

SPECIAL REPORT: The Leftover People

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Published in the *Sacramento Bee*

September 12, 2004

Final Chapter: A different world For latest Hmong arrivals, new freedoms - and frustrations

For months, Pao Vue dreamed that when he finally got the chance to go to America, he missed the plane.

He'd be forced to spend the rest of his life the same way he'd spent the first 28 years - penned up in squalid Thai refugee camps, where each sunrise signals a new battle against hopelessness.

And then, in July, he had a new dream: He flew through the clouds and woke up in Sacramento in an air-conditioned house on a queen-size mattress from the Hyatt Regency, the first mattress in a lifetime of bamboo beds.

About the time a cousin in Sacramento showed him how to make his first vacuum cleaner roar to life - a sound that backed his two little daughters against the wall - Vue realized he wasn't dreaming.

He was finally in America.

"I'm very happy to be here," said Vue, his brown eyes sparkling. "It's really clean - the camp was very dirty. And here I've got a lot of freedom - I can go anywhere I want."

Vue, his three brothers and their families are pioneers, among the first of 16,000 Hmong refugees to arrive in America from Wat Tham Krabok, the temple squatters camp north of Bangkok.

The Vues came a month after U.S. officials rushed Aeng Chang - a former war veteran dying of bladder cancer - to Sacramento for medical treatment, making his family the first to arrive from the camp. Nine days after he got here, Chang died, leaving his widow and six kids to make their own way in America.

Like Vue and the Chang kids, two-thirds of the 16,000 Hmong refugees were born in Thai refugee camps and know no other life. About 2,000 are expected in Sacramento, half of them children who will have to find their way to school. And nearly all come from large families that will have a tough time finding housing they can afford.

Sacramento already has one of the highest concentrations of refugees in the nation, and local officials and Hmong advocates say they're ready to help these newcomers, too. Public agencies have scrambled to hire Hmong translators, nurses, mentors and counselors, and collected furniture, clothing and school supplies.

But after the first 225 new Hmong landed in Sacramento this summer, school officials and Hmong leaders realized they'd be swamped when the rest arrive later this year.

"We're ready, but we're also dealing with some systemic limitations," said Ia Moua of the Hmong Women's Heritage Association, one of several local agencies helping the new Hmong. "Housing and transportation are the two main ones. We haven't even begun to address some of their anxiety at being in the U.S."

Culture shock - and awe For the handful of families who arrived here this summer, America has been a land of boundless freedom and total helplessness, of thrilling and frightening firsts.

Their first flush toilet. Their first shower. Their first drinking fountain. The camp in Thailand had no plumbing. They used outhouses, washed with rainwater from a cistern and hauled drinking water from a water truck.

Their first stove. Their first sink. Their first air conditioner.

They didn't know how to work any of it. The Chang family microwaved cans of Campbell soup, then ate it straight from the can, undiluted. The Vues locked themselves in their house, then couldn't figure out how to unlock the door.

Their American relatives had to show them how to regulate the hot and cold water, how to open a window to let in fresh air, how to run the washer and dryer.

Grasping the mechanics of modern American life was the easy stuff. Without cars, driver's licenses or any idea how to ride a bus or read a street sign, the Vues and Changs are prisoners in their own homes, waiting by the window for relatives to show up and perform a thousand otherwise insurmountable tasks: reading the mail, getting a phone turned on, buying a money order to pay a utility deposit.

Vue and his wife and two daughters are here with his mother, Mee Lor; his two younger brothers, See, 13, and So, 18; and his older brother, Xiong Vue, 29, and Xiong's wife and three small children.

But Vue is the only one who speaks any English, and what little he knows he learned over the last five months.

The Vues' lifeline in America is their uncle, Dang Vue.

He's their official sponsor, which means he has promised the U.S. State Department he'll take responsibility for their life in Sacramento: finding them a home and furnishings, taking them to the doctor, helping them register for school and public assistance, and - ultimately - finding them jobs.

"Our families are very close - their grandfather and my father were brothers," said Uncle Dang, whose own English is so rudimentary he needs his 17-year-old daughter, Ze, to translate.

When Uncle Dang and his family made it to the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand from Laos in 1986, Pao Vue's parents took them into their hut for a year. Now, he said, it's time to return the favor: "Whenever you're down, somebody should help you."

But Uncle Dang, 38, seems an unlikely champion. Eleven years after arriving in California, he's still trying to get his bearings.

After five years of cleaning toilets, first at an elementary school, then for a local shipping company, he was laid off in 2002. He hasn't been able to find another job - his two years at Sacramento's Fremont Adult School weren't nearly enough to teach him English or a skill. And last year, his wife was laid off from her job at a Sacramento cookie factory when

business fell off.

Uncle Dang's family of five gets by on \$1,650 a month - \$435 in food stamps, \$540 in welfare and \$675 in Supplemental Security Income for his 15-year-old daughter Gao, who's deaf. They pay \$263 a month for a three-bedroom apartment in a federally subsidized complex in Oak Park.

Uncle Dang put up all 12 of his relatives for their first few days in Sacramento. Their idealistic view of America was shattered the first night, when Pao Vue's two teenage brothers suffered the theft of their brand-new sneakers from outside Uncle Dang's front door.

Since Uncle Dang is unemployed, he's free to drive his relatives to the supermarket, to the refugee clinic in Oak Park, to the welfare office on Florin Road, to Will C. Wood Middle School in south Sacramento where most of the new Hmong children are being tested and registered for school.

On these missions, Uncle Dang often has to make multiple trips because he can't fit all 12 relatives into his 1991 Honda Accord. Then he waits hours until they're finished.

Uncle Dang does it gladly because he remembers the kindness of Vue's family back in Ban Vinai, the last official Hmong refugee camp in Thailand.

Vue's mother, Mee Lor, 62, fed, clothed and cared for more than a dozen little kids in the refugee camp - half of whom now are young adults in Sacramento.

Vue's father, Chong Lor Vue, was respected in Ban Vinai, a shaman who healed the sick and the depressed and a traditional Hmong flute player and coffin maker. In 1998, Chong Lor Vue died of cancer, never realizing his dream of a life in the United States.

To honor his memory, Uncle Dang and other relatives helped the Vue family find its first home, a three-bedroom, sky-blue house in the Tallac Village neighborhood just south of Tahoe Park. The house rents for \$975 a month.

The Vues and other new Hmong would qualify for housing assistance - if there were any left in Sacramento. Anne Moore, director of the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency, said the waiting list is three to five years long. The larger the family, the longer the wait.

The Vue brothers brought few reminders of their past life to their new home: a suitcase full of embroidery, some photos, an armful of clothes and a large bronze gong - the one their shaman father banged to call the ancestor spirits to heal ailments of body and soul.

Their first task was to hang the gong on the living room wall. "It's all my father had," said Xiong Vue. "It's a gift from him I need to keep."

Then, an uncle from Fresno brought them a TV and VCR.

The first night in their new home, Aug. 1, they watched three East Indian romance videos dubbed in Hmong, then fell into a sweet sleep on four cushy mattresses, some of the 600 Sacramento's Hyatt Regency has donated to the incoming Hmong.

"I fell asleep right away," said Mee Lor, who shared a room with her two teenage sons. "In

Thailand, the walls are made of bamboo and there's no privacy."

On their third day, calamity struck. Around dinnertime, Xiong Vue's 7-year-old son complained of a toothache. Soon he had a fever and was screaming about the pain.

The Vue brothers couldn't call anyone. Despite the best efforts of numerous relatives, they wouldn't be able to get phone service until they received their Social Security cards.

"We can't call anywhere," Pao Vue said, "so we keep looking out the window to see who's coming."

At 10 p.m. that night, the Vue brothers walked to a pay phone, but Uncle Dang wasn't home.

The next morning, Uncle Dang drove the boy to a dentist, who pulled three cavity-filled teeth and treated an infection.

Pao Vue resolved not to rely on Uncle Dang forever. That afternoon, he leafed through a magazine full of used-car ads. "I want a car," he said, if he could ever afford one.

The \$400 resettlement cash the U.S. State Department gave each member of Vue's family on arrival - \$4,800 total - has almost run out, and their monthly welfare checks and food stamps, expected to total around \$3,500, haven't kicked in yet.

Like other poverty-stricken legal residents, the new Hmong will qualify for up to five years of welfare, though able-bodied Hmong will be expected to find jobs. Despite their relative lack of skills, Hmong families on welfare have gotten work at a rate almost double the county average - 42 percent compared to 24 percent - said welfare department spokeswoman Kerri Aiello.

"I knew there was a lot of freedom here but I didn't realize how much my rent, phone and utility bill would cost," Vue said. Everyday items like soap, which cost 15 cents a bar in Thailand, cost more than a dollar here. "When the welfare department no longer supports me I wonder how much I will have to work to cover all these bills."

New life a pressure cooker See Thao and her six kids have been here a month longer than the Vue family - and they're a month deeper in debt and despair.

As the first Hmong family from the Wat Tham Krabok temple camp in Thailand to settle in America, they arrived full of optimism, hoping American doctors could save their cancer-stricken dad.

But when Thao's husband, Aeng Chang, died of bladder cancer, Thao suddenly owed \$6,000 in funeral bills.

By August, she sat paralyzed on the sofa in her rented home in south Sacramento, head in her hands, doing math that always ended in a negative number.

"Life is much better here, but I'm here alone with no husband, no one to provide for the family," she said. "I get \$1,119 a month in welfare, but my rent is \$1,000 a month, and I only have \$100 left to pay for utilities, water and trash. There is no money to buy toilet paper, dishwashing liquid, diapers."

She's mystified by the mail, never knowing whether it brings a bill or a check. "I flip it over back and forth, but I don't know what it says because I don't know how to read."

Twice a week, her husband's cousin, Sacramento County strawberry farmer Cha Va Chang, reads it for her - in return, she said she's worked in his strawberry fields for free.

Today, there's a letter from Sacramento County Children's Services offering to take her deaf son Xeng, 7, to a doctor to get his ears checked. Xeng was born with an ear infection, Thao said.

When he was 3 years old, she took him to a Thai doctor, who said he could restore Xeng's hearing - a \$1,200 operation the family couldn't afford. Xeng was never taught how to speak or sign, so his family communicates with him through improvised hand gestures.

"I'd love it if he could finally hear and learn to speak," his mom said. She wonders if it's too late.

Since June, a steady stream of relatives - including Thao's sister-in-law, their official sponsor - has brought her clothes, books, furniture and bags of fruit, but that doesn't make up for the loss of her husband.

Mornings are the loneliest for Thao, when her four oldest children are at summer school, leaving her at home with Xeng and Sada, her malnourished 2-year-old.

But for the older kids, who spent their first month in Sacramento glued to the television, summer school has been a heavenly escape.

When it comes to education, many California Hmong are still struggling - only 23 percent over age 25 have finished high school. Those challenges will grow by as many as 1,000 new Sacramento Hmong students from the temple camp, half of whom have never gone to school.

The Chang kids - as the first to arrive - have been helped out by several Hmong teachers.

Vince Xiong, a fourth-grade teacher at Collis P. Huntington Elementary School, said all the hurts and fears he experienced as an 8-year-old refugee came flooding back when he visited the Chang family.

Xiong, now 33, said that on his first day at school in Portland, Ore., he fought with a kid who hit him with a baseball bat at recess, and came home in tears, telling his parents he never wanted to go back. "But they said, 'We came to America to learn.' "

When Xiong noticed the Chang kids didn't have decent shoes to wear to school - some lacked soles, others were ill-fitting hand-me-downs - he spent \$140 of his own money to buy them new sneakers and socks.

"I wanted to touch these kids' lives a little bit, to make them feel more welcome than I did," he said.

Shao Xiong, another elementary school teacher, drove the Changs to and from the Hmong/Mien summer school in south Sacramento every day, then taught them English.

On July 12, their first day of summer school, Hue - a 10-year-old who can't sit still -

charged up to a Hmong administrator and declared in Hmong, "I can't wait to meet all my new friends!" By recess, he had inserted himself in a kickball game.

The Changs were amazed that there was a special teacher, Shao Xiong, just for the four of them. "In Thailand, there were about 50 kids in each class," said Choua, a shy, slender 14-year-old.

One morning, in a cavernous classroom, they play a game with alphabet cards. If they can sound out the letter, they get to keep the card.

"I want a card! I want a card!" Hue says excitedly in Hmong. The teacher tells him to wait his turn.

Choua picks up an X, then puts it back, giggling - it's too hard to pronounce.

Brother Chai, who's 11, spots some English words on the blackboard and says, "Let's read those words! The worst thing that's going to happen is, I'm only going to get it wrong."

The Chang children love their teacher, but they reject their first school lunch in America, chicken nuggets and Tater Tots.

While other kids at the summer school wolf down the free lunch, Tia, 13, gingerly nibbles a chicken nugget dipped in ketchup. The rest stop after the first bite.

Within two weeks they're speaking basic English sentences - "How are you today? My name is Hue" - and eating at KFC after Mr. Xiong decides they've been especially good in school.

One day, Choua brings in a book given to her by a cousin - "Dr. Doolittle and the Pirates" - and Xiong reads it to them in English, then translates it into Hmong.

"They didn't know there was salt water in the ocean," he says later. "When regular school starts, these kids will be struggling."

The Chang kids likely will have to go to four different schools: Choua to Hiram Johnson High; Tia to Will C. Wood Middle School; Chai and Hue to Earl Warren Elementary; and Xeng, the hearing-impaired boy, to a special class somewhere, once the district assesses his needs.

They have no idea how they'll get to all those schools.

Their mom, See Thao, would like to go to school to learn English, too, but she doesn't have a baby sitter for her youngest, "and I don't know how to drive or how to get there."

Sacramento Lao Family Community, a Hmong social service agency, plans to run a shuttle service for new Hmong adults who want to go to night school, and district officials are trying to place Hmong kids in schools they can reach on foot.

Families made whole The Vue brothers are tired of putting their new life on hold.

On the fourth day in their new house, they moved their father's gong to the bathroom and replaced it with a big wall clock set to Sacramento time, so they know exactly when somebody's coming to take them out into the world.

Pao Vue is preparing for his learner's permit test so he can drive everyone to school someday. The first English class the brothers went to was full, but they found another with space. They'll go to class at night while their wives go in the morning so they can trade off on child care.

Their Social Security cards came in the mail and they finally were able to get their phone service.

Their preferred form of communication, however, remains the epic storytelling that has kept Hmong traditions alive for 5,000 years.

At a crowded family gathering at Uncle Dang's apartment, the smell of chicken and vegetables wafts from the kitchen and tales of the old days fill the living room, drawing tears and laughter.

"I recognize everybody," the Vue brothers' mother, Mee Lor, says as ties long broken are reconnected. She points at Uncle Dang and his cousin Chue Vue. "Those two lived with me when their mom passed away. I'm going to watch all the kids here, pretty much like I did in the old days."

One of those kids, Mindy Vue, a 22-year-old teacher's aide, beams at her family - now larger by 12 - and says, "We Hmong believe the bigger your family, the warmer your house."

GRAPHIC: Sacramento Bee photographs / Manny Crisostomo

Mee Lor, 62, second from left, sheds tears of joy as she is welcomed to her new world by relatives moments after her arrival at Sacramento International Airport in July. She arrived from Thailand with her two younger sons, See, 13, and So, 18. Mee Lor is joining her two older sons and their families for her new life in Sacramento. She is one of about 2,000 Hmong coming to the capital from the Wat Tham Krabok camp.

Chue Vue, center, smiles when he spies his long-lost aunt, Mee Lor, and her two youngest sons at Sacramento International Airport in July. Lor raised Chue Vue for 10 years in the old Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand. At left is Dang Vue, the arriving family's official sponsor and lifeline in Sacramento. Dang Vue has promised the U.S. State Department he'll find them a home, take them to the doctor and help them register for school and special English classes.

For the Chang family, learning the basics of modern life was eased by the coaching of relatives who were already in Sacramento. But there were some bumps along the way. At left, Choua Chang, 14, microwaves soup. As she eats from a bowl, below left, siblings Tia, 13, and Hue, 10, dine right out of the can.

Pao Vue, left, wakes up in his Sacramento home in July, his dream of being in America finally realized. "I'm very happy to be here," he says. But along with his new life come worries. Above, Vue tries to balance his expenses against income, but the \$4,800 in resettlement cash his family got had almost run out, and monthly welfare checks and food stamps hadn't kicked in yet.

Opening doors For the Hmong families who arrived in Sacramento this summer, modern American life has been filled with mysteries - how to work a door lock, a drinking fountain or a microwave - not to mention the most basic of puzzles: how to get around.

Mai Ge Vang unlocks the door to a one-bath, three-bedroom rental that her extended family of 12 will share in the Tallac Village area. Uncle Dang Vue, 38, and other relatives helped the family find and furnish the \$975-a-month house.

Pao Vue, above right, checks to see if his first-ever air conditioner is working as his family and their relatives gather in the living room of their first home in America. At left on the wall

is a bronze gong that Vue's shaman father banged to summon the spirits of ancestors to heal body and soul. At right, Vue's older brother, Xiong, and his wife, Bla Thao, haul their clothes into the bedroom they will share with their three kids. Later, an uncle from Fresno brought a television and VCR.

At left, Pao Vue's daughter Chue Vue, 3, wakes up in her new home in Tallac Village, just south of Tahoe Park, in July, looking to see if any aunts or uncles have come to visit. Above, mother Mai Ge Vang puts up a clothesline with the help of brother-in-law So Vue. The house rents for \$975 a month. The family would qualify for housing assistance, but the waiting lists are long.

From left, Tia, Chai and Choua Chang listen to teacher Shao Xiong while brother Hue, foreground, is distracted by his foot during a summer school session in July. The Changs were amazed that there was a special teacher, Xiong, just for the four of them. "In Thailand, there were about 50 kids in each class," said Choua, 14. Within two weeks, the Changs were speaking basic English sentences. Xiong helped solve their transportation problems by driving them to and from school each day.

With Sada, 2, in her lap, See Thao, at left, registers her other kids in the Sacramento City Unified School District with the help of district officials. Thao, right, feels the weight of raising six kids by herself. She and her family were the first Hmong to land in America from the Wat Tham Krabok camp, but her husband, Aeng Chang, died of cancer after their arrival.

Dang Vue carries a 50-pound bag of rice into the new home of his cousin Mee Lor and her family, which includes nephew Xiong Vue, left. As the family's sponsor, Dang helped the family get into the three-bedroom, one-bath rental in Tallac Village.

Banhia Vue, 4, above, is fed by her mother, Bla Thao, as the girl concentrates on a Hmong video. Meanwhile, Banhia and her cousin Yang Vue, 5, who is at far left, play in their mothers' shoes as other family members watch a Hmong video in their new home in Tallac Village. They moved into the house in July.

Sacramento Bee / Olivia Nguyen Hmong American populations By the end of the year, 16,000 new Hmong refugees are expected in the United States.

STATE / CURRENT ESTIMATE / PROJECTED NEWBY END OF YEAR 1. California / 95,000 / 5,650 Sacramento / 25,000 / 2,000 2. Minnesota / 70,000 / 5,500 3. Wisconsin / 50,000 / 3,500 4. North Carolina / 20,000 / 400 5. Michigan / 15,000 / n/a

Note: Hmong estimates are based on figures provided by local Hmong leaders and service organizations.

Source: Hmong National Development

Sacramento Bee / Olivia Nguyen Helping the new Hmong Here are some things

Sacramentans are doing to help the new wave of Hmong:

* Donations of clothing, furniture, school supplies and household items - as well as leads on affordable housing - are being accepted at Opening Doors Inc. (916-492-2591), Hmong Women's Heritage Association (916-394-1405) and Sacramento Lao Family Community Inc. (916-424-0864).

* Opening Doors, which does refugee resettlement, is offering agricultural training and jobs for new Hmong at local farms.

* After a story in The Bee about the needs of the newcomers, the Hyatt Regency hotel donated 600 mattresses to Sacramento Lao Family Community.

* Sacramentans interested in learning Hmong language and culture can attend classes at Lemon Hill Career Center (916-433-2620).

* Backpacks and school supplies donated by Citibank employees, the Sacramento Hmong Task Force and others are available at Sacramento Lao Family Community.

* Furniture, clothes, wheelchairs and household items are available at Opening Doors and the Hmong Women's Heritage Association.

* Refugees can take English classes at the Sacramento City Unified School District (Rose Xiong, 916-264-3782), the Grant Joint Union High School District (916-286-7560, 286-

3891) and other districts. Old Marshall School (916-264-4113) has an ESL class for Hmong refugees starting Monday from 8:30-11:30 a.m.

* Job training classes are available through Lao Family Community, the Grant district, Asian Resources (916-454-1892) and Old Marshall School.

LOAD-DATE: February 10, 2005