Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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This is Cassie Quach with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine. Today is Monday, May 18th, 2015. I will be interviewing Mrs. Chau Quach at her home in Corona, California.

CQ: So, can you please state your name?
CMQ: I am Chau Quach.

CQ: And when and where you born?

CQ: Can you describe your hometown where you grew up?
CMQ: Um, I lived in Gia Dinh. It’s suburban. It’s about a twenty minute car ride from Saigon. My hometown is a small town and I lived in a group community where all the families build the houses and live together in the same area. It’s gated. And we’re not the family, but we lived there for a long time. And, during the war, I was young and I didn’t know much about it because I’m sure there was a lot of things going on. There were probably people that got killed or people—there was a lot going on, but I just was not aware of it because I was young. Basically I just go to school and come home. So I was just young so I can’t remember a lot, but it looked peaceful to me at that time. And, my neighbors, they really were nice. They always like friendly, helpful, and they always keep an eye out and make sure we don’t do bad things or, you know. So, they keep an eye on each other. We keep an eye on each other.

CQ: Can you tell me about your schooling in Vietnam?
CMQ: Schooling, I went to a Catholic school when I was young. I was from Pre-k to three years- to third grade. And a lot of— it’s a Catholic school so a lot of sisters there and we learned French and we prayed every morning before we start class. And it was really nice. The teacher is wonderful, but I remember one of the teacher. She was really mean to me (laughs) because I was— I loved to look outside, look at the birds while I was schooling so she always smacked my hand with a ruler, a wooden ruler and she had like two or three wooden rulers, not just one, and smack it on my little hand. I’ll never forget that. And her same is Sa— Mrs. Sa, and I hated her at that moment. (Laughs). Yeah, so, and then, I had a lot of friends. I loved the school a lot. Every day, I walked. When I was young, my uncle usually [gave me a ride] to school on his bicycle and then take me home. When I was about third grade, he had to start working so I usually walked to school. It’s about twenty minutes to walk to school and twenty minutes to walk back. Yeah, but, you know. I walked
with my other cousin. He go to the same school with me. Yeah, so it was- it was fun. And then when the Communist came in 1975, they closed all the private schools, religious schools. So I have to go to public school. In fourth grade, I go to public school. It’s a bit further. It’s about uh, I would say twenty-five to half an hour walking. So, at that time, my uncle still [gave me a ride] to school at the beginning. So, it’s kind of hard because like, you have your ritual. Like, you always praying and you have to study the bible and all kinds of things and then very structured. And this school it’s different a little bit for me because I’m not used to not praying in the morning. I have to start making friends again. And it’s really hard, but finally I got to know some people and I went to that school for two years and then I transferred to - the sixth grade I had to transfer to a different school because they only teach up to fifth grade. And then sixth grade I go to basically like- basically, what do you call it here? Like from sixth to eighth grade. Yeah, so I went to a school called Rang Dong and it was a bit closer to my home. Almost about twenty minutes walk and at that time, I walk every morning to school and walking back. And, the school start from seven o’clock in the morning to twelve in the afternoon. And I loved that school. I have so many memories. I have a group of friends, ten of us- five girls and five boys- and we do everything together from going to tutoring, to going picnic, helping out at school. We always join and do different things for the school. We more in like jour- like paper, like making a paper for school. Yeah, so it was fun. And the teacher was wonderful. They always helpful. Sometimes they even come to my house and talk to the parents and have lunch sometimes. They were very nice to me. Very good memories with them. I never forget, at noon, boys and girls, we always play jump rope together and we do different things. We go to families who have trouble and help them with the teacher, with our group of ten people. And the teacher go out to the people who- the kids who need help and help them. So, it’s a great , great time, you know, during that time. Well, talking about going to school, every day I go to school at seven and come home around twelve noon and the ritual was we have to eat lunch every day at home after school and then we take a nap for half an hour to an hour. Then, after that, at two o’clock we have to- or, three, - we have to go to tutoring from three to five. And basically we go every day for Vietnamese literature, or math, or biology, or French. That’s the four subjects that we always do tutoring . So , we go almost every day. Every day, basically five days. And, we come home. We have our dinner- wash up and have our dinner, and start getting homework out and do our homework. And by seven o’clock, my uncle would start, you know, call us in. He always help us with our homework every day . So we finish homework, he check it and while he check it, he have another set of homework for us. And he would teach us, you know, go over our homework and teach us the new thing. So basically I have two session of tutoring every day . (Laughs). It’s quite a bit. And then by the time we finish everything, then we go to sleep around ten o’clock. So, it’s a lot of good memories there.

CQ: Can you tell me about the members in your family?

CMQ: I have- I’m the oldest one in my family out of four . I’m the oldest sister and I have my brother, Khanh, and then my brother, Thanh, and my sister, Ngoc. And I also live with my uncle’s family and I have one cousin, Tien. And my mom and my dad. My dad is- my dad is Tuan Vu and my mom is Mai Nguyen. My dad is in military. He’s, I forgot what rank he is, but he’s in construction and he’s an engineer for bridge, house, whatever they need him. And my mom just a house wife and she stay home and help us with school, or cooking, or most of housework women do- housewife do. My dad- my dad, most of the time he not at home because he work a lot and so my uncle, he’s the one help me with schoolwork. He’s like my other dad. Yeah, he’s really helpful to me.
CQ: Where are the different places you have lived in Vietnam?

CMQ: I live in different place. I live , I think in two different places besides Saigon. My dad in military so when I was born in 1966, I was born about ten days, my dad was draft so he have to go to Thu Duc and train there for a year. So, at that time, I still live in Saigon. And then about a year old, when my dad graduate from Thu Duc school , he transfer, well in the military, they transfer him to Nha Trang and we lived there for two years. But at that time, before we moved there, my mom was pregnant with my second brother. So my second brother was born in Nha Trang and we all lived there for two years. And then my dad was in the military and they transferred him to Da Lat for another three years and that’s when my mom was pregnant with my third brother Thanh, and he was born there also. The second brother, he was born there. Da Lat is a beautiful place. I remember there’s a lot of waterfalls , a beautiful lake, and my dad take me to see friends with house with lots of fruit trees and it’s beautiful, but sometimes it’s scary. When I first moved there, I was scared because it was a cold place, not hot like in Saigon. At night you can hear the wind blow really hard and the tree making weird sound. I was scared of that and sometimes it was so cold. From the living quarter to the kitchen, we have a wall with a window where we can just crawl to the back and get something instead of open the door and walk to the back. So, it’s a very good memory and we have lots of fun. I go to school there- I went to school there- and my teacher, I remember his name is Mr. Long. I was a trouble child. Always lost a pencil every day and he always get mad at me . Like, he would tell my mom, “Why your child alway lose a pencil?” (Laughs). So anyways, it was fun. We lived there for three years, but sometimes it can be scary because you can hear the bombs, you can hear the gun, and all different sorts. And every time it’s like that, my dad have to run to the station, the military station. I don’t know what you call that, but he have to be there because he in military and left my mom and us at home. Of course they have like a safe passage. I don’t know what you call it. So they dig it so they already have it. So when the bomb comes or whatever, so we have to run in to there and hide. I remember, I was young, sometimes it would rain a lot so they would have a lot of water and you run in there. You don’t even know what’s underneath that water. It can be anything. It can bite you, but as a kid, I remember I was very scared. It’s dark, it’s cold, and it’s wet. And we have to hidden in there for few hours until it’s safe to come out. And, yeah, we stayed there for three years and then we go back, but by that time, the Communist start attacking Da Lat, you know. So, I heard a lot of gun shooting, a lot of bombing, and people start moving, transfer to Saigon. From the military too. So my dad, in the military, of course we were transferred to Saigon. I remember there was a lot of people. My mom and dad were scared and we travel with another family friend of my dad. He was in military also. So from that time, we live in Saigon. Well, my dad still sometimes had to move. I think we did move back to Da Lat and live there for another year or so. And then we move back to Saigon and we lived there. Let me remember- yeah, so 1968 we already go back to Saigon and live there. So that’s-from that time- that’s the last place we moved in Saigon and we stayed there.

CQ: So when you moved to Da Lat, was that the first time you experienced war or bombs?

CMQ: I think so. That’s the first time as I remember. I hear bombs. I hear gun shooting. Yes, that’s the first time.

CQ: Is there anymore childhood memories or stories that you can remember and want to share?

CMQ: As a kid, I just don’t aware with a lot of things. Because, you know, I think my parents protecting me very well. So, I just go to school, and go home, and go tutoring. So,
I’m sure aware that a lot of things going on outside, but as a childhood, I remember we just have to invent a lot of games. We don’t- our family don’t have lots of money so my mom don’t usually buys me toys. So, my brothers and my cousin, we always invent some kind of card games, or we do throwing coins, or we do hide-and-seek, or sometimes I would climb over the wire fence to go to the neighbors and watching a cock fight. (Laughs). Which is not I supposed to do. Or doing cards- playing cards. It’s a very easy game. We just count numbers, whoever have higher number wins and I always come home with- because they don’t play for money, but we cook with a wood fire so the pot always have- I don’t know what they call it, but it’s black and outside the pot. Every time you lose, they use that black- coal- to draw on your face. (Laughs). So I come home with a full face of coal. I have to climb back over the wire fence and come back home and wash my face really good. And I usually sneak out during the nap time in the afternoon and one time I was get in trouble with my mom because she caught me. I never sleep, I just wait for my mom to shut her eyes and then my brothers and my cousin, we sneak out. Well, my family live with my uncle’s family so there’s two families live together in the same house so that’s why I have my cousin Tim (Tien), my brother, Khanh, and my brother, Thanh. And we all wait for my mom to sleep and we snuck out and we start climb up on the tree, pick out the fruit, and then next to our house is the neighbor where we pick up the fruit from them. (Laughs). Yeah, so it was nice. After that, sometimes we get in trouble. Or, we go watching- we do cricket fighting. We have a lot of crickets around our house so we see the hole, we just put the water in there, and the cricket come out, we catch it, and we put it in a little match box to keep it there. Sometimes, my brother says, “I have one. You want to fight- cricket fight?” So we put the two crickets to fight. (Laughs). We were bad. Or, we will try to catch a bird. During our nap time, we would try to invent all these things. So what we do is, we just get a little basket. A small- what do you call that? Like a drainer? So we put it there and we have a chopstick to put it along the sides and then we tie the string with the chopstick. So, basically we try to put the drainer- the bowl- up like this (makes hand motion), and the chopstick like this (makes hand motion), and connect the string to the chopstick, and put a little rice. So, the bird will hop in there and eat the rice so we pull it. We pull the string so the wood stick will collapse and catch the bird in there. But we release it. We keep it for a few hours and we release the bird. Yeah, so that’s those memories I never forget. And then, during the Moon Festival, we don’t have money to buy- you know those lights? What do you call that?

CQ: Lantern?

CMQ: Yeah, lantern. Yeah, so we have to make it. My uncle teach us how and we have a big bamboo tree in the back so we chop it down and my uncle teach us how to make the lantern. It’s very simple. Like, three circles and we tie it together, and put a stick in the middle, and try to put a little candle holder. And we just walk around. So, a lot of memories like that. And in my country at that time, yeah- I very much like that. Like, inventing a lot of games and enjoy ourselves. Or playing chess. You know.

CQ: So, what religion did your family practice, if any, and what role did it play in your daily life?

CMQ: My family have- well, mainly it’s Catholic. When my dad’s family- they not really Buddhist, but they worship ancestors and stuff like that. I don’t what to call that. But when my dad get married to my mom, my mom’s family say he have to become Catholic in order to marry my mom. So, I guess my dad really love my mom. (Laughs). So, he convert to Catholic. But, you know, just to get married and then after that, he doesn’t go to church.
So my mom say that, “Okay. You don’t want to go, that’s fine.” So she baptized all of us and my mom would take us to church every Sunday. Yeah, but mainly Vietnam, everybody mostly is- I think sixty percent is Buddhist and for some reason, I don’t know how we get into Catholic, but we are Catholic and we go to church every Sunday and that’s why I go to Catholic school. Yeah, but, you know, my dad have no [objections]. He doesn’t say anything. He agree and my uncles agree to it. You know.

CQ: Were any of your family members involved in the war in Vietnam and if so, how?

CMQ: Okay, let’s talk about my dad first. My dad, he went to college so for the longest time, he didn’t join military until I was ten years- uh, ten days old. At that time, they drafting people and my dad have to sign up and join and he went to Thu Duc. That’s where they train all the new soldiers and he stayed there for a year. But, you know, he go back and forth. Like after a year, he done- he graduate, then they transfer him to Nha Trang, and Dalat, and back to Saigon. Oh, also, Nha Trang then he go to Pleiku too. Different states, but my mom didn’t go- different cities, but my mom didn’t go. Just mainly Nha Trang and Dalat. That’s where we stay. And also my uncle, he left the country. He joined the navy and he left the country quite long in ’68, 1968. So he joined the American navy and he left ever since. That’s how long he’d been gone. And that’s on my dad’s side. On my mom’s side, I have my uncle- the oldest uncle, Uncle Phuong. He’s a soldier, but he helping the doctor with, you know, with helping all the injured soldiers, all the people that got wounded. My third uncle, he also- like my dad- he in military. Over there, you get to certain age, you have to sign up to join the military if you don’t go to college and he is one of them. He also a military in construction. He’s a soldier and he’s in construction, architecture, engineering. Same as my dad. And my fourth uncle, he also do the same thing. He joined the military and he in the construction, you know engineer. My seventh uncle, he also joined the military, but he’s in combat unit where he had to go into the woods, hiding rain or shine. It’s harder for him. Lucky for him- thanks God he’s fine. And my ninth uncle, he also joined, but he’s- I forgot- a phi cong. He fly an airplane. I don’t know what you call that. A pilot? Yeah, so most of the men there, they have to join military. My uncle, my fourth uncle, he was hurt really bad when he come back [from] some place far away and he get hurt really bad. So they delivered him back to Saigon and cure him- help him. Yea, I think something with his finger and then he couldn’t shoot anymore so he get out of military.

CQ: What do you remember the most about that time period, during the war?

CMQ: During the war, I was too young. I’m sure there were a lot of things going on. Before 1975, it’s very- I’m aware that a lot of things that’s going around. 1968, that’s when the North Vietnamese attacked the South, go to the central. I know that a lot of shooting. A lot of- there’s a bullet go through my house. It was scary. Every house, we always have to dig a tunnel to hide during the war so we always have a tunnel. And I remember, my mom would take us to- oh, I’m so sorry, that’s in 1975. We just hiding under the table, under the bed until its calm. And then I think for a week or so until its calm down, and my uncle would find a family in Saigon and we go there and stay for a week or a month. And then we come back. Yeah, and another thing that I experienced is before 1975. It was really bad. That’s when the fall of Saigon. So before, a few days before I hear a lot of bombing, a lot of gun shooting. It’s very scary. People stressed, and worried, and don’t know what’s the outcome of this war. I remember every house we dig tunnel because we know it’s coming. So every house dig a tunnel and my mom would send us to the tunnel and we stay there for like a day or two hiding (clears throat) in a tunnel. It was sad, you know. In 1978- like the