

Strong Ties



These new Southeast Asian immigrants arrive in Des Moines.

by Jean Florman

DURING THE 1800S, Iowa was seen as a “land of opportunity” by many ethnic groups. Thousands of people came to the Midwest to improve their lives by farming, trading, and building new towns. Not all settlers who wanted a better life came to Iowa in the last century. Some arrived just a few years ago.

The Tai Dam (tie dom) of Vietnam began arriving in Iowa in 1975. The Tai Dam **refugees** [people who flee their own country because of war] had been invited to resettle in Iowa by Governor Robert Ray. They originally were from northwestern Vietnam. Between 1954 and 1975, war in Vietnam forced many of them to flee to the nearby countries of Laos and Thailand. Another ethnic group, the Hmong (mung) originally of China who migrated to Laos, also fled to refugee camps in Thailand.

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“I dropped my tears”

Khao Baccam remembers his family trying to escape the fighting in Vietnam when he was seven years old. “My parents moved me frequently, fleeing from war and **persecution** [being badly treated because of your beliefs]. I did not know where we were going. I just held onto my mother’s hand and she kept on dragging me along.”

Khao’s family settled in Laos, where they remained for 21 years. After war started in Laos, Khao and his family fled to Thailand. In 1975, they settled in Iowa. Over 2600 Tai Dam refugees are now settled here.

Many of the refugees from Vietnam and Laos escaped in overcrowded boats. Khao had to leave everything but \$100 behind. By the time he arrived in Iowa, he had “nothing at all.” Other refugees even had to leave some members of their family behind. One Lo Thi tells how her daughter and four grandchildren “didn’t get to come along [from Laos to Thailand] because [the person helping us escape] was in a hurry and couldn’t get them all. I dropped my tears crossing [the Mekong River].”

Coming to Iowa

Individuals, families, communities, or church groups in Iowa “sponsored” Tai Dam families. When One Lo Thi and her husband Vong Lo Van arrived in Iowa, their relatives and their sponsors helped them find a home, get health checkups, study English, and find jobs. Vong detassled corn near Mt. Pleasant and studied writing, reading, and speaking for eight hours a day.

Relatives brought silverware, linens, and clothing to the couple. Unlike the Vong’s home in Laos, their house in Iowa has running water, electricity, heat, air conditioning, and a refrigerator.

Life is easier and more peaceful in Iowa, but many Tai Dam immigrants miss their friends, relatives, and the customs of their homeland. “I was lucky to have the chance to come and live here,” says Khao Baccam. But he adds that his “memories in the homeland . . . make me think and miss home.”

Older Tai Dam immigrants like One Lo Thi worry that, “However happy we are, we can’t forget our people over there [in Vietnam and

Laos]. Younger generations, five or ten years from now, might not know, not understand all these things.” Tai Dam immigrants want their children to learn the Tai Dam language and customs, and to keep alive the stories of their parents’ struggles.

“We have stronger social ties, a stronger love and cooperation than Americans,” says One Lo Van. His wife adds, “The love between the Tai Dam [can’t be thrown away.]”



A young Southeast Asian immigrant

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