George Chin

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My dad came here in 1938. I was not born yet.

Well, my granddad was in Danville, Illinois, and he had contacted his son, my dad, who was living in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, at the time. And he said that there was a Chinese hand laundry on the campus of the University of Illinois here in Champaign, for sale, and it was a good opportunity for him. So my dad somehow got here by bus and took the opportunity and bought the business.

Early, there were two other Chinese hand laundries in town, so there were three. I would remember that my dad would get so angry, that he would get into these price wars and it was frustrating because a competitor was always beating his price. [chuckle] So eventually he did kind of create a new marketing strategy that worked very, very effectively. He started doing pick up service at all the fraternities. So he would do pickup and delivery, so that was kind of ingenious of him to do that. And then, he ran up to Chanute to pick up laundry to do at the Chanute Air Force Basel. And then, and I remember that we expanded, doubled the size of our laundry business.

We lived above the Chinese hand laundry. Well, the floor above that was an attic. My dad converted the attic to house Chinese students. So we had six graduate students living with us.

My parents were working very hard in their business, when they opened their first restaurant, so between the two of them, they had to split their time between the restaurant and the Chinese hand laundry. My mom had done most of the in-home schooling, so we were off at elementary school all day long.

I remember writing Chinese, except I can’t write Chinese today. You know, at some time and point I kind of said, “I want to be American,” and I kind of declared it so I quit learning to read and write. When I went to school and realized I didn’t speak very much English, and it was difficult to communicate, I just need to jump in with both feet and so I can get assimilated pretty quickly.

Mom and dad said, “Aw, we want you to be the first doctor in the family.” Well, I didn’t get that far. [chuckle] I ended up graduating from the University of Illinois and decided I wanted to go into business, and my brother and I opened our first restaurants, Eddie’s Deli, an open-air café right in the basement level of the old House of Chin on Sixth Street. So we ended up becoming restauranteurs from there.

There are just so many wonderful things about Champaign.

My wife was offered at tenure track professorship up at a law school in Chicago. It was just a whole different lifestyle, and eventually my wife said, no, we’re not gonna leave this community. “I’m not gonna accept it.” So we ended up staying here in Champaign.