

THE HISTORY AND STATUS

OF

INDOCHINESE REFUGEES

IN

LA CROSSE, WISCONSIN

BY: DENIS LEE TUCKER, EXEC. ASSOC. DIRECTOR
LA CROSSE AREA Hmong MUTUAL ASSISTANCE ASSOC.
2615 GEORGE STREET, SUITE A
LA CROSSE, WI 54603
(608) 781-5744

LA CROSSE'S INDOCHINESE REFUGEE COMMUNITIES

1. Generally, what were some of the historical-political events that led Indochinese people to become refugees?

There are five Southeast Asian refugee groups in this area - Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese (Vietnam born). Each has their own history, culture and reasons why they became refugees. However, their histories all share the war in Indochina and allegiance to the United States -against Communist aggression. We will be concentrating on the Hmong since they are the largest of the minority groups in this area.

The Hmong originated in China and started migrating into Southeast Asia about 150 years ago. Their preference for establishing small villages high in the mountains explains why there was little objection to their settling in to the highland areas of Laos and Vietnam in the 19th century - no one else was interested in those areas.

In the 1890's the French gained control over much of Indochina, including Laos. About 1896 the Hmong became subject to the French colonial tax system, a system based on population not income. So much per family had to be paid regardless of how much income the family had. Many Hmong could not pay the tax and the Hmong Village Chiefs refused to try to collect it. When the French tried collection by force, the Hmong attacked. The French ordered a cease-fire and negotiations of peace were instituted and successful.

Indochinese Refugee
Communities

Between 1919 and 1921 the Hmong in North Vietnam rose up in a similar, but much bloodier, revolt against the tax system. This was the "Crazy War" or "Madmen's War" as the French called it. Between 1921 and 1945 there were no major incidents and Hmong life was relatively peaceful and calm.

Between 1941 and 1945 Laos was occupied by the Japanese. The Hmong joined the French and ethnic Lao forces against the Japanese, developing a reputation as guerrilla fighters. At this time, Touby Lyfoung rose to power and prominence as the field commander of a Hmong militia that furnished intelligence and guerrilla support to the regular French/Lao army.

Between 1945 and 1953 Laos became totally independent. During this time differing factions struggled for control in the country. Touby and his supporters eventually became part of the Royal Lao government. In a parallel manner, another Hmong leader, Fay Dang Lor, and his supporters became part of the Pathet Lao, which established ties with the Viet Minh in North Vietnam and the communist faction.

In 1962, Touby was appointed to the cabinet position of Minister of Health - the first member of a minority to hold such a high rank in the Lao government. During this time a supporter of Touby, Vang Pao, also rose to power as Major General in the Royal Lao army and in 1963 was appointed by a royal decree to command the Second Military Region of Laos.

Over the course of the next few years, the guerrilla army, composed mostly of Hmong and other minorities, under Major General Vang Pao's control, quickly became recognized as the most

efficient fighting force in Laos. This was the army that was later supported and advised entirely by the Americans beginning in the mid 1960's.

The long years of war between 1955 and 1975 severely disrupted the pattern of Hmong life. Thousands of families were forced to abandon their villages and flee to other areas leaving houses, possessions, and livestock behind. Many older people and children died in the disruption. Raising crops and other essential parts of their existence were very hard to continue.

When the American military forces pulled out in 1975 the Hmong became the primary targets of destruction by the Communists due to their allegiance to the United States. The Hmong were forced to flee to refugee camps in Thailand. Many times the journey to the Thai border was a very long dangerous one. For some, upon reaching the Thai border it meant waiting until the dark of night and trying to swim across the Mekong River using hollowed out bamboo shoots to breathe through from under the water as they tried to hide from the Communist soldiers. Once in Thailand they waited at refugee camps to be processed for resettlement into other countries such as the United States.

There are still thousands of refugees living in very deprived and very dangerous conditions in the Thai refugee camps.

2. What are some of the socio-cultural differences between their background and ours?

There are over 2,500 refugees in La Crosse. The majority of these are the Hmong, numbering about 2,400 in the city, but there are also about 100 Cambodians, Laotians, Vietnamese, and ethnic

Chinese (Vietnam born). They each have their own distinct culture.

The Hmong are very family oriented with a clan system. Clan being the person's last name. There are only 21 different clans, or last names, in all the Hmong society. In La Crosse there are eleven different clans. Extended families are very common. It is typical to see aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents all living with the immediate family of husband, wife, and children. That is why you may see 10 - 12 people living in one house. Older people are held in high regard. The concern of the group is put ahead of concern for the individual.

Their religion was primarily a mixture of animism and Buddhism. A Hmong Medicine Man or Shaman, was called upon to cure illnesses through a re-connection of the "good spirits" in the house or body. This would often involve ceremonies and animal sacrifices.

Hmong girls usually married at about 14 - 16 years of age and boys were usually 17 - 19 years old. The cultural marriage rites would sometimes include what is termed as "kidnapping" in this country. The boy would snatch the girl away and a trial marriage would be performed for three days before the actual ceremony. Although the girl might appear to be resisting, it was actually a part of the marriage ritual and what was expected of her. The marriage was usually planned in advance and agreed to by the boy, the girl, and her parents. Members of the same clan are not allowed to marry. However, marrying one's first cousin would be allowed as long as they do not have the same last name, (clan

name). Polygamy was allowed for men but not women. Divorce was uncommon. Large families were preferred - due in part because children were expected to care for their parents in their old age. Therefore, the more children you have - the better off you would be in your old age.

3. What is involved in the process of adjusting to life in North America for Indochinese people? What makes La Crosse an attractive relocation site?

Compared to American standards, the Hmong come from a very primitive lifestyle. They were not familiar with such basic things (in this country) as electricity and plumbing facilities. They were, in general, mountain dwellers, dependent on swidden agriculture for subsistence. Swidden agriculture is a farming method in which densely vegetated areas are cleared by burning, and the ash is used as natural fertilizer - this method is also known as slash and burn.

The complexity of life in America is very confusing to many of the refugees. Learning a new language, how to use a city's transit system, driving regulations, hunting and fishing laws, marriage requirements, men's/women's rights, use of cooking ranges, furnaces, etc., are all new to them.

Health issues are strange to the refugees. Many had never heard of hepatitis b or tuberculosis before coming here. When they arrive in La Crosse, one of the first stops they make is the Indochinese Screening Clinic. Depending on their physical condition, they might be told they have a disease or condition they had never realized, or ever heard of before, and may have not had any symptoms that they were aware of.

Trying to get a job and off welfare is very hard for the refugees. Not only is language a barrier, they also lack appropriate job training and skills needed to be able to work in this country.

These are surface problems faced in adjusting to life in this country. There are also many emotional problems to deal with as they face the loss of possibly family members and friends along with their country.

Part of the reason La Crosse has become an attractive relocation site has to do with the fact that most of the refugees coming to this area now have relatives here. The geographic resemblance to the highland mountainous region of Laos also appeals to them. La Crosse provides them a good opportunity to learn English through programs in English-as-a-Second-Language in the La Crosse School District and Western Wisconsin Technical College. The Technical College, as well as the two universities, also provide them the opportunity to learn a job skill or profession.

4. What are their greatest strengths? Needs?

Their greatest strengths include their determination, flexibility, and their strong family structure. The Indochinese students are very high achievers and goal oriented. They do very well in school and adjust rapidly. They are learning how to be effective advocates for their people as well.

Their needs are many, however. As mentioned earlier, the language barrier and lack of appropriate job skills for this country make finding employment a big problem. Welfare dependency

is high. At the present time approximately 80% of the refugees are on some type of public assistance.

A problem causing steadily mounting concern among all segments of the resettlement network is that of mental/emotional illness of the refugees. There exists a great need for properly trained cross-cultural counseling professionals and para-professions. According to Dr. Joseph Westermeyer, one of the nations leading cross-cultural psychiatrists, in data he collected in 1986 the following results were shown:

- * Some 20-25% of all refugees are "at risk" of suffering disabling mental illness.
- * The incidence of paranoia and schizophrenia is as much as 100% higher among all immigrants than among the general U.S. population.
- * Depression (from moderate to disabling) is the biggest single emotional problem of refugees.

In a study done in San Diego in 1985, testing results showed that while 74% of Americans presented a "positive sense of well being", only 24% of Southeast Asians indicated this.

5. What are the myths related to their presence?

Some things we hear and are sometimes questioned about at the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association include the concern residents have about refugees driving new cars. People tell us they know

is high. At the present time approximately 80% of the refugees are on some type of public assistance.

A problem causing steadily mounting concern among all segments of the resettlement network is that of mental/emotional illness of the refugees. There exists a great need for properly trained cross-cultural counseling professionals and para-professions. According to Dr. Joseph Westermeyer, one of the nations leading cross-cultural psychiatrists, in data he collected in 1986 the following results were shown:

- * Some 20-25% of all refugees are "at risk" of suffering disabling mental illness.
- * The incidence of paranoia and schizophrenia is as much as 100% higher among all immigrants than among the general U.S. population.
- * Depression (from moderate to disabling) is the biggest single emotional problem of refugees.

In a study done in San Diego in 1985, testing results showed that while 74% of Americans presented a "positive sense of well being", only 24% of Southeast Asians indicated this.

5. What are the myths related to their presence?

Some things we hear and are sometimes questioned about at the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association include the concern residents have about refugees driving new cars. People tell us they know

Indochinese Refugee
Communities

the refugees are given \$5,000.00 when they come into this country and we are also continually asked about the large families of the refugees.

As far as the new car issue - there are many refugees that are working - many have been placed in jobs through the employment services we offer at our agency. As a result many of them are in a position to buy a new car. This one car may be shared by as many as three families or possibly more, all related to one another. Just because you see a Southeast Asian driving a new car, it does not necessarily mean that car is registered to that person or that he/she ever paid one cent toward it.

There are no refugees that receive \$5,000.00 when coming into this country. The resettlement process is varied. All refugees come into this country because of having relatives here, a sponsor, and a voluntary agency, such as the Diocese of La Crosse, Lutheran Social Services, or others responsible for their resettlement. Depending on the agency they come in through, they may receive between \$100 to \$200 each. This is a one time payment that provides food, shelter, and other essentials, to last them until they start receiving assistance through the public welfare system. Having sponsored families myself, I can tell you this is not much when you are dealing with a family that does not have any more possessions than the clothes on their back. Once they are on the public welfare system, they receive the same payment any non-refugee welfare recipient receives.

It has already been explained why large families are important to the Southeast Asians. While this custom is changing

with the younger newly married couples - large families are still an important part of the culture, especially for the older ones.

The Hmong do not eat dogs or cats. The majority do not even have one as a pet.

6. What is the La Crosse Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association (HMAA)? What does it do? What needs does it meet?

The HMAA was incorporated in December 1982, as a charitable and educational channel serving the needs of the Southeast Asians in their adjustment to life in the United States.

In 1984, through a coordinated effort on the parts of the La Crosse County Health Department, St. Francis Medical Center, and the HMAA we established the Indochinese Screening Clinic. This clinic provides health screening information, referral services, hepatitis b immunizations, and TB testing for the refugees. The clinic has the best success rate in the state for hepatitis b immunizations.

We provide assistance to the refugees in obtaining housing and clothing. We operate a free clothing center at the Indochinese Screening Clinic for the refugees. This is stocked entirely by donation from the general public.

We also provide orientation/adjustment services for new arrivals. This includes workshops and classes with representatives from the Department of Natural Resources, legal firms, law enforcement agencies, domestic violence prevention agencies, schools, etc., present to explain the legal requirement in these matters and answer questions.

We provide employment and pre-employment training services as

Indochinese Refugee
Communities

well. This involves resume preparation, instruction on how to approach employers, filling out application forms, how to conduct yourself during an interview, what an employer expects of the person they hire, etc. We make employer contacts to provide that particular organization with information on the Southeast Asian refugees and talents and qualities available from within this community. We are also involved with economic/small business development.

As previously mentioned, we see a great need for developing and implementing cross-cultural training systems for interested mental health professionals and para-professionals. We are actively involved in this project, coordinating it through our agency.

We have several programs targeted to the Southeast Asian youth. The South-East Asian Leadership (SEAL) is a training program for the young people to learn basic living skills, money management, setting and achieving goals, employment seeking, social behavior, and other skills needed to cope as an adult in this country. Basic Skills classes are operated through the summer to help youth improve their academic abilities in areas of math, science, English, social studies, etc.

We provide translation/interpretation services for medical and dental clinics, legal agencies, and many other areas where language is a barrier.

Much of our work involves advocating for the rights of minorities in several areas.

In recent months we have established a Community Attitudes

Task Force and a Multi-Cultural Youth Council. Both of these groups have their emphasis on educating others of cultural differences and promoting a greater appreciation for cultural diversity. Hopefully these types of efforts will help to eliminate racist, prejudicial, attitudes.

7. What can we do to make Indochinese people feel more welcome and comfortable in our community?

Get to know them. We have a volunteer service similar to a big brother/big sister program through our agency. American or non-refugee volunteers are assigned to refugee families or individuals. This could be for the purpose of tutoring in math, English, or other subjects, or simply for the purpose of getting to know one another and each other's culture better. By getting to know each other, not only does a friendship have the chance to develop, you also have the opportunity to assist them in the problem areas of their adjustment to life in this country.

When you hear rumors about the Indochinese community, please encourage people to find out for sure if the things they are hearing or saying are true or not. We encourage anyone with questions to feel free to call, or come by the La Crosse Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association. Our address is 2615 George Street, La Crosse, WI 54603. Our telephone number is 781-5744.

Thank you.