

**Bachelor's Project:
Interview with Valerie Mah
Interviewed by Elise Chenier
Location: Toronto, Ontario**

For the full interview, go to the Archives section of this web site.

I started teaching um, and in order to, to, to raise your status and make more money um I started at, sort of a level one. You have to get your degree and when I, so in order to get into University, you've you know, you have to have the marks. Which I did not have at the time. So I had to take a pre-University history and at that time I discovered that there was very little written about the Chinese in Toronto and Canada. And so I uh took this pre-University history and I wrote a paper on the Chinese who worked on the railway and I got really hooked. On the fact that there was very little written <yeah, I would imagine there was nothing> There was, yes, hardly anything at that day.

Elise 00:09:07-00:09:09

What did you use as your sources, to write about the?

Valerie 00:09:10-00:26:46

Just, you know you do a bit of research. It was history; it was history course, so, you, there was there was a lot. You're looking for a lot of stuff that isn't necessarily there <right> So umm, that was, and I did get into University and, and in University I took a sociology course from a Professor called um, Dennis McGill, who was the found, who was one of the co-writers of "Africville" and because of what he had done on Africville, and by this time um, um the, the um, my future husband his father was the first Chinese Presbyterian Minister in the community and so that's how I got connected to that early group of Chinese that lived in and grew up in that Downtown area <okay> And that became my, my source so through University I, I wrote um, uh about the bachelor society because um, uh I interviewed. you know I, I did the research and, and through the families of these people, his friends, and then, then later on I finished. I was almost finished my course and I had one more subject to go and I asked Dennis McGill if he would, would I could do um, uh one paper in you know or I could work with him as a um graduate, and undergraduate stu-student and he said and he said, "Oh I don't do undergrad students. I only do post graduate students." But he was willing to take me on and I did um, what was it? In depth look at Toronto's early Chinatown and one was the bachelor society. I think the in depth came first and so then I made, I, I did a proper, more proper research paper and Dennis came to me, called me up in June and he said, "I have to hand a mark." and I said, "You told me I had til September to do this." and he said well, um he said, "Well we'll wait til September." and I said, "No" because in order to get to category three in teaching I had to have a degree and the degree meant a huge amount for, for category changes <sure> so he said, "okay, I'll make a deal with you." He said, "What mark di I give you in?" He didn't give it to me the, the, the TA gave it to me, "in, in your paper that you know, you wrote before for me." and I said I got a B+ and he said, "okay, I'll give you a B+. But if you don't write me a paper that is up to a B+ I will insist that you write it, is that fair enough?" and I said, "Yes, that is fair." Because this is a big step to go from the category, from the lower category up, and I was supporting a husband and a, and a child at that time and working <wow> Cause all of this studies had been done part time. So um, he allowed it. I wrote uh, um he handed in the mark, I handed in the paper during the summertime, and that was kinda the end of it, it was a big thick thing with lots of pictures and documentation through the family. The, the, the pictures I had done in my research I only had one week off to do, to do research everything else was as part time student. At working at night and, and never a full time student. So the gist of this story that I'm leading to, is that I was down at city hall, um at the archives underneath city hall, the metro archives at that time and

I was doing some work and they said, umm they asked me, you know I wanted to buy something or, or get something copied and they said, "what's your name?" and I said "Valerie Mah" and they said "AHHHH your Valerie Mah" and I said "yes, what I have I done?" and she said, " Oh we had your paper in here. A copy of your paper and somebody stole it." And, and and I said, "ohh" and, and so then I told them of how I had gotten the B+ on this paper and they said, "all of us have PH.D's and we never do that way. We haven't done that much work for, for a paper and, and let alone get a B, B+ for it." So they were kinda astounded and I was kinda wooh. [laughs] But it, but because of that desire to, to find the history and because of the, that contacts I had. So in the study there are twelve families that lived and grew up in that Downtown area, which people like Tom Lok, and who had a pharmacist right on Dundas and Dorothy, the Chu family, of which I hear your going to interview Dorothy. Which is wonderful, cause Dorothy went with her mother who was a seamstress. Now Dorothy's family had a laundry in the outer areas and so when I interviewed Dorothy she told how, she was allowed to go to Chinatown. Cause not everybody was allowed to go to Chinatown, like outsiders, um it wasn't the, the um, what did you call it? Um, um considered proper for people to go down to Chinatown. But she was allowed to go down with her mother, because her mother did the sewing for the costumes of the Opera stars that came to Toronto. And in those days many of them were men and even during the war when the Chinese were so poor. Her, the Chinese in the community were paying quite large sums of money to bring, import these, these Opera stars in, in their beautiful costumes to perform down in Chinatown. And I, I can remember coming into town with my father and going and we would be in a dark and somebody say the line was coming and their pushing a chair through the room, you know because that's they didn't have a line but you know that, I that part that sort of thing. You know these darken rooms with, with all these people in the rooms watching the Opera and, and this was their little bit of home and so Dorothy was allowed to go down into Chinatown with her mom and she; you know has maybe some recalls. the other thing with Dorothy is that they at one time lived on Chestnut Street which is a side street there and in doing my picture collection, I, I, I twigged on that if you can tie it up to the TTC, the Toronto Transit Commission and they always did before and after pictures. So they would take a picture of the street, Elizabeth street with th-the streetcar tracks and then you could see whether there were parking meters. You could put a time frame and then they remove the, streetcar tracks and um, from, from the renovations example and there'd be a second shot. So there were before and after shots of buildings in Chinatown. So<wow> that became one of my best sources of before and after. And then the exciting thing was to take these pictures to the Mon Chong, which is the Chinese group build the home for the aged and all these guys that had lived and grew up in that Chinatown area, were part of a group that, that um bonded around, a, a Chinese a young Chinese minster called Reverend Ron Con and Ron um, he was getting tired of being the only person at a grave site of a bach-bachelor, quotes bachelor Chinese men, man. with the undertaker and himself so he approached his friends, this group of guys who grew up in Chinatown to say, "we need a place, for them" and so um, uh they got together and build the Mon Chong home for the aged. And uh the first home for the aged, and like all these guys were involved. So they were on the board of directors, I was on Women's group. the men didn't have any money so they amalgamated with the women. I think because they wanted our money, which they did and I ended up becoming their treasurer. So as I found pictures the exciting thing was being able bring them pictures, "oh that's where I used to live" <right> and it was really quite exciting for me that, that was you know where the excitement started to gather and I know there was one day I was working in the archives at um, Noks Presbyterian Church and because my, my husband had uh, my husband's father had a, um was a minister. He, there was a picture of the, th, the do they call the? oh the beginner's group four year olds all lined up for a picture, cute little kids you see. And so I got an enlargement done at the, that's why they knew me so well at the archives. I had an eight by ten, paid for that brought it. Took it to the meeting and they were all standing there in awe. You know because they were, "oh there I am" you know and he was so hurt when I brought that picture home, because he, to think he was in the

archives. Like he's, "my picture's in the archive's" an you know, he doesn't think he's that told, so you know <yeah, right> I found his picture in the archives. The other source was um, okay so the, the oh yes and, and the under city hall that archives you go by streets so you I knew Dundas Street, Elizabeth Street. All these little streets around here and so there were shots taken of the, the what did the, the slum area or the different areas of the city , and so you know what's, where you looked for pictures to identify um, people and , and I know, you know. Then you go to, my mother-in-law had, had extensive album. So then you, you know, my husband would say, well those of the, tho-the what the? the pictures were all formal pictures, were all formal pictures were taken on the steps of the, the registry building down there. So, it, it's I, I like to do things pictorially, and you know when I find these things. You probably understand this. you get so excited about, you know the connection between these thing. SO that's how I knew Dorothy and all those people and because some of those guys were on the, you know they, they now become doctors and architects, and lawyers and stuff like that and um, <people who were on the board?> On the board, but they had lived and grown up in, in and i have maps you know where identifying where they lived and, and he was, he was a great um, um source of, of um , of things I was the one who, who took it you know and wrote it and, and through the multicultural history society interviewed them. So I made it a formal process of interviewing um, at least one member from each of those twelve families. And of those twelve families they had sixty-five offspring and I think it was about thirty-five of the guys, not the girls went on to University and then they got their funding through um, because they were veterans. But they were not allowed to work on the front lines because they were like, the war against Japan. So therefor they looked, you know so, my worked um, on the VIP planes uh Churchill and Queen Whillemina, um and they had two bars, you know and, and some of them were ambulance drivers and, an that's how some of them got there, their future occupations. Like I remember my brother-in-law in Ottawa, he, you know I've a brother-in-law who became an architect. My brother-in-law in Ottawa he was a geologist and a chemical engineer but, he didn't get it that way because I think his eyesight was bad and he couldn't get in. Um, but these, that's how a lot these professions and then some of them. The parents felt that in order to get a proper education they had to go back to China. So those guys got sent back to China so they, you know they did fair professionally as some of the guys who stayed behind and, and <okay> and, and were part of that. So um, during all this you know get all excited about things and you have associations and one of the restaurants that my husband did public relations for was Si? restaurant, which was first on the south side of Dundas and then on the north side of Dundas and, and um it, it was through them. You know you get to know the street and, and the things happening on the street and, and functions, like on the south side next to their old store there's the Lam See Ho Tong, which is the men's society and anybody with the surname Lam, Lam would go to that Hall. Which was up on the second floor. So you know we as young people would go there for, for functions as well, um there was a hotel on that side of the street. The same side as the Lam See Ho Tong, I think it was just a little bit further and then going towards the corner would be my Uncles house, 109 Dundas street. And he was an Uncle. I called him Uncle, but he was actually my father's cousin and he was a Doctor and he was, not the first doctor in Chinatown. But one of the early doctors and he was the doctor who looked, what do you call it? Hotel physicians for, for Hotel, so he, he was the, he was at 109 Dundas. Um, on that north side, and then on the other side. The other person I remember would be Tom Lok, one of my husband's good friends. And um, they he had the pharmacist, so we often joked about the fact that Tom would stand in the door of the pharmacy, watching the women and the, people going into the hotel and he'd time them and I [laughs] I mean we used to joke about, "tom don't you have anything better to do," you know and he'd say, "ohh that didn't take too long," you know he's figure i don't know he must had to watch, you know a great long time.