Opening remarks, All Together Now, Museum of Vancouver

22 June 2016

Given the nature of this exhibit, let me begin with a definition, which describes All Together Now. It’s a verb, to collect, a. to bring together into one body or place; b. to gather an accumulation of (objects) (Merriam-Webster).

I am very pleased to be a part of this exhibit and equally glad that over the years Viviane, the curator, has been busily gathering us, the folks whose collections are represented in this space as her “collection of collectors.” Among 20 collections, there are objects that range from the common to the unusual, and from the small to the large—a bit of this and a bit of that.

I doubt that any of us had envisioned that we would participate one day in a museum exhibit. So here we are, with our guests, with our passions for particular objects.

For me, it’s menus. People have asked, “Why menus?” and more specifically, “Why Chinese restaurant menus?” I’m the daughter of a restaurateur, and more precisely, of a Vancouver Chinatown restaurant—the WK Gardens, so my collection seems a good fit as to who I am. It’s associated with my identity, much like other collectors and their collections.

The other point about identity and my collection is that I’m an anthropologist and one of my areas of interest and research is food and culture; in fact, I teach several courses about food. Again, perhaps this is not so surprising given my background.

Growing up, whenever a new Chinese restaurant opened in Vancouver, my family would regularly dine out and do the taste test. We ‘spied’ on the competition! What was on the menu? What were the signature dishes? Did the chef do something different than what WK Gardens did? What were the prices?

The dishes presented were not just to fill that hunger gap; they were to be carefully examined and ‘dissected’ as to ingredients, flavours, and preparation.

As a restaurant business, survival meant knowing the competition but also what made the WK Gardens distinctive. This is where menus become important: research! In many senses, much of my collection, I can say, is my inheritance—gifts from my Uncle Harold and my father. Thanks to them, I have pieces of Vancouver’s restaurant history, which include numerous menus from Chinatown.

When I look at these menus, I think of how Chinatown has become a shadow of what it was in its heyday. At that time restaurants were busy and booming representing a wide range of tastes and pocketbooks. You could even dine and dance at a number of different restaurants. Who remembers Marco Polo, Ming’s, or Mandarin Gardens?
The dining attracted the much larger community. Chinatown was a ‘happening’ place—a place to celebrate or commemorate life events, whether births, grads, weddings, or even deaths, as well as, to attend specially organised social events. These are represented by uniquely produced invitations and menus. I look at the Eng wedding banquet menu from 1967 and wonder whether the couple are still together. Or, the 1949 Canadian Women’s Press Club Dinner and wonder what outfits were modelled for the fashion show!

The Chinatown menus are associated with my own memories and history, as well as those of my family in their role in Vancouver’s restaurant scene. For those who wander through this exhibit, in viewing the menus and the other collections, they too may find a piece of their childhood or past, or a memory attached to their family. *All Together Now* is about Vancouver and beyond; it’s also about “us.”