

VM: I really don't know. Maybe they knew each other too well. Considered each other like brothers and sisters. But of those kids, in one of my papers, the percentage of the guys that went to university, and mostly the guys went, and most of them because they had some kind of dreams. And I often wonder what would have happened to my husband if the war hadn't ended, and would he have gone on to... like, he was in advertising, but I thought I wonder what would have happened. His one brother was a chemical engineer, a geologist, another brother is an architect, the youngest brother is a doctor. But Daniel was in advertising, and he worked on the planes, and then I think he was going to go into translation, he liked the uniform, he said, but then the war ended.

JL: Why do you think so many of them enlisted, even though Chinese weren't given equal rights back then?

VM: Well, they enlisted to be useful, but they weren't allowed to be in the front lines, because they looked much like the Japanese, so that's why they were working on the planes... let's see, he was working on the planes, they were in the ambulance core, but that's where most of the relatives... I think my brother in law went to

England not because he enlisted but because he had some sort of eye problem... but he did go to England, and he did meet his future wife, who was **Sheila**, an English schoolteacher there.

JL: You mentioned Geneva Park. Can you describe what that was and how you got involved?

VM: I think it was through CCA, the Chinese Canadian Association. It was an opportunity for the young people of Toronto to meet Americans, and they organized it – I came in as sort of an outsider, on the fringes, but because I lived in Toronto I helped. When you look at, in the pictures, at how many did come up, and how many were matched, I just did the MC of the 50th anniversary of one of the couples, and we have a lot of memories of how he used to... she came up to Geneva Park, and he used to drive down, and it was so many hours, or 65 dollars to fly down. But he would drive down to see her. And it's almost like these, in a lot of them, my brother in law married an American nurse, his friend Henry married an American nurse. I don't know... Dr. **Ivan Mark**, his wife is also an American. These are the.. the guys married women from down... and I'm trying to think if there were American men marrying Canadian girls... I don't think it was that many, whether there were so few women here, that's why they were choosing down there, that's...

JL: Well, do you remember there being less women when you were in Toronto?
[43:19]

VM: Yes. When I went to this dance... there were very few new ones. That's why Henry made that comment. And maybe that's why they chose some of the girls from down south. My roommate, for one of the times I was at Geneva Park, was this beautiful girl from New York, and she was in a flower girl song. She was dating one of the guys here. And she said "the trouble with Max is that he thinks he's God's gift to women, and I'm God's gift to men." I remember that... but she was gorgeous, and that really appealed to all the guys here. There were a lot of guys, and I think that some of them stayed single. And I used to say to my husband, "why did you wait so long?" and he – smart ass – said that "I knew that you were coming".

JL: So what kind of activities were... like, how long was the camp, and what did you do?

VM: Come to think of it, I don't remember. Like... canoeing, camping, that kind of thing. I can't even remember, because usually I was busy. We were doing the, you know, we would do a skit, and that's about all I remember, and then looking at the picture I do recognize a lot of the people that were up there.

JL: So I guess a lot of people got together, they did get matched up... did it advertise itself that way, as a matrimonial...?

VM: Oh no, just, you know... the other interesting thing was, we called ourselves Chinese Canadian, whereas they called themselves American. If you asked them, "oh, what are you?" they'd say "American", whereas if you asked us, we're "Canadian... Chinese" we would answer "Chinese". Different feeling. And I think

it's the melting pot referral to the Americans compared to the Canadians. There was a different kind... a pride. I really don't remember the stuff we did up there. One of my best friends, well, actually, he ended up being music director for the Toronto Board of Education. And he was part of the staff up there, so I belong to, now, the retired teachers' choir. And he was the director for 17. And one day, he said "I was trying to think who I've known the longest", and everybody sat up there, thinking it was them. And I was a new member to the choir, but then he said "Valerie Mah", and they all looked at me, and he said "well, we won't talk about the circumstances of where we met" [laugh]. But I mean he had been on staff, and he was a very sweet guy, and they were always curious, "how did Valerie know...? She was the latest member of the choir, and we've known him all these years. So how...?" But he was on staff at Geneva Park.

JL: So here... [46:45]