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Interview with Fong Her

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Fong Her*

Interviewer/Transcriber: Peter Chou Vang

Editor: Paul Hillmer

*Interview in English

Can you please state your name?

Fong Her (:06 sec)

What year were you born and where were you born?

I was born in 1969 [cannot say it in English] but in Laotian it's called *Pho Kham Houa. (:27 sec)

Growing up in Laos, what was your family's occupation?

We were farmers. (:36 sec)

Tell me your memories of Laos. What do you remember?

I came to Thailand when I was eight or seven years old. So when I was in Laos, I was a little kid and so I had no responsibility—mostly just playing times and hunting, fishing and a lot of stuff. We were in the mountains [of northern Laos], mostly we lived in the forest and it was just all kid's memories—fun games and stuff, but my parents were very hard-working people. (1:32)

In Laos did you experience any danger, any accidents or anything that was life-threatening?

Yes..Because we lived in the jungle we used a lot of primitive tools and sometimes those primitive tools—you have accidents with them. One time, my mom chopped one of my legs, but it was because [we] kids played [near her] and she accidentally did that. See right here [laughing and pointing to his three-inch scar]? And then, because of living in the jungle, there were a lot of diseases, also. When I was a baby, about maybe three or four years old, I got sick and my family thought that I was going to die. A lot of diseases...a lot of rare diseases also, but eventually when I grew up...those just went away. (3:05)

Were there any wild animal attacks or any thing like that—like when you see movies of tigers and leopards—anything like that?

Personally, I had never experienced it, but in our town, [the town was called *Raug Yia, "Straight Hill/Mountain"] there was a man who went hunting and he was attacked by a bear. He lived long enough to come back to town, but he was very messed up. (3:51)

After Laos, when you came to Thailand, can you tell me about your experience in Thailand? What was it like—was it different from Laos in any way?

Yes, Thailand was mostly what you call a refugee camp, so we were in a refugee camp and a whole bunch of people living in one camp. That means there's a lot of trash, a lot of diseases, not enough food, and you are not free to wander or hunt or farm, so it's pretty different. A very hard life, but of course I was still a kid so I didn't have much responsibility. (4:57)

Do you remember [how] the Thai people treated you?

When we got to Thailand, the Thai people did not like foreigners; they did not like refugees. So they were beating people up [Hmong refugees] around us. The morning that we reached Thailand, we were in a big group so a lot of the people around us got robbed and beaten up. Luckily my family was not beaten or robbed. But whatever that we had, whatever money that we had, they came by and searched everything. So they got everything. We were brought into a camp, we were fed that morning and we were shifted to the refugee camp where we stayed about a year and a half. (6:10)

What [do you remember about] growing up in the refugee camp in Thailand?

Mostly just playing...when we got there...we did go to school there but most of the memories playing as a kid out in the field [speaking in Hmong about a game involving rubber bands]. We're in Thailand, we had no source of money so the shopping things like that...it does not exist. We were able to sell chicken bones and in Thailand that's pretty rare. One other thing is that as a kid we looked for Pepsi bottle...we don't get a lot for those but as a kid you get a few Thai money called *Ba. You get...not even a *Ba, it's like a fourth of a *Ba and that's pretty good and you could buy candy with that. Pepsi bottles were very rare, chicken bones were even rarer, so we searched for that. And another thing was the refugee camp had a center. Because we kids were not used to drink milk they forced us to drink milk before they give us candy or crackers...but we want those crackers so we had to drink milk to get it. So every time that we want cracker we had to go to that center to drink milk. (8:43)

What year did you and your family come to Thailand?

1978 (8:53)

And you stayed there for a year and a half. When you first came to the United States, how old were you?

I was about nine years old. (9:04)

Tell me about your trip from Thailand to United States. Where did you go and where did you travel to?

We came out of that refugee camp and we stayed a week at Bangkok. Coming out of the refugee camp...it's pretty hard for the adults but for our kids it was just another trip. We went to Bangkok, we stayed there for a year and that wasn't a camp but it was a refugee but it's like a refugee area. Also and it's a lot worse than the camps because you go to Bangkok, you had a little place and you stay there and there's no food also. So we stayed there a week or two and then we finally got onto the plane to America. We came and we landed in California. Most likely, San Francisco...oh no, it's San Francisco. We got to San Francisco...of course we don't speak any English. My brother, my older brother speaks a little bit so he was just listening to our names (calling out their names at the airport). It was like a bad dream, right now I remember it's like a bad dream. We got to San Francisco, it was at night. They ship us to a farm; we stayed there about a week or two. I remember when we got to the farm, we got a room for our whole family. We had nine people in our family at that time. We had a room for our whole family. There were bunk beds, we had a room for our family, we didn't know how to sleep on the bunk beds so took the sheets (and mattresses) from the bunk beds and laid it on the floor. So we slept on the floor. I remember, we didn't know how to use the bathroom so we had to ask for that and then they gave us apples and we didn't know how to eat them. It was like a bad dream. Then from

there, we stayed a couple weeks there and then we were shipped to St. Paul, Minnesota. (12:05)

Telling me your experience growing up in both Laos and Thailand and then the transition to the United States—especially St. Paul. Was your first experience with the snow, cold weather and the environment were there's a lot of different ethnic groups...how do you feel about all this new strange environment?

When we were in Laos, we were in the mountains. We were free to hunt, to do whatever. We were farmers so we're not a typical American farmer but a mountain farmer. That meant that we had to cut down a lot of the forest just to plant (slash-n-burn method) our crops. Free to hunt, to fish and to whatever...we got to Thailand, it's a refugee camp. It was pretty restricted, you can't go outside the camp or you get shot. When we got to St. Paul, it was May the 9th, 1980. It was still cold that year. We don't have any coats, they passed us coats for that spring. A church sponsored us...it's a church it's not a family...that meant they had more funds to receive us at that time. We had a house ready to move in when we got here. We had food in the refrigerator. We had a lot of food. We never experienced that and then also, we had people—brother-in-law, aunt and uncle they were already here...so when we got to St. Paul it was a lot easier for us kids and for the adults also because a lot of people that we knew were already here. It was a church that sponsored us, not a family that meant we had everything ready when we got here. (14:50)

Do you still keep in touch with the church sponsors?

Not for the past six or seven years, but before that we did. Right now, we got to this country 1980...so 2003...that's 23 years. So maybe...we kept in touch the first 15 years but the last six, seven or eight years we haven't been able to get in touch with them. (15:31)

Tell me your first experience in the St. Paul public school. How did it felt to go to school for the first time?

I wasn't that dizzy but my younger brother was puking [he couldn't pronounce it right and Fong laughed for 3 seconds after I corrected him]. That was something because we never experienced riding the bus like that. When we got to school, of course we do not know any English so at that time I knew the words, "O.K." and "yes." I remember one time, I was going to the teacher and wanted to go to the bathroom. I went to the teacher and stared at him for a long time and I just ran out to the bathroom and I guessed he understood that [chuckled to himself]. We were with a lot of Hmong kids, so even though I don't speak any English we were still comfortable at school...not that we weren't with American kids or what they call it...the mainstream class. (16:58)

What were the elementary school, middle school and high school that you attended? What did you guys learn at this time? Where exactly in St. Paul did you stay?

When we came to St. Paul, the sponsors had bought a house [correcting himself whether the house was bought or rented] at Snelling and Hewitt. It's on Hewitt, just two blocks west of Snelling. So we lived there. The first elementary school we went to was Highland Park Elementary. From there, I finished with ESL [English as a Second Language] there. I think it was like third or fourth grade...[he was confused]...I spent half of fourth grade at Hancock elementary and then all of fifth grade at Hancock elementary. When I came to Hancock...I was with the mainstream class which is...I'm the only Hmong because at that time, they felt [because of testing] that we were ready enough to get in those classes. And

then from there, sixth grade was at Park Way Elementary. Then my junior high was at Cleveland and at that time we moved to the East Side [St. Paul] already so...Cleveland Jr. High. Then from Cleveland Jr. High to Humboldt High School. We moved to the South Side already when we were at Humboldt. I graduated from Humboldt High School. (18:44)

Tell me how your experiences with high school and with your Hmong culture influenced you in college.

Humboldt...every school was a little different, I guess Humboldt had a lot of different ethnic background in there. There's Hmong, there's Mexican, there's...many different cultures in there. We participated in a lot of after-school curriculums...I participated in a lot of after-school curriculums also. In that way, you got mixed up with different kids, different background kids and...in that way it prepared you for college, where you go to a place that you have basically no friends and you have to make new friends. That helped a lot. I went down to the University of Madison, Wisconsin. At that time, as far as I know, I was the only one from St. Paul [who was] Hmong and the people that I know down there so...I had to make new friends down there. (20:26)

What motivated you to go to college? What was the primary factor in it?

It was a choice that I made long before I got to my senior year. The stories of suffering and hard work in Laos from my parents...that motivated me. When we were in Laos, my parents had ten children. Three of them were married already [back in Laos and Thailand], so then we had seven kids [in their family back in Laos]—very small kids. During the war, we were going into the jungles and following people. A lot of relatives didn't like us because we had a lot of small kids in our family. So that meant that the stories that my parents told us...the relatives didn't like us and that we were alone now and we had to educate ourselves so they can respect us. It's not totally like this but you get something like this to motivate you to get as high as you can [educationally]. So that...that's pretty [strong] motivation for me and my younger brothers. (22:15)

I'm going to ask you two questions. What is your career or your occupation right now? Looking back to see where you came from...from the mountains of Laos, do you considered yourself successful in what you done with your life so far?

Right now I'm self employed as a realtor, selling houses. My wife is doing closings for all of my transactions and then we have set up a travel agency with our real estate business also. We didn't do this until 2001. Before that, I went to school as an electrical engineer...I worked as an electrical engineer for...I think...about five or six years. From there, I transferred a little bit into real estate and now I am a full-time realtor. I have my own real estate company now. We have about nine agents in my company, plus the closing and the travel agency...it's pretty OK. Considering back when I talked to my parents about the hard life in Laos, the farming, the hunting, everything...they never seem to be interested in those anymore. Considering the hard life in Laos to basically live by the rules in Thailand and then to this country...from the time we were little up to now...I think that we're doing OK. Just measuring [comparing] with other families, I think that we're doing pretty OK. (24:27)

Are there some things about Thailand or Laos that you want to [pass on to] your children—so that they'll grow up and appreciate that they are living in a free country—where they're not oppressed? What is the biggest thing that you want to

leave behind for your children to remember about Laos and Thailand and the Hmong Culture?

Right now I have two girls; one is eleven years old, one is going to be ten...in September. I'm trying to teach them the...well not teach but tell them the experience that we had in Laos. Maybe not the really hard life, but what we were like over there, so...they know where we came from and know...maybe not the whole history... [but they will] have a feel of where we were. Like I always told them, "Back there, we didn't have gifts, we didn't have shoes, we didn't have pants, we didn't have toys, we didn't have a lot of things." So they should appreciate if they have food on the table and that's it. (26:32)

Do you believe that certain values of the Hmong culture should be kept for the younger generations?

I'm a Christian now and [he says in Hmong that he doesn't keep with the old traditional ways]...a lot of the Hmong culture originated from the Shamans and the spiritual world so...I do not think that all of the things that relate to Hmong culture should be kept, but the values should be kept and practiced. A lot of the things that we practiced originated from...what they call "culture"...originated from spirits and Shamanism and what do you call...[I answered: "Ancestral worship"]...yeah something like that. So, I don't think a lot of...as they say...culture should be kept, but I believe that the values should be there, but we should not practice a lot of that. (28:12)

One last question: What do you have to say to Hmong who, maybe ten years from now, will be listening to your recording? Is there any wise saying that you want to leave with them?

We Hmong are hard working people and we share values that...I know that we adapt to the world we live in—in the environment that we live in—very quickly. That is not always a good thing. Adapting too fast to the environment you live in is not always a good thing. Sometimes adapting too fast...will get you into trouble, and I see that happening. Trying to...well remember that we are hard working people and we should value that from our parents and our grandparents. Like how Americans say, "There's no free lunch." so whatever you see and you want, you have to work for. [Speaking in Hmong "Like they say"] "Whatever you see, that's what you get." So if you want to get something, you have to work hard for it. (30:22)

OK, thank you for your time.

No problem. (30:25)