

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Southeastern Asian Immigrants Project

Life Experience

O. H. 503

HUYEN THI THU TRUONG MITCHELL

Interviewed

by

Porncharas Arirachakaran

on

April 28, 1981

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INTERVIEWEE: HUYEN THI THU TRUONG MITCHELL

INTERVIEWER: Porncharas Arirachakaran

SUBJECT: Life in Vietnam, Journey to the U.S.A., Family,  
Work

DATE: April 28, 1981

A: This is an interview with Mrs. Huyen Thi Thu Truong Mitchell for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on Southeast Asian Immigrants, by Porncharas Arirachakaran at 41 Crescent Street, on April 28, 1981, at 9:17 p.m.

Good evening, Huyen. Can you tell us where you came from?

M: My hometown in Quang Tri, Vietnam.

A: Where is this?

M: In the north, right between North and South Vietnam.

A: Can you tell us a little bit about your family?

M: I have five brothers and five sisters and I am the oldest.

A: What did your parents do?

M: My father was in the South Vietnamese Army; he was a sergeant. My mother was a housewife.

A: What did you do when you grew up? Can you tell us about your education?

M: When I grew up I had six grades in school and I had to quit to take care of my family. I did babysitting and house cleaning for people. In 1965 the Americans came into Vietnam. My house was bombed in 1966. There was fighting in the whole neighborhood and my house was bombed; we had nothing left. We moved to a city called Da Nang, Vietnam. When we moved we had no house, no food, no clothes. We lived on the street. The next day I went around and asked people how I could get

work. I didn't even speak English then. They said across the river there was what they called the Third MAF Special Service.

A: What is that place?

M: It was the United States Marine Corps Headquarters. For a job in there I needed a birth certificate. I was only seventeen years old and they wouldn't give me the job because I was too young. They said when I turned eighteen I could come back and they would give me a job. I went back downtown to the police and I said, "I want my new birth certificate; make me eighteen years old." They took my money and they gave me my paper. The next day I went back and they had to give me a job because I was eighteen now. I started out working in the mess hall. I worked there for two months, and while I was working I learned to speak English. Later, Lt. Col. Black--he is about fifty-five, fifty-seven, a very nice gentleman--asked me how old I was and why I was working. I told him what happened to my family and that we had no house and lived on the street. He wanted to help me. He sent me to school downtown where I studied English for four hours in the morning and learned to be a bookkeeper for four hours in the afternoon, but I also got paid for a full day. He sent me there for six months. When I got out of that school and I came back he gave me a job in an office as a secretary. My pay started out at \$14 a month. That was a lot of money. I could rent a house and I could send my brothers and sisters to school with that money. My father was still in the Army, but he wasn't paid very much. He got paid about \$10 a month. I made more than what he made.

After I worked for eight months I asked for a transfer to IBM. They sent me to Saigon for six months and I went there to school for IBM. My pay went from \$14 to \$25. So my family and I survived. Then we bought a house. Three months after that I met my husband in the same office.

A: At Saigon?

M: Da Nang. I went to school in Saigon, but I came back to Da Nang.

A: At that time were the Communists in charge?

M: No, the Communists didn't take over until after April 30, 1975.

A: After you got married what did you do? What is your husband's name?

M: Thomas Mitchell. My husband went home in April of 1970. He got out of the service, but I was still in Vietnam. He went home for two months and came back and got a job with Philco-Ford Corporation. He was a warehouse manager and we stayed in

- Vietnam for two years. We left Vietnam in February of 1972.
- A: Where did you come to here?
- M: My house is in Mount Jackson, Pennsylvania.
- A: Can you tell us the important events during your life?
- M: The war was significant, especially in the city where I was from in the city of Hue. They had a big fight in 1968.
- A: Can you tell us a little bit about it?
- M: It is very sad. That is the most beautiful city in Vietnam. That is the city of queens and kings. In Tet, what we call New Year, in 1968, they began to fight for two weeks straight. After that the whole city was bombed and everything was burned. Nothing was left. Thousands of the people died there. Whole families were lost. They turned a beautiful city into an ugly one. Americans burned it down and North Vietnamese shot and killed. Do you want to know how I feel about Americans?
- A: Yes.
- M: I have two different feelings: Love and hate. I hope you know what I mean. I love American people; they are the warmest, fun, friendly, easy to get along with, but I don't like the American government. I shouldn't say this because I am an American now; I am a citizen. Before 1975 they promised Vietnam they would be beside us whenever we needed help. In April 1975 we needed them, but they just walked out and they pretended they didn't know us. That is how the country fell to the Communists. That is how I lost my family.
- A: Do you know where your parents are?
- M: I know where they are, but they are all split up.
- A: Your brothers and sisters are all split up?
- M: Yes.
- A: What was your first impression when you came here in 1972?
- M: Exciting. It was like heaven to me. If you saw what they have here and what we don't have, compared to us they are so rich. I love American people; I mix in with anybody. Especially where I live now, the people love me. Wherever I go people give me hugs and kisses. Whatever I need they help me. American people are super nice. I don't think I can get help and be friendly like that even in my country. We feel the same, but we keep it inside. I think the American way is better.

A: What do you think about your job? How did you learn or hear about the United States before?

M: Most of it I saw in the movies. We love American movies, French, Japanese, and Chinese. We learn a lot from the movies.

A: What do you think of your life in the States with your husband? What about your language difficulties?

M: It is very difficult, even right now. I think this is the most difficult language you can learn. When you speak and write it is different. I am still learning now and my children and husband help me. When I say something that isn't right, they correct me.

It is so different here. In Vietnam when children go to school, we have to pay; it is not free. I sent all my brothers and sisters to school.

Later, when I met my husband and we got married and my husband had a job, he bought a house for my family. It was a beautiful home in Da Nang. The house cost \$3000. If you bring that house here it would be \$50,000. The labor is cheap, that is what made it different.

A: Do you know what happened to them?

M: They lived in that house in 1971 up to 1975. When the Communists took over they took the house from them and money, everything that we left them. They split my family up in five different groups. Some were sent to Hanoi, some were sent to the mountains to make farmers out of them.

A: Did they split your father and mother up too?

M: My father was in prison because he was in the South Vietnamese Army.

A: What about your mother?

M: My mother suffered a stroke right after the war was over and she lost her voice. Right now she can't talk; she can't walk, she lost her mind. During the war in 1975 she thought that all of my brothers and my father died. My one brother was an officer and the other was a sergeant.

A: Were they dead?

M: No.

A: Who takes care of her now, do you know?

M: Nobody takes care of her. They don't allow anybody to be with old people or sick people.

A: Where do they keep her?

M: In 1976 they sent her up in the mountains with all the old and sick people by herself. Later, when I sent money home, somehow they used that money and my brother brought her back. She lived near Saigon. Right now my brother is married and my mother has to live with my baby sister. They live somewhere, but I don't know where.

A: When your brother got married you didn't know where she was?

M: He is married and in Saigon now. They only allow a certain amount of people to stay in the same house. When he was married, he lived with his wife's family and they had enough people there so they wouldn't allow my mother and my sister to live there. My mother and sister moved about forty miles away from Saigon.

A: Do you plan to help them?

M: That's what I do now. I have three jobs.

A: Where do you work now?

M: I work for Airway Industries for five days and I do catering on the weekends. In the summer I sell my foods at fairs. I have my name, Huyen Oriental Foods.

A: What foods do you cook, Vietnamese or Chinese?

M: Both.

A: Do you like your job now?

M: Even if I didn't like it I have to stay with it because I need that money to help my family survive and bring them here. I send home between \$10,000 and \$14,000 a year.

A: How do they exchange the money over there?

M: I send it to people in California.

A: When are you going to bring them over?

M: I'm going to, but I don't know when or how. They want so much money over there and I have a hard time making money over here. I can never catch up. I pray some day that I can bring them, especially my mother.

A: What do you think of the living conditions here?

- M: If I would have my whole family here I would be very happy with no complaints.
- A: What about your religion?
- M: I belong to the First United Presbyterian Church in Mount Jackson.
- A: Did you used to be a Buddhist before?
- M: I was a Buddhist, but the place where I live I can't go anywhere to find a Buddhist church. I believe we all believe in one God, no matter what religion we are. I decided I would go to the Presbyterian church so I could go there every Sunday with my family here and pray for my family in Vietnam.
- A: How about your children? How many children do you have?
- M: I have two children.
- A: How old are they?
- M: One is ten and is in the fifth grade. The other is nine and in the fourth grade.
- A: When you came here you had your sons?
- M: I had them in Vietnam.
- A: When you were in Vietnam at that time did you work when you had a family?
- M: Yes.
- A: Can you tell us your desire to adjust to a new life here?
- M: Right now in this business we are doing really good. I have been busy almost every weekend catering for weddings and for church groups.
- A: What do you plan to do in the future?
- M: I would like to keep it secret.
- A: Looking back, what changes would you have liked to see happen in your old country?
- M: I wish my country could go back to 1960. That is when it was a wonderful time. We had no war, no fighting. Everybody was happy with nothing. We were very simple people. We had a good president back then; his name was Ngo Dinh Diem. In 1963 he was killed and slowly Americans came into Vietnam and war

- grew and grew. I really miss the old times. We were poor, but we didn't know we were poor. We were hungry, but we didn't know we were hungry. We were happy with nothing. When Americans brought in so many things we knew about it, liked it, and they took it away. That hurt.
- A: Is there anything else you would like to add?
- M: My mind is so much with my family. I will do anything I can to bring them here so they can see the freedom.
- A: How long have you been here?
- M: Nine years.
- A: You haven't seen them since you left in 1972?
- M: My husband wanted me to go back when I became a citizen. I had my citizenship one week before my country fell to the Communists. I haven't had the chance.
- A: The first time you came to New Castle in your new house, do you remember what happened?
- M: The people were all very nice; they all welcomed me.
- A: Do you try to keep the Vietnamese culture for your children?
- M: No.
- A: What do you try to teach them?
- M: I try to teach them to speak my language, but they turn around and say, "Mom, I'm an American. If I speak Vietnamese who will I speak to?" I tell them, "Me." They say, "Mom, you need English more than we need Vietnamese." They can count and say a few simple things in Vietnamese.
- A: Can your husband speak Vietnamese?
- M: Very little.
- A: Is there anything you would like to add that I didn't cover?
- M: No.
- A: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW