

SPECIAL REPORT: The Leftover People

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Chapter three: Hmong miracle Minnesota made its newcomers welcome - and they flourished

St. Paul, Minn. – Ever since they began settling in America in the late 1970s, there's been a friendly rivalry between the Minnesota Hmong and their California kin. Many of St. Paul's Hmong consider themselves a little savvier, smarter and more progressive than their more traditional compatriots in the Golden State. California Hmong, who never have to shovel snow, often retort, "If you're so smart, how come you live in Minnesota?"

And they have a song - recorded by a Hmong crooner from Merced - that suggests California Hmong girls are prettier.

Now, many of the 16,000 Hmong refugees coming to America from Thailand this year must decide whether to join their relatives in Minnesota, or those in California.

And, despite subzero winters and mosquito-infested summers, a growing number are choosing Minnesota.

They're not the only ones. Enterprising, well-educated young Hmong from Sacramento to Providence, R.I., are flocking to be part of the Minnesota Hmong miracle.

Although California still has more Hmong than Minnesota - an estimated 95,000 compared to around 70,000 - Minnesota Hmong rule in every conceivable area: income, education, politics and business.

Their amazing leap from St. Paul's Frogtown ghetto - where most began life in America as illiterate tribespeople - to positions of influence and affluence can be traced to an economic and social climate more hospitable than what Hmong found in California.

The Minnesota Hmong have tasted more success, in large part because church sponsors, foundations, educators, employers, lenders and public officials pitched in from the start to speed the Hmong on the road to self-sufficiency.

"The mainstream community opened their hearts to the Hmong," said Xang Vang, who arrived in Minnesota in the winter of 1977 lonely, homesick and unemployed. Today, Vang, 54, makes a nice living buying and renovating homes.

Minnesota Hmong are more than three times as likely to own their own homes as those in California, their median family income is more than \$12,000 higher per year, and they are more likely to finish high school and college.

St. Paul - now the nation's largest Hmong metropolis with more than 40,000 - has become the Hmong Paris, home to Hmong comedians, playwrights, artists and filmmakers.

Hmong Americans can be found at every level of government from the St. Paul school board to the state Senate, where a Hmong woman is the majority whip. The only Hmong elected officials in California are school board members, even though Sacramento has about 25,000 Hmong and Fresno, 35,000.

At the end of February, in a testament to Hmong clout in Minnesota, St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly led a 19-person delegation - including seven Hmong professionals - to Thailand to welcome the 16,000 refugees to America and to evaluate their educational and medical needs.

Meanwhile, Sacramento Mayor Heather Fargo said she didn't realize a new wave of Hmong was coming until a May 29 meeting with local Asian American leaders.

Fargo said no Hmong had contacted her, and she wasn't aware that there was a Sacramento Hmong refugee task force, although she's since formed a task force of her own.

In the Sacramento area, Hmong compete for services with more than 50 other ethnic groups, including the more numerous Latinos and the Russian-speaking refugees, as well as Lu Mien tribespeople from Laos, Bosnians and others. In contrast, St. Paul's Hmong are the city's largest immigrant group.

Along with Minnesota's generally more welcoming climate, there's a local drive to be the best that has rubbed off on the Hmong, said Sia Lo, the mayor's senior policy adviser.

"You see it between Medtronic and St. Jude Medical (medical technology companies), between 3M and Honeywell," Lo said. "It's in that healthy spirit of competition that the Hmong are thriving."

The Twin Cities - St. Paul and Minneapolis - boast two Hmong newspapers, two Hmong cultural centers, three Hmong-owned Best Steakhouses and even a Hmong-Latino nightclub with two dance floors, one for Hmong hip-hop, the other for salsa.

The 175-member Minnesota Hmong Chamber of Commerce sponsors its own golf tournament; there is no California Hmong chamber.

The St. Paul area has 18 Hmong lawyers and five Hmong medical clinics; Sacramento has one of each. St. Paul has more than 500 Hmong real estate agents; Sacramento has fewer than 50. The St. Paul Police Department has 13 Hmong officers; the Sacramento department has one.

The most stunning symbol of the Minnesota Hmong's upward mobility is Cedarhurst - a 26-room Civil War-era mansion on the outskirts of St. Paul - that's now home to a Hmong doctor and his family.

St. Paul has become the standard for Hmong success worldwide, said real estate developer Cha Vang, son of the famous Hmong war hero, Gen. Vang Pao, who lives in Orange County.

"We came from the mountains, we didn't know how to read and write, and now we run multimillion-dollar companies and make huge investment decisions," Vang said.

Starting out The Hmong in Minnesota and California started even: in the ghettos of Sacramento, Fresno and St. Paul - cities where refugee resettlement agencies had found sponsors for them.

"People tried to burn our house down three times in two years," recalls Tou Ger Xiong, a Hmong comedian who was 6 years old when his family moved from Thailand to the Frotown ghetto in 1980. "We had our windows cracked 32 times. My dad would take his

battery out of the car and store it inside. My mom didn't want to walk from the house to the bus stop."

Hmong families desperate for work drifted to Minnesota anyway.

Like the Hmong in Fresno and Sacramento, they faced their share of insensitivity. Yee Chang, a St. Paul Realtor, said that in the 1980s he and other Hmong teens learned martial arts to defend themselves from assaults. Even in college at St. Olaf's south of Minneapolis, Chang said some of his classmates joked about watching their pets around him, implying the Hmong ate dogs.

While many Hmong got lost in California - which had already attracted thousands of other Asian and Latino immigrants - they immediately stood out in Minnesota, which was 97 percent white.

"People were kind of enchanted by them," said Jane Kretzmann, who worked for Lutheran Social Service, one of the largest resettlement agencies.

The first Hmong had barely arrived when the Governor's Office called Kretzmann asking her to hire a bilingual Hmong worker because another 150 refugees were coming.

St. Paul Mayor George Latimer got police and health officials to employ Hmong interpreters, and in his 1978 State of the City speech, he welcomed the Hmong to town.

Latimer said he didn't have to "run around and convince people the Hmong had a right to be here. That was a given."

Sacramento County Executive Terry Schutten - who lived in St. Paul from 1986 to 1999, serving as the Ramsey County manager - said local church groups virtually adopted the Hmong.

"Our parish had programs where we would go and work with a Hmong family," he said. "My wife and kids took over furniture and mattresses and tables, and at Christmas there was a huge drive, presents and food, and then we delivered the gifts. There's a lot more of a sense of pulling together to help the newcomers."

Lutherans, Catholics and Presbyterians took in refugees or found them housing. They organized summer programs and English classes, and encouraged the Hmong to buy starter homes as soon as possible, then trade up. Sometimes, the sponsors actually helped make a down payment, Kretzmann said.

May Ying Ly, a Sacramento Hmong leader, said the Minnesota family that sponsored her nephew's wife put her in their will: "She's like their own daughter."

Ly's family also had loving sponsors, a doctor and his wife. But they lived in Hawaii, and Ly's family migrated on to California in the late 1970s, along with thousands of other Hmong.

California's draw Initially, California - not Minnesota - promised to be the Hmong paradise in America, a place they could farm year round. Their political leader, Gen. Vang Pao, had settled in Southern California, declaring Minnesota too cold for his aging bones. And California welfare payments were higher, a draw for mostly illiterate refugees without marketable skills.

But reality fell far short of that promise. Families that did get farm work harvested crops from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m., often with their children, leaving little time for homework.

And the Hmong faced heavy competition for fieldwork and other entry-level jobs from Latinos, Filipinos and other immigrants.

Those Hmong who landed first in California often were sponsored by immigrants still learning the system themselves.

Robert Khang, the first Hmong to arrive in Sacramento, said his sponsors - a Vietnamese family - took his wife and year-old son home for dinner on their first night in the United States, then checked them into a motel on Stockton Boulevard.

"After two weeks, they said they could not help me any more," Khang said. "My son was very sick with pneumonia, but the sponsor did not take him to the hospital. We had only one meal a day, and I couldn't communicate. I cried every day."

In the early 1990s, California's higher home prices continued to rise, and unemployment topped 8 percent.

Meanwhile, Minnesota's economy - built on 350,000 manufacturing jobs - took off. By 1998, unemployment had fallen to 2.4 percent, half the national average, and "anyone who wanted a job got one," said Minnesota demographer Barbara Ronningen.

By decade's end, an estimated 8,000 California Hmong had moved to Minnesota.

From the beginning, Minnesota's charitable foundations teamed up with public officials and vocational colleges to train thousands of Hmong for \$15-an-hour assembly line work.

The jobs required little English, but good hand-eye coordination - a skill Hmong women had developed over years of stitching pa ndao, the colorful needlework for which the Hmong are famous.

Others were trained as nursing assistants, machinists, welders and computer operators.

Local Hmong organizations made sure the trainees succeeded.

"If somebody didn't show up for work, somebody from the staff of the Hmong organizations would go work their shift," said Kretzmann.

Hmong who were picking cucumbers in Minnesota 20 years ago now make everything from airline meals to heart valves.

Those jobs have turned the Hmong into taxpayers and helped them buy houses and, in many cases, establish a family routine: At least one parent gets home in time to make sure the kids do their homework.

Minnesota's public schools - among the nation's best, with much higher high school graduation rates and math, science and reading scores than California - also have nurtured the Hmong renaissance.

By 1980, the St. Paul School District had joined forces with the city and county to hire

Hmong teachers and counselors to propel the Hmong forward, said Sacramento County Executive Schutten, who previously held a similar job in St. Paul. "That whole sense of cooperation to get the job done is critical and it's frankly more advanced than it is here (in Sacramento)."

In 1983, Yang Dao, the first Hmong refugee to receive a doctorate, resettled in St. Paul. Yang told the Minnesota Hmong their future was in America, not Laos, and preached education as a panacea for poverty.

Yang's daughter-in-law, Kou Her, 28, attended ninth grade in Sacramento before her family moved to St. Paul.

In Sacramento, she said, "It was hard to get out of ESL (English as a Second Language) class - I told the teacher I felt like I was wasting my time. When I got to St. Paul, ESL was gone. The school was better, the teachers were better, and I got more attention."

It helps that Hmong have served on the St. Paul school board since 1992. A few months ago, board member Kazoua Kong-Thao got a call from a Hmong dad whose daughter had failed a reading test required for graduation and was threatening to kill herself.

"I got her a tutor through the school and she passed on her final try," Kong-Thao said.

Success breeds success Though some Hmong kids were bullied in school, many of those born in Laos adopted their parents' work ethic and rose to the top of their classes anyway, much as many Vietnamese kids have done in Sacramento.

Comedian Xiong became valedictorian of his class and won a scholarship to Carleton College, south of Minneapolis. Now 30, he lives in a four-bedroom house in the tony St. Paul suburb of Woodbury, and confers daily with his financial planner - who's also Hmong.

He makes as much as \$6,000 a speech as a motivational speaker for corporate America, but he's always doing free, spontaneous performances in Hmong neighborhoods. At the Hope Academy Hmong charter school recently, he delighted a class of sixth-graders with his dead-on imitation of a Hmong teenage girl with attitude, then told them to be proud they live in two worlds.

Xiong and other young Hmong constantly travel between those worlds. On a recent Saturday, at a shaman ceremony for his uncle's new daughter, Xiong dined with 30 other males while the women waited their turn.

That night, he and his East Indian fiancée feasted at Tango Sushi, run by four Hmong brothers, then partied at Club Escape, a hot Twin Cities nightspot.

"It's a great time to be Hmong - this is where the action is," said Xiong over a beer at Malina's, a sports bar run by two Hmong social workers.

He recalled the days when University Avenue, the main drag in Frogtown, was a gantlet of strip joints, drug dealers, gang-bangers and hookers.

Today it's the Hmong Champs-Elysees, lined with pastry shops, bookstores, newspaper offices and restaurants. "Frogtown has pretty much become Hmongtown," Xiong says. "We're taking over slowly. We don't have a Don Corleone, but we have a friend of a friend of a friend."

One of those friends telephoned Fresno supermarket owner Cha Fong Lee and his son-in-law Dan Vang in 1999 with an offer they couldn't refuse.

The friend connected them with a Hmong officer at Western Bank in St. Paul, which loaned them \$3 million to buy a dying mall in Brooklyn Center, a western suburb of Minneapolis. "It was the eyesore of Brooklyn Center, only 40 percent occupied," Vang said. "We took it over and anchored it and now it's 75 percent rented.

"The most critical piece was they had a Hmong person making this decision; the gatekeepers actually lent an ear to somebody who knew the ins and outs of the community."

In Fresno, which had no Hmong bankers, Vang said it took them six years to qualify for a business loan.

"There was a lot of ignorance on both sides," he said. "They didn't know what the Hmong community is, and we didn't fit the normal credit (profile): a large amount of assets, a certain amount of cash flow, been in business for X amount of years. The Hmong have been in America for 25 years, but we've really only done business for the last 10."

Vang now lives in a Minneapolis suburb with his wife and two small daughters. He hates the cold but loves the atmosphere: "There's a willingness of the general community to embrace us. Around here they call it the Minnesota Nice: 'We'll welcome you as long as you succeed.'"

Lao Lu Hang, a Hmong loan officer with Western Bank, says the Hmong gamble hasn't turned out to be a gamble at all: Fewer than 10 percent of the bank's 200 or so Hmong business customers have defaulted - far below the national average.

Hmong repay their loans because the culture demands it, Hang said. To owe money is shameful and all debts must be settled before you die.

Today, Minnesota's Hmong get business loans at the same rate as non-Hmong, according to the Federal Reserve.

Some problems remain Not every Minnesota Hmong is a success story. Police count more than a dozen violent Hmong gangs, including a few, such as the Oroville Mono Boys, filled with California transplants.

About a quarter of Minnesota's Hmong, many of them elderly and disabled, remain on public assistance. So many Hmong have been placed in public housing projects that Ramsey County was recently sued - unsuccessfully - for favoring the Hmong over other ethnic groups.

There is a growing class gap between the new Hmong intelligentsia and older, more traditional Hmong, some of whom fear assimilation is coming at the expense of Hmong culture.

But there are signs of accommodation:

A Hmong driving school teaches Hmong elders who don't speak English how to drive. More than 100 Hmong women have been certified as day-care providers, and now run a co-op. A

grass-roots group, Hmong Men for Peace and Unity, has taken on the long-taboo topics of domestic violence and gender roles.

One ancient custom persists: most Hmong men still pay a dowry, or gift of gratitude, for a woman's hand in marriage. The dowry for California Hmong brides typically runs \$7,000 - about \$2,000 more than in Minnesota, which some offer as proof that California Hmong women are more desirable. "We call it the export tax," said Barry Thao, president of the Hmong club at the University of California, Davis.

But Minnesota Hmong say the lower price actually reflects their more progressive, pragmatic world view: Clan leaders have capped dowries at \$5,000 to reduce family squabbles and free up savings for investments.

Dr. Xoua Thao, who as a family physician is one of the Hmong trailblazers in Minnesota, said Hmong tend to share cultural traits of resourcefulness and diligence. "Their progress is to a large extent influenced by outside institutions," he said. He advised California Hmong to ask why they're not getting loans, or not doing as well in school.

Thao moved to Minnesota from Rhode Island in 1995 to start a Hmong clinic and is now known as "Uncle Doc" by his clients, many of whom had never seen a doctor.

Thao, who in addition to his medical degree also holds a law degree and a master's in public health from Harvard University, has done his part to empower the community: He founded the Minnesota Hmong Chamber of Commerce and the Hmong Bar Association.

And three years ago, Thao and his brother True Thao, a psychotherapist, spent \$1.4 million to buy and renovate Cedarhurst Mansion, now known as "The Hmong White House."

On the wall in the tea room hang photos of former U.S. Sen. Frank Kellogg and other influential people who stayed at the mansion. In the middle of the montage, larger than the rest, is a portrait of a Hmong couple - Thao's parents.

The Thaos serve English high tea for history buffs and other groups, hold fund-raisers and host visiting dignitaries. During one such visit, True said, "We told the U.S. ambassador from Laos he can be assured the Hmong can make it in America."

Thao says the next step is a Hmong bank: "It takes only \$5 million."

St. Paul Mayor Kelly's fact-finding delegation to the Hmong camp in Thailand in February inadvertently sold thousands of Hmong on Minnesota. A few Hmong even assumed Kelly was running for president.

Before Kelly's trip, about 8,000 of the camp-dwellers were leaning toward California; now they're evenly divided, with each state expecting about 5,500 refugees, according to State Department estimates. The rest will go mostly to Wisconsin, North Carolina and other states with Hmong enclaves ready to sponsor them.

The new Hmong - who began arriving in late June - already are getting the "Minnesota Nice" treatment. More than 4,000 families, Hmong and non-Hmong alike, have volunteered to help them. St. Paul has contracted with Hmong organizations to provide job training and English classes. The health department has added eight bilingual staff members.

Sacramento County health officials have hired five bilingual staff members, but the county -

which has one of the highest concentrations of refugees in America - plans to rely largely on existing programs.

"We've been resettling refugees since the 1980s," said Sacramento County refugee coordinator Roy Kim. "We have an existing structure in place that doesn't need to be built up or built out."

Sacramento County school officials plan to put the newcomers directly into ESL classes in regular schools. In St. Paul, the school district has created four transitional schools where new Hmong children will go for six months before they're eased into regular schools.

Minnesotans "have a social compact, a history and a culture of all of us working together," Kelly said, to ensure that the Hmong - like the French Canadians, Germans, Irish and Scandinavians before them - become productive citizens as quickly as possible.

"There are countries where people flee from, and countries where people flock to," he said, "and I'd much rather be the latter."

GRAPHIC: Sacramento Bee photographs / Manny Crisostomo

Along with banks, state government and other institutions, Minnesota's schools - among the nation's best - have helped nurture the Hmong renaissance. Hmong have served on the St. Paul, Minn., school board since 1992. Above, a class assignment lines the walls of Hope Community Academy, a K-6 Hmong charter school in St. Paul. At right, three boys play the keng, a traditional instrument, at the Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul.

Dr. Xoua Thao and a brother spent \$1.4 million to buy and renovate Cedarhurst Mansion in St. Paul. On a wall of the mansion, which is now known as the "Hmong White House," hang photos, above, of former U.S. Sen. Frank Kellogg and other influential people who stayed at the mansion. In the middle of the montage is a portrait of Thao's parents. At left is a nightclub where young Twin Cities Hmong hip-hop on one floor while Latinos salsa on another.

Enterprising Hmong have flocked to Minnesota to be part of the Hmong miracle. At left, a worker hoists pork at a slaughterhouse in St. Paul owned by Pao Chao Yang, hailed as Minnesota's first Hmong millionaire.

Comedian Tou Ger Xiong, above, entertains students at a school in St. Paul. Like many Hmong born in Laos, he adopted his parents' work ethic and now earns up to \$6,000 a speech as a motivational speaker.

Mee Moua scored a big upset over a handpicked candidate to get elected to the Minnesota Senate in 2001, relying greatly on Hmong voters to become the first Hmong in America to win a state legislative office. Hmong now serve at almost all levels of government in Minnesota.

A window of a Hmong-owned building overlooks University Avenue, the Hmong Champs-Elysees in the Frogtown area of St. Paul. It is lined with pastry shops, newspaper offices and restaurants.

Nearly 30 Hmong men are seated for dinner during a shaman ceremony at the home of an uncle of comedian Tou Ger Xiong in a suburb of St. Paul, Minn. The ceremony is for the new daughter of Xiong's uncle. At left, the women prepare the food in the basement and await their turn to eat.

Mao Yang Ly, 102, above right, is helped into her son's car following a checkup from Dr. Xoua Thao. Meanwhile, Thao, background at left, has some advice for Tony Thao on the care of his daughter Rose. Dr. Thao is known as "Uncle Doc" to his patients, many of whom had never before seen a doctor. He founded the Minnesota Hmong Chamber of Commerce and the Hmong Bar Association.

Sacramento Bee / Olivia Nguyen Friendly rivalry

..... / MINNESOTA / CALIFORNIA Hmong population* / 70,000 / 95,000
SCHOOLING** No schooling completed / 41.7% / 53.0% High school graduates / 31.1% /
22.9% College degree / 11.9% / 9.8% Master s or higher / 1.9% / 1.6% Home ownership /
53.9% / 16.4% Median family income / \$36,784 / \$24,372 Some public assistance / 28% /
50% Living in poverty / 33% / 53% Families with working wives / 34% / 20%
*Estimate **For Hmong ages 25 and over
Sources: Census 2000, Hmong National Development Inc., California Department of Finance
Demographic Research Unit

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