

Lynette Nyman, "[This is Home: the Hmong in Minnesota](#)," *News and Features*, Minnesota Public Radio, March 8, 1998.

### Part One: Hard Work

... After living in the United States for nearly 20 years, Yer Vue, Vu Xiong, and their eight children appear to be an average Hmong-American family. They live in a small house in Saint Paul. A Hmong New Year shrine is in one room while a large-screen television entertains the kids in another. English and Hmong words swirl through the air. The door jambs are greasy with hand prints of passing children. Yer gives her daughters a few dollars to buy some food at the corner grocery. When they return, the children sit down to eat.

On this night the menu is canned tomato soup and soda crackers. Afterwards, if she's not too tired, Yer might prepare boiled chicken, a traditional Hmong dish that's a sign of prosperity. But her daughter, Pakou, says she won't eat it.

Pakou: I don't really like to eat Hmong food. I hate boiled chicken so much. I hate boiled chicken.

Pakou helps her mother around the house by doing the dishes. Mee, another daughter, babysits in the afternoon before her father comes home from his job, and while her mother sleeps before going to work. But it's hard to find any peace with eight children. The youngest is four years old. Yer says people are often surprised to learn the size of her family.

Yer: They say "eight?" And I say "yes."  
They say "oh, I can't believe it."  
And they say "how do you feel?"  
And I say "crazy mother."  
That's what I say: "crazy mother."  
...

Ilean Her's family was one of the first to get out because an uncle in the military told them to prepare to leave. Her remembers playing outside when suddenly everything changed.

Her: My father comes running back and he says "this is the day. We need to go down to the airfield." And we were running. And I remember there were tons and tons of people. And I remember my mother saying there were tons of people just fighting like crazy to get into the planes because there were so few of them. And lots of families were separated because some people got on the planes and some people didn't.

Her was seven years old when the airlift took her family to Thailand where they lived in a refugee camp. Most Hmong refugees looked to France for resettlement. Her hoped her family would choose the same, but her father thought the United States offered more opportunities. About a year later, they left the camp for Iowa and, later, Minnesota. A lot has changed for Her since then. Today, she's a lawyer who directs the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans.

Her: In the last 20 years the Hmong experience has just really been reacting. You come here, you sort of like landed, what do you need to do just to make sure that you're okay without really planning and thinking: "Okay, this is where I want to be in 20 years. This is where I want the children. This is how I can help to plan for their success and my success and the family's success."

Her says Hmong families have come a long way since the early days when everything was different and new. Then, even something as mundane as turning on a gas stove presented a problem. Finding jobs and learning English were the top priorities. Public assistance allowed for some time to adjust and gain new skills. People moved around from state to state looking for work and family. Some of the movement continues - a kind of second migration. Last year,

an estimated 10,000 Hmong people left California for Minnesota. Over time, gender and generation gaps have developed. For example, Her says young Hmong people put money and material wealth first.

Her: I know for the older community, my parents' generation, they really value the Hmong culture. And they really want their children to know more about that. And so they're - and if you talk to young people they'll say their parents say the same thing all the time - you can have as much education as you want. You can have as much economic success coming your way, but if you don't know your culture, if you don't know the traditions, then it means nothing.

Today, a quick flip through the Hmong-American telephone directory shows signs of assimilation and American success. There are listings for doctors, bankers, and other professionals. A number of social-service agencies are listed too...

Yer Vue and Vu Xiong often talk of an easier life in Laos; as if deep in nostalgia for good times despite the war and the loss of family. It's a life none of their children know since all were born in the United States. Recently, Mee, the eldest at 15 years old, disappeared for a few days and didn't tell her parents where she was. They were frantic until they found her at a friend's house. Yer says she tries - but often fails - to discipline her children.

Yer: They like to be freedom so sometimes they don't come home. So you don't know. If you ask them they say they are American. We are American so we do whatever we like. So you can't tell anything. So it's hard for me.

Yer stayed at home looking after her children for 14 years. Now she has a job outside the home. Both Yer and Vu are machine operators at IC Systems, a printing company near Saint Paul. Yer's on the night shift ; Vu on the day, working six, sometimes seven days a week to earn over time. Vu says he's concerned about his children's future. He'd like them to attend college, but it might be too expensive. He says his dreams are on hold as he struggles to meet day to day needs.

Xiong: I think if I had a mother and father or I have someone to support me, I would be in school and get more education and get more skills, but nobody here so right now we working as much as we can to get the money to support the kids and pay the bills. We got a lot of bills to pay credit card, house payment, car payment, water, heater, telephone, food ...

These are very American concerns, yet Vu and Yer still have one foot firmly in the Hmong culture...

## Part Two: Leading the People

... HMONG SOCIETY IS BASED ON A CENTURIES-OLD SYSTEM of nations and clans. There's the white, blue, and black Hmong. Within each of those nations, there are clans such as the Vang, Lyfoung, Her, Xiong and others. The clan system shapes much of Hmong life. For example, marrying someone in your own clan is forbidden. Ancestry is traced through male ancestors and Hmong men are the clan leaders. They advise their members and help resolve disputes. They also negotiate marriages and how much a groom's family must pay his bride's family to have her. Someone like Chai Fue Xiong could do that. A man in his 50s, Xiong has been a CIA-trained soldier, a clan leader, and a business owner. He's lived in Minnesota for 15 years.

Xiong : When I arrived in the Twin Cities I was hired as a mediator or family counselor with Lao Family Community. After a year, the program ended so I was laid off. So then I start my own Asian grocery store where I worked for many years until last year when I sold the store to start a car-selling business.

Selling used cars requires the art of negotiation, so Xiong might have a leg up on his competition. But he's most concerned about problems the Hmong face here that they rarely experienced in Laos such as divorce, depression, and violent crime. Many clan leaders like Xiong feel powerless to help those in need, especially as young people seek assistance from the outside. Xiong says most clan leaders are watching from the sidelines.

Xiong: Yes, we are. Even I am. But since we are here we can't do anything. We don't have the power to exercise our thought. We still - if we heard that someone was raped and murdered - we love the individuals, we care about the individuals. If we heard that someone has been murdered, we are in tears. We care about the individuals, about the family. Even if we heard if someone has left the family and leaving the children at home and not returning, we feel sad and sorry about the family, but we are just not in a position to help resolve or address the issues.

Clan leaders believe the mainstream system won't provide long-term stability and cultural identity for the Hmong people. But a new generation of leaders is trying to rise to the challenge of bridging the gap between traditional Hmong values and the realities of life in the U.S...

### Part Three: Sew It Right

... In Hmong villages in Laos, a woman hand-stitched her family's garments for daily work and ceremonial occasions. She bought black cloth and colored thread from Chinese vendors traveling through the mountains. She also grew and processed hemp for skirts. The clothes were then embellished with embroidery and appliqué work. The hand-sewing was a matter of survival and highly valued. A woman's ability to sew often determined how she fared in finding a husband.

Masami Suga, with the Refugee Studies Center at the University of Minnesota, has conducted oral history projects with Hmong sewers. Suga says the Hmong tradition had women teaching girls to sew as early as four or five years old. She says they started with a very small piece of cloth.

Suga: Barely larger than the size of their hand. And they would learn basic cross-stitching. They'll learn the combinations of certain colors. They'll learn different types of different patterns. And eventually, by the time they're somewhere between 10 to 15 years old, the girls knew how to do needlework but were also able to complete and sew an entire ensemble...

### Part Four: Going Home

NO ONE HAS AN EXACT FIGURE. Yet, estimates suggest between 5,000 and 10,000 Hmong-Americans from across the country bought plane tickets to Laos last year.

In 1998, the embassy of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in Washington D.C. issued around 10,000 visas. Officials there say most of those went to Hmong-Americans, including one for May Chou Her.

A woman in her 30s with dark curly hair, May is at home in Minneapolis packing one of three suitcases on the night before she begins a journey to Laos. Her birth family was Vietnamese-Hmong. So it's the people rather than the place that draw her to Laos. She's going to see her father for the first time since she was an infant.

Her: I'm really anxious. I cannot wait to see him. You know this morning I woke up at 4:30 in the morning I say "oh my God, I'm going to miss the plane." I say "wait a minute. I'm supposed to be working one more day before I go."

May was seven-months old when her parents ran from gunfire in Laos. She was strapped to her mother's back when anti-Communist Hmong soldiers mistook May's family for North Vietnamese supporters. The soldiers captured and killed her mother. Her father kept running. The troops took May to a village camp where they handed her over to other villagers.

Her: One woman fed me, another day one woman fed me, so until my mom that raised me, she doesn't have many children. She only have one son, so she came and took me and adopted me. So she raised me. She took me to Thailand - to the camp - and then to the United States. And I recently lost her three years ago so that's why I planned this trip; to go and see my Dad.

May wipes tears from her eyes as she talks about the family she lost and the father she's about to see. They've exchanged letters for the last 13 years. He lives near the border of Vietnam. Travel there is unsafe so May plans to meet him in a village where a cousin lives. May is taking gifts to her family: Hmong costumes for the women, and - for her father - funeral clothes, another traditional gift. She'll be gone for a month.

Like many others, May bought her plane ticket from Classic Travel in Saint Paul, an agency built around Hmong-Americans visiting their homeland. In 1991, Chue Tsu Vang and his wife Joua moved their business from Wisconsin to Minnesota. Vang says during October, November, and December, Hmong people depart for Laos nearly every day. They're the most popular months because of Hmong New Year celebrations. But Vang says that's not the only reason people go.

Vang: The visit is not just a visit. But it's a plan for helping the family back home. And by the time many people journey back for two week, three week, for a month, and they probably work twice harder than they're working here, they try to get things done before they coming back, they return home to the US.

...