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Interview with Khu Thao

Kelly Vang
Concordia University, Saint Paul

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Khu Thao

Interviewer: Kelly Vang
Translator/Transcriber: Peter Chou Vang
Editor: Paul Hillmer

Tell me a little bit about yourself.

My name is Khu Thao. I am 87 years old and was born on October 8, 1914. I was born in Leng Theng, Laos. My father's name is Khoua Vang Thao and my mother's name is May Yang. I have six brothers and two sisters. After I was born my parents and I moved to Phou Lo. When I was old enough to garden, Uncle Tong Ya Thao and Grandpa Wang Lue Thao found us and lived with us for five years. Then we moved with my uncle and grandpa to Nam Ka Ma, which was their village. When the corn and the garden was harvesting, we moved to Nam Khoua.

I was married twice. My first husband died and then I got remarried to Cher Kue Vang from Long Cheng, Laos. When we got married, my husband and I went and hid in the forest from the communists until 1977 and then moved to live in Na Xou. In Na Xou we went and lived with my husband's brother's son, Boua Fue Vang. While living with Boua Fue we moved to a village called Na Pai In Vang Vieng, Laos. In 1978 we moved to Ban Douon, which was on the way to Thailand.

When I was married to my first husband, I bore only one daughter named Phoua Xiong, who I am living with right now. I don't remember when I married him because we didn't keep track of dates and I don't remember how old I was. When my daughter was old enough and reached puberty, my husband died, leaving just us two by ourselves. After my husband died and my daughter was old enough, she took off and got married, leaving me by myself all alone. I also don't remember how old I was when I married Cher Kou Vang. When I married him I only remember that I was already old, that's why I don't have any more children.

When you were younger, what did you like to do for fun?

When I was younger I didn't go to school or anything. I only helped my parents garden. There were no schools in the village and no one to teach. If we wanted to go to school we had to go down to the cities. All my life I have moved around everywhere and everywhere I moved to I only helped my parents garden. There wasn't really any time to play.

When did you move to Thailand?

I moved to Thailand in about 1985. During that year we left Ban Douon to Vinni. In Vinni we lived there for about two months and then moved on to Xieng Kham and lived there for about four months and then moved to Phana for six more months. We then finally came to the United States in 1986.

When you didn't garden, what did you do for fun?

When I was younger, in my teens, my sisters and I went and picked paa] tshau [leaves from trees] to come make baby dolls for us to play with. As we got older and knew how to do chores, I went with my parents to garden, farm, make rice patties, and grow cornfields. When the rice was ready to harvest, I would go and reap it with my parents. After we reaped it, we would hit it with a big stick or hit the plants on the ground, covered with a huge cloth, until all the seeds fell out. There was no time to rest. The only time to rest was during our new year. But our new year was only for a few days. It wasn't easy, like living here in the United States. After new years, we went back to gardening. In January or February, it was the time where we would go and cut down the forest or

field and prepare the field for another year of rice patty and cornfields. After we cut down the forest, we would let it dry for about one month. Then we would go back and burn it. If all of it did not burn away, we would have to go and pick up the remains and put it in a pile and burn it. We had to do that so the field would be nice and flat and clear to plant, and when weeds started to grow, it would be easier to pull them out and destroy them. First we would plant the corn seeds, the the rice patty. After we were done planting the rice patty, the cornfields were already full of weeds for us to pick. After we were done weeding the corn, the rice needed weeding, too. Throughout the whole year we would have to weed the fields twice before the corn and rice fields started to grow. The corn was the first to be ready, and then the rice. After we had put the corn away, then we would go back and harvest the rice. After we harvested the rice, if we had the time, we would hit it for the seeds to come down and then we would have new years. If we didn't have time then we would just bring it in and stack it up in the storage room until after the new year. Then we would go back and hit the rice. After we were done hitting it and all the seeds came out we would put it away in the storage room. This was our everyday lives. This was the cycle of our lives. Gardening, farming and harvesting was our daily cycle. Back in those days there were no cars, unlike now. No matter how far or near, we would have to walk and all we used were our backs and shoulders to carry things. But then there was a lot of freedom during that lifetime. There were no debts to pay, no taxes to pay, no one to boss you around, and no one to tell me what to do. The only thing that was scary back then in the days were the tigers. When I learned how to garden I was probably around six or seven years old. When gardening we would have to burn in the sun, get wet in the rain, get bit by little bugs and mosquitoes. We would start our day every morning at about five in the morning until seven at night. This is if we lived far from the garden and would sleep over there. If we were going from our house, we would start at about seven in the morning and come back home at five at night. Farming is not an easy job; there is no time to rest. The only time is when we would rest was after we finished a row of rice or corn or when we took a break to eat lunch for about 30 or 40 minutes. The clothes we wore were very ragged and the women didn't get to wear pants like the men. They only wore Hmong skirts or Laotian skirts. The women's heads were wrapped with a cloth at all times, so nothing would get in our heads. The men wore hats. There were no shoes to wear. On the way back home we would have to chop some firewood and pick some pig's food (like banana trees or other plants) for them to eat and other animal's food to bring home. There has never been a time when we came home without bringing anything back with us. We had to bring all these things back so we would have firewood to make fire and food to feed the animals. We would farm to eat for the next year. That means if we farm this year, all the food would be for next year to eat. Some years the rice wasn't very good and we couldn't grow enough for us to eat the whole year. When that happened we would have to grind up the corn and eat that or potato trees or other things that we could eat.

Making clothes was also a very hard job. We made clothes out of hemp. All our clothes were hemp. We would have to plant the hemp plants at the same time as the corn. When the corn was ready to harvest the hemp was also ready. When the hemp was ready and old, we would reap it. We would cut off the leaves and the roots, then dry the stems in the sun until they were nice and dry. Then we peeled the skin off and made it into strings and cloth to sew into clothing. Mostly the women did this. We would make the string by peeling the skin off the stem and then tying them all together in a long strip and hanging it up. After that we would take it and crush it in a rice chopper. We then took it and rolled it up and wrapped it up into a ball. Then we would take it and spin it at the spinning machine and cook it in a huge pan and add ashes with it to make it white. When the hemp was white we took it and washed it in a stream. After we washed it, it was not quite white yet, so we would have to take it and cook it again until it was white. If it was white and good we would take it and dry it. Once it was dry we would roll it up on the cross again and spin it into yarn like

rolls. Then we took it to another machine (sort of like a sewing machine) and put all the strings together and made it into cloth. When we made a lot of cloth, then we'd take it and make our clothes, especially the Hmong outfits.

What were weddings like back in Laos?

Weddings back then were like the ones we still do. There are two kinds of weddings. One is when the husband comes and asks for the wife at her home. The other one is when the wife just takes off with the husband and they come back and tell the woman's family that they have taken her. The man's parents would have to find two elders that go to the woman's house and tell her parents that they have taken her to marry their son. After three days, the man's parents have to give cigarettes and money to bring over and let them know for a fact that their daughter has been taken away to be married to their son. After three days, the man's parents have to find one person who is the "mej koob"—the main speaker for the family, one person who carries the basket of food, and a best man that bows with the groom. They also have to find a bridesmaid for the woman. She has to be with the bride at all times to make sure that no one would trick her or tempt her to go do other things. On the bride's side of the family they need a "mej koob," a main speaker for their side, a person who does all the cooking, and their person who takes charge of the wedding. Other than that the woman's side of the family has a few people who look into the bride's future and see if she will have a good life with her husband. If they were to see problems, there are to fix them and tell the bride and groom what to do. The weddings back then were for three days and three nights before it was done, but ever since we emigrated from China, it's only been for one day and two nights. Now we only have it for one day. Then when the wedding is over the groom can take the bride home with him. Before they do take her home and before the ceremony begins, the husband has to pay a price for the bride. They pay for the bride's parents for all the hard work that they have done raising their daughter. If there has been any shame that the groom has put on the bride's parents, they would have to give some money to the parents for that also. But all these prices depend on the bride's parents.

What was courtship like?

Throughout our whole generation and culture, we have never dated in front of our parents because we were embarrassed. The only time the male would come and talk to the female was when she was already sleeping. Back then the guy would just come and sit outside of the girl's bedroom. He would whisper and shine a flashlight in her room and talk to her through the walls. If the girl likes the guy, then the girl would wait for her parents to sleep and then would go and take the guy in and take him to her bedroom. You would never see boyfriend and girlfriend hold hands or be together in public until the day they get married.

What do you remember about the war?

During the war we were very poor and scared. We moved place to place and never had time to watch our corn and rice fields grow. Right when it started to grow we would have to move or run away to a different place already. I was very sad. During the war we moved and ran away from the communists. We would sometimes go and hide in the forests and live there for a while until it was safe to move again. All the hills we climbed and all the bad times we had are very vivid to me. I will always remember those times and I wish we had left our country. My second husband also died during the war years in 1984. At that time all our families and relatives had fled to the United States already, leaving me behind with my daughter. I lived with my daughter and her family when everyone came to the United States. I was very sad when my husband passed away because there were no relatives left to do his funeral and we were very poor.

Tell me about coming to the U.S. What was that like?

We finally came to the United States in 1986. It was very hard for me coming to the United States because I didn't want to leave my homeland. I was going to miss my country and it made me very sad, but I decided that it would be better for me to come to the United States than to live in a communist country. I didn't know what the United States was going to be like. I was scared. When we got here we landed in Iowa. We didn't know anyone in Iowa. We landed there because that was where our sponsor was living. It was an American family that sponsored us, but I don't quite remember their names. When we got here we didn't know how to use anything. Our sponsors showed everything. They showed us how to use the toilet, take a shower, use the television, and all the other things we didn't have in our country. Everything was new to us and we didn't know how to work it.

When we got here and our relatives heard that we were finally here, they came and got us from Iowa and took us to Minnesota. We were in Iowa for about a year before they came and got us. Koua Xang Vang and Youa Chang Vang were the ones who came and picked us up from Iowa. I was so happy to see them. I thought that I had lost contact with them all. They were my second husband's children. When we got to Minnesota, we lived with Khoua Xang and his family for a while until we found our own place. I was very happy to see relatives again.

How do you feel about your life today?

I miss my country very much, every day, and want to go back and see it, but no one would let me go. They all keep saying that I am too old now and it wouldn't be safe for me to go by myself, but no one would go with me, either. Last year I finally got my passport and was all set to go back, but then the relatives wouldn't let me go. I was sad and angry, but there was nothing I could do about it. I'm still hoping to go back and just see Laos again. I just want to go back and see my land. I dream about my homeland almost every day. I miss it!