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Discursive Table of Contents—Royce Ong
Tape 1

00:01:55
Born San Francisco, 1930. -- Attended the First Baptist Church in Point Richmond. -- Parents employment background. -- Childhood memories of San Francisco. Grew up in Butchertown, part of the Bayview District. -- How his family settled in Butchertown. -- Coming to Point Richmond. In 1934, Ong’s mother moved into the family home in Point Richmond after Ong’s father lost his job due to discrimination by his union. -- Family home in Point Richmond. Ong’s grandfather built the home around 1903 and put the title under his daughter’s name. -- Asian Exclusion Act and owning property. -- Description of the family home and surrounding neighborhood. -- Description of Point Richmond, brief history of town’s industry.

00:15:10
Parents were unemployed during the Depression, family lived off government assistance, father later worked for the WPA. -- Mother separated from Ong’s father, believes she was one of the earliest Asian Americans to get a divorce. -- Early memories of Point Richmond, town’s ethnic make up. -- Speaking Cantonese in the household, Ong always answered in English. -- Learning English at Washington Elementary School and around Point Richmond. -- Memories of Washington Elementary School. -- Mixing with more affluent neighbors. “Even as poor as we were, nobody looked down on me.” Games they played. -- Food served at home. -- Thoughts about anticipating the start of the war. -- Memories of the construction of the shipyards. -- Rocks used in construction came from a quarry near Point Richmond, used to fill in the shoreline.

00:31:40
Memories of the shipyards, emitted a lot of light, made great noise. “Was like a town of its own.”. -- Port Chicago explosion. -- Memories of the open spaces and later war housing projects. -- Discrimination against outsiders. “Go back were you came from.”. -- Remembers that most outsiders came without children. -- Discrimination against kids from Oklahoma, threw rocks at them because they were poor and outsiders. -- Befriended many Mexican American students. “A lot of the Mexicans somehow blend in, because I was darker skin then the others. So, I had a lot of friends that were Mexican.”. .. Mexicans were Richmond’s largest minority before the war. -- Richmond was conservative and prejudice city. -- Differences between Richmond residents and those of Point Richmond, newcomers versus locals.

00:45:30
Attending high school in Richmond, met more people of different races than in the Point. Attended Roosevelt Junior High, where working class kids went and kids from Point Richmond. -- Description of businesses in wartime Richmond. -- Public transportation, trains and buses that brought workers to the shipyards. -- Mother’s employment background: worked as housekeeper before the war, then was hired at Standard Oil during the war years. -- Livelihood improved once Ong’s mother started work at Standard Oil, put gas and electricity in the home, used kerosene and coal before the war. -- No apparent discrimination at Standard Oil. Does not remember his mother telling hurtful stories. -- Point Richmond local. Family was known by the most townspeople and shopkeepers. -- Knew no other Chinese families in Point Richmond or Richmond. -- Visits to San Francisco, grandparents’ birthdays. -- Relations with family members
from San Francisco, mother lived independent of the Chinese community. -- Thoughts on assimilation.

Tape 2

00:01:25
Did not know about Japanese Internment, was young and did not have radio. -- Distinguishing between Chinese and Japanese. Many Chinese, including Ong’s mother, wore pins which indicated their ethnicity. -- Family sentiment towards the Japanese. Because of the invasion of China some did not buy Japanese-made products. -- Relatives in the military, had cousins serving in Europe. -- Referring to World War II as the Pacific War or the European War. -- Patriotism in the Chinese community. In the 1930s, collection jars gathered money to help China fight the Japanese. -- Post-war unemployment. -- Change in Richmond’s demographics, white families moved out. -- Influences of racial prejudice, people moved out.

00:16:00
Destruction of war housing. City Council thought it would displace Richmond’s black residents. -- Impact of population influx on Richmond’s schools, came after the war. -- Growth of the suburbs. -- Point Richmond had a stable population. -- Destruction of the Cutting War Apartments. -- Downtown Richmond was still commercially vibrant after the war. -- Richmond’s commercial redevelopment, a lot of empty lots, relocating to Hilltop Mall.

00:30:50
Remembers Chinese families arriving in Richmond around 1950, worked in grocery stores. - Employment after graduating high school, federal employee for 36 years, supported mother. -- Working for the defense industry, 1950s at Camp Stoneman in Pittsburg, CA, Benicia Arsenal, Port Chicago. -- Conflict of interest; supporting the nation’s foreign war. -- Reaction to communist change in China. -- Memories of the Korean war, the draft.

00:43:55
Defense industries regained strength during the Korean War, Cold War. Richmond, however, did not benefit much from military expenditures. -- Why whites moved out of Richmond: prejudice and bad economy. -- Comparison of Richmond’s pre-war to post-war periods, racist influences on historical perspective. -Racial discrimination and city jobs—police, fire. Practices changes in the late 1960s, early 1970s. -- Riot at Trevillini’s Department Store, late 1969, police and community relations
Today is January 15, right?

I think it is, isn’t it?

We’re recording with Royce Y. Ong. My name is David Washburn, the interviewer. We are at the University of California at Berkeley. Royce, I’d like to start with some rather simple questions just to establish a few things.

All right.

When and where were you born?

San Francisco. You want the year I was born? 1930.

You had told me that you were baptized Baptist.

Yes.

It was First Baptist Church in Point Richmond.

So you were baptized in Point Richmond.
Ong: No, I was baptized over in town, but that’s the church I attended, First Baptist Church in Point Richmond. I was baptized, I think, over in Richmond, in Barrett Avenue Baptist Church. That was the main church in the Baptist area, in downtown Richmond.

Washburn: In San Francisco, do you remember what your parents did for work?

Ong: My mother was a homemaker, my father was a chauffeur.

Washburn: Chauffeur for whom?

Ong: I don’t know who he chauffeured for, but somebody with money. He worked only half a day, because all he does is just drive the man around.

Washburn: I understand that you moved to Point Richmond when you were younger. Although you were still a young boy, what do you remember about growing up in San Francisco?

Ong: Not much. Only thing I remember, we had cousins who would take me up to where Hunters Point was. Used to be up there, nothing but wild animals and things. That was before it built up. Then one time we brought home a dog and my mother made him take it back. He followed us home. And then I remember, the stockyard was there. You see the animals going to the stockyard slaughterhouses. That’s the only thing I kind of remember. And I remember going downtown to see my grandfather, who lived in Chinatown. We lived out in Butchertown in them days, what is known as Bayview District.

Washburn: So you lived out towards what is now Bayview-Hunters Point.

Ong: Yes. In the early years, everybody bragged about it if you were born in Butchertown. That’s where Lefty O’Doul was born, the famous ballplayer and manager. That’s why they have a bridge named after him on Fourth Street, the Lefty O’Doul Bridge. He always used to brag that he was a Butchertown boy.
Washburn: Why was it called Butchertown?

Ong: They had slaughterhouses there, for the cows and the sheep. But they were gone when I left. They probably left in the fifties.

Washburn: Has anybody told you why your family settled in Butchertown and not in Chinatown?

Ong: The reason was my paternal grandmother bought a house down there. All my mother’s brothers lived across the street. So she lived down there across from them. My grandmother wanted to live there too, but she only lived two years after I was born. She died in the hospital with a tumor and so they picked that area to live in. It was very unusual, because there was hardly any Chinese in there.

Washburn: I think you described to me once that there was a shrimp camp out that way.

Ong: The shrimp camp is where the Hunters Point Shipyard is. They used to pay ten cents a pound for them to peel the skins off of the shrimp. My mother used to do that for extra money. That’s the only thing I can remember. But all my uncles worked uptown, except for one uncle who would work at the slaughterhouse. In later years, before he retired in the seventies, he became superintendent. But they weren’t doing that much slaughtering of animals.

Washburn: When and why did your family move to Point Richmond?

Ong: The reason was my mother owned a property since 1903. When they had the 1934 strike, that Harry Bridges and the maritime had, just like the one they had a couple months ago, the town became unionized. My father, since he was a Chinese man, never was in the unions. They didn’t allow them, so the man that hired him didn’t dare keep him, because the whole San Francisco Bay Area became union. So they had to let him go. My mother was lucky, owned a home, so she had to tell the people she rented out to they had to leave, and she moved back in.
Washburn: Right before your family moved to Point Richmond, your father’s job became unionized. He was a chauffeur, you said?

Ong: Yes, but he didn’t marry my mother until 1922. His job was a chauffeur and odd jobs, and then when the strike came, he was non-union so he lost his job, and during the Depression you couldn’t find work. We had to rent, but she owned a home already so we moved back over there, so not to pay rent anymore.

Washburn: What year was that, about?

Ong: 1934, in July.

Washburn: You had described to me when we first met about how your mom owned the home. Can you describe who built the home?

Ong: My grandfather built the home and he put the property under my mother’s name. So the day the property was bought, my mother was the owner of the property. I don’t know much about the house, but the lot was owned by her. She had to pay a twenty-dollar gold piece. That was a requirement in them days. I found out later from people, other kind of monetary fund wasn’t acceptable for property. Only gold was, so paper and silver didn’t mean anything. That’s why the deeds all say that.

Washburn: When did your mother’s father establish the home there?

Ong: Far as I could tell, the year the house was built. He might’ve been there earlier, but 1903 was the year the house was built. Some famous carpenter built all the homes there. He had it built.

Washburn: Do you know why he built it there in Point Richmond?
Ong: Got me. Very unusual, because, like I was telling you, the Asians didn’t get allowed to own property, so I was surprised that he bought a lot and they sold to him.

Washburn: But at that point in 1903, your mother was born here in this country.

Ong: Yes. She was a citizen, so he automatically just put the property under her name. [phone interruption]

Washburn: Let’s go back once again. By 1903, your mother had already been born here.

Ong: Yes.

Washburn: You describe that your grandfather put his property in her name.

Ong: The property is all under my mother’s name, so she’s the owner of the property.

Washburn: It’s kind of a naive question to ask, but just for other people—why did he have to do that?

Ong: Because—I think it was the Exclusion Act that didn’t allow the Asians to own property. It started 1898, but in 1915 they kind of put it back on. I don’t know if it was still in effect through those years. I always want to go to the library and read up more about it, but the law was that no Asian person was allowed to own any property, or buy it, even.

Washburn: Asian immigrant.

Ong: Yeah. “Asian” especially meant “Chinese.”

Washburn: However, Asians who were born here could own property.
Ong:
No, they really couldn’t. The Exclusion Act had stopped them from immigrating and stopped them from owning property in the United States, especially California. I think they had their own law that was a little [more] stringent than the United States law. They were even segregated in the schools, when you read history. But you read the Japanese didn’t, because they protested it. Their government was strong.

Washburn:
I remember reading that.

Ong:
Yeah, you seen that on Channel 9, how the Japanese went back to school and the Chinese didn’t have a strong government. They didn’t dare say anything.

Washburn:
That was between Teddy Roosevelt and the Japanese government.

Ong:
Yeah, because he was trying to be friendly with them. So the Japanese had more privilege. They yelled and he right off stopped it.

Washburn:
Can you describe the house that your grandfather built to live in?

Ong:
He just built a small bungalow, like. It wasn’t real big, because he was ready to go back to China soon as they made their money here. The Chinese always had that theory, to make enough and go buy a big farm in China, and then they’d have all the relatives work off the farm. But there’s not too many of them did that.

Washburn:
How did you learn that that was your grandfather’s idea?

Ong:
My mother told me, and my great-aunt, who lived in the city—didn’t live with us, but she remembered all that.

Washburn:
Can you describe the neighborhood that the house was built in?
Ong:
Point Richmond’s a kind of influential area. It still sits there in the same area.

Washburn:
For those that don’t know about Point Richmond, can you describe it?

Ong:
Point Richmond was a town that was built up when Santa Fe [Railroad] came in the early 1900s. Standard Oil, which is now known as Chevron, built there too. Most of the people that lived there in the early part of the century were either Santa Fe or Standard Oil workers. So the little town grew up. Santa Fe had their yard there, and Ferry Point was where the ferryboats—wasn’t ferryboats; was kind of like tugboats—carried the passengers or trains over to San Francisco. Most of the people who lived there either worked in the yard as engineers, firemen or track people. The town was bought up by [John] Nicholl—that’s where the town still has Nicholl Knob—and Ellis Landing, they bought the property. They were hunting birds and things, they thought it was a good place to start building up. So Point Richmond now is a place to live. All the wealthy people are moving back in there. It’s a little historic part of Richmond. Historic district.

Washburn:
So when your parents moved over to Point Richmond, what did they do for work when they arrived?

Ong:
They were unfortunately unemployed during the Depression. My father and mother survived on social security. A form of social security; I don’t know what they really call it. They used to give you food stamps every two weeks or something. You go over to town, they give you anything that was available from the farms, like rice, dry fruit. They’d give you cornmeal. That’s your diet of food all the time. Then, in the late thirties, my father didn’t want to go to work, but the WPA [Works Progress Administration] came in. So they told him he had to go to work because he had a family. So he worked on the dam road, where it is now, El Sobrante, and widened the road up, took the blackberries out. He worked making the causeway to Mare Island. Then in 1940 my mother got encouragement from a Scottish lady up the hill. Mrs. Brown, who was a pioneer lady, told her my father was too lazy, it’s best to divorce him. I think she was one of the early Asian women to get a divorce. So after that, my mother became what is known now as a single parent.

Washburn:
What were some of your earliest memories, moving to Point Richmond?
Ong:
Only thing I remember was the Point was a small town, and there was mostly now you call them Caucasian people living there. Only me and a girl and a boy that was Mexican were the only other minority people there. Half of the population in them days was all Italian people. My neighbors next door were Italians. They had thriving businesses in Point Richmond, because that used to be the main part of town until—about 1912 or 1913, they moved over to proper Richmond, and that started building up. City Hall and everything left downtown, but the police station, for some reason, stayed downtown until 1950 when the new modern City Hall was built.

Washburn:
You moved to Point Richmond when you were only four years old.

Ong:
Yes.

Washburn:
Back in San Francisco, you said they spoke Cantonese to each other.

Ong:
Yes.

Washburn:
So you grew up speaking Cantonese in the household.

Ong:
My mother spoke it. My father spoke a little bit, but he never was around much. I imagine he did. I don’t remember him much, because he left so early. My mother knew English, but she always wanted to speak Cantonese, but I didn’t. I always answered in English, made her mad.

Washburn:
So moving over to Point Richmond, you didn’t have any problems with language or anything.

Ong:
No, but the only thing is, I was telling my father this, I’m telling everybody now, I don’t believe in bilingual education, because for some reason I was lucky to have a first-grade teacher—I did not know English until I was six years old. My mother, for some reason, neglected to teach me English. I went to the teacher—she passed away, I knew her for years and years—Miss Ruby {Simmons?}, she taught me English, she taught me to write, and I’m amazed what she did for me. After my first grade I started picking all that up. So
I always say, if you’re a foreign person and you don’t learn English, it’s just too bad. Because I had that trouble. Like everybody said, I could have been sent backwards because of my language trouble.

1-00:17:49
Washburn:
How was it for you moving to Point Richmond and not knowing so much English? Do you remember having difficulty?

1-00:17:56
Ong:
Never had people around me that spoke English. [laughs] Always seeing my mother and my aunts and uncles.

1-00:18:02
Washburn:
And in Point Richmond, nobody spoke Cantonese, so do you remember any language difficulties when you were younger?

1-00:18:09
Ong:
Looks like I didn’t. I got along with them real good, so I must have picked it up real easy. I never had trouble with talking to people, and I learned it just as fast, so I was one of the lucky persons. A lot of people want the bilingual education, I tell what could happen. I had it happen, and I’m lucky I got out and ended up with good jobs. See, I was born without English language knowledge, which was bad. So I know how it is, with people that didn’t, but it was my case that since I was so young, I picked it up real good. Then I think what helped me was that Scottish lady that was like a grandmother to me. She always made me pronounce words and things.

1-00:19:01
Washburn:
This was at Washington Elementary School.

1-00:19:04
Ong:
Yes. So I had to stay back one semester, because I was too late going to kindergarten.

1-00:19:13
Washburn:
For those who don’t know where Washington Elementary School is, can you describe it?

1-00:19:17
Ong:
That’s in a suburb of Richmond, Point Richmond historic district.

1-00:19:28
Washburn:
But where it’s located is—
Ong:
It’s in the city proper. Since we have a post office in Point Richmond itself, there’s no way to stop us from using the Point Richmond address, but the city frowns on it. But nobody who lives there ever says you live in Richmond.

Washburn:
You entered elementary school in about what year?

Ong:
1937 to spring of ’42. First grade all the way up to sixth grade.

Washburn:
What’s probably your most vivid memory about the classrooms at Washington?

Ong:
The first school building was a three-story building. It was big rooms with high ceilings, and it didn’t have heat. They only had central heat in the hallways. The stairs were made out of mahogany or something, because it was an old 1913 building. During that time in the forties, the WPA built a school that was a low-floor, and looked like kind of Washington building, George Washington. Had a little thing for weather vane on top and the building kind of resembled George Washington’s building. It’s still there to this day, but they added more classrooms. It was a very modern building for its year.

Washburn:
Did you attend the older building?

Ong:
Yes, I attended about a year and a half or two years. The building stayed until after the war, because the army came and took it over.

Washburn:
At that age, can you remember what were some of your favorite subjects?

Ong:
I liked to draw a lot. We used to listen to the Standard Oil music. All the kids went down the stairs to the auditorium. They turn on the radio, listen to Standard Oil opera music. They sponsored it, like Texaco did. Texaco used to have operas, from back East. They used to go down there. That’s where you go on rainy days, and they had their PTA meetings with your parents.
Washburn:
Most of the kids who went to school at Washington Elementary, where did their parents work?

Ong:
Most of them either were Standard Oil or Santa Fe, and then a lot of them did other work. Some of the mothers work at downtown Richmond, [which was] very vibrant then, had all the major stores, like Kress, Woolworth, shoe stores, Montgomery Ward’s, so a lot of them worked there as sales clerks.

Washburn:
Would you say that during the Depression, like yourself, many of those kids were working, where their families were living on social security, also?

Ong:
Not very many. It was a very influential area, even then. Most of them had a job.

Washburn:
How would you say the Depression affected the other students?

Ong:
Most of them, I think, had good incomes. They all had nice houses on the bay side, where the people are still building the $500,000 homes or more.

Washburn:
What was it like for you, then, with your family living off social security, and these other kids—

Ong:
I never had trouble. I sailed right in with the kids, go to their houses, and they’d come to my house. We were around them, everywhere we went. The movies, and everything. So, even as poor as we were, nobody looked down on me.

Washburn:
Who were some of your best childhood friends? Do you remember their names?

Ong:
I can’t hardly remember. One was Robert Chamberlain. And Arthur Hudson. Those were the two guys I used to hang around with. They had brothers. Then I had—one was Dick O’Connor. His cousin was the famous Donald O’Connor in the movies, the dance star. His father was a big shot at Standard Oil. Those were the kids right in my neighborhood.
The only funny thing, my neighborhood never had any girls. They always had boys. Then another guy was a guy we called {Schnookie?} next door. The {Amantini?} family were close, and they still live there.

1-00:24:21
Washburn: What would you guys do as children in town?

1-00:24:24
Ong: Always play soldiers. We thought soldier was a great thing. Now, everybody knows better. Go over and get killed or something, but during World War II we thought soldier was the best thing in the world. In them days, everybody had little toy guns.

1-00:24:44
Washburn: So would you go over to their house and they’d come over to your house also?

1-00:24:47
Ong: Yes. They lived right next door to me, some of them, some farther down the street. But most of them moved away, and some I don’t know what happened. A very few of my schoolmates left in the town. There’s only about three or four left; all the rest are newcomers, because they all went over to Richmond where the newer homes were built in the forties.

1-00:25:11
Washburn: What kind of foods did your mom cook when you were growing up?

1-00:25:15
Ong: My mother cooked Chinese food and American food, but I don’t. I just eat regular American food.

1-00:25:23
Washburn: When these friends would come over, would they come over for lunch sometimes?

1-00:25:29
Ong: No, they just come to visit and play.

1-00:25:36
Washburn: So they never came over and your mom cooked them Chinese food or something.

1-00:25:38
Ong: No. We had one family that came and ate apple pies and stuff, because my mother used to get it from a relative in Salinas. They used to send them up by railway express every
year in apple season, three or four crates of it. So my mother made apples. One family did eat the apples. We had a lot of relatives that lived in Salinas.

1-00:25:58
**Washburn:**
One thing I want to focus on with you—I’d love to talk more about your childhood, but—

1-00:26:06
**Ong:**
The war years, that’s the main thing.

1-00:26:09
**Washburn:**
I want to talk a little bit about the war years, right. [interruption to check recorder]

1-00:26:42
**Ong:**
You know what mystified me? In the war years, I got a book from my friend—had to give it back to him—the National Park there published a book on the coast artillery of the Bay Area. They mentioned 1941, when they had a training, never mentioned why the soldiers went from Fort Lewis, Colorado, down to Fort Roberts to train. They never mentioned it. We were little kids, though. The war had started—no, the war didn’t start.

It was November, the month before the war start. We seen about a hundred army trucks pulling 40 mm cannons, going from the ferryboat, going down Cutting Boulevard, which was Highway 17, heading south. Two weeks later they came back. Some stayed. Two weeks later, the war come. So I cannot understand; I think somebody knew something was going to happen. So when the war come, the army was already there. They put up the guns for the Japanese to bomb us. They were right behind my house; they put up 50 mm machine guns and the 40 mm cannons, anti-aircraft. So that was a funny thing, how they knew and stayed, because it’s never mentioned in any books why they were doing that. Just like I heard some guys on the bus one day as a kid, just right after the war, say they went two weeks before the war, they went out and met a Japanese tanker out two hundred or three hundred miles out in the ocean, and gave them gasoline.

1-00:28:12
**Washburn:**
I’m sure there are lots of stories like that. But when we first met, Royce, you had mentioned that you were going to school down at Washington Elementary School when activity at the Kaiser shipyards started. What do you remember about the construction activity in that area of town?

1-00:28:36
**Ong:**
I was a traffic boy. There was a company called {Marco?} that built the shipyards. They come through with a rock quarry, with the trucks, and we had to make sure the kids didn’t get run over, because they came through the tunnel carrying rocks. That’s when they start building the shipyards up. Shipyard Three was already built in early 1941,
because, as a boy, I went down there to watch them launch Liberty ships for the British. Then when the war come, I later read—because them days I didn’t read much, being young—Kaiser was authorized to take over all the shipyards. Henry Kaiser ran them all, even {Todd?} was under his command, because the Maritime [Commission] took them over. But that was already building ships for the British.

1-00:29:20
Washburn:
Maybe you were too young, but what do you remember about them pumping out from the canal and establishing that area down there by the canal as building it up for the shipyards?

1-00:29:34
Ong:
Yeah, they start bringing the rocks on the quarry around the canal. You still see the scar in the hill. That’s where all the rocks came from. You know where the sewage plant is? On the side, you still see a big scar. A lot of the rocks were taken off the hill to make the shipyards.

1-00:29:49
Washburn:
So what did they do with those rocks?

1-00:29:50
Ong:
Fill in the shoreline on the canal there. But, like I said, Shipyard One was already built. That’s the one that’s still there, that they’re collecting the coke, where Rosie the Riveter is near, that’s the one that already was built before the war. Shipyard Two and Three was built after the war started, but they did it real fast.

1-00:30:11
Washburn:
You went to school about eight o’clock in the morning or so. Do you remember going to school and also seeing workers arriving at the shipyards?

1-00:30:23
Ong:
When the shipyards got finished, yes, because you hear all the commotion going all night. Hammering and everything, all through the night. It was lit up like a big city. With the three yards going, they had lights on because the Japanese weren’t going to bomb us any more. They had a hundred thousand people working three shifts. It was just like a town on its own, noise and everything.

1-00:30:47
Washburn:
Do you remember hearing those noises?

1-00:30:49
Ong:
Yeah, you’d hear the hammering on the metal of the ships.
Washburn:
Did you hear that at school and at your home?

Ong:
At school, and you hear it sometime at night, if they’re really hammering. Daytime, like I said, they had entertainment for the employees here, dance bands and music and people singing, because that was the Big Band era.

Washburn:
Why did you hear that music?

Ong:
Because the school ground was only about a block away from it. We see all the cars going in and out, and see the electric trains run. Right back of the school they had a big platform. Then when I went to junior high, the war was still on, you see all the buses downtown taking the workers to work.

Washburn:
At what age did it strike you that all this activity was for something really big?

Ong:
When I first was eleven, twelve, it didn’t dawn on me. When I was thirteen, fourteen, I knew it was a big war on. Then I remember the big explosion in Port Chicago—I was already going to junior high—on a Friday night. Next day, I didn’t know it, but I went over and one of my friends at school was selling newspapers that had a big explosion at Port Chicago. That was July 1944 where it blew up two ships and a railroad disappeared, never seen again, and blew up all the barracks. Later—funny—in 1963, myself worked there as a grownup man.

Washburn:
Port Chicago.

Ong:
Yeah.

Washburn:
At that age, what do you remember thinking about that explosion?

Ong:
I thought it was something bad. Horrible. You could see the explosion and hear it in the air, but you couldn’t see it good.
Washburn:
Did you see the smoke in the air?

Ong:
I think it was a flash. You hear it, a little bit, up in the sky like an atomic bomb would be, and that was then. We heard it about four or five or six o’clock at night. Then we turn the radio on and they mention a big explosion, but them days, I didn’t know where it was. We never had a car, so I never traveled out of town. [laughs] Funny. Never knew where all those cities were. My mother never had a car, she never liked to drive, so we always stuck just in the Bay Area. And all the later years, I worked at all those places they mention.

Washburn:
I’d like to ask you about the construction activity. You weren’t a worker at the shipyards, but you were very close to the activity going on there so you could kind of observe it from an outside point of view. For somebody who doesn’t know what was going on there, what would you tell them was one of the most vivid memories that people living nearby the shipyards had?

Ong:
Right across from the schoolhouse, they start building {Ellis Morelda?} Village for the workers, and they built {Floyd Terrace?} on the side with the sewage disposal. They had houses on tiers going up kind of like Vallejo did, because they didn’t have much room to build in the hills. Then, on the left side, I used to deliver papers there when I was about thirteen, fourteen, but Canal [Boulevard] housing came up, hundreds and hundreds of big buildings, kind of like Hunters Point. Five or six families lived on decks, tiers, upstairs, downstairs. They must have had about a hundred buildings. Then they had a row of buildings just for the bachelor men. From then on, every empty lot in Richmond had war housing on it. Later, I read in the paper they had 28,000 war housing. So everywhere you went, you seen war housing that wasn’t downtown. That area, where the shipyard was, was hardly any people living there. It was all open land.

Washburn:
What was there before they built the housing?

Ong:
Nothing. People that owned the property never built. They only had two or three houses on that side of the area. Most people lived in Point Richmond or downtown Richmond itself, and that was all just open lots. But people owned them; my aunt herself owned one, but she didn’t want it back after the war. They gave it back to her. They confiscated everybody’s lot, and put housing on it.
Washburn: What do you remember about what natives were saying about all these people coming into Richmond and all this activity? How can you describe it from somebody who was raised there before the war?

Ong: It was okay with me, but the saying in them days and a lot of the native Californians say it, it’s not nice: “Go back where you come from.”

Washburn: So people did say that.

Ong: Oh, they did say it. Californians are kind of nasty people, when you look at it. Even up north in those small counties, they don’t care if you’re from down here. Like Amador; lot of people laugh when you hear them. You didn’t have to be some other color person, you were from some other state, they just always say, “Go back where you come from.” That was a good slogan. [laughs] You tell people, they’re mystified. They faint.

Washburn: You said you went to Roosevelt Junior High in 1943.

Ong: I went from 1943 to 1945.

Washburn: When do you first remember as a student experiencing this influx of people into the schools who weren’t from Richmond? All these migrants?

Ong: A lot of the people that migrated, from memory, a lot of them didn’t have children. Later, they grew up after the war, but from what I observed and later looking at newsreels and things, I think most of the people were single people. They might have girlfriends or wives, but there weren’t that much kids. Well, they were little. My mother worked for a family, took care of kids, they were only about two, three years old, so they weren’t in the school when the war was. They were later in grammar school, but by that time I already was grown up, going to high school. There weren’t that many really grownup kids. They didn’t bring very many older people, but I had some people when I went to grammar school that came from Oklahoma. They were ten or eleven. [laughs] Here’s a thing that is going to shock you. The white kids used to chase them home every night, throw rocks at them, because they were from Oklahoma. The only kid that defended them
was two boys. They were Catholic, and their mother didn’t like that, so we threw rocks at them too, even though we knew them. How do you like that for prejudice?

1:00:37:46
**Washburn:**
Why was that?

1:00:37:48
**Ong:**
Because they were poor. In those days, they had an awful expression, they always call people that weren’t born in California “Okies” or “Arkies.”

1:00:38:00
**Washburn:**
Because they were from Oklahoma and Arkansas.

1:00:38:02
**Ong:**
That’s what people did. A lot of people think that they’re prejudiced against other races; they were prejudiced against white people themselves that weren’t born here. We used to chase them home. When you look back, that was kind of bad. My mother never knew about it, but she would have been mad. We even had two girls that joined in with us. How do you like that, David? That shocks people when I tell them.

1:00:38:25
**Washburn:**
I’ve heard that, a little bit. Do you think that was because—

1:00:38:30
**Ong:**
All those people, they were brought up middle-class thinking. It’s just that the parents didn’t know it, and they got the idea that the people that were from another state were kind of dumb or they didn’t fit in a pattern. You heard that before, when you talk, huh? That’s funny. I tell people I kind of think it’s funny, but I tell how people are.

1:00:38:55
**Washburn:**
So the few kids that did come with their parents during the war, that you knew in Roosevelt Junior High, did they stick to themselves?

1:00:39:05
**Ong:**
I used to stick mostly with the kids I knew and a lot of the Mexicans. I somehow blend in, because of the darker skin than the others, so I had a lot of friends that were Mexicans and grew up in high school. And later years, I knew them, too. I had friends from both sides, but I knew a lot of Mexicans, because they tend to hang around themselves in them days. So I always got in with them. They grew up and had good jobs. Because Mexicans, in them days, were frowned on. They were like the Afro-Americans of nowadays, because Richmond didn’t have a big Afro-American population until after the war. The
Mexicans were kind of like a scapegoat because they all were laborers at Santa Fe and their parents didn’t speak English, even then. But the kids did pretty good.

1-00:39:52
Washburn:
The Mexicans were the largest minority in Richmond before the war.

1-00:39:53
Ong:
Yes, what you call minority. There probably weren’t over two or three hundred. But out of twenty thousand people, they were the minority of Richmond. Because Richmond was a very conservative city, and as I grew up later I seen on newsreels and Channel 2, they were the only city that allowed the Ku Klux Klan to parade.

1-00:40:19
Washburn:
Why do you think it was such a conservative city?

1-00:40:22
Ong:
I don’t know. I couldn’t understand that, but on the papers, you read back in history, they were very conservative, and they were very prejudiced. The councilmen, everything. They were kind of like the racist people, the supremacists back in the early century in the South. I was surprised when I read that in the papers.

1-00:40:46
Washburn:
How did that affect you when you were—

1-00:40:48
Ong:
Because I lived in the Point, I never was over downtown, but I remember there was a Chinese market in ’37, the people were trying to put it out of business. I seen it in the paper in later years. They were picketing, said they were nasty and they weren’t clean, they wanted a Seventh Street market.

1-00:41:06
Washburn:
About what year was that?

1-00:41:10
Ong:
In the late thirties, ’36 or ’37. The white people picketing in the market, wanted to put it out of business. But it stayed and lasted until up to the fifties. So it looked like they were very prejudiced in them days against Asians, too.

1-00:41:23
Washburn:
Did any folks ever tease you when you were younger?
Ong:
No, because in the Point, my mother knew everybody. They were kind of more friendlier, but downtown Richmond, I imagine, was kind of bad. But then, since I don’t live there, I never have seen those people.

Washburn:
Can you describe a little bit the difference in the two societies there? The folks that hung out in the Point and the folks that hung out in Richmond? Was it divided?

Ong:
Richmond was more business people, but they had a lot of Standard Oil people. Most of them weren’t old-timers. They were probably later people, came in the twenties or something. Point people, most of them were descendants of the people that was there when the city first started. But after the war, like now all the people I know all came after the war, from Texas and Oklahoma. I mean, they were friendly, but they were not native. Most of the natives have passed away. Most of the people that were born there died in the seventies and eighties, more and more.

Washburn:
What was that like for you? It seems like you spent most of your time as a child hanging out in the Point.

Ong:
One thing is, when we was poor, there was a white lady called Mrs. {Lee?}. She put us on kind of like a welfare thing, and we got free milk all the time, because she knew my mother was unemployed. She had a lot of authority. One time at school I remember, I was about seven years old, she called up the principal of the school and said she had a fresh fish, and “I want one of you boys to take him home.” So during the mid-day, even when the school was on, I had to go home with one of the boys and bring the fish home. The school principal did it, so she must have had a lot of influence in the Point.

In them days, my mother knew the police chief and my grandfather knew a lieutenant down there, and when my grandfather died in ’44, my mother was already divorced and my father always threatened to kidnap me, so she was afraid he’d kidnap me. So she went down and asked them, “Is there a private detective I can hire?” The lieutenant said, “Don’t worry, we’ll take care of it.” Next day, when my mother went back down to make sure, he said—I think the funeral was somewhere middle of the week—next day, they had a police inspector to take me over in a police car. Nowadays, they would have fired the whole department. Turned out, the police inspector was the son of the police chief, Chief [L.E.] Jones.
Washburn:
I was going to ask, Royce, what was that like for you? It seems like you spent a lot of your time growing up as a boy in the Point. What was that like for you then to go to Roosevelt Junior High, which was in Richmond proper?

Ong:
I met more different races of people than I did in the Point.

Washburn:
For someone who doesn’t know where Roosevelt is, can you describe how you went from your house at the Point?

Ong:
You caught the 72 bus and went about a mile, and downtown Richmond, on A Street on the right-hand side of Macdonald. It was a middle school, you call it now, but in them days it was junior high. Up on Twenty-third Street they had Longfellow, which was the middle school for the wealthy people of Mira Vista. That half of town was 100 percent Caucasian people, and this was for the people that were poor and the Point Richmond people.

Washburn:
So Roosevelt was more the working-class school.

Ong:
Yes. Longfellow was for the higher-class people. Mira Vista in them days was like North Berkeley: real high-class, high-price, real deluxe homes, and it still is to this day.

Washburn:
When you were going to school there at Roosevelt, what can you describe about the activity that you saw on the streets during the war?

Ong:
It was very busy. You had about seven movie houses, and the movie houses operate twenty-four hours. On Cutting, which is near where I lived, they had about fifteen grocery stores. They stayed open all night and day. I heard in the later years, I didn’t know, but people slept in the all-night theaters, that didn’t have a place to sleep, when they were working at the shipyards. Then some people, I heard, one trade the bed at daytime; at night somebody else took over the bed. People with helmets were everywhere, the shipyard helmets. We seen people and people.

But then the shipyard train brought in a lot of people from San Francisco and Oakland. We used to go home with my mother after we shopped—we had to ride the streetcar until
Ashby Avenue, for the buses were saving gasoline and rubber tires, so the 72 bus didn’t go all the way to Oakland. At night, around nine or ten o’clock, you’d hear the shipyard train go by with the little horn. They were the elevator trains, about seven, eight cars. People smoke in the back, because you’re not allowed to smoke inside. Full of men and women going to the shipyard, because the shipyard train went as far as Ninth Street in Berkeley, then it turned toward the bay and went on the old Southern Pacific tracks and then over to the shipyard railroad tracks.

1:00:46:49
Washburn: When did you ride the train with folks who were working at the shipyards?

1:00:46:52
Ong: Never did. All those years, I never did ride it. That was a shame. Always rode the local, but never rode those. Just to ride it in daytime, to ride out there. I always liked electric trains; I have never rode it. But I see the people go by when I was on the other transportation.

1:00:47:09
Washburn: The shipyard workers didn’t ride the local buses?

1:00:47:12
Ong: Local ran from downtown Richmond, but in Oakland all they used is the trains. They ran the shipyard trains and they ran the regular modern articulated trains, too, because they had steps. The shipyard trains had to stop at platforms. You couldn’t get out anywhere, if you lived in one of the war housing.

1:00:47:39
Washburn: You said your parents were divorced in the early 1940s. What did your mom do? What was the first job that she got?

1:00:47:51
Ong: She always was a housekeeper all the time for people, clean houses and cook, and took care of children. During the war, she managed to get a job for three years at Standard Oil.

1:00:48:04
Washburn: I’d like to spend five minutes talking about that, because I think that’s really important.

1:00:48:09
Ong: She worked in the marketing department.

1:00:48:11
Washburn: How did she get a job at Standard Oil?
She knew a councilman, Mr. {Tiller?} and another councilman, Mr. {Scott?}. One worked at Standard Oil, and one was the owner of a trucking company, so they had influence with Standard Oil. She asked them if they’d hire her, so they got permission to hire her. Because they’d never hired anybody but Caucasian people. So she was one of the only Chinese there. They put her in the marketing department. She set up food and stuff for the Standard Oil ships. They had a little streetcar going there. It went out during the fifties, but they load them up and brought the food to the Standard Oil tankers.

So why do you think your mom got a job there if the people who were working there discriminated against her?

Well, it was a shortage of people and they needed help, so that was a good reason they would hire her. They needed a woman there to do that kind of work. With the war on, they needed all the help, so they can’t discriminate and not hire somebody. So she got a job there, but she lost it when the war was over, because every place laid off, and the veterans got their jobs back. She worked at only menial work, but she quit working in 1950 and I worked, too. She got sick, so I went and got a job working for the government.

Let’s talk about how her job working there at Standard Oil during the war, how that affected your life.

We had a lot of money, and we put electricity and gas in the house, and did a lot of building on the house. Later, when I worked, we had enough money to put a full foundation of concrete around the house, and steps. Modernize the house some.

Prior to the war—

She was only making about sixty dollars a month doing her little jobs.

So you guys were rather poor.
Ong:
Yeah, really. We were really poor. Now, you’re poor, you go and ask for welfare and they pay your house rent and food, but them days it was never heard of. My mother never bothered to ask my uncles. She didn’t want to ask them for help, so she just had a little job all the time. So my poor mother really worked hard to bring me up. My father never gave us any—that do you call it—he didn’t send any money. He didn’t do it, and you couldn’t get him to do it.

Washburn:
Do you remember how much she was getting paid there at Standard Oil?

Ong:
Standard Oil, I don’t know what. I think they paid about seventy-five cents an hour, or something less than that. I don’t know what the wage was. I think the shipyards paid a dollar an hour. Eight dollars a day, but a lot of them worked overtime and, let’s say, they got rich off it.

Washburn:
I’ve read that that wasn’t just the case for your family, that many families were poorer during the Depression, and once jobs came around in the war their livelihood really improved.

Ong:
Yeah, they went to the shipyard and really made money, and a lot of them bought—some of them—down below. Miss {Moxley?} my mother knew real well, worked at the shipyard, her and her husband worked a lot of overtime. They bought some apartment houses. From the forties, fifties, sixties until they moved back to Kansas, they had rental property. A lot of them did that. They bought up old property and rented them. The ones that did save their money, that didn’t go back to Oklahoma or something.

Washburn:
How did you feel once your mom started working at Standard Oil?

Ong:
Didn’t mean much. We just had a decent job, and finally had electricity in the house.

Washburn:
What did you do before you had electricity?
We used kerosene and coal. [laughs] So I was like people living on the farm, so I had both ends of it. To this day, everybody laughs: “You know how it was to be poor; you know how to be middle class.”

Did your neighbors have electricity?

Yes. I think we were one of a few houses. One more family there, but they had a good job. I don’t know why they had it, but we were about the only ones that still lived like on the farm. My father had a chance to put electricity in for eighteen dollars but he told the local electrician that he was robbing him.

If your mother didn’t speak English so well—

She spoke English good.

Oh, by the time she got a job there she spoke English?

She always had a good English vocabulary. She was good in spelling and everything else. The only thing, her downfall was she never finished school. She only went to third grade and she was not good in mathematics. But spelling, she was great, and she really wrote good. To this day, people are amazed at her handwriting. And she really knew how to spell. I had to ask her. My spelling was never that great, but I got better by using a dictionary.

Do you remember her telling you any stories about discrimination she felt working at Standard Oil, that people treated her differently?

No. She used to walk down with some of the ladies that worked there. They came during the war, and got along real good. She knew everybody in town. They grew up with her. She didn’t go to school with them; they grew up later and they knew each other, all through my grandfather. My grandfather was very smart. He knew algebra and things. One family behind us that lived there, his son used to take care of my mother. When she was divorced, we moved into that house and lived there six months until we finally got
my father out of her house. He wouldn’t move. In them days it was hard to get anybody evicted, so when the papers came the marshal come and told him he had to leave. So we lived in a big fancy house up on the hill, owned by Mrs. Brown, whose husband was a civil engineer for Standard Oil. So I have to say I’ve lived in a real fancy house in my lifetime, for six months. It was a real good house.

**Washburn:**
Your family was really connected within Point Richmond.

**Ong:**
My grandfather was there. He didn’t stay long, but his name was known and everybody knew him.

**Washburn:**
He was there since the beginning.

**Ong:**
Yeah. All the firemen knew my late aunt, too. She one time had a little restaurant there. Most of the people knew my grandfather. All the shopkeepers, when my mother used to visit them, came back to who her father was. They all knew her, so she always stopped by to talk to them.

**Washburn:**
So he was a real pioneer.

**Ong:**
Yeah, she knew the German guy that owned the liquor store, selling beer and things. She knew the Jewish guy that was a clothier. She knew a lot of people in town. My great-aunt knew the firemen in the firehouse, so they used to ask how my great-aunt was doing. I said, “She’s living in the city now.” They asked me if my great-aunt was my aunt, and I said “Yes.” The judge remembered my grandmother owning the Republic Café, over where BART is now. There used to be a street on the right-hand side and there was a little district until the fifties, and they tore it down. She owned a Chinese restaurant open twenty-four hours a day.

**Washburn:**
Growing up, what was your contact with other Chinese?

**Ong:**
None, except for my relatives coming to see me. There was not another Chinese family in Point Richmond, even a café or anything. Outside of my own relatives, I never had seen another Chinese.
Washburn: How often would you guys go back to San Francisco to visit?

Ong: Well, my aunts and uncles come over to see me, see my mother all the time. But my mother, after the divorce in 1940, we never seen my father’s side of the family at all.

Washburn: Did you go over to San Francisco often?

Ong: Used to, once a year when my grandmother and grandfather had a birthday. It was protocol, everybody come over to the birthday party. That was the only time I ever went to the city. So my recollection of San Francisco is: I remember riding the ferryboats, and I remember the Sacramento Street cable car, because my grandfather had a house right on Wentworth Street, right across the street from Portsmouth Square, and the Sacramento cable car ran down Sacramento Street and Clay Street, so we’d just walk a block and rode the ferry home.

Washburn: Where did the ferry go in Richmond?

Ong: They first had one come down to Ferry Point, the Yosemite, but that went out in ’36. Not enough riders. So we had to either ride the five-minute ferry on the end of Broadway, which was five cents. Even with the fare of ten cents, it was still cheap enough for my father to get us over there.

Washburn: Broadway in Oakland.

Ong: Yeah, that was the five-minute ferry. Southern Pacific ran it, but lot of times, we came back on the Key System, which ran the electric train. They had a pier that went two miles out in the open bay, right underneath the Bay Bridge.

Washburn: What did your relatives who were coming over to Point Richmond think about you guys living there?
Ong: My mother’s side didn’t know we were poor, but my father’s side, he used to make fun of us. He said, “Boy, this is a mansion on Golden Gate Avenue. You have a castle here.”

Washburn: Even though the house was small?

Ong: He used to say that. That was to make fun that we were the poorest house on the corner.

Washburn: Oh, he was making fun of you.

Ong: Yeah, but that was my uncle on my father’s side.

Washburn: What did they say about you guys being Chinese and not living in a Chinese neighborhood? Did they think this was strange?

Ong: They never liked it much, because my mother never liked Chinatown. They always said, “Your mother’s funny. She never liked Chinese.”

Washburn: Why do you think that was it?

Ong: I think because the Chinese, she’d never associate with them. Funny, huh? My uncles always knew that, but she never cared for them and was glad to move right out of there fast. Her friends always were Caucasian people.

Washburn: So she felt very comfortable living outside the Chinese community.

Ong: No. I’m so Western that even to this day, people say that you act like a Western person.

Washburn: Well, you’re third generation here, yeah?
Ong:
Yeah. I mean, I’m not a prejudiced person, but I know there’s other races of people. Well, let’s say I look at you just the same as anybody else. But I don’t look at you that I like you because you’re a Caucasian. In my case, I was brought up that I never looked down on other people either. So I can associate with anybody and act like them, and they like me because I act like them. But then, I was born where it was nobody but Caucasian people, and I’m kind of like a person that was adopted and he has a white family that adopts him, like Asian girls or boys. They grew up. The family kind of grows on them. Like, you know, they take orphan kids from Asia, or some people raise up Afro-American kids and you say that you’re a family, they’re like you. So I grew up with Caucasian people, so I like Western culture, I like their museums, I like football, I do everything that most people do. Some don’t like it, think it’s a shame. Some people always like to go back to the homeland, and that’s why I think people get prejudiced, because they don’t act like them, they don’t want to do things like them.

Like some of these people now, the poor Muslim people. They have their own culture and they always get down and pray, but most people in America are Christians. Don’t you think so, David? And they act kind of strange, and they wonder why people don’t like them, because they don’t want to act like the other people. I always got my idea of “you’re in America, act like an American.” You’ve been to Europe; somebody told me that if you don’t speak their language they tell you to get out of town. What did you find out in other countries? If you don’t speak their language, they kind of bounce you out?

Washburn:
I wanted to talk to you also about growing up in Richmond and what you remember about the Japanese internment. Let me describe first: when did you first remember knowing that the Japanese were being interned?

Ong:
I really didn’t know. We didn’t have a radio. We didn’t get radio until my mother put electricity in, about ‘42 or ‘43. When I was younger, I heard about the Japanese were—I really didn’t know about it, because I was that young, I didn’t read the newspaper. My mother or father probably read it. We had to wear a badge for a while, but that didn’t last long. It said, “I’m Chinese.” But being without a radio, we didn’t know much about what was going on.

Washburn:
You don’t remember seeing stuff in the newspaper about it?
Ong: No. Never much was a newspaper reader when I was young. That was too bad. I knew in later years that they were in there, but when they went in there, didn’t know a darn thing about it.

Washburn: You had mentioned the first time we met, about Chinese people making clear to people that they were not Japanese.

Ong: Yeah, they had little pins that say, “I’m Chinese.”

Washburn: Why did they wear those?

Ong: People in Chinatown would make them and sell them, to make sure they didn’t pick on them because they thought they were Japanese, because most Caucasian people didn’t know the difference.

Washburn: Did your mom ever have to wear one of those?

Ong: She wore it a little while, but I don’t think too long. She never went over to the main part of town or anything. But after March of ’42, all of the Japanese were in internment camps, so there was nobody but Chinese. Wasn’t that the date? I think for sure it was March.

Washburn: March of ’42.

Ong: That was the end of it. Why wear pins when they were already gone? They couldn’t distinguish the two different people.

Washburn: Did folks ever say anything to you about being Chinese? Did they ever confuse you with being someone of Japanese descent?
Ong:
No. My mother definitely looks it. Most people always thought my mother looked like Indo-Chinese, because she had different eyes and features, but she wasn’t.

Washburn:
The Japanese invaded mainland China in the early thirties. What do you remember your mom saying when you were growing up about Japan?

Ong:
She never spoke much politics, but on my family’s side, they were always mad about the Japanese. But my mother never made issues of anything.

Washburn:
How were they mad?

Ong:
They just didn’t think much of them. They wouldn’t buy their goods, and to this day—when my great-aunt passed away in 1983, she wouldn’t buy anything made in Japan. Which was untrue; she probably bought a TV and didn’t know it, or didn’t care, but she wouldn’t buy anything that had “Japan-made” on it. She was the only person I knew that was still alive that was up in age that was from that era, because the rest of the people were like my cousins. They were just young like me.

My cousins, we have a big age range in my family. Some of my cousins are twenty years older than me, so when World War II come, one of my cousins—the only one still alive—I don’t know how he did it, he was Chinese, but he was a bombardier on the planes flying out of England. He was an officer. Them days, they were called “master sergeant” because—I read a lot on airplanes—they had a shortage of officers so a lot of enlisted men only had enlisted men titles. He was a master sergeant. I know a man down the street who was a navigator-radioman. He was a master sergeant. Most of them were supposed to be second lieutenants, but they didn’t give them that title. They were like the navy, had chief petty officer fliers. They flew airplanes like a regular officer, but they weren’t that rank. So he flew over Germany.

Washburn:
This is in your family.

Ong:
Yeah, he was with, I don’t know which bomber squad, the Eighth or the Ninth. They were all coming out of Germany in those days, B-17s. He served, and then I had another cousin that died in the Battle of the Bulge.
Washburn: Growing up, a lot of people called World War II the Japanese War. Some people do. They don’t even call it World War II. Some people just refer to it as the war with Japan.

Ong: Yeah, Pearl Harbor. “World War II” didn’t come out until after the war, to differentiate it from World War I. That was the war with Japan. “World War II” was after the war was over and history come up, they had to put the “II” on it.

Washburn: So when you were growing up, did you refer to it as the war with Japan?

Ong: Yeah. We remembered Pearl Harbor. Songs, everybody would talk about it, and everything that flashed through the war said “Remember Pearl Harbor!” or pictured a Japanese or something. We knew we were fighting in Germany too, but this end of the country was definitely Japan, because all the soldiers going out of Fort Mason and everything was going to fight in the Pacific. We always know this as the Pacific War. All my relatives got called up and they went to the European War.

Washburn: They did? They didn’t fight in the Pacific?

Ong: All we knew were fighting the Germans.

Washburn: What do you remember about the patriotic sentiment in the Chinese community? Do you remember?

Ong: Before Japan attacked us, they used to collect what they called the “rice bowl.” ’37, ’38, ’39, they collect money for China, in Chinatown itself. We never participated in it, but I knew they did it, because you go to Chinatown and you see those jars and they had big things they collect money in for China.

Washburn: To fight against Japan.
Ong: Yeah, to fight against Japan. Then my father, when you think of it, he did have a little job working for some airplane company in San Francisco, building components for airplanes for China, but I never know, because I never asked him. I don’t know which company it was or what type of plane, but we did sell some of the minor planes that wasn’t used in the air force to China itself.

Washburn: This is before World War II.

Ong: Yeah.

Washburn: So the sentiment in the Chinese community—

Ong: Were against Japan way before everybody else was.

Washburn: Exactly.

Ong: Because I remember reading history: Lindbergh thought the yellow race was the worst people in the world until the war come and he had to fight Germany. Hitler gave him medals. Lindbergh was a patriotic American, but he didn’t think much of the yellow race.

Washburn: Growing up, were you—

Ong: I never seen him.

Washburn: Sure, but growing up, when do you think you became aware that in some ways the Chinese community was allied with the once-discriminatory white community in fighting against the Japanese?

Ong: Because I remember we had relatives, a friend in Oakland, that had newspapers mentioning it, how they were collecting money and everything. Then you hear it from the
American newspapers too, that they were collecting money. Not too much. Most of it, I learned later years in history. Well, I knew they were collecting money for China, because that was the popular sentiment in Chinatown, against the Japanese. Then the Japanese attacked China twice, ’33 and then in ’37, the main war. So I’m a war historian, because I read all about wars all through the centuries. I know a lot about airplanes, too. When people ask me, “How do you know all that?” I say, “I read up on it,” even though I wasn’t there. I mean, I was there but I wasn’t that old. I kind of amaze people when I tell them what they want to know. All through World War II. They’ll ask me about airplanes. I know all about it.

Washburn:
Do you remember what it was like when the war ended?

Ong:
Kids downtown were selling, “Extra! Extra! The war’s over in Germany!” Then when Japan was on the radio, everybody celebrated, but I wasn’t in San Francisco where all the sailors from Camp Shoemaker—they used to all make fun of them. They were guys that never went overseas, but they did most of the damage ripping everything up. There was a camp near Livermore called Camp Shoemaker and they were processing all these sailors, and they went down toward the town. But just like the paper says, they never went overseas any time. They had all the streetcars, they yanked the trolley poles down and stopped all the streetcars. To this day I wish I had a lot of pictures of them, because the newspapers showed a lot of pictures of it in them days. And the shipyard laid everybody off. Unemployment started real bad in ’48. Couldn’t hardly find work.

Washburn:
Let’s talk about that. The shipyards started laying people off in ’45.

Ong:
Yeah. There was unemployment all the way up to ’48.

Washburn:
There was unemployment how?

Ong:
Around the government installations, because I had a man that worked for me in Camp Stoneman and he had to go over to Guam to work. Those years, the sheet metal men. He was laid off, and he couldn’t find any local work. He was still in the service but couldn’t find local work.

Washburn:
How did you notice the changes that were taking place in Richmond after the war? I mean, immediately. You entered Richmond High in about what year?
Ong: ‘46, the year after the war. School didn’t change much.

Washburn: When did you, as a young man, start noticing the changes that were taking place in Richmond?

Ong: After they closed the housing down, more and more people were moving into town. There was minorities, and the white population were moving out. Because when I went to school, graduated in ’49, downtown Richmond still had a white population. A lot of the schoolgirls and boys were still living downtown. I didn’t think about it until later years, what happened, because I never think about those things. But later years, I thought about a lot of the school kids that used to live on Chancellor over there, and their addresses—they weren’t there. They moved out to the suburbs, El Sobrante. A lot of the kids that grew up with me in the fifties moved to El Sobrante. That’s still there; it was more of a farmland. They got out of proper Richmond. A lot of my Mexican friends moved out there. They got married and they moved out there. Some moved to Hayward. So Richmond lost a lot of the original population.

Washburn: Why do you think that was?

Ong: They’re prejudiced. [laughs] I don’t know what you want me to say. They were prejudiced people. It wasn’t because they had more money; they were prejudiced and didn’t want to be living there. They were, kind of. Because Mexicans, growing up as a kid, Mexican people and blacks never got along too good. I know a lady that had a woman that cleaned her house, but during the war she got a job as supervisor at Santa Fe, on the trains. She was a black lady, and she didn’t think much of the Mexican workers.

Washburn: We can speculate what other people think, but what was it like for you when you started interacting with more black people in Richmond?

Ong: My mother was always liberal. Never had that trouble. She liked everybody. So in my case, I never was taught to dislike other people. Never did to this day; never will. My mother was friendly, liked everybody, so I was taught up. My grandfather believed in the Golden Rule.
Washburn: What was that?

Ong: That was a Ten Commandments-like, everybody used to use. He was very religious and the Ten Commandments—I imagine it’s like the Bible thing. You treat everybody as he is due, and all those things. I don’t remember every verse of it, but—

Washburn: What was the first time you remember hanging out with black people in town?

Ong: Over at junior high, but I didn’t hang around them. They were there. I never hang around them even in high school. But I hang around when I started working with them; I rode with them, I went to their houses. I got along with them real good. They’re my best friends, were black people, and some of them I visited their widows, until they passed away too.

Washburn: In the schools, though, did you notice that people mixed, or was it separate?

Ong: No. Just like even to this day, they all sat in their own place.

Washburn: How so?

Ong: When I work at the navy, and that was the eighties, the black people sat in one corner, the white people sat in the other, even in modern times.

Washburn: What was it like in the Richmond schools in the forties, though?

Ong: There weren’t that many black children, but like I said, they were all little kids. There was only a few—well, maybe less than a hundred grownup kids that were black, I mean school-age.

Washburn: In the high schools.
Ong: Very little. Now, there’s 60, 70 percent. But then, the regular kids that grew up, they were just little three- or four- or five-year-old kids, six-year-olds, so they weren’t in my classes. I knew there was a lot more after the war, but they were not old enough to be in high school. So Richmond High in the late forties had a very small black population. Most of them came from North Richmond, which is a predominately black area, which is still now. Because what happened was, when they closed the war housing down, a lot of them moved to other cities.

Washburn: What do you remember about the changes in the war housing? You described the construction of the war housing; what do you remember about the destruction of the war housing?

Ong: When they tore it down? What happened was, an awful thing happened. The city manager of Richmond, can’t remember his name, he went back to Washington and asked permission to rip the war housing down. When he went back there—this was years later when I read up on it, because I was young—Washington told him, “When we want those war housing ripped down, we’ll tell you.” The theory was, if you rip the war housing down, the blacks had to move out of Richmond, which was a boomerang because they ended up buying all the housing downtown, and didn’t move out. But the Richmond council’s theory was, if the housing are gone, the blacks have no place to live, because that’s when the restriction law was still around, so the blacks weren’t allowed to buy into certain areas.

Washburn: So they wouldn’t have been able to buy anywhere.

Ong: Yeah. So they thought that was it. It didn’t work.

Washburn: They thought that that would get rid of them?

Ong: Yeah. It was in all the newspapers when he went back there. Blacks were always segregated in the war housing, too. They lived in one end of Canal; whites lived in another end. The black area was kept longer because they didn’t have no place to go, but the whites’ were already torn down. So they had segregated housing, even like back East, in some of the federal housing.
Washburn: So you don’t think that the migration and all the people that moved in really affected the school system until when?

Ong: Until after the kids started getting school-age.

Washburn: When was that?

Ong: I would say most of them started getting older around the fifties. That’s when Richmond High started losing a lot of its population, moving out. Late fifties, ’52, ’53, ’54. That’s when a lot of them moved out. Thirteen, fourteen. The Korean War, that’s when the school started getting more minorities in. They were grown up by then. Because California had very little minorities up this area except for Oakland. Oakland was known as the little Detroit.

Washburn: That’s what they called it. You graduated Richmond High in what year?

Ong: Spring of ’49. They were slowly coming into the lower grades, but not enough to really say. It was still an all-white school.

Washburn: For the most part, still all white.

Ong: El Cerrito was an all-white school until about the sixties. That grew out of the Richmond School District. Then they opened another high school. [Harry] Ells became a high school during the war, but that was pretty near the war was over. That’s still there. It’s now a middle school. Then Longfellow always was white. Ninety-nine percent; there was hardly any Mexicans even there. That was ripped down, they put up Harry Ells. So Roosevelt was the longest one with minorities in it. They shut it down to become Gompers Continuation School in the seventies. It’s for people that drop out, and they try to get a high school education.

Washburn: You said that you noticed people in Richmond moving out to El Sobrante—
Ong: Concord—

Washburn: In about what time, would you say?

Ong: Oh, in the fifties. Big mess. That’s why Concord grew up so big. They all went to central Contra Costa.

Washburn: Where did these people who moved out—as best you can remember, where did they keep their jobs?

Ong: A lot of them already had jobs somewhere else. Some of the kids I knew owned service stations up on Solano Avenue. There weren’t too many worked in Richmond subsequently, worked for Standard. There weren’t too many manufacturing, even, so a lot of them work other places. They just happen to have been born here, they stayed here; but when they got old enough, they moved out on their own. Some of them still had their parents living here, like my good friend who owned a barbershop. He moved to Napa. He used to have a good house on McBryde, but his wife was a Caucasian woman, she didn’t want to stay in Richmond anymore, so she left. Funny thing: a lot of people that moved away from Point Richmond in the fifties—they were older people—they came back in the seventies, because that was the in place to live.

Washburn: But this move to the suburbs did not affect Point Richmond very much?

Ong: No. A lot of the younger people moved out, but a lot of the older people from other places stayed, from the shipyard days.

Washburn: For people who don’t know Point Richmond so well, why did that move to the suburbs affect Richmond more than it affected Point Richmond?

Ong: Point Richmond, a lot of them were Californians that never go anywhere. Californians used to have a habit of never moving out of their own property. I read an article once—up to the late sixties, 70 percent of Californians never went out of the state. They stuck to their home, until later when the airplane come around. It was amazing to hear that.
Washburn:
So the community was more established in Point Richmond?

Ong:
Yeah, established to this day. The only community I ever hear of you can still walk the streets without getting scared at night. That’s why everybody loved it. One time, Washington School was going to close, not enough students. Then they brought in a lot of minority students so they make up 30, 40 percent of it now. They bus them in.

Washburn:
When did they start tearing down war housing along Cutting?

Ong:
All along the fifties. They really went fast. The government owned them; they got out of it. They kept a few war housing on Fourteenth Street and one over on Lincoln Avenue is the only reminder of the war years.

Washburn:
Atchison Village, also.

Ong:
The Richmond Housing Authority took them over in Easter Hill. But Easter Hill was not a government project; it was later built. So those were the only three projects that you can say were from the war years. All the rest were demolished and gone.

Washburn:
What do you remember about the activity to take apart those houses?

Ong:
Just that to me, the war was over, so it didn’t really dawn on me. The shipyard people weren’t there, so they had to tear them down. Later, industry shot up there; now there’s all this high-tech industry.

Washburn:
Right after they tore them down in the fifties, what did they—

Ong:
Nothing, just empty lots.

Washburn:
They were empty lots.
Richmond was really hurting. They didn’t have anything to take those properties, and high-tech didn’t come in until the late sixties and seventies. So they had a lot of—no work; there was nothing there, just open land.

So if you would have driven around Richmond in the fifties—

Oh, it was nothing. After the shipyard left, it was kind of a town that fell apart. It was just residential. It’s still running, a part. A lot of businesses come in, but they don’t live there. But the town itself was just nothing. That’s why it was always called a shipyard town.

Can you remember how all of the postwar change affected the commercial areas in town?

Downtown was still vibrant, because the malls were never built yet. So people from all the surrounding areas used to come down to Richmond. We had five or six blocks of stores. We had Ward’s, we had Gallenkamps, Woolworth, Kress. It had Breuners, Kahn’s Shoes, which is nationwide. We had Anita’s, a nationwide store. They had all the nation’s big stores or franchises all around the country there.

Travellini’s also?

Yeah, Travellini’s, but they went out when they had that riot in 1969.

I’d like to talk about that later on, but for people who don’t know, where were all those businesses located?

They disappeared when Richmond thought they could redevelop downtown.

But where were they located originally?
They went up to El Cerrito Plaza. El Cerrito Plaza was supposed to come to Richmond. Richmond didn’t want it, they said it was going to hurt downtown.

I mean, where was that business district in Richmond?

Right down Macdonald Avenue, the full length of it. That’s one of the longer streets in the Bay Area for downtown. Went from Fifty-fifth Street to First Street.

There was businesses all along there?

Only from Fourth Street all the way up to Sixteenth was the main part of town. Twenty-third had another district. That’s what still survives. On San Pablo Avenue is the only residual of a district in Richmond. The rest is just a little shopping center came in ten years ago.

How can you describe to somebody the process of those businesses moving out of Richmond?

It was bad. The city tried to rebuild, but they tore every building down and left it looking like a war zone. People laughed. It looked like a war had been there. Empty lots everywhere. Every major street had empty lots. All the major stores were gone. The last ones to leave were Macy’s and [JC] Penney. They went up to Hilltop [Mall]. Penney’s hang on the longest. I think Woolworth did too, but Woolworth started closing the basement up, and you knew suddenly what was going on. Then after that, was not a major store in town until 1989 or ’90, FoodCo came in. That’s about the only one. Walgreens, FoodCo, and little stores that minorities operate was the only thing still left. They’re surviving, because a lot of Latinos moved in from Mexico, and Afro-Americans go there, so they’re doing pretty fair.

When did all this change take place? When did the change of the businesses like Breuners—
Ong: ‘69, ’70, when the city redeveloped and bought everybody out. In other words, they bought them out and forced them out.

Washburn: Why did they do that?

Ong: They thought a developer was going to come in. Some man from southern California was going to build a big mall, but a city mall with pedestrian bridges between the major streets. Later he found out that the people that were middle class do not come down to Richmond. Even Ward’s, which has a nice store on Forty-second Street, lost 80 percent of its middle-class people. Even today, it’s closed. Nobody come in there but local people.

Washburn: When was Hilltop Mall established?

Ong: 1975.

Washburn: So all these businesses moved out of downtown—

Ong: No, they went to El Portal first. It was a little shopping center in San Pablo. A lot of the men’s stores moved up there, and women’s stores. Then they were doing pretty good, and then they themselves went out of business.

Washburn: So the central shopping area moved down to San Pablo for a while.

Ong: Yeah. The Safeway used to be on Twenty-third. Had a nice Safeway; it’s a Grand Auto now. It moved up to the end of town near El Cerrito, on San Pablo and Macdonald. So that’s where Lucky’s is. Outside of FoodCo coming in, there was no major store downtown at all. Then when Penney’s left, that was the end of it. Downtown, once in a while I go there, because my barber’s there and I go to Walgreens, but 90 percent of the people from the Point goes over to Marin County to shop, or go up to El Cerrito.
Washburn:
Even when you were going to high school, up until '49, do you remember having friends in school who, one day they were there, then the next day they had moved away?

Ong:
A lot of them. Their families moved up. Some moved up to Marysville area, or moved completely out of the Bay Area.

Washburn:
This was even in the late forties.

Ong:
Yeah. The family moved, moved up more to the country estate. Lot of them already had country homes to begin with.

Washburn:
Can you think of someone you knew who did that? The story of a friend of yours?

Ong:
I don’t know, I don’t keep up with them. [laughs] The Hudson family moved out. They moved up to Colusa or something, but I never kept up too much with the people who left. If they left, they left.

Washburn:
As best you can remember, what was the Hudsons’ story?

Ong:
The mother and father had a fair job. They were kind of poor, but they weren’t that poor. They rented. They didn’t have a fabulous job; they didn’t own a home. They were the only ones I knew who rented. They had two brothers and a sister. But they left early; after the war they all moved out of Point Richmond. One time there was a big exodus from Point Richmond because the homes were old and they all want the newer, 1940s-style home. Stucco, big windows. Then, the funniest thing—I always laugh nowadays—everybody coming back that could come back.

Washburn:
What can you describe about that feeling, that people wanted to have these newer homes.

Ong:
Oh, I felt they were lucky to get out. We never worried about it, but they left, everybody I knew. Hardly anybody I knew anymore. To this day, I don’t hardly know just a few
families from my era. Ninety-nine percent are new people. Or some that didn’t have kids my age—they were little kids—now I know them, but some were my age, they came from the South or something to work in the war years. Some didn’t come until after the war.

2:00:30:10
Washburn:
You had mentioned in Richmond that there weren’t many Chinese folks there.

2:00:30:16
Ong:
No, as far as I know.

2:00:30:19
Washburn:
When did they start coming?

2:00:30:21
Ong:
Around ’49, ’50, a lot of them when they started letting them immigrate again. A lot of the families started coming in, opening grocery stores. They weren’t the owners themselves, but they were the workers they hire to work for them, probably at a low wage or something. There was a couple Chinese markets called Food Bowl, where they had a two-store chain. They were the big stores in downtown Richmond and out there near San Pablo.

2:00:30:49
Washburn:
Food Bowl was a Chinese-owned store?

2:00:30:54
Ong:
Yes. It was a very big store, too. They brought in one Chinese boy, he was younger than me. I had to take him around school all the time because he didn’t speak English.

2:00:31:06
Washburn:
Tell me about that. Who was he?

2:00:31:08
Ong:
I can’t remember the boy’s name, but I had to show him around and everything. Since he didn’t know anybody else, he always hang around with me. I already was a senior; he was just a freshman.

2:00:31:17
Washburn:
In high school?
Ong: Yeah. So when I left, that was it. He was on his own.

Washburn: Did you guys speak Cantonese together?

Ong: I tried to understand him, and I managed to figure out what he talked about, but I wasn’t that much on Chinese. Very bad. This day, I’ve kind of forgot all of it, because I never spoke to anybody after that in Chinese after my mother died.

Washburn: How did your family meet his family?

Ong: Didn’t know them. Only knew this guy through school and I knew where he worked at. We didn’t know them at all, except for the boy himself. His father and him worked the store. They came from China. After school he would work there too. He was not the major family. One of the girls in my school, same grade as me, was the owner’s daughter, but they spoke good English so they must have been here years ago.

Washburn: Let’s talk about what happened after you graduated high school. Graduated in ’49—

Ong: I went to City College one year. My mother couldn’t work, so I worked at a department store at Christmastime, the Dollar Store. It was downtown. Just worked a few months. Never liked the job, because the owner happened to be a relative of my mother’s through marriage and he didn’t care for me. There was a man there that was learning to be a manager, he said, “This isn’t a job for you. You ought to go and work for the government.” So I started taking government tests.

Washburn: Did you move over to the city?

Ong: No, I still lived there. Took government tests and became a government employee for thirty-six and a half years.

Washburn: Took the civil service exam.
Ong:
And passed. Them days was before affirmative action. In them days, you had to go out and compete. They didn’t say, “We want ten of this and ten of that.” I always passed the test real high.

Washburn:
Before I ask you about that, you mentioned that you worked for the Dollar Store because your mom couldn’t work.

Ong:
My mother worked a while. Then she got sick, couldn’t work. The guy that ran the store, the manager, was a relative of my mother’s. He was her in-law, my mother’s brother’s wife was his wife. So he hired me for a few months. I worked there, and then went to the government.

Washburn:
You had mentioned that a lot of things changed when your mom got a job at Standard Oil. How did your life change once the war ended?

Ong:
We had electricity and gas come in. We already had running water, but never had electricity and gas. That was a big difference than having coal oil and coal to cook.

Washburn:
Sure, but once the war ended she lost her job.

Ong:
Yes, but we already had the modern conveniences, considered modern. Before, we were living like on a farm back in the 1900s. That makes a big difference. People that don’t have electricity, like the poor homeless guy living in the street, you know how it is. You don’t have no modern convenience. Then we had a radio, but didn’t have TV until later. My mother never liked TV, so we never bought a TV. So I didn’t get one until ’58.

Washburn:
How did you guys make do after the war, after she stopped working at Standard Oil?

Ong:
My mother did menial work and cashed in a lot of her bonds. We survived, though. Then when I got a job, she didn’t have to work any more.
Washburn: You supported her.

Ong: Yeah, she was very sick. She died at fifty-four years old.

Washburn: What year was that?

Ong: In 1958. Like people say, she died at a very early age.

Washburn: You were young; you weren’t but twenty-something.

Ong: Twenty-eight.

Washburn: So you passed the civil service exam, and where’d you get a job?

Ong: June of 1951. I worked at Camp Stoneman in Pittsburg, California.

Washburn: Doing what?

Ong: I was a stock clerk. I worked for the quartermaster. Funniest thing—I seen guys go overseas to fight in the Korean War, here I would issue them clothes. Lot of them thought I was in the government as a soldier, but I wasn’t. So I was issuing clothes. I stayed there until ’54, and they closed up because the war was over. I went straight over to Benicia Arsenal, which is in Benicia. They were an armament place. I worked there until ’63. When they closed, I went over to the Naval Weapons Station off Port Chicago until I retired in 1986 as a missile mechanic, which was a fabulous job. I made missiles.

Washburn: So you worked in defense industries your whole life.

Washburn: Was it a state job, or a federal job?

Ong: Federal. Always worked in military installations. Some people just work in an office; I didn’t. The first one were embarkations, send the troops to Korea. Later one, they were rebuilding tanks and guns for the allies, and then the last one was building missiles and stuff for all the navy. Vietnam War, we sent out 7 percent of the ammunition, and then later when I retired, they were already sending the missiles for the Persian Gulf War. They were still making them.

Washburn: That seems like a pretty stable job to have, working with the federal government. Did sometimes your views on the wars that were being fought differ from—

Ong: We were kind of prejudiced. We were for the war. We were like a hawk. People laugh, I was a war hawk.

Washburn: Why was that?

Ong: Because everything I did was for the war. Even when the place closed, my mother and everybody write letters to keep it open.

Washburn: Did you always support what was going on in the military?

Ong: Yes, because you were brainwashed that the Communists were bad.

Washburn: Why is that?

Ong: You had to sign a statement that you weren’t a Communist, and everything in the war remind you of the enemy. Like World War II, but there it was more patriotic. Here was a
war we didn’t fight, so everything I did was to fight the Russians. They were a menace from ’49 on.

Washburn:
So you always remember them being the number-one enemy.

Ong:
Yeah. I was a war hawk. I hate to say it. Now I’ve kind of changed, because I don’t think we’re living on wars anymore, but everybody that worked there had that same—well, some people didn’t. They used to have some woman complain about the Vietnam War. People tell them, “Get out of here. You don’t have to work it.” She thought it was awful they were going to draft her boy, or something. Which they did, draft a lot of people; called me up for the draft, and I didn’t make it. I didn’t have the weight.

Washburn:
Do you remember—you’re working in the defense industry and the Communists are your enemy, and yet in 1949 or early fifties, the Communists take over in China.

Ong:
Yes.

Washburn:
Did you follow what was going on?

Ong:
Yeah, I always thought Chiang Kai-shek was the good guy. I mean, he was kind of a dictator, but he was fighting the Communists that even then was bad, especially how they treat people. I read all through history, myself. Even Russia didn’t have a good time in the thirties. They killed a lot of people and everything. He was like Hitler, Stalin was.

Washburn:
What was it like in the Chinese community when the Communists took over there?

Ong:
I had a man that was a herb doctor, like an uncle to me. He was upset no end, because the Communists killed a lot of his family in the villages. A lot of people didn’t know it until I talked to him and his wife, they execute a lot of people just on the spot, like the Germans did. But it’s never come out in history. But now I know the Red Guard even had a war with some of the ex-veterans in 1952. It was on TV one night. The documentary was {Civic Ocean?}
2-00:39:29
Washburn:
Did you ever feel like people ever thought of you as maybe more of a Communist, because you were Chinese?

2-00:39:37
Ong:
No. Only thing bad was when the Korean War come, the Chinese entered the war. My mother couldn’t—the herb doctor couldn’t get more herbs from China. They passed a thing, I don’t know when. They had an embargo until real late in the sixties. They tried to send things from Canada to her as a civilian. Because he wasn’t a herb store person, he wouldn’t let her get it. A lot of people don’t realize we were really mad at the Chinese.

2-00:40:10
Washburn:
Chinese Americans were mad at the Chinese.

2-00:40:12
Ong:
No, not about us, but the Chinese in China, because they entered the war on the North Korean side.

2-00:40:18
Washburn:
And yet you were working for U.S. defense industries, supporting the south.

2-00:40:25
Ong:
I worked when the war started. So I was drafted, even before the war started, and went to an induction camp. I just didn’t make the weight, otherwise I would have been in the army for two years, if I was called up. They didn’t want me; they rejected me, but otherwise I would have been sent to Korea. See, when I work at Stoneman, I found out that all the guys drafted was going to Korea, fast. Six weeks of training and you were gone, and a lot of them didn’t come back. I’ve even talked to men now that were older men, but worked in my yard. They were officers and they said a lot of guys they knew joined up the Marine Reserve, because they were making money at sixteen. They were taking sixteen-, seventeen-year-old kids, and they all came back in a pine box. When I was called in February of ’51, the Chinese had entered the war and they were sending us reeling backwards. All these poor guys that were drafted never fired a gun. They didn’t have a chance to get those veterans of the Chinese-Japanese war. Some of those guys had ten years of fighting under their belt. This guy tells me, all his friends that joined the marines all came back in a box.

2-00:41:38
Washburn:
How would you describe, as best you can, what you were thinking, working for the U.S. defense industries?
I was glad I had a decent job. My mother always preached to me to get a good job, and I did.

But I mean, what was your mentality working for defense industries while the Communists were in China and then ultimately they started fighting against U.S. forces in the Korean War?

Well, I entered when the war already had started. I was for it, fighting against them. Everybody knew them days that Communists were a menace. Didn’t think that much about them, but when they called me up I knew I had to go and fight them. I wasn’t ever that crazy to be in the army, except for maybe when I was a ten-year-old boy or something. I never was never really crazy over the military. I worked with them so much, I know how they act and everything, but I never cared to be one. You always made more money as a civilian. They had to work alongside me, the navy guys, and they made half what I made and they do the same work I did.

Camp Stoneman was in Pittsburg?

Yes.

The defense industries in the Richmond area started to close down and move away, or just closed down completely. Did other people in the Richmond area go to work at defense industries?

When the Korean War came up, they built back up. Because Port Chicago—I was never there, but a guy whose brother worked there—they dropped from two, three, four thousand down to less than five hundred people. But when I went there, the Vietnam War was on, they built back up to over twelve thousand people.

During the Vietnam or the Korean War?

Vietnam War. I worked through all the wars, except for World War II. I worked the Korean War, I worked in the Vietnam War. If I had have stayed I would have been in the
Persian Gulf War, but I retired by then. I took early retirement. I had a lot of years then, so I was exactly one month and fifty-six years old, I went home. I didn’t have to work that long, because I got a good pension at that age. So I was lucky; I got out real early from a lot of other people, because I started working at twenty-one.

Washburn: If you didn’t work for defense industries at twenty-one, where do you think you would have worked, in retrospect?

Ong: It was hard to get work then. Very hard in the fifties for a young person to get a job. I could have got a lot of work delivering stuff, but I never had a driver’s license. I had many offers, but, “You have to drive,” they say. I had a license in ’54, but I really didn’t get a car until ’60. I drove ever since. People think I drove when I was a young man; I never did. I’m a fairly good driver, a more than average in driving, so a lot of people think I drove all my life.

Washburn: You had mentioned something about being brainwashed to really—

Ong: When you work for the government, you always knew the enemy was the Russians. That’s the first thing they taught you. In my case, I was passed for confidential and secret, because I became a printer. For those, you have to sign an affiliation that you know what you’re there for. Everybody that worked with the government always knew the Russians were our enemy, because of the Cold War. That’s the reason they kept going. In a way, I have to say thanks to the Russians for keeping my job going. They kept the Cold War going all those years; they would have closed down after World War II. Hard times. A lot of people didn’t realize that all these cities in Contra Costa County, like Concord and everything, grew up during the Korean War. When I first worked there, Concord only had five thousand people. Then the Korean War come, they went up to a hundred and fifty thousand now. So a lot of the cities up here grew up from the war years.

Washburn: How did the Cold War affect the Richmond area?

Ong: Didn’t do much, because there was nothing here for them to do. Ships were not needed. Standard [Oil] might’ve done good, but then they always sold gasoline. Santa Fe [Railroad] didn’t have more business than any other years, but the only thing—they kept the passenger trains going because they carried a lot of soldiers and stuff. But the war years didn’t do Richmond a bit of good.
Washburn:
You mean the Korean War years?

Ong:
Yes. It didn’t do Richmond good. It didn’t have anything related to the war then. But Benicia had just the arsenal, and when they closed it was hard times for them. Pittsburg was real hurting till about the sixties when the camp closed down. That was one of their major source of work.

Washburn:
I’ve talked to some people I’ve interviewed, and I’d like to hear your opinion. Some people say the reasons why white middle-class people started leaving Richmond was one, because there were more black people moved into town, and they didn’t want to live near them. Also, according to what you’re saying, there were no jobs, so they needed to move to Concord.

Ong:
There were no jobs for white people except they work out of town. And remember, a lot of those Southern—

Washburn:
But Royce, what is the story? Did they move out of Richmond because they were prejudiced, or because there were no jobs?

Ong:
A lot of them were prejudiced. They wouldn’t show it outright, but they were. Remember, a lot of the Southern white people were from the South. Most of the shipyard people were from the South, white and black. Naturally, they never lived with them, and why should they live with them when they get a more modern house somewhere else? The black people lost their jobs, so they bought the older houses. They still worked, but they couldn’t afford the houses that they were building up in the suburbs, and they didn’t want them, anyway, because the races tend to stay together.

Washburn:
What was the mentality that Southern whites brought to Richmond?

Ong:
They just showed that the Southerners were prejudiced, a little bit, that you never knew before. Well, Californians always had prejudice. The Native Sons [of the Golden West] people were what you call now very conservative. I read articles in later years that Richmond was a very conservative town. Very conservative. They frowned on a lot of things that other cities didn’t frown on. Richmond, in the early years, everybody was kind
of middle class. They all had good jobs, because they all work at the industries. So Richmond, with twenty thousand people, all of them either Standard or Santa Fe, except for a few people that did menial work.

2-00:49:04
Washburn:
Or Ford or Pullman.

2-00:49:06
Ong:
Yeah. Except for the war come in, they add another eighty thousand people, you had people that were very conservative, had nice houses, had good income. Even in the Depression they were driving—like, the kids I knew all had ’38, ’39 Oldsmobiles. They had cars, in those days, up-to-date cars. Their mothers, some of them worked in jewelry stores in Oakland and stuff, besides their father worked for Standard. They had a good two-income, before two-income really was known. The guy I know, Bobby Chamberlain, his mother owned a jewelry store near University Avenue and did real good, until she moved out of this area. Father, naturally, was a Standard man, had—well, not a big paycheck, but a steady income, had a nice little house on Washington Avenue. They weren’t hurting at all. Depression didn’t mean a thing to them. They just seen it in the newspaper.

2-00:49:57
Washburn:
Some people could say that after the war, let’s say I was a middle-class white person who lived in Richmond, they could say, “Well, I didn’t move out of Richmond because I was prejudiced. I moved out of Richmond because there were no jobs.” Would you believe them?

2-00:50:16
Ong:
Well, a lot of them moved out and probably went back home. A lot of them went back to Oklahoma. I knew a lot of people, they said they went back, because a lot of those people who worked at the shipyard weren’t that educated, either. They taught them how to weld, but the education wasn’t good in the white or black area, but the blacks had no future. Like now, everybody love California, even if you’re from a foreign country. [laughs] The blacks said this was better than the South, so they stayed. The South had nothing for them. They were treated—segregated schools, segregated drinking fountains, everything. And jobs; they did the worst job, so naturally they were the ones that would stay. A lot of whites went back to their farm or family, but the blacks had nothing to look forward to. So naturally they stayed in California. But a lot of them didn’t live in Richmond, either. A lot of the young people that worked with me, their family moved to Berkeley, but the young people came back where the housing were cheaper in Richmond, because they build a lot of the houses on twenty-five-foot lots in the late fifties.

2-00:51:22
Washburn:
What would you say to somebody who says that, “I moved out of Richmond not because I’m prejudiced, but because there were no jobs.”
Ong: They weren’t a prejudiced person, then. They tolerate people.

Washburn: Would you say that maybe that’s just an excuse?

Ong: A lot of old people now I know, that lived locally themselves, older men, they’re prejudiced as a son-of-a-gun. They always lived there and they still don’t like them. They mention them when they have like a chief that’s a minority. They say, “Here we got a bum running as the police chief.”

Still to this day.

To this day, they still say that, the older men. I never was that way, but a lot of older white men still say that.

Why do you think they haven’t changed?

Because it’s hard to change a person. Their mind is already set up. They know they’re inferior or something, so they feel to this day they’re a bunch of dumb guys. And the jobs they work on never had black people. One guy I know worked for the Key System, never hire a black person until the late fifties. One guy. You want to know something funny? Reading on the history of the war, the Capitol [Transit] Company in Washington, D.C., had a shortage of men. They never had women operators. They had a big streetcar system, and the law was supposed to hire anybody to fill in, so they hire one black man for a token. They gave him so much trouble that he finally quit.

Let’s talk about the civil rights era in Richmond.

Richmond only had two black policemen.

Who were they?
Ong:
One’s name was [Douglas] Ellis and one’s name was [Lonnie] Washington.

Washburn:
Where was their beat?

Ong:
Downtown and the shipyards. They weren’t allowed to stop—I heard from black people now; I never knew then—but black people said they weren’t allowed to draw the gun out to arrest a white man if he speeded or anything.

Washburn:
When did the city start changing its hiring practices?

Ong:
I would say late sixties or more. You used to never see black firemen, or anything. The city was very prejudiced. This city never hired much people. I would say it was ’60 when they started a lot of black people for working. Most of these guys were younger men, that were working. There was hardly anybody that’s my age that was working for the city. They didn’t hire them. Probably had a few in the City Hall, but not much. Because I used to never see black policemen at all, except for these two guys. One of them, Washington, I think, quit early. The other guy quit because he shot a black boy. They called him prejudiced. The black people always hated him. Black kid ran away from him, he shot him.

Washburn:
When was that?

Ong:
Oh, in the late fifties. They shot him in the back, somewhere. They shot him in the back, or something. I never heard that, because I never kept up with them. Bus drivers didn’t have blacks, not in this Richmond division. They hired women because they had to.

Washburn:
Even though people in the fifties moved out of Richmond, were the people who were in the city council—

Ong:
It was all white people.
Washburn: Who had moved out of Richmond?

Ong: They had to live in Richmond, so they still lived in Mira Vista, the fancy area. We never had people from the Point, even, until the late eighties.

Washburn: If someone doesn’t know what Mira Vista is like…

Ong: It’s a real fancy area like North Berkeley, Kensington. It still looks that way. They have nice, fancy homes.

Washburn: Where is it located?

Ong: All custom-built, with big yards. Fancy rock walls. Big living rooms. I used to have a teacher there; she always asked me to go up. I finally went, after I was older and safer, and they were old-aged. Her house was built by themselves, because her husband—she was my schoolteacher, he was a worker with Standard, and they have a fabulous house. Even to this day, you’d like to live there.

Washburn: Where is it located?


Washburn: When did the city start changing, start becoming more of a diverse body?

Ong: In the sixties and seventies, when a lot of people moved out of Oakland because the houses were cheap. The housing in Richmond were getting run down and the absentee landlords started owning old houses. They were mostly people from—

Washburn: I mean, the city government.
Ong:
Oh, the government in the early seventies when they start diversifying. The white people were dying and retiring, and they were voting in more black councilmen and mayors. Then later, in the nineties, the white lady that lived where I did became mayor. We end up with a white mayor for eight years, and we have more white councilmen back on again, like one guy, {Jim Rogers?} the lawyer that’s on TV. He’s back on, and we got a white guy from my area. One time we had four white people, all living in the Point.

Washburn:
For somebody who doesn’t know what happened at Travellini’s, will you describe it?

Ong:
What happened was the Roosevelt Junior High, this was ’69, there was mostly black girls there and they went into some department store, I forgot what the name was. Department store on Seventh Street, couldn’t remember the name. They ran in and took clothes, ran out the other end. The police tried to stop them, and they didn’t, and—what the hell did they do? Then the police went after them, arrested some of the girls. The owners shut the store down for a day, and that night, they called police brutality, they burned down all the stores on Eleventh Street and burned down Travellini’s Department Store, which hired a lot of minorities. He always complained that, “I hire them, and they work for me.” They burned a little section of town down.

Washburn:
Where was the police brutality?

Ong:
They claim it because they were arresting the young girls that ran through the store, running out the other side. Then that night, they burned down that part of town.

Washburn:
How many stores burned down?

Ong:
Only Travellini’s and a few small stores.

Washburn:
Was there a crowd of people that gathered to do this, or was it just a small incident?

Ong:
It was a bunch of young black kids that did the stealing and burning. The police chief called for mutual aid. I didn’t know the barber then; I wish I was there, I could go to the
barber and take pictures through the window. But what they did, he gave the order which you would never use nowadays—Chief Brown: shoot to kill.

2-00:58:39
Washburn:
The police force was still mainly white at this time?

2-00:58:41
Ong:
White police chief. He used that statement. You would never use it in modern times, but that was the statement. Shoot to kill.

2-00:58:49
Washburn:
Shoot to kill the rioters.

2-00:58:51
Ong:
Yes. And they called for mutual aid. Of course, Richmond being a conservative town, every little white town in Contra Costa sent police. They had police from Clayton, they had police from Concord, they had police from Walnut Creek, they had police from San Ramon, and San Francisco sent its famous tactical squad, carrying shotguns and helmets. They went up the buildings, carrying shotguns and watching the town for about a week.

2-00:59:23
Washburn:
When was this, do you remember?

2-00:59:24
Ong:
’69. Late part of ’69 somewhere. Richmond really had what you call martial law. All these cities: “Hurry up, send police in.” I had a camera, but I never knew the guy in the barbershop. I would have took pictures. It’d be worthwhile—all these foreign police cars traveling up and down town through Richmond with their police insignias on them. But like I said, I rode a bus. And San Francisco sent in their tactical squad.

2-00:59:28
Washburn:
Had the black community complained about police brutality?

2-00:59:56
Ong:
They couldn’t complain much.

2-00:59:58
Washburn:
No, in other instances.
Ong:
I don’t think they liked them. The newspaper was pro-city, so I never heard anything complaining. The way they had it was like martial law. They had more police than ever.

Washburn:
Did this incident start a process that started some change in Richmond?

Ong:
Yeah, a lot of people thought it was getting out of hand. A lot of people that seen it still mention to this day, laugh about it. I had a girlfriend that was a young girl going to college, she went through there in her Corvette and she remembered the police wouldn’t let her go through. She was just driving through; she wasn’t going to see anybody. So that was kind of a black eye in Richmond that year. Showed how mean they could get.

Washburn:
Lot of people I’ve talked to mention that.

Ong:
When the police chief [ordered] shoot to kill, that was a no-no. But he said it, and everybody didn’t condemn him.

Washburn:
Brutal.

Ong:
That was the thing; they were glad to hear it. That’s how funny it was.

Washburn:
Well, we have to kind of end things up here. Is there anything you want to add?

Ong:
It’s just too bad that Richmond deteriorated. It was a good town once and it still could be nice, but they got more people on welfare. I read in the paper one time, Richmond had 11 percent welfare and eleven thousand women on welfare. That don’t help the city much. With all the dope selling on the street—you go down Pennsylvania Avenue you see it. It was real bad, up to a few years ago. You see these guys with {painter hats?}, and guys from Marin County, everything, would come over to buy dope. That don’t help.
Richmond has as much shooting now as Oakland, for its small size.

Washburn:
What do you think needs to change in Richmond?
2-01:01:35

Ong:
Well, you got to get more jobs, but that’s never going to happen. Everybody says that; more jobs and more kids willing to go to school. But they’ve been brought up third-, fourth-generation welfare, they think it’s cheaper to do nothing, to have babies, than work. A lot of them are. They’ve been on welfare since the forties; that’s four generations. A lot of unwed mothers. The Hispanics seem to do fair, but their trouble is they don’t speak English. They have a big Laotian population there, the boat people, they brought them over and just today I read in the paper they have a lot of problems because they don’t know how to speak English. The other day, had an article where a family came five years ago. Mother and father don’t understand the kids, they all speak English.

2-01:02:29

Washburn:
I have to turn this one off.

2-01:02:31

Ong:
What do you think? I think that’s a downfall.

[End of Interview]