

The Milwaukee Hmong

History in Milwaukee

The Hmong began immigrating to America and Milwaukee in the late 1970s. This was made possible in 1975 when Congress approved the immigration of some Hmong to the United States under the “parole” power of the U.S. Attorney General.

Why did this happen? Let’s start at the beginning. Hmong recorded history goes back to at least 2,000 BC in China. In the early nineteenth century, some Hmong began to migrate southward into the mountainous regions of Thailand, northern Burma, Vietnam, and Laos. Some of those who settled in Laos would end up in the United States. Many Lao Hmong had been aligned with the United States’ military efforts during the Vietnam War. When the war ended, Laos gradually fell to the Communists, and the Hmong faced genocide. Thousands of Hmong fled Laos for refugee camps in Thailand. The United States Congress intervened and approved the immigration of those Hmong families that had supported the US war efforts.

The immigrants

Hmong arrived in America in their greatest numbers in the late 1970s through the 1990s. Following a period of secondary migration within the

United States, substantial numbers of Hmong ended up in Wisconsin, making them the largest Asian group in the state.

But immigration to the United States was not easy. The Hmong who had lost so many lives in Laos, and whose cultural and life practices had been wrenched from them by the war and the camps, now faced radically new challenges. In the mountains of South-east Asia, the Hmong were subsistence

farmers. As low-tech horticulturalists, Hmong households produced most of their basic necessities, and rarely had access to anything else. In post-industrial United States, most workers sold their labor and purchased their basic necessities plus much, much more. Very few of the complex life skills the Hmong had acquired in their mountain homes were relevant for this new world.



“During the [Vietnam] War my dad was a war captain. He worked with the CIA to fight against communists from North [Vietnam] to Laos to South Vietnam. When Laos fell in 1975, he feared persecution. The Hmong were threatened with extermination. We went to Thailand. We were six months in Thailand in a refugee camp [before coming to the US].”

“We were animists. Christianity was introduced in the 1950s in Laos—late 1950s. It’s fairly new to us. About 65 percent here are Christian and 35 percent practice a belief in ancestor worship. They believe that when ancestors die, they become good spirits and come back to help others. People offer to ancestors, offer incense, a small meal to ask good spirits to share meal with them. [They] burn special paper from way back in Chinese history, will transfer this into money to good spirit to have a means of purchasing things. [It’s] very popular in this group. Hmong culture has different ways of marriage ceremonies and funerals. Even though some are Christian, they practice cultural parts of celebrations.”

“We believe that people come to this world and when [they] depart go back and be with grandparents and great grandparents. During a funeral we guide the person back step by step.”

Quotes of Hmong informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

In their mountain homelands, Hmong artisans and craftspeople commanded high status. Hmong art forms are praised for their intricacy, symbolic expression, and beauty. They now entered a world where artistry drew *some* respect, but the greatest status and economic resources tended to go to those with formal educations and skills in advanced technology. In Southeast Asia, the Hmong had little access to education. Until very recently, they did not even have a written language.

Every facet of daily living in urban America involved new learning experiences. The Hmong had to learn everything from use of electricity and indoor plumbing to driving a car to banking to operating computers.

In addition, social organization among the Hmong was based on large extended families, lineages, and highly complex clan systems. In the United States, families were relatively small and few groups were organized along lineage or extended family lines. The U.S. economic system—with the emphasis on mobility and the selling of labor—tended to *disperse* rather than unify family groups.

And yet, against all odds, the Hmong in the United States and in Milwaukee, succeeded. In less than thirty years, the Hmong were becoming well integrated into the U.S. economy and social fabric, while retaining most of their traditions. Some were able to retain their healthy eating habits through gardening and participating in farmers' markets throughout the city.



In Milwaukee, the Hmong have their own newspapers, educational organizations, women's associations, arts and crafts clubs, a small museum, food markets, youth programs, family services, and student

associations. And through education, the Hmong have advanced socially and economically in nearly every field they have entered.

"In Laos, meat was costly. Growing vegetables was more widely available. Hmong had no high blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes. This is new here. A lot of exercising [in Laos], working on farm, hot weather. Coming here is different. Less activities, lots of meat here. Vegetables often cost more than meat. Produce not natural anymore. See more gout even today."

"Both have to work to pay the bills and put kids to school. A lot of parents today do not know the right way to help the kids, with peer influence, commercialism. Parents have very little time with the kids."

"People always accuse us if there is a cat missing or anything—that we'd caught it and eaten it. They say we are backwards, and we are—or were."

"Our organization was always the clan system. The government did not provide funds for us. Divorce is done today too in the clan system. We have a judge. [We] go to that person. The person doesn't get paid. It's a social obligation. We also have [name of association] that has youth programs and family services. We still have early marriages at fourteen and fifteen and are trying to change this. But we are worried that the family does not work together as a unit anymore and creates imbalance in family. Kids are influenced by outside things. We help women and men to understand the roles they play. Women are becoming more self-reliant and sometimes seen as a threat."

Quotes of Hmong informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Fieldnotes from 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.: August, 2009

Unlike his mother, “Xang” spoke perfect English. He helped her load and unload vegetables on Sunday morning. After setting up the tent, Xang took all the produce from the back of the family pick-up truck and organized the vegetable display for the farmers’ market. His mother moved around the cabbage and radishes and straightened out the rows. Xang’s eight-year-old son, who spoke both Hmong and English, was chubby by Hmong standards. He helped his family with the markets and in exchange collected a few quarters.

The market organizer apologized to Xang because the crowds had been sparse lately. Xang said it didn’t matter. These were vegetables left over from their Saturday market and he was glad to have a place to sell them. He said his mother did most of the gardening on rented plots owned by the [name of program] in her own Milwaukee neighborhood. The gardening helped her maintain Hmong cultural traditions. She could plant the kinds of vegetables they used for cooking Hmong dishes and also reap a few medicinal herbs. The farmers’ markets had been wonderful niches for the Hmong in Milwaukee to sell off their surplus. Very few farmers from the rural areas were willing to drive fifty miles to the city to service these venues.

Xang had a job for a nonprofit. He was born in a refugee camp in Thailand, came to the US at age eight, learned English, and later earned a degree in Social Welfare. He explained that his parents’ generation had a hard time learning English because the Hmong written language was a relatively new development and few members of the older generation knew it back in Laos. This made learning a new language very difficult. He was just happy his mother was able to keep busy with gardening and keep the Hmong culinary traditions alive.

When the tent was completely organized, Xang left his mother and son to sell their produce. While Xang’s son could do translations, most of the time the grandmother was able to negotiate sales through hand gestures. Within minutes she was busy taking orders. The boy was off buying Tootsie Rolls from other vendors with the quarters he’d earned.

“But our needs are still underserved. Hmong still have to learn how to use [the] system to their advantage—we don’t know how. If they do know about it, they are intimidated and don’t know how to advocate for themselves. They have been passive.”

“It’s fifty-fifty. I have a grandmother very knowledgeable about herbal meds. Some work. Whatever works. Our people believe in this. We use doctors too. Whatever works.”

“We still eat the foods from old country—rice, vegetables. You see Hmong gardening a lot—home-grown vegetables. I do my own gardening.”

“Children [are] becoming so Americanized. The Lao that grew up here still believe in respect for the elders. But the younger generation has lost that respect. They don’t like the traditional foods, and the parents can’t change them anymore.”

“It’s hard to get your kids really into work. They think because they are an American, [they] don’t have to work that hard now.”

Quotes of Hmong informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Where to observe Hmong culture

One of the best venues to learn about Hmong traditional (and contemporary) life is at a local Hmong New Year's celebration. At these events, Hmong dress in traditional clothing and enjoy traditional foods, dance, music, and other forms of entertainment. Thousands attend from Milwaukee County and other areas. They are usually held in December at the State Fair Grounds in West Allis or the Franklin Sports Complex in Franklin.



"[My] wife sews traditional clothing. I don't do anything. Wife tries to pass on to kids. Only time we wear traditional clothes is on New Year. In Laos [we] wore these more often. . . And we started these story cloths back in the camps. Men would draw little figures that meant something from the old time and women would stitch them together to make story. Today some Hmong sell at markets. But most [are] made by machine now."

"We speak it at home. If you teach a kid English first and Hmong second, they will get a huge accent and you can't understand them. If you teach them Hmong first and then English, then it works out."

Quotes of Hmong informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Meet one of your current Hmong neighbors

Ncuab Tina Yang

Ncuab Tina Yang is a second-generation Hmong American. Having earned a degree in early childhood education, she works today as an early childhood education teacher for Neighborhood House in Milwaukee's Concordia area.

Throughout her life, Ncuab has continued to learn about her family and the hardships they endured to get her to the point where she's at today. While expressing gratitude for her life in the United States, she has not surrendered her traditions. "I take my shoes off every time I enter my home," she states. She cooks and eats traditional Hmong meals at least four days out of every week and speaks Hmong daily.



Ncuab has faced episodes of racism and ethnocentrism in Milwaukee. Despite this, she is proud to be a positive, strong, and independent person. Additionally, she reaches out to members of diverse populations. “In my daily walk of life, I cross paths with a variety of ethnic groups. I enjoy exploring diversity through food, shopping at different grocery stores, and trying new restaurants.” She participates in Hmong festivals and celebrations, but also those of other ethnic groups. “I want to continue to learn and grow and share the love.”

References

Lackey, J. & Petrie, R. (2013) *Strolling through Milwaukee's Ethnic History*. Milwaukee, WI: MECAH Publishing.

The Amazing Adaptation of the Urban Hmong documentary by Urban Anthropology Inc.