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Interview with Mai Lee

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Mai Lee

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Editor: Paul Hillmer

Tell us your name and birthday.

The name and birthday is... The name is Mai Lee; clan name is Lee. My mother and my father are of the Lee clan. My birthday is one thousand twenty [she means 1920], day, the second month [February], 25th day.

Tell us, what was it like when you were in Laos?

When in Laos, [I] made food to eat, to eat; [I] farmed—slash and burn farmed—to eat. [It was] not like living here.

When you said slash and burn here and there, who did the slash-and-burn farming and/or who took care of the house—cleaned the house?

Ah, when going to do [things], back in our homeland, there was not one single person who took care of the house. After going to farm, [we] would come back to take care of the house. [We were] busy, busy with the job of farming to eat, then when going, [we] all went. When we came back, then we cleaned [the house].

Who made the food or cleaned the house or did slash-and-burn farming or chopped down trees. Who did this?

Yes, like that. You cook to eat then you go and go to the farm and farm until done at night and then you get home and then you will cook to eat.

The men and the women did what? Or did they do the same?

The men went to clear the fields and chopped trees. And the women, for instance when you lived in your homeland, women went to farm by picking weeds, picking wheat, picking wheat, picking poppies.

In one typical day, can you tell us what you did?

-One day, one day, [I] went to farm. After one whole day of farming I came home, I came to cook [a] meal to eat. When cooking a meal, I pounded rice, ground rice and did everything in the house. [I] was doing this.

Then do kids do the same too?

Right, kids do the same, too.

For kids, what are their jobs/chores?

Kids' jobs are: come sweep the floor, chop pig greens for pigs to eat, come feed the chicken. These are kids' jobs.

Tell about what clothes you wore when you lived in Laos. What did you do when you were going to go out for fun? Tell me what you did.

When we were in our homeland, we were going to have fun; for instance, Hmong's fun is the New Year. Hmong's New Year is the first and second day. We dressed up and participated in ball tossing. The elders said to go chicken fight, but we went ball tossing, went to make jokes and laugh for the elders to see.

What does ‘to make jokes and laugh’ mean?

To make jokes and laugh means to go talk.

Then, when you all wore clothes, back when you lived in the old homeland, what kind or what clothes did you wear?

-When we were in our homeland, we wore Hmong clothes. If we didn’t wear White Hmong skirts, then we wore black clothes with red and green waist sashes.

When you went to the New Year did you wear clothes like this, too or was it different?

Yes we wore [clothes] like this, but when in the house, we wore old ones. When going to the New Year for leisure, we only wore new clothes.

Are there things you did with friends that were not just the New Year? Please tell us about those things, too.

When we were in our home, going to help one another together, there was not any time to go and have fun. We all did it ourselves. Everyone did it themselves. Everyone did it themselves, it was busy, busy, that you did your things and I did my things. Just like when the farm had a lot of weeds or there was a lot of land to farm. Then, for instance, you might go help me one day and then I go help you one day. Switching and aiding each other to farm, there was no time for anything else.

Oh, then let me ask you about listening to singing, or playing bamboo pipes or other things.

What did you do back in your homeland?

When we were in our homeland, we...we were very dumb so we did not know how to sing songs. Singing in Hmong, was only ‘Kwv Txiaj’ (Sung Messages). Hmong’s definition of ‘singing’ means sung messages. Then the ones that know how to sing, sing it, the ones that don’t know how to sing, that’s it, they stop there and go play and laugh and joke with one another. There is nothing.

When did you sing these ‘sung messages’ with your friends, when do you sing it?

That time is during the New Year.

During New Year, it’s sung most, right?

Yes, only during New Year’s. Only during New Year’s is when ‘sun messages’ are sung. But other than that, going to the farm, you don’t sing it.

And, these ‘sung messages,’ why sing them?

-Sing (laughs)...I sing to you and then you sing to me, then we sing so we have motivation to make fun and laugh for everyone.

Then I’m going to ask you about when you date, or during the New Years where you go sing these ‘sung messages.’ Can you tell us how this process is...in Hmong—Hmong during the olden days?

Hmong tradition?

Yes, Hmong tradition.

Hmong tradition. When living ‘barbarically,’ girlfriend and boyfriend, when talking/dating, go talk at the New Year or during the night do they talk for fun. There is nothing to it.

Well, during the night when talking, what do they talk like? Tell us [laughs] more about it.

[Laughs] Girlfriends and boyfriends talking, during the days when we lived 'barbarically,' uh, when talking it is embarrassing as well. But like right now, there is talking lip to lip [means face-to-face]. Back then, us old people, it was not talking lip to lip. When the bachelors came, they were shy and embarrassed of the [daughters'] moms and dads. When coming at night, then there were talking through the holes in the house, when talking through the holes in the house, they talk about if I will like you or you will like me. Then if talk goes well, then marriage comes. That's it.

Asking you about Hmong tradition – for instance what do you believe in and do you participate in shamanistic ceremonies? Tell us about those as well.

We don't embrace the new tradition, we embrace the old tradition. We practice shaman ceremonies, if there are chickens or pigs to kill to eat. But there are shaman ceremonies, calling the soul ceremonies, there is nothing, just doing these is all.

Tell us about some things that the shaman does and tell a bit about this.

The things the Shaman does, he does it and if he sees, then about calling him to come do a ceremony for the household ...only if he sees, then we will call him to fix the household. When he fixes, he fixes the whole household and we get a pig to represent everyone, after the healing ceremony, there's happiness, and you live peacefully, with no medical problems.

Is this the only thing he does, or are there many things that a Shaman does?

Um, he does it. He's the only one that does it. When he does it, then that's the end.

Then, about calling the soul ceremonies—talk about this.

Calling the soul ceremonies—for instance, the New Year. For Hmong, during the New Year, the Hmong take chickens and eggs to use for calling the soul ceremonies, or calling your spirit and soul for everyone's household's spirits and souls to come together, and come stay together so there is peaceful living and the spirits don't separate, so there is peaceful living then.

OK, then let me ask you about what people say are called belief in 'ghosts/spirits.' It's referred to as believing in 'ghost/spirits'?

Yes.

Can you tell about Hmong beliefs so Americans can know?

Belief. Belief is....belief that your mother, your father [in terms of ancestral beings], that if you have an illness, you have to call your mom and you dad to come eat and drink, then your mom and you dad will bless you. You burn incense and paper offerings for your parents; then they will come help you.

Then, when will you have to do all this?

When you are ill and the healing ceremony predicts so, then you will do it. That's it.

Are these soul calling ceremonies and these shamanic ceremonies required during the marriage ceremony?

When getting married, there are no shamanic ceremonies. When getting married, there is killing chickens and killing pigs for soul-calling ceremonies, then there is eating and drinking.

Then please talk about the marriage ceremony. How is it done?

Marriage. Marriage is when the son/man goes and marries one's daughter/girl; and when this happens, three days later we go do the marriage ceremony. We go kill chickens and pigs to eat, go ask the girl's mom and dad from a distance, then go pay them and we can take their [daughter] to come live with us.

Which household does this?

-Which ever household, it's all the same.

The same? Then the woman's and man's household does what?

They are in the house and cook for when they [the couple] arrives home.

Then, for instance, the, the man's household pays or the wife's household pays?

Oh, the man pays. If the son, for instance, goes and marries the daughter, he must pay the family.

Talk about the different things the households do. If you are a girl marrying a husband, for instance, what does this family do? Or if you are a son in the Hmong household, then what does your household do?

When you are the son, then when you go get married, your mom and your dad prepare the meal of eating and drinking, then they make the food, prepare the money, and then they go pay the girl's price and bring her to come live with you.

Yes, then if you're the daughter, then what do you do?

If I am the daughter, then they [referring to husband's relatives] come pay my mom and my day and then they take me away.

Yes, do the daughter's mother and father have to do something

Yes

Do they have to pay?

No, [they] do not pay money. The daughter's mother and father do not have to pay money, but...they have to make the meals for the daughter; they give pants, shirts and money, if there is silver or gold, then they give silver and gold as dowry for the daughter when she goes.

Oh, then can you talk about your own marriage and what it was like, and tell us about it.

When I was getting married, my mom and my dad made the meal for my husband and my husband's household to eat. They came and paid money for my mother and my father. Then after paying I went to live with them.

Oh, then tell about how you met your husband.

When meeting my husband, we saw each other, we liked each other, we talked and then we married.

You said earlier that when you liked one another, you went to the ball toss and talked at night.

Did you do any of these things?

Yes, we did. [Laughs] Ball tossing, we did do ball tossing, and as girlfriend and boyfriend we did talk at night only.

Okay, please talk about farming and raising animals and other things when you were in Laos.

Going to the farm. After eating breakfast, we farmed, when the time of farming came, after eating breakfast, lunch was packed then we went to farm. We farmed until night, then came home, then when we came home there was caring for the chickens and pigs. After this, dinner was made and eaten and we slept and then the next day when the morning came, we awoke, and we prepared to do the same thing and then went.

When you went to farm, how was this done?

When farming...metal hoes were used to farm.

When you farmed, how far was it from your house?

It was far. When going to farm, it took about one to two hours to get to the field.

You just walked there?

Yes, we walked.

When you got to the farm, did you just prepare the soil? What did you plant?

When we got there, we prepared the soil only...during the time of planting, then we planted; during the time of preparing the soil, then we had to prepare soil first to plant.

Then, what did you plant?

We planted corn, planted wheat, planted sweet peas, planted green peas, branches, just this.

Did you just plant to eat or did you plant to sell also?

We planted only to eat.

The majority was to eat?

Our land was mountainous, so it was just enough to plant to eat, not enough to sell.

Then, you, your household, your mother and father, when farming, did your household have its own land, or did you farm with a lot of people?

We farmed our own land; we did it ourselves. For instance, you farm, so your whole household farms their own land. Every year, we farmed the same land; we didn't farm for others, only for ourselves.

How about watering your greens in the farm—how do you do this?

Living in our homeland, we didn't water the farm. We just waited for the rain to water our farm. When it rains, raining on the plants, they grow and grow bigger. It harvests, and then we just wait to eat. We didn't water it like we do here.

Back then, when you lived there, if there was no water or if there was no rain, were there times when your garden did not grow, if so what did you do?

If it did not grow, then that's it. If there was no rain, then we just waited for the rain, because there was no water. The farm was all the way over the hill; streams could not reach it, and then we just waited for the rain. If it rains, we get to eat. If it doesn't rain, that year we go hungry. If there is money, we go buy food to eat.

Then, if you didn't have money to go buy anything, then what did you do? Do you go to your relatives and your husband's relatives to eat, and to help them farm so they would share their food with you, too?

Yes, it's like that. If there isn't anything to eat, then we must go help them [our relatives] and they will give some food to us. We mix this food with greens. Back then when we did not have food, we took a little bit of rice to mix with greens to eat until the time when the corn was harvested.

Then, asking about something you mentioned earlier...about caring/raising for animals, please talk a bit about this.

About raising animals, the ones that are raised to produce further offspring are left, and the pig, the one that is raised to eat, the one that is fed to be very fat to eat, we put it separately from the others and just feed it only, so it will eat well so it can grow fat and we will eat it.

Then how about those animals that you raised for offspring purposes, what purpose do you raise that for?

We just raised them to look at.

Just to look at?

We raised them to look at and to leave it there just to watch.

What do you raise? Earlier you said pigs and also what?

We raised pigs, raised chickens, raised sheep; if there were cows we raised them, we raised ox.

Do you raise other things, like dogs?

Yes, dogs we raised. Back then we raised dogs for the purpose of watching our house.

You said raising dogs to watch you home—how so?

Back then when living 'barbarically,' during the night we were scared. When we were scared, dogs slept at the outer house walls and barked so you would know...

In Hmong tradition, you said dogs watch you home. How can dogs come watch your home?

Their eyes, their eyes see. Their eyes see ghosts; when they bark then you know there must be something here or there, perhaps tigers, so when dogs bark then you know.

When you talk about ghosts, back then in the homeland, what were the Hmong or your or your household's thoughts on believing in ghosts?

- [Laughs] Ghosts, you did not see them, but when dogs barked Hmong people said that 'it's probably ghosts.'

Can you talk about how this belief is like in believing in ghosts? How do you feel about it?

-We don't believe [trust] in ghosts. When talking about ghosts, we are scared.

Why are you scared?

It's dark, the house is in bad shape, dogs are barking. Then we are uneasy and then we are scared.

Back then, you always told tales about there being ghosts there. Why do you think you had come to believe that there are ghosts there?

When dogs bark like that and you do a shamanistic ceremony to see, and sometimes when dogs bark and the shamanistic ceremony is done, this says that you have the ghosts of mothers and fathers that they have come see you then. That is why. Sometimes it gets better, then dogs no longer bark; then this is where the belief is.

You said ghosts of mother and fathers, can you explain to those that don't know what it is?

When you have a mother and father that have passed away, for instance they have a cow [spirit] so this spirit comes back and when they come and you raise dogs, these dogs see them. Then these dogs bark.

OK, then I will go on to ask about when you lived in Laos. How was it and was it sunny, was it cold, during what time and when you lived there, how was it?

When living there, our homeland was very cold like now as well, but there was not any snow. So when we lived there, there was sunshine, there was rain. When it did not rain, it was very foggy in our land; when we went to farm it was filled with fog. But we just went to farm anyway, just so we could eat. Sunshine was only for a small period of time. It rained mostly. So we just farmed as we could. If we wanted the weather to be like now, it was not.

You said that during this time, it rained, so what were your houses like? Were there times when you had to take care of your home because of the rain or some other problem?

Our houses. Then our houses were only 'qeeb.' These 'qeeb' houses, when we made them, with a big wide base that you swept clean, so when it rained it only rained outside. The inside of the house was already swept so it was clean.

You said 'qeeb' houses. What is this?

Qeeb or 'Grass' houses are 'qeeb' – similar to grass. These are used to cover the house and when you tightly cover the house like this, you live in it 2-3 years. But if you use the grass to thinly cover, then in 1-2 years, you have to change it [house coverings]. Or if, you can, then you go chop up trees to use to cover the house, then you can live longer there.

If it is very windy, then what did you do?

When it is windy...back then when it was windy, this was not a problem. The coverings of grass and wood are heavy. If you were in a windy area, you really couldn't say what would happen. But when you were in a not-so-windy area, there was really no problem.

Ok, then do you want to talk about your life with children, or with your mother and father? Do you want to talk about how this was?

When I lived with my mother and father...when you live with you mother and your father, you are not poor. You have the strong figures of your mother and father that hold you up. You are not heartsick or lonely. Upon starting you own life, you are poor and you don't have a lot, and your mother and father are no longer your mother and father. You have become your own mother and father, so you are so poor that you don't have peace. You go farm, and you step on slimy dirt, you stay in the house, there is slimy dirt.

Then I'm going to ask you about when the Viet Cong were fighting and the Vietnam War. I want to ask you when you were in Laos, when was the first time you heard about this fighting?

When I heard about the fighting, it was already during Vang Pao's time where they were fighting seriously. Guns were loudly going off here and there. When watching them fight, we lived far away, we did not live near. We lived far away, but people were shooting loudly from all over, afar.

During that time, where did you live?

We lived in Laos then, but we lived also near Vietnamese territory.

Then during that time, you heard they were fighting, so then you knew the Viet Cong were fighting?

People were discussing that 'the Viet Cong are coming.' Then the Viet Cong did come, and you did see them, but you did not see them fighting.

When they were fighting, did you go help, what did you do or did your husband help with the fighting? How so?

When my husband was there...when the Viet Cong came on our homeland and came to kill all, I was in the house taking care of the children. My husband was to carry rice to the Viet Cong all the way to the battle fields.

Then, this soldier work, do you know what it was?

Soldier work meant going to battle. Going into battle means not having food to eat. Then you went to get other people's rice, the people carried rice all the way into battle fields for the Viet Cong to eat.

When you said your husband was away in the battlefields, you said you were at home doing housework; did you worry about your husband?

Yes, very worried. I was very scared that when he went, fate would not allow him to come back.

Did you live with a lot of Hmong where their husbands went into the battling fields as well?

We lived in that area where there weren't people actually in the battle fields, but they went to carry rice, to carry this rice for people in the army to eat. In each village, two people each went once to carry rice. They went and it was 7-10 days when they would return. We were very scared of the Viet Cong.

During this time, when the Viet Cong came, what did you do?

When the Viet Cong came, we just ran.

When you ran, were there times when people came and did bad things to you? Were there people in your village who died or got hurt by the Viet Cong?

No there were no incidents, but when the Viet Cong came, since the territory of the Viet Cong was near, when Viet Cong came around once, and then our soldiers came once and then this is where the complications began. They were asking if we were harvesting rice. When they asked this, we said 'no we did not harvest rice'; the soldiers that came through just went through. We just told them this.

Harvesting rice like what?

Harvesting rice, as when they came we made them rice to eat.

Oh you mean the Hmong?

Yes. When the Viet Cong came and wanted to eat, we had to find for them to eat as well. When General Vang Pao came, when they wanted to eat, we had to find for them to eat as well.

So you said then that the Viet Cong came to search to see if you were harvesting rice for the Hmong to eat, right?

Yes, harvesting rice...like they are not happy when the Viet Cong are gone, so more soldiers come to ask if we harvested rice for them.

They're just asking, right?

Yes, they ask, they are just wondering.

Then did people or Viet Cong come to your village to search for other things?

Viet Cong didn't come, they only came every so often when they passed by.

Were there other different people that came? How about the Americans?

Americans did not come to our village. When we lived in our land where we did, Americans did not reach our land.

Oh, then when talking about Americans, do you think it was important that you and the Hmong helped the Americans?

Because Hmong did help Americans, that's why Americans did come help the Hmong, so because of fighting, Hmong did follow the Americans.

Why do you personally think you wanted to help the Americans?

They came to help us. They came to free us, so we had to help them.

How did they help free you?

They came to help us. For instance, because of the fighting, we came to live in Long Chieng, and then they sent us food to eat. They sent us greens and rice to eat so these people [Americans] told us to do work for them, and then we had to do it.

Then, what made you, the Hmong, your household only or you personally want to help them?

Oh, the man of the house. The man of the house helped. The men only. Women, they cannot give anything to help.

Then what do you think was the reason why Hmong initially helped the Americans?

Americans helped by providing food, like I said, so if they said to help them then we must help them.

Can you talk about the Hmong people and their problems with other people that led Americans initially to help the Hmong? What do you think?

There was not. There wasn't any; the Viet Cong came and passed through and then Americans came to live and then Americans went back down and then Viet Cong came and made it hard, so we ran and Americans were able to help.

You said the Viet Cong made it hard for you. How so?

They did not make it hard, but then they came to search here and there and then we got scared and ran.

What do you think that you got from helping the Americans?

Got nothing, as long as we got food to eat. They helped give us food to eat then we got to eat that.

When you think about living in Laos. When the Viet Cong told you to follow their traditions/beliefs, what did you say?

When they said that, we said we were just people that farmed; we did not know. They were wanderers of the land, when we made things and when they wanted rice; we willingly gave it to them. But we were naïve and did not know anything and did not know how to help them. We just said this.

How do you think your life has changed due to the fighting between the Viet Cong, Americans and Hmong?

Back then, my life, I thought my life would change because it was not held strongly together and it would fall apart.

Can you talk more about how your life changed?

My life changing...how it changed was when the country fell apart, you could not produce for yourself, and ultimately you could not live. Where you ran to, you just want to run to be free.

Were there things in your life that changed a lot during the time in Laos vs. during the fighting time?

Then, there were no changes, I was too scared, so it could not be changed.

Were there things about your life in Laos after you fled that were different from your time during the fighting? How was life different?

There was nothing different. If it was different it was the difference that you were very scared and you ran, you ran out, then you ran to hide in the forest and woods, then you changed your feelings so that you would run and hide and not come out to stay in the village. Probably staying in the village, you cannot produce meals. Then we ran some more. That's it.

Then, can you talk about how your households, your children or your husband have changed?

The children—I don't know. My husband and I changed, as I have talked about earlier. Changes, originally the changes that most importantly come are that your husband leads and you follow.

OK then, talk about you—your household running out of your house. Where did you go and how did you get there?

We, when we ran, we ran out of the village, then we ran to Long Chieng. We were living at Long Chieng and when it was destroyed, we ran and lived here and there. Then we ran out of Thailand eventually. Then we came here.

When you ran, how did you arrive at Long Chieng?

Running to Long Chieng is because the Viet Cong came and shot at us in the village, and then we got scared so we ran and followed the Chow Fa to this land. We ran towards Long Chieng and soldiers—American soldiers came to pick us up and we came to Long Chieng.

So the Americans came to pick you up so you could come to Long Chieng?

Yes

So when you all ran, did you run in the jungle only...or...?

Yes, it was only running in the jungle

Tell about how running in the jungle was like?

When running in the jungle, we were hungry and thirsty. Children were very hungry and very thirsty to the point of death, but we didn't come to the point where there was water so we had to starve until we reached water. The people were close to death along the paths. Yes, like this.

Talk about your children, what did you do with them?

My children. At that time my children were still small. So I carried them on my back. Even small, I carried. Carried, I carried children. There were things I carried on my back, then children went over these things and were carried along my shoulder. Children covered the things on your back and you carried them out. When you're hungry then you just eat whatever you can.

How old were your children then?

At that time, there was a 5-year-old, there was a 6- and 7- year-old and then there was a 3-year-old....

Going back and asking about when you ran in the jungles and when the Viet Cong came to shoot at you guys...when you ran, were there people who died or those that you knew that passed away?

When we were running there wasn't anyone. Only when we reached the road when the Viet Cong shot from there, only a son died, a son of the Thao clan that was with our sons. But other than that, everyone made it; there was nothing.

Did you have to cross rivers?

Yes, we had to cross a few rivers. We had to cross a few to come to the area to rest where airplanes would take us to Long Chieng.

When you all crossed the river, how did you cross?

When crossing, we paddled. We were scared so the soldiers were in the lead and children were on our shoulders and then we crossed the river. During that time we were running, the water was shallow, so it was not deep. We ran across the river, so when crossing, everyone crossed themselves. Everyone had children over their shoulders and we just came.

You said you followed the Americans when crossing the river?

Yes, we followed the American soldiers.

The soldiers helped you so when you crossed the rivers, they were with you?

Yes, together they were with us.

Oh.

Those soldiers, some went ahead and some followed us. They took us, those that were running from the Viet Cong and put us in the middle so we would be able to escape freely.

Did they shoot at the Viet Cong when the Viet Cong came?

Yes, they shot at them.

They shot at them?

Yes, they shot at the Viet Cong and it was scary, because the son got shot in our group and died.

When you met the Americans, what kind of people did you think they were?

Then, I did not know. When you saw them, you were scared of them so you didn't know; as long as they helped you escape...

So you all just kind of stuck with them?

Yes, we just kind of stuck with them and followed them, right.

Were there relatives, people from your household, that did not come with you or stayed over there?

All of ours came. Our people, all those from our village all came. It's empty. All came, like when you take a blanket or floor mat that is spread and uncover it. There are no people left there at all.

Then your household all came?

Yes, they all came.

Crossed the rivers and came to Long Chieng right?

Yes.

Were there members of your household that could not come with you or passed away during the time you lived on your homeland?

Yes there were some, but they were not ours. It was Hmong people, so I did not know them then. You only know your people.

Then, asking about your arrival to Long Chieng. What did your family do?

Upon arrival to Long Chieng, when we came, they handed out rice. We ate, we received their rice to eat and greens to eat, then we came to live there.

What do you mean by 'their' [food]?

American's

Americans? Then...

Americans handed out rice, we got food to eat and became 'alive.' Then we just lived.

So, when you and your household lived in Long Chieng, how long did you stay?

We stayed about 10 years.

Ten years in Long Chieng?

Ten years, yes about 10 years

When you were running, what year was that? When you guys ran and followed Americans to Long Chieng...

That year, it seemed...I don't know because I am dumb, but people said it was 1964.

1964? So you guys stayed there until 1974?

Yes, we stayed there about 1974 then we ran out from there.

When you lived in Long Chieng, how was your life here different from when you lived in your homeland?

When we lived in Long Chieng, we lived peacefully. Only when we lived there and could not adjust that there was sickness. But we lived peacefully, were able to eat, were able to be clothed; then we were not poor when we lived in our territory.

You did about the same things there as you did when you were in Laos?

Yes, we did that, but they fed us and we weren't as poor, so we did work, but not as hard as before. We did not work as before because we weren't as poor as before.

You lived in Long Chieng, you said you lived in Long Chieng for 10 years, then you ran again. Why did you run?

The Viet Cong came again, the Viet Cong came and then we ran again, then we ran and lived here and there; then we escaped to Thailand.

You said you ran to many different places. Do you remember where you ran to?

We ran, we ran to *Pwv Piab, down to *PusLaj, then we ran and hid here and there, and then escaped into Thailand.

Then when you were running, were the Americans with you or did you run by yourselves?

During that time, it was only us. During that time, the Americans escaped so we were very poor.

We were poor so we ate and asked for bitter branches, ate banana branches, ate things and ate weeds and stuff from trees. We were very poor and could not handle this, so we escaped from there.

You said Americans ran/escaped. Talk about how they ran?

Americans returned back. Then Americans and General Vang Pao left, then Americans all ran and left back. There was just us poor Hmong people who could not run, so we stayed and ran here and there and after running for awhile, we ran to eat weeds and stuff from trees; we ate potatoes, and all this stuff. We could not handle this, so we decided to run from the jungle into Thailand.

Asking you again, about escaping into Thailand – How did your household run to get into Thailand?

When my household ran, we ran in the jungles. In the jungles, we ran from here to there. We tried to find the road to follow, and we searched and found and escaped from there.

You escaped from there, so how did you arrive in Thailand?

When we came, we crossed the river. We hired Thai's use of boats, and they used boats so we escaped across by this.

When you and your household crossed the river, you all crossed by boat?

Yes, we rode on boats. Since coming across bamboos, we didn't make it. Floating on bamboos and cutting bamboos to use so we could paddle in the water did not work since the Viet Cong shot at us at the edge of the water, we could not cross. We returned back and they hired them—hired the Laotian people to take us and to send us over to Thailand. Then we were able to escape.

When you hired them, how many of you were there?

There were a lot. There were about 30-40 individuals.

You guys ran together as a group then?

Yes, we ran as a group. The Lao people slowly took one group at a time to the edge. We only ran during the night time.

During the night only?

Yes.

You said that when your household ran, you said Lao people came and shot at you.

Yes, the Lao people [Pathet Lao] shot. The Lao people shot dead the grandma from St. Paul's husband and son at the edge of the water; we didn't see this while running. We ran back, and stayed for a while. They, those who escaped and crossed the river, sent people back to come get us. That is why we were able to escape.

During that time, was there anyone in your household that passed away?

yes, there were some that passed away. In my household, the grandma from St. Paul's husband and the son were part of my household. The only ones that passed away were those two. Then there was none.

During that time you arrived in Thailand, what did you do?

When we arrived, we came to live. They sent us greens and rice for us to eat.

[End Side 1]

I want to ask about the time when you successfully crossed the river into Thailand. What did you do? What was your life and your household's lives like?

Our life was that of lives destroyed by war. We lived in bunches here and there doing this and that. We waited for them to bring us food. When living in Thailand, there were no means of working; we just sat around. When they brought food we would go retrieve it to eat only.

When you lived there, were you worried about certain things?

Yes, very worried. I was worried about how my life would turn out. Running back, we wouldn't be able to do, living in Laos we couldn't do, and escaping to come here, we couldn't do. It was very difficult.

When you and your household lived in Thailand, did you reunite with some of the people that you had not seen?

No, we did not meet at all. When we came, those that were together we met, but those who did not come, we did not see again because we could not go [to see them].

You said that when you were in Thailand, you had nothing to do and just sat around, what other things did you do?

Thai people enclosed us and they did not allow us to do anything, so we came to just sit around, probably we just came to eat.

You just sat around and ate? Were there other things you did?

No, we did not do anything. There was no land to farm. There was nothing to do. Thai people closed the area and did not allow us to go out, so we couldn't do anything.

When you were in your house, what did you do?

When in the house, we were dumb so we just stayed inside, we didn't do anything. We picked some greens to sell at our doors and stuff. We just got a few greens to eat, that was really it.

The women and the men, since you did not farm, what did the men do and what did the women do?

The men just sat around, the women just sat around. Just sitting around. For instance, Thai people made us go do work and we went to do work when they wanted us to do. We went to do work with the Thai. In one week we worked one or two days, then you came home and sat around. We just sat around and could not get out anywhere.

How about sewing, did you guys do...?

Sewing, we did not know how to sew so we didn't sew. It was only your mom that came later that sewed, we did not sew.

You did not sew at all?

No we didn't sew because we didn't know how to.

Oh.

We came and only stayed for a short period of time. We only stayed [in Thailand] for about one year, and then came to the United States. We didn't do anything.

You didn't know how to sew then?

We didn't. I did not know how to sew.

When you lived in Thailand, do you all go out for leisure or have The New Year?

Yes, we went out. (you went out, too) We went to see Hmong people toss ball, Hmong have fun, yes we went.

The Thai people let you do this?

The Thai already enclosed us in the base. Since the Thai people enclosed us, inside we lived and inside we played.

When you and your household lived here....did....were the Thai people mean or nice—what did you think?

You go outside and they are mean, no doubt. When you go outside, they beat you. But since we were scared, we did not go out. So we stayed inside, eating whatever we had; we did not go look elsewhere.

You said that the Thai were mean to those who went out. Were there incidents where people went out and the Thai did something to them?

Oh, the Thai were very mean. Those who went out were beaten. The Thai captured the women who went out.

The women that are captured, what do they do with them?

They were captured [Laughs]...the women were captured to be like dogs.

When you were inside, did you have arguments with the Thai people, or were they pretty nice inside?

No, there were never arguments. The Thai people were very mean; when you saw them, you were already scared of them. Why would you go argue with them?

Were there some that were pretty nice?

I don't know. We had just come recently to live there, so you didn't know. Those Thai people, you didn't know them.

So you didn't talk or your household didn't talk with...

You didn't know the Thai language, so why talk to them?

Oh.

We were dumb and did not know how to talk.

Asking about when you lived in Thailand. Did you just stay in one area and then leave or...?

Yes, we were only in one area

Just one area, so you didn't move around to live with other different Hmong people?

No we didn't. We lived in the same area.

So you lived in the same place for one year, right?

Yes, we lived in the same area for one year. Then the Thai kept enclosing us and we got scared; then we applied to come here [the US].

Asking you about that, when your family applied to come, how did you do it? How were you able to apply or how did you know about applying to come?

Americans came in allowing us to apply; then some people told others, 'Let's go apply to go to America, because it is too hard living here.' We could not live there, so we applied to go to America. Then we heard other people talking. We just decided to apply and see if we would be allowed to go. Then we were allowed to go.

Did you want to go?

The thought of wanting to go, I did not want to go. But at the same time, living in Laos or Thailand where we were so poor, we did not mind and thought we might as well just go.

Your household thought this as well?

My household, they really wanted to come.

They wanted to come and you didn't?

Yes, for me truthfully there was your Mom that was still in Laos, so I did not want to come. My household wanted to come badly.

Why did they want to come? You...

They said they were too poor. In Laos, they crawled all over the fields to get food to eat; thus they were too poor so they no longer wanted to stay and ultimately wanted to come.

Let's talk about the day that they told you you could come to America and for you to pack. Do you remember?

Yes, I remember. They told us, 'It is the day; you all are going. Pack all your things. You leave on the 8th. Then we all fully packed and on the 8th, when the car came, we went and came here.

What year was that?

1980.

1980, the 8th day and which month?

The eighth month as well.

Eighth month?

The eighth month, eighth day and in 1980 as well.

When you were about to leave, did they tell you to bring certain things or what did you have to do before you could come?

We didn't have to do anything. When we were about to leave, we were uneasy so we just bought two chickens to use for soul calling ceremonies for everyone and then just left.

Were there people you had to leave?

Yes, definitely. There were people left that we were going to leave, but when leaving and when the day arrived for us to depart, we left them and just came to the US.

What kind of things did you bring here?

There was really nothing to bring. We just brought ourselves and our bodies. There were not even clothes to wear.

Do you remember coming from Thailand to America? Did you have any worries about anything?

Yes, I was very worried. I was worried that when we arrived we would not know how to live. And when arriving, the town was so big and we didn't even know anyone, so how could we live?

Do you remember the day you rode the airplane? Please talk about this.

When riding the airplane, I don't remember. When riding the airplane, I only knew that when we left it was the eighth, the eighth is when we left Thailand; then I don't know when we arrived here—the eighth, maybe 9th or was it still then eighth... Because in Thailand, it is one day ahead of here. We did arrive here, though.

That first time, was it your first time to ride in an airplane?

Yes, it was the first time.

So when you came, what did you think?

When I came I thought that that meant leaving everyone. On the way here, the waters were so big! What were we going to do to go back? [Laughs]

When you rode the airplane, what did you think when you were on the plane? What did you think of the airplane since it was your first time?

When I was inside, I just was in it; I didn't know what the airplane would do. [Laughs]

Asking about the arrival in America, where initially did you arrive first?

We arrived and lived in California. We stayed here for about eight months; then we came to Madison and have been here since. We haven't moved elsewhere.

You said you lived in California and then came to Wisconsin?

Yes.

Why did you come there [California]...you just came there or did you have sponsors...

We had sponsors in California and then they said since we had relatives here [in Wisconsin], they told us to come here, so we came.

You lived...or when you lived in California, where did you live or what town did you live in?

We lived in Santana. In California, we lived in Santana.

Your sponsors lived here?

Yes.

Do you still talk to your sponsors?

Well, our sponsor was just one of our sons.

Oh, then your relatives were in Wisconsin, so then you came here.

Yes, our relatives [from my husband's side] were in Madison, so that's why we came here.

I want to ask you about when you arrived in Wisconsin. Talk about how your life was different. Were there some things in Wisconsin that you had to change? For example...how was it different from when you lived in Laos? For instance, the food is different, the language is different and work is different. Please talk about this.

In California, when talking about the best place to live, California was the best place to live, but there were no relatives there, so we came here. Living here is good. It's better than Laos. You don't have to

work; they help you. It's only [unpleasant] in the winter time, but when it's not the winter time then you can go out for leisure and go places freely. And your own people are with you, so you don't have to worry about anything.

When you said living in California, how long did you live there again?

We lived there only eight months.

Oh, eight months. Then, can you talk about being Hmong and coming here and, for instance, how eating food is different here compared to in Laos? Can you talk about these things?

About eating, back in your homeland, when you eat and make food, the smell of food is sweet; but living here, when eating and making food, the smells are like smells of bark and you wonder how you're going to adjust to eating these things. When you eat it, it's good, but the smell is like bark, so you can't really [believe you can] eat it.

Since you have just arrived, are there foods that you did not like, since in America the food is different than back in Laos?

In America, the food is good. It's just like I said, it has that smell. When living here longer and longer, you no longer smell that smell. Then you just get used to it.

Talk about how they speak English here and how you speak Hmong. Is that difficult for you? Talk about this.

- [Laughs] Not knowing English is like being a pig. When they talk to you, you don't know; then you have to have someone to translate for you.

Do you think this is difficult for your household?

Oh, yes, very hard. It was so hard, that I thought, 'how could my children ever know?' I thought like this.

When you have to go to the store or fill out forms, what do you have to do since you do not know English?

I don't know, so I ask people to help go translate or fill out forms. I ask them to translate and fillout; I do not know.

How about working? What do you think, since back in your homeland, you guys just farmed, and upon your arrival here, they don't farm much. You said you lived in California and then came to Wisconsin. How was that for you?

When I came, I didn't have to work. When I came and lived for a while, after living here and there, I received money from the government and did not have to work.

When you came to live here, how old were you?

When I came then, I was 55 years old. But when I came then, when you were 60 you could receive government benefits—not like now. When children turned 18, there was a short time after when I received benefits. Then I just decided to take the benefits. During that time they only gave food stamps and some cash to be used for rent. So I had these benefits until I reached 60 years.

Then, you never thought about working or...

If I could drive and if I were smart, I would definitely have gone to work. Back then, my body was able to do work, but I didn't know how to drive. I didn't know how to drive, so I couldn't go to work. When going, it was not near but far, so it was impossible.

How about going to school? When you first arrived did you think you wanted to go learn English...or...?

At that time I wanted to learn English. But when I was taught so many times, I still did not know it. You come home and go the next day and you don't even remember. [Laughs]

So you did go to school for a while?

Yes, I went, I did go to school.

Just going to school where they taught English?

Yes, just English. They also taught ABCs. Even at my old age, they still started from the ABCs.

So the children, your children, went to school as well?

Yes, they went to school as well.

During that time, did you think you wanted them to go or that you were worried that going to school would not be a good thing?

Yes, during that time I was ignorant and did not know; I wanted them to go so they would know.

About coming to America where they used things that were not used in Laos, how did you feel? For instance, here they use computers or they use things that people in Laos have not used.

Here they do use these things. In Laos there are none. In Laos, the hand writes. If you are knowledgeable, then your hand writes. You take what you get.

During that time, you had to learn to use phones and things in American culture that you had not used before?

Yes, upon arrival to America I started learning how to use phones. People taught and I learned; then I would know how to use the phone and call people.

Asking you about the exact day upon arrival in America at the airport, and your initial step from the airplane when looking at the land of America, what did you think?

When coming out, I thought that I have come to America and it is very good.

When you arrived, were you scared? Was there anything that you were scared of?

Then, no there wasn't. Upon arrival here, where there is a good land, I didn't think about there being anything to be scared of.

When you went to live in a house, were there things that were different or that you didn't know about upon first living in your house...

During that time, when we went to live, we did not know. Where we lived, we lived in public housing so the people that fixed the houses were also Hmong, so they would tell us about things we did not know.

Then you just lived in houses that were fixed up by Hmong people...

Yes, we lived in the houses and got to live in public housing that Hmong people maintained.

OK, what is the most difficult/hardest thing about living in America,?

The hardest thing is that you don't know the language.

How has not knowing the language changed for you?

It has not changed. Not knowing the language...I still cannot speak it, so it has not changed.

What is the best thing for you about coming to America?

The best thing is that upon coming here, there are no things to worry about.

Why do you think there are no things to worry about?

With your arrival here, people give you some money to use; you just come live so there is nothing to worry about.

How do you think your new life has changed you and your household?

It has changed it a lot. Now for instance, you don't know a lot now, but your household—your children are smart and know a lot more now. Then you are no longer poor.

Are there times that you want to go back to live in Laos?

Oh, with the country here, I do not want to go back. With the country here, I do not want to go back, so I will just stay here. Perhaps until there is no more fighting on the land, if I can go then I will go; if I cannot go, then I will not go. That's it.

You'd rather stay here than go back there?

Yes. Now I have become a citizen so they say I can stay, so I will stay.

As a person lucky enough to come to America, how do you think your life is different from those who are still in Laos?

Coming to this country is very different. Coming to this country, we are well off. To eat, we don't have to worry. They give us a bit of money so if one cannot eat, the money can be used to buy something. But in Laos, now I don't know how life would turn out when you cannot do anything or go anywhere. Plus as you age and cannot do anything. There are worries.

Do you have any words to give to the Hmong children now and those who were born in America that did not come from Laos? Do you want to say something to them? What do you want to say? If you can say something, what would you say?

Uh, I don't know what to say so I will not say.

For instance, if you want to say some words to the kids now to remember about the Hmong?

To say...We are Hmong. Remember that we are Hmong. Remember and do not become Christians, and follow the Hmong traditions. Remember to obey and be well-mannered. Remember to be well-mannered like others, which is good. That's all I will say to the younger Hmong.

Do you want to talk about some things that we have not talked about? Or some things about your life that we did not talk about, did you want to talk about this?

Oh, there is nothing more to say. I do not know how to talk about this.

OK, then that's it.

That's it then?

Yes. Thank you.