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Hur, Young K and Ben S Oral History Interview (Korean): Asian and African American Residents of Holland

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Interview with
Young K. Hur and Ben S. Hur
Korean Residents

Conducted August 12, 1994
by Donna M. Rottier

1994 Summer Oral History Project
The Asian-American Community in Holland, Michigan

DR: The date is Friday, August 12, 1994. This is Donna Rottier and I am interviewing Young and Ben Hur in their restaurant in Holland, Michigan. Could you both please repeat your full names for the record on tape?

YH: Young K. Hur.

BH: Ben Seunghwa Hur.

DR: Thank you, and your current address?

YH: 2200 Perry Street, Holland, Michigan.

DR: Also your dates and places of birth?

YH: My birthdate is [date removed], 1945. I was born in Korea.

BH: I was also born in Korea, on [date removed], 1939.

DR: Thank you. When did each of you first move to Holland, Michigan?

YH: I moved to Holland, Michigan, in 1979.

BH: About five years ago I visited here twice. I moved to Holland permanently in April of this year, 1994.

DR: Could you begin by describing a bit about your life in Korea before you moved to the United States?

BH: I finished both college and military service in Korea. I then came to the United States as a student. I did study in different subjects at a number of different universities. I then taught at colleges and universities in the United States. In April of this year I became a business man.

DR: What subjects did you study in college and later teach?

BH: I studied engineering at the undergraduate level. I got two Master's degrees, one in speech communication and one in public health. I also have a doctorate in speech communication. Until 1993 I taught at many institutions, such as the University of Missouri at Columbia; the University of Maryland Overseas Program in Seoul, Korea; Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan; and [Culver-Stockton?] College in Missouri.

DR: What year did you first come as a student to the United States?

BH: In January, 1966.

YH: I attended nursing school in Korea and came to the United States, to the city of Chicago, in 1969. I worked as an R.N. in Chicago for seven years. Then my former husband and I moved here, to Michigan.

DR: Why was it that you decided to work in the United States?

YH: My former husband was in business. Moving to the United States was a tremendous business opportunity for us.

DR: What did you know of the United States before you moved here, or what did you expect to find?

BH: Personally, my impression of the United States was that it was a mostly rich country, and luxurious. And, speaking of big cities like Chicago, my impression of Chicago through the mass media was of gangsters, a gang city, a dangerous city. Those were my impressions before I came here.

YH: Mine were about the same, I guess.

DR: How did those impression differ from what you actually found once you got here?

BH: Well, that they were not entirely true. The world is similar wherever you are; there are some richer people, some poor people. Chicago is not a gangster city by any means at all, nor is any other city. I lived in Chicago for many years, during which time Chicago has become my second hometown. I know the city very well. My first impression has changed greatly.

DR: Had either of you planned on living in the United States permanently when you first came here?

BH: As far as I'm concerned, I was half and half. I wanted to go back. My original thinking was to return to Korea after I received my doctorate. But having a doctorate here in the United States, I wanted to teach in the States first. That's half and half in my case.

YH: In my case, I was going to return to Korea, but time goes by.

DR: How did you both end up in Holland, Michigan?

BH: As Young, my wife, said, we were remarried, in April of this year. This was the second marriage for her. We came here for two different sets of reasons.

DR: I asked the question to both of you at the same time, but I mean for you both to answer as individuals.

YH: My husband found a better business opportunity here, so we moved here. My former husband is deceased about five years ago. Ben

and I met each other at the Korean church in Grand Rapids. We were married last April.

DR: Was the reason you and your former husband moved here to open this restaurant?

YH: Right.

DR: Why did you decide on Holland as the place to open it?

YH: My husband was looking around the West Michigan area, in Muskegon and Grand Rapids, because we heard that Michigan was a nice place to live, and we wanted to get away from Chicago. At first we moved to Muskegon. We opened a restaurant there; it is still there. It is called the Egg Roll House and is located at the Muskegon Mall. While we had that restaurant, a contractor from Holland contacted us that this is a nice place to come, so we moved down here. We just liked it, I guess. That's how we started.

DR: You [Mr. Hur] just recently moved to Holland, is that correct?

BH: That is correct. Again, as I said, I visited here twice. My primary reason to settle here was because of our marriage. I like the town. I claim this as my hometown now and the town where I plan to stay and live in.

DR: What did you think of Holland before you moved here and how has that changed, if at all?

BH: I was told by my colleagues at Ferris State University that Holland is full of Dutch influence, and that the Tulip Festival is

held during May. My purpose to visit was due to the Tulip Festivals. I had a pretty good impression of the town then, and I still do have a good impression of it.

DR: Could you tell me a bit about your restaurant?

BH: Young and her former husband built the building in 1979. It has been for fifteen years now. This was the first Chinese restaurant in town. For the first five years I guess business wasn't good. In other words, they lost some money until the Hollanders learned to enjoy the taste of Chinese food. That took about five years. Afterwards, then, they started having pretty good business. Now there are many competitors in Holland.

DR: How many Asian people were living in Holland when you first moved here?

YH: Oh, hardly any. Altogether we had about four Korean families. I don't know much about other groups, because we weren't close to each other, but there were also some Vietnamese. There were only four Korean families when we first moved here.

DR: Do you have an idea of how many Korean people live in Holland right now today?

YH: Excluding children that are adopted by American families, right now I would say probably about five to six families. There are also a couple Korean women who are married to American men. But that's about it.

DR: Do you know how many Korean children have been adopted by American families in the area?

YH: I ^{think} guess that there are many. I see a lot of them here at the restaurant when they come in. Some families have three to four Korean children in one family.

DR: Why do you think it is that so many Korean children are being adopted?

YH: In Korea, when girls who are not married have children, it's a great shame to the whole family. In their cases they give up their children, so there are many of those.

DR: Do you have children of your own?

YH: I do. I have three children. My oldest daughter will be twenty-six this fall. She just graduated from the University of Michigan. I have also two sons. They are twenty-two years old, and twins. They are both seniors at Michigan State University.

DR: What are your children studying or planning to do?

YH: My daughter graduated pre-med, but she gave up going to medical school. Right now she is involved with a business. She has been working at a hotel as a convention manager for two years now. She is happy. The other two boys are both in business. They are doing internships this summer.

DR: What were your hopes for your children when you moved to Holland?

YH: We just wanted them to do their best, and they turned out to be very good children.

DR: How do you think their lives are different in any ways having grown up in Holland than they would have been had they grown up, say, in Chicago?

YH: My concern in Holland right now is that there is a lot of crime going on which we didn't have when we first moved here. Because of this business we spend a lot of time here, and we really couldn't spend a lot of time with them when they were young. They pretty much did their own things. I think they did really well without parents supervising them. We see a lot of people who have problems with their children in big cities; their children are involved with gangs, or are involved with drugs because their parents are always working.

DR: What schools did your children attend in Holland?

YH: West Ottawa.

DR: What do you think about the West Ottawa school system and their experiences there?

YH: I think it was good. They liked it.

DR: Are you involved in any other activities or organizations in the community?

BH: We are members of the Chamber of Commerce in Holland. I have gone to the Holland Rotary Club three times. I am not a member yet, but I have enjoyed meeting new people and listening to the speeches there. Those are my recent activities.

YH: I don't have any really outside of the restaurant.

BH: She is a busy woman.

DR: You mentioned the Korean Church in Grand Rapids. Could you explain the role of religion or a personal faith takes in your life?

BH: We are both members of the Korean Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. The church is called the Hahn-in Christian Reformed Church of Grand Rapids.

DR: How many people attend the church?

YH: About 150. They are almost all Korean, with a few Americans, too. There are several Korean ladies who are married to Americans, and they come to our church. There are a lot of children, too--almost one hundred children. Our church is now adding an educational center for children.

DR: How many years has the church been established?

YH: I think for eighteen years.

DR: What do you enjoy most about going to this church?

BH: I think largely there are two reasons most people go to the church. There are those who believe in Christianity, and then some of them are churchgoers to meet other fellow Koreans for social reasons and so forth.

DR: Does your family celebrate any special Korean holidays or traditions?

BH: Neither of us have families here. In Korea, yes, they do. They follow the traditional holidays and they celebrate those days. But not here; we just merely go by American holidays.

DR: Have you visited Korea since you've lived in the United States?

YH: I did last April.

BH: For two weeks.

YH: After twenty-five years.

BH: I lived in Korea for six months before I came to Holland. I also lived in Korea for seven years and taught American soldiers there before I came to Big Rapids to teach at Ferris State.

DR: What was it like to go back to Korea after having lived in the United States for so long?

YH: It was very different. Everything was very different. Sometimes I would walk on the street and feel like I was in a different country. Even the people looked different to me at times. I don't know why, but ~~I~~ guess right now the children are all tall and not like they used to be. A few times I wondered, "Oh, am I really in Korea?"

DR: Do you think you might ever go back to Korea permanently to live?

BH: I don't know, it depends. But frankly speaking, it's unlikely to happen.

DR: Do you have much contact with the other Korean families or people who live in Holland, or in the greater West Michigan community?

BH: We do have contact with Koreans in this city, and in Grand Rapids, of course, with the church.

DR: Is that contact on a personal basis?

YH: Just friendship.

BH: Social reasons mostly.

DR: Do you have much contact with Asian-Americans who live in Holland who have come from other Asian countries?

YH: Not really.

BH: We are very busy people, Donna. We start at eleven o'clock in the morning until ten in the evening. From Monday to Saturday we just don't have time. We don't even have time to read newspapers, we are so tired. Practically any social gathering or participating in other activities is not possible for us right now. On Sundays we go to church and meet with people. That is generally about it.

DR: What changes have you seen in the Asian-American community in Holland in the time that you've lived here or been familiar with the area?

YH: When we first moved, we didn't recognize so many Asians living here, but all of a sudden I see a lot of Asians here--Cambodian and Vietnamese mostly--and a lot of stores owned by them. I see a lot more Asian people at our restaurant, too.

DR: Why do you think it is that so many Asian people are moving into Holland?

YH: I think one of the reasons is that Holland churches are sponsoring and bringing them here and helping them out.

DR: What do you think about that growth in the Asian population in Holland?

BH: Well, what can we say? They choose Holland, like we chose Holland, as a place to live. They chose, and that's their right. I don't know what to say on that.

DR: Do you think it's a positive thing for Holland?

BH: I think so. The world is no longer so small. The world is becoming a global village. We start to see and understand all the different cultures and different people. I think that this will be a good opportunity to understand other cultural groups.

DR: How do you think Holland as a community is responding to and receiving these people with various cultural backgrounds who are moving into the community?

BH: I don't know. I don't have an answer for that.

YH: I don't know either. Maybe Holland is more open now than it used to be.

DR: Have you ever noticed or experienced yourself any racial tension or prejudice against you because you're Korean?

YH: Not really.

BH: I don't think so.

DR: What do you think is the best thing or the most positive thing about living in Holland?

BH: Again, this Dutch culture is something that I enjoy. Also, geographically Holland is close to Chicago, and Grand Rapids, which is also a bigger city. It is culturally accessible to big cities; yet, Holland is still small enough to enjoy a small town

environment. And there is Lake Michigan, too. I think this is really, geographically, a good location. I've been hearing that Holland has been growing a lot. I can see the reason why.

YH: I like it here. It's comfortable, and it's beautiful.

DR: On the flip side of that, what is the most negative thing about living in Holland or what do you like least about living here?

BH: Weather! (laughter)

DR: A lot of people seem to say that.

BH: Well, you can't win them all, right?

DR: Do you intend to stay in Holland? Do you think you may ever move to another location?

BH: We don't know yet. Right now we are settled here. We are happy living in the city of Holland. As we grow older, when we reach the age of retirement, I don't know. At that time we'll think about it, but right now we are pretty settled in Holland.

DR: Do you plan to continue to run your restaurant?

BH: Yes, right now that is what our aim is. Our goal is to run the restaurant nicely, to provide Chinese food to the community. We have very good food.

DR: Have you ever thought of expanding or moving to a new location or adding another restaurant?

YH: No.

BH: I think we are well-satisfied where we are now in terms of the size of the restaurant. This is the largest Chinese restaurant in

town and we have many loyal customers that we have established over fifteen years. We are happy where we are. In terms of relocation, we are not considering that. In terms of expanding, I think we have a good size restaurant, and to expand would be too burdensome right now. We are not thinking about expanding our business, but just about running this restaurant well, the way it's supposed to be run.

YH: We are just concentrating on giving better service to our customers, and making them happy.

BH: And providing quality food to our customers.

DR: What one thing about each of you would you like to make sure that people who are reading this interview know? Basically, what would you like to be remembered by or known as?

BH: We own the first Chinese restaurant in town. Young has been very well known in this town, although I am new here. We want to be known for our restaurant, and as business people. Both Young and I, we have lived in the city of Holland for many years with a good Chinese restaurant with authentic food and a good environment, and Oriental music. I guess that's it.

By the way, I wrote a book called Culture Shock! : Korea. The second edition was published in 1993. The book's out of print now. The new books will be available at the end of August or early September. I was invited to the authors' night at the downtown Booksellers. Because no books were available, I

interacted with many other authors, and I brought my book to demonstrate the nature of the book to other authors.

DR: That's all of my questions. Thank you very much for taking the time to do this.

YH: Thank you very much.

BH: Thank you for giving us this opportunity.

Note regarding interview with Young and Ben Hur on August 12, 1994:

As was the procedure with all of the interviews conducted, a copy of this transcript was sent to Mr. and Mrs. Hur for editing. Partially because they are so busy running their restaurant, they did not return a completely edited transcript. Per Mr. Hur's request, some minor grammatical changes have been made to make the transcript more readable. I followed up with the Hurs a couple times by visit or phone, once with a reminder letter in January of 1995, and finally this summer with another copy of the transcript and a final letter urging Mr. and Mrs. Hur to make any clarifications or edits they feel necessary for the overall clarity and accuracy of the interview. It is my hope that Mr. and Mrs. Hur will return an edited transcript, but until that time, this is the version as transcribed from the tape-recorded interview with only minor changes in the grammatical structure. Any information which I could not decipher from the tape is denoted by brackets.

dmr
08/23/95

*9/5/95 - Mr. Hur called with several changes
Transcript is now final.*