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Interview with Jim Anderson

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Jim Anderson

Interviewer/Transcriber/Editor: Paul Hillmer

9 June, 2005

James Anderson is Ramsey County Department of Human Services' Planner for Immigrants, Refugees, and the Homeless. He spent about ten years working in Thailand in various capacities, helping Hmong and Cambodian refugees under the auspices of the International Rescue Committee.

(00:02) Could you talk about some of the experiences that led up to your decision to join the IRC [International Rescue Committee], maybe a bit about what the IRC is, and what led you in that direction?

Well, I have to admit that my—the circumstances leading up to my going over there were as happenstance as they could possibly be. I had a friend who was working in Thailand who was working for the program called the JVA, the Joint Voluntary Agency, which is the—the IRC had a contract with the State Department to represent the other resettlement agencies back in the States as one of the legs of the three-legged stool that administered their refugee resettlement program in Thailand, along with the State Department—

[recorder stopped]

...and I was standing in the middle of a blizzard in Fairbanks, Alaska when I got this letter saying, 'How would you like to come to Thailand?' and [chuckles] I looked at it as deliverance...

(1:14) What were you doing in Fairbanks?

I was just traveling with a friend, seeing the sights, trying to figure out what I was going to do with my life. I had just finished a Master's program in social work, and was still trying to figure that out when this letter arrived and the opportunity just to get out of a snowstorm in Fairbanks seemed like a good idea. I was thought I was going for six months. I didn't know what I was going to be doing. All I knew was I was going to be working with refugees in Thailand. I was like a lot of Americans at the time. When we signed the Peace Accords in Paris in 1973 it was like, 'Halleluia! It's over! We don't have to think about that anymore. It's passed.' And the last thing in the world that I wanted to do was to keep alive sort of thinking about Vietnam in particular and Southeast Asia in general, and I was glad to have avoided the draft, and that was it for me. So I really hadn't given any thought to it. I went to Thailand thinking I was—I was on a six-month contract, and I figured I could do anything for six months. And upon arrival there I went right out to the Thai-Cambodian border—this was in early October of 1980—and I was so shocked at what had transpired, learning about all that had transpired in this region since 1973.

(3:01) What kinds of things do you remember learning?

Well, it was an incredible experience on the Thai-Cambodian border at that point because there was still this crush of new arrivals, all in very, very bad shape, fresh from the Khmer Rouge genocide, and learning about that, not knowing—realizing how completely oblivious that I had been to this incredible catastrophe that had been going on throughout the region. And then subsequently learning more about the whole—I remember seeing a *Sixty Minutes* report back in '79 on the Vietnamese boat arrivals, and how serious that was, and—but again, it was sort of, 'Well, that's another place, it's not—it doesn't concern me.' I was like most Americans over all of that news, getting confronted with all of it face to face, and then subsequently learning about the Hmong and

the experience that they had undergone, particularly after we had signed the Peace Accords in '73. I was absolutely blown away. It was so cataclysmic, and of such great moment. You know, six months went by and the thought of leaving then was just impossible. And so I wound up staying, and wound up staying...

(4:46) Tell me, as much as you can remember, about your first contact with Hmong people and the issues surrounding them in Laos and the challenges of bringing them into Thailand.

The first, well, the first experience was really second-hand, because a lot of the folks that were in the refugee section at the US embassy in Bangkok were folks that had been very involved with the whole 'secret war' in Laos, folks who had been on the ground there—folks like Mac Thompson and Jerry Daniels. So hearing about it from them, first off, and then [I] had a chance to go up with one of the JVA teams to do some interviewing, originally in Ban Vinai, and later in *Chiang Kham, and going through the interviews, and one of the—the JVA part of that whole interview, or the resettlement process, was doing the initial file preparation for all of the refugee applicants for resettlement, and a part of that was getting a bio to basically make the case for refugee status—although for the Hmong it was pretty much of a slam dunk. I mean, if the Hmong wanted to go, they got to go, but unlike most of the Southeast Asian refugee groups there, the Hmong were probably the least enthused about resettlement to the United States. Most wanted to hang in there. Most still had the dream of recapturing an independent lifestyle in the hills of Laos and didn't want to go anywhere, and they knew that the lifestyle would be so much different in the United States than anything that they felt prepared for, and...

[Interrupted]

(7:12) So in making application, they had a lot of misgivings about coming here...

A lot of them did. A lot of folks were willing to at least go through that first stage, they felt it was probably a good idea at least to have a file, but a lot of folks, after they got approved, and the buses would arrive in camp, they simply wouldn't show up. And so—and these were interview approvals that started back in 1978, '79. When we were interviewing them in '81, '82, '83 they were coming back and we were, 'Why didn't you go the last time when you had the opportunity?' and they'd say, 'Well, we were told by our parents or grandparents back in Laos that our cousin was coming out and we needed to stay and wait for them.' Or in one amazing story that was translated to us with an absolute straight face and obviously was firmly believed, the family said, 'We were ready to go, we were convinced that we were going to go, and we packed up and we were actually walking from our house down to the central collection area where the buses were, and a snake crossed the path, and it stopped in the middle of the path. We tried to shoo it away, and it wouldn't move. So we knew then that it wasn't just a snake. It was the spirit of our grandparents telling us that we weren't allowed to go yet, that we had a cousin who had not yet come out, and that it was our obligation to wait for him.' So I asked them, 'Well, what happens this time if a snake crosses the path?' and they said, 'Well then it's just a snake, because our cousin is already here.' [Interviewer laughs] So there were lots of reasons, but essentially, for most, either the father or grandfather was a former soldier who still felt a military obligation to be available to carry on the fight, or that they really did have this hope that there would be a regime change in Laos and it would allow them to return and re-capture what they had lost. So a lot of people weren't just willing to go. And one of the things that constantly amazed me was we'd have these very, very bright, young interpreters, often times married with children of their own, who weren't applying for resettlement. And I'd ask, you know, 'It's amazing to me, because it seems like you would do extraordinarily well in the United States,' and

they would say, 'My father or grandfather says no, we're not going.' And there wasn't any sense of, 'I have the right to question that or respond to that in any way.' It's simply 'that's the way it is.' And these were grown people with families of their own. The rule of the family leader was absolute. So there were lots of folks who didn't want to go, but in collecting their stories and taking down all of these bios, and finding out more about what their involvement had been, and—some of these folks had been actively fighting since they were 12 years old, and now were grandparents—young grandparents, mind you, but grandparents nonetheless. And the thought that they had spent almost their entire life, virtually their entire—what we would consider adolescent through adulthood life, either fighting or in flight, was just mind-boggling to me—and that very rarely did I ever encounter anybody that blamed the US. Most tended to insist that they were grateful for the assistance that the US provided to them, but really what they were doing was fighting for their own cause. And what I heard from US officials in the embassy—those in the know and those who had been on the ground and those who had really been through a lot of the stuff with some of these folks, were much more adamant about the fact that the US had made a lot of assurances and a lot of promises and that we basically turned our back on them. We abandoned them and left them to a very, very cruel fate. But I rarely heard that from the Hmong themselves. That's very interesting. And I don't know whether that was something that they didn't want to raise with me, an American, sort of a quasi-government official, because it wouldn't have been polite, or it wouldn't have been advantageous for them. I'm not sure, but I didn't really get the sense that there was this angry feeling of betrayal, but I felt that from a lot of the American folks who had been involved in the war effort in Laos.

(13:32) You mentioned that you were hearing these stories from people who had been in the field. What kinds of things were you hearing that helped shape your understanding of what was going on in these parts of Southeast Asia that, as you said, most Americans hadn't thought twice about?

It was most dramatic just the second day off the plane when I started talking through an interpreter with some of the Cambodian refugees and learning about what life had been like under Pol Pot, what they had lost, and then in subsequent following up, learning about the experience of the Vietnamese refugees, and the whole boat experience, and then learning about what had happened following the evacuation from Long Cheng, and how desperate people had been because reports were flying all over the place, 'The Vietnamese are coming! The Vietnamese are coming! We've got to get out of here,' not knowing where to go, not really—most folks that I talked to didn't say, 'Well, we're going to go to Thailand and we're going to sit there for a while, and wait 'til we can come home.' They were just fleeing their village. That's really all the further they were taking this, and they were going to hide out, maybe in the jungle for a while and see what would happen, and sort of just the momentum or meeting up with other groups and they sort of inexorably started heading down toward the Mekong River. So just that whole collection of experiences which were, by nationality very unique and very separate, but in sum total painted this picture of just complete human devastation. It was just—it was absolutely overwhelming.

(15:43) What kind of impact does that have on a young man who's figuring he's just signing up for six months?

I think—there were a lot of folks over there that came over and did these interviews and just couldn't really handle it. And I think that—I don't know what it was about the make-up of folks who wound up staying a long time. But I think—gaining the perspective of trying to be empathetic without sort of absorbing the experience—I mean, if you took these stories home at night and slept on them at night, you wouldn't sleep, and they'd eventually have to get out of there. I mean, it was nightmarish. Talking to a Cambodian refugee less than a year or about a year removed from the

Khmer Rouge, when everything was extremely fresh, was a pretty awesome experience, I would have to say. I think a part of it was the fact that this was the one outlet that they had. This was the one opportunity that they were being given to, one, tell their story, and two, hopefully get out of there—you know, have that opportunity to get out of there. And knowing how important that was at that particular point in time sort of, I think gave a lot of meaning to it all.

(17:39) How much information did you and your colleagues have to actually collect? Can you give me a sense of what that process was like?

Well, it really varied. We spent a lot of time, particularly in the early '80s, in serious opposition to INS policy. The way it worked was the JVA program did the initial interviews and prepared the case files, organized the information around family trees and all of that, tried to link up with—you know, 'Does this family tree match the family tree of the supposed brother who left two years ago?' or whatever. So we gathered all of that initial information. The State Department sort of oversaw and did—you know, overall policy regarding the resettlement effort and the local negotiations with the Thai government, and then INS would come in and they would make the final determination as to who was going and who was not. And unlike for the Hmong, for a lot of the Cambodian refugees and Vietnamese refugees it was very difficult. It was very difficult getting approved. The INS came in with a 'border defense' mentality and it was their job not to provide easy access to the United States. And the US was still trying to sort out how we were interpreting the Immigration Act of 1980, and how that affected refugee processing and all of that, and INS had a very, very strict constructionist view of their role there, and basically it was to keep the stop sign up and firmly in place. So we found ourselves pretty dramatically opposed to what INS was doing. And the more opposed that we would be, the more detail we would try to coax out of the refugees to try to build that case for refugee status that was so blatantly obvious. So we'd have to get into a fair amount of detail the further we went along in that process until things changed pretty dramatically. INS officials and Justice officials came out to view the operations along about '82, '83, '84, and during that process they'd come back and they'd be pretty appalled at what their own INS officers were doing there. And they'd issue a series of guidance memos that eventually sort of brought everybody back into a more 'team' approach. But through those first several years, we found ourselves going into more and more and more detail. We wanted to know—and this in itself had to have been a fairly harrowing experience for the refugees themselves, having to sort of maybe re-live in too much detail what had gone on and how much they had lost. But it was the only way we were getting folks approved.

(21:25) Did your job responsibilities change over time?

Well, yeah, it changed. I went over there and I spent probably the first year as an interviewer and then I became a team leader, still doing interviews but sort of overseeing that team of interviewers that we were there for, and then by '84 I had become the program manager for the JVA program over there, and then...

(21:57) What did that involve?

It involved spending more time than I wanted to in Bangkok and then not being attached to any particular team out in the field but going around and seeing we were operational and at any given time in six or seven different camps, so going around and spending time with each of them...

(22:23) Sort of a regional supervisor...

Yeah. And then after that I became the—IRC had the JVA program there, but they also had a very large assistance program providing all kinds of programs in the camps: sanitation, public health,

education programs, etc., etc., medical programs, and I became the Thailand country director for the assistance program in '87. That's what I did for the last four years there. And we had a large program in Ban Vinai and *Chiang Kham and then in *Ban Napho as well—where the Hmong, after they closed down Ban Vinai, actually after I left, they closed down. Ban Vinai was the last remaining strictly Hmong camp and they moved everybody to Napho where they still had a certain residual population of lowland Lao, so...

(23:33) So, for the uninitiated, what does a refugee need, how is a refugee treated, under what conditions does a refugee live?

Well, it varies a lot, and the Thais—I can speak most directly about the Thai experience, obviously. The Thais were very clever about milking it for all it was worth, frankly. I mean they—I want to be really fair and paint this in its truest sense, because Thailand was besieged. They were overwhelmed with refugee arrivals, and their initial reaction was the same as any country to a wave, a large wave of what they considered to be undocumented illegal immigrants—and that is, 'No, you can't come in here.' But it was also in the context of a very dicey situation for Thailand, because here the Cambodian refugees were being chased to the border literally by the Vietnamese troops, so the dreaded Vietnamese army was literally at their doorstep and there was very little doubt that if the Vietnamese had wanted to do so they could march right in to Thailand—that there was very little the Thai military could do to stop them. And so it wasn't an ordinary refugee situation for Thailand. It was definitely a national security situation and they were able to parlay the refugee crisis into a ton of international agreements for their own national security's sake: agreements with the United States, agreements with China. China, who was backing the Khmer Rouge, was seeking Thai access to be able to supply the Khmer Rouge, and still the primary fighting force, as a guerilla force against the Vietnamese and using Thai access to the Khmer Rouge at the border to be able to supply them and keep them supplied—so Thailand very adroitly sort of maneuvered all of this. There were also a lot of reports—'cause in the mid- to late '70s Thailand had a fairly serious, significant communist insurgency of its own to deal with that was supported by China, and it was reported by Nayan Chanda from the *Far East Economic News* that part of the agreement was that China could use Thailand to keep the Khmer Rouge a strong fighting force in return for withdrawing assistance for the Thai communist insurgency, which literally vanished overnight. So Thailand managed things pretty well, but in order to do that, they had to agree to provide some asylum, which they continued to do reluctantly, and keeping conditions as semi-difficult as they possibly could. They were certainly adamant about the fact that they didn't want any refugee competition economically in the local regions. That had its own bad, negative side effects because...

(27:47) What do you mean by “refugee economic competition”?

They didn't want refugees being able to go out and set up businesses or even to compete for jobs out in the countryside. So basically they set up concentration camps and kept people penned in as best they could. And that had its own drawbacks, because the locals would see truck after truck of supplies and all of this food coming in and, 'Hey! Nobody's bringing me any food!' So there really wasn't anything that the Thais could do to sort of be perfectly delightful for their own citizens over this whole arrangement, but they would work things out so that they got enough international aid and enough international assistance that they could keep things going. But in the meanwhile there was—it wasn't a static population, it was a—I mean, there was a steady influx, and Thailand periodically would announce that, 'All right, that's it! We're closing the border! Nobody else is getting in', [etc.]. With the Cambodian situation on the border it was particularly intense, because the one main large Cambodian refugee camp was only about ten kilometers removed from the

border where there were anywhere from 400-800,000 Cambodians who weren't allowed in, but were sort of captive of the—of various political factions along the Thai-Cambodian border.

(29:40) I assume there was a significant amount of exploitation of these refugees once they crossed the river.

Oh yeah. Absolutely. And for the Hmong, the Thais always saw the—you know, 'The US is willing to take them, why don't they just go?' And so the Thais were constantly issuing announcements saying, 'This is your last chance. We're going to let the US Embassy come up here and they're going to interview you for resettlement. If you don't take it this time, this is your last chance. We're not giving you another chance.' And the Hmong, for their own reasons, would take that with a grain of salt, and then six months later they would get their next 'last' warning. [Both chuckle] And that went on every year, at least a couple of times a year they'd get a last warning, to the point where they absolutely stopped believing it entirely. And so when the Thais, in the early '90s finally moved to actually start closing camps, they didn't believe it then, either, until it was too late.

(30:52) But getting back to this idea of what the refugee camp experience was like...

Yeah. It was probably the most boring existence you can possibly imagine, because they weren't allowed to do anything. There were folks, particularly young folks, would clamor to come and work for the agencies that were setting up programs in the camp and they'd learn skills and there were a lot of folks that would enroll in both child and adult education programs in the camps, but there wasn't anything to do. It was just—it was enforced idleness. It was so unnatural. It was painful to hear kids talk about, 'Yeah, I know where rice comes from. It comes from the back of the UN truck.' And that's what they were growing up in. Kids growing up and spending fifteen years and never seeing dad or mom work—not a normal, healthy situation whatsoever. It was amazing to me that there weren't more problems in the camp, because—you know, just sort of interfamilial conflicts, because, you know, there's so much time on your hands. It was just—I was struck when we went to *Wat Tham Krabok, which was a very, very different situation entirely, because it was basically a free-standing village and everybody had to work. They weren't being provided any services or anything, period—and everybody talked about—particularly up until a couple years ago when the Thai military moved to consolidate control over the camp, that it was far, far preferable. I mean it was a real life, and they liked it there, as opposed to the refugee camps, which almost universally they talked about hating. They'd have to troop down once or twice a week to get their rice supply off the back of the trucks and drag it home. That was one of the more exciting points of the week. And you'd see, you know, you'd see kids running around playing everywhere, but there was just this look of depression upon all of the adults. They'd just sit there and—there's nothing to do, and I'm sure they were just bored out of their minds. And there wasn't any way to relieve that, which is perhaps why the birth rate remained so high in the camp. [Chuckles] So not a pleasant experience at all. They had basic amenities. I mean, nobody was starving to death, everybody had housing, everybody had access to medical care—so everything was being provided, but it was just a totally empty experience.

(34:31) Like standing in line for five, ten, fifteen years.

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. And there was this feeling, even amongst folks who really didn't want to go, there was this sense that it was available to them, so that if they ever decided to resettle to the United States that it was available. The United States sort of represented—not as satisfactory as the idea of going home to Laos, but it sort of represented in a lot of people's minds, I think, this golden panacea, that everything will be OK. If we resettle to the United States, if we decide that we have to do that, then our problems will be over, because America is such a rich country. And so, I think

that helped people deal with the sense of trauma and loss that they were going through in the refugee camps, that they could put it off because they saw—either way, if they had the opportunity to return to Laos, Plan A, that would be great. If they were forced into resettlement to the US, that would be OK too, and so they said, internally, I think, they were able to justify this putting off the shock of their own experience. And then having the opportunity of coming here and working in refugee programs here and seeing, I think, the mental health problems for refugees in the first couple of years here is extraordinary because all of a sudden they realize, one, just how overwhelmingly difficult it is to adjust to life here, and two, all that stuff that they had been able to sort of allay for so long in the camps came rushing back. I think that sort of double whammy was sort of overwhelming. But I think that overall, my experience coming out of working in the refugee camps was—it was an experience that I don't think anybody over the age of three found in any way defensible. It was a bad, horrible, foreign, eternal kind of existence.

[End Side A]

(0:00) Did you get to know any Hmong people or Hmong families to the point where you felt that you gained more insight into Hmong culture or the Hmong situation?

Yeah, there were several families in Ban Vinai that I got to know pretty well working there. They were families of the interpreters I worked with. And they really went out of their way to talk to me about life in Laos, and what it was like, to explain their culture and show me hospitality. And what stood out for me was how endlessly awkward I felt, because they would really delight in inviting me to their house for supper, and they would always put on a splendid feast—and I always knew that this was the equivalent of about a week's worth of rations. But they insisted on doing it. And this was an experience that was pretty common for a lot of us, that the less you have, the more you were willing to give. And it always felt very uncomfortable. There didn't seem to be any way to repay that. It seemed to be very one-sided—that I was learning a lot, that they were sharing a lot with me, and I just didn't know what I had to share with them. But nevertheless, I really appreciated how they were willing to take me under their wing. They really—I don't think there was anything in it for them. They didn't want anything from me. They just were incredibly warm, generous—I had the same experience in Cambodian and Vietnamese camps as well. I think that it was a fantastic lesson for me in how much they valued just human interaction in a way that, I think in some cases, that our fast-paced world has lost. So what I learned about the Hmong culture I learned kind of like from about three or four specific families who were really very open and willing to share.

(3:18) How did your perspective change as your job descriptions changed and you sort of took on more responsibility in this area?

Well, overall I would say that it was hard not to become pretty cynical about the whole process. [I] realized that ostensibly the whole refugee program is a humanitarian response, but that it's really primarily a political response, and that it's very much parceled out based on political interests. I developed some friendships later on with folks who had been working in Central America in particular, and we realized that the experience there was very, very different from what we were experiencing there. And we really felt a sense of—by and large, we sensed a sense of common mission with a lot of the embassy folks in Bangkok, [who] were very interested in the whole refugee situation and realized that such was not the case for countries that we were less inclined to be of assistance to, particularly countries like Nicaragua, that we were much more likely to welcome refugees from Nicaragua than we were for refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala, whose regimes were every bit as hostile and brutal to their own citizens, but they just happened to be on our side, and therefore their people who were escaping couldn't possibly be refugees. So as I

became more aware of how these things varied across the board, it was also—and the thing that still just amazes me is that we were almost totally silent on the fact that there were, at any given time, several hundred thousand people who continued to be basically prisoners of the Khmer Rouge along the Thai-Cambodian border, and the US was completely unwilling to raise a voice of any kind about that situation, simply because the Khmer Rouge were absolutely needed in order to keep the pressure on the Vietnamese in Cambodia—to the extent that when somebody would flee from the Khmer Rouge-dominated camps along the border, the US would tacitly approve of them being rounded up and sent back. So the broader my perspective got, the more cynical it all appeared for me.

(6:48) Did you have any contact with people from the *Chao Fa* movement?

A little bit. They would come into Ban Vinai periodically—[they] tended not to, obviously, come down and mix it up the US government folks at all—I mean, we were sort of all seen, whether we worked for voluntary agencies or the government, we were all sort of seen as this collective—we were all American people, you know. And they knew that their presence in Ban Vinai and *Chiang Kham and in other camps was very controversial for the Thais—the Thais didn't want to acknowledge that at all. So they tended to stay away from us, but, you know, we'd constantly get reports from others, 'Yeah, they're in here and they're talking and trying to recruit and talk to folks about going back in. They're getting supplies, they're just having R & R,' whatever.

(7:56) Did you have a significant number of people who actually left the camps and returned to Laos?

Not a significant number, no. It wasn't so significant that, at any time there was a noticeable drop in the number of folks in the camp. I mean, there would be people leaving, but we would have no way of identifying them, because none of the programs that were being offered were in any way mandatory, and so there wasn't any attempt to sort of do a roll call.

(8:34) Now let's make sure I have this right: the refugee crosses the river and makes it to the refugee camp how?

Generally there were guides who would pick folks up on the Laos side of the border and take them across the river and then bring them into the camp. And there were lots of reports that some of the guides were very trustworthy and some were very not trustworthy. They had no intention of delivering folks to the camps; they would just take them half-way across the river and dump the boats after they got paid and, you know, whatever—or they'd bring them across and turn them in to Thai authorities. So it was always real dicey for folks, as they were crossing the river, whether they were actually going to get into the camp or not.

(9:44) So then they get into the camp and, I assume, through some process, you or one of your colleagues are notified that you need to come in and process this bio...

Well, the first thing they do is they go to get registered with the UN. I mean, they'd have to do that to have any kind of legal status in the camp. And once they got in and got registered with the UN, then the UN would regularly send us copies of the registration so that we'd know who was there. This is when we were still—we're talking about the resettlement program now. And then we'd put 'em on lists and call them in.

(10:28) What do you think kept you there for ten years? As you said, that's certainly not what you expected to begin with.

Yeah. Well, one, I loved Thailand. I loved the tropics and—it was a beautiful place to be, and it had—the beaches were great. I would say that it was—I mean, it was the most meaningful work that I'd ever done. It was interesting, it was exciting, it—you know, I had a sense that there was real purpose to what we were doing and—knowing that that doesn't always happen...[Chuckles] So I think all of those factors combined, and then, you know, I met my wife over there...

Oh really?

Yeah. And we got married over there and had two children over there, and I don't know how long we would have stayed there. We loved it right up until the end, but the last four years we lived in Bangkok and I would probably spend at least 60% of my time in Bangkok, and Bangkok's a tough place to live. I mean, there's an 18-hour traffic [jam]. There was no freeway system—now there's a—it's quite amazing to go back now, because things have really changed a lot. You can actually get around in the city now. But there was an 18-hour traffic jam, the air quality was horrible—it just sort of weighs you down after a while. And so that's really why we left; we just got tired of Bangkok.

(12:27) Sorry, I need to back-track again a little bit. When you were serving these refugee camps, where were you physically stationed? Do you live right outside the camp...?

Yeah, usually in the closest accessible town. The IRC would either rent—depending on the size of the team, we'd either rent hotel rooms or we'd rent houses and live there. And sometimes the team would be in place—well, obviously on the assistance side it would be a permanent sort of set-up. Most of the folks we hired on, expatriate folks, we'd hire on for year contracts, and Thais were there much longer-term. But with the resettlement program the teams would be in place anywhere from a two-week stretch to a six-month stretch, and sometimes longer. And when we started processing in *Khao-I-Dang [a Khmer refugee camp in Thailand] we were there a long time. Ban Vinai was pretty much—probably eight months out of the year we had a team out there.

(13:47) How much training did you receive when you first got started?

When I first got started not a whole lot, not a whole lot—because they were still making it up as we went along. We were still trying to figure out what information was needed and how this was all going to shake out. We eventually started working on an orientation manual. People would actually go through a couple weeks of orientation when they first arrived, but that came later.

(14:21) So then when you were a program manager, where were you stationed and how would you go about supervising the people under you?

Well, actually stationed in Bangkok, but at that point I was still probably out country at least 80% of the time, going from camp to camp. I had a motorcycle I used to drive around. It was great.

(14:47) Who is your wife? How did you meet?

My wife is Liz Walker, and she actually came to work at JVA. Her sister Susan was the first Thailand director for the American Refugee Committee when they were setting up their program. Her other sister Pat was in medical school and went over as part of ARC's first medical team that went over there. [The whole family lived in Thailand and Laos throughout the wars].

(15:21) And I suppose we should mention who their father was

And their father was Fred Walker, who was chief pilot for Air America in Vientiane for a number of years, right up until the end. And so Liz came to work for JVA while I was there and actually—very politically incorrect—I was her boss at the time. [Both laugh] And we hit it off.

(15:52) Is there anything in particular that you think the average uninformed American should know about the Hmong, about the refugee camps, and why they were told, as you say, that if they wanted to come to America, they could come?

In 1954, one of the provisions of the Geneva Conference that divided Vietnam into North and South was that the countries of the region should be basically allowed to determine their own fate, and that foreign troops were not allowed in. But with the collapse of the French colonial period that sort of brought on this political vacuum crisis that spurred the creation of the Geneva Conference to sort all this out—I mean, here we were, we were five years removed from China going communist, we were fresh on the heels of the stalemate in Korea, we were terrified, basically, that the whole Southeast Asian region, which certainly would have included Thailand in our calculations at that point, was about to topple into communism. So we weren't about to sort of leave the arena. We were also very wary of what it would mean if we were to directly violate the terms of the Geneva Conference by sending in troops. And Laos was really a major focus at the outset. And we wanted to—it was a major focus for basically both sides of the struggle. And we wanted to ensure that our interests there were protected. And the Hmong became our guys. They had already been working with the French, and we knew enough to know that these guys were really good. You know, they were really good at what they did. They were great soldiers, they were easily trained, they were willing, and we really looked to them to sort of spearhead this effort, to not only maintain a constant interdiction effort on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but also to try to preserve a pro-Western Laos as well. And so we were sort of cast in the role of overseers, payers, recruiters, trainers, suppliers, but they were the guys doing the fighting. And it took an incredible toll on their people, and that's why—I talked to folks and they'd been fighting since they were twelve years old. It didn't necessarily start out that way, but that's quickly how it evolved. I mean, if they were going to keep up the numbers required to maintain the struggle, that's what they had to do, and they were willing to do that. They thought they were riding a good horse in the US. They thought that if the US says they're going to back us and they're going to support us and they're never going to abandon us, that's a pretty good bet. So they believed in what they were fighting for, but they also believed in the US and the US, I don't think, ever ignored an opportunity to remind them that we were with them all the way. I mean, the reports are that the Hmong lost or—were either missing or killed in action ten per cent of their population. So—if we'd have lost the equivalent it would be twenty million instead of 55,000. So they suffered grievously. Going around *Wat Tham Krabok 25 years after the fact, [there were] still lots of folks with old war injuries—guys were missing limbs and—devastating, absolutely devastating. I virtually never talked to a family that didn't lose somebody. And it was particularly acute—I think they felt that they were fighting for something up until 1973. And then when we turned our backs and walked away and basically left them pretty defenseless, they really, really got hammered, and especially, I think, when their own leadership flew out of Long Cheng, it was like, 'We're on our own.' So to say that we owe the Hmong a great deal is a gross understatement. When I—you know, I talked to so many former servicemen men over there, former pilots who were rescued or knew other pilots who had been rescued, or people who had been brought out of Laos by the Hmong—incredible bravery going way behind enemy lines and risking their lives, their whole battalion's lives to rescue downed American pilots. What they were willing to do for us was absolutely beyond belief. The fact that we didn't win the war effort does not diminish in any way our responsibility for that whole group of people that we kept on the line for an awful long time. And, of course, I didn't know any of this before going over there. It just sort of revealed itself in layers, year after year, as I was over there. But the thing that we didn't know, the thing that—you know, all through the resettlement years what we didn't know was just how amazingly resilient this group of people is—that their capacity to absorb American culture and

master it and do well in it is beyond belief. When you spent time in a refugee camp with them and, for those who spent time with them in a more natural setting in Laos, the lifestyle and existence couldn't be further removed from our own here, and how they've been able to master that change is absolutely a miracle.

(24:38) What did you do when you left Thailand?

Initially went to Chicago. My wife had gotten a job as part of the first Asylum Corps with the INS. They set up a special Asylum Office because the number of asylum requests had gotten way beyond what the normal INS offices could handle, so they set up a special Asylum Corps, and they specifically had recruited from the old resettlement program, not just in Thailand, but elsewhere. So my wife got a job there, and we spent about a year in Chicago and realized that's not where we wanted to be—my wife is from here, and so when she got a job up here we moved up here, and it was quite miraculous that as we were moving up here Ramsey County was announcing their interest in hiring a refugee and immigrant planner. So I was very fortunate.

(25:49) So I imagine that you worked with a broad continuum of refugees.

Right. What was so great is that it really sort of helped complete the circle for me, because I had this overseas experience with the Southeast Asian refugees, but I only knew anecdotally what life was like on this side, and so being able to see more up close the struggles that people were going through, the successes and difficulties that people were having here, sort of helped put it all in perspective.

(26:35) I imagine you've worked with a significant number of Hmong refugees, immigrants. How would you describe that work and some of the issues that you and the people you've worked with have had to face?

Well, I think overwhelmingly the concern has always been—well, twofold, really. One is for that group of folks who were adults when they arrived—have really had a very difficult time here. I mean, it's been very, very hard—and I think increasingly so as time went on, because it became easier and easier to sort of settle into a Hmong enclave in St. Paul, and the sense of urgency about learning English and moving into our culture more, reduced for folks, because, you know, for those folks who were 25 years of age or older, who had never been to school, who knew not a single word of English when they arrived, it's hard to imagine just how difficult it was for them. So the big concern for the Hmong families and the Hmong community agencies trying to work with the Hmong refugees has largely been around that adult population when they arrived, and now the rapidly aging population, many of whom still have never made that acculturation, who still feel as foreign here as they did the first day they got off the plane. And that's terrifically sad. The other group of folks, really—I think that because, for a lot of the Hmong parents, their decision to come to the United States, whether reluctant or enthusiastic, was, for many if them, at least, was an admission that, essentially their life was no longer the focus, that everything now was being officially transferred to their children. And that put a lot of pressure on those kids, a lot of pressure to—you've got to do well. If your American classmate is spending an hour a night on homework, you have to spend three hours a night on homework. You have to observe Hmong rules in—heaven forbid—dating and, you know, socializing in general. You're not to become too American, although you have to learn English right away and you have to learn all about this culture but you have to stay Hmong. A lot of pressure, tremendous amount of pressure that kids went under, and what is so amazing is how many kids responded so wonderfully and successfully to that kind of pressure. But for a lot of kids it was really more than they could handle, and so you saw kids dropping out, a lot of, sort of the first intergenerational conflict, as far as I know, in Hmong history [Chuckles]—that

suddenly there's this huge gap between parents and their kids. And the parents no longer start—you know, they don't understand these kids, and these are the first kids going through adolescence. And just how difficult that was for both sides of that generational gap—and some kids wound up either directly and defiantly disobeying and sort of forcing the hand of their parents who said, 'We have no choice but to kick you out,' or the kids themselves chose to leave. And so that also has been very tragic—I think tragic on all kinds of levels. These kids who are getting kicked out of their Hmong families because they're too American, but not really being American enough to really fit in, and so sort of being stuck somewhere in the middle and being really lost and isolated. And no wonder there's an allure of joining some compatriots in a gang, because it's the only sense of family or belonging or understanding that you can find. So there's been that, that's been real difficult and real tragic for a lot of Hmong families. But I still think the overwhelming sense is that—just how miraculous it is that so many have done so well, and how justifiably proud they are that they've been able to do that, after what they've gone through, [to] come out the other side. So I would say both sides, you know, the elders and the youth are particularly vulnerable groups in this first, second and third generation of Hmong in the United States. As the older generation, as those adults pass on, and all of the Hmong will either have been born here or essentially raised here, I don't think we're going to see any different kinds of issues than we see with any other family in St. Paul. What makes this group still very unique is this bedrock of very knowledgeable folks about the old ways, and it's sad to think of that passing, although I think there's still sufficient interest amongst enough people that it won't pass easily. But over the course of the next 20 years, the Hmong culture of St. Paul will have suffered some really grievous losses, I'm sure.

(34:10) I know we're running short on time, but let's talk about this trip you took back to Thailand with Mayor Kelly's delegation and what that was like for you.

The first thing is what a great shock it was to everyone, I think here and there, that this was actually happening. Suddenly there was this announcement after years and years of—you know, there wasn't any talk of it—there wasn't any serious talk of it. There was some advocacy about—you know, 'Gee, the US really needs to do something about this population,' but there really wasn't anything seriously being discussed that we were aware of at all about resettlement. So all of a sudden it dropped on us like a bombshell. One of the things that became quickly apparent—it was obvious that we were going to get a significant portion of the folks from *Wat Tham Krabok here. It was equally obvious that there wasn't anybody who could really tell us much about that population, who they were and what that camp looked like and what the experience of the folks had been there. Even relatives who had made trips over there to see their family members had a fairly narrow view of what life was like there. And we talked to a bunch of folks that had been over there and at least got some information, but really had a hard time getting a handle on it—certainly didn't know anything about demographics. Normally in a refugee situation [it's the] easiest thing in the world. You can go on any web site for any of the non-governmental organizations working in a refugee camp or the UN or the International Committee for the Red Cross and find out all you want to know about the people who are living there, demographics-wise, at least. You can find out educational level, you can find out sort of what life is like there. We didn't have any access to information. The US embassy really didn't know much about this population at all. They hadn't spent any time there at all. The Thai government really—they didn't know a whole lot and weren't particularly interested, other than the fact that they wanted to see them gone. So there wasn't anybody to turn to; there were no organizations that were there providing services, so we really quickly came to the conclusion that, gee, it would certainly be helpful if we could have a group of folks go over there and actually talk to people and find out—the one thing that we knew was that these folks were undoubtedly going to be very vulnerable, because if they were victims of crime,

who would they to turn to? The Thai police weren't going to be very helpful—we knew that. So, I mean, what sort of existence did they have? There were numerous reports that *Wat Tham Krabok was being used as a sort of major drug-running center, that drugs were coming in there and that some of the Hmong refugees were being forced because of their vulnerability into being pack mules for drugs coming in from Burma...But we didn't know anything, whether there was any truth to that or not, who knows? We didn't know if people were getting access to schools, we didn't know what kind of medical care was available, so fortunately the mayor agreed and jumped on the bandwagon and raised the money to get a delegation sent over there. I think it was a real smart move. The first thing we noticed when we went in there was how overwhelmingly young the whole camp was. There were kids everywhere. And it turned out that in the population that was registered, 52% were under the age of 16; over 60% were under the age of 18, and that, by and large, as one would expect, they hadn't been studying English, they had been studying Thai. It was a more literate group than we saw in the refugee camps, but it wasn't English literacy, it was Thai literacy. They really saw that their future and their children's future was probably in Thailand. Kids, by and large—some kids had access to school. In the local Thai public school in the neighboring village, there were 1600 kids in that public Thai school; all but 50 of them were Hmong. There were 50 local Thai kids in this school. All the instruction, of course, was in Thai. The teachers commented to us—the teachers from the local Thai school commented to us, they said, 'You know, we don't necessarily like to admit this, but the Hmong kids are far brighter than our own, [both chuckle] and they're going to do very well in the United States because they are very, very sharp.' We're hearing the same thing now from the St. Paul school folks, so...But it cost money to get the kids into the local Thai school. They had opened up a camp school as well, but it also cost some money for folks there, and except for a handful of families who were better off than most in the camp, very few families were able to send all their kids to school, so there were choices to be made, and usually it was the boys and maybe the girls for a year or two, but that was that. So the boys generally had more education than the girls, and a lot of kids still weren't getting access to education at all. It was only when they announced resettlement plans that all of a sudden English classes started popping up in camp but the people who were teaching English really didn't speak English, they were—you know 'there's an opportunity here!' There was like one English textbook available for folks. I mean, it was—the other thing was, it was real life. People kept telling us, 'Yeah, until they put up this barbed wire'—I guess this was in 2003—2002 or 2003, the Thai military moved in when the monk died and put concertina wire all around the village and made it look more like a refugee camp and started controlling access in and out of the camp, and that was the lifeblood for folks, because there were a few businesses set up in the village (***) and they had a pretty flourishing market going on, but most people, in order to earn a wage had to go out of the camp to work, you know, out in the local fields, the rock quarry, construction projects, or whatever. And so having more difficulty being able to do that was pretty dire for folks, because, again, there was nothing being provided. They had to buy their cooking wood, their water, their food, their clothing, their building materials—everything. And if—you wonder why families had lots of kids, but if you had enough people going out to work, you could do OK. But they'd get up, they'd get picked up in the camp at 2:30 or 3:00 in the morning, and taken off to who knows where to work all day long, and return to camp around 5:00, and for that amount of time, they could make about \$2.50. That's roughly half or a little less than half of the going Thai labor rate. But again, if you had enough folks, you could live fairly well. You could afford luxuries like—luxury living was having a cement floor instead of a dirt floor, having actual cinder blocks instead of scrap wood or metal as your walls. Some people even had electricity, refrigerators. We saw cell phones, we saw—some people had laptop computers. These were things you'd never see in a refugee camp! [Chuckles] And a couple of folks had vehicles. Amazing! I'd never thought of it, you know? That was something that just struck me as just wild!

So there was a real—whereas in the refugee camps it was sort of a very leveling experience, it sort of—everybody had nothing, you know? So everybody was poor, but all of the basic needs were covered. Here it was completely different. There were gradations in lifestyle, and some were relatively well off, some were—the slippery slope was that if you got sick or if you ran afoul of the Thai authorities and couldn't get out of the camp to work, then things would start dovetailing downhill very fast. Because usually what would happen was, the first thing you'd have to stop buying was your cooking wood, and then you couldn't boil your water, and you'd start getting chronically ill, and then less and less able, as you went along, to work. And it was only because of the incredible Hmong cooperative spirit that people like that were able to survive at all. Neighbors would take care of those who couldn't—'cause nobody else was going to. But we saw people who were desperately ill in the camp, with late stage cancer or whatever, and it was just a pretty miserable experience, to be there, being really, really sick, and being totally dependent on your neighbors who probably weren't very wealthy themselves, and knowing it. But access to medicine and stuff—there was a Thai public health clinic that had gotten set up—a couple of years earlier there had been a chicken pox epidemic in a local Thai village and the Thais raised a cry of alarm, so the [government] sent in a public health clinic. But it wasn't what we think of as a public health clinic. They opened up an office that had a couple rows of some medicine, and people could come in, [but] they'd have to pay more than they could afford. There wasn't anybody actually going out in the camps to actually see if people were sick. There wasn't any public health outreach of the kind that we think of. So, in spite of all of that, people greatly preferred *Wat Tham Krabok to any refugee camp that they'd ever lived in. And people were scared to death, because now that resettlement had raised its ugly head—

[Tape ran out]

(00:19) People were terrified of the whole resettlement issue, because they didn't know what this was going to mean, they didn't know who was going to be accepted and who was going to be declined. They were frightened. They came up to us and [said], 'My uncle has got a bad arm from the war. Is that going to keep him from being accepted to the US?' And they were really frightened. There was also a relatively small group of old soldiers who still said, 'I'm not going.' But for the first time we were seeing wives and grown children who were saying, 'OK, that's fine, but I'm going.' Some of the old soldiers were—talked to a couple of our Hmong delegates about being physically very frightened, because there was a lot of bitterness in the camp that the decisions that they had made ten years ago, twelve, fifteen years ago had resulted in sort of the loss of those years. [They were] just biding their time and treading water and now they were going to the United States anyway when they could have been done with school, they could have been in good jobs, but now here they're starting over again. 'I'm 25 and it's too late for me, and I'm resentful as hell about this,' and actually some of the old soldiers were saying they were feeling really intimidated by some of the younger folks in the camp—very new, novel kind of experience, but probably, I guess not totally to be unexpected. There was a noticeable lack—I didn't get the sense of a great feeling of joy that, you know, we have this chance again, this last chance to go to the United States. I think people—the way people were reacting was just by being overwhelmingly nervous about all of this! [Anxious moan] 'What if we don't get to go now? What if we get left behind?' Also, there was—tragically—because the Thais announced in April of 2003 that they were going to do this registration for everybody in the camp without any link to resettlement, so a lot of people were very skeptical about what this meant. You know, 'Now what are the Thais going to do to us?' And a lot of people either left the camp at that point or refused to come forward to register, and then when the announcement was made they were no longer eligible for resettlement. So there was lots of split families. And

people were terrified about what this meant for so-and-so, this relative or that relative who wasn't registered, and 'Oh! What's going to happen?' 'They're living with me, why can't they go?' Of course, we'd have no answer for that. So the whole sense was one of tremendous anxiety, not a sense of joy about this opportunity. And that was troubling, to say the least. And in the back of all of this was the fact that we knew that people were going to find it very, very difficult here, that there was going to be a tremendous reliance on their relatives here in St. Paul, some of whom were not in a position to be able to help out much; that there was no housing subsidies or public housing available for these folks, and how in the world are they going to make do on market-rate rents? All of this has been extremely difficult for these folks. It's ironic that when the first wave of refugees came, there was relatively generous support for folks. There was no Hmong or linguistic or infrastructure available in the community for assistance, but there was at least some material support to help people. At least there was public housing available. Now there's this tremendous Hmong infrastructure in St. Paul—you know, you can't go into any business or service anymore without seeing Hmong faces and hearing Hmong voices. So there's that, but there's very little in the way of practical support for folks. And that's going to continue to be a big issue and a big concern for folks. There are Hmong families who either have or are expecting to receive in some cases five, seven, eight different relative groupings coming over. In some cases—I know one fellow who's got 100 relatives coming. And he's expected to be able to help them. Well, obviously parceled out, that's going to be very little help. So that's going to continue to be a big problem. I have a lot of resentment about the whole US government policy towards resettlement. If we want to sort of continue this myth that this is primarily a humanitarian response, and if the US has a ceiling of 50,000 refugees that it's allowing into the country, this is not an overwhelming burden for the federal government. Fifty thousand refugees! And why the federal government can't step up to the plate and ensure that the basic needs of folks, which has to include housing, are being met—it's beyond belief to me! What happens inevitably—and we saw this as soon as Mayor Kelly made his announcement that this delegation was going to go over there, and there was certainly a lot of suspicion that we were going over on a recruiting trip—that we were going to be, you know, pleading with the Hmong, 'Please come to St. Paul! We're the best!' blah, blah, blah. Obviously that was not the attempt, but the whole notion was, 'Who's going to pay for this?' Well, the federal government is insuring, unfortunately, that an undue part of the burden does fall on local communities, and it just oughtn't be that way. It raises hostility, it raises resentment, and it completely detracts from the humanitarian nature of the enterprise. It's frustrating and it's galling that we're penny-anteing refugee resettlement like this. It just oughtn't be this way, that we can just bring people in and just sort of cast them to the fates with nowhere near enough support to provide for basic infrastructure, food, clothing, housing, is just unconscionable to me,. It really gets my goat. It's just totally unnecessary.