Narrator: JOHN PHAM
Interviewer: Tiffany Huang
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TH: My name is Tiffany Huang and today is May 17th 2015. I am going to interview John Pham and we are at Montclair, California. This interview is for the Vietnamese American Experience class, Oral History Project. So we will begin with your name.

JP: My name is John Pham and I was born in Vietnam -- in Biên Hòa City, and I was born in June 23, 1983.

TH: I’m going to ask you the questions first. What are your parents’ names?

JP: My parents’ names: my dad is Lap Pham and my deceased mom, Lurt Le.

TH: How are they like?

JP: They’re very easygoing. At first, what I remember back in my childhood, they were very easy. Once I grow up, I see that they are very strict in any way.

TH: Why do you think they were strict?

JP: Because of their background from my grandparents.

TH: Where did you grow up? How would you describe the hometown you grew up in?

JP: Basically, I grew up in America here, but then I was born in Vietnam. I came to America when I was 10 years old.

TH: Oh. Do you have any specific memories of how it was like in your hometown before coming here?

JP: I still remember just a little bit that -- my, back in Vietnam, the hometown that I was born in and lived for 10 years was very poor. The houses built very closely to each other, which we can hear the neighbors talking from the walls, which is right into each other.

TH: So the walls are very thin or very close?

JP: It’s not thin or not thick, but the walls were right next to the house.

TH: Interesting. So like you mentioned about the houses, do you want to tell me any childhood memories?

JP: My childhood memory wasn’t that good because you know the situation of being poor back in Vietnam, it was very -- the way people live unlike, not like in America here, that they enjoy their life. Well, if I want to mention, I would like to mention my school friends back in my childhood. We played every game that we created.

TH: Do you have a favorite game?

JP: You know, marbles... you know, those small, glass marbles? You know those marbles?

TH: Mancala?

JP: Yeah, those plastic. No, not plastic, but glass marbles. We played that. We played rubber bands and we played kite. Yeah, every season we have different kinds of games. Marbles, which is in the summer as well as flying the kites. And in Vietnam, we don’t have the seasons like in America here. We have the cold and the hot, but we still play. Different seasons, we have different games.

TH: So a lot of the games, do you make it yourself?

JP: Yes! We created, well, in the summer, we have the, we played cricket. They fight. The crickets fight each other.
TH: Actual crickets?

JP: Yes, actual crickets.

TH: Oh, interesting. Wow, very different from America how we play video games.

JP: Yes, very much. We don’t have that game. You know, well back then, the game’s not popular in America here. But sometimes we play pools to the billiard s.

TH: Billiard? What is that?

JP: You know billiards? You don’t know pool?

TH: Oh, pool. Okay! So since you were involved with many activities with your friends, like, how about your neighbors? What were they like, since you guys live very close to each other?

JP: We have ups and downs among my friends. My friends and I have ups and downs. But we were very close to each other. We played a lot of activities and we know each other because we live close to each other. We know everything. We know each individual close, just like brothers and sisters.

TH: Like I mentioned, since you guys were a close knit community, what kind of local gatherings and events were there?

JP: Gatherings… during Christmas Time and Lunar New Year. The only two big events that we held … What I remember is that the Lunar New Year, the fireworks that each family had. Well, I don’t quite remember how we gather the big two events, but they were the memorable events for me back in my childhood.

TH: Those two were the most significant?

JP: Significant, throughout the year.

TH: What made it significant? Were there specific activities in each event that made it significant?

JP: Well, the two big events, Christmas and New Year, were that each family, each of my neighbors, would be so crowded. But then, the rest of the year was very silent and quiet. So that was the only two events throughout the year that I remember the most were the Christmas time and Lunar New Year.

TH: So the energy that everyone brought together, that made you really happy. That’s why it was really significant?

JP: Yes, yes.

TH: Nice! Since you were very young back in Vietnam, do you do chores back then?

JP: No, I did not because I am the youngest in the family of 10 children. So I didn’t have to do anything, but then I still had to -- well ‘cause I was young, younger than 10 years old, when I came to America, that’s why my family didn’t ask me much around the house.

TH: Since I did not realize that you had this many siblings, what were their names?

JP: Well, the first one: Nguyet Pham. Second, Hong Pham. Third one, Binh Pham. Fourth, Dinh Pham. The fifth, Thang Pham. The sixth is Thuy Pham. Seventh, Lan Pham. Eighth, Hang Pham. Ninth, Thinh Pham, and I’m the last, John Pham.

TH: What is the year gap between you and your eldest sibling?

JP: Between my oldest sister, and me, older than me about -- she’s 28 years older than me. And the one that is apart from me is nine years older than me.

TH: Wow. What do you know about your family name? Like the origins and the history of it?

JP: I’m not really sure, which I’m still learning the meaning of my siblings’ names. Yeah, I’m still searching to know the origin and the meaning of the individual names of my siblings. I cannot answer you that question.

TH: It’s okay. Are there any traditional first names or nicknames in your family? Do you have one?

JP: Well, I don’t. In my family we don’t have the traditional or custom names … because my dad didn’t start that. So we don’t have Vietnamese traditional names in the family.

TH: So they just called you by your first names?
JP: Yes, we just called, my dad and my siblings just call our names the real name in the family.

TH: What languages do you speak?

JP: Well, like I said, I grew up in America here so pretty much English and very influence in Vietnamese, and I can speak a little bit of French and Japanese.

TH: Oh, wow! Where did you learn French and Japanese?


TH: Do you speak a different language in different settings, such as home, work, or even back in school?

JP: At home, we use Vietnamese. Besides home, mostly likely I speak English to my friends because most of my friends were born in America. And Japanese to some friends I know back in school, back in college, and my host family back in Japan. They sometimes call so I have to use Japanese, but my Japanese is really weak when I don’t practice.

TH: How much education did you receive prior to coming to America and then after coming to America?

JP: Well, I finished fifth grade back in Vietnam and when I came to America here, I started as a sixth grader until I receive my B.A. in Philosophy eight years ago.

TH: Okay. How much education has your family received? Maybe like your parents or the one who received the most education?

JP: My parents, no. My mom didn’t receive much education back then because my maternal parents, my maternal side… actually my maternal grandparents passed away early. That’s why my mom didn’t receive that much education. However, my dad, he graduated university back in Vietnam. What I heard was that he received more than BA back in Vietnam. It was fortunate for him.

TH: Do you remember which university he went to?

JP: It was Hanoi University up north.

TH: Okay. How about your siblings? You can just mention who had the most education and who had the least.

JP: Well, for most of them, I do not know because I never asked. So their education, I’m not sure.

TH: That’s fine. Relating to education, what jobs did your parents hold?

JP: Well, my dad was a teacher and my mom was pretty much a housewife.

TH: What did your dad teach?

JP: He taught language, education. He taught language: French, English. I believe that he taught a Latin class back in Vietnam, too. To some of his students now they are nuns and priests in Rome.

TH: Wow! Since he was a teacher in linguistics, did he teach it to his children, like you?

JP: Yeah, he taught me English and French basically and most of my siblings, too. He taught us throughout the years.

TH: So different topic, how did your parents, grandparents, or other married relatives come to meet and marry? Is there, like, do you remember?

JP: I am not quite sure about my grandparents, my uncles, aunts… What I heard from my parents, that they say my grandparents, they just met up with each other and let my parents marry at a young age. But it was a set up marriage for my parents.

TH: Arranged marriage?

JP: Yes.

TH: Do you think arranged marriage haven’t changed or is it more lenient now?

JP: Arranged marriages nowadays, I don’t think people want that, but then, back in my folks’ town, they had a lot of arranged marriages. What I heard from back in the day, if your parents say that you have to marry that person, then, you just nod your head and say “okay.” But the nowadays, I don’t think any of us want that.
TH: Were there any consequences if, let’s say, someone went against it? Like, “I don’t want to marry him or her,” since it was so strict back then.

JP: I think so. Back in the old days, if your parents say that you have to marry that person, if you don’t, I think they would punish you by kicking out of the house and the family. They will deny, “You are not my child” or my “son” or “daughter.”

TH: So currently, do you live in this house?

JP: Yes, I’ve been living here for a couple years.

TH: So do you have a spouse?

JP: No, I’m still single. I’m not married yet.

TH: Do you plan to marry?

JP: I am not sure because I don’t want to settle down yet. That’s why I’m not really sure if I want to have a family soon.

TH: Does your family have any special sayings or expressions? Like, anything really? Because certain families have different reactions to things.

JP: Pretty much. For now ‘cause my dad is very old, but then when he was younger, he told us how we act, how we sit during the meals. Once we have meals, we cannot talk. That’s how he’s been taught before. So he passed it to the next generation in my family. But then, when he’s getting older, he doesn’t care any more of that. He said that whatever you do, just enjoy.

TH: At the dinner table, were you comfortable of not speaking?

JP: Back then we were very intense when we eat at the table with my parents. If you say something or if we chew very loud, my parents will yell at us back in the days. But now they aren’t anymore in my family.

TH: Are there any special family foods that you’d like to share?

JP: My family… well, when my mom was still alive, she cooked. What I liked the most is the tomato soup that is very special. The only ingredient that I taste that I didn’t learn from her. The tomato soup that’s very strong, especially in the – I tried to make it. I tried to make it once, but couldn’t have that taste of my mom’s ingredients of the tomato soup in my family.

TH: Was she the only one that made it specifically how you wanted it?

JP: Yes. She made it on the occasions, which are the special holidays throughout the year. We had it only four or five times per year because it so special soup that I didn’t think until now that I can’t make that soup again. That’s why it’s so special for my family, especially for me.

TH: Do you remember any specific ingredients besides tomato?

JP: Well, she put grapes in there, she put dried shrimps, and she mixed with the beef. That’s what I remember of, but she didn’t show the ingredients. The tastiness is very special. It’s very hard to say what she put, but if I taste it again, I will definitely tell you. But it was very special for me.

TH: Home cooked meals! Just adding onto that, was it just your mom who made the tomato soups? Or like, your neighbors, did they know how to make it? Maybe different taste, obviously.

JP: No. What I heard was that she taught my neighbors back in Vietnam, too, but then they couldn’t make the soup at all.

TH: The replica was not a replica?

JP: No,

TH: Okay. Are there any special songs that your family holds?

JP: No, we are not that type of music family so we don’t have a special type of music.

TH: Do you like music?

JP: Pretty much. I like music a lot.
TH: Which type of music do you listen to?
JP: Throughout the day I have 3 different kinds. In the morning, I listen to Catholic songs. Throughout the whole day, I listen to all kinds of music: jazz, rap, classical, opera, Vietnamese opera, pretty much R

TH: Do you have a favorite artist you listen to?
JP: My favorite classical artist is Yanni and Richard Clayderman. They were very famous in classical music.

TH: Do you have a favorite song you listen to?
JP: My favorite song from Céline Dion is “When I Fall In Love.”

TH: Why? Why is that your favorite song?
JP: That’s how I met my first love.

TH: Would you like to tell me about that? When did you guys first meet?
JP: When I was at my friend’s house, I sat there and I listened to… Well, when I was at my friend’s house talking, that day I was so stressed from finals and then, somehow my friend turns on Céline Dion music. I listened to the song, “When I Fall In Love” by Céline Dion and clicked from the lyrics. While I was listening to that song, one girl just came up to me and tapped on my shoulder and asked for my name, and that’s how we met.

TH: When was this?
JP: It was ten years ago.

TH: Is she the same ethnicity as you?
JP: Yes, she is Vietnamese American.

TH: So moving on from music, what religion does you and your family practice?
JP: We are Roman Catholic.

TH: Do you belong to any temples, churches, or organizations?
JP: I don’t belong to – well, we do often do go to Sancho Church in Ontario, California.

TH: Do you only go there during Sundays or in what capacity do you go to church?
JP: Well, we go to church every Sunday; however, I am in the youth group at church in which I am involved. So once in a while we would have a meeting among our group, the Vietnamese Youth Movement USA, which is the international youth group. We praise and worship and adore the Eucharis. That’s why you saw me with the uniform.

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TH: Are there any major holidays that you guys participate in within the church?
JP: Yes, the Paris Anniversary, the Yuet Anniversary. We do the dance in Easter and as well as in Christmas time.

TH: What is your favorite holiday other than the ones you just told me?
JP: My favorite holiday is Christmas because family and friends get together to say thanks to each other for the friendships.

TH: My favorite holiday is also Christmas! I can relate. Going back to the tomato soup – ever since your mom made it, and she tried to teach it to other people, were your siblings ever able to replicate that?
JP: No my siblings cannot make that. Well, they can the soup, but the taste is very different. The taste doesn’t seem to be original.

TH: They don’t match up. Along with the cultural sense, do you have any pictures, figures, or jewelries that your family passed on to you?
JP: No we don’t. For the others we don’t, but the pictures, my dad still is the one who keeps the whole family pictures. But for me, I don’t have any old pictures from my family.