

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - EAU CLAIRE

FROM HOMELAND TO THE HEARTLAND: THE RESETTLEMENT AND  
ACCULTURATION OF FIRST GENERATION HMONG AMERICANS IN EAU  
CLAIRE, WI

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## *Abstract*

In the 1970s, the Hmong people of Laos fled their homeland in search of freedom from persecution by the communist regime in Laos. Most moved to refugee camps in Thailand, and then relocated to the United States. Historical research in regard to this story is scarce at this point, with most of the focus on the Hmong that settled in California or the metropolitan United States. This paper is focused on the story of first generation Hmong Americans as they settled in rural America, namely Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Eau Claire was attractive because it offered quality education for people with diverse needs, whether the need be grade school, college, or ESL. Eau Claire was also attractive because of the rural lifestyle it offered. Once arriving in Eau Claire, the first generation Hmong Americans were forced to deal with many problems, such as prejudice, economic recession and governmental policy, the language barrier, and unemployment. The formation of ethnic enclaves, and the groups associated with this formation, aided the acculturation process, which may not have led to much advancement for first generation Hmong Americans, but helped them gain their footing in American society.

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	3
FROM CIVIL WAR TO RELOCATION . . . . .	6
Relocation . . . . .	8
MOVING TO THE UNITED STATES AND SETTLING IN EAU CLAIRE . . . . .	10
Educational Opportunity . . . . .	11
Ethnic Enclaves . . . . .	12
OBSTACLES TO ACCULTURATION . . . . .	14
Age Groups . . . . .	14
Employment . . . . .	18
Regulation of Federal Aid . . . . .	21
Housing . . . . .	23
Household Skills . . . . .	24
Gardening and Sewing . . . . .	26
Changing Cultural Practices . . . . .	27
Prejudice and Harassment . . . . .	28
CONCLUSION . . . . .	30
BIBIOGRAPHY . . . . .	32

## *Introduction*

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Hmong refugees poured into the United States. The majority of them settled in metropolitan areas on the west coast, while others settled in cities like Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Paul, or Philadelphia. From these metropolitan areas many Hmong moved to rural areas in Wisconsin or Minnesota. One such destination was Eau Claire, Wisconsin. From the late 1970s through the 1980s, Eau Claire became a popular destination for first generation Hmong Americans. The Eau Claire community proved to be accommodating to the needs of a first generation Hmong-American, yet the Hmong had many difficulties as they settled into the community.

Historical work in regard to the Hmong is somewhat scarce at this point. However, there are four monographs on Hmong resettlement and acculturation that stand out: Historian Sucheng Chan's *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America*, Sociologist Funghatou T. Lo's *The Promised Land: Socioeconomic Reality of the Hmong People in Urban America (1976-2000)*, Sociologist Jeremy Hein's *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: A Refugee Experience in the United States*, and Historian Ines M. Miyares's *The Hmong Refugee Experience in the United States: Crossing the River*. With the exception of Miyares' book, all contain brief discussions of the war in Laos and the refugee camps that occurred as a result. The emphasis within these books is on the assimilation process of the Hmong as they settle in America. The major difference between these monographs lies within either the amount of emphasis placed upon the assimilation process or the definition of assimilation itself.

In order to create theories and conclusions on the subject of Hmong resettlement and acculturation, the authors used case studies. Lo uses Milwaukee as a case study for

the Hmong assimilation process in the United States. Much of Lo's research on the topic of Hmong assimilation into the Milwaukee community was done through the use of oral histories. This is because Lo's assimilation models require the opinions of those in the case study.<sup>1</sup> Hein uses Indochinese immigrants as a case study in assimilation theory. To accomplish this, Hein uses statistics from volunteer agencies, of both religious and nonsectarian affiliation, to establish a basis for the assimilation process.<sup>2</sup> Miyares uses Hmong communities in Fresno and Merced as a case study. She uses statistical data like that garnered from censuses and a series of interviews with Hmong people who live in these communities. Through these resources, Miyares was able to touch on the majority of the subjects relating to Hmong assimilation and enclave formation in the cities of Fresno and Merced, including education, sources and levels of income, political culture, and Hmong families.<sup>3</sup> Chan makes reference to volunteer agencies in regard to their help in finding work for Hmong people. However, Chan puts more emphasis on the role of Christianity and education in changing the culture of the Hmong settlers. This is especially true in regard to the schooling of Hmong children.<sup>4</sup>

Though the books mentioned above provide an exemplary introduction to Hmong resettlement and acculturation, no historian has written anything on the plight of first-generation Hmong Americans in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Therefore, this paper is bringing new information to light. Eau Claire's first generation Hmong Americans offer an example of the struggles that first generation immigrants went through as they adapted to

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<sup>1</sup> Funghatou T. Lo *The Promised Land: Socioeconomic Reality of the Hmong People in Urban America (1976-2000)*. (Bristol, IN: Wyndham Hall Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Hein, Jeremy. *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: A Refugee Experience in the United States* (New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Ines M. Miyares. *The Hmong Refugee Experience in the United States: Crossing the River* (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Sucheng Chan. *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

American culture. Their story also provides valuable insight into relations between whites and Asians in an area of the country where there were few minorities.

This paper is divided into three chapters. The opening chapter is dedicated to the Laotian Civil War, Thai refugee camps, and the relocation process. The next chapter will focus on the resettlement of the Hmong in the Eau Claire area, including the role that educational opportunity played in attracting the Hmong, as well as the formation of ethnic enclaves. The last chapter, and by far the longest, is focused on the problems that the Hmong had in adapting to American culture. This chapter is broken up into a number of sections that emphasize the educational experience of different age groups, employment, federal aid, housing, cultural differences, and harassment.

This paper traces the typical life of a Hmong immigrant as he/she settled into the society of Eau Claire, roughly between 1978 and 1990. This time frame is appropriate because this is a study of the resettlement and acculturation of the first generation Hmong Americans in Eau Claire. Before 1978, the Hmong population in Eau Claire was not large enough to make any solid conclusions. After 1990 Hmong still settled in Eau Claire, but the Hmong population had begun to shift to its second generation. The second generation had a much different experience. Along the way this paper describes the difficulties that first-generation Hmong faced as they acculturated into American society, as well as the effect that volunteer agencies had upon the Hmong settlers. Educational opportunity and a rural setting attracted Hmong refugees to Eau Claire. The formation of ethnic enclaves helped advance the acculturation process, while age, cultural differences, government and assistance group aid, and prejudice had differing effects on the acculturation of the first generation Hmong.

### *From Civil War to Relocation*

A major goal of United States' foreign policy in the Cold War era was containing communism in Southeast Asia. This led to involvement in Laos. In the late 1950s, the United States attempted to prevent the Communist led Pathet Lao party from gaining power in Laos. This included such things as funding one hundred percent of the Lao national army and aiding the Royal Lao party in the 1958 elections through the use of CIA advisors. Historical monographs on the topic of Hmong immigration to the United States often refer to the civil war in Laos as the "U.S.'s Secret War in Laos." The majority of U.S. involvement was secretive, through covert CIA operatives as well as secret negotiations. The U.S. failed in reelecting the Royal Lao and the communist led Pathet Lao came to power. The regime change in Laos led to a civil war in which the United States pledged to aid (through the CIA) the democratic factions in Laos. Though the United States supported the Royal Lao, the Royal Lao still conducted deals with the Pathet Lao. The Hmong, however, were adamantly against the Pathet Lao and communism, as it threatened their ability to retain independence and self-governance. Consequently, among the Laotian people, the Hmong were by far the most affected.<sup>5</sup>

United States involvement in the Laotian Civil War led to the relocation of the Hmong. The war began in 1960 and as the war progressed, the United States committed itself further to the democratic factions in Laos. Of major significance was an agreement in July of 1961 between General Vang Pao and the CIA, which included stipulations for aid to the Hmong people after the conflict ended, including: "If the U.S. lost the war, they

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<sup>5</sup> Lo, *The Promised Land*, 48. The conflict between the Royal Lao and the Pathet Lao originated in 1950, just three years after Laos gained independence from France. France aided the Royal Lao until they were defeated by the Viet Minh in Vietnam in 1954, 46-50.

would find a new land for the Hmong to live in.”<sup>6</sup> After the war, these provisions would become the basis for U.S. aid to the Hmong people. The war ended on May 15, 1975 as General Vang Pao and his military officers retreated to Thailand.<sup>7</sup> Upon the withdrawal of American personnel, the Hmong became targets of the communist regimes in Laos and Vietnam.<sup>8</sup>

The Hmong people’s defeat in the war made them enemies of the powerful communist regimes in Southeast Asia. Lo states, “When the United States lost the Vietnam War, the Hmong – being allies of the U.S. – were targeted for elimination. They had few choices; one of those choices was to become refugees throughout the world.”<sup>9</sup> Most of the Hmong were forced to move into refugee camps in neighboring Thailand, for months or even years.<sup>10</sup>

Poor conditions in Thailand, led directly to the resettlement of the Hmong in the United States. Historian Fungchatou T. Lo states, “Barbed wire surrounded the camps, and at each end Thai officers guarded the gates . . . In 1984, there were a total of 210 apartments that sheltered over 42,000 Hmong refugees.”<sup>11</sup> For income, Hmong women sold needlework and necklaces. This was their most significant form of income.<sup>12</sup> The refugee camps in Thailand were a large factor in the desire of the Indochinese refugees to come to the United States, as the majority of the refugees in the camps wished to come to the United States rather than France, Canada, or Australia.<sup>13</sup> Some preferred France, as a

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<sup>6</sup> Lo, *The Promised Land*, 57. Vang Pao was a General in the Royal Lao military. The Royal Lao were the main resistance to the ruling communist regime, the Pathet Lao.

<sup>7</sup> Lo, *The Promised Land*, 60.

<sup>8</sup> The Pathet Lao in Laos and the Vietcong in Vietnam.

<sup>9</sup> Lo, *The Promised Land*, 62.

<sup>10</sup> Chan. *Hmong Means Free*, 48-49.

<sup>11</sup> Lo, *The Promised Land*, 76.

<sup>12</sup> Lo, *The Promised Land*, 76, 81-85.

<sup>13</sup> Hein, *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia*, 43.

few of the refugees spoke French. However, they were limited to a location with a sponsor, and the United States had more sponsors available than did any other country.<sup>14</sup>

### *Relocation*

The Hmong of Eau Claire, Wisconsin came to the United States with the help of the United Nations. The United Nations resettlement process deserves a brief explanation. When a refugee decided he/she wanted to leave Thailand, he/she would contact UN personnel to tell them to which country he/she wished to relocate. This process involved a series of interviews between the refugee and UN representatives. If the refugee in question were qualified, he/she would then meet with personnel from the country to which he/she hoped to immigrate.<sup>15</sup>

Resettlement in America involved a similar process. The lines for interviews with American personnel were long, as America was the most sought after destination. During the interview, the refugee had to prove that he/she, in fact, was a refugee. The refugee also had to state why the United States was a suitable destination.<sup>16</sup> The most common and acceptable answer was for a chance at a quality education. If the refugee passed the interview, he/she then had to wait until a sponsor became available in the United States. This process often took months and sometimes years if it was hard to find a sponsor.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kao Xiong, interview by Tim Pfaff, 26 October 1992, transcript, Chippewa Valley Museum, Eau Claire, WI. Hmong Refugees could not relocate until they a sponsor was available in their country of relocation. Kao Xiong's statements lead me to believe that the United States had far more sponsors than did countries like France or Australia.

<sup>15</sup> Hein, *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia*, 22. Sociologist Jeremy Hein asserts that the United States was involved in helping Southeast Asian refugees before the Hmong in 1975. Hein states, "Hmong and Laotian refugees arriving in the United States after 1975 took their place in a much older American policy of regulating refugee migration in Southeast Asia.

<sup>16</sup> Kaying Xiong, interview by author, tape recording, Eau Claire, WI., 17 October 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Kao Xiong, interview by Tim Pfaff, Chippewa Valley Museum, Eau Claire, WI.

While Hmong refugees in Thailand had little choice but to come to America, they had a difficult decision on their hands. Houa Moua made this difficult decision in the late 1970s, and explains the decision:

. . . I had very difficult time to make decision. I am the one who made most difficult decision to come to America because many ways made me not to come. First, I did not have any education in my entire life. Second, I have been missed and departed my family members first time in my entire life. I do not know how to live without my mother and brother and sisters. I do not know if I will see them again or I will ever meet them again or not. I had not idea about life in this country. My life in the future is very dark. . . So, it took me two months for me to make my decision to come.<sup>18</sup>

The decision to migrate was therefore difficult for many reasons: some as complicated as the cultural differences they would no doubt face in moving to a strange country, and others as simple as not wanting to leave their family and friends.

The sponsor was the most important factor in getting the Hmong refugee families to the United States. A church group was often involved in this process. Churches were encouraged by volunteer groups such as the Indochinese Refugee Advisory Committee to be a “friend of the refugees.”<sup>19</sup> The church, usually affiliated with either Lutheran Social Services or the United States Catholic Conference, would find a married couple in its congregation that was willing to sponsor a refugee family.<sup>20</sup> The sponsor helped the refugees in two ways: they found the refugee and his/her family adequate housing and they set up the father (or whoever could work) with a job. Passage was not granted until a sponsor had these things established for the refugee family. Once the refugee family was established in the United States, the role of the sponsor diminished.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Houa Moua, interview by Tim Pfaff, Chippewa Valley Museum, Eau Claire, WI.

<sup>19</sup> Indochinese Refugee Committee, Minutes for June 11, 1981, Jack O’Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, WI.

<sup>20</sup> Kao Xiong, interview by Tim Pfaff, 26 October 1992.

<sup>21</sup> Kaying Xiong, interview by author, 17 October 2006.

### *Moving to the United States and Settling in Eau Claire*

Many of the Hmong in the Eau Claire community lived for a number of years in another U.S. city before coming to Eau Claire. Most Hmong immigrants first lived in California before relocating to the Midwest, but Eau Claire also has a connection with Hmong settlers in the Chicago and Philadelphia areas as well. Yer Vang of the Indochinese Refugee Committee reported on September 18, 1980, “Many families have moved to Northwestern Wisconsin from Chicago. Northwestern Wisconsin has 121 families – a total of 602 people. Eau Claire has 45 Hmong families, and 11 Vietnamese families, for a total of 263 people.”<sup>22</sup>

The majority of the Hmong in Eau Claire came from other cities in the United States. Many Hmong found Eau Claire more attractive than the larger American cities in which they first lived because Eau Claire offered a more rural lifestyle. The overwhelming majority of Hmong in Laos were farmers, a lifestyle much different from that in the metropolitan United States. From 1979 through 1990, the Hmong population in the Eau Claire area increased at a rapid rate. The Hmong were a small minority in Eau Claire County in 1980. There were 78,805 total people in Eau Claire County in 1980. The Hmong made up less than one percent of that population.<sup>23</sup> In 1979, the Hmong population was only 68, a number so small that they were all but unnoticed.<sup>24</sup> By January

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<sup>22</sup> Indochinese Refugee Advisory Committee, Meeting held September 18, 1980 at Lutheran Social Services, Jack O’Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, WI.

<sup>23</sup> Wisconsin, Legislature, Legislative Reference Bureau, *1990 census of population*, Madison, WI: 1991, A.3:1990/10.

<sup>24</sup> Hmong Population in E.C. County, Hmong Mutual Assistance Association, Inc, 1979, Jack O’Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center.

of 1981, however, the Hmong population had increased to 378.<sup>25</sup> A steady increase in the population of the Hmong in Eau Claire would continue throughout the 1980s, with the population reaching 1823 by 1990.<sup>26</sup> Although the rural setting of Eau Claire was important in attracting Hmong refugees, other factors were also at play.

### *Educational Opportunity*

The Hmong settled in Eau Claire in large part because of the community's educational institutions. Metropolitan areas such as Chicago featured schools with large class sizes, leaving little time for individual attention for Hmong students. The need for more attention to first-generation Hmong students was heightened by their limited English skills. Joe Bee Xiong states, "I went to school, I knew math, but not English at all . . . I started my life with everything new."<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the educational opportunities in an area such as Eau Claire go hand in hand with a rural lifestyle. Hmong Americans continued relocating to Eau Claire throughout the 1980s, making them a significant part of Eau Claire's community.

The availability of English as a second language (ESL) courses at Chippewa Valley Technical College was attractive for many Hmong families in other places of the United States. Kaying Xiong and her family settled in Chicago in 1978, before they moved to Eau Claire in 1981. While in Chicago, Kaying's father worked at a factory. Though that job was enough to get by, he desired to learn English so that he could

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<sup>25</sup> Hmong Population in E.C. County, Hmong Mutual Assistance Association, Inc., Jan. 1981. Hmong population statistics are unavailable for 1980, 1984-87, and 1989. Jack O'Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, WI.

<sup>26</sup> Population Demographics, E.C. Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association, Inc., 1990, Jack O'Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, WI.

<sup>27</sup> Joe Bee Xiong, interview by Jim Leary, 15 December 1992.

interact with people in the community. Kaying's family heard that Eau Claire was more accommodating to that sort of situation, so they moved to Eau Claire. Kaying's father represents the typical middle-aged first generation Hmong. The middle-aged Hmong were the most in need of educational assistance. Therefore, Eau Claire's educational institutions, especially the presence of ESL courses, were paramount in attracting the Hmong to Eau Claire. Education was not only crucial in attracting the Hmong to Eau Claire; it was also vital to advancing the acculturation process.

### *Ethnic Enclaves*

The factors that attracted the Hmong to Eau Claire were also important in the formation of ethnic enclaves, a process that benefited the acculturation process. The most relevant assimilation theory for this study is Ines M. Miyares's theory on ethnic enclaves, proposed in her book *The Hmong Refugee Experience in the United States: Crossing the River*. Miyares argues that the assimilation process was affected by the formation of ethnic enclaves. Miyares defines enclaves as “. . . voluntarily formed ethnic communities with viable internal social, economic, and political systems.”<sup>28</sup> Enclaves form with the assistance of three groups: sponsors – or voluntary agencies, community-based organizations, and the host community at large.<sup>29</sup> Miyares believes that the formation of enclaves is inevitable. Miyares argues that as Hmong immigrants settle into ethnic enclaves they not only addressed social needs, but the enclave created a diversified economic system that helped facilitate the employment of the immigrants.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Miyares. *Hmong Refugee Experience*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Miyares. *Hmong Refugee Experience*, 13-17.

<sup>30</sup> Miyares, *Hmong Refugee Experience*, 71.

The process of site selection is a key component to the formation of ethnic enclaves, and helps explain Hmong resettlement in Eau Claire. Miyares explains the process of site selection:

There appear to be three essential elements in site selection. The first is the pioneer migrants who convince others to follow. In the case of refugee enclaves, this is influenced by the relationships built between *active sponsors* and *primary refugees*, resulting in secondary migration to that site. The second is *community based organizations* from either the host community, the enclave, or both, which build formal and informal links between the enclave and the host. The third is the response from the *host community*, either to actively accept or passively tolerate the development of the enclave. Enclaves will form where immigrants feel welcome and are given the opportunity to create a community with a transitional culture.<sup>31</sup>

The “primary refugees” in Eau Claire were the first of the Hmong to settle in Eau Claire.<sup>32</sup>

The “primary refugees” for the Hmong of Eau Claire were crucial in encouraging their friends and relatives to relocate to Eau Claire. In Eau Claire, the “primary refugees” became the pillars of the Hmong community, as they were the leaders of some of the prominent assistance groups created in the early 1980s.<sup>33</sup> Kay Moua, as well as some other leaders from “community based organizations” was integral in encouraging Hmong to move to Eau Claire from other regions of the United States. Joe Bee Xiong was one such immigrant who took Moua’s advice. Xiong lived in Philadelphia, then Chicago before he telephoned his friend Kay Moua in Eau Claire. Xiong states, “Kay Moua was one of the first Hmong families who came to Eau Claire. We telephoned him and he said that up in here Eau Claire is a small town with good education for you. We and others

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<sup>31</sup> Miyares, *Hmong Refugee Experience*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Miyares, *Hmong Refugee Experience*, 19.

<sup>33</sup> Kao Xiong, interview by Tim Pfaff, 26 October 1992.

moved to Eau Claire in 1980.”<sup>34</sup> This example illustrates the site selection process. The Hmong were encouraged to move to Eau Claire by “primary refugees” and “community based organizations.” The other aspect of site selection, “the host community,” ties in with the role that educational opportunity played in attracting the Hmong to Eau Claire. The Eau Claire community, through Chippewa Valley Technical College (CVTC), made English as a second language (ESL) courses readily available for the Hmong. Thus, the “host community” was integral in the site selection process.

The Hmong of Eau Claire differ from the Hmong in Miyares’ study due to the diminished role of the sponsor in Eau Claire. Sponsors played an important role in bringing the Hmong to Eau Claire, but they only affected those who came directly to Eau Claire from Thailand. This portion of the Hmong community in Eau Claire was very small, as most Hmong had previously settled in other areas of the United States before moving to Eau Claire. Therefore, the formation of ethnic enclaves as well as the process of site selection in Eau Claire was more dependent on primary refugees, community based organizations, and the host community, than it was on sponsors.

### ***Obstacles to Acculturation***

#### *Age Groups*

The greatest problem facing the Hmong as they adapted was their educational deficiencies. In order to find employment or to communicate with the people of the community, adults had to learn English and some other skills. Those between the ages of

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<sup>34</sup> Joe Bee Xiong, interview by Jim Leary, 15 December 1992, transcript, Chippewa Valley Museum, Eau Claire, WI.

thirty and fifty had the most difficulty in adjusting to American life. This is because they needed to find work immediately after arriving in Eau Claire. Younger people, especially those below twenty, had an easier time adjusting because, according to American standards, they were expected to go to school. Those older than fifty mainly stayed at home doing household chores and made very little attempt to interact with the rest of the community. If they did, then the assistance of a younger family member was necessary. Since the middle-aged group had the most difficulty, a further explanation of their situation is necessary.<sup>35</sup>

Age was one of the biggest determinants in the difficulty of education for the Hmong. The middle-aged group (between thirty and fifty) experienced the most frustrating acculturation experience among the Hmong people of Eau Claire. They had the most education of any of the Hmong who migrated, yet they had the most problems adapting to their new lifestyle. After all, they had completed their grade school education while in Laos, with some receiving further education. Only five percent of Laotians had received a high school education, while just four percent had received a college education.<sup>36</sup>

Due to their deficiencies in English, the Hmong had difficulty interacting with people in the Eau Claire community, something that was important to acculturation and economic advancement, and even in some regards, for survival. Kao Xiong describes this:

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<sup>35</sup> Kao Xiong, interview by Tim Pfaff, 26 October 1992.

<sup>36</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Southeast Asian Refugee Self-Sufficiency Study, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.: 1985, HE 3.2:So 8/2/final, 49. Based on a 1982 survey of Indochinese immigrants in Boston, Chicago, Houston, Seattle, and Orange County. The survey included 1,114 Laotians.

This group of people . . . have lots of education in Laos but their ability to learn English is very slow. They will take three years in ESL classes just to get their drivers license and go shopping and make a few phone calls. They can call someone they know, but they can't talk to the doctor, lawyer or a police officer . . . They will go to apply for a job and they cannot fill out the application . . .<sup>37</sup>

As mentioned above, the middle-aged Hmong had the responsibility to work along with attending classes, which added to their difficulties. Some of the middle aged Hmong knew French, which could have made learning English easier. The younger Hmong found education much easier.

Though the younger Hmong experienced fewer problems in education, they still were behind most other students due to their deficiency in English. In the grade school system in Laos, if students learned a foreign language, it would most likely have been French. This is because Laos was a French colony between 1893 and 1953. Therefore, it was not necessary to learn English to survive in Laos. In some cases, Hmong students did learn English, but these were only advanced high school or college students. In many cases, these people wound up as interpreters for American servicemen during the Laotian civil war. After the war began, older male students joined the military, taking away many of their educational opportunities in the process. Despite these setbacks, the younger Hmong had a relatively easy time learning English, and thus adapting to their new lifestyle.<sup>38</sup>

The younger generation of Hmong proved to be good as well as eager students. John O'Connell, former adult basic education coordinator at District One Technical Institute, states, "They are excellent students and would stay here day and night if we would let them. They have a tremendous motivation to learn and to become trained so

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<sup>37</sup> Kao Xiong, interview by Tim Pfaff, 26 October 1992.

<sup>38</sup> Kao Xiong, interview by Tim Pfaff, 26 October 1992.

they can provide for their families.”<sup>39</sup> In 1982, there were 135 Hmong adults (most of whom were young adults) taking English classes at Eau Claire and Chippewa Falls area schools, which shows the dedication that the younger Hmong had to their education.

The elderly in Eau Claire’s Hmong community did not adapt to American culture because they made no attempt. In fairness, they had little choice but to rely on their younger siblings, as it would have been very difficult to learn a new language at such a late stage in life. Kao Xiong states, “Those who are very old, like 60-80, they just come here and can’t do anything but stay home and take care of their nieces and nephews. Their problem is that they just can’t go outside without taking the children taking them. Some children are reluctant to take their grandparents to the park or other places.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the elderly first generation Hmong simply did not acculturate. Due to their inability or in some cases refusal to adapt to American culture, the elderly Hmong had little to no interactions with the community in Eau Claire outside of their family.

Proficiency in English was the main goal for most of the Hmong, but some were able to move onto to an advanced education. In 1988, sixty-one Hmong students were enrolled in college, and there were six college graduates.<sup>41</sup> Joe Bee Xiong graduated from Memorial High School in the early 1980s. He then moved on to study at Chippewa Valley Technical College (CVTC), where he experienced a new set of difficulties. Xiong states, “I studied computer language. I thought I chose the most difficult major because I didn’t know half of the English words. The computer itself is another language. . . Then I

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<sup>39</sup> Bill Gharrity, “Hmong eagerly learn English,” Eau Claire Leader Telegram, June 8, 1982.

<sup>40</sup> Kao Xiong, interview by Tim Pfaff, 26 October 1992.

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Profiles of the Highland Lao Communities in the United States, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C.: 1988, E 184. L25 Y36 1988, 93.

went on to Mount Scenario College and I graduated with a criminal justice major.”<sup>42</sup> Joe Bee Xiong’s experience illustrates two points: that many of the young and middle-aged first-generation Hmong (though not all) sought to advance themselves through higher education, and they continued to struggle in advancement due to their underdeveloped English skills. However, the determination of those such as Joe Bee Xiong shows that the drive was there for advancement.

### *Employment*

The first generation Hmong had difficulty gaining employment. The main obstacle was a lack of job seeking skills. Job seeking skills were a greater issue for the Hmong in seeking employment than the language barrier. Yer Vang states,

Language barrier is not really a problem. We need a different attitude. You can get by . . . Refugees do not have much experience. Their job seeking skills are not there. Americans need courses in how to find a job, like you need to have a firm handshake. Many Indochinese want to go to an interview with a friend, but they should go alone . . . What can we do in the community? We need close coordination, workable work –experience programs while refugees go to ESL. We need ESL part of the day and work part of the day. We need our own course in how to get a job.<sup>43</sup>

While some of the refugees who came to Eau Claire in the 1980s had job experience elsewhere in the United States, the majority of their experience was limited to either farm or military employment in Laos. It was unlikely that either of these jobs required a formal interview. Therefore, the Hmong needed to learn how to conduct themselves in an interview. English classes were a part of this process. The Hmong also gained employment through the assistance of volunteer agencies.

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<sup>42</sup> Joe Bee Xiong, interview by Jim Leary, 15 December 1992.

<sup>43</sup> Indochinese Refugee Advisory Committee, Minutes for May 14, 1980, Jack O’Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, WI.

The Indochinese Refugee Advisory Committee helped Hmong find jobs in a number of ways. Among the most prominent ways in which they helped was through Job Service. Job Service provided the Hmong employment and other forms of aid as long as the potential employee met a few criteria. Job Service reported on October 15, 1981:

1. Potential employees must know English.
2. Everyone must seek a job. On the job training is available.
3. If a job is offered they must take it. Other aid may be withheld if refused.<sup>44</sup>

This shows once again the importance of learning English. It was essential for the Hmong to learn English, for their survival in the U.S.

When regular work was unattainable, some Hmong settlers scraped by with short term jobs. These jobs included such things as painting or repair jobs. Since it was difficult for them to communicate with the rest of the Eau Claire community, they were able to get these short-term jobs only through the assistance of volunteer agencies. The Indochinese Refugee Advisory Committee helped by making the community more accepting of the Hmong. They did this by making workers more available and publicizing jobs held by refugees. Thus, short-term jobs were an important source of income for the first generation Hmong.<sup>45</sup>

Job statistics give a sense of the plight the Hmong had in acquiring employment. In 1983, 242 refugees registered at Job Service. Forty-five were placed in jobs through Job Service, and nineteen gained jobs on their own. While this was an increase of one hundred percent from the previous year, it was still a bad situation. Only twenty-six percent of the Hmong who registered at Job Service gained jobs in 1983. This means that

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<sup>44</sup> Indochinese Refugee Advisory Committee, Minutes for October 15, 1981, Jack O'Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, WI

<sup>45</sup> Indochinese Refugee Committee, Minutes for June 11, 1981, Jack O'Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, WI.

nearly seventy-five percent of these people were still without a job and this only counts those that registered at Job Service. It is reasonable to assume, then, that the Hmong were largely unemployed in 1983, leaving them to rely on sponsors, family or friends who had a job, and state and federal aid for refugees.<sup>46</sup>

America's overall economy and governmental policy in the early 1980s was not conducive to the employment needs of Hmong refugees. The recession of 1980 – 82 had a negative effect on the availability of blue-collar jobs. The unemployment rate during the recession reached 9.5 percent, and would only be reduced to 5.3 percent by 1989.<sup>47</sup>

Governmental policy deserves some of the blame for this. Samuel Rosenberg states,

Two thrusts of state labor markets were apparent. The first was to increase competition in the labor market at a given level of unemployment, by reducing the social wage and lowering the effective minimum wage. The second was to reduce union power through higher aggregate levels of unemployment, increased labor market competition and the interpretation of existing industrial legislation in a pro-business manner.<sup>48</sup>

To be fair, these policies did lead to overall economic growth after 1982. However, they also led to increased economic inequality, which left fewer opportunities and benefits for blue-collar America.<sup>49</sup> Since the majority of first generation Hmong Americans worked blue-collar jobs, they were affected negatively by these policies.

By the end of the 1980s, the economic situation of the Hmong was still not ideal. The median income of families in the United States was \$48,248 in 1990.<sup>50</sup> The average

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<sup>46</sup> St. Olaf Refugee Committee, Minutes for September 21, 1983, Jack O'Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, WI.

<sup>47</sup> David M. Gordon, Thomas E. Weisskopf, and Samuel Bowles, "Right – wing economic in the 1980s: the anatomy of failure," from Michael E. Bernstein and David E. Adler, *Understanding American Economic Decline*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 252.

<sup>48</sup> Samuel Rosenberg, *American Economic Development Since 1945*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 234.

<sup>49</sup> Rosenberg, *American Economic Development*, 235.

<sup>50</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Money Income of Families - - Distribution by Income Level, Race, and Hispanic Origin, In Constant (2003) U.S. Dollars, Found at

annual income of one-worker Hmong families in Eau Claire was \$10,400 in 1988, while two worker families earned just \$19,760. The average income for Hmong men was \$5.00 an hour and the average income for Hmong women was \$4.50 an hour. Forty-three percent of Hmong jobs in Eau Claire were part time in 1988. Of the 365 Hmong families in Eau Claire, 313 were on welfare in 1988. Only two families owned homes. Just three families owned a business: two grocery stores and a restaurant.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the economic situation of the first generation Hmong Americans in Eau Claire did not improve much by the end of the 1980s. Not only were the Hmong earning far less than the rest of the United States population, they were earning far less than other Asians in the United States. In 1990, the median income of United States citizens characterized as either Asian or Pacific Islander was \$57,655, which was over \$10,000 more than whites were earning during this period.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the Hmong were not only earning less than the average American, but less than most other Asian groups as well. This is in large part due to the low-level of education of the first-generation Hmong, especially those in the middle-aged group. Some were able to earn a college education and gain higher paying jobs, but that was the exception rather than the rule.

### *Regulation of Federal Aid*

The United States Federal Government provided aid to many Hmong families.

Federal aid to refugees was described in this way:

Refugees who are members of families with dependent children may qualify for and receive benefits under the program of aid to families with dependent children

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[http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/income\\_expenditures\\_wealth/family\\_income/](http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/income_expenditures_wealth/family_income/), Accessed 20 November 2006.

<sup>51</sup> Profiles of the Highland Lao Communities in the United States, 93.

<sup>52</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Money Income of Families.

(AFDC) on the same basis as citizens. . . Similarly, aged, blind, and disabled refugees may be eligible for the Federal supplemental security income (SSI) program on the same basis as citizens. . . Needy refugees who do not qualify for cash assistance under the AFDC or SSI programs may receive special cash assistance for refugees – termed “refugee cash assistance” (RCA) – according to their need.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, federal aid was helpful for most Hmong refugees in the years immediately after resettlement. But this aid was not meant to last forever, rather it was meant to help refugees in their quest for self-sufficiency.

The necessity of finding a job was heightened by the regulations with regard to receiving aid. Refugees in the United States were allowed to receive federal aid for three years. After the third year in the country, they would be treated the same as American citizens. They could receive aid in some circumstances, but not the aid specified for refugees. They had a three-year window in which they could receive assistance. In this time, the refugee had to find a job, and in most cases this meant learning English along the way. In addition, it was often necessary for the refugee to get a job, or at least attempt to garner a job for them to qualify for refugee assistance. Assistance entailed medical assistance as well as a cash stipend. Medical assistance was possibly the more important of the two, as it was expected that the refugee have a job throughout the three year aid period, so they would continue to receive at least a salary after that period ended, but their health benefits would end.<sup>54</sup> Though the aid provided by the government was for the short term, its aim was to help refugees in the long term.

Aid from the federal government was aimed at helping Indochinese immigrants gain economic self-sufficiency. Beginning in 1983, the Refugee Domestic Assistance

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<sup>53</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Refugee Resettlement Program, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.: 1985, HE 3.72:984, 26-27.

<sup>54</sup> Indochinese Refugee Advisory Committee, Minutes for September 18, 1980, Jack O’Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, WI.

Program was formed to provide assistance to refugees, the majority of which were Indochinese. In 1984, \$357.1 million was reimbursed to states that provided refugees with such things as: direct cash, medical assistance, aid to unaccompanied refugee children, payments to refugees eligible for Supplementary Security Income and state and local welfare agency costs. Sixty-seven million dollars was awarded to states to provide refugees with English language training, vocational training, and other social services. The purpose of this was, “. . . to promote economic self-sufficiency and discourage refugee dependence on public assistance programs.”<sup>55</sup> Also in 1984, states received \$2.7 million from the federal government for three initiatives:

- (1) To increase the number of wage earners in refugee and entrant households;
- (2) to provide enhanced skills training, job placement, and followup assistance for employment and self – employment of targeted refugee and entrant populations;
- and (3) to assist Highland Lao/Hmong refugees in attaining self – sufficiency.<sup>56</sup>

Therefore, the federal government played a crucial role in helping Indochinese immigrants advance economically. The total federal assistance for Wisconsin in 1984 was \$4,353,749.<sup>57</sup> Without aid from the federal government, assistance groups like Eau Claire’s Hmong Mutual Assistance Association may not have gotten off the ground.

### *Housing*

The main reason that Hmong families had difficulty acquiring housing was their poor economic situation. Most Hmong families throughout the 1980s did not make much money, so they were forced to live under poor housing conditions. Koa Xiong illustrates the housing situation:

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<sup>55</sup> Refugee Resettlement Program, 18.

<sup>56</sup> Refugee Resettlement Program, 19.

<sup>57</sup> Refugee Resettlement Program, 23.

When they look into the apartment, they will find so many things wrong. The rent is cheaper because it is not in very good condition. And then in winter-time the heat doesn't go very well, and so you end up a lot of these families stay in a house where it is very cold. So the health department or the sponsor or mentor or tutor will come over and say, "Oh this is too cold. You can't stay in this house, you can't stay in this apartment, you have to move out." But where will they go, where will they move to?<sup>58</sup>

Therefore, the importance of improving the economic situation of the Hmong families is accentuated by their poor housing situation. But that is not the only problem, as the traditional large Hmong family carries a large burden with it. The more people in the family, the larger the house or apartment is needed, leading to an increased need for substantial income.

Landlords were also hesitant to rent houses to large Hmong families. Hmong families were often as large as seven or eight people, but most of the houses available for rent had merely three or four bedrooms. In most situations, landlords would not allow large families to live in a small house due to the stress this would place on the house. The majority of traditional Hmong meals involved steamed rice and vegetables. Some landlords also complained that Hmong families' use of steaming and boiling rotted window frames in the winter. Thus, family size and cultural stereotypes have played a role in the difficulties of the Hmong finding sufficient housing.<sup>59</sup>

### *Household Skills*

Many Hmong lacked simple household skills. As noted earlier, Christian groups were essential in helping the Hmong adapt to American culture. One such group was the St. Olaf Refugee Committee, a Catholic organization that started the Eau Claire Catholic

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<sup>58</sup> Kao Xiong, interview by Tim Pfaff, 26 October 1992.

<sup>59</sup> Kao Xiong, interview by Tim Pfaff, 26 October 1992.

Refugee Project. In 1982-83, they worked with the Hmong of Eau Claire in the following areas:

1. to improve their housing conditions
2. to improve their household management skills and their household record – keeping
3. to improve the refugees’ understanding of American culture and institutions
4. to provide an introduction to the Christian religion and to church participation to a group of families so requesting
5. to provide a greater understanding of the Southeast Asian refugees among the Eau Claire population.<sup>60</sup>

Of particular note here is the improvement of housing conditions and household management skills. For the St. Olaf committee, this meant several things. The committee looked for more sufficient housing (in many cases this meant moving outside of “Hmong areas” in Eau Claire), they helped explain to the Hmong their rights as tenants, volunteers helped the Hmong to weatherize their houses as they were not accustomed to the cold winters of Wisconsin, as well as assisting with other general house improvement projects.<sup>61</sup> Many families needed carpeting and rugs for their hardwood floors. Heavy drapes were needed to help keep houses warmer.<sup>62</sup>

Household management skills encompassed many things. The Committee taught several Hmong families’ general household duties such as house cleaning, cooking with appliances, preventing insect infestation, as well as general record keeping.<sup>63</sup> Volunteers also instructed Hmong on how to use outdoor appliances such as power lawn mowers.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, Even the simplest tasks seemed arduous to the Hmong.

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<sup>60</sup> St. Olaf Refugee Committee, Eau Claire Catholic Refugee Project, Jack O’Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, WI.

<sup>61</sup> St. Olaf Refugee Committee, Eau Claire Catholic Refugee Project.

<sup>62</sup> St. Olaf Refugee Committee, Minutes of September 28, 1983, Jack O’Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, WI.

<sup>63</sup> St. Olaf Refugee Committee, Eau Claire Catholic Refugee Project.

<sup>64</sup> St. Olaf Refugee Committee, Minutes for February 28, 1983, Jack O’Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, WI.

### *Gardening and Sewing*

The Hmong of Eau Claire were skilled in gardening. Thus, many of the assistance groups worked with the Hmong on gardening projects. For example, the St. Olaf Refugee Committee organized a cucumber-growing project. In the summer of 1983, several Hmong families made roughly \$20,000 selling cucumbers to the Gedney Co. This was a significant achievement especially when the project cost only \$250 for rent, seeds, and supplies. Other similar projects were done in order to generate money for Hmong families without sufficient income. This was significant in helping the Hmong transition into American culture by encouraging them to make use of some of their skills from the homeland, as many Hmong, especially women and children were accustomed to agriculture.<sup>65</sup>

Another skill that the Hmong took advantage of was sewing. Nearly all the assistance groups in Eau Claire gave attention to getting sewing machines to Hmong families. As a part of traditional Hmong culture, many of the women do needlework and other sorts of crafts. In most cases the crafts were made for the use of the family. It is also possible that they used these crafts to make some profit. The volunteer agencies, as well as the technical college worked to make affordable sewing machines available to Hmong families.<sup>66</sup> Though they did this type of work early on, many women moved away from these traditional roles as they became accustomed to United States culture.

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<sup>65</sup> St. Olaf Refugee Committee, Minutes for September 21, 1983, Jack O'Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, WI.

<sup>66</sup> St. Olaf Refugee Committee, Minutes of September 28, 1983, Jack O'Connell Hmong Collection, Eau Claire Area Research Center, Eau Claire, WI.

## *Changing Cultural Practices*

The first generation Hmong in Eau Claire changed many of their cultural practices as they interacted with Americans. Historian Funchatou T. Lo terms this, “Cultural and behavioral assimilation.” Lo states, “Cultural and behavioral assimilation assumes that the newcomers have changed their cultural practices, including religious belief and observance to those of the host society.”<sup>67</sup> Many of the first generation Hmong converted to Christianity as a result of their interactions with volunteer groups, many of which were church affiliated. Kaying Xiong and her family converted to Christianity a few years after their arrival in Eau Claire in 1981. They had prior experience with Christian groups during their time in Chicago, and had even more interactions with the Christian volunteer agencies in Eau Claire.<sup>68</sup> Women’s roles also changed for the first generation Hmong of Eau Claire.

Many Hmong women were attracted to the United States due to the more egalitarian society. Sociologist Jeremy Hein states, “The attractiveness of some elements of American culture for Indochinese refugees is most evident in changing gender roles. Women in the United states have more egalitarian roles within families and greater freedom to define their roles without reference to the family than has traditionally been true for women in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore, traditional Hmong female work such as sewing and gardening diminished as the period went on. This was especially true for younger females. As female Hmong grew older, they often went to

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<sup>67</sup> Lo, *The Promised Land*, 143.

<sup>68</sup> Kaying Xiong, interview by author, 17 October 2006.

<sup>69</sup> Hein, *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia*, 112.

college. Thus, they moved out of the household and into the workforce. This was not as acceptable in traditional Hmong culture.<sup>70</sup>

### *Prejudice and Harassment*

Though most interactions with the people of Eau Claire were positive, some had a negative effect. Prejudice had an effect on the acculturation of the first generation Hmong of Eau Claire. Lo explains that, “attitude and behavioral assimilation begins when the newcomers have reached a point where they encounter no discriminatory and prejudiced attitudes from the host society.”<sup>71</sup> The first generation Hmong never reached this point. Discrimination persisted due to false beliefs on the part of native Wisconsinites, true cultural misunderstandings, and Hmong confusion in dealing with local government. Upon arrival in Eau Claire, many Hmong families were subject to discrimination by the white citizens of Eau Claire. One popular rumor was that the Hmong eat dogs. That is untrue, according to Kay Moua. Moua states, “We are very concerned about this rumor. It angers us because never in Hmong history have we eaten dogs.”<sup>72</sup> Because of rumors such as that of dog eating, Hmong families received harassing phone calls in the early 1980s. Some calls even included physical threats. In an effort to avoid this harassment, many Hmong families changed their phone numbers so that they were unlisted. Hmong children were harassed, and in some cases beaten, in

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<sup>70</sup> Statistics on intermarriage of the first generation Hmong are unavailable, but this could nonetheless be a key component to the acculturation process. According to Lo, intermarriage, attitude and behavior, and civic assimilation are also key components of the assimilation process. Inter-marital assimilation as defined by Lo “occurs when the newcomers intermarry and interbreed fully into society.”<sup>70</sup> This is a form of assimilation in which Lo found that the Hmong were largely unaffected. However, Lo asserts, “this does not suggest that interracial marriage does not exist.” Lo, *The Promised Land*, 168.

<sup>71</sup> Lo, *The Promised Land*, 171.

<sup>72</sup> Bill Gharrity, “Harassment of Hmong stirs concern among police,” *Eau Claire Leader Telegram*, June 15, 1982.

large part due to the stereotypes that permeated throughout the Eau Claire community.<sup>73</sup> Other harassment problems are explained by differences in culture.<sup>74</sup>

One cultural difference that led to harassment in the early 1980s involved fishing laws. Hmong people were not used to the various licenses, laws and procedures in Wisconsin. Kao Xiong states, “If a person in Laos wanted to go hunting or fishing, you just go where you want. Here . . . people tell you that you have to have a license. Whatever you do you need to have some kind of proof that you know what you are doing, right?”<sup>75</sup> For instance, Hmong people loved to fish; therefore, they would catch many fish to take home. This was legal under Wisconsin fishing regulations, but the Hmong did not abide by laws pertaining to fish disposal. Dead fish cannot be thrown back into Wisconsin waters. Hmong people were accused of leaving dead fish on the shorelines. This contributed to harassment from citizens in the Eau Claire area. This is just one of many problems that the Hmong faced in adjusting to the American system of regulations.<sup>76</sup>

The Hmong faced many challenges in learning the American system of governance. Some of them were rather simple problems, as Kao Xiong states of Hmong in Eau Claire, “They don’t really know how the system works in this country. Sometimes they will look at a fireman as a police officer. Sometimes they will look at an official person as being the authority of everything. And they will ask one person a question

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<sup>73</sup> Bill Gharrity, “Hmong often treated badly in new home,” *Eau Claire Leader Telegram*, June 7, 1982.

<sup>74</sup> Bill Gharrity, “Hmong often treated badly in new home.”

<sup>75</sup> Kao Xiong, interview by Tim Pfaff, 26 October 1992

<sup>76</sup> Bill Gharrity, “Harassment of Hmong stirs concern among police,” *Eau Claire Leader Telegram*, June 15, 1982.

about something the person has nothing to do with or has no ability or no jurisdiction to respond.”<sup>77</sup> This was an issue for the Hmong that took some time for adjustment.

### *Conclusion*

From the moment that the Laotian civil war went in the favor of the communists, the Hmong were faced with an almost impossible situation. First they were forced out of their homeland and into Thai refugee camps. Life there was harsh, and the camps were not meant for permanent residence, so most Hmong refugees were forced to migrate to the United States. Once they arrived here, they encountered an American culture that was very different from their experiences in Laos and Thailand.

Eau Claire's rural setting has led it to be a popular destination for the Hmong people. The settlement process was helped along by the volunteer agencies in the Eau Claire community as well as the many sponsors that helped the Hmong in their transition to an American lifestyle. Family ties also were important in attracting the Hmong to Eau Claire, as the first Hmong settlers in Eau Claire advertised their positive experience to their friends and family members back in Thailand as well as in cities across the United States.

The first generation Hmong overcame much as they were adjusting to the lifestyle of Eau Claire. Due to cultural differences and the unfamiliarity with the American system, the Hmong were subject to prejudice and harassment in their early years in Eau Claire. Most important of these problems were the troubles that many faced in the educational system, especially in regard to English. Their deficiencies in English, as well as their unfamiliarity with the job finding process, led to difficulties in garnering

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<sup>77</sup> Kao Xiong, interview by Tim Pfaff, 26 October 1992.

employment. All of these contributed to the slow advancement of the Hmong in Eau Claire throughout the 1980s.

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