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A NEW LIFE IN MONTANA:  
THE LAOTIAN HMONG – THEIR HISTORY, CULTURE AND AMERICAN JOURNEY

By

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Master of Arts, Columbia International University, Columbia, SC, 2000  
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Thesis

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A New Life in Montana: The Laotian Hmong – Their History, Culture and American Journey

Chairperson: Michael Mayer

Following the end of the Vietnam War, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian refugees fled their homelands for America, where they started their lives over again. This paper examines the immigration of Hmong hill-tribesmen from Laos to the United States and their adjustment to a new life in America, particularly in the small community of Missoula Montana. How did they acculturate to such a very different environment from what they had known in Laos, and how successful have they been in America up to this time?

The Hmong were among the most recent émigrés to America's shores, and though their experience was unique, it was not wholly without parallel. The experiences of millions of Eastern and Southern Europeans, the so called "the new immigrants," around the turn of the twentieth century, throw light on what Hmong immigrants may be going through now. The paper traces Hmong history from ancient times in China, up through their migration into Vietnam and Laos and their involvement in the Vietnam War as American allies

Based on interviews with first, middle and second generation Hmong in Missoula, on interviews with Americans who worked with the Hmong in Montana, on local newspaper accounts, and high school and college records, the paper argues that the Hmong in Missoula have successfully adapted to living in Montana. They have done well in school, established themselves economically, and adjusted to life in the United States. Cultural attributes have helped them to survive and succeed in a place very different from their homeland. The influence of culture on educational, vocational and economic mobility has been noted by other historians. This paper agrees with historical studies that suggest a link between culture and immigrants' strategies for success in America.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Most of all, I want to thank my parents, Bill and Louise Keightley, for taking me around the world when I was growing up and introducing me to other cultures, and for their support during my graduate study. Thank you for giving me a wonderful childhood in India and Montana! Final thanks go to Jesus Christ. If humans truly followed what you taught, surely the world would be a much safer and better place.

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# A New Life in Montana: The Laotian Hmong-- their History, Culture and American Journey

*To my parents*

## Preface

In late 1975, nearly 40,000 Hmong tribesmen fled from Laos across the Mekong River to Thailand.<sup>1</sup> The Vietnam War was over and the North Vietnamese and Laotian communists decided to exterminate the Hmong because they had supported the United States and the Royal Lao government during the war. Within ten years, 100,000 Hmong transplanted themselves to America and attempted to start their lives over again in a new country. Several hundred came to Missoula, Montana and the Bitterroot Valley. How did they fare in such a very different place from where they had grown up, with such a vastly different culture, different technology, and a different way of perceiving the world? The history of the Hmong and their journey to America and to western Montana in particular, is the subject of this paper. Part I discusses their long history and indigenous culture. Part II reviews the circumstances that led to their emigration, and Part III relates the story of their lives in Montana and how they adjusted to a new environment and a new world.

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Quincy, *Hmong: History of a People*, 2nd ed. (Cheney, Washington: Eastern Washington University Press, 1995), p. 215. Other hill tribes such as the Mien also fought in the war against the communist, were persecuted by the new Lao government and the Vietnamese, and fled to Thailand.

## Part I: The Hmong in China and Laos

*“Hmong means free”*

--statement of a Hmong elder

### Hmong Origins

The Hmong are a tribal people indigenous to the mountains of Laos, northern Vietnam, Thailand, Burma and south western China. Since 1975, emigrant communities also reside in America, Australia, and France. Historically, the Chinese called them “Miao,” meaning variously “rice shoot” or “barbarian,” but the Hmong prefer to be called by their own name for themselves, “Hmong,” which means “the people,” or “free men.” The total population of Hmong is approximately seven million, the majority of which live in China.<sup>2</sup> In Indochina, they made their living by slash-and-burn agriculture. They lived in thatch huts with earth floors, subsisting on rice and corn, other vegetables, chickens, pigs, cows, and wild game. The only cash crop they grew was opium, which they traded for silver. The Hmong used silver coins to decorate their ceremonial clothes, and silver bars to pay a dowry to the bride’s family upon marriage.

Hmong generally have dark hair, and a fair complexion. Father Francois M. Savina, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century French missionary to the Hmong in Laos and Tonkin (northern Vietnam), noted the presence of blond and red-haired Hmong, including some with light blue eyes.<sup>3</sup> Savina analyzed their language and believed it was unrelated to

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<sup>2</sup> Sue Murphy Mote, *Hmong and American: Stories of Transition to a Strange Land*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2004) p. 177. In 1990 around 200,000 Hmong still lived in Laos, 400,000 in Vietnam, and 140,000 in Thailand Murphy Mote writes.

<sup>3</sup> Some Hmong I interviewed think this probably came about from intermixture between French colonialist and Hmong in that area, but I am not sure. Hmong stories relate that in the past the majority of Hmong had blond, brown or red hair and blue eyes, but that these Hmong were easily identified by the Chinese and killed. Keith Quincy’s *Hmong: History of a People* (Cheney, 1995) records an interview with an eighty year old man who remembered when Chinese came to his village in northeastern Laos looking for white babies. At the time there was only one

any other language in Asia. Hmong creation stories sounded like Biblical and Babylonian accounts.<sup>4</sup> Based on their appearance, language, and folk lore, Savina concluded that the Hmong “must be viewed as having had their primitive origins on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates, from whence they left for the north, either through the Caucasus or through Turkestan.”<sup>5</sup>

According to some Hmong legends, the Hmong’s ancestors lived in a very cold place where the days and nights were months long, the water was frozen, and fine white sand (snow?) covered the ground. In this land, the Hmong people were very small and wore furs. They call this Hmong homeland *Ntuj Khaib Huab*.<sup>6</sup> From this homeland they migrated southward into China. From AD 400 -- 900 the Hmong maintained an independent hereditary kingdom in central China.<sup>7</sup>

### History in China

Chinese histories relate that the Hmong lived along the fertile Yellow River basin prior to Chinese settlement. The Chinese waged frequent military campaigns against them from around 1500 B.C. to the 19<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The Chinese sought to assimilate

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white baby in their village. “The infant’s parents were warned before the Chinese arrived, and they carried him into the forest where they hid until the Chinese finally left.” -- (Keith Quincy, *Hmong History*, p. 20) Catholic missionaries who first contacted Hmong in remote areas of China in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century also noticed some Hmong had lighter colored hair and/or had blue eyes. It is doubtful that any intermixture with westerners could have occurred amongst the Hmong at that time living in remote areas of China. Quincy, *Hmong History*, pp. 16-17

<sup>4</sup> Modern-day linguists agree with Savina and think Hmong is not related to any other language, except possibly Yao.

<sup>5</sup> Quincy, *Hmong History*, p. 9. Modern-day anthropologists, looking at facial characteristics of the Hmong, believe they must have come from outside of Asia.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 25., Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches you and you fall down: a Hmong child, her American Doctors and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), pp. 13-14.

<sup>7</sup> Quincy, *Hmong History*, p. 44.





Map of China – English spellings of provinces vary.

the Hmong but encountered stiff resistance. Sue Murphy Mote, in her book *Hmong and American: Stories of Transition to a Strange Land*, notes: The Hmong were furious fighters. Since Shang times in the eighteenth to twelfth centuries B.C., their abilities had been sharpened to by the need to defend what they desperately considered theirs. ... Cross bows and poisoned arrows rounded out [their]... arsenal. In the late 1600s, a Chinese factional general multiplied the power of the Hmong juggernaut immeasurably when he left behind in a Hmong village some flintlock rifles, gunpowder, and cannons. Another Chinese general ... showed the Hmong how to manufacture their own flintlocks, or blunderbusses, a ... [firearm] used in colonial America around the same time.<sup>8</sup>

In 1727, the Hmong in Yunnan and Kweichow (spelled Guizhou today) provinces rebelled against the Chinese emperor. They closed the passes in their territory and built stone signal towers on the mountain ridges to warn of approaching Chinese. The Chinese Imperial government required thousands of troops and two years to put down the rebellion. At least 30,000 Hmong soldiers died in that war, and probably more Chinese soldiers. The Chinese sacked 12,000 Hmong villages and captured nearly 50,000 Hmong muskets.<sup>9</sup>

Only about twenty five years later, China faced another Hmong rebellion. The Hmong of Szechwan province closed the passes through their territory. Emperor Chi'en-lung sent two expeditions to reopen the passes. Both efforts failed. Then he tried diplomacy, offering the Hmong gifts. The tribes came out of the mountains and received

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<sup>8</sup> Murphy-Mote, *Hmong and American*, p. 100. The Hmong flintlock was highly prized by the Hmong, and Hmong in Laos used it up until the middle of the twentieth century -- see Murphy-Mote's book p. 100. Some were very accurate with it up to a hundred yards or so. Hmong General Vang Pao (V.P.) presented one to President Lyndon Johnson, when V.P. came to the U.S. in 1968. Hamilton-Merrit, *Tragic Mountains*, 1993, p. 204.

<sup>9</sup> Quincy, *Hmong History*, p. 56.



the gifts, then promptly retreated back into the mountains before negotiations could commence. Nevertheless, the area remained peaceful for the next five years. When hostilities broke out again, Chi'en-lung sent two envoys to negotiate with the Hmong. The Hmong treated the emissaries poorly, and two Hmong princes publicly insulted the Emperor, claiming that his rule was criminal. Chi'en-lung flew into a rage when he heard this and vowed to exterminate the Hmong. To this end, he dispatched three armies totaling nearly 120,000 men. The first army, under General Ouen-fou, encountered surprisingly light resistance as it proceeded through two mountain passes. After the second pass the trail sloped down into a deep gorge. Ouen-fou's scouts reported no Hmong in sight, so the army advanced. Once inside the gorge, Hmong appeared in force on the rim of the gorge, and rolled boulders down onto the Chinese. The rebels kept the Ouen-fou's army trapped inside the gorge for some weeks until they calculated the soldiers were sufficiently weakened from lack of food and water. Then the Hmong attacked and wiped out Quen-fou's entire force of nearly 50,000 men! The generals of the remaining two armies apparently did not search very hard for their disappeared comrade.<sup>10</sup>

When the two other generals returned to Peking, the emperor executed one, exiled another, and appointed a brilliant strategist, General Akoui, to defeat the Hmong. Akoui had experience fighting in the mountains of Burma. After a year and a half of fighting, Akoui was able to advance only forty miles into Hmong territory. Eventually Akoui defeated the Hmong but only at great cost.<sup>11</sup> Father Savina wrote that the Hmong

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<sup>10</sup> Quincy, *Hmong History*, pp. 7-8. It was only some years later that the fate of Ouen-fou's army was discovered from Hmong prisoners captured in another, more successful, campaign.

<sup>11</sup> Quincy, *Hmong History*, pp. 8-14.

possessed “a bravery and courage inferior to no other people.”<sup>12</sup> Robert Cooper, a British anthropologist who spent two years living among the Hmong of Thailand, wrote of them, “[They are] discreet respecters of personal liberty who demand only that their liberty be respected in return...”<sup>13</sup>

### Characteristics of the Hmong Culture

Generally speaking one could characterize the Hmong as courageous, energetic and strong-willed. In her book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*, Anne Fadiman writes:

The history of the Hmong yields several lessons that anyone who deals with them might do well to remember. Among the most obvious of these are that the Hmong do not like to take orders; that they do not like to lose; that they would rather flee, fight, or die than surrender; that they are not intimidated by being outnumbered; that they are rarely persuaded that the customs of other cultures, even those more powerful than their own, are superior; and that they are capable of getting very angry.<sup>14</sup>

When the Chinese built model villages for the Hmong to try to entice them out of their mountains, the Hmong preferred to stay in the mountains and retain their Hmong ways, rather than assimilate into Chinese society. Of course some Hmong did join Chinese society, and the Chinese called them “cooked” Hmong, as opposed to the “raw” Hmong who lived in the mountains. Catholic missionaries in China in the early seventeenth century were told that the “raw” Hmong were dangerous brigands who would cut one’s throat at the slightest provocation, but when a few brave missionaries

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<sup>12</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>13</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You*, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You*, p. 17.

made contact with these Hmong in the remote mountains, they found the Hmong to be gentle and hospitable. The westerners noted that the “raw” Hmong were very different from the Chinese. They did not eat with chopsticks and some of them looked different from the Chinese. Some had blue eyes and red or blond hair. In addition, Hmong children played many of the same games that European children played, such as hide and seek, spinning tops, shuttlecock, and marbles.<sup>15</sup>

The Hmong highly value their freedom, a habit inculcated by their migratory lifestyle. In the mountains of Southeast Asia they practiced swidden, or “slash and burn,” agriculture. Hmong would select a promising site, one with lush foliage and lots of earthworm droppings in the soil, cut down the natural vegetation, pile it together and burn it.<sup>16</sup> Then they planted the forest overlay with rice, corn, opium or whatever they wanted to grow. The burnt plants acted as fertilizer for the soil, but within five years or so, the land would become exhausted and the Hmong would need to find a new site to farm. Hmong in Thailand migrated an average of six miles a year.<sup>17</sup> If persecution or pressure to assimilate became too unbearable, they could always move to another mountain range.

Along with courage and tenacity, the average Hmong in Asia displayed tremendous physical vitality and endurance. Their houses in Laos had cracks in the walls through which the cold winter winds and rains could come, and conditions in Hmong villages were usually not very sanitary. Nevertheless, most Hmong were healthy and vigorous. They had acquired a resistance to diseases like Typhoid, which would have soon incapacitated most other people.

Observers also noted physical conditioning of the Hmong. A Sung dynasty

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<sup>15</sup> Quincy, *Hmong History*, pp. 16- 17.

<sup>16</sup> Earthworm droppings were a sign to the Hmong that the soil was fertile.

<sup>17</sup> Quincy, *Hmong History*, p. 76.

document from the 12<sup>th</sup> century said of the Hmong and other tribal peoples, “They use shoes made of leather and run up and down the mountains as if flying.”<sup>18</sup> Later Ming dynasty documents likened them to wild deer.<sup>19</sup> In more modern times, Hmong warriors in Laos and northern Vietnam demonstrated their ability to cover large areas of rugged terrain in a short amount of time.<sup>20</sup> Living in the mountains and having to walk up and down hills all day must have contributed to Hmong endurance.

The Hmong are group rather than individual oriented. Vang Tou Fu, a Hmong refugee in America, noted, “The major point to remember is that a Hmong person is never an individual. He is always part of a family.... The individual must put his personal desires aside if the family has other expectations of him/her.”<sup>21</sup> Decisions are made by appealing to the elders and looking for consensus. On the other hand, they can be very independent as well. Moua Cha recalled that when he decided to go to America in 1973 to study, his family did not want him to go. They said if he died in America they would not have enough money to bring his body back to Laos, and in Hmong culture it is very important that a person be buried in the right place. Moua Cha replied, “Forget about me today. If I survive, you will know me in the future...”<sup>22</sup> Adult sons in Laos sometimes would live with their parents and other times build their own houses a little

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<sup>18</sup> Sue Murphy Mote, *Hmong and American*, p. 99.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>20</sup> See for example the story of Chao Quang Lo, a Hmong chieftain in northern Vietnam, who, independently from the French, resisted a Vietminh takeover of his village, defeated a Chinese battalion and fought to a standstill a Chinese regiment sent across the border to capture him in the early 1950s. Several times he led his men on forced marches of up to 200 km over rugged terrain, pausing only to eat. Quincy, *Hmong History*, pp. 160-167.

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Ingram, “An Assessment of the Assimilation Variables on the Lao Hmong Refugees in the Missoula, Montana High Schools.” (Unpublished Master’s Thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Montana, 1980), p. 33. In an interview in Missoula on December 7th, 2009, Youa Vang confirmed this cultural characteristic to me.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Miller interview with Moua Cha, Sacramento, CA, 30 September 1991. Archives, Mansfield Library, University of Montana.

distance away, starting their own farms. Children were sometimes sent far away to live with a relative or friend while attending school. Teenage boys traveled on their own to other villages in search of a wife.<sup>23</sup>

There are eighteen clans of Hmong, each with a distinct name. Additionally, in China, there are several different tribes of Hmong: White, Black, Flowery, Red, Striped, and Green (sometimes called Blue).<sup>24</sup> Hmong cannot marry within their own clan but must find mates from outside. Other clan members of the same generation are looked on as cousins. Clan members are obligated to help others of the same clan whether they know them or not. Divorce is very rare among them. Robert Cooper, a British anthropologist described them as “people who do not steal or lie.” He said they showed no trace of jealousy of an outsider who said he wanted to live like the Hmong but owned an expensive motorcycle, tape-recorder and cameras and “never had to work for a living.”<sup>25</sup>

The Hmong were famous for their hunting ability. One Hmong, living in Thailand during the 1960s, claimed to have killed two rhinoceros and twenty elephants during his lifetime.<sup>26</sup> They hunted with crossbows, poisoned arrows, and the famous Hmong flintlock. Because their weapons did not shoot very far, they had to get very close to the animal and often did not kill it immediately. Hunting could be quite dangerous, as German anthropologist Hugo Bernatzik discovered while living with the

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<sup>23</sup> Lue Yang, interview with the author, Missoula, MT, Spring 2009. Mai Lee, interview with Susan Miller, 1991, Archives, Mansfield Library, University of Montana. Quincy, *Hmong History*, p. 101, 102.

<sup>24</sup> One Hmong story says that long ago the Chinese forced them to wear different colored clothes in the hope that eventually this would cause a division among the people, making united action impossible.

<sup>25</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You*, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Quincy, *Hmong History*, p. 86.

Hmong of Thailand during the 1930s. They showed him four inch deep holes put in a tree trunk by a wounded gaur (a larger and more ferocious cousin of the American buffalo) trying to get at several Hmong hiding behind it for protection.<sup>27</sup> The Hmong often killed off all the animals in their immediate vicinity leaving the jungle strangely quiet around their villages.

The Hmong in Laos valued hard work. Hmong children started working around age five with small tasks around the house. By age eight or nine, they were able to work in the fields, and a nine year old was said to be able to do as much work as a woman with a baby on her back. In Laos, their days were regulated by the crowing of the rooster. During the busiest season they would get up in the dark at the first cock crow, have something to eat, and then walk to the fields where they would work all day until sunset. In the less busy season they could sleep-in until the second or third cock crow. The hard, physical work from a young age may have contributed Hmong physical vitality. Pregnant women continued to work up until the time of delivery, and began working again soon after.<sup>28</sup>

Hmong parents were extremely attached to their children and very attentive to their needs. They gave them lots of physical affection, touching them, hugging or kissing them, and carrying them on their backs when they would go out to their fields to work, until the child was about six years old.<sup>29</sup> The child was almost always in contact with his or her parents. Keith Quincy in his book *Hmong: History of a People*, stated: “For the Hmong the family was nearly everything. Children in particular were cherished and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>28</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You*, pp. 3,4, 74.

<sup>29</sup> Aza Hadas, “Male-Female Communication Among the Hmong of Missoula.” (Unpublished Master’s Thesis, Department of Interpersonal Communications, University of Montana, 1979), p. 101.



enjoyed.”<sup>30</sup> The meaning of life for the Hmong was their ties with their family members, living as well as dead. Most Hmong couples had as many children as they could. Because children in Laos and China were always with their parents, they learned their parents’ values and culture easily and quickly. Hmong girls traditionally got married around age sixteen, and boys a few years later.

The traditional Hmong religion is shamanism. Hmong believe that illnesses are often caused by spirits which must be appeased through animal sacrifice. Every home has a spirit that guards the house, and traditional Hmong homes have an altar shelf at the back of the house. Ancestors’ spirits also influence Hmong’s lives and must be kept happy. Places have spirits as well. Contact with the spirit world is mediated through shamans who can travel into the spirit world -- sometimes on a spirit horse – and fix things. Some Hmong shamans in America report difficulty practicing their trade, because their spirits have difficulty finding them in the new land.<sup>31</sup>

#### History in Laos: 1815 - 1954

Laos is a landlocked country situated between Thailand and Vietnam.<sup>32</sup> It has an area of 91,428 square miles, about two thirds the size of Montana, and in mid-1971 had a population of about 3,033,000. The northern part of the country is characterized by rugged mountainous terrain. A U.S. government publication describes the mountains as “sharp crested and steep sloped, and the slopes are greatly dissected. Valleys are V-

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<sup>30</sup> Quincy, *Hmong History*, p. 100. The emphasis on family is still very strong among Hmong in America today.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Ulrich, “The Hmong and Cultural Diversity in Missoula, Montana,” (Unpublished Honors Thesis, University of Montana, 1993) Davidson Honors College, University of Montana, p. 86.

<sup>32</sup> Laos was called *Lan Xang* in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, which means “Kingdom of a million elephants.” Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a distant shore*, p. 460.

shaped, and there are many narrow gorges; adjacent crests rise 2,000 to 4,000 feet above valley floors. Several ranges are around 5,000 feet in height, and many peaks reach well over 6,000 feet.”<sup>33</sup> The climate is influenced by the monsoon winds that blow over East Asia, from the Indian Ocean to the coast of western Siberia. The dry season extends from November to April. Monsoon rains lash the land from May through October. Average rainfall varies considerably throughout the country, however most areas receive at least sixty inches of rain per year, with some receiving as much as 160 inches. Rich tropical forests cover more than 21,000 square miles of Laos and drier woodlands cover nearly 36,000 square miles. Coniferous forests account for over 1,000 square miles. The Plain of Jars is located in the northern Xieng Khouang Province, so named because of large stone jars that dot the plain, left there by a previous civilization.<sup>34</sup>

By the late 1740s a few Hmong had migrated south from China into Tonkin (present-day northern Vietnam) and settled near the Chinese border.<sup>35</sup> Fifty years later about six thousand Hmong escaped conflict with the Chinese, by crossing the border and settling above the Thai village of Dong Van, just a few miles from where Kwangsi, Yunnan, and Vietnam intersect. For a time, relations were strained between the lowland Thai and the Hmong, but eventually the Thai came grudgingly to tolerate the newcomers. Around 1815, some Hmong -- probably from the Dong Van settlement -- established a new colony on the northern tip of the Fan Si Pan mountain range in northern Vietnam, but, they left within a few years.

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<sup>33</sup> Donald P. Whitaker et al. *Area handbook series Laos: a Country Study*, 2nd ed. (Headquarters, Department of the Army, American University, Washington D.C., 1971), pp. 11,12,14,17.

<sup>34</sup> Whitaker et al. *Area handbook*, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> Information in this section is from Quincy, *Hmong History of a People*, passim.



**Map of Laos showing Xieng Khouang and the other northern provinces where the Hmong settled.**

The colony migrated after a visit from the Chinese opium merchant Ton Ma. Ton Ma told the Hmong of the densely-forested, rich, and uninhabited mountains of Xieng Khouang province in eastern Laos. An expedition set out from the Fan Si Pan colony. Finding Xieng Khouang as ideal as Ton Ma had described it, a small contingent of Hmong moved there. Within a few years, the whole Fan Si Pan colony had relocated. Throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, Hmong in China heard about the success of the Xieng Khouang community, encouraging further migration into Indochina.

### The Time of the French

In 1884, France annexed northern and central Vietnam as protectorates of the French empire. By 1893, France had extended its control over Laos.<sup>36</sup> For the Hmong, the coming of the French had both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, French troops helped to protect them against bands of marauding Chinese bandits known as “Black Flags.” The French also built all-weather roads and eventually pressed the government of Laos to treat minority groups more equitably. On the other hand, France levied higher taxes than other colonial powers in South East Asia and India. Unfortunately for the Hmong and other mountain tribes, the greatest burden of the taxes often fell on them due to corrupt Lao officials. The Hmong rebelled against oppressive taxes in 1896 and again in 1917.<sup>37</sup> The rebellions were short lived, though.

In her treatise *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, The Americans and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992*, Jane Hamilton-Merritt contends that “by the 1920s most

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<sup>36</sup> Quincy, *Hmong History*, p. 113.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 128-130.

Hmong considered their relationship with the colonial French to be to their advantage ... by the 1930s, many Hmong believed that since the French had education, an advanced economy, laws, a military capability to provide security, and technology -- particularly aviation --they could guide [the Hmong]... to a better life and improve their status in Laos.”<sup>38</sup> For the most part, prior to World War II, Laos was peaceful under the “Fackee,” as the Hmong called the French.

### The Time of the Japanese

When France fell to the German army in the spring of 1940, change came to Indochina. The new Vichy government of France instructed the French army and administrators in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos not to interfere with Japanese military and administrative desires in the area.<sup>39</sup> Soon, Japanese soldiers entered Laos along Colonial Route 7, which had been built by the French. The Japanese allowed the French to remain in place but took over the Pa Heo silver mine near Muang Cha and forced “Hmong men, women, and children to work it as slave laborers and to sleep in the mine shafts.”<sup>40</sup> One night a mine shaft collapsed, killing over 200 Hmong. Instead of closing the unsafe mine, the Japanese merely rounded up more Hmong to work the mine, and more Hmong died. Word of Japanese cruelty spread quickly and the Hmong tried to avoid contact with them.<sup>41</sup>

In late January of 1945, an American B-24 bomber from Calcutta, India, parachuted five Free French commandos into northern Laos. Their mission was to

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<sup>38</sup> Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 22

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

organize indigenous resistance to the Japanese and ultimately to prepare for an Allied invasion. Contacting Touby LyFong, a French-educated Hmong leader, the commandos told him of their plans and asked for his help. Maurice Gauthier, one of the French commandos, recalled:

*Touby said, 'I'm with you.' ... he was willing to cooperate and bring his people into the fight together with us. We agreed to give weapons to his people, train them to use them, and lead them in the fight. There was no question of money; there was no question of mercenaries. I think Touby saw in this an opportunity of gaining better positions for his people, politically.<sup>42</sup>*

On the night of March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945, the Japanese attacked French installations throughout Indochina, taking over all the major cities and imprisoning thousands of French soldiers and civilians. Some French units resisted, suffering heavy casualties. Hamilton-Merritt writes that Hmong witnessed Japanese cruelty against the French, and this convinced them that they must help the French.<sup>43</sup> They hid Frenchmen in caves and moved them around at the risk of the Hmong's own lives.

WW II ended on August 15, 1945 with the surrender of Japan. Hmong witnesses say that Japanese soldiers stationed in Laos and Vietnam at that time committed suicide or simply disappeared to the west "like the wind." Some of the Japanese soldiers joined the communists Vietnamese armed forces in North Vietnam, called the Viet Minh.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 27/28.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 33. Vue Sai Long witnessed Japanese cruelty at the market town of Ban Ban in the spring of 1945; Japanese soldiers paraded five captured French soldiers through the town. The Japanese had threaded strings through the nostrils of the French. "Blood spurted from their noses as the Japanese jerked them from side to side while shouting to the Hmong onlookers. 'Their noses are too long ... see this, we are showing you these French who are not humans. They are only ghosts and they can't control this country.'" Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 33.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 36. French Commando Maurice Gauthier stayed in Laos for some months after the Japanese surrender. Headquartered at Touby Lyfong's house, Gauthier, his radio-operator, Touby, and several Hmong warriors slept on hillside some distance from the house each night to

## The Vietnamese and Low-land Lao

Historically, the Hmong and other hill tribes in Laos often experienced poor relations with the lowland Lao and with the Vietnamese. The minority groups together in Laos outnumbered the Lao, but the Lao ran the country.<sup>45</sup> The Lao looked down on the minorities as uneducated people; some accounts say that when a tribal person wanted to see a Lao government official, he had literally to crawl into the official's presence and wait for recognition before he could speak.<sup>46</sup> During the colonial period, the French imported Vietnamese as administrators and soldiers. Hamilton-Merritt comments that the "perceived aggressive Vietnamese personality and hostility toward the Hmong conflicted with Hmong values." Hmong observed that when the French brought Vietnamese soldiers with them, the French did not allow the Vietnamese to harm them. However, when Vietnamese soldiers came without French officers, they killed Hmong animals, entered Hmong houses, took whatever they wanted without paying, and called them insulting names.<sup>47</sup>

At the time of Japan's surrender, more than 30,000 Vietnamese administrators, police and merchants lived in the Lao river towns.<sup>48</sup> The Viet Minh controlled Xieng Khouang city, and other Hmong areas in northeastern Laos. Allied with the Viet Minh were the Pathet Lao Communist party and its armed soldiers. Hamilton-Merritt asserts

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forestall a surprise attack by the enemy. Just before dawn on November 23, 1945, 100 heavily armed soldiers surrounded the house. Firing awoke Gauthier: "Hmong in the nearby hills... ran to our position with their weapons." The Hmong surrounded the enemy and killed or wounded all of them. Gauthier recalls, "One machine gunner was Japanese as was his gun. There were other former Japanese soldiers in this group. Many of their weapons were Japanese. The Japanese soldiers acted as advisors to the Viet Minh." Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 40.

<sup>45</sup> Whitaker et al. *Laos a Country Study*, p. 21.

<sup>46</sup> Quincy, *The Hmong*, p. 116.

<sup>47</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 20.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38



that “by protecting French soldiers, providing intelligence for the French, and conducting guerilla warfare against the Japanese and the Viet Minh, Touby’s Hmong had chosen sides in the battles to come.”<sup>49</sup>

### The Return of the French: 1946 until 1954

After the war, France wanted to retain its colonies in South East Asia. Simultaneously, some southeast Asians saw this as a time to throw off the colonial yoke. Within a month of Japan’s surrender, Viet Minh leader Ho Chi Minh, proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.<sup>50</sup> Fighting soon broke out between the French and the Viet Minh. Most of the Laotian Hmong chose to support the French. The revitalized French army trained Hmong to fight the Viet Minh and called them the *Meo Maquis*, meaning Meo (Hmong) commandos.

One young Hmong who made an impression on the French was Vang Pao. In 1952, as a soldier in the Lao Territorial Army, he was assigned by to “learn all Viet Minh troop locations in his area and their attack plans.”<sup>51</sup> Only 18 at the time, Vang Pao, with a small group of Hmong, small arms, and thirty rounds of ammunition, hiked cross country through the jungle to the area where he thought they would find Viet Minh troops. They came across a group of thirteen Viet Minh camping. The Hmong surprised them, killed twelve and captured one, along with some “important documents and maps describing impending military actions against French posts.”<sup>52</sup> After another successful operation, Vang Pao’s French commanding officer was impressed and said, “Vang Pao,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 46., Not all Hmong supported the French. Some supported the Japanese and later the Vietnamese and the Laotian communists.

<sup>50</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 38.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-52.



you have to become an officer,” and Vang Pao answered without hesitation “O.K. I agree.”<sup>53</sup> Within ten years, Vang Pao became the highest ranking Hmong in the Lao army and was put in command of Military Region II, in north eastern Laos. Military Region II would witness much fighting with the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao.

The French Garrison at Dien Bien Phu fell to the Viet Minh on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1954, after 55 days of unrelenting battle. The French high-command intended to use the garrison at Dien Bien Phu to lure the Viet Minh into a battle in which the French could destroy them with long range artillery and aerial bombardment. Instead, the trap sprung on the French. Beginning on March 13<sup>th</sup>, North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap’s one hundred plus 105 mm howitzers and eighty antiaircraft guns blasted the French fortress. Later, Viet Minh sappers dug tunnels under the barbed wire encircling the encampment and planted explosives, blowing holes in the perimeter. Sappers emerged from tunnels inside the French base, where they blew up bunkers and planted the Viet Minh flag. At the end of the battle, 2,000 French Expeditionary Corps soldiers lay dead and almost 12,000 were captured, including many Hmong who fought alongside them. The North Vietnamese did not release some of the Hmong POW’s until 25 years later, when China invaded northern Vietnam.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.53.

<sup>54</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, pp. 54 -62. According to Hamilton-Merritt, when China invaded Vietnam, the Vietnamese released the POWs to avoid embarrassment for having kept them so long.

## Part II: The Hmong and the Vietnam War

*We “fight, work like buffalo, run, starve, and die – and no-one knows.”*

--Hmong chieftan, quoted in Mary Ulrich, “The Hmong and Cultural Diversity,” p. 34.

Following the defeat of France, the United States became more involved in Laos and all of Indochina. The Eisenhower administration viewed Laos as key to the security of South East Asia. If Laos fell to the communists, South Vietnam and Cambodia would fall, and in all probability Thailand, Burma and the rest of South East Asia. In the global effort to contain communism, the small country of Laos became the front line.<sup>55</sup>

The Geneva Conference in 1954 granted Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam their independence, ending the first Indochina war. From the Hmong viewpoint, however, the conference did not solve the real problem. A saying by a Hmong elder circulated among the clans at that time: “Do not worry about the words in Geneva, they are only words. Worry about the Vietnamese soldiers in Laos, they are real.” North Vietnamese soldiers and political cadre remained in Laos despite the Viet Minh’s denial of their presence. The Pathet Lao, ostensibly supposed to be peacefully reintegrated into the Lao government and society, did not lay down their arms but instead occupied Phong Saly and Sam Neua provinces in north-eastern Laos.<sup>56</sup> There, they and the Viet Minh, “set up schools ... printed textbooks, appointed headmen and district officials, dealt out punishment ... recruited a local army -- called ‘volunteers’ – and acted as if these two

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<sup>55</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, pp. 69, 94.

<sup>56</sup> The Final Declaration of the 1954 Geneva Accords stated that, “All citizens of Laos and Cambodia [are] to be integrated without discrimination into the national community ...” Mike Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, (Beacon Press, Boston, 1971), p. 279.

provinces were a Pathet Lao state.”<sup>57</sup>

The French did not totally abandon Laos but left some men as advisors. Captain Jean Sassi, concerned that the departing French government would disarm the Hmong, sent his junior officers to Hanoi to recover war materiel for them, noting, “...there would be no question that I would leave my Hmong friends disarmed facing the Viet hordes that we kept on fighting after the cease fire...” The *Meo Maquis*, with the help of Sassi’s junior officers, stockpiled and camouflaged tons of munitions and equipment on the Plain of Jars. The Hmong *Maquis*, stationed around the Plain of Jars, appeared to be the only defense of north-eastern Laos against the communists. Sassi recalled:

*When I left Laos [in March 1955], it was independent, it had preserved its king, its government, its army. Numerous French military advisors were still there. The ICC [International Control Commission charged with monitoring cease-fire violations] ... had an office there. ... the Viets were not in the big cities. They had not won any battle, quite the opposite. Our Maquis had everywhere thrown them back. The Viets were everywhere completely insecure. American forces were stationed in Vientiane, apparently ready to relieve us.*<sup>58</sup>

In the second half of the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration began providing military and economic aid to Laos. Hamilton-Merritt states, “The U.S... took over a large share of the responsibility of training, equipping, and paying the Royal Lao Army with the aim of enabling it to cope with the continued presence of ... Pathet Lao armed units ... in Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces.” The American aid program soon became the largest of any such program in the world in terms of funds spent per capita. Unfortunately, little of the economic aid reached the hill tribes in the northern provinces,

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<sup>57</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 64.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65, 66.

nor did much reach the Lao farmers.<sup>59</sup>

As communist control of villages tightened, the Hmong found it difficult to gather intelligence. Moua Cher Pao, a wily Hmong warrior leader who had a reputation for courage and stubbornness, organized his own intelligence team. It consisted of his eight-year-old daughter, Nhia, and several of her friends. The group of children, carrying back-baskets filled with bamboo shoots, set out for communist-controlled villages. Viet Minh soldiers harshly questioned the children as to their purpose. Nhia recalled:

*I politely and happily told the soldiers we had come to sell them the very best bamboo shoots [considered a delicacy]. After the questioning, the Viet Minh soldiers always let us sell our shoots. While we were selling to Hmong, we asked in our Hmong language how many soldiers in the area [sic], what plans the enemy had, and whether they could escape. When we had the information and had sold our bamboo, we left to tell our own soldiers the news about the communists. My reports to my father were often the same: 'The people are afraid and when the communists are not watching they intend to leave.'*

In 1959, North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units attacked Lao government outposts in Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces.<sup>60</sup>

In late December 1960, an American counter insurgency expert the Hmong called "Colonel Billy" visited the Hmong in northern Laos. He asked them if they wanted to fight against the Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese. Vang Pao, now a Lt. Colonel, "assured Colonel Billy that his people hated the communists -- particularly the Vietnamese -- and would fight." Vang Pao said, "For me, I can't live with communism. I must either leave or fight. I prefer to fight." Communism ran contrary to the Hmong's traditional, independent, way of life. According to Hamilton-Merritt the Hmong in Laos heard about

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 70

<sup>60</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, pp. 64, 65, 66, 72, 73.

what the communists in China had done, and decided they did not want that way of life. Colonel Billy told Vang Pao that he believed the United States could provide refugee assistance for the Hmong who had already fled from the communists to other areas of Laos, and, if they fought the communists, weapons and training. Vang Pao replied that he needed to confer with the leaders of the various Hmong clans.<sup>61</sup>

Hmong elders debated the wisdom of allying their people with the United States. The French had left Indochina abruptly, “leaving the Viet Minh to harass and kill those who had worked with the “Fackee”. Hmong Maquis, captured at Dien Bien Phu, languished in North Vietnamese prisons, and the French did nothing to help them. Would the Americans be different? Hamilton-Merritt writes:

Elders talked about ‘treaties’ much as Native American leaders talked about treaties with the white man, believing that written agreements were only words on paper and that spoken promises were more important.... There were historical reasons in the Hmong past to be cautious of treaties with foreigners.<sup>62</sup>

Some days later, after conferring with the clans, Vang Pao called Colonel Billy back and “pledged that with training and weapons equal to those of the enemy, his men could push the Vietnamese back across the border.” That night, Lt. Colonel Vang Pao and his officers sat with Colonel Billy and Thai Colonel Khoupnan in a dark room lit only by candles surrounding a *ba-sii* offering of fruit, incense, and a duck egg. A shaman spoke a chant asking the spirits to protect these three men and give them good fortune, and he tied strings with knots in them around the three colonels’ wrists to bind their souls

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<sup>61</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 89. Colonel Billy’s real name is not revealed in Hamilton-Merritt’s book.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

tightly to their bodies. Then Vang Pao and his officers tied more strings around the wrists of the American and the Thai imploring the spirits to protect them. Hamilton-Merritt writes perceptively, “With this ceremony, the fate of the Hmong was irrevocably linked to that of the Americans.”<sup>63</sup>

### The secret war in Laos: 1961-1973

The year 1961 opened with a change of American Presidents. During his last days in office, President Eisenhower informed President-elect John F. Kennedy that Laos would be his most serious problem and that intervention by U.S. combat troops might be necessary.<sup>64</sup> The Kennedy administration elected not to send U.S. ground forces, but instead chose to continue “the third option,” begun under Eisenhower. Insurgency would be fought with counter-insurgency using unconventional forces and tactics. Colonel Billy’s idea was to keep the American presence in Laos minimal. He wanted to depend on indigenous people who knew the terrain intimately, and were highly motivated to defend their own country. The American role consisted of supplying and training the Hmong. The CIA funded them on a shoestring budget so that, if necessary, they could be completely supported by locals. The U.S. government did not acknowledge American military involvement in Laos until after 1970. Thus, the war in Laos that occurred concurrently with the Vietnam War became known as “the secret war.”

From 1960 to 1961, a second Geneva conference, “set out to accomplish what the 1954 accords failed to accomplish ... create an independent, neutral state .. of Laos.”<sup>65</sup>

All the countries that border Laos: North and South Vietnam, China, Cambodia, Burma

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<sup>63</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, pp. 89, 83, 90, 91, 92.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.94.

<sup>65</sup> Ulrich “The Hmong and Cultural Diversity,” p. 31.

and Thailand, signed the accords which came out of the 1960/61 Geneva conference. The United States, the Soviet Union, India, France, Poland, Canada, and Great Britain, also signed the agreement. The accords prohibited all foreign troops and any foreign bases from residing in Laos, and stipulated that the signing powers could “not use the territory of the Kingdom of Laos for interference in the internal affairs of other countries” or “the territory of any country, including their own, for interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom of Laos.”<sup>66</sup> American CIA advisors and roughly 600 US military personnel pulled out of Laos in June 1962. The U.S. waited to see what the North Vietnamese would do. Unfortunately the North Vietnamese did not pull out, but instead began attacking the civilian population in Northern Laos.<sup>67</sup>

About a month after the signing of the second Geneva Agreement, NVA troops attacked the town of Ban Ban and its surrounding area, in which about 6,000 Hmong, Khmu, and Lao people lived. Unable to defend themselves, the lightly armed villagers fled southward. Hamilton-Merritt writes:

After 18 hours of flight, they sought refuge in a high mountain bowl to rest. About midnight, the communist soldiers rushed the sleeping camp. “The ambushers, fiercely armed, and more than 400 strong, ran screaming down the hillsides and slithered down the faces of the limestone cliffs surrounding the bowl. Then they launched into an unspeakable orgy of bloodletting,” remembered one survivor.

People panicked, fleeing herd-like out of the bowl with their attackers pursuing all night. “Children were snatched from their mother’s arms and hurled with head-crushing force against rocks. Old men and women were shot in the legs and left to die alone, abandoned by their young and their executioners. Women were raped, then disemboweled.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Hamilton Merritt, *Tragic Mountains* (Indianapolis, 1993), p.119.

<sup>67</sup> Ulrich, “The Hmong and Cultural Diversity,” p. 32.

<sup>68</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 121.

In her thesis, *The Hmong and Cultural Diversity*, Mary Ulrich writes, “This incident, which left over 1,300 dead and 200 captured, soon became typical of North Vietnamese conduct in Laos... [The] true nature and true intent of the communists in northern Laos [became clear] to the Hmong ... and others living there.”<sup>69</sup> By the end of August 1962, U.S. intelligence estimated that there were 10,000 North Vietnamese soldiers in Laos. That same month, two hundred thousand mostly Hmong refugees, fled northern Laos.<sup>70</sup> The U.S. government, working through U.S. AID and the CIA, air-dropped or landed rice, salt, and medicines for the refugees.

When it became clear that the North Vietnamese had no intention of adhering to the new Geneva Accords, U.S. military experts and CIA advisors returned to work with the Hmong. American personnel in Laos became convinced that the Royal Lao Army (RLA) would not be able to stand up to the North Vietnamese. Additionally, the U.S. wanted to cut off supplies flowing along the Ho Chi Minh trail from North Vietnam to the Vietcong in South Vietnam.

What started as a force of a few hundred Hmong guerillas supplied and trained by the CIA, grew to an army of over 20,000. Vang Pao, now a General, commanded the army. Hmong spotters flew with American pilots to direct airstrikes against enemy forces in Laos. Hmong radio officers reported on NVA and Pathet Lao movements, and commandos infiltrated enemy areas and rescued downed American airmen.<sup>71</sup> They also protected American radar and listening posts on mountain tops in northern Laos. These secret outposts, often within enemy controlled territory, saved the lives of many

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<sup>69</sup> Mary Ulrich, “The Hmong and Cultural Diversity,” pp. 32-33.

<sup>70</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 122.

<sup>71</sup> According to General Vang Pao, Hmong soldiers were involved in saving the lives of hundreds of American airmen shot down. They often paid with their own lives to rescue downed pilots. Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, pp. 218-222.



American soldiers fighting in South Vietnam. Their presence enabled bombers from Thailand and aircraft carriers to fly precision strikes against targets in North Vietnam during inclement weather.<sup>72</sup> Within a few years the U.S. Air Force agreed to train Hmong as pilots of prop-driven T-28 fighter planes.<sup>73</sup>

The North Vietnamese sent three divisions (forty to sixty thousand troops) into Laos, and the Pathet Lao fielded about twenty thousand troops. Despite being outnumbered and outgunned most of the time, Vang Pao's "irregulars," Hmong, Mien and Khmu farmers provided a strong defense against the communist forces.<sup>74</sup> The French and Colonel Billy knew that the Hmong's genius as fighters "was their quickness in striking and their superb knowledge of the terrain." Colonel Billy said:

*... the Hmong knew the terrain and could run up and down those hills without equal. They could run circles around the Vietnamese. The Hmong, sitting on those mountaintops, could strangle the enemy. They were doing to the North Vietnamese exactly what the communists were doing to us in South Vietnam. They were fighting a true guerilla war and the Vietnamese couldn't come to grips with it.*<sup>75</sup>

In early 1967, General Westmoreland informed President Johnson that "if we couldn't stop the flow of men and material down the Ho Chi Minh Trail the war [in Vietnam] could go on indefinitely." The U.S. Air Force's "Operation Steel Tiger,"

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<sup>72</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, pp. 174, 206.

<sup>73</sup> Vang Pao used his Hmong Air Force like artillery, to blast enemy positions nearby. Unlike American pilots, Hmong pilots got no R&R. They flew courageously, many missions per day, against NVA and Pathet Lao forces, until they were shot down and killed.

<sup>74</sup> Vang Pao's irregulars – Hmong, Mien and Khmu farmers -- were initially armed with WW II era weapons, bazookas, recoilless rifles etc. the U.S. had stockpiled on Okinawa. Some of ammunition was bad, grenades did not work etc. V.P.s older artillery did not have the accuracy nor the range that the NVA's Soviet-supplied artillery had. *Tragic Mountains*, pp. 94, 105, 117, 272

<sup>75</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 176.



attempted to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>76</sup> The North Vietnamese responded by putting more troops and more powerful and sophisticated anti-aircraft guns in Laos to guard their supply line to the Vietcong fighting in South Vietnam. They used blinking lights at night to confuse pilots, underwater bridges and camouflaged netting to hide the Trail from the air. As the air/ground war increased over Laos, the U.S. asked the Hmong to do more. Colonel Billy asserted, "... We were asking them to do more than they were capable of handling. We asked them to take on more military responsibilities, particularly conventional, set-piece military battles.... I had spent years there, studying the situation. I knew the Hmong, their situation, and I knew they were best at being guerillas, but that was being changed by the Americans."<sup>77</sup>

Colonel Billy's mentor, Desmond FitzGerald, thought the same way as Colonel Billy about using indigenous, guerilla-type forces to fight insurgency, and keeping the American presence at a minimum. In 1965, FitzGerald became the Deputy Director of Plans for the CIA. This was an influential position, but unfortunately for the Hmong and for Colonel Billy, FitzGerald died while playing tennis in 1965. The new leadership in the CIA began to change the way they managed the war in Laos. "They thought if you put more money and more Americans in there, it would get bigger and better. They were wrong,"<sup>78</sup> Colonel Billy said. In Hamilton-Merritt's analysis:

Colonel Billy's pride in the successes of his counterinsurgency efforts and of Hmong pilots was being blunted by Washington policy changes toward Laos. He strongly believed that the number of Americans should remain at an absolute minimum, and that Thai involvement should increase if more men were necessary. He always imagined that the Thai would join the Hmong and the Lao

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 171, 149.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 175-176.

<sup>78</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 175.

to fight their common enemy, the North Vietnamese.<sup>79</sup>

The result of the Americanization of the war in Laos, its change from a guerilla war to a more conventional-style war, was an increasing loss of life for the Hmong. Lao soldiers often ran away when the NVA approached their positions and the Hmong were often asked to retake those positions. Vang Pao's Hmong also had to defend fixed positions. U.S. government data found that "by 1971, many [Hmong] families were down to the last surviving male (often a youth of 13 or 14), and survival of the tribe was becoming a major concern." The American embassy in Vientiane warned the State Department that the Hmong peoples' resistance to the NVA and Pathet Lao might collapse.<sup>80</sup>

In January 1973, the U.S. signed an "Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam," and agreed to withdraw all remaining American military personnel within sixty days. The last U.S. military man left Laos on June 3, 1974. Hamilton-Merritt writes, "No longer did the sleek jets, the gunships, or the fleets of helicopters sit on bases in Thailand to be used against the enemy in Laos. Air America [a front for the CIA], Continental Air Services, and the U.S. Air Force had gone home."<sup>81</sup> The Hmong and the Royal Lao Government were now left alone to face the North Vietnamese. Supposedly all foreign troops were to be withdrawn from Laos, but the NVA never left. Some 40,000 remained in Laos in addition to "Vietnamese cadre, political commissars, advisors, and civilians who worked with the Pathet Lao."<sup>82</sup>

By the spring of 1973, Laotian Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma concluded

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 175

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 174-176, 199, 201, 268.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

<sup>82</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, pp. 304, 329, 330.

negotiations with the Pathet Lao to begin the process of forming a new coalition government. The new government took office in April 1974.<sup>83</sup> In early 1975, the Pathet Lao and NVA mounted another major offensive south of the Plain of Jars. When Vang Pao's forces began to push them back he was recalled to Vientiane, the capitol of Laos, and ordered by the Prime Minister to cease all attacks. Quincy writes that "given the drift of events, it would soon be the Hmong against everyone else."<sup>84</sup> Vang Pao, seeking to avoid a hopeless last stand, disbanded his army and flew to an American base in Thailand.

Estimates vary as to how many Hmong died during the war in Laos between 1960 and 1975. According to Hamilton-Merritt, some 17,000 Hmong soldiers were killed in battle and uncounted others wounded, and perhaps as many as 50,000 civilians died during the war. Other estimates are much higher. Clearly the "secret" war in Laos which accompanied the Vietnam War, though smaller in scale, still managed to kill tens of thousands of people and create hundreds of thousands of refugees.<sup>85</sup>

### Fleeing the Country

On May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1975, the Pathet Lao newspaper *Khao Xane Pathet Lao*, stated, "It is necessary to extirpate, down to the root, the 'Hmong' minority."<sup>86</sup> A broadcast on Radio Pathet Lao called the Hmong the "main perpetrators of the barbarous, notorious crimes against the Lao people."<sup>87</sup> Fearing for their lives, nearly 40,000 Hmong fled to Thailand

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<sup>83</sup> Quincy., *Hmong History*, p. 205, Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 329.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>85</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 334.

<sup>86</sup> Quincy, *The Hmong*, p. 208.

<sup>87</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 340.



in late 1975.<sup>88</sup> Of those who remained, thousands were sent to reeducation camps, where many died. Many others were forced into agricultural communes in the lowlands of Laos. Unused to warmer climates, the mountain-dwelling Hmong were particularly vulnerable to tropical diseases. Through the remainder of the 1970s and 1980s, Hmong continued to escape to Thailand. According to the World Refugee Survey, between 1975 and 1982, 285,000 people fled from Laos to Thailand. Of these, 165,000 were ethnic Lao and 125,000 from the hill tribes.<sup>89</sup>

The journey for the Hmong was perilous. Sometimes they walked for days or weeks through the jungle, subsisting on little food, only insects or bamboo shoots/leaves in some cases, while evading the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese soldiers intent on capturing or killing them. Upon reaching the Mekong River, which is several miles wide, they had to cross it any way they could, often using inner tubes as flotation devices. Many Hmong drowned trying to cross the river or were shot by NVA and Pathet Lao patrol boats. Others hid in the jungle for years, sometimes subsisting on little more than bamboo shoots, avoiding government troops or actively resisting. The new government of Laos bombed Hmong villages with planes and helicopters, used chemical warfare on them, and dropped napalm on their crops.<sup>90</sup> In 1980, China supported Hmong and other hill tribesmen in guerilla operations against the Vietnamese and Laotian military forces, but this assistance did not last long.

Upon reaching Thailand, Hmong were put into refugee camps where supplies

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<sup>88</sup> Quincy, *Hmong History*, p. 215.

<sup>89</sup> Robert P. DeVecchi, "Politics and Policies of "First Asylum in Thailand," World Refugee Survey, (U.S. Committee for Refugees, New York, 1982), p. 21.

<sup>90</sup> The Lao People's Democratic Republic of course denied using chemical weapons and attacking Hmong civilians. Hamilton-Merritt's *Tragic Mountains* documents atrocities committed against the Hmong after 1975 with photos, interviews and sketches by Hmong villagers.

were minimal. This was part of a “humane deterrence” policy practiced by the Thai government to discourage more Hmong, Mien, Lao and other ethnic groups from fleeing to Thailand. It did not work, because the conditions in Laos for the Hmong were so poor. By 1978, 50,000 Hmong lived in the camps. Many of them arrived sick, injured, or with diseases caused by the trauma of their escape. Refugees could seldom find employment, as the Thai government prohibited them from moving to urban centers. At Ban Vinai refugee camp, bandits regularly preyed on refugees coming to and from the camp. In 1982, Hmong from the camp armed themselves with knives, hoes, and axes, tracked down the outlaws, and killed nearly a hundred of them in one week.<sup>91</sup> Within the camps Hmong waited for years to obtain visas for the U.S., France, and Australia. Others did not want to immigrate at all and waited to go back to Laos or fled to Wat Tham Krabok, a Buddhist temple in northern Laos.

For most of the Laotian Hmong, the war was over. The outcome of allying themselves with the United States was exactly opposite from what they had hoped.

Hamilton-Merritt writes:

Over the years, the Americans had repeatedly told them that together they would defeat the communists and that the Hmong, who would be acknowledged for their heroic efforts to save Laos, would be greatly appreciated by the Lao people, resulting in a better life for them. Now ... they were being instructed by the Americans to leave their homeland ... perhaps forever...<sup>92</sup>

Vang Pao recalled, “I never imagined that I would be a refugee, because the United States – the greatest country on earth which had saved Europe from the

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<sup>91</sup> Quincy, *Hmong History*, p. 216.

<sup>92</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, pp. 340-41.

Nazis and Asia from the Japanese – supported me in my fight against the communist takeover of my country.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 351.



### Part III: Coming to America

*Give me your tired, you poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the  
wretched refuse of your teeming shore...*

--inscribed in the base of the Statue of Liberty, from “The New Colossus” by Emma  
Lazarus.

In its brief history, America has been a beacon of hope for millions of people who left their native lands for a better life. Puritans landed desiring to make a “city on a hill” whose light would not be hidden from the rest of the world. They envisioned a purer Christianity than existed in England. Jewish people came as early as the seventeenth century to escape persecution. Irish fled starvation caused by the Great Potato Famine of the 1840s and 1850s. Chinese also entered America motivated by famine in China and job opportunities in America. Throughout America’s history, immigrants have come to the young country in unprecedented numbers, drawn by the promises of religious and political freedom, free or cheap land, jobs, economic prosperity, and adventure, and pushed by unhappy circumstances in their homelands. For the Laotian Hmong, however, there were few attractions that drew them to America. They did not come for free land, jobs, or to attain wealth, but merely to survive.

Most Hmong knew very little about America before arriving.<sup>94</sup> Ronald Takaki, professor of Asian-American History at University of California Berkley, proposes that the Hmong are not immigrants, but rather refugees. Refugees, Takaki proposes, are involuntary migrants, whereas immigrants are not. Chinese who came to the United

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<sup>94</sup> Many stayed in the refugee camps in Thailand as long as possible hoping they could go eventually back to Laos. They heard about the difficulties of Hmong who went to America. Rumors circulated in the camps that American doctors ate the organs of Hmong patients who had died, that gangs attacked and robber Hmong etc. -- Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You*, chapter 4.

States in the late nineteenth century called America “*gam saan*,” meaning “gold mountain.”<sup>95</sup> To them, the United States promised economic opportunity. Many planned to stay a few years, save money, and then return to China. For the Hmong and other Indochinese, who immigrated after the Vietnam War, there was no *gam saan*. Takaki writes, “They did not think and dream about coming; in fact, most of them had no time to plan and prepare for their movement to a new land... Unlike the Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian immigrants in America, they cannot go home.” “[They are] like the homeless people ...” one refugee lamented, “they have no place they can call their own. They feel no sense of belonging to this land.”<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, whether as immigrants or refugees, there are similarities between the Hmong’s adjustment to America and that of earlier arrivals. (The similarities will be elucidated later in the paper.)

### Immigrating to Missoula, Montana

During the war, Americans promised the Hmong that if they fought the North Vietnamese, the United States would take care of them. No formal treaty was signed

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<sup>95</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Distant Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Little Brown and Co., Boston, 1989), p. 80.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 471. For refugees, immigration is often a sudden, dramatic change, for which they are little prepared psychologically or materially; many leave with only the clothes on their backs. Many of the Hmong saw loved ones die from sickness, starvation, or at the hands of the Pathet Lao or Vietnamese Communists while trying to escape Laos. The physical and psychological trauma of refugees’ escapes from their home countries, can cause a post traumatic stress syndrome similar to what war veterans experience. (Over one hundred Hmong men have died in their sleep inexplicably since arrival in America. It may be caused by the severe stress of their experience fleeing Laos and suddenly being put into a very different environment in which family relationships and the whole web of life was changed.) Additionally, refugees often are homesick for the country and way of life that they left and perhaps can never return to, as well as for loved ones left behind. They also feel a sense of isolation and loneliness in the strange new environment that are hard for most of us to understand. Of course earlier immigrants also experienced some of these feelings. The difference between refugees and immigrants may be more one of degree than of quality, (i.e. how severe was the trauma involved in leaving one’s homeland? how harsh were the conditions that motivated leaving? and whether or not one has the option of returning home?).

with the Hmong, but verbal assurances were given repeatedly to this effect. Tasseng Yang – a Hmong leader – recalled an important conversation with Colonel Billy in late December 1960:

*I asked, 'If we defeat the Vietnamese, how will you help us?' Colonel Billy answered, 'If Hmong people beat the Vietnamese, then we will help the Hmong people as much as we can. If the Hmong people lose, we will find a new place where we can help the Hmong people.' That promise pleased us.*<sup>97</sup>

When U.S. forces pulled out of South East Asia, the Hmong reminded the Americans of this promise. In order to immigrate to the United States though, refugees had to pass an interview and a physical exam, and show that they had a sponsor willing to pay for their transportation and take care of them until they were self-sufficient. About three hundred Hmong emigrated to the U.S. in 1975. Through the remainder of the 1970s, Hmong continued to leave the camps in Thailand for America, and between 1979 and 1980, 37,000 hill tribe people, of whom the Hmong were the largest group, landed in the United States. Some of the first Hmong to settle in America, settled in Missoula, Montana.<sup>98</sup>

Missoula is the home of one of the two state universities in Montana. In 2006, the population of Missoula county was 104,068. In 1970 it was just under 60,000.<sup>99</sup> In 1970, about 8,000 students attended the university.<sup>100</sup> Situated in a broad valley surrounded by

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<sup>97</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 92.

<sup>98</sup> Information in the above paragraph taken from Ulrich, "The Hmong and Cultural Diversity," pp. 40-42.

<sup>99</sup> Headwaters Economics "A Socioeconomic Profile of Missoula, Montana" [www.headwaterseconomics.org](http://www.headwaterseconomics.org). produced by Economic Profile System.

<sup>100</sup> The student population of UM was 7,218 in the fall of 1968. 8,393 attended fall quarter 1970. Student enrollment continued to increase gradually through the 1970s. In 1980 it was 8,884. By 2010, enrollment had risen to around 14,000. *Consolidation Enrollment Reports*, (Helena, MT: Commissioner of Higher Education, 1971, 1975)

mountains, with one river running through it and another beside it, it is a beautiful place, close to nature. For the Hmong refugees, the mountains around Missoula reminded them of home, and this was comforting.

Hmong contact with Missoula began as early as 1968 when General Vang Pao sent one of his daughters to the University of Montana (UM). In the early 1970s a son of Vang Pao came as well.<sup>101</sup> Moua Cha, a 27-year-old Hmong soldier, trained by the U.S. Special Forces in Kentucky, immigrated to Missoula in 1973 in order to get an education. He spent his first two years attending Hellgate High School in order to improve his English.<sup>102</sup> Providentially for his people, Moua Cha was in the right place at the right time. When dozens of Hmong arrived in Missoula in 1976, and hundreds more came between 1977 and 1980, Moua Cha had already lived in Missoula for three or more years, learned English, and learned how to survive there. He was then able to assist the refugees who came after him.

The Hmong's connection with Montana, and Missoula in particular, likely came about through Montana Smoke Jumpers who were recruited by the CIA to work in Laos during the war. Jerry Daniels, from Missoula, was among them, and he ended up working closely with General Vang Pao and becoming close friends with Moua Cha.<sup>103</sup>

Daniels graduated from Missoula County High School, present-day Hellgate High School, in 1959. The CIA then recruited him to work in Laos. Because of his experience as a wild-land firefighter, jumping out of planes and hiking through the mountains of

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<sup>101</sup> Ulrich, "The Hmong and Cultural Diversity," p. 52.

<sup>102</sup> Moua Cha "Early Hmong History in Montana," interview with Susan L. Miller, Sacramento, California, September 30, 1991, Archives, Mansfield Library, University of Montana. Likely the school may not have known his age.

<sup>103</sup> Susan Miller, Bounthavy Kiatokaysy and Tou Yang, ed., *Hmong Voices in Montana* (Missoula Museum of the Arts Foundation, Montana) 1992, Mansfield Library, University of Montana, pp. 16-19, 21.

Montana, the CIA thought that he would be ideal for the work. As it turned out, Daniels thrived in Laos. He began his career as a cargo kicker, dropping supplies out of the back of C-46 cargo planes to Hmong refugees within Laos who had fled the communists. Later, he became the liaison officer between Vang Pao and the CIA. Near the end of the war Daniels moved to Thailand, where he continued to help the Hmong in refugee camps. Daniels' mother, Louise, sponsored Moua Cha to come to Missoula in 1973.<sup>104</sup>

After attending Hellgate High School for two years, Moua Cha enrolled in the University of Montana. He soon dropped out in order to help found the Lao Family Community in California. The Lao Family Community helped refugees learn survival skills in America: everything from how to get a driver's license, to where to learn English, to how to use household appliances. After volunteering for several months in California, Moua Cha, and his wife Mai Lee, returned to Missoula to start a Lao Family Community there. The Lao Family Community was renamed the "Refugee Assistance Corporation" in 1986, as refugees from other countries began immigrating to Missoula. Moua Cha and Mai Lee devoted much of their lives to helping Hmong refugees in America.<sup>105</sup>

In 1975, General Vang Pao settled in the Missoula area. Moua Cha said Vang Pao came to Missoula because his son was there.<sup>106</sup> Within a year, the rest of Vang Pao's family followed him, and other Hmong began immigrating to the area, perhaps because

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<sup>104</sup> Moua Cha, "Early Hmong History in Montana," interview with Susan Miller, Sacramento, CA, 1991, Archives, Mansfield Library, University of Montana. More information about Jerry Daniels can be found in Jane Hamilton's *Tragic Mountains*, 1993. He worked with the Hmong for more than twenty years and was loved and esteemed by them. He died in Bangkok Thailand in 1982, at the age of 41, and is buried in Missoula.

<sup>105</sup> Information on Moua Cha taken from Susan Miller's interview with Moua Cha entitled, "Early Hmong History in Montana," 9/30/1991. Mansfield Library Archives, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana. Susan Miller et al. *Hmong Voices in Montana*, p. 27

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

they wanted to be close to their leader. Vang Pao bought a ranch in the Bitterroot valley west of Corvallis, a small town forty miles south of Missoula, on which he supported forty-eight of his relatives. He also supported another thirty Hmong living in a house in Missoula.<sup>107</sup> For the rest of the 1970s, Hmong continued to arrive in Missoula. Between October 1979 and April 1980 an average of fifty-six refugees arrived each month. By mid-1980, there were 738 Hmong in Missoula and Ravalli counties.<sup>108</sup> Mary Ulrich writes, “By 1981, the number of incoming refugees had slowed dramatically, and many Hmong families relocated to areas with better job opportunities.”<sup>109</sup> The last Hmong refugee family arrived in 1992.<sup>110</sup> Since 1983, the population of Hmong in Missoula has been stable at about 250 to 300 people.<sup>111</sup>

### Learning to Survive

Like earlier immigrants, the Hmong had to learn how to survive in a very different world. Everything was different in America. Not only did the people look different from people in Asia, the material world around them was different. Accustomed to dirt-floor houses without electricity in the rainy mountains of Laos, many Hmong had never before used electric stoves, electric lights, telephones, central heating, indoor plumbing etc. Many had never been exposed to traffic lights, cross walks, and sidewalks. Cooking was different, obtaining food was different, even walking across the

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<sup>107</sup> “Friends in the Community,” *Missoulian*, December 12, 1976

<sup>108</sup> “It’s not always a warm welcome,” *Missoulian*, June 17, 1980. The number may have been more. According to Lue Yang, a Missoula Hmong elder, there were nearly 1,000. Interview with Lue Yang, Missoula, Montana, Spring 2009.

<sup>109</sup> Ulrich, “The Hmong and Cultural Diversity,” p. 59.

<sup>110</sup> Ber Yang, interview with the author, Missoula, Montana, December 7, 2009

<sup>111</sup> Ulrich, “The Hmong and Cultural Diversity,” p. 67. The population of Hmong in Missoula today is still about 250 people according to Hmong elder Lue Yang.

road was different. Additionally, the climate was almost opposite. Laos is predominantly wet and warm, while Montana is dry and cold for much of the year. Some Hmong found the hot summers in Montana harder to deal with than the winters. As a people, the Hmong had often moved from place to place, but never had they gone so far, across an ocean. Coming to America was almost like going to another planet for many of them. American volunteers helped them to learn how to survive, but one of the biggest challenges for them was learning English. Without English they could not work. Knowing some English was necessary just to function in Missoula.<sup>112</sup>

#### Acquiring English and going to school

Some adult Hmong began learning English by taking English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at the Vocational Technical School in Missoula. Others learned English from American volunteers. The Hmong also taught one another what they had learned. In Corvallis, Mary Haws and Dixie Connor, neighbors of Vang Pao's family, began teaching English to fifteen women and one young man at Vang Pao's ranch while the children were in school. The *Missoulian* reported that, "The women act shy but friendly and eager to learn. They learn the words for practical things -- food items, months and days of the week -- and each has a turn at being 'teacher.'"<sup>113</sup> Haws and Connor seemed to enjoy teaching them as well. Twenty-two Hmong enrolled in adult

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<sup>112</sup> Anne Fadiman's book *The Spirit Catches You* relates how early how some Hmong refugees, unaccustomed to western appliances, poured water on electric stoves to extinguish them, built charcoal fires on the floors of their American homes etc. Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You*, p. 187.

<sup>113</sup> "Laotians Find Refuge in Friends -- Friends in the Schools," *Missoulian*, December 12, 1976.

education classes in the fall of 1976.<sup>114</sup>

Hmong children learned English at school in a kind of total immersion program. In the 1970s, Missoula and Corvallis public schools did not have an ESL program, because none had been needed up until that time. Suddenly a group of non-English-speaking students flooded the schools. The principal of Corvallis Elementary School, Bob Olson, was given two days notice that twenty-five Laotian students would be attending his elementary school. He and his staff came up with the idea of a “buddy system” which would pair a Laotian with an American student who would help him or her learn the routine of the school. This seemed to work well, and one teacher commented that all the other students wanted to help their new classmates. Volunteers from the community also came to the school in the morning each day before classes started to help teach the Hmong students English.

The Hmong kids made a good impression on the school. Olson said the children were “enthusiastic, eager to learn, healthy and well-disciplined.” Diane Sapesius, the school secretary, said, “They’re adorable children,” and the janitor, George Seawright, said the new Laotian students are, “just wonderful kids ... and they’re good kids too.”<sup>115</sup> The *Missoulian* ran a nearly two-full-page set of articles in the Sunday paper on the Hmong students and parents on December 12, 1976. The article, entitled “Laotians Find Refuge in Friends,” featured pictures of Hmong and American kids playing and studying together and Hmong women studying English together in their home.

Relations between Hmong and American kids were sometimes not so good though. Bounthavy Kiatoukaysy, one of the editors of the Missoula Art’s Museum’s

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<sup>114</sup> “Laotians in many schools,” *Missoulian*, December 1, 1976.

<sup>115</sup> “Laotians Find Refuge in Friends -- Friends in the Schools,” *Missoulian*, December 12, 1976.



*Hmong Voices*, wrote in an unpublished paper, “Americans are very friendly, but in high school the students were very cruel.”<sup>116</sup> Some Hmong students were spat on, told to go back to Vietnam, and insulted, told to cut tree trunks and attach them to their legs to make themselves taller etc. It was hard for the Hmong students to respond to these kind of insults because they did not know enough English and did not want to have any trouble. At other times American students would just ignore them and pretend like they were not there.<sup>117</sup> In the fall of 1976, nineteen Hmong students attended elementary schools and nine attended high schools in Missoula school district one.<sup>118</sup>

Once they got out of elementary and middle school, Hmong students attended one of the three public high schools in Missoula. A significant number attended Big Sky High School (BSHS). The school began in 1980 with a student population of 1,136. Over the years, the number of students attending BSHS has remained about the same. One thousand one hundred and seventy attended in 2000, and 1,041 in the 2009/2010 school year. The student body has been overwhelmingly composed of Euro-Americans, but a small percentage of other non-white students have also attended the school. Nine Hmong graduated from BSHS in the 1980s. Eight of these graduated in the top half of their classes; three in the top twenty-five percent of their class. All of the Hmong who graduated in the 1980s had been born in Laos or Thailand and likely did not have eight years of elementary and middle schooling in the U.S., before attending high school.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ulrich, “The Hmong and Cultural Diversity,” p. 70.

<sup>117</sup> Ulrich, “The Hmong and Cultural Diversity,” p. 73, Patricia Ingram, “An Assessment of the Assimilation Variables on the Lao Hmong Refugees in the Missoula, Montana High Schools.” Unpublished Master’s Thesis, Department of Anthropology. University of Montana, 1980.

<sup>118</sup> “Laotians in many schools,” *Missoulian*, December 1, 1976.

<sup>119</sup> Information in the above paragraph on Big Sky High School and the Hmong student attendance and records was provided by Deb Pengelly, Records Clerk at BSHS, February 2010. I

Hmong enrollment at Big Sky High School increased dramatically in the 1990s, as a result of the first generation of Hmong having gone through elementary and middle school in Missoula. Some of this group were likely born in America. Forty-two Hmong graduated from the high school in this decade, nearly seventy percent of them in the top half of their class. Nearly twenty percent of the Hmong who graduated from BSHS in the 1990s, were in the top ten percent of their respective classes, and two graduated at the very top of their class with a perfect 4.0 gpa. This is a remarkable achievement especially considering that the families of these students had lived for most of their lives outside of the United States, did not speak English fluently, and had never gone through the school system in America themselves. The Hmong high school students could not rely on their parents to help them with school assignments, which they did not understand. Parents did, however, emphasize success in school and tried to ensure that their children worked hard and did well.<sup>120</sup>

Thirty-six Hmong graduated from BSHS from 2000 to the spring of 2009. Of these, approximately fifty-three percent graduated in the top half of their classes. Like graduates from the previous decade, nearly twenty percent of these Hmong graduated in the top ten percent of their classes, and one graduated first in his class of 312 students.<sup>121</sup> The academic achievement of this group, as far as percent graduating in the top half of their class, is a little lower than that of the Hmong who attended BSHS in the 1980s and 1990s. It is hard to say why, other than perhaps that the earlier Hmong students were more likely to come from more educated Hmong families, than those who came later.

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am thankful for her valuable help in my research.

<sup>120</sup> Survey of eight Hmong students at the University of Montana, Fall Semester, 2009, Missoula, Montana.

<sup>121</sup> Numbers and class ranking obtained from Deb Pengelly, Records Clerk at BSHS, February, 2010.

The first Hmong refugees to arrive in America were from the elite in Hmong society. Beginning around 1980, poorer and less educated Hmong began immigrating to the United States. Their children who were born after 1980 would have been graduating from BSHS in the latter 1990s and in the 2000s. As well, perhaps as the Hmong community had been in Montana for ten years or so by 1990, parents may have begun to adopt a more relaxed American outlook and somewhat lessened pressure/expectations on their children to excel in school.

Another measure of success at BSHS is the Eagle Medallion, the highest award given by the school. BSHS confers the Eagle medallion on students who have made an outstanding contribution to the school or who have earned a perfect 4.0 gpa. Each year, approximately twenty students win the medallion. In 1992, two Hmong students won it; five more won it between 1993 and 2001. According to Betsy Williams, an ESL instructor currently at Jefferson Elementary School who has been involved with the Missoula Hmong since 1978, some of the Hmong students have become the valedictorian or salutatorian at their high schools. Academically, the first generation, middle generation, and second generation Hmong did well at Big Sky High School, despite having to overcome language and cultural barriers. Many were in the top twenty-five percent or top ten percent of their class, and a few graduated at the very top of their class. This can be attributed to the Hmong students' hard work and positive attitude.<sup>122</sup>

### Studying at a university

After graduating from high school, many of the Missoula-area Hmong chose to

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<sup>122</sup> Awards plaque, Main Hall, Big Sky High School. Deb Pengelly and Betsy Williams, February 2010, Missoula, Montana.

attend the University of Montana (UM) in Missoula. Before going to college though, many attended the Upward Bound program on the UM campus. Initiated in 1965 by President Lyndon Johnson, Upward Bound aims to help students from low-income families attend college. Students who do not have a college educated parent also qualify for the program. One of the programs Upward Bound at UM offers is a six-week-long summer program on the campus where high school students live in the dorms, take classes in Math, Science and English, along with elective classes, visit other colleges on the weekends, go on wilderness campouts, and tour museums, historical sites, zoos, and science parks among other places.<sup>123</sup>

Jon Stannard, the Director of the Upward Bound Program at UM since 1980, recalled that the early Hmong students in his program were very respectful and serious. They wore long sleeved shirts and dark pants. Around 1990, Stannard noticed a difference in the Hmong students. They dressed and talked more like Americans, and would joke with the other students. Only a few Hmong went to university in the 1980s. Getting through college was very difficult for Hmong students in the 1980s, Stannard said. These students would have been from the middle generation, those Hmong who were born in Laos or Thailand and came to America as children or young adults. They did not grow up speaking English, so the language barrier was greater for them than for the second generation who were born in America. Additionally, they did not go through the full American elementary and secondary school system.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> [www.umt.edu/ub/default.aspx](http://www.umt.edu/ub/default.aspx)

<sup>124</sup> Jon Stannard, interview with the author. University of Montana, January, 2010. Some Hmong students in the Upward Bound program made friends with American Indian students who were also attending the program. The Hmong students attended powwows and some of the Hmong made friends with Blackfeet in Browning, Montana, rode horses and stayed in tee pees. "They loved it," Stannard said. He thought there were a lot of similarities between Hmong and

In the 1990s, more Hmong attended the University of Montana. Two entered UM in 1992, and by 1997, twenty-seven Hmong students were enrolled at UM. In the 1998-1999 school year, twenty-three Hmong attended the university.<sup>125</sup> Of the twenty-one Hmong students who graduated from the Upward Bound Program between 1995 and 2009, eight earned a Bachelor's degree from UM, two earned AA degrees and one went on to earn an MA degree. Four are currently enrolled, and five did not attend university. In all, seventy percent of the Hmong students who were part of the Upward Bound program during those years graduated from or are presently attending college. This is a higher percentage than that of all other students in the program. Sixty-one percent of the Euro-American students and sixty-one percent of the Native American students who attended the Upward Bound program graduated from college or are currently attending. Stannard attributed the Hmong students' success and persistence to their "unbelievable drive to succeed." They feel like they have to do the right thing, Stannard said, for the honor of their family and culture, and are willing to persist even through difficulties.<sup>126</sup>

In her Dissertation titled "Middle Generation Hmong Students' Perceptions of their College Experiences at the University of Montana," Eloise Thompson identified some of the difficulties Hmong college students experienced in the late 1990s. These included: apprehension because of previous negative experiences in high school (see footnote # 76), loneliness -- they found it difficult to make friends with American students, feeling overwhelmed by language and cultural barriers, and a sense of

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Native American cultures.

<sup>125</sup> Elois Thompson, "Middle Generation Hmong Students' Perceptions of their College Experiences at the University of Montana: A Phenomenological Analysis." (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Education, UM, Mansfield Library, 2001), p.22.

<sup>126</sup> Jon Stannard, University of Montana, January 2010. Statistics on the Upward Bound program generated by Stannard.

frustration because of being unable to communicate adequately their own thoughts, knowledge and feelings. Thompson wrote of the middle-generation-Hmong college students, “Not only are their language skills not transferable, but neither are many of their past experiences or the survival or cultural skills they may have used in the past ... College is experienced as an environment that magnifies their weaknesses and minimizes their strengths. The pride and capability that the students feel in other arenas of their lives have been diminished in the college setting ...”<sup>127</sup> To counteract their difficulties in college Hmong students relied on hope, courage, resilience, and tenacity. “The Hmong are fighters,” Thompson wrote, “Their approach to college is similar to their approach to other aspects of life [i.e. to fight].” One college student in Pennsylvania said, “I am always telling myself that I cannot give up. I’m not a quitter. I’ve got to fight. You know fight is the key word that will make me a success ...”<sup>128</sup>

### Finding a Job

Like the Southern and Eastern European peasants who came to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most of the Hmong had few work skills that would transfer to America. In Laos, most had been either farmers or soldiers, though a few had worked in cities as clerks or in some other position. Some had never been exposed to a monetary economy before.<sup>129</sup> In an interview with the *Missoulian* on December 12, 1979, Hmong leader Xue Vang Vangyi said that his people “have no idea of what a job is, of what it means to be employed. And most, because they have been at

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<sup>127</sup> Elois Thompson, “Middle Generation Hmong Students’ Perceptions of their College Experiences at the University of Montana: A Phenomenological Analysis.” (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Education, 2001), pp. 64, 76.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>129</sup> Ulrich, *The Hmong and Cultural Diversity*, p. 63.

war for longer than fifteen years, have no education.”<sup>130</sup> Used to working for themselves as subsistence farmers, they had never worked for anyone else for wages. Vangyi said the Hmong were, “good at laboring, and farming ... and they are good at guns. [Beyond that they have few skills]”.<sup>131</sup>

In his book *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson describes the transition that English farmers and independent craftsmen went through when England industrialized in the early nineteenth century. Forced from their farms and shops by a changing economy, they had to seek work in factories. Previously, as peasants or private artisans, they had controlled the pace of their work. The blacksmith could close his shop and take a break to go visit family or friends when he wanted. The peasant could take a rest in the middle of the day. Farmers had days-long holidays and festivals that they traditionally enjoyed. During the non-growing season they might have a month or longer off for leisure or to engage in other pursuits. Once they began to work in the factory, Thompson wrote, the former-peasants’ days were regulated by the time-clock and the machine. They could not simply stop working when they wanted to, take a long rest at noon, or take off time to visit relatives. The peasant found that the machine was a harsher task master than the weather. The Industrial Revolution put an end to merry old England, with its more relaxed atmosphere of peasant frivolities and gaiety. It brought a world of whistles and clocks, sixteen-hour days, child labor, and production quotas.

The previously self-sufficient, independent, Hmong farmers experienced a similar transition when they came to America. They came from an agrarian society to one of the most industrialized nations on earth, and had to find a new way to make a living in

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<sup>130</sup> “Laotian Refugees learn U.S. Ways,” *Missoulian*, December 12, 1979.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

America. In Laos, Hmong farmers worked hard, but had a month off in the winter between the growing seasons when they could hunt, socialize with Hmong from other villages, or engage in other non-farming pursuits. Additionally, as in many agricultural societies, there was a feeling that when one attained enough material goods or wealth, one no longer had to work. According to author Sue Murphy-Mote in her book *Hmong and American: Stories of Transition in a Strange Land*, it was not uncommon for Hmong to retire after they reached age forty.<sup>132</sup> One Hmong I interviewed felt that working in America eight hours a day, five days a week for fifty weeks a year, was more wearing than the traditional kind of work Hmong did in Laos.<sup>133</sup> Another Hmong in America said she remembered the old, tattered clothes they wore in Laos and did not miss that, but she missed “that feeling of freeness” that she had there. In Laos she could go where she wanted and was not bound to a job or responsible to a boss.<sup>134</sup> It is hard to say which kind of work situation would be more difficult, but it is clear that work in America was very different for the Hmong from what they were used to in Laos.

Though the Hmong farmed in Laos, that skill did not transfer very well to America, or to Montana, because farming in America was very different from that in Laos. In the late 1970s, some Hmong began attending the Trapper Creek Job Corps Center in the Bitterroot Valley, south of Hamilton to learn English and job skills such as welding, carpentry, and building maintenance. Dick Pannock, a welding instructor at the Job Corps, said, “[The Hmong] are uncanny welders, exceptionally steady ...I think it’s because welding is a one-on-one situation -- just the welder and his machine.”<sup>135</sup> Despite

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<sup>132</sup> Murphy Mote, *Hmong and American*, p. 67.

<sup>133</sup> H, interview with the author. Missoula, Montana, February 2010.

<sup>134</sup> Fadiman, *Spirit Catches You*, p. 105.

<sup>135</sup> Rex Bovee, “The Hmong find a home,” *Montana Magazine*, Vol. 10, No. 5 (Helena



learning English and mastering a skill, it was difficult for them to get a job in the Missoula area. One reason was that they were usually shy and reserved when speaking to anyone in authority, and it was hard for them to convince employers that they could do the job.<sup>136</sup> Another reason was the poor state of the economy in Montana, especially during recessions. “The 1980s was truly a depression decade,” wrote Harry Fritz, a professor of history at UM, “mines, mills, and smelters closed ... the 1970s energy boom went bust...”<sup>137</sup> From January to July 1980, and from July 1981 to November 1982, there were 2.2 and 2.9% contractions in the national GDP respectively. Maximum unemployment rates were 7.8% for the first period and 10.8% for the second period. These two short periods of economic contraction are referred to as the “double dip recession.”<sup>138</sup> During this time, many Hmong left Montana for other areas of the country in search of better job prospects.<sup>139</sup>

Some of the first generation Hmong immigrants to the Missoula area got jobs in manufacturing. Several worked at Stimson Lumber mill, and at least two worked at Smurfit Stone Container, a paper mill near French Town. Of course, they could get some vocational training through the Job Corps, but the training was often perceived to be too short and insubstantial, and it did not guarantee a job once they graduated from the program.<sup>140</sup>

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Montana: Montana Magazine Publishing Company, 1980), p.32.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>137</sup> Harry W. Fritz, “Montana in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Montana Legacy: essays on history, people, and place*, Eds. Harry Fritz et al. (Helena, Mont.: Montana Historical Society Press, 2002) p. 342.

<sup>138</sup> [www.fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/7962.pdf](http://www.fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/7962.pdf), p. 14.

<sup>139</sup> General Vang Pao and his family left the Bitterroot Valley and moved to California. Soon all of the Hmong had moved out of the Bitterroot either to Missoula or to someplace else.

<sup>140</sup> One Hmong man was trained as a heavy equipment mechanic but could not find a job doing that. Instead he got work as a translator and social worker. Interview with the author, Missoula, Montana, February 2010.

Despite not having high paying jobs, some of the first generation Hmong in Missoula attained a modicum of financial success. They owned their own homes, drove late model pickups or cars, and were able to take vacation trips. Besides working full time jobs, some started businesses. “Super Yang” restaurant opened in 1983 and became quite popular. Lue and Mary ran the restaurant until 1987, when they closed it because it took up too much of their time -- they both had full time jobs in addition to managing the restaurant. In 1988, Lue Yang started “Lue Enterprises,” a contract sewing business that provided employment for thirteen refugees and two Americans. Mary Yang also earned money from the sale of Hmong *paj ntaub* -- Hmong embroidered flower cloths.<sup>141</sup>

The middle generation, those who came here when they were children or young adults, were more likely to go into white collar and middle tier professions. Some of them went to college and earned Bachelors or Associates Degrees. At least one works for the university now and at least one works for the Forest Service in Missoula. At least one works at a bank in Missoula and others work in business, architecture, and nursing. Two other Hmong are teachers in the Missoula school district.<sup>142</sup> Other Missoula based Hmong supplement their incomes by making *paj ntaub* and selling them at local craft fairs or by selling vegetables and flowers that they grew.

Today, only a very few Hmong in Missoula who are disabled or elderly are on

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<sup>141</sup> Susan Miller, Bounthavy Kiatoukaysy and Tou Yang , editors, *Hmong Voices in Montana* (Missoula Museum of the Arts Foundation, MT, 1992) pp. 28. The Hmong give flower cloths to friends and relatives when they move away as a remembrance or keepsake. Hmong embroidery is important for the children to wear during the Hmong New Year’s celebration. Susan Miller et al. *Hmong Voices in Montana*, p. 51.

<sup>142</sup> Betsy Williams, English Language Acquisition teacher at Jefferson Elementary School, Missoula, January 8, 2010. I have not mentioned the names of the Hmong working in various professions in Missoula to respect their privacy.

any kind public assistance.<sup>143</sup> This is a testament to the success of the vocational programs of the Refugee Assistance Corporation in Missoula, which worked in collaboration with the Montana government and other organizations to help the Hmong get jobs. It is also a testament to the Hmong's own optimism, courage, and drive.

Most of the second generation Hmong are currently in college, or are planning to go to college. They are studying in the fields of Nursing, Accounting, Information Technology, and Business among others.<sup>144</sup>

### Relating with other Americans and Cultural Adjustment

The arrival of the Hmong in Montana created a clash of cultures for them and for the Americans. Suddenly, almost literally overnight, the Hmong refugees were thrust into a foreign world with a culture that seemed very much at odds with many of their traditional beliefs and practices. In America, thirty people would not normally live together in one house, but in traditional Hmong culture, large extended families often lived together. In America it was illegal to have more than one wife, though this was perfectly acceptable for the Hmong in Laos. In America, one could not just go out into the forest and hunt when one felt like it, but one had to wait until a certain time of year, purchase a license, and hunt only with specified hunting tools in certain places. Ancestor worship and animal sacrifice -- elements of traditional Hmong religion -- were not understood by most Americans. Additionally, the Hmong's whole way of looking at the world was different from that of most Americans. The Hmong were traditionally

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<sup>143</sup> Ber Yang and Youa Vang, interview with the author, Missoula, MT, December 7, 09, E-mail from Carol Carpenter, State of Montana Refugee Coordinator, December 8, 09.

<sup>144</sup> Surveys with Hmong college students at the University of Montana, Fall 2009. Their names have by and large been left out in order to respect their privacy.

animists, and believed that every material object had a spirit associated with it. Places had spirits, as did animals. For the Hmong, most of life was spiritual. Humans had several souls. When someone got sick, the Hmong believed that one of that person's souls may have left his or her body, causing sickness. A shaman could be consulted to find out of the cause of the loss of a soul, and to retrieve it. This was quite different from the western scientific view of the world. Americans also did not understand the Hmong.<sup>145</sup>

Montanans' responses to the Hmong refugees have spanned the gamut between a warm welcome and outright hostility. Some Montanans did not understand who the Hmong were and wondered why they were here. The Hmong were easily confused with the Vietnamese with whom America had just concluded an unpopular war. When General Vang Pao purchased his land in the Bitterroot Valley, neighbors speculated on how he got the money to buy it and what he was doing there. Some thought the Federal Government was buying the Hmong cars or giving them more financial aid than it gave to native Montanans. Others thought the Hmong were taking their jobs. The Hmong were willing to work any shifts, evenings, weekends, or whenever, and got a reputation as

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<sup>145</sup> Information in the above paragraph on Hmong culture is taken from Susan Miller et al. *Hmong Voices in Montana*, Keith Quincy's *Hmong: History of a People*, and Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. The Hmong also used herbs and massage for healing -- ref. *Hmong Voice*<sup>145</sup> Susan Miller, Bounthavy Kiatoukaysy and Tou Yang, editors, *Hmong Voices in Montana* (Missoula Museum of the Arts Foundation, MT, 1992) pp. 28. The Hmong give flower cloths to friends and relatives when they move away as a remembrance or keepsake. Hmong embroidery is important for the children to wear during the Hmong New Year's celebration. Susan Miller et al. *Hmong Voices in Montana*, p. 51.

<sup>145</sup> Betsy Williams, English Language Acquisition teacher at Jefferson Elementary School, Missoula, January 8, 2010. I have not mentioned the names of the Hmong working in various professions in Missoula to respect their privacy.

<sup>145</sup> Ber Yang and Youa Vang, interview with the author, Missoula, MT, December 7, 09, E-mail from Carol Carpenter, State of Montana Refugee Coordinator, December 8, 09.

<sup>145</sup> Surveys with Hmong college students at the University of Montana, Fall 2009. Their names have by and large been left out in order to respect their privacy. *s in Montana*.

hard workers, so perhaps this was partially true. In late 1979 and early 1980, a large influx of Hmong to the Missoula area occurred due to overcrowding of the refugee camps in Thailand. An article in the June 17, 1980 edition of the *Missoulian* reported that, “During a recent week, seven refugee families reported to Moua [sic] Cha, director of the Lao Family Community, Inc., in Missoula, that passersby had thrown rocks at them and yelled at them.”<sup>146</sup> Other Hmong had the windows of their homes broken by rocks. Others were shot at, tailed by cars, beaten, or threatened. Americans on motorbikes rode around Hmong gardens and chewed them up.<sup>147</sup> Moua Cha, then the elected leader of the Missoula Hmong Community, believed the economic downturn in the economy around that time, along with the presence of many new faces in the community, precipitated the harassment directed at the refugees. At the other end of the spectrum, other Montanans befriended and volunteered to help the refugees.

Like Pocahontas, who, according to the story, recognized the Englishmen’s plight at Jamestown and prevailed on her father’s tribe to bring them food in the winter of 1607 and 1608, 20<sup>th</sup> century Montanans came to understand that the Hmong needed help to learn how to survive. It was a strange and unfamiliar world to which the Hmong had come. People like Mary Haws and Dixie Connor volunteered to help teach the adults English. Others, like Ginny Rose, Pat Lynch, Sharon Evans, Dorothy Overdahl, and Jim Sayne volunteered in the schools to teach English to the Hmong kids before school each day.<sup>148</sup> Haws took them shopping and to medical appointments. Todd Brandoff, a Vietnam War veteran, befriended the Hmong elders, and brought Hmong kids out to his

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<sup>146</sup> “It’s not always a warm welcome”, *Missoulian*, June 17, 1980.

<sup>147</sup> Sylvia Foss, interview by phone with the author, December 12, 1976. Sylvia Foss befriended the Hmong in Missoula in the 1970s and 80s, by telephone, April 3rd, 2009, “Laotians find refuge in friends,” *Missoulian*, December 12, 1976.

<sup>148</sup> “Friends in the Schools,” *Missoulian*, December 12, 1976.

house to slide on a waterslide.<sup>149</sup>

Many of the refugees arrived with little more than the clothes on their backs. Haws related how, after the year's first snow storm, she "took one of the women to the doctor's office and she was wearing thongs, the only shoes she had."<sup>150</sup> Missoula-area churches and civic organizations also helped the refugees. The Christian Missionary Alliance church (CMA) sponsored about twenty five Hmong families and helped them learn how to survive in Montana. Neil Claudt, a church member, remembered meeting Hmong arriving at the airport in the winter. Some of the refugees did not have winter coats. The church brought the Hmong winter coats, and helped them to learn English, American cooking, knitting and the Bible.

Christianity had been introduced to the Hmong in Laos by Father Savina and other French missionaries in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Savina created a written script for the Hmong because they did not have a written language at the time and started a church. In May of 1950, the first Protestants contacted the Hmong in Laos, according to G. Linwood Barney, an American missionary with the CMA church. Barney helped to translate the Bible into their language. Like the earlier Hmong in China, Hmong in Laos usually received missionaries hospitably, as long as the missionaries were not too forceful in trying to convert them. By 1954, according to Barney, some 4,000 Hmong in Laos had become protestant Christians.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Some of the elders when they saw this wanted to try it as well. Brandoff related how one Hmong man, seeing and understanding the concept of the waterslide became so excited he began taking off all his clothes to go on it immediately. They did not have any down-hill sports in Laos, other than sometimes sliding down a muddy hill on a log. David Keightley interview with Todd Brandoff, Hamilton, Montana. September 22, 2009.

<sup>150</sup> "Friends in the Community," *Missoulian*, December 12, 1976.

<sup>151</sup> Ulrich, "The Hmong and Cultural Diversity", p. 17. Barney was also an Anthropologist and wrote several articles about the Hmong in Anthropology magazines as well as a book: *The*

Some of the refugees who came to Missoula attended Sunday school classes at the CMA church. Claudt recalled that they were very attentive and respectful, but it was hard for them to understand Christianity. Hmong shamanism and the traditional Hmong world view contained no concept of an action that might offend a higher being and need forgiveness. Thus, the Biblical story of the redemption of man was hard for many Hmong to grasp.<sup>152</sup>

In the early 1980's the issue of religion confronted the Hmong community in Missoula. Local churches had sponsored many Hmong families and befriended them. Likely, some of the Hmong felt pressure to convert, even if church members tried not to put any pressure on them. Hmong elders said that either all of the members of a family should become Christians or none should, because they feared division in the community.<sup>153</sup> Some of the Hmong became Christians initially, but later returned to animism.<sup>154</sup> Others remained Christians. The CMA church baptized over twenty Hmong one Sunday, and a Hmong church existed for a short time in Missoula, but broke up as most of the congregation moved away in order to find work.<sup>155</sup> Hmong community members may have wondered whether they could be both Christian and Hmong?<sup>156</sup> At

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*Meo, an Incipient Church*, 1957. Sometimes missionaries found small, meticulously rolled balls of opium in the offering plates at their churches.

<sup>152</sup> Neil Claudt and Sylvia Foss of the CMA church, interview with the author, spring 2009, Missoula, Montana, Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You*, p. 19.

<sup>153</sup> Ulrich, "The Hmong and Cultural Diversity," pp. 85-86.

<sup>154</sup> Ulrich, "The Hmong and Cultural Diversity". One Hmong woman related that she had become a Christian and went to the church, but because her family has had so many difficulties – one child died of cancer, another was very sick – she returned to animism to comfort herself. Interview with Mrs. Q, Spring 2009, Missoula, Montana.

<sup>155</sup> Interview with Sylvia Foss, wife of CMA Pastor Foss, spring 2009. Sylvia Foss recalled one older Hmong in his seventies who was baptized at the CMA church in Missoula. The elderly man said he had become a Christian in Laos as a teenager, but had to renounce his new faith in order to get married.

<sup>156</sup> A Hmong pastor in Minneapolis argues that the Hmong church in America is helping to



present, most of the Hmong in Missoula are shamanists.<sup>157</sup>

### Maintaining their culture and community

Inevitably immigrants are influenced by the culture of their new country. Consciously or sub-consciously, they adopt some aspects of the host society such as dress, language, modes of behavior, and ways of thinking. As time passes, immigrants adopt more of the host culture's characteristics. By the second or third generation the immigrants' descendants might fully identify with the host culture.

Up to this point though, the Hmong in Montana have successfully maintained a high degree of their essential Hmongness. At the Missoula Hmong New Year's celebration in 2009 teenagers and young adult Hmong who had been born in the U.S. performed Hmong dances, played traditional Hmong instruments, and dressed in traditional Hmong clothes.<sup>158</sup> Second generation Hmong told me that they would probably consider marrying only another Hmong. At least these aspects of Hmong culture seem to have been transmitted to the second generation. On the other hand, surveys of second generation Hmong at the University of Montana reveal how they perceive their culture is changing in America. One wrote, "...the Hmong culture in America is dying and even I don't know as much anymore ...". The language is being

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preserve Hmong culture because when the people go to the church they speak Hmong together, read the Bible in Hmong and sing songs in Hmong. For them, Christianity is as much Hmong as it is American. "Hmong 2000 Census Publication: Data and Analysis," p. 26, "What You Cannot See in the U.S. 2000 Census" by Rev. Kou Seying. <http://hmongstudies.com/2000HmongCensusPublication.pdf><sup>156</sup> Ulrich, "The Hmong and Cultural Diversity", p. 17

<sup>157</sup> Sylvia Foss interview, spring 2009.

<sup>158</sup> Missoula Hmong New Year's Celebration, Target Range Elementary School, November 21, 2009.

replaced by English or “Hmonglish,” he wrote.<sup>159</sup>

Beginning in 1990, the Missoula-area Hmong started Hmong literacy and culture classes.<sup>160</sup> The Missoula School District # 1 Bilingual Program “provided innovative cultural support for the Hmong refugees in Missoula.”<sup>161</sup> In the cultural classes, students learned traditional Hmong dances, music, and storytelling. One student I interviewed told me of a Hmong youth group he attended in which they would take field trips to parks and other cities in Montana and learn about Hmong culture. At present, there is a summer school program that focuses on strengthening the Hmong language for second generation Hmong.<sup>162</sup>

### Immigration in perspective

Though the immigration of the Hmong and other Indochinese to America in the 1970s and 1980s was unique, in other respects it was similar to that of earlier groups of people who came to America. In the late nineteenth century, nearly five million Italians, eight million Eastern Europeans, and perhaps three million Greeks and other peoples from the Balkans and Asia Minor, immigrated to the United States.<sup>163</sup> Historian Oscar Handlin’s book, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People*, reveals the range of their experiences. The experience of these earlier immigrants sheds light on what the Hmong are going through now.

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<sup>159</sup> Student C. Survey of Hmong students at University of Montana, Fall Semester, 2009. Missoula, MT. Follow up E-mail, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010.

<sup>160</sup> Ulrich, *The Hmong and Cultural Diversity*, p. 80.

<sup>161</sup> Susan Miller et al. *Hmong Voices in Montana*, p. 29.

<sup>162</sup> Betsy Williams, English Language Teacher, Jefferson Elementary School, Missoula, MT, Jan. 8, 2010.

<sup>163</sup> Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that made the American People*, 2nd ed. (Little, Brown and Company, New York, 1973) p. 33.

Like the Hmong, these earlier immigrants had to go through tremendous adjustments when they came to the United States. It was a very different world for them. The great majority of them had been farmers in Europe. Many had not previously been exposed to electricity, cities with streetcars, indoor plumbing, working for someone else, a monetary economy, and the norms of American society. Over time, they became more like Americans; most Jews shaved off their long beards and stopped wearing the hair on the sides of their heads in *payot* (long curls), women changed from peasant garb to American women's clothes etc. But becoming an American, at least in their eyes, took a long time, and not all were certain they wanted to make the change. They did not want to give up the good things from their cultures and were not sure they wanted to adopt American values and behavior. Immigrants wanted their children to be educated and saw the school as a place where their children would learn American ways, but they also wanted their children to retain their parents' language and culture. Italian parents wanted their children to come home from school to have lunch with the family, as they had done in Italy. Children were expected to succeed, but the very values they needed to succeed in America were different from the traditional values promoted by their parents. The very definition of success for immigrants was often different from that held by mainstream American culture.

In his book *The Huddled Masses, the Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921*, Alan Kraut proposes that "most immigrants arriving after 1880 had never been exposed to the [American] ideology of success." "...Immigrants brought with them their own definitions of success, or the good life, quite different from those set forth in [popular

America culture]...,” Kraut writes.<sup>164</sup> For Greeks and southern Italians, it was more important to keep their families close and together, than to make advances in education, vocation or even the acquisition of material wealth.<sup>165</sup>

To get ahead in America, immigrants perceived, they had to adopt American ideals of individualism, and independence. This often conflicted with the emphasis on community and submission to elders that was characteristic of the cultures from which they came. As Handlin observed:

The loyal, dutiful man, faithful to tradition, the man who was the son and grandson of substantial peasants, was reduced to the indignity of hired labor, while shrewd, selfish, unscrupulous upstarts thrived. Clearly the attributes the immigrants held in high esteem were not those that brought success in America. The idea of success was itself strange; to thrust oneself above one’s station in life called for harsh, competitive qualities the peasant had always despised.<sup>166</sup>

Thus it seemed to the children of immigrants that they often lived in two worlds: the world of the American school and later the American work place, as well as the world in their parents’ home, where the old language and customs prevailed.

For the immigrants, impoverished by the poor economic conditions which had impelled them to emigrate in the first place, and by the cost of the journey to get to America, getting ahead financially in America proved difficult. Immigrant families often depended on the labor of the entire family to survive, and, for at least one or two generations, children were expected to perform tasks like little adults.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Alan Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921*, (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson Inc.) p. 104

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>166</sup> Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, p. 73.

<sup>167</sup> Handlin painted a somewhat depressing picture of the immigrants’ experiences once they arrived in the new world. He stated that most of them were not able to achieve their dreams of

Handlin described the new immigrants of the late nineteenth century as peasants, who had either owned their own land or farmed someone else's land. Many, if not most, could not read and write their own language, and were unused to working for someone else. Many had not been exposed to cities, with their attendant noise and confusion, alienation from nature, confining walls, and sometimes unscrupulous merchants and labor contractors. "In all matters," Handlin writes, "the New World made the peasant less of a man." Immigrants could not control their own lives the way they had before. They labored at "intangibles" in factories to produce objects they would never see. Labor became labor "for its own sake and meaningless. Actions no longer related to the rhythms of the soil now seemed related to nothing at all."<sup>168</sup> In addition, the new comers sometimes experienced hostility from the broader society. Handlin wrote of the "overt hostility" of society towards the immigrants and the "unmerited insults of strangers."<sup>169</sup>

Whereas the Hmong were not peasants in the technical sense of being settled on a piece of land (the Hmong migrated every few years), their agrarian lifestyle in Laos in many ways could be compared to that of European farmers in the late nineteenth century. In Laos the Hmong had made almost everything they needed. They grew their own food, built their own houses, made their own flintlock rifles, and made their own clothes. In the mid- twentieth century, some of these things began to change. They bought some of their clothes instead of making all of them and bought modern rifles, but still the Hmong

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owning their own farms in America. They got caught with little capital in the ports of entry and were forced by economic conditions to take low paying, inherently unstable jobs and were never able to save enough money to get out of the city and buy the equipment and/or land that would enable them to become independent farmers. Handlin writes, "At the end of a stint [of work] the worker was weaker and older, otherwise no different from what he was before." Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, p. 63.

<sup>168</sup> Handlin, *The Uprooted*, pp. 72,73.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 263 - 264.

were largely self-sufficient up until the second Indochina war forced many of them to become refugees. When the Hmong came to America, they experienced a similar alienation from the land and the way of life they had known in Laos as the European peasant-immigrants did a century earlier. Hmong children and young adults, like the children of late nineteenth century European immigrants, had to confront the reality of having to live in two worlds. One wrote, “Try[ing] to understand [both Hmong and American cultures] and be both [American and Hmong] is difficult, since we have to do twice as much. It’s like being two person[s] in one body.”<sup>170</sup>

The Hmong, like the earlier immigrants, also have their own idea of success. In Laos, just having enough food for the day and a little more was a success.<sup>171</sup> A second generation Hmong college student related that he thought success was just surviving and having enough food to eat.<sup>172</sup> Some Hmong men, like earlier immigrant men, have felt a loss of status and freedom coming to America. For example, Hmong husbands cannot control their wives to the same degree as they could in Laos, Moua Cha related.<sup>173</sup> In addition, first generation Hmong sometimes had to take jobs that they would have considered beneath them in Laos. Similarly, for the Hmong in Montana, getting ahead financially has not been easy. They supplement their incomes and diets with food grown in gardens and animals hunted, and children are expected to help in the gardens. Like millions of the earlier immigrants, the Hmong, when they came to America, did not know

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<sup>170</sup> Questionnaire passed out to middle and second generation Hmong, University of Montana, Fall 2009.

<sup>171</sup> Ber Yang, interview with the author, October 26, 2009, Missoula, Montana.

<sup>172</sup> Student C, University of Montana, Fall 2009. Of course, Hmong ideas of success in America are changing, and many of the younger Hmong think of success more like mainstream American culture does.

<sup>173</sup> Moua Cha, “Traditional Hmong Culture and Early History in Sacramento and Montana,” interview with Susan Miller, Sacramento, California, September 30, 1991. Archives, Mansfield Library, University of Montana.

how long their stay would last. Most of the first generation hoped to be able to return to Laos in the future, should the political situation change.<sup>174</sup>

### Achievement and mobility

Even though they had few transferable occupational skills and little formal education, the Hmong who immigrated to Missoula were able to obtain employment and accumulate some material wealth. It appears that their children will do even better. The sons and daughters of the first generation Hmong immigrants have obtained more education than their parents had. Most of the American-born children of Hmong parents went to or are planning to go to college.<sup>175</sup> As well, the second generation are, by and large, getting better jobs than their parents had. From the Hmong perspective, this is how it should be. Hmong parents highly value education, even if they are relatively uneducated themselves, and want their children to be successful. If the child obtains a higher occupational level than his or her father, Hmong parents do not feel threatened by this, but rather proud. The success of the children adds honor to the whole family, clan, and community. In contrast, other immigrant groups in America have had different rates of occupational and economic mobility. Stephen Thernstrom, a History Professor at Harvard University, analyzed mobility among different groups in Boston in his groundbreaking work, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880 -1970*.

Thernstrom's research revealed that different immigrant groups in Boston, and

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<sup>174</sup> Lue Yang, interview with the author, spring 2009.

<sup>175</sup> Mai Zoo interview with the author, fall 2009, Missoula, MT. Results from Jon Stannard's Upward Bound Program indicate the majority of Hmong students who participated in Upward Bound went to college. Of course not all second generation Hmong would have attended Upward Bound, but it is likely that many did because of Hmong parents' emphasis on education.



perhaps in America as a whole, experienced different rates of occupational mobility. In 1890, 65% of the Irish immigrants in Boston were working in what Thernstrom terms, “Low manual” labor occupations, compared to only 31 % of British immigrants and 36% of Scandinavian immigrants. Of the second generation Irish immigrants born between 1860 and 1879, 36% held “Low manual” jobs as the last job of their career, as opposed to only 23% of second generation British immigrants, 27% of other Western European immigrants and 12% of non-immigrants. Southern Italian immigrants were similarly overrepresented in lower income manual labor type jobs.<sup>176</sup>

Thernstrom asked what caused the different rates of occupational mobility. Irish and Italian immigrants may have been less educated than Western European immigrants of the same time period, and they also came from more rural backgrounds. On the other hand, East European and Russian Jews also came from rural backgrounds and had little formal education, yet they advanced vocationally and economically much faster than did the Irish and Italians. The Irish as well, had the advantage of speaking English prior to immigrating to America. Did Irish and southern Italian immigrants experience more discrimination in America than Eastern European and Russian Jews? Thernstrom thought not. Thernstrom wrote:

Among the major groups to be found in Boston, the Irish and the Italians moved ahead economically only sluggishly and erratically; the English and the Jews, on the other hand, found their way into the higher occupational strata with exceptional speed ... there is some basis for believing that something more than readily measurable Old World background handicaps – illiteracy, inability to speak English, poverty at the time of immigration, and the like was involved, and that certain

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<sup>176</sup> Stephen Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880 -1970*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 131, 132

features of the cultures the immigrants brought with them had some effect.<sup>177</sup>

Thernstrom proposed that the cultural and religious values of the Irish and southern Italians influenced their rate of mobility. The Irish and Italian immigrants were Catholic and may have emphasized education and material success less than Jewish immigrants. More research is needed on the influence of culture and world view on occupational, economic and social mobility in America.

The Laotian Hmong do not have a long historical tradition of education, yet Hmong immigrants to Montana, and I would guess in America as a whole, value education highly. In Laos only a few notable Hmong were able to obtain more than a rudimentary education, among them was Touby Lyfoung. Yet education was valued by the Hmong. Hmong leaders encouraged their people to go to the French and Laotian schools and saw education as a means of improving the Hmong's status in Laos.<sup>178</sup> It is likely that this attitude of seeing education as a means of advancement of their people as a whole, carried over to the Hmong immigrants in Montana. Further research on the Hmong immigrants' attitudes towards education and the occupational and educational progress of the Hmong community in Montana is needed.

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., pp. 250-251. It is gratifying, near the end of my research, to see that Stephen Thernstrom had similar ideas about the effect of immigrants' culture on their success in America.

<sup>178</sup> Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, p. 20, Quincy, *Hmong History*, pp. 138, 139, 140, 142. Possibly long contact with the Chinese, who have a tradition of education, influenced the Hmong as well.

## Conclusion

The complete story of the Hmong's immigration to Missoula, Montana cannot yet be fully told, because the Hmong are still in the process of finding their way in America. Clearly, though, the Hmong who immigrated to and settled in Missoula have adapted to living there, though it has been difficult for them.<sup>179</sup>

Parts of traditional Hmong culture have helped them to succeed in Montana. Among these are: close families and clan affiliation, work ethic, persistence and courage. Parents expect and press their children to work hard and succeed in school and vocation.<sup>180</sup> If one does poorly, this results in a loss of face to the individual and the family.<sup>181</sup> Additionally, children within the family compete somewhat to be the best child, so that their parents will chose to live with them when they get old. This brings blessings and honor to the child and his or her family. After the parents die, their spirits will watch over and protect that child's family more than those of the other children.<sup>182</sup> Family and clan members lend one another money if necessary to start a business. One wrote on a questionnaire, "Hmong usually loan money to family, friends, to help build their life so it gets better. It is strictly sent to members they can trust by looking at their value or success. Money is usually borrow [ed] during weddings to pay for the bride or for the cow and pigs, to help feed the community that attended."<sup>183</sup> If a family or individual moves to a new city, they will seek out and find other Hmong in that city

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<sup>179</sup> In an interview with H. who owns his own home and an expensive pick-up truck, I said, "You are successful. You own your own house ... [etc.]" H agreed but said it has been "really hard." Missoula, MT. Spring 2010.

<sup>180</sup> Questionnaire passed out to eight Hmong University of Montana students, Fall 2009.

<sup>181</sup> Ber Yang and Youa Vang, Missoula, Montana, December 7, 2009.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ber Yang, questionnaire, University of Montana, Fall 2009.

almost automatically. Then they try to figure out how they are related.<sup>184</sup> These webs of relationships help Hmong in America to find jobs and to settle in new areas. One will almost always have a place to stay and food to eat.

Second generation Hmong in Missoula are still expected to work hard and often help their parents in the large gardens that they grow.<sup>185</sup> Some do not particularly like working in the gardens, one second-generation-Hmong told me, but “it helps to feed them.”<sup>186</sup> The women, especially when married, are expected to be energetic and to take care of their families.<sup>187</sup> The desire not to be seen as a bad son or daughter-in-law, motivate them to work hard. The only aspect of their culture that might hinder their success, the Hmong told me, is that boys are expected to do more than girls and girls are - or were -- expected to marry early. Because of this cultural expectation, Youa Vang told me, many of the women of her generation and older did not go to college. But this is changing now, and currently more Hmong women graduate from college than Hmong men.<sup>188</sup>

Though the Hmong in the Missoula area have adjusted to America economically and are mostly self-sufficient, they have not necessarily adjusted well in all areas of life. First generation -- and to a somewhat lesser extent middle generation -- Hmong in America suffer from many difficulties. They may be haunted by memories of the war and seeing loved ones killed. Additionally, they miss their homes in Laos, no matter how much better off materially they are in America. One Hmong, though he had been in

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<sup>184</sup> Youa Vang and Ber Yang, interview with the author, December 7, 2009, Missoula, MT.

<sup>185</sup> Mai Zoo questionnaire.

<sup>186</sup> Student C, UC Commons, October 26, 09.

<sup>187</sup> Ber Yang and Youa Vang interview with the author, Dec 7, 09.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

America for over a decade, said he dreamed of Laos every night.<sup>189</sup> First generation Hmong men often suffer from depression in the U.S. One first generation woman in Missoula said that her husband had been depressed for twenty years and wanted to go back to Laos. She said she herself did not like living here but was still happy. Even though they have a nice home here, they miss the place they had grown up.<sup>190</sup>

Thirty some years after the first Laotian Hmong came to Missoula, they have integrated into the cultural and economic environment of Missoula. The Hmong migration to Missoula was the first time any people from their culture had come to the West, and it was the first time that substantial numbers of immigrants from South East Asia came to America. Though for generations Hmong have been moving and adapting to changing circumstances, their move to America was the biggest change of all, described by some as a “trans-centennial” change. From a non-monetary, agricultural, non-literate, non-technological society, they were transported to a capitalistic, industrial, highly technological, literacy-based society. In Laos, they were accustomed to the jungle and its dangers. Living in America, one refugee said, is like living in a “bureaucratic and technological jungle.”<sup>191</sup> It required tremendous adjustments of them. Nevertheless, most have successfully navigated their way through the change.

First generation Hmong in Missoula have obtained jobs and held onto those jobs. Most of them own their own homes or are living in homes that one of their children owns.<sup>192</sup> Middle generation Hmong have successfully gone through the education system; many have earned college degrees and gone on to gainful employment. Second

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<sup>189</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You*, p. 205.

<sup>190</sup> Hmong elders Mr. and Mrs. M, interview with the author, Missoula, Montana. Spring 2009.

<sup>191</sup> Takaki, *Strangers from a Distant Shore*, p. 461.

<sup>192</sup> Mr. and Mrs. M, interview with the author, Missoula, Montana, Spring 2009.

generation Hmong are going to college and preparing themselves for careers in Nursing, Accounting, Information Technology, and Business, among other fields. The Hmong have successfully adapted to living with Americans, though Americans have not always been welcoming to them. At the same time, the Hmong have maintained their close communal ties and culture as well. Given where the Hmong came from, and the linguistic and cultural hurdles they had to overcome, their survival and the amount of success they have achieved in the Missoula area is a tremendous accomplishment. The Hmong's cultural values of courage, hard work, and close families and clans, account for the degree of success they have obtained.

A recurring character in Hmong folktales is the Orphan. The Orphan is left to live alone in the world, relying only on his wits. In one story, he meets two sisters -- one good and one snotty -- and offers to share his humble home with them. The snotty one says:

What, with a filthy orphan boy like you? Ha! You're so ragged you're almost naked! Your penis is dirty with ashes! You must eat on the ground, and sleep in the mud, like a buffalo! I don't think you even have any drink or tobacco to offer us! <sup>193</sup>

In her book explicating Hmong culture Fadiman wrote:

The Orphan may not have a clean penis, but he is clever, energetic, brave, persistent, and a virtuoso player of the *qeej*, a musical instrument, highly esteemed by the Hmong ... Though he lives by himself on the margins of society, reviled by almost everyone, he knows in his heart that he is actually superior to all his detractors. <sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You*, p. 19, referencing Charles Johnson's *Dab Neeg Hmoob: Myths, Legends and Folk Tales from the Hmong of Laos* (St. Paul, Macalester College, 1983)

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

The Orphan is a symbol of the Hmong people. In this story he marries the good sister, who is able to see his true value, and they prosper and have children. The snotty sister ends up marrying the kind of bad spirit that lives in caves, drinks blood, and makes women sterile.

The Hmong in Montana have prospered. Though they have not been rejected in Montana like the orphan in the stories, they have retained the same cleverness, optimism, persistence, courage and -- at least to some extent -- energy as their ancestors in China and Laos had. This has enabled them to not only survive in a very foreign world, but to begin to thrive. In an interview Youa Vang said that she has that optimism, the optimism of the orphan, deep inside. No matter what happens, she has optimism and courage.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Youa Vang and Ber Yang, interview with the author, December 7, 2009, Missoula, MT.

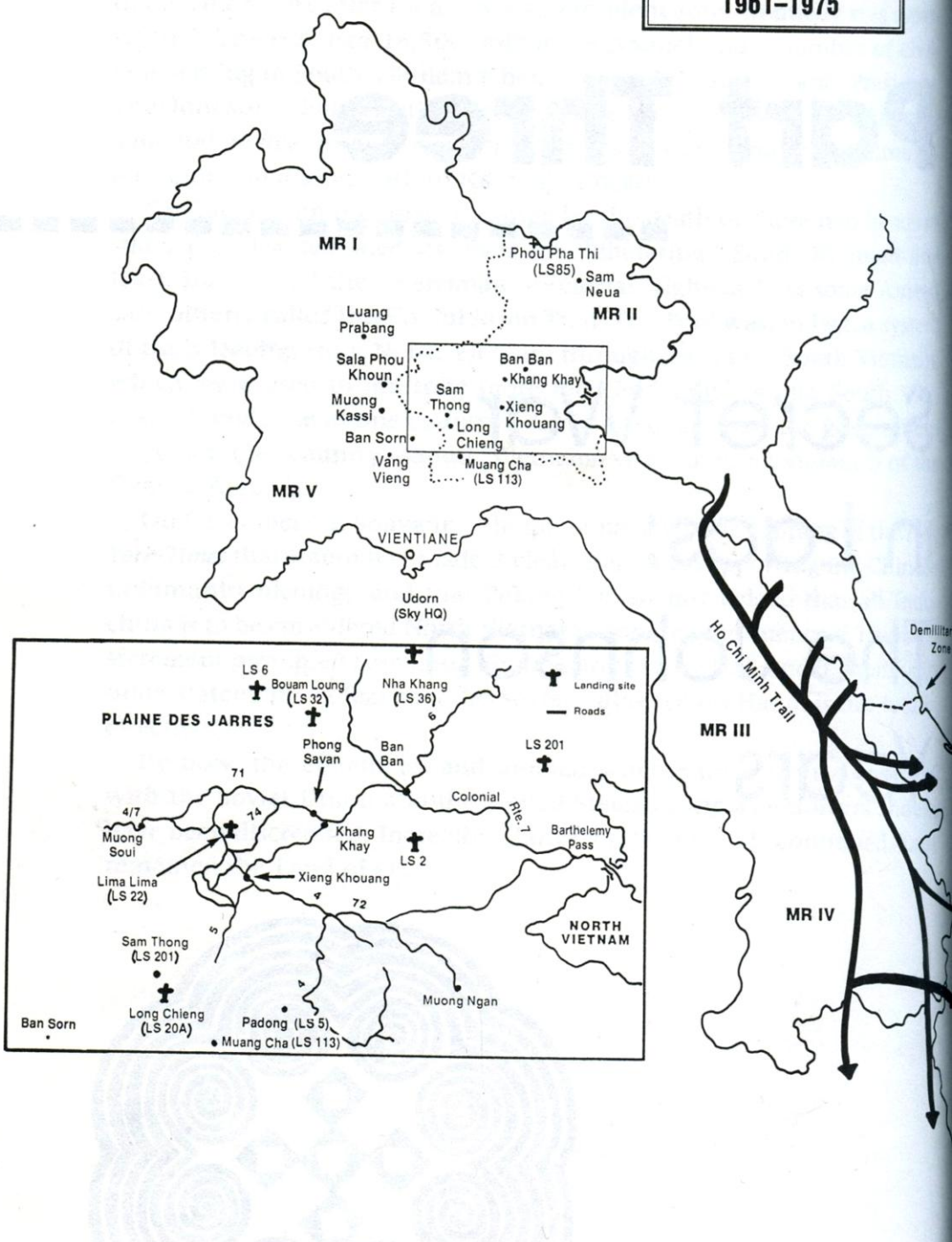


Appendix – Additional Maps



Possible route of Hmong migration – several thousand years B.C. until the nineteenth century A.D.

**Laos: The Ground War  
1961-1975**



**Ground war in Laos showing the Ho Chi Mi Trail and area of heaviest Hmong fighting around the Plain of Jars. Hmong airstrips shown.**

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