



**Tom Tongumpun  
The Cottage Restaurant  
Memphis, Tennessee**

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Date: June 28, 2021

Location: The Cottage Restaurant, Memphis, TN

Interviewer: Simone Delorme, Kelly Spivey, and Annemarie Anderson

Transcription: Annemarie Anderson

Length: Forty minutes

Project: Summer Avenue Memphis

[00:00:08:00]

Simone: Ready to start? This is Simone Delerme. Today is June 28, 2021, and I'm at The Cottage Restaurant on Summer Avenue, recording this interview for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Could you start by introducing yourself and tell us a when and where you were born?

[00:00:29]

Tom: Oh, my god. That was a long time ago. My name is Tom, normally they call me Tom because my name is Thomnoon Tongumpun. I was born in Thailand in 1947. Many, many, several years ago, I moved from Thailand to America in 1971. And then I never, I haven't been home for over twenty something years. Yeah, I just went home in the past four years, I've been trying to go home once a year to see my mother, which she is 94. She's very, you know, very.

[00:01:23]

Simone: So when you moved from Thailand, did you come straight to Memphis?

[00:01:27]

Tom: No.

[00:01:28]

Simone: Where did you go first?

[00:01:29]

Tom: I was in North Carolina at Goldsboro, a small town, for **a week and a year**. I learned how to learn the language from the community college, and then I moved to East Tennessee to Johnson City to finish up my master's degree. And when I finished my master's, I looked around to see what I could do, what I liked. I found the special education was the field that I think that I could work better. So I enrolled and continued to my, another master's degree

in special education. From then on, I start getting a job, a paying job, but my first job were horrible when I first come to America. I got paid, what? At that time, two dollars, a dollar eighty an hour.

[00:02:26]

Simone: What were you doing? What kind of work?

[00:02:29]

Tom: In a warehouse.

[00:02: 30]

Simone: Warehouse.

[00:02:31]

Tom: Bagging potatoes, sack potatoes. You know, five pounds, ten pounds. They come by the truckload, and then I'm the one who sacked them. From a dollar eighty to two twenty and two forty and then three thirty something. And then, when I got me a good job that paid me by the-- Memphis city school, that paid me real good.

[00:02:58]

Simone: So you went from Tennessee to Memphis, the city here. Okay, okay.

[00:03:04]

Tom: They accept me for my education field. I apply in the morning. By three o' clock in the afternoon, they called me in and said, "Tom, you got the job. You start tomorrow." I said,

"what?" [Laughter]

[00:03:21]

Simone: What was that experience like?

[00:03:22]

Tom: Ooh, bad. [Laughter]

[00:03:25]

Simone: Tell us about it. Why was it bad?

[00:03:26]

Tom: They send me to the school down in Midtown, now in **Nowtown**. At that time, I'm kind of tiny, small, and then my students are so tall, they're bigger than me. So they kind of intimidate me, you know, because it was ninth grade. They were big and tall students.

[00:03:51]

Simone: How did you get into the restaurant industry?

[00:03:53]

Tom: Ooh. I, when I first come and then I saw the Cottage Restaurant on Summer, down the street, you know, that way. I kind of like it. I like the name and I like the way it look. And I just, that's it. And then I went away, do some teaching, do some working, and then never—and then I start building a house, not building, buying a house, got a rental property and then one of my tenants, one day he said, “You know, The Cottage Restaurant is for sale.” And so I said, “How much?” And he said, “\$60,000.” I said, that's kind of too much, but I'm going to go look and see how much. And then I come over here and talk to the lady who owns it. I said, “How much do you want for it?” And she said, “\$26,000.” And I said, I'll buy it tomorrow.

[Laughter]

[00:04:58]

Simone: And you bought it the next day?

[00:05:00]

Tom: I bought it the next day and since then, we've been open 365 days nonstop. We never close. Unless there's snow.

[00:05:10]

Simone: Okay. And what year again did you buy it?

[00:05:13]

Tom: Three years ago.

[00:05:14]

Simone: Three years ago.

[00:05:15]

Tom: Three years ago June the 15. And July 1 we start, change over everything, so two more days, maybe, and we're three years anniversary. We're going to have a party. It's a lot of work. A lot of work. [Phone rings] [Tom speaks to waitress] And he come up here, I thought. [Speaks to Simone] I have one more customer coming.

[00:05:43]

Simone: Okay. If you need to pause at any time, tell us. And where you in the restaurant industry before? Did you have any experience? No experience?

[00:05:57]

Tom: No, no.

[00:05:59]

Simone: And how about with the cooking? Do you do some of the Thai cooking?

[00:06:01]

Tom: A little bit, a little bit. I have a good cook back there then, and she's very good. I have two cooks who are very good. I was watching her, how she cooks, how she does, and then for the Thai food, I cook at home, you know, I cook just like I cook in Thailand.

[00:06:24]

Simone: How did you learn how to cook?

[00:06:26]

Tom: We're poor. We were very poor. Every day I have the budget of maybe a dollar, it being twenty baht over there, thirty baht over there. So the thirty baht, I have to feed five people. So I have to know how to buy this and that and that. Get enough meat, enough vegetable, enough things to cook enough for five people. We have five in the family, sometimes seven because my aunt always drop off the children for my mother to take care of. So I have to do that, buy the thing that's right. I cannot spend over thirty baht, a dollar in America. This time, now it's a lot more now. I'm talking about in 1960 something, okay? So I kind of know how to cook from then on, so then learn, I watched the lady cooking so I— and then she quit. Make it real hard because I have to be here at six o' clock, and we close at six. So I don't know what time I'm going to be busy, just like I told you, after three maybe we slow down. But today is exceptional. We have a lot of people. I've got one more coming. [Laughter]

[00:07:59]

Simone: Okay. I want to talk more about Thailand. If we could go back, where in Thailand did you grow up?

[00:08:08]

Tom: I was born in Bangkok, and then I go to school around the house, the neighborhood because one school here, one school here, one school here. I mean, pre-kindergarten, elementary

school, high school surround it, walking distance. We don't have a car, we don't have bicycle. We're poor. We don't have anything. We have nothing. So I go around it. And then, when I finished high school, I apply in Bangkok, and they don't take me. They don't accept me.

[Laughter] But the Chiang Mai University, the university up north, about eight hours north of Bangkok, accept me. So I moved from Bangkok to Chiang Mai, stayed there for four years.

[00:09:04]

Simone: What did you study?

[00:09:06]

Tom: Mass communications.

[00:09:07]

Simone: Mass communications.

[00:09:08]

Tom: And then, it's pretty good. I thought I'm going to be a news reporter, a news writer, something like that. Starting to, but never making that far. And then one day, my aunt married with an American guy. He asked me, "Do you want to come to America?" Right after, a year after I finish my school. I think about it, and I say, "Oh, good. Okay." So I collected all the money, buy the plane ticket, got two hundred dollars in my pocket. That's all I have. And then go from Bangkok to Johnson City, stay there for a year. Learn how to drive there, drive the stick shift. Which, don't know how, the car, it hopped like this because I don't know how to synchronize. But it was a lot of good experience. Good fun, and I have a good people in Johnson City who helped me. Either friend from school or the teacher. I got a job over there as well, in the community college. I told them, you know, I know how to do the audiovisual a little bit. But my speech is not good at that time, so they put me in the lab, in the learning lab, so I duplicate all

of the cassette tape, and at that time, we use a lot of cassette tape. I duplicate the lesson plan, the lessons to the classes in the cassette. A hundred at a time. And all that time, it runs, I know all about it. And I make a lot of cassette tapes. I make a lot in the library. I work in the library. You know, like work study, fifteen hours a week, make a little bit of money, just to live by. And then everybody so friendly in Johnson City—not Johnson City, in Goldsboro. Then when I moved to Johnson City, I happen to get a job at the steakhouse. I moved-- I got promoted, good promotion. I go from the dishwasher to the busboy, and then the next day I do the cooking. Cooking steak and cooking potato and cooking everything for the customers. That restaurant is very, very famous. **We owned our own** restaurant in Johnson City. I even met the, what's his name? All the-- Al Gore over there. I met the, all the movie star, they come. That place, at that time, we don't have no french fry like Texas Steakhouse, something like that. Only got one steakhouse over there. Big, super big steakhouse. I take a lot of good pictures with the celebrities. Not with Elvis, with the—the name is out of my mind right now, but it's a very well-known people.

[00:12:51]

Simone:       Okay. And take me back to when you moved to Memphis. What was it like? What was your experience like?

[00:12:59]

Tom:           When I was in Johnson City, I met the friend, I met up with a friend of mine in Johnson City, and then he moved to Memphis to work with the organization Forget Me Not. It worked with the handicapped people, like the homebound. At night we pick them up from school. So during the day, we just like be a big babysitter. And he called me and said, “You want a job? Work with the—I got a good job for you.” He didn't tell me what kind of job. So when I got here and saw the job I had, it's kind of hard. I have to take care of eight people. Eight adults.



Which none of those can talk. They were very profoundly—we have to do everything for them. Cook for them, change clothes, give them a bath, give them a shower, which I have never done before. So kind of rough for the first couple of months. At that time, I have no choice. But the lucky I am, I was—one day, I happen to met with one guy. I look at him, I said, are you **Dr. Boon, Dr. Tonang**? And he said yes. And **Dr. Tonang** used to be the professor in Chiang Mai University. And then he moved to Memphis, He married a lady from Thailand in Memphis. And I happened to see him, and he used to teach my class over there in Chiang Mai. I said, “What a coincidence.” I just never know that. So I began to situate myself, I connect with them, situate myself doing this, doing that, and finally, I quit that job, got me a teaching job in the Oakland, Tennessee. I taught there for two years, about thirty miles from here, Oakland. It’s a lot of—its fun. I get along well with people, with everything. Just like I said, I applied— no, and then. At that time, the one-hour photo lab was very booming. Everybody opened one hour photo labs. You know what I’m talking about? So I look at it. I kind of know a little thing about photography. So I open, I get together with a friend of mine who give me an opportunity, you know, money. We spend about \$100,000 to buy the equipment, set up, open the one-hour lab. Ooh, made a lot of money. Make a whole lot of money. But, when we come to the money, everybody want money. When we come to the money, the guy who start me the business, he said, “Well, I’m not going to wait until the end of the year to get paid from the profit we have. I’m going to take out a certain amount. This much per month every month.” I said, “Kind of unfair.” [Laughter] But I only got twenty percent in there, so he had eighty percent, so whatever he said, he signed the check and took it out. From then on, everything started going downhill from what we make a lot of money, we make less and less because the digital coming to play. So we lose, so finally we had to close down the place. It’s down the street here, though. 4900

Summer. That's my lab. Mh-hm. That's right here, down here. Not too far. I'm just around here on Summer, I'm not going anywhere. My house is down the street. I'm kind of proud of myself because when I come to America, I only got two hundred dollars in my pocket. Now I've got eight houses. Eight houses in Memphis and one condo in Panama City on the beach. Beachside condo. So I'm kind of doing well. And I live in the-- the house I bought in Collierville, they appraised it for \$450,000. I paid 155. [Laughter] I paid 155 for it and it's \$450,000. I'm not going to move, I tell you.

[00:18:18]

Simone: And what is your opinion of Summer Avenue? How would you describe it since you've been on Summer Avenue for so long?

[00:18:23]

Tom: Summer Avenue is two things. The restaurants and the car lot. The only thing two things that you can see is restaurants and car lot. All of the international restaurants around here on Summer Avenue. Even Chick-fil-A is going to open right there down the street. It means Summer is growing very good. And then for me, Summer is safe. You know, we have, from time to time we have some un-- let's see, we call, not uncivilized, but somebody with not too happy come in here, rowdy, doing that, doing that. Yesterday, I had two guys come in here and interrupt my customers. Just like one guy here a while ago. I'm glad he didn't do anything. They didn't make it here yet, even though I called an hour ago. Still hadn't made it here. Everything else is fine. We get along well down the street here. Time to time I will cook for beauty shop here. Ice cream shop down there, and Mexican restaurant. I will make them something, this and that. And when I need something. Like I need avocado right now, I run over to the Mexican restaurant and I say, can I buy some avocado from you? He said give it to me. And the chicken

place right here, well, we get along well with them even though we compete. But we compete in different fields.

[00:20:15]

Simone: So you've been very successful.

[00:20:17]

Tom: Yeah, but it's been a lot of work.

[00:20:20]

Simone: A lot of work.

[00:20:23]

Tom: A lot of work, just like today's Monday and today is my shopping day. I'm supposed to go shopping tomorrow for the week today, but I can't go. Today is kind of a busy day. I'm glad you've come so I can be hanging around the customer because they're going to be mad if they come here and it's all locked. There's five people there, and I've got one more coming. He eats certain things. He calls first if he's coming. He calls first.

[00:20:57]

Annemarie Anderson: What year did you move to Memphis?

[00:21:03]

Tom: [19]71, [19]70. I think— You know, I forgot. I taught at Humes for fifteen years, sixteen years. And then I taught at the Cordova Middle School another five, that'll be twenty. It's missing somewhere. I teach twenty six years, altogether. I've been in Memphis 26 years now. 26, 27, 28, 30 years now. 30 years in Memphis. And then moved three houses. The first place is apartment down the street on Summer. Three bedroom apartment. I lived there for a year. Then I moved to a small house down there, and then, from then on, I saw the small house, good price, so

I kept buying it. I kept buying the house in that area, so I bought eight of them down in that area. And the houses were, at the time I bought, its worth about 80,000 dollars. I paid 26,000. One of them, I paid 14. [Laughter] Because if you don't pay taxes, the county are going to take it and they're going to put it in the auction. So I kind of like that house, so I bid. We start off with the three thousand dollars. We bid until we got to about 16,000, and the other guy kind of quit. So I said, "okay." I go from there. And the other house I bought next to it, and next to it and next to it. And then in that whole neighborhood, I bought eight of them.

[00:23:07]

Simone: And you said you got to Thailand recently and you hadn't been in a long time.

[00:23:11]

Tom: Three years in the COVID.

[00:23:14]

Simone: What was it like being back?

[00:23:16]

Tom: Good, good. Very, very good. You know, it kind of, I don't remember the money, the chang, the coin, the one I usually use is different. Then, I have it now kind of confused a little bit. The cost of living is kind of high, much higher. And it, I have no idea where I'm going in Thailand. It's got a lot of tall buildings, which I've never seen that before. I lived by the river, the Chao Phraya, the main river of Thailand. I lived there all my life, but I remember my neighborhood. It's pretty good. My mom is, she's keeping up herself real good. My sister is still taking care of her. And then I, every month, I have the one account, set it up for her. Whatever she want, just go ahead and spend it. Take it out and use that account. I don't care who say what, whatever she want just give it to her.

[00:24:39]

Simone: That's beautiful. That's wonderful. Do you have, either of you have questions that you want to ask?

[00:24:47]

Kelly Spivey: I'm actually curious, you said you did a lot of the cooking growing up? I guess the question is, did you— how did you just figure that out? Did your mom help you or was it just-- ?

[00:25:05]

Tom: My mom don't cook. She doesn't cook. That's why I have to take over [Laughter] We have to do a lot of look around, see what the other people, what the food they sell look like. What the ingredients in and then try to remember. And then over here, if I don't know anything, I look at YouTube. YouTube help a lot. Then I have to a lot of watching YouTube and then write it down, what I need. For example, tomorrow, I have to make a meatloaf. Normally, I kind of know how, but I have to go back and look at the YouTube, look in about three or four sessions and then come back, come buy all of the ingredients. With the one, I think is good, and they come out good. They come out real good. And then I create a little new kind of food all the time here. When you run around doing the thing in the kitchen, you come up with a good idea for that some – I don't know if it's good or not, but it kind of work. It's kind of good. The other day, the ladies, the two ladies and a daughter came in, ordered the Khao Soi. The Khao Soi is kind of noodle dish which you only find in northern Thailand, and I happen to be me, I come from the north, so I kind of know how. I remember what it is, so I create the tray for it and all what I have in the kitchen laid on it. It looked good, it looked very good. And it tasted very good. And then this morning, I opened the can. I thought it was a purple hull pea can, but I opened the beans

instead, so that's why I told them, we're going to have a barbecue this week, so I have to get rid of the beans. The baked bean, I opened the wrong can of bean. So we're going to have barbecue chicken, or barbecue ribs outside this week sometime. And then going well, I mean, last Sunday, we have barbecue ribs. I spent three hours cooking and five minutes, gone. Disappeared. But we got a lot of people.

[00:27:58]

Simone: And you do it outside?

[00:27:59]

Tom: I cook outside, and then bring it in. People waiting [Laughter] but we have a buffet, a lunch buffet, I mean breakfast buffet on the weekends. That's what it is. And it was a lot work, a lot of fun. Breakfast buffet on the weekends take up a lot of my time. I have to think each week what I'm going to do, what I'm going to cook for the breakfast, American breakfast. Right now, I run out of ideas sometimes. What should I do now?

[00:28:41]

Simone: Any more questions?

[00:29:43]

Annemarie Anderson: I have one more question, and that's how have you seen Summer Avenue changed since you arrived?

[00:29:48]

Tom: Ooh, it's changed a lot. We have an open border, we have a lot of Latino citizens here. We see a lot of Mexican restaurant around here. And then, my good mechanic is from South America, too. They've changed a lot. They live behind here on Macon, mostly Macon right here. They changed a lot and then, that's only. There is no gun violence on Summer Avenue, but

beyond Summer, yes. On that part of, you know, before Jackson Avenue, from here down to Jackson Avenue, that's a lot of crime right there. But it's not on Summer itself. But anyhow, I'm not going to say it is safe. I park my car here at night doing well in the past couple of weeks. Then one day I start the car, it makes a lot of noises. Somebody come and cut my muffler. Two cars. My Prius and my Honda. It cost me a lot of money. That not only happen here, it happens everywhere. Catalytic converter, they took it. They have that small machine now to go under there and cut it and pull it out. But they're gone now, they've been long gone now. [Waitress talks] Tell them that they left. They're gone.

[Conversation off recorder with the Police]

[00:31:35]

Simone: Is there anything else you want to add about yourself or your family or your experiences?

[00:31:40]

Tom: I have a real good family.

[00:31:44]

Simone: Tell us about them.

[00:31:46]

Tom: My son, he graduated from Ole Miss. He has his master's, he has two or three master's degree in Ole Miss because he worked with the Boeing, and he does some computer work. And they have a program that you can take classes, they pay for the classes. So he's taking all the classes. So he has master's after master's after master's. And he works as a programmer. He's very good at that. And he's trying to, he saw one. I try to stop him, but I don't know if I can or not, I try. I still try. He wants to open the game room where the young people can go there and

play games. But I feel like in the game room is where the not-too-good people come in to play games. They come in, they do drugs, they do— especially where his place is located in Mississippi, and I kind of don't like it much. He tried to do everything himself. I try not to let him open it. I take as long as I can. I say, I'll help you pay for the market. Keep the building, keep everything in there, just don't open it. Just do whatever you do now and don't start because if you start, you're going to have to be there from six o' clock in the morning to ten o' clock at night. Just like me, stay here. And then my daughter, my older daughter, she just finished her nursing practitioner last month. Her picture's outside.

[00:33:53]

Simone: Oh, that's her!

[00:33:56]

Tom: You see? Yeah, that's her. And then she just finished that two months ago. And then my daughter, the little one just get her medical school, she got her medical degree, and next month she's going to take a state test, she's taking her time to take the test, to go into there so she can be an intern somewhere, so I've got good children. And I was not real good, but I'm not that good, good in school. I just take care of myself and just, you know, belong just like that, an average child. So I'm very good. We have a good life. Good time in America, good life in America. Make good money. I don't make a lot of money, make good money. Make very good money. Don't ask me how many cars I have because I don't know. I've got so many. I'm the one who pays for the insurance. I don't know how many. Maybe ten cars, maybe? Each one of those have a car and then some time it broke, I have to buy another one, but not a brand new car. We don't buy brand new cars. We have used cars so everybody have their own car.

[00:35:29]



Simone: Okay, okay. Fantastic.

[00:35:32]

Tom: Life in America got to have a car.

[00:35:33]

Simone: Yes. Agreed, agreed. Perfect. You two don't have anything else to add?

[00:35:42]

Tom: Pretty good, pretty nice. Really good.

[00:35:46]

Simone: Good. Thank you so much. Those were all my questions unless you wanted to add anything else.

[00:35:50]

Tom: I have nothing to add. I'm thinking about what to buy. [Laughter]

[00:35:54]

Simone: Okay! Let us not keep you.

[00:35:57]

Tom: Too late now, today they're closed now. I think they close at 5 o' clock, so right now it's close to five. By the time I get there, it'll be—

[00:36:04]

Simone: Too late.

[00:36:05]

Tom: Yeah, too late. So I guess I'll go tomorrow.

[00:36:10]

Simone: Well, thank you so much for your time and for the interview. And again, we'll want to make some of these for you, so we will want to bring in a photographer. A professional photographer to take some pictures and things like that. No being shy. Perfect.

[End of Interview]