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## Yam, Bruce Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with  
Bruce Yam

(unedited)

Conducted March 23, 1997  
by Jean Sytsma

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project  
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project

Interview with Bruce Yam

March 23, 1997

Interviewer: Jean Sytsma

JS: It's Sunday afternoon, March 23, and we're here to interview Bruce Yam. Bruce, could you tell me the date of your birth?

BY: [date removed], 1963.

JS: And where you were born, Bruce?

BY: Cambodia.

JS: What city?

BY: Botinbam.

JS: What was your family's occupation in Botinbam?

BY: Rice factory.

JS: Your father had a rice factory? How many children were in your family?

BY: Seven, five brothers and two sisters.

JS: What number were you?

BY: Number seven. The youngest one in the family.

JS: How many years difference was there between you and your oldest member of your family?

BY: Tough question.

JS: The oldest one is still in Cambodia, I take it?

BY: No, that's Ken.

JS: That's Ken, your brother.

BY: Ken is the oldest one.

JS: Ken I would say would probably be about forty-two.

BY: Forty-five. I would say about twelve or fifteen years difference.

JS: When you lived in Cambodia and your family owned this rice factory, what was your job there?

BY: Just helped a little bit with my Dad, and Mom, and go to school in the morning. Go to English school at night, private school. Chinese school in the afternoon. In the spare time, just help with my parents.

JS: So education was very important to your family?

BY: Yes.

JS: What brought you to the United States, and to Holland, Michigan? You tell me you were born in Cambodia. I recall you came to the United States approximately 1979, is that correct?

BY: 1981. Because the Communists, in 1975, between 1975 and 1979, and so after 1979 is when we tried to get away from the Communists. We went into Thailand and stayed in the camp for a couple years. We got sponsored by the church, which is Montello Park Church. Yes, we got here in 1981.

JS: When you first came to Holland in 1981, where did you live?

BY: On 17th Street in Holland, in an apartment.

JS: What was your first impression when you came to Holland? Was it in the summer, was it in the winter, was it in the fall?

BY: It was in the hot summer, blueberry time. We went to pick blueberries, make some money. And then start fall, and then start school.

JS: When you first came to Holland, what class did they put you in when you started school at Holland High?

BY: Sophomore. We would still go to a special class for English.

JS: Now during the Communist time, were you still able to go to school, or was there a period of years where you didn't have any school?

BY: No school, no four years, no school, no education. Nothing.

JS: Just survival.

BY: Just survival, and work for them, not enough food.

JS: What was your job for the Communists?

BY: Everyone had to do what they were ordered from morning till dark.

JS: What particular job did your group have? What were you in charge of?

BY: It depended on the season, like rice patty season. It's all different. It just depended on what they wanted us to do.

JS: So when you came to Holland, and you went to pick blueberries, it kind of reminded you of, at home, going into the rice patty fields?

BY: It's not that bad, it just completely different. And I wouldn't do anything like this, seemed not that hot. On the job, and just, go out there and keep us busy.

JS: You went to Holland High, and you were a sophomore. You took special English classes. What do you feel was your biggest challenge attending Holland High, other than learning the language? How did you feel their curriculum was, comparing it to Cambodia? The schooling, the education, the teachers, did you find that it was different than the type of schooling you had in Cambodia, or was it similar?

BY: Oh yes, a lot different, especially this different language. Different type of teacher, over there you had to do what the teacher said. But over here, and not too much of a challenge from, like you had to do your homework or whatever. Some students not even worry about that. Over there, you cannot do it, and you can't pass the class, and have a tough time. Over here, you just might miss English class, as I have a tough time with my history and my government and say "Oh, I need some help with that." A little bit tough. But the first year I just took all the easy classes, so it was a little bit easier. So second year, my junior, it was a little bit tougher, and senior, it was tougher yet.

JS: But you graduated, and you graduated with a good grade point, I remember.

BY: Four point maybe, I can't remember anymore.

JS: That was very good considering all of the challenges you had to overcome. Tell me a little bit about the other brothers and sisters that came with you to America. You came here with how many were in your family?

BY: I came here with just three of us, brother and sister. Brother was married, he got a couple kids. With the sister, she's just single.

JS: Did she go to school too?

BY: No, she didn't. She just went to community education at night, after work and something like that.

JS: Then you graduated from high school, and during high school, you found a part-time job at Family Fare. Tell us how you advanced yourself at Family Fare.

BY: That was my first job and my last job also.

JS: How many years were you at Family Fare?

BY: I worked there for 15 years.

JS: Your first job at Family Fare was burning...

BY: Carry out and clean up the meat department in my senior years, carry out for one year, then start back in the meat department cutting meat. From there, start in 1984.

JS: When you were in the meat department, did someone train you to do this job, or did you just kind of watch the other employees?

BY: Oh just watch them do it. Nobody showed me too much how to do it.

JS: Who did you work with at the time?

BY: Tim Tross, and a few different people that worked there, which is my first my boss, Jerry Heerspink.

JS: Jerry, I believe, died of cancer, correct?

BY: Yes, he died of cancer a few years ago. His wife is still living.

JS: Then Tim became your boss, and then you became the assistant manager.

BY: That is correct.

JS: How many employees were in the meat department when you left Family Fare and started your own business?

BY: Seven, eight employees in the meat department.

JS: And I believe you went from the store on Washington, over to the new store, is that correct?

BY: Yes.

JS: Tell us about some of those changes. Was that a good move for Family Fare, do you

feel?

BY: I feel that maybe they rent that building at the end of the contract, and they probably spoken for the old place. They had a lot of money, they do whatever they have to do. It seemed like just left there and got all those next door businesses upset because no traffic go there anymore. Before that, they told those people that they were going to put something else in there, make sure they get all of the traffic in the area. But now, there's nothing in there yet.

JS: You moved to Holland in 1981, and we're now at 1997. Over the last sixteen years, tell me how do you feel Holland has grown, when you drive past Prince Corporation, Herman Miller, Haworth. Do you remember these companies when you first came to Holland that most of them were...

BY: No, I never do see these. I never had a chance to go around and check all these places out. I just go to school and come from school and stay home. I ride a bike in town a little bit, and never had a chance to go outside, but most of the time I would just see the corn fields just ride a bike out through the town a little bit. And now you can't see corn fields anymore. Grown real fast for the entire population.

JS: Now do you feel with all of these companies that have come into town for the Asian community, it has been a real big blessing with all of these companies grown. How do you perceive the Asian population to go in the next ten years? Do you think you are now at its peak, and it's going to stabilize, or do you still think that more and more people from different states will continue to come into Holland because of its good economic?



BY: Oh, I can see that most people on welfare or whatever where would they come from, they would try and get a different job. I mean a good job. They might have a lot of friends that refer to them and say, "Come over here, there's a lot of jobs open or a lot of good jobs around here." I can see it jump up a little bit.

JS: Most of the Asians that come from other cities are very industrious. They're willing to work hard. Most of them, like you, they either buy a house or build a house. Now what prompted you to buy your own business? First of all, tell us what business you bought?

BY: I bought a party store, which is like liquor, wine...

JS: Where is this party store located?

BY: Located at Lincoln Avenue, by Prime Tyme.

JS: How did you find out about this party store, that it was for sale?

BY: When they were doing these things, like reading paper, I just go from store to store, and ask the owner there, and see the interest of selling the business or not. But I found out that this one, and called Lincolnshire, and he said he was interested in selling it, and we just got a deal with it.

JS: So you and an attorney bought the business. You didn't go through a real estate agent.

BY: No, I did not go through the real estate. Just pretty much myself. My attorney did all of my paperwork for me.

JS: Was the guy pretty receptive to sell you the business? Or did he kind of like say, "Hmmm, I don't know"?

BY: Oh, he pretty much wanted to sell it because of the problem with the family and problem with running the business. He can't keep it up by himself.

JS: Do you think if you had not worked at Family Fare you still would have been interested in buying a party store?

BY: Oh yes, I'm always looking for something different, because you don't expect to work for somebody for so long and for the rest of my life. I had to look ahead and try to make myself to be a self employee.

JS: Probably your biggest teacher in life was probably your father, correct?

BY: Yes, that's my father.

JS: How many employees did your father have at his business?

BY: Probably right around fifty or sixty employees.

JS: That's quite a bit for a small company.

BY: He had like two different ones in two different cities.

JS: What do you think your biggest challenge has been since you've started your own business?

BY: It's a big step up. Pretty much risky business, you don't know how you're going to make it or not, but I had to work hard. But I look at it, it might be work for me because I put a lot of time into it and I hope that it comes out pretty good.

JS: What I noticed about your business, too, is you got good support from your wife. Why don't you tell us a little bit how your wife helped you out with the business.

BY: I got good support from her. She had a good job for the last ten, twelve years, which means we put money aside to be able to afford to buy the business. Right now she

puts in a lot of hours and we split shifts, she put in about twelve, fourteen hours and myself also. We tried to get it going, to afford a family.

JS: If you would compare Holland business opportunity to a business opportunity you would have in Cambodia had you not come to Holland, do you think it's about equal? If you never would have come to Michigan, and would have stayed in Cambodia, you would have had a business there in Cambodia, correct?

BY: I would probably go to college or get a little bit more education, and be like my dad, I wouldn't have to worry about that. It's kind of tough question because I was only twelve, fourteen years old, and by the time I say I lost my parents in 1977, I was like fourteen. It's kind of tough for me to answer that question.

JS: But when I look at you, coming to the United States at age fourteen, going to high school, graduating from high school, working at Family Fare, taking on a business. Most people who have lived here all their life wouldn't tackle it, but yet you seem to have the determination and enthusiasm to make it succeed. Was one of the reasons for getting your own business in the hopes of passing it on to your son someday?

BY: I don't look at that, because it's a long way to go yet. They have to decide whatever they want to do. They might go to college and there might be something else beside working twelve or fourteen hours a day.

JS: But it's very typical of any immigrant who comes to the United States that the first generation and second generation does the physical labor and the third generation goes to college. So you would be not disappointed if your son would decide not to take over the business?

BY: No, I'm not.

JS: Okay, wonderful.

BY: No, I'm not looking forward to see that.

JS: Living in Holland, we also have some negative aspects, what do you think are some of the negative aspects of Holland? Maybe you haven't experienced any of that, but I think coming from another country sometimes, we see Holland in a different limelight than people who have lived here their whole life. What do you think Holland could improve on?

BY: Any person, any religion?

JS: It doesn't matter.

BY: Well, I don't know.

JS: Or do you feel that Holland has treated you very fair and you feel that the city, even though it's small, it has a lot to offer?

BY: Yes.

JS: When you went to high school, you were also involved at Hope College. They had a program called Upward Bound. Could you tell us a little bit about that, and could you tell us if you think that was a good program to be involved with?

BY: Oh yes, the Upward Bound program, it just helped with the people that get behind the homework, like Spanish, Cambodian, and Vietnamese, all the different people that start high school without starting from the first grade, and kind of behind with English and stuff like that and they need help. So we were there at night and three nights a week, something like that. With the tutor, and help us with the homework,

finish the homework up for the next day at school. I'd say that's a pretty good program. A Hope College student helped us, be in training, they want to be a teacher in the future.

JS: How do you think Holland is going to change in the next ten years?

BY: Oh, they're going to be big like Grand Rapids, I think. Zeeland, Holland, going to be connected and Grand Haven, Holland going to be connected. But I don't want to see it too fast, you know, growing too fast, but just a little bit every time would be nice.

JS: Do you think Holland will grow as fast in the next ten years like it has in the last ten years?

BY: Yes, I would think so, the way it goes right now. Everybody just put everything up, people just moving in. A little bit too fast for me. I like the way it's quiet, a quiet town, like on Sunday, you can hardly see the cars driving around. Grand Rapids is too big and too busy.

JS: In 1981 when you came to the United States, there were approximately 20 Cambodian families in Holland. What prompted the Cambodians to Holland? Was it the church sponsorship, or a previous Cambodian who had been here? It seems to me there must have been some interest for the Cambodians to come to Holland. Maybe you can tell me a little bit about that. Who came to Holland first? I believe there was a Chao family.

BY: Yes, Thai Chao. They came here in 1975, I believe. Soon after they heard about their relation, a brother and sister, they escaped from the country, Cambodia. He

gets the church sponsor, you know, actually, they're from church, and they just keep coming. Every children trusts in sponsor in family of two or three.

JS: When you first came to Holland, it was rather hard. The Cambodians, I recall, used to have meetings and parties and stuff like that. Is that how you found your wife, too, or was your wife introduced to you by another source?

BY: Just introduced from different people.

JS: What year did you meet your wife?

BY: 1987.

JS: Okay, you got married in July of 1988.

BY: No, 1987.

(voice in the room): No, 1988.

BY: Oh, '88.

JS: You've been married now for...

BY: Nine years.

JS: And you have two children. How old are your children?

BY: One is seven and one is five. The oldest one Bonnie, and the youngest one Davey.

JS: They both go to school. Do they enjoy school here?

BY: Oh yes, they enjoy school everyday.

JS: Do your children have contact yet with other Cambodian children at school, or are there quite a few Cambodian children that attend the school where your children go to?

BY: Not too many of them. On the northside here they go to a different school.

JS: Do you teach your children still how to speak the Cambodian language and the Chinese language, or are you concentrating now-a-days more on the English language with your children?

BY: Pretty much English right now. When I talk Cambodian, they understand, but they talk English back.

JS: Have you taught your children some Chinese also?

BY: Just a little bit. Now they might forgot all of it now.

JS: Okay, I think I have one more question. You know, everybody says "If you're not Dutch, you're not much." How do you feel about that statement?

BY: Oh, personally I don't take it as a serious word for it. But it depends on the person that you- you're dutch, you're dutch, you're not much, you're not much, and what's the difference? You live your own life, I live my own life. You spend the money the way you want, and I spend my money the way I want. And you get a problem, you need help, I can help you with that. There are a lot of people who work for me in the store now, and always ask for help, and I say, "No problem, I can help, but please help me back."

JS: Do you think that in the future the Asians will have some type of symbol, too, in Holland? I mean, the Dutch have wooden shoes, can you see someday maybe that the Asians having their own little symbol?

BY: I'd like to see that, but right now, there's no communication between each Cambodian family. They just think "It's none of my own business. I just take care of my family."

JS: When you talk to other Cambodians about Holland, how do you feel they feel basically about Holland? Has Holland been good to them?

BY: Oh yes, most people like it.

JS: I know that the Chinese-Cambodian community has had a big effect on the working class as far as some of the companies like Bil Mar, Prince, Haworth, Herman Miller. The companies were very eager to hire these people when they first came from the camps, and came as immigrants, because of their work ethic. Do you feel that the work ethic will continue with your people, or do you feel that as the immigrants retire and the second generation takes over, that the dedication and the faithfulness will wain a little bit?

BY: Probably to a second generation, it probably will. It's not saying the original people that came from over there, they used to work hard everyday without enough food. To the second generation, they don't feel that I have to do this, I have to do that. They don't care.

JS: How do you feel about the health care here in Holland? Do you feel it's good with our doctors and hospital, or do you feel that it's something that Holland could improve on?

BY: I'd like to see them make a big change in hospitals. Every time I go there, I never see enough doctors around there. Now I just go to Zeeland, because it's quicker. Every time I go to Holland Hospital for emergency, I sit there for at least two or three hours. It's kind of tough.

JS: So you go to Zeeland, and within an hour, you're in and out?



BY: Yes, half an hour, I check in and about fifteen minutes I check out. It seems like they respect the patient a little bit more than in Holland. In Holland it grew too much and they should find a few more doctors to put in there to take care of the patients. Just quick in, quick out, no matter what kind of insurance they have, what kind of medicaid they have, and what kind of money they have. They've got to take care of the sick people. And the money just worry about later. If the person can't make a payment, what can they do?

JS: What do you think you'll be doing ten years from now?

BY: (laughter)

JS: Do you think you'll still be running your store, or do you hope to sell it and retire?

BY: Oh, that's a really tough question, right now I just keep it there, and hopefully I can make it that far. Just day to day, you never know. I hope I can make it, I hope I can stay there and do a little more.

JS: I think that will conclude our interview. Do you have anything else you would like to add to this interview? Any other things you would like to see Holland change as a city? Or do you feel that the way things are going now is pretty fair, and do you have any ideas on how city government could change?

BY: (laughter) Tax.

JS: That's everyone's problem, universal problem.

BY: Yes, everybody has to pay for that, yes.

JS: Well, this will conclude our interview, and thank you very much.

BY: Thank you.