This study employed ethnographic methodology to investigate and record the post-camp, pre-assimilation period of Laotian refugees. The primary goal was to document the special problems and experiences of the Laotian population as they attempted to adjust to new roles and expectations within mainstream North American society.

Oral histories and biographical statements focused on the perceptions and observations of the members of the refugee population as they arrived and interacted with American culture. Data gathered during fieldwork were analyzed within a framework of selected educational and anthropological theories.

Fieldwork within the Laotian refugee community during its post-camp interfacing with North American culture generated conclusions and recommendations which focused on and related to the entire spectrum of human activity. Particular emphasis
was placed on Laotian and American cultural structures as well as on the psychological and cultural difficulties and challenges each population encountered during the first stages of assimilation/acculturation. This study was conducted with heavy emphasis on participant observation and analyzed within the anthropological tradition of reflexivity.
URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY: AN EXPLORATION AND INTERPRETATION OF
THE POST-CAMP PERIOD OF LAOTIAN REFUGEES SETTLING
IN EUGENE-SPRINGFIELD, OREGON

by

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Many friends and teachers have contributed to the fabric of my being. Each in a special and tangible manner remains a part of me. My parents, who were my first teachers, began that process by providing unlimited encouragement and a loving environment from where I might wonder, dream, and respond to the world around me as well as explore the landscapes within. Various other individuals have lent energy and dimension to those dreams, wonderings, and explorations. The list is too long and the years too many to cite each one individually. I remain grateful to each one for being what they are and for sharing with me.

Every project entails involvement with a particular set of individuals who contribute to its uniqueness. During the doctoral program, I have grown from the support, advice, and experiences of professors and graduate people. The members of my doctoral committee, Dr. Wayne Haverson, Dr. Ed Ferguson, and Dr. Nicholas Yonkers advised and encouraged the exploration of dimensions unusual to the doctoral process, including encouragement to pursue my own strengths. A deep and special appreciation is in order for the contributions and involvement of Dr. Thomas Grigsby and Dr. Dorice Tentchoff. Dr. Grigsby, my academic advisor from the Department of Post-Secondary Education as well as committee chairperson, and Dr. Dorice Tentchoff, academic advisor from the Department of Anthropology and supervisor for
the ethnographic fieldwork, both provided and shared experience and encouragement to pursue the multiple dimensions of this project. Beyond their formal responsibilities, their enthusiasm for my work and their friendships, each of immense value, were critical to the completion of this endeavor.

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For all of those friends and teachers I have mentioned above, as well as those unnamed, my deep appreciation. Who I have become, what I strive to be is, in part, due to what I have seen and admired in them.
SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To those who have had the courage and who continue to have
the courage to say "No" to oppression in whatever form it may take.

KOB

Kob
is that you,
hung from the tamarind tree
bloody -
and why have they cut your hands off?
you said you would struggle in all ways,
Kob, i believe you now.

do you remember
one morning, how we were walking on that mud path to the village?
The sun was hot, and the way long,
i tried to keep up with you, but my legs were tired
and i kept slipping
You slowed down to wait for me,
and to pass the time away while we walked together,
you told me a funny story of
the little girl who tried to walk to school in the rain,
but found that for each step forward that she took, she would
slide back two,
because the road was slippery.
So she turned around and walked backwards,
and in that way she reached the school in no time at all.
We laughed, and then already our village was in sight,
and my legs seemed strong again.
You said you would struggle in all ways, Kob,
i believe you now.

Today, Kob,
when i saw you
hanging from the tree,
your hands cut off,
i thought i could walk no more, ever.
But then i remember your laughter,
and how you said you would struggle in all ways,
and i grow strong again.
Kob, i believe you now.

-- By a friend of one of the students beaten to death and hung at
Thammasat University after protesting the United States bombing
of Laos; as quoted in Indochina Chronicle, Jan.-Feb., 1977.
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Wishing both to create a buffer zone between Thailand and Vietnam and to cut the supply lines between North and South Vietnam, the American airmen, like the Thai generals of the nineteenth century, are systematically destroying the capacity of a large part of Laos to support human life. It remains to be seen if a scorched earth policy of this sort can continue to be implemented by a democratic nation such as the United States, even under the cover of a 'hidden war.' The Thai war destruction of Laos in 1827-1832 is more than a black spot in Asian history; the image of Thailand has been stained by it forever. When the facts come to light and become more widely known, the Laotian case, 1945-1970, will probably become, along with the war in Vietnam, one of the most appalling 'success stories' of Western enterprise in Asia - something a 'silent majority', feeling guilty of complicity and cowardice, will certainly not like to discuss.¹

There has been a rapid influx of Laotian refugees into the United States of America since 1978. According to the United States Department of Immigration Report to Congress (1981), in the years immediately following 1975, the Southeast Asian population that entered the United States was over ninety percent Vietnamese.² Much of our initial data, many of our language and vocational theories, our cultural response, and most of our informal social awareness of and relationships with the refugee population are based upon experiences with the Vietnamese. The major body of
immediately available information is the direct result of a carefully orchestrated governmental and media portrait cultivated throughout the duration of the Southeast Asian war.3

More recently, large groups of refugees have arrived from Laos and Kampuchea. The origins of these peoples may be found in distinctly different cultural traditions than the Vietnamese, though they have shared a similar historical relationship with the United States. In particular, they hold in common the American Southeast Asian war, 1945-1975. In the period since 1978, about sixty thousand Laotian refugees have been admitted to the United States. The principal categories of refugees from Laos are the Lao Lum (lowland Lao), or ethnic Lao which include farmers, rural villagers from the lowlands, former government bureaucrats, soldiers of the Lao faction that supported the United States, and Lao Sung (the Hmong and Mien tribespeople) from the highlands. Some ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese traders have left the urban areas of Laos and applied for refugee status.4 The majority of the Laotian refugees arrived between 1977 and 1981. As of December 1983, the United States Department of State officially estimated that forty-four thousand Laotian refugees had residence in the Pacific Northwest and California.5

Both the refugee population and its new host country (the United States of America) were active participants in the Southeast Asian war. The arrival of refugees, first the Vietnamese in large numbers and then the Laotians and Kampucheans, has been the source of a number of perceptual and cultural adjustments and prob-
lems for the Asian and American populations alike. Among the difficulties the Laotian population has encountered include:

- overcoming and coping with loss of culture, status and support groups;

- adjusting to a new culture, language, and values system;

- understanding American expectations and perceptions of Laos and Laotians;

- recovering from the refugee camp experiences, including social, psychological, and physical deprivation;

- surviving during a period of difficult and changing economic conditions in the United States; and

- adjusting expectations of the new culture with the realities of living in it as a refugee.

For the American population, a different set of problems and adjustments have occurred, including:

- reconciling the American role and involvement in the physical and cultural devastation of Laos with the presence of the refugee population;

- attempting to understand the role of the United States in the Southeast Asian war as well as accepting defeat there;

- overcoming deep-rooted historical prejudices toward
Oriental peoples while close to one million new Asian refugees have arrived since 1975;

- developing an understanding that Vietnamese, Laotians, and Kampucheans are people from different cultures and historical experience;

- understanding that Vietnamese, Laotians, and Kampucheans speak different languages and cannot translate or interpret for each other;

- discovering and then accepting the fact that the American population was deceived by four different Presidents concerning the nature and extent of the "hidden war" in Laos; and

- providing adequate funding, realistic and meaningful educational opportunities during a period of economic recession and inflation.

Statement of the Purpose

The central purpose of this study was to investigate and interpret the post-camp, pre-acculturation period of the refugee population from Laos residing in Eugene, Oregon.

Objectives of the Study

This study was designed to record the post-camp, pre-acculturation experiences of the Laotian refugee population.
The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Research the history related to the outmigration of the Laotian refugees.

2. Review literature relative to the post-camp, pre-acculturation period for Laotians and to record the historical antecedents relevant to the refugee process.

3. Identify the Laotian population, live in the community, conduct open-ended interviews, generate demographics, and record the refugee experiences in accordance with accepted ethnographic methodology.

4. Record for historical purposes the uniqueness of the events of the post-camp period while that process was transpiring.

5. Provide recommendations for guidelines for anthropologists, educators, and social service providers as they attempt to understand and to assist the Laotian refugees during the acculturation process.

Significance of the Study

...They are here, we know very little about them... we are bumbling in the dark in an attempt to understand them and then to reach them as they deal with the seemingly insurmountable problems they face when they arrive here. There's a lot of unproductive fear, mistrust, frustration aimed at the Laotians by Americans who perceive them as the enemy, as Vietnamese, as lazy, as stupid....

Fieldwork Interview, Refugee Health Service Provider, 1982
I don't like having to teach gooks, wherever they came from. Hell, I spent thirteen months in Nam. I want to forget it. I don't want to look at those ugly faces in class every day. I've cleaned that experience over there from my mind.  

Fieldwork Interview, Community College Teacher of Refugees, 1982

We passed through our fifth long year of struggle against the U.S. aggressors, and we have scored a certain number of successes. We rely on ourselves and have the support of the progressive peoples of the world, including those of the United States.... We have had lots of trouble and difficulty but despite our long struggle, little is known about our situation outside of Laos....

Interview of Phao Phimphachanh, Laotian Leader, by Noam Chomsky, 1970

... to speak to each other as human beings... the reaching out of the hand is important... this is what my people need the most... Once they know they are welcome then they will have the strength to face whatever else....

Fieldwork Interview, Laotian Refugee Community Leader, 1982

To date, no comprehensive study exists that records the initial stages of acculturation of the Laotian refugees. Nevertheless, some 350,000 Laotian refugees are now residing in the United States as a direct result of American involvement in Southeast Asia from 1954-1975. In light of this influx of refugees, the year 1980 witnessed the passage of the historic Refugee Act, designed by Congress to meet the needs of arriving refugees and to establish support systems for cultural integration. This legislation established the broad legal basis for refugee admission into the United States. Up to three years of basic economic subsidy, provisions for
learning English and obtaining extensive vocational training were guaranteed by this document.

With the change of governments in 1980, a reassessment of the 1980 Refugee Act was initiated by the Reagan Administration. This resulted in new national policies in regard to refugees that cut benefits in half and limited funding to eighteen months from date-of-entry. The focus changed from the learning of English and North American cultural orientation to the new priorities of job preparedness and rapid assimilation into the work force. May of 1982 signalled the advent of these new policies as programs and services were cut back and as new systems initiated by the Reagan Administration were implemented.

Due to a deep economic recession in the United States, accompanied by escalating inflation, funding cuts for all public service projects were executed on regional and local levels. It was demonstrated that the severity of funding reductions had a tremendous impact on all aspects of the acculturation process. This factor, combined with Reagan Administration changes in public policies, was one of the key elements which may determine whether long term acculturation is probable or possible. In addition, the changing economic situation has created new pressures for the American public, thus impacting its relationship with and acceptance of the refugee population. These developments have contributed to additional stress on the community level and generated additional hostilities toward the refugees by concerned Americans.
Numerous educators and anthropologists have observed that public education as employed in the past often alienates immigrant and minority peoples from their own cultures. This has often created attitudes among minorities that are not conducive to rapid acculturation (Hezel, 1975; Ramauri, 1973; Freire, 1976; Kozol, 1976; Spaulding, 1976; Zeigler, 1980).

The American public has had little or no preparation for the influx of Laotian refugees. The war in Laos and the extent of American involvement was a well-kept secret from the American people. It has come to be identified as the "hidden war" (Chomsky and Zinn, 1972; Ellsberg, 1972; Burchett, 1970; Bransfman, 1973). Few Americans have studied Laotian culture and there is much confusion as citizens attempt to understand where the Laotian refugees have come from and attempt to relate to them.

In addition, Americans have only recently begun to look beyond the confusion and disillusionment of the post-Southeast Asian war period. Americans have begun to raise questions concerning the government's attempt to manage information as opposed to the Congress' and the public's right to know. They have also raised questions related to the issue of whether a war need be declared by Congress for it to actually be recognized as a war. Most recently, these issues have been brought to the forefront of the media and juxtaposed with new and similar involvement by the United States throughout Latin America.
Assumptions of the Study

1. The Laotian refugee population of the communities studied is representative of the greater Laotian refugee population.

2. The refugees understood the questions asked, the intended use of this information, and were honest in response.

3. The background of the researcher in cooperation with translators and informants was sufficient to interpret the Laotian refugee experience.

4. Ethnographic methodology, when conducted by accepted anthropological and educational standards, is valid for the interpretation of the refugee experience.

5. Analysis of the post-camp experience would be a useful contribution to anthropological and educational data and could be used by practitioners involved with the refugees during the acculturation period.

Limitations of the Study

1. Interviews were limited to those individuals that expressed their willingness to participate.

2. With only a basic understanding of the Laotian language, the researcher relied heavily on the use of interpreters,
the interpreters understanding of the questions asked, and the interpreters understanding of the participant's response.

3. Although indirectly translatable, some words and concepts were not directly translatable from Lao to English.

4. The interpreters were Laotian refugees with varying degrees of education, different understandings of Lao and North American culture, and of varying age, respect, and status within their primary culture.

5. The researcher brought to the study his own particular set of experiences, education, and selective bias.

6. The process of acculturation is still transpiring and the eventual outcome of the post-camp experience is unknown.

This study was therefore dependent upon the individual perceptions of the refugees and translators as they offered interpretations of their experiences and upon the researcher's interpretation of that information. The ethnographic process was conducted during the initial stages of acculturation. The experiences and interpretations of that process may change over time and with additional developments.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The review of literature has been organized to focus on three integrated topical areas covering related ethnographic and historical literature from the disciplines of Anthropology and Education:

1. Education and the acculturation process
2. Anthropological research and the study of Education
3. United States role in the origins of the Laotian refugee process

Education and the Acculturation Process

At the core of each person's life is a package of beliefs that he or she learns and that has been culturally determined long in advance of the person's birth.... the world is made coherent by our description of it.... 1

Educators and anthropologists have written extensively about the impact of social institutions on traditional communities and on the process of acculturation. In particular, some anthropologists have analyzed schools in terms of their cultural congruence with the culture they serve (Kimball, 1974; Cohen, 1975; Carnoy, 1974; Ogbu, 1974; Kozol, 1968). Jules Henery's micro-ethnographic studies of the United States urban classroom culture conclude that they are the extensions of the dominant Anglo-Saxon
middle class culture projected into the school setting (Henry, 1975). Essentially, this means that the system of reward in the classroom and how it is to be learned, as well as the criteria for student success are all influenced by cultural factors that more often than not are absent from the immigrant community. Ogbu (1974) observes and analyzes the problems of ghetto schools and the loss of primary culture identification for many of the students. Spindler (1976) raises questions related to the concept of cultural congruence and the relationship of the immigrants to the United States national culture which is trying to integrate them and change their value systems, specifically:

1. In fact, are the schools agents of the national culture?
2. Can cultural integrity of immigrant groups and minority individuals be preserved as integration and value re-training occur?

Spindler's model provides a theoretical framework for the study of acculturation/assimilation roles in community settings. He states that institutions are instrumental activities, i.e., they retain their credibility as long as they produce results that are reasonably congruent with social beliefs, needs, and expectations. In times of change, schools become focal points for the introduction of new information and often the results produced may not be congruent with traditional cultural needs or expectations. School, community, and national culture alter traditional cultural aspira-
Recent literature related to the process of education within a cultural system is replete with models for the study of immigrants and acculturation. Bernstein (1970) examines the socio-linguistic approach to assimilation; Gamio (1971) investigates the process of assimilation of Mexican-Americans into American culture; Cohen (1965) looks at the role of culture in relation to the educational process; Glazier, Nathan, and Moynihan (1963) expose the myth of the melting pot theory; Higham (1975) records the assimilation process of Jews in urban America; Taylor (1971) presents a detailed account of European immigration to the United States; and Pullen (1981), in a brief study of the Portland, Oregon Southeast Asian community assesses work related aspects of the first eighteen months of the assimilation process.

Numerous studies from classic literature related to the process of immigration and assimilation provide models for urban ethnography. Jacob Riis (1890, 1892, 1902) researched immigrant experiences in urban slums; Oscar Handlin (1951) presents a sensitive analysis of the problems the new immigrant encounters through detailed examination of the history of immigration; Solomon (1956), Higham (1955), and Jones (1960) provide accounts of immigrant synthesis.

Educators and anthropologists have yet to produce in-depth studies of the Laotian refugees as they confront acculturation and assimilation. In particular, the literature search indicates that no studies exist that thoroughly examine or record the events of the post-camp refugee experience and assess the long
range implications for the Lao refugee or, in fact, for the dominant North American culture.

Some educators have stressed the need for a technique of instruction that encompasses a process of "humanization" of previously dehumanized individuals. A dehumanized, highly stressed condition has been reflected in the behavior of great numbers of the refugee population in the period following release from the refugee camp environment. Because most of the Laotian refugees are non-literate in English, educators like Paulo Freire insist upon a concept of education for the pre-literate or non-literate that is compatible with human dignity and responsibility. Furthermore, they encourage the use of methodology that incorporates the study of language with concepts and experiences meaningful to the adult learners within the context of their daily lives:

In so far as language is impossible without thought, and language and thought impossible without the world to which they refer, the human word is more than mere vocabulary, it is word and action....

Freire refers to the world of the illiterate as a culture of silence in which the masses are mute, prohibited from taking part in the transformation of their society or from acquiring self esteem. He indicates that the illiterate must experience more of the culture and the society into which he is expected to integrate and to which he must adjust the sum total of his life experience.
In the context of national development, a number of anthropologists and educators identify an implicitly assimilative function for education institutions rooted in economic determinism - a stance expressed by Carnoy (1974). From this perspective, schools as instruments of the development process, inherently collaborate in the breakdown of loyalty, support and identification to kin groups, extended family, ethnic groups, and other models of traditional solidarity not congruent with the capitalist model for industrialization and progress (Cohen, 1975; Shimahara, 1975).

Sinclair (1923) in his classic study of American education develops this thesis in more depth:

We have allowed the education of our youth to fall into the absolute control of a group of men who represent not only a minority of the total population but have at the same time enormous economic and business stakes in what education it shall be...4

He further asserts that the American educational system is an "instrument of special privilege" with its main function to perpetuate a capitalist system rather than the education of humankind. The monopolization of college and university boards by other than academicians establishes an "interlocking set of directorates" which stabilizes this mission and creates a uniformity.

Kozol (1980) raises questions concerning what is transpiring within the educational process. He alleges that research is a "self-perpetuating process of delay" and that
parameters are placed around research by those who determine what questions may be asked, what research is acceptable, and what resources and references are legitimate:

The school serves the state. The interests of this state are not compatible with private ethics or unmanageable dissent. The stars and stripes are not above the door for decoration, they tell us, in the clearest possible terms, the name and motives of the owner of the structure that our learning shall inhabit....

Kozol further cites the dependency of higher education on large state and federal subsidies as evidence of the fact that the universities are obvious extensions of the lower levels of state-controlled education. He asserts there are "ten times four thousand students in black, poor white, Spanish neighborhoods" of the large American cities who will never have the opportunities of the "privileged" but for the "accident of color, cash, and birth." Professors, in the words of Kozol, are "with rare exceptions, free to argue or discuss whatever they like," as long as the process is confined to words and discussion. He maintains this neutralizes the active thinker and doer, co-opts meaningful examination of the issues, and perpetuates a system that attempts to keep the energy and activities of everyone and everything within its sphere of influence in a position beneficial to its smooth operation. He concludes by stating that through neutralized "discussion and investigation," American education dilutes reaction and removes us from "...the things
we do, the sights we see, the agonies we empower..."; he charges that it is an atrocity that even to this day, when the record of our role in Southeast Asia has been thoroughly documented, we still "cannot say that how we effortlessly kill" is evil and real.7

Anthropological Research and the Study of Education

Ethnography and participant observation have been the central research orientation in cultural anthropology since the late nineteenth century. The work of Franz Boas among the Indians of the Pacific Northwest Coast, and Bronislaw Malinowski's study of the Trobriand Islanders are classic examples of ethnographies based on intense participant observation (Boas, 1895; Malinowski, 1928). More recently, Rabinow's (1977) fieldwork in Morocco and DuVignaud's Change at Shebika (1970) provide additional perspectives on the ethnographic process and question the role of the researcher.

What is participant observation? Participant observation requires the participant observer to acquire knowledge about another culture by undertaking to enter and participate in the culture he or she wishes to study. The general requirement is about two years in duration. The participant observer actually undergoes partial socialization into the life-ways of that culture (Pelto, 1967, 1971; Spradley, 1980). His goal is to learn how members of a different culture experience and ascribe order to their world (Bodgan and Biklen, 1982).
Anthropology, more than its sibling social sciences, possesses a hard-earned methodology of field observation, capable of generating considerable accuracy in collecting qualitative data. The anthropological format grants a place for objectivity as well as subjectivity, and allows for, even insists upon mediating the two. Uncovering and describing the researcher's own assumptions, interpretations, and translations in concert with informants and translators becomes a fundamental aspect of the investigation itself (Rabinow, 1977).

The personal approach to cultural research has also been defined in articles by White (1955), Bruyn (1963), Honigman (1976), Denzin (1978), Georges and Jones (1980), and Wolf (1979). The essence of their theory is that participant observation allows observation of behavior in context, and it allows researchers to follow leads and to make discoveries in the field that are not facilitated by other types of research design. Furthermore, it offers researchers the opportunity to learn about and experience the way other people define their relationship to the world.

Finally, while participant observation remains at the heart of anthropological research, Pelto in Anthropological Research: The Structure of Inquiry advises anthropological researchers to take advantage of other techniques and information gathering systems that have been developed in other social science disciplines if pertinent to the questions the researcher is asking.
Most educational research is based on paradigms drawn from sociology, psychology, and economics. These kinds of studies attempt to isolate small numbers of component dependent variables in a problem and then relate them to an independent variable. Such studies tend to assume an exclusively quantitative approach. They represent an attempt to apply research parameters and standards of proof drawn from the physical sciences to the study of social and educational phenomena. Such studies are valid, but holistic qualitative approaches to research such as those prevalent in anthropology also contribute to the field of education, especially in the area of cross-cultural and comparative education (Bodgan and Biklen, 1982).

In a recent article in Anthropology and Education Quarterly, Comitas, Lambras, and Dolgnin comment that qualitative work of anthropology introduces a needed dimension and balances quantitative studies of psychology, sociology, and economics in the field of education.\(^8\) In another article, educators Smith and Poland (1976) state that anthropological use of participant observation is an essential part of the educational research spectrum. According to these educators, such research provides the necessary data base for the generation of new hypotheses and theories. In turn, these theories and hypotheses provide the basis for further verification and research, i.e., hypothesis testing, experimental studies, and correlational studies. Bodgan and Taylor (1975) emphasize the urgency and the need for balancing quantitative educational research with strong qualitative research.
In Hymes (1977) view, members of different cultures exposed to the same data are very likely to ascribe different levels of importance to the data. He believes that only ethnographic research can provide an understanding of events as they are perceived by members of another culture. In fact, according to Rabinow (1977), one cannot begin to understand the cultural perceptions of others until one participates as an observer, examines one's interpretation of that experience, cross-checks and then correlates those perceptions and conclusions with those of the interpreter or informants from the other culture. Furthermore, he asserts that the researcher and the informant together create something totally new. The final product is not a replication of anything already existing.

Qualitative ethnographic studies, based on participant observation, provide one way to ascertain what constitute E.M.I.C. differences, i.e., meaningful differences in the eyes of participants in a culture substantially different from their own. According to Masamann (1976), we need to know a great deal more about what happens at the cultural interface between our own formal educational culture with all of its assumptions about what is important, and the traditional kinship-based education systems; systems that may incorporate a vastly different set of assumptions. Wolcott's *A Kwakiutl Village School*, and Baggs, Gilmore, and Jordan's *Culture, Behavior, and Education* are two examples of ethnography that deal with the interface between modern, formal educational systems and traditional non-Western cultures. The general principles derived from these ethnographies
indicate that Western-style education is not enough to meet the full spectrum of need of the individuals and the cultures it is applied to. Furthermore, they assert that Western education has become a tool for the destruction of pre-capitalist cultural forms.

As the participant observer undergoes some degree of socialization into the culture he is studying, he undertakes a role in the community and must develop an ability to communicate at a personal level with members of the community (Pelto, 1970; Wolcott, 1975; Spradley, 1980; Bodgan, 1982). He brings to this role his training in anthropology and education, training that sensitizes him to the differences between his own culture and the culture he enters into and learns from. From this base, the ethnographer, with the help of informants, uses his observations to develop an ethnography.

**United States Role in the Origin of the Laotian Refugee Process**

If there is any one country that may be described as the geographic heart of Southeast Asia, it is Laos. Laos has common frontiers with virtually every country in the area... even if we were not interested in the fate of the Lao people, the defense of Laos would be a strategic necessity because ultimately, the fate of all Southeast Asia, and our own security may hinge on it....9

Senator Thomas J. Dodd, May 1962

I want to make it clear to the American people and to the world, that all we want in Laos is peace, not war—a truly neutral government, not a Cold War pawn... the test of a truly neutral country is whether one side or another dominates it and uses it....10

President J.F. Kennedy, March 1961
We desire nothing more in Laos than to see a return to the Geneva Agreements and the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops, leaving the Lao to settle their own differences in a peaceful manner....

President Richard Nixon, March 1970

In the eyes of United States imperialism, Laos is to serve the American plans for the encirclement of, and attack on the socialist camp, the D.R.V.N. and China in the first place, and for checking and sabotaging the national liberation movements in Indochina and Southeast Asia. From D. Eisenhower and J. F. Dulles to J. F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, the American leaders have always considered Laos a key position in U.S. global strategy....

Phoumi Vongvichit, Laotian Historian, 1969

For the greater part of the last thirty years, the United States has conducted a bitter campaign against the civilian population of Laos, first by war and then by economic isolation.

The tiny country of Laos, bounded on the east by Vietnam, on the south by Kampuchea, on the southeast and southwest by Thailand, on the northwest by Burma, and on the north by the province of Yunnan, China, occupies a strategic position in Southeast Asia and in global dynamics. Since the end of World War II, this arena has been a focus of American manipulation and interference which has ultimately led to the widespread devastation of the social, environmental, political, and economic structures.

The question of United States involvement in Laos is well documented. The role and the official interpretation of the record of American involvement raises many unanswered questions. According to the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, in each case of the series of Indochinese crises, the President
of the United States consistently refused to relate to the American public the full truth concerning American involvement. According to Mirsky and Stonefield in America's Asia: Dissenting Essays on Asian-American Relations, "O.S.S. operatives made initial contact with the anti-Japanese resistance movement in 1945" and activity increased until 1968 when "American planes destroyed every village in parts of Sam Neua province." In addition, from the period 1946 to 1963, Laos was the recipient of more American dollars per capita than any other country in Southeast Asia. Eventually the pro-American faction, represented by the Royal Lao Army, would be the only foreign army totally supported by American taxpayers. The conclusion of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars was that "...the result, time and time again, has been the distortion of reality, the escalation of rhetoric, intensification of secrecy, circumvention of Congress, manipulation of the press, and hoodwinking of the public [by American Presidents]...." After the debacle, it has come to light that for over a decade, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.) waged a secret war with a secret army in Laos. This operation was so clandestine that American operatives in Laos kept much of their activity a secret from even the pro-American faction. The same cloud of secrecy had initially extended to communications between the President and Congress, as was revealed when Senator Symington testified during congressional hearings on the hidden
war, saying "...not only was it without approval of Congress, but literally without its knowledge, including me, on a sub-committee supposed to be the regulating committee." That it ceased to be a secret war was due ultimately to its size and its failure to accomplish its goals.

Like many peoples during World War II, the Laotians developed a resistance movement to free themselves from colonialism. In this case it was against the French, an ally of the United States. The French had been in complete control of Laos since late 1893 when the Scott-Pavie talks between the colonial powers, Britain and France, established mutual boundaries for their Southeast Asian colonies. The French imposed a colonial administration on Laos and collected heavy taxes, including a capitation tax. French was taught as the official language in the few schools. According to Vongvichit (1969), during the nearly ninety years of French domination over Laos, more than ninety-five percent of the people remained illiterate, and there were no books or newspapers published in the national language. For the whole of Laos the people had "no freedom of assembly, no right to stage demonstrations, or hold political gatherings." In addition, there were no elections and no voting rights. Vongvichit cites over twenty different instances of rebellion by Laotians that were suppressed during the French occupation. On October 12, 1945, a coalition of Laotian groups proclaimed their independence and adopted a constitution. Mirsky and Stonefield indicate that Prince Souphanouvong, leader of one
of the factions, appealed to the United States for assistance with achieving independence. Purportedly O.S.S. agents admonished the French while reminding them of Roosevelt's anti-colonial sentiments. At the same time, Souphanouvong elicited support from the newly proclaimed Vietnamese Republic headed by Ho Chi Minh. This period signalled the birth of the Pathet Lao (Lao National Movement). The Provisional Lao Government denounced all treaties with France, deposed the King, and began to unite the whole of Laos which had historically been ruled by regional governments with loose and shifting alignments.

The French returned in force after the withdrawal of the Japanese. The Lao Issara (Lao Provisional Government) fled to Bangkok where they set up a government in exile. The King of Vientiane and Luang Prabang, siding with the French, merged with the royalty of the kingdom of the south and the French recognized them as a constitutional monarchy and included them in the French Union. Thus, the northern aristocrats, educated and trained by the French, secured power. This set the stage for American involvement and further support for the French. By 1953, with the help of (then) Cambodian and Vietnamese liberation movements, the Pathet Lao (Free Lao) under Souphanouvong claimed to be the only government representing the Lao people. The United States government, without much difficulty, convinced the French to withdraw and to recognize the Vientiane faction as the legitimate leader of the Lao. Bitter civil war ensued between internal groups and the faction supported by the French and the
United States. According to Vongvichit, the United States had supplied the French with almost twenty-five million dollars worth of military aid between 1950 and 1953 to consolidate the French position and defeat the Pathet Lao. The French were unable to suppress the Lao Independence Movement and by 1954 the Pathet Lao were invited to the Geneva Agreement Conferences which recognized the sovereignty and independence of Laos and that a neutral government of National Union was to be established. History would prove this neutral position to be short-lived.  

Geneva 1954 was a lost opportunity for peace as far as Laos was concerned. American determination to maintain in its eyes a stable, well-armed, non-communist regime outfitted with foreign advisers, together with the resolution that no political considerations should be allowed to endanger this regime, precluded neutralization of the country and national recognition of the Pathet Lao....

Marek Thee, 1971

The American presence in Laos in the 1950's must be examined as a part of a larger framework of events which includes the Cold War, the policy of "containment," and the "Asia Doctrine." The years immediately following World War II were characterized by mutual hostility and suspicion between the United States and the Soviet Union. After the communist victory in 1949, official relations between the United States and China were similarly strained. American policy generally viewed China as a puppet of the Soviet Union. This same narrow status was extended to communist or socialist movements in Southeast Asia. American fears of a universal threat posed by communist subversion and
aggression led to the policy of containment, which sought to restrict the activities of communist nations to spheres of influence already stabilized. The fears of a growing communist block were instrumental in creating an enormous intelligence network to counter the perceived threat. As Allen Dulles noted in 1958, "...the National Security Act of 1947... has given Intelligence a more influential position in our government than Intelligence enjoys in any other government of the world."\(^{25}\)

The policy of containment as espoused by the United States clearly defined that communist incursions into either neutral or pro-West areas were to be firmly resisted, the means to achieve this to include covert operations, political and economic sanctions, military aid to friendly third parties, commitment of American troops, and even nuclear "brinksmanship." Within this context the Asia Doctrine was developed. This doctrine placed America in the role of international policeman of and economic provider for all of non-communist Asia. It was based on what has proven to be the erroneous assumption that all of the communist nations were unified in their purposes in/of opposition to the United States. This role was further complicated by post-war Asian nationalism which struggled against European colonialism. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, commenting on France's activities as a colonial power, observed in 1944, "France has milked it [Indochina] for one hundred years. The people of Indochina are entitled to something better than that."\(^{26}\)
The insurgent Asian nationalism was often socialist or communist in nature, which put the United States in an awkward position as the post-war superpower. The United States consistently refused to recognize the ideological and functional diversity as well as the political divisions across the spectrum of the communist or socialist nations. In fact, there is still no universally agreed upon definition as to what constitutes a communist or socialist nation. The central question for America became which to support: Asian nationalism, which appeared to be communist or socialist by American definition, or European colonialism? By the time of the Truman Administration, the United States chose the latter, with the justification being opposition to the spread of communist influence. The United States chose to view the various Asian nationalist movements as puppets of the Soviet Union or China, rather than as the legitimate expression of the Indochinese people to be free from foreign oppressors. Self-determination, neutralism, or a moderate stance became impossible for the Lao.
under President Eisenhower, were "...to assist the Lao:

1. In keeping the communists from taking over Laos;
2. In strengthening their association with the "free world"; and
3. In developing and maintaining a stable and independent government willing and able to resist communist aggression and subversion....27

Control of American efforts to achieve those objectives were secretly assigned to the C.I.A., as the United States was careful to keep a low profile with its involvement in Laos. The C.I.A. would soon co-ordinate the functions of tribal guerillas, Thai, Royal Lao, Phillipine, Korean, and South Vietnamese military forces, the United States Agency for International Development (U.S.A.I.D.), American Air Force and Army military missions in Laos, Thailand, and South Vietnam, American embassies in the region, and even the International Voluntary Services Agency (I.V.S.), an organization whose "roots... lie in the pacifist religious sects of heartland America."28 In a Metromedia Radio News interview conducted by Dan Blackburn in June 1970, Dr. John H. Hannah, Director of the United States Agency for International Development made the following comments:

Dan Blackburn: Doctor, how do you respond to complaints that the A.I.D. program is being used as a cover for C.I.A. operations in Laos?

Dr. Hannah: Well, I have to admit that this is true. This was a decision made back in 1962 and by administrations from then until now.... I don't like the way that C.I.A. cover, but we have had people that have been associated with the C.I.A. and doing things in Laos that were believed to be in the national interest, but not routine A.I.D. operations....29
According to Vongvichit, after signing the Geneva Agreements on Laos, "...the U.S. combined its military advisors"- P.E.O. [Program Evaluation Office], M.A.A.G. [Military Assistance Advisory Group], P.A.G. [Police Advisory Group], U.S.O.M. [United States Operations Mission] - all under the cloak of the U.S.A.I.D. In turn, the U.S.A.I.D. and the U.S.I.S. [United States Information Service] worked under the American Embassy. Through these groups, the United States set up "...a camouflaged apparatus... for control of the administrative, economic, cultural, and military aspects of the Lao government."

Vongvichit also quotes an article in the Revue de Paris, December 1959, which stated "The Americans behave in Laos as in a conquered territory and that the veritable government in Laos is the U.S. Embassy...." Despite the complexity and the strength of this sophisticated network, the desired objectives never proved to be forthcoming.

During the first decade of American intervention in Laos, it is evident that the United States fully intended to disregard its tacit approval of the Geneva Agreements, and had long range plans to co-opt a neutral Lao stance in Southeast Asia. As early as 1954, Richard Nixon, then Vice-President under Eisenhower, called for the United States "...to take the risk now by putting our boys in...." Marek Thee, in Notes of a Witness, refers to the "secret Western understanding" worked out first in a seven-point Anglo-American paper in Washington D.C. during 1954 and then finalized at a tripartite Anglo-Franco-American conference and signed at the American Embassy in Paris.
At that secret conference, Dulles, Mendes-France, and Eden concluded that any Indochinese agreement must:

A. Preserve at least the southern part of Vietnam... and be unwilling to see the line of responsibility drawn further south than Dong Hoi [near the Eighteenth parallel];

B. ...not impose on Laos, Cambodia, or retained Vietnam any restrictions materially impairing their capacity to maintain stable non-communist regimes; and especially restrictions impairing their right to maintain adequate forces for their internal security to import arms and to employ foreign advisors;

C. ...not to contain political provisions which would risk loss of the retained area to communist control.33

In addition, S.E.A.T.O. (Southeast Asian Treaty Organization) was instructed to provide the police force for the imposition and enforcement of the provisions the three Western nations agreed upon in Paris. Thee concludes that the Paris Agreements were contrary to the provisions agreed upon in Geneva in these areas:

1. The Geneva Agreements provide for a political solution with specific dates for free elections. The secret Paris document stands against any elections that might risk the loss of "retained areas" to communist control.

2. The secret Paris Agreement leaves unmentioned the necessity of consulting the will of the people of Indochina. Instead, it persists on maintaining a "bridgehead" in Vietnam.

3. Unlike the Geneva Agreements which proposed to neutralize Southeast Asia, the secret Paris Agreements are specifically aimed at converting Southeast Asia into an anti-communist block with "adequate military forces, supplied arms, and free foreign advisors."34
In the final analysis, we find the secret Paris Agreements, not the Geneva Convention Accords of 1954 as the blueprint for American involvement in Laos. Quietly the French withdrew, and transferred all of their agencies to the American Mission.

Specifically, under the 1954 Geneva stipulations for Laos, there was to be a general cease-fire, removal of the Viet Minh (North Vietnamese) and the majority of French troops, the regroupement of the indigenous Pathet Lao forces to the two northern provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly pending a political settlement, and a prohibition against the introduction of foreign military personnel or advisers. These provisions were intended to protect Laos from the wider Indochinese conflict by insuring its neutrality through the formation of a coalition government free from foreign interference. This last provision, however, would have created enormous problems for the attainment of American objectives. Circumvention of the prohibition on foreign advisers was accomplished by the C.I.A. As the former Under-Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson explained, "Under the Geneva Agreements, we were prohibited from having American personnel in Laos... [the] C.I.A... is really the only other instrumentality we have...."

As previously cited, Intelligence had been given the highest priority by the Truman Administration under the National Security Act of 1947, and by the 1950's the C.I.A. was ready for operations in Laos. The nature of Laos itself facilitated these covert operations. Few Americans had a clear understanding of
its place in Southeast Asian dynamics. It was small, poor, mountainous, and largely inhabited by tribal groups with few ties to the outside world. The comments of an American official in Vientiane, the capital, provide this evaluation in 1961: "This is the end of nowhere. We can do anything we want here because Washington doesn’t seem to know it exists...."37

In post-war Laos, there were three significant political factions: a small group of rightists, supported by urban elites and increasingly by the C.I.A. and led by General Phoumi Nosavan, the spectrum of leftists supported by large segments of the rural population and the Viet Minh and led by Prince Souphanouvong, and the neutralists, supported by Geneva Accords and ostensibly by the United States and led by Prince Souvanna Phouma. Depending upon shifting political alliances, the Soviets and the Chinese would on occasion lend support to the neutralists or the leftists. However, with few exceptions, that aid was minimal in comparison with American aid and involvement.

In accordance with the 1954 Geneva Accords, the neutralist Souvanna Phouma was assured the post of Prime Minister. His primary task was to form a coalition government from the three factions. Within ninety days after the Geneva Convention, he resigned, citing increased foreign intervention as the cause.38 His attempts to integrate the Pathet Lao into the new government so that it would be representative of the entire Lao population were opposed by the United States. The formation of a neutral, representative government in Laos remained a target for American dollars and American intervention. "By merely withholding the
monthly payment to the troops," Roger Hillsman remarked, "the United States could create the conditions for toppling any Lao government whose policies it opposed."

For the next several years, with the United States opposed in both policy and objective to a neutral government, the power shifted back and forth from the center to the right, with Souvanna resigning due to rightist opposition to his negotiations with all three factions representative of the Lao population, or with the rightists gaining control and then failing to muster enough support from that body or from the population to maintain control. This instability was entirely supported by American taxpayer dollars and orchestrated by Americans in defiance of the Geneva Accords. C.I.A. activity in Laos was conducted with the knowledge of successive American Presidents and kept a secret from key members of Congress as well as from the people of the United States.

By 1956, the United States became more blatant in its violation of the Geneva Agreements and established a military mission in Laos under the euphemism of a Program Evaluation Office. This deception was far from covert, as only a year later the State Department listed Laos as a country where "M.A.A.G. personnel are stationed." In 1956, through another shift in alliances, Souvanna Phouma regained power, negotiating once more with the Pathet Lao. Despite interruptions, he was able to work out a series of agreements with the Pathet Lao, known as the Vientiane Agreements, by 1957. With the upcoming elections of 1958 to include the Pathet Lao, American officials became worried about
a possible Pathet Lao electoral victory, and hastily developed a crash program named Operation Booster Shot.41

This program entailed the implementation of massive social welfare projects designed to sway the opinion of Lao voters. Subsequently, a coalition of the Pathet Lao and the moderates won a majority of seats in the National Assembly. Much to the disappointment of American officials, Prince Souphanouvong was elected Chairman of that assembly. Needless to say, the large infusion of dollars had been a total failure. The Lao people's preferences were contrary to American plans for that country. The C.I.A. subsequently organized an opposition group, the Committee for the Defense of National Interests.42 The United States then cut off aid to the duly elected government which expressed the will of the Lao people. Within two months of the 1958 elections, the government fell. American interests and American plans for that country took precedence over the will of the Lao people.

At this point, the C.I.A. put all of its energy into the support of General Phoumi Nosavan, but failed to get him appointed Prime Minister.43 Nosavan remained in the powerful post of Minister of Defense and Veteran Affairs until he was able, with the help of a massive infusion of American dollars and C.I.A. manipulations, to influence the elections of 1960. Contrary to the Geneva Accords, the roles were revised to exclude the Pathet Lao supporters and Souphanouvong, winner of the 1956 elections, was held in "house custody" and disqualified from participating.
As one author pointedly noted,

C.I.A. agents clearly participated in the election rigging, with or without the authority of the Ambassador. A foreign service officer flatly told one observer... that, prior to the voting, he had seen the C.I.A. distribute bags full of money to village headmen; the inescapable conclusion was that the U.S. had bought votes.44

The C.I.A. further expanded its involvement and influence by supervising the Green Beret teams that conducted the covert training of the Hmong tribespeople in 1959 as the core of the secret army.45 The Hmong, or "free people," is the name by which they identify themselves. Because the Hmong were considered intruders by the Lao, having migrated from China in the late eighteenth century, they were ideally suited for the purposes of the C.I.A., whose objective was to create internal divisions within the population. By setting Lao against Lao, American forces could theoretically be kept to the "advisory" level. Through the process of capitalizing on traditional Lao antagonisms, a secret army was formed. This generated a split among the Hmong tribespeople as well, as many of them supported the Pathet Lao. A C.I.A. Chief in Laos declared

...even if the Pathet Lao seize power, which is difficult for it to achieve, the U.S.A. will remain in Laos, for Meo [Hmong] forces could be used in a lasting way....46

General Nosavan, with C.I.A. backing, finally gained power through fraudulent elections. His high style of living, based in part on his monopoly of imports of gold, wines, and spirits, as well as ownership of the biggest opium parlor in
Vientiane,\textsuperscript{47} generated hostility and resentment in a nation whose annual per capita income was one of the lowest in the world, only sixty-six American dollars.\textsuperscript{48} One Lao historian commented on the influx of American dollars which saturated the Lao economy and which were controlled by a chosen, pro-American elite:

The Lao economy is rotten, a victim of a sham prosperity brought about by foreign [American] aid. It has turned Laos into a market for U.S. unsalable goods. It has limited the importation of means of production so as to put a brake on national production and increase the importation of consumer goods, especially luxury articles.... It has spawned a stratum of valets of the Americans, who together with their masters hold the monopoly of trade....\textsuperscript{49}

Corruption was widespread, reaching a point in 1961 where the Royal Lao Government bought two million dollars worth of gold with "their" savings; savings from the American cash grant program. Re-exporting petroleum, cement, and other items to Cambodia and Thailand in order to make a profit was a common practice. Almost no records were kept, and U.S.A.I.D. never audited, indeed did not have audit rights on the use of American taxpayer monies.\textsuperscript{50}

The Pathet Lao, on the other hand, were known among the people as generally honest. They had a long record of opposition to colonial exploitation and to French rule. The Pathet Lao organized schools and study groups for the rural peoples, trained medical assistants, introduced improved agricultural practices and promoted Lao culture, and introduced the first adult education programs for minorities in the country's history.\textsuperscript{51} Additional reasons for strong Pathet Lao sentiment were based on the fact
that Nosavan's corruption greatly inflated prices on the black market, a vital source of goods in Laos. Rural people, nevertheless, disliked being forced into hard labor as porters for the Pathet Lao, and some resented the Viet Minh presence in northern Laos. However, the Lao people perceived the Pathet Lao as Lao, not outsiders, as a group that had their general interests at heart. Other groups were identified with outsiders - the rightists with the Americans and the neutralists with the former French elite.

In the early 1960's, a combination of the previously mentioned points as well as mounting pressures for a neutralist stance within large segments of the army led to a growing crisis for General Nosavan. The Second Battalion, the finest unit in the Royal Lao Army, was thrust into direct conflict with Nosavan. Kong-le, the neutralist commander of the Second Battalion, was slighted when his troops were assigned to "rest" in a series of old shacks on a mud flat outside of Vientiane. Having borne the brunt of the heaviest fighting, Kong-le demanded better treatment and more suitable quarters for his men. Nosavan promised better conditions but never followed through. Expressing utter lack of confidence in the General's leadership, Kong-le carried out a well-planned coup d'état by seizing Vientiane in a pre-dawn strike while Nosavan and his Cabinet were out of the city. As a neutralist, he called upon Souvanna Phouma to head the government and pursue a course in alignment with the Geneva Accords. Souvanna invited Nosavan to join in a coalition government. The United States formally recognized the coalition upon
the recommendation of the American Ambassador.\footnote{53}

Parallel to these events, the C.I.A. and the American military missions secretly gave General Nosavan substantial moral and material aid at his base at Savannakhet. This course of action was contrary to the official public posture assumed by the Ambassador. Simultaneously, Nosavan's support in Thailand came under pressure from the United States which resulted in the closing of the border, hence preventing the flow of vital commodities into Vientiane. Nosavan, through covert advice from the C.I.A., held off joining the new coalition as he built up his forces and supplies with the intent of retaking control. The C.I.A. diverted large amounts of supplies meant for Vientiane to Nosavan's camp at Savannakhet.\footnote{54}

With blatant disregard for international agreements, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Parsons demanded that the coalition government cut off all ties with the Pathet Lao. This demand, clearly contrary to the Geneva Accords which placed great emphasis on a neutral coalition government that included all three factions, again frustrated Lao attempts to solve their problems from within. Souvanna Phouma refused to exclude the Pathet Lao.\footnote{55} The Thai-Nosavan blockade of basic supplies including food was continued. At that time, when the attempts to conform to the Geneva Accords were thwarted by the United States, Souvanna turned to the Soviets for aid. Not to pass by a golden opportunity, the Soviets responded by air-lifting supplies by way of Hanoi on December 11, 1960.\footnote{56}
Only a couple of days later, "with plans drawn up by American advisers," Nosavan moved on Vientiane with his forces. As a result of the battle that followed, hundreds of Lao civilians were killed, and Kong-le was forced to retreat. Kong-le had been supported by the police force, segments of the Army, urban and rural people constituting a broad coalition of Lao nationalist elements. As he left the Vientiane area, he passed out over ten thousand American-made rifles to the Pathet Lao. Souvanna Phouma expressed his bitterness over the American efforts to destroy the neutral coalition in the following statement: "What I will never forgive the United States for... is the fact that they betrayed me and my government...." In a thinly masked attempt to cover up its activities in Laos, the United States found another scapegoat when it charged that "...the responsibility for the current strife in Laos [rests] squarely upon the U.S.S.R. and its agents." Ultimately, this activity on the part of the United States pushed the neutralists into a strong partnership with the Pathet Lao, and within months the Pathet Lao took control of the strategic Plain of Jars in the north. In 1961, Nosavan's troops were soundly beaten and the recently elected President Kennedy responded by increasing the ranks of the secret army, which had long been in action. According to General Lansdale, an American counter-insurgency expert, by July 1961,
About 9,000 Meo [Hmong] tribesmen have been equipped for guerilla operations, which they are now conducting with considerable effectiveness in Communist dominated territory in Laos... command control of Meo operations is exercised by the Chief C.I.A. Vientiane with the advice of Chief M.A.A.G. Laos. The same C.I.A. paramilitary and U.S. military teamwork is in existence for advisory activities... and aerial resupply.61

The Hmong general, Vang Pao, directed the secret army for American advisers. His involvement with the United States ultimately led to a diaspora of Hmong people across the globe.

By 1962, events in Laos took a disastrous turn for the United States and its rightist forces. President Kennedy approved an increase in the secret army from two thousand to eleven thousand.62 At this time, an additional force composed of Thai, Philippine, Korean, Taiwanese, and Vietnamese mercenaries was combined with the eleven thousand Hmong to allow aggressive undertakings by the United States without committing American troops to the process. Regardless of this support, Nosavan suffered severe defeats in 1962 which compelled Kennedy to order several thousand American troops, stationed in Thailand, on alert. The Pathet Lao were close to taking control of their own country. Ironically, the extreme reluctance of American allies to support overt intervention, the Congress' fears of escalation of activity, poor leadership, the ineffectiveness of Nosavan's American-supported and -armed troops, and the ultimate possibility of a Soviet-American confrontation forced Kennedy to seek a negotiated settlement at the Geneva Conference of 1962.63
Marek Thee, as a member of the I.C.C. (International Control Commission), recalls that taking into consideration the distrust among the various parties across the Lao political spectrum during close to twenty years of warfare, "...it was astonishing that agreement to form a coalition government was reached so quickly." The Pathet Lao, according to Burchett (1970), were extremely modest in accepting a "parity" role with the rightists in the government. This acceptance of a cease-fire and a new coalition government by the neutralists and the left was the only reason that Nosavan's forces were not subject to complete destruction, a course of action which would have been easier for the Pathet Lao. President Kennedy and the American Embassy supported the neutral coalition only because it saved the remainder of the pro-American forces. Ironically, such a government could have been formed anytime during the preceding years of warfare except for the consistent intervention on the part of the United States. Like the previous Geneva Accords, the period of calm was to be short-lived. Hillsman, in To Move a Nation, quotes Averell Harriman as saying at that time,

We must be sure the break comes between the communists and the neutralists, rather than having the two of them teamed up as they were before....

Again, as during the period after the 1954 Geneva Accords, the United States had a hidden agenda. Nothing had changed except the growing world understanding of the extent of American involvement in the Laotian civil war.
The coalition government, however, never even got off the ground. Nosavan and his troops were in control of the Vientiane area and "...from the very first day it [the new coalition government] was a prisoner of Nosavan's troops and police... Nosavan's placemen staffed the ministries... to have broken Nosavan's grip on Vientiane at this time would have meant restarting the civil war...." Souvanna Phouma, involved in class interests, was pleased to see the progressives held in check by the American-backed reaction. Thus, the stage was set for weaning the neutralists away from the Pathet Lao, a fulfillment of Harriman's stated purpose. Burchett states that Nosavan's secret instructions to his civil servants staffing the ministries included warnings to obey "...only orders from his old administration, on pain of severe punishment if they disobeyed."  

President Kennedy used this period as an excuse to build up forces in Thailand, escalate involvement with the secret army, and to refinance Nosavan. McCloskey (1972) states that during this period the Congress had the "annual responsibility to provide for the common defense and to fund the standing army." The failure on the part of the President and the C.I.A. to provide pertinent information to the Congress subverted the balance of power between the branches of the federal government as embodied in the American Constitution. Furthermore, he states that as a member of Congress,
I was in Congress for almost two years (from December 1967 until November 1969) before learning that my votes for the various defense appropriation bills included over one billion a year to conduct a war in Laos. How can Congress meet its constitutional responsibilities when most of its members don't know and can't know what they are voting for....70

The period between the Geneva Accords of 1962 and the American defeat in 1975 was characterized by growing resentment on the part of the Congress with the failure of the President to provide necessary information for a clear understanding of the extent of American involvement, by increasingly large numbers of American citizens swelling the ranks of the anti-war movement, by opposition to the exorbitant costs of this and other ventures in the region, and finally by the C.I.A. acting more and more as an entirely independent agency with few external controls.

Pertinent to Laos in this period were the events concerning American involvement in Vietnam. A relative calm in Laos after the 1962 Accords began to evaporate and the secret war intensified. This intensification was directly related to American interests and plans for the entire region. Though of course the two were integrally entwined, Laotian internal interests took a back seat to the regional conflict. Any kind of cease-fire in Laos would have hampered American interception efforts along the newly formed Ho Chi Minh Trail that passed through Laos on its way south, supplying Vietnamese resistance forces, and interfering with the American military operations in Vietnam. Continued activity in Laos was critical to the success of the United States in the region.71
On August 11, 1964, William Bundy of the Kennedy Administration stated that

If despite our best efforts, Souvanna on his own, or in response to third country pressures, started to move rapidly toward a conference, we would have a very difficult problem.72

Continued economic and military pressures by the United States precluded the possibility of any successful peace talks among the internal factions in Laos. Covert interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and covert air strikes over the Plain of Jars continued. Noam Chomsky castigates the American press for waiting so long to break these stories, commenting that

The media have often feigned a touching regard for lovely little Laos and its 'gentle' folk, even while they were suppressing the abundant evidence of the murderous United States attack on the land and its people....73

Regarding an article on the war in Laos in the New York Times, Chomsky proceeds to remark that

...the history is very well sanitized as benefits America's newspaper of record. The U.S. role [in Laos] is completely ignored apart from a few marginal and misleading references. As late as 1975, the New York Times is still pretending the U.S. bombers were striking only North Vietnamese supply trails....74

As awareness of the American-sponsored destruction of Laos surfaced, the press began first to focus on the refugees and only later on the secret army. Meanwhile, the Vang Pao and Nosavan forces, coupled with the United States Air Force, system-
atically destroyed bridges, factories, hospitals, and civilian population centers. McCloskey quotes a Life Magazine article of April 30, 1970 as stating "...from all reports, the wholesale bombing of Pathet Lao areas goes beyond anything the North Vietnamese have experienced."75 Twenty-one I.V.S. volunteers are cited as having written to President Nixon that

...the extensive bombing of civilian areas is particularly vicious... refugees told of being forced to live in holes and caves, of having to farm at night, of systematic destruction by U.S. war planes of the human basis for a society....76

The State Department, however, continued to deny any knowledge of the bombings.

McCloskey further develops the following points concerning the refugee situation in Laos:

1. Reports were in the possession of the U.S. Embassy showing the bombing was clearly the most compelling reason for the refugees leaving their homes....

2. Some of the refugees had moved because of the direct orders of the Royal Lao Government [rightists], not voluntarily; and transportation was provided by U.S. aircraft...

3. It is apparent that cluster bombs and white phosphorous were used against the civilian population of a country against whom the United States had not declared a war... the bombing was done under the direction and control of the U.S. Air Force...

4. Both the extent of the bombing and the impact on the civilian population of Laos were deliberately concealed by the State Department....77
A quotation by Los Angeles Times reporter Arthur T. Dommen sums up the situation:

There were many reasons for this policy [of secrecy imposed on Laos operations by the Executive branch]. Among them was certainly the desire to avoid possible congressional inquiries into what was going on, and thus possible restrictions on the operations....78

Bernard Lassiter, writing in the International Herald Tribune, October 20, 1969, testified to reports that every operation mounted in Laos by Royal Lao forces was directed and controlled by the American establishment there. He stated that "...the U.S. flies up to 300 sorties a day against the Pathet Lao...."79

Congressman McCloskey further maintained that

...in July 1969, U.S. planes intensified their attacks against the towns and villages in and around the Plain of Jars, reducing every building down to the humblest bamboo hut to ashes.... Incidentally, the code name for this air offensive in Laotian was "Ke-Kheu" - [Revenge]....80

The original C.I.A. operatives in Laos who commanded the secret army were an unorthodox breed; known as "true believers," these staunch Cold Warriors had seen action in World War II, the Korean War, or both. Symbolic of the "true believers" was Tony Poe, who was known to have bribed his Hmong troops to bring in enemy ears at a dollar each. He hung a large plastic bag on his porch and the ears were collected there. Poe also paid ten dollars for a severed head if accompanied by a Pathet Lao Army cap. He was supposed to have stopped these practices when he found out his troops were killing people needlessly for the bounty,
but Poe still kept the heads of his most hated foes pickled in jars that lined his bedroom wall.\textsuperscript{81} A former American agent in Laos said of Poe, "He's a great guy, who I really respect. But I'm not sure how he can justify the slaughter of the Meo tribe and love them as much as he does."\textsuperscript{82}

A 1971 Senate Staff report noted that "These irregular forces have become the cutting edge of the military, leaving the Royal Lao Army as a force primarily devoted to static defense."\textsuperscript{83} This same report continued, "The brunt of the irregular losses has fallen heavily upon tribal groups such as the Meo, which is one of the reasons why Thai irregulars have been brought in...."\textsuperscript{84}

The secret army was also supplemented by ethnic Lao, Lao Theung, and Mien peoples.

Hmong losses mentioned above were described in 1968 by an I.V.S. volunteer, "Pop" Buell, who was the man most responsible for providing relief supplies to the Hmong warriors and their families, who often became refugees:

A few days ago I was with Vang Pao's officers when they rounded up three hundred fresh Meo recruits. Thirty percent of the kids were fourteen years old or less, and about a dozen were only ten years old. Another thirty percent were between fifteen and sixteen. The rest were thirty-five or older. Where were all the ones in between? I will tell you, they are all dead... these little kids... looked real neat... they were eager... they wanted to play Indian themselves. But Vang Pao and I know better. They are too young, and are not trained. In a few weeks ninety percent of them will be killed.\textsuperscript{85}

By 1971, twenty-five percent of the Hmong were dead. Many of the casualties were civilians who were forced to leave their homes,
largely due to daily American bombing.\textsuperscript{86}

The Senate staff report above notes that Thai irregulars were being introduced to cover Hmong losses. In 1970, it was revealed that the C.I.A. was paying five to ten thousand Thai troops in Laos, so Congress passed a law against that. The C.I.A. ignored Congress and kept the Thais on the payroll, with the rationale that they could be considered volunteers in the Royal Lao Army.\textsuperscript{87} This was a catalyst for Senator Fulbright, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to remark:

\begin{quote}
This seems to me to be a very low state of affairs for the United States to come to, fighting our wars with [mercenaries]... and then giving the impression all over the world that those people are so devoted to our welfare... that they [donor nations] have voluntarily sent these people to fight.\textsuperscript{88}
\end{quote}

Despite such misgivings, 1970 was a low point for the secret army, and more mercenaries were needed due to intense pressure by the Pathet Lao. In one northern village, Long Pot, previous losses of their youth led village elders to refuse American requests for more recruits. Air America, the C.I.A. airline that handled guerilla deployment and support, refugee (Hmong family) evacuation from combat zones, as well as other tasks, warned the elders that if no recruits were forthcoming, rice drops might be stopped. None were sent, "So they stopped dropping rice to us."\textsuperscript{89} For most tribal groups in Royal Lao or disputed territory, and especially for those groups whose men fought in the secret army, rice drops were often their only means of survival. The relocations of populations due to the
war interrupted the planting and harvesting of rice, and for the Hmong, priority had always been given to the growing of opium anyway, as opium is their traditional cash crop. Laos, in the heart of the Golden Triangle, is well known for its high grade heroin.

From several sources it is clear that Air America, and hence the C.I.A. was deeply involved in the drug trade, in spite of former C.I.A. Director William Colby's assertion that "...resolutely refusing to permit Air America aircraft to carry drugs, C.I.A. kept free of contact with the trade...."90 Air America pilots are recorded as offering different versions. As one admitted,

We knew we handled a lot of dope, although we didn't do it intentionally... some damned Lao general would be the customer..., and you had to carry what he wanted you to carry.91

It is also well known that Air America aircraft were exempt from the customary border checks other aircraft were subject to, as Thailand and South Vietnam were both American client states. If the Hmong's opium was not marketed, they would have faced financial ruin, an unthinkable prospect for an ally making the secret war so cost effective. Long Cheng, the C.I.A.'s northern Laos covert operations base and Vang Pao's secret army headquarters reportedly sheltered a heroin refinery. Vang Pao was known to have been involved in major international drug deals.92 In 1970, one author concluded that there
...can be little question that the de facto policy in Laos is to wink, at the very least, at the transportation of opium locally by American quasi-governmental employees. There is further evidence that designated opium shipments are cleared and monitored by the C.I.A... [which would indicate] a major contradiction of America's stated policy on narcotics, as well as a violation of international conventions to which we are party.93

In Laos, the secret army, civilian refugees, communication and transportation systems depended almost entirely on air power. As a mountainous, underdeveloped nation, Laos had few roads, and even those were mostly dirt strips that were virtually useless in the rainy season. Any sort of large scale operation, such as the secret war, required massive air support to function. The C.I.A. saw to this vital need by employing the Taiwan-based Air America, Inc. The New York Times described Air America as "...an enterprise that is shadowy and vague even by Laotian standards."94 Most of the flying was done by helicopter or small plane, due to the rugged terrain. The tasks of the pilots usually included food and medicine (soft rice) drops, or weapons, explosives, and ammunition (hard rice) drops, or ferrying American officials and agents from base to base; more dangerous tasks included searching for bands of refugees from allied tribes in combat zones, and picking up or dropping off guerilla counterinsurgent or reconnaissance teams behind enemy lines.95 Bombing raids also played a part in Air America's diverse activities, though they were normally carried out in conjunction with American Air Force, Navy, and Marine squadrons based in Thailand, South Vietnam, or on the Seventh Fleet.
From 1964 on, bombing played an increasingly large role in American war strategy in Indochina. As has been cited, more American bombs were dropped on Laos from 1965 until 1975 than on the Axis powers in World War II, or more tonnage per capita than any other nation in the history of warfare. Eighty-two percent of that total was dropped between November 1969 and March 1973, and are known collectively as the "Nixon bombings." Bombing on such a scale went far beyond the considerable abilities of Air America, so the C.I.A. co-ordinated Air Force, Navy, and Marine bombing sorties over Laos that reached a peak of some seven hundred sorties a day.

From June 1964 until March 1970, the United States would only admit to flights of "armed reconnaissance" over Laos. The official definition of "armed reconnaissance" is "...an attack sortie flown in search of targets of opportunity"; however, in case of a downed plane, American officials felt it best to "...continue to insist that we were merely escorting reconnaissance flights...." American officials claimed to adhere strictly to rules preventing the bombing of civilian villages, but pilots were rewarded for structural damage inflicted, not for sparing civilians. At the height of the Nixon bombings in 1969, eighty percent of the ordnance (bombs) at the regional air base at Udorn, Thailand, that was to be used in Laos, was anti-personnel ordnance. These bombs and other types of ordnance (mines) are designed to kill and maim people indiscriminately.
One brief description of such ordnance serves to illustrate the damage that was intended by the American government to be visited upon the people of Laos:

The anti-personnel bombs include the pineapple, which has 250 steel ball bearing pellets in it which shoot out horizontally. One planeload carries 1,000 such bombs, which means that one sortie sends 250,000 steel pellets shooting out horizontally over an area the size of four football fields; the guava is an improvement over the pineapple in that it is smaller and its pellets shoot out diagonally; one planeload of guava bombs shoots out 300,000 to 400,000 pellets diagonally so that they will go into holes where the peasants are hiding; the plastic bomb, which breaks into thousands of slivers one-eighth of an inch by one-sixteenth of an inch, will not show up on an x-ray; the fragmentation anti-personnel bombs... which break into dozens of jagged fragments, are larger and calculated to do far more damage than the steel ball-bearing pellets. Similarly, flechettes are tiny steel arrows with larger fins on one end which peel off the outer flesh as they enter the body, enlarge the wound, and shred the internal organs.... Anti-personnel mines differ from the bombs in that they are not dropped with a specific target in mind. Rather, they are part of an officially designated "area denial" program. Under the Nixon Administration, hundreds of square miles [were] flooded with hundreds of thousands of such tiny mines as the Gravel, Dragontooth, and Button bomblets, in an attempt to make areas under attack uninhabitable for human life.... Air Force representatives testified that the area denial program had been instituted in [an area inhabited by] over 200,000 people. These mines are camouflaged to look like leaves and animal droppings....

The effects of this bombing on civilians was studied in a report by the United States Information Service in 1970. In one survey, two hundred and fifteen refugees from various parts of the Plain of Jars were interviewed. From those refugees, which represented a cross-section of the hundreds of thousands of refugees in Laos, it was found that ninety-seven percent said they had seen a bombing attack; ninety-five percent said their villages
had been bombed; eighty percent of the casualties were civilian, twenty percent were Pathet Lao; seventy-one percent said the United States was responsible for the bombing, seventeen percent said it was the Royal Lao Government; and forty-nine percent said that fear of bombing was the reason they left their homes to become refugees, with only twenty percent giving dislike of the Pathet Lao as the cause. However, even after the United States had dropped over two million tons of bombs on Laos, the Pathet Lao controlled more territory than they had before the bombing.

In 1971, the American Embassy in Laos printed a book that stated that the refugees were fleeing from the Pathet Lao, and this was eight months after the above survey was made, a survey that concluded that "The bombing is clearly the most compelling reason for moving." The fact is that anti-personnel devices were used against the civilian population of a country with whom the United States was not at war. This led to charges that the bombing was a deliberate policy to destroy the "civilian infrastructure" of the Pathet Lao (i.e., the tribal groups in the areas of conflict). American officials could hardly admit that such was their policy, and as one author reasoned, something else must have been the cause for the enormous number of refugees, because

Policy says that the United States does not bomb civilians. Policy is true. Therefore refugees could not have been moved on account of the bombing. Because they were not bombed. Because policy says they were not bombed....
The historical record clearly indicates that the C.I.A. managed a massive secret war in Laos, that Congressional regulatory bodies were evaded and deceived by the C.I.A., that American Presidents lied to the general public to cover up C.I.A. activity, and that it was the people of Laos that suffered the consequences of the C.I.A.'s dubious policies. By 1973, American involvement in Laos was sharply reduced as yet another coalition government was formed in response to plans for withdrawal of the American military presence in Indochina. The United States shifted its focus to shore up the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam. In December 1975, after the fall of Saigon, the Lao coalition was dissolved, with power going to the new Lao People's Democratic Republic, a socialist government that supported a mixed economy allowing for some private enterprise. To this day some American companies remain in Laos as well as a full Embassy staff maintaining normal relations.

In the final analysis, the policy the United States pursued was a tragic failure. Despite the fact that seven hundred thousand of the one million people estimated to have inhabited Pathet Lao-occupied sections of Laos have become refugees in the last ten years, the United States did not defeat the resistance. Despite the fact that most people lost their homes, fields, and buffalo, despite the fact that their life styles were entirely devastated by American bombing, the Laotian people have endured. Branfman notes that great portions of the urban population of Laos were "left relatively unscathed"; rather, "it is the ninety percent who earn their livelihoods by tilling the soil and raising
livestock who are the corpses, the soldiers, the refugees...."109

Ironically, with the exception of the segment of the Hmong who fought in the secret army, a clear majority of those people remained at home to rebuild. They had barely survived the policy of "Let's bomb 'em back to the Stone Age" as advocated by General Curtis Lemay.110

The period from 1975 to 1979, the time after the American withdrawal from Southeast Asia, marks the historical exodus of thousands of Laotians. For the new Lao government, there were the momentous tasks of rebuilding a nation whose ecology and economy were decimated as a result of decades of war, and of fostering the development of a national consciousness and a common language among its more than sixty-eight ethnic groups. These problems were exacerbated by the fact that over sixty percent of the population was illiterate; the average annual income per capita was less than ninety American dollars; there were unresolved differences of an ideological nature between the former supporters of both the Pathet Lao and those who had sided with the Americans; and there were roving bands of armed, unaligned Hmong guerillas to contend with. Hundreds of thousands of displaced persons became either internal or external refugees.111

According to Chomsky, with the withdrawal of the Americans, the survivors of the various hill tribesmen who had worked for the C.I.A. to fight the Lao people were abandoned, as they were no longer of any service to the United States.112 John Everingham, an Australian journalist, noted that "the incredible bombing had turned more than half of the total area of Laos into
a land of charred ruins where the people fear the sky..."\textsuperscript{113}

In 1977, Norman Peagam of the \textit{New York Times} wrote that on the surface, little seems to have changed in the daily life of Vientiane, though the economy was down, "partly as a result of the total halt in U.S. aid in 1975 and the blockade imposed by neighboring Thailand."\textsuperscript{114} He noted further that "crime, drug addiction, and prostitution have been greatly reduced...."\textsuperscript{115}

Nayan Chanda, writing for the \textit{Far Eastern Economic Review} in 1977, reported that Thailand had blocked food, supplies, and even medicine from the International Red Cross from entering Laos.\textsuperscript{116} Chanda further explained that the Thai blockade, combined with structural problems resulting from American imperialism and the false Lao economy that was dependent upon it and the American dollar, wrought havoc on the traditional Lao subsistence economy.\textsuperscript{117} Chomsky quotes Lao Vice-Foreign Minister Khamphay Boupha as saying

The United States has dropped three million tons of bombs—\textsuperscript{118} one ton per head—forced 700,000 peasants to abandon their fields; thousands of people were killed and maimed; the unexploded ordnance continues to take its toll. Surely the United States does not show humanitarian concern by refusing to help heal the wounds of war.

In addition, Chomsky noted that the United States has forced Thailand to close the border with Laos.\textsuperscript{119}

Chomsky, in \textit{Laos: War and Revolution}, concludes that by the time the information concerning American involvement in Laos reaches the public, it will be of little help to the
"peasants of Laos, rotting in refugee camps, huddling in their caves...." Furthermore, the process in Laos has been expensive only in dollars, not in American lives, land, or environment. Despite the enormous investment of dollars, military equipment, and loss of human life, the Pentagon could not record any progress by the end of the war. 

The problems of the shortage of essential equipment and money to reconstruct, interference by the United States with attempts by the new government to recover from the war, a huge and unstable internal refugee population, the aforementioned destruction of the ecology and regional infrastructures, massive starvation and disease due to destroyed crop-land, the widespread drought of 1977-78 that made food scarce, the Thai blockade of international war relief efforts, and the out-migration of the small professional class prompted thousands of people to leave Laos for other areas where stability might be found. Refugees left for economic, political, ideological, and/or personal reasons. Among those leaving Laos were the members of the present Laotian community of Eugene, Oregon. It is their story and their journey I hoped to document and to understand as I departed for my fieldwork in November 1981.

The events related to fieldwork are recorded in the following chapters. In addition, the latter months of 1982 provided the opportunity to journey to Thailand as an educational and cross-cultural consultant to provide educational
and cultural workshops for personnel working in the refugee camps. This experience aided in placing the refugee process in context as I retraced the Lao's journey from their homelands through the various experiential stages involved in resettlement in the United States of America.

The Thai Refugee Camps, 1982

The refugee camp process is as complex as it is disconcerting. Thailand was the first country of asylum for almost all of the Laotian refugees. Some refugees flew to Paris or London prior to 1975 and requested asylum there. Mostly diplomats or students, they comprised only a small percentage of the three hundred to five hundred thousand refugees that eventually left Laos. In context, it is important to consider that while attempting to deal with Laotian refugees streaming in from the north and northeast, simultaneously the Royal Thai government had Vietnamese and Kampuchean refugees crossing its borders in the southeast. In 1975 alone, almost two hundred thousand people entered Thailand seeking asylum. This escalated over the years and Thailand, out of economic and political necessity, reached out to the international community for assistance. Camps sprung up all along the Thai borders with Laos and Kampuchea.

Officially, the Thai Ministry of the Interior was responsible for administering official camps such as Ubon, Nongkhai, Ban Vinay, Novei Yot, Sob Trang, Chieng Khan, and others. Each of the Lao camps in Thailand was characterized by its own special conditions including population, size, ethnic distribu-
tion, and relationship with international agencies. Basic services such as food and shelter were initially provided by the Thai government.

LEGEND

- Khmer Camps
- Lowland Lao and Hilltribe Camps
- Vietnamese Camps
- Processing and Transit Centres
- Affected Thais and Border Encampments

Figure 1. Major Refugee Camps in Thailand
With the dramatic increase in the refugee population in 1975, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees took financial responsibility for the official camps. Additional aid and services were provided by international voluntary agencies. Numbers of other camps, however, were administered by the Thai military and were subject to erratic and questionable administration. The Thai regard refugees as displaced persons with no rights under the law. The United Nations regards them as "refugees" and hence falling under the protection of the Geneva Convention on Refugees of 1967. For the Lao refugees, getting to a United Nations-administered camp was a high priority. The kinds of abuses they were subject to without this protection are clearly defined by their biographical statements in Chapter IV of this dissertation.

During my visit to Thailand, interviews and conversations with refugee camp personnel, administrators, and refugees shed light on the data I had already accumulated during my fieldwork in the United States. A sample of comments by some of these individuals are arranged in the following order: interviews with American, Philippine, and Thai teachers in the camps, conversations with United Nations High Commission on Refugees and State Department personnel, Thai teachers in Northwest Thailand, and Thai citizens.

Interview 1

This American teacher/supervisor is a Vietnam veteran in his early thirties. He originated from the Midwest, and after
the war became involved with refugee services at home. Later he "signed on" with a voluntary agency, which led to his experience in the refugee camps in Hong Kong and then Thailand.

The bureaucrats here are full of shit. They lead a comfortable life and that cushions them from reality. Money... homes... women... power... Christ, who wouldn't lose sight of reality! These guys live high, so what's the fate of a few refugees in relation to all that lies in waiting for these guys. They turn their heads... they rationalize, they pop another pill and hell... they manage to sleep easy between the silk sheets and the brown thighs. I hate to think of what will happen if they ever have to face the reality of what has happened here... their part in the process and what continues to happen here. It may certainly plunge them into a bummer they might not be able to recover from. I fought in Nam, I came back hoping to contribute in some small way to the repairs.... Well, now I know... I don't sleep well... but at least I'm not going to wake up somewhere down the line and face it all again. I'm doing that now... it isn't easy. I guess that's the price I have to pay for being naive in the first place. Hell, I was eighteen... death, war, Vietnam, army, they were all words. I didn't understand their meaning... I just wanted to win. Isn't that what we always strove for? Now I understand, but who the hell listens anyway? I'm just another crazy vet.

Interview 2

This Philippine national was a teacher in her own country and has obtained a Master's degree from an American university. She was involved with the Peace Corps training before her tenure with the international voluntary agencies. In her own words, "... partially to avoid the growing domestic problems in the Philippines and partly to gain additional international experience..." she accepted a job as a teacher trainer with the Save the Children Federation which, along with the Experiment in International Living, are involved in the refugee
camp education process in Thailand. She perceived this as a 
"career ladder" to a Ph.D. program at a "good American University."

We are here to help these refugees. They couldn't do it alone. When I was in the Peace Corps, I always reminded people to keep a positive attitude. What does it matter now about the "war" as you call it? That's over. Forget it. Most people have forgotten it... right now we have to help these people in the camps. That's what we're here for. You can do a lot with your education... why focus on the unpleasant? Lift them up... you won't do that by raising all of those unpleasant questions. When they get to your country they will be O.K... free again like before they were refugees, free to be what they want. I wouldn't have made it so far in life if the United States had not helped my country. It still helps... that's why we tolerate the refugee camps. They [refugees] have caused us much trouble. Be positive... then the refugees will feel positive also. Anyway, isn't it better to be American than anything else...?

Interview 3

This interview was conducted with a twenty-two year old American teacher of English as a Second Language in the refugee camp at Nong Khai. Hired by a church-sponsored voluntary agency right after her graduation from college, she worked three months in the United States before her recruitment as an "expert" to teach in a refugee program in Thailand which was struggling to define its role and purpose.

I have a degree and I was an honors student in college. I also worked in community organization before and after college. We had a number of refugees in our community... nobody seemed to be able to deal with the many problems associated with their being there. I worked indirectly with them; I wanted to find out just what was the origin of their adjustment problems. The courts, the welfare agencies, the schools seemed totally perplexed with the myriad of problems and had few or no strategies at all
for dealing with the uniqueness of those problems. The entire refugee scene appeared to be in utter chaos... applying band-aids here and there, but never touching on the real crux of these problems. I applied for a job here in the camps and I got it... they figured that because I worked in/with various aspects of the community that I was prepared or qualified to teach cultural orientation. In all honesty, I, too, thought I was qualified. After all, I am American, I am a fairly sensitive and aware person, and I do have a degree. After being here for a while, I realize that I was not adequately prepared to teach cultural orientation... I was not prepared to teach, I hadn't had experience in either areas. When I began to question just what I was doing and what that meant to the well-being of the people we are supposed to be "teaching", I began to freak out. More so, when I went to the supervisors I realized they weren't prepared. A lot of them have come through the Experiment... middle class student types who come to the camps to do their fieldwork for international management experience. In a number of cases I found I was more prepared than the individuals who were supposed to be training me. I had at least seen the refugees in the community and was aware of their problems. A lot of these guys have spent their time on campus with "foreign" students. We all know that's a far cry from working with refugees. I don't mean that in a derogatory manner. So, they come over here and associate with middle and upper class Thais... barely touching on the refugee experience. In addition, the Consortium doesn't give us much in the way of training. It is truly amazing how few of the people over here are prepared to teach... there is a real need for time planning, management, and basic teaching methodology. It really makes you think of how arrogant we are. Now that I am here I can see the camp experience creates a number of problems, additional ones, for the refugee to deal with. I have some real questions about just how much we are doing to help create a sense of dignity and independence for these people. One thing I do know... we are not preparing them to deal with the realities of American life. We are told we can't mention welfare... that's totally unrealistic. So, we end up creating artificial situations that don't relate to the past experience of the refugees and may very well be situations that these individuals will never experience in the States. In the long run, it's a sort of cultural imperialism... we do things in a manner that pre-disposes the refugee to act and to think in a manner that is convenient for our society... regardless of the cost to the human being. Then there is the situation related to the Thai teachers. Even though many of them have been to the
States as students, they are not teachers... and they sure are not the people who should be teaching American culture. A good number of the Thai teachers really try... yet they are faced with a task that is impossible for them to achieve. Try discussing American culture with the Thai, or a great many of the Americans, for a matter of more than five minutes... the whole situation works out to this equation: teachers who have not been trained to teach teachers, or in some cases who have never taught and, who have never been schooled in the teaching of American culture, are training Thai teachers who have never taught, who are teaching in a second language a complex process they don't understand to a third group of people who are learning in a second language of experiences very different from their own cultural perceptions. Let me ask you, how valuable do you think this is for the refugees? What is going on? A lot of us work hard here, long days, little pay. I just don't understand why the focus isn't on getting these people out of here... I thought about breaking my contract but I'll finish it. I'm learning a lot... maybe I can apply it back in the States... whatever... It just doesn't seem like we make a dent in the misery over here... it's really disillusioning... certainly not what I expected. I think a lot about the fact that we seem to be failing the refugees here and are probably setting them up for failure in the States.

Interview 4

The following presentation is an excerpt from a longer interview which this twenty-three year old Thai teacher would not allow me to put into print. The concerns of this man, like most of his Thai peers, focused on the administration and on teaching as opposed to some of the broader political and social implications of the refugee process raised by some of his American peers.

We are trying to find a way to let the administration here [Panat Nikom] know that we are dissatisfied with our wages and benefits. There is no job security here... only one cycle at a time. We get an orientation, but very little on-going training. We have many needs... most of us have never taught before. I was a university student in the United States for a year... that really doesn't make me an expert on the U.S., especially since my field of study was quite different... in the sciences. I needed a job...
they hired me on the fact that I had lived in the U.S. and can speak English. This is my first job. I couldn't work in the U.S. as a student... my parents paid for everything. We now know the Indonesian teachers are paid more than us, and have more benefits. Work in the camp isn't easy... it can be depressing... I'm very tired at the end of the week. Some of the teachers here [Thai and American] thought we should raise a lot of noise over these issues. However, I think we should carefully write them down, get everyone to agree, and then present them as adults. My father has warned me not to disgrace him by causing any trouble with the Americans here... he's very sensitive to that. Also, his business could suffer if the wrong people got news of any trouble on my part... I have to be cautious, we all have much to think about. American teachers don't seem to understand that we can't act as freely as they do... we have to consider many other people and the family name each time we get involved. It isn't easy....

Interview 5

Characterizing herself as a "late sixties idealist,"
this thirty year old American woman was involved with the refugee camp programs in Thailand, Hong Kong, and Indonesia since 1978. As a teacher, teacher trainer and, when I met her, a camp monitor for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees-related teaching programs, she has an extensive background in camp-related stages of the refugee process.

We've been over here [Thailand] three years or so. I've seen a great many different types of people... both American and Thai... this isn't the first time I've been through this discussion... the question is where to begin. At first I was really aghast at what I was seeing, experiencing, witnessing all around me. If you think Panat Nikom is bad now, you should have seen it a few years ago. There have been a lot of changes here... almost entirely in the physical realm, though, the camp remains the camp. The Vietnamese incarcerated across the road... separated from everyone else... had and still have it the worst! Many of the Americans here are so ugly, in the lowest sense of the word. They play tennis after
work with the middle class Thai students... they live in that "suburban" housing separated from the Thai community, you know, ovens and flush toilets and toll house cookies... a little American enclave in the middle of Panat. The Thais that live there are either married to Americans or they have been to the States and identify with the States more than they do with their own country. They dream of going back there... are one step removed from their own people... many steps removed from the refugees... and not quite "Americans." From the number of Thai teachers I have spoken to, worked with... they are much more aware of their situation here than most of the Americans. I need to explain that. A goodly proportion of the American teachers (remind me to comment later on their teaching experience) have come out of the Experiment or other "schools" like that, and they truly don't have a grasp on what's going on over here. Yes, they're schooled in cross-cultural awareness but hell, what does that mean when its all developed from the American perspective?... by Americans, for Americans... they've never questioned what's going on... the political and economic aspects... the repression of what's happening over here... and what's happening to all of these human beings. They've been trained in the mainline American perspective... America is good, the communists are bad... the U.S.A. is "saving" these people... we're all do-gooders! They believe that. More so, they've never stopped to question why and what they as individuals are doing here. They have the degrees, they are getting the experience abroad... they will be the beneficiaries in the long run. They have to believe what they're doing is right... to face the truth would shatter them, most of them. It's easy to fall into the "American Abroad" routine... knowing what's right for the refugees, being the interpreters of American culture (only one perspective), being so sure... at least from nine "till five. The rest of the time is spent in Bangkok whorehouses, living high, collective lucrative per diem expenses, travelling, career-building, playing tennis, playing American abroad. They know so little about themselves... their own country, the history and depth of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, the economic and political motivations behind that movement. It's a comfortable system for certain Thais and for the Americans abroad. Ironically, most of them have forgotten that this is all a result of war. Teaching is another question, separate from the fact that I don't find the cultural orientation program realistic or meaningful for the refugee... the fact is that most of these people never taught. A great deal has been said about schools of education and teachers but, in the final analysis, there is methodology that is useful...
effective... and can be meaningful, especially for adults. Hell, the refugees are treated like little children... or not complete adults... or culturally inferior... whichever way you want to look at it. What's the anthropological term?... [ethnocentric]... yes, ethnocentric. We know more, we're better, do it our way... the right way, "you inferior, primitive people." Hell, it makes me angry. From the top to the bottom that mentality prevails. I know the refugees feel that. It may sound strange, but they do have the full range of human emotions. There is a tremendous need for some sort of teacher training over here... real training... not how to put together bulletin boards... rather, how to make people think, how to stimulate discussion, how to share with the refugees about extremely difficult cultural idiosyncrasies... and then work together to make them meaningful as these humans strive to integrate this knowledge with their own experience. The system, the way it is set up, is an obstacle to this process. Inadequate classrooms, inadequate teachers, young people not yet adults... not yet aware of the problems and dimensions to adulthood... not having worked out their own life process... directing, pressuring adults to "learn" in a most uncompromising manner. I guess I could go on for days... I hope you are understanding me. It's only fair to say there are some good people here... it doesn't seem they last very long... they burn out, burn up... get tired of fighting an inadequate system... the lethargy of the process... tired of absorbing the agony of human beings caught in this camp life... tired of being undermined by the do-gooders... lacking a support system. After a while,... for your own sanity... people come and go... like fireflies in the night... a brief spark of light, a moment of hope. Things are disrupted a bit, but in the long run, this process... like the darkness... prevails. The system sluggishly moves ahead, even before the spark has diminished... been absorbed... forgetting that moment of uncomfortableness. We are left with few good teachers....

Interview 6

At twenty-eight years old, this Thai woman has had extensive university training as well as political experience in Thailand. She describes herself as "always having been opposed to U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia." When I interviewed her, she was working as a translator/teacher for Lao refugees in an English as a
Second Language program in a refugee camp. As Thai Issan, her immediate ancestors were Laotians living on the Thai side of the Mekong River.

The story of what has happened in my country and in other Asian countries goes way back... before our lifetime and before those of our grandparents... back to early French and British colonization. It's a long story... and volumes could be written about what they labeled Southeast Asia. Our histories do not refer to the Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, Kampucheans, etc., as one big block of states... This is a Western concept through which farangs [Western whites] have misrepresented all of us and done great damage to our cultural identities. I don't need to cover the whole of the colonial period with you. Needless to say, we were all exploited, pitted against each other, drained of resources, and given nothing in return. You must remember that we have seen many generations of this. The West found traitors among our peoples... willing to sacrifice identity for money, for position, for power, despite their skin coloring and heritage. They became Westerners in mind, philosophy, and in desire. They often covered that with the trappings of the military or with official positions, using empty words of "saving the people" from one thing or another. Who was to save us from them? It took a long time for many people to realize that we were the only ones who could save ourselves... and what was left of our lives and our futures. The last military campaign in Southeast Asia, one basically fought against American imperialism but born in colonialism... had a tremendous impact on all of us. The consequences of the physical damage that the American war machines wrought on our lands and our populations were the darkest moments of our recorded histories. I find it difficult to believe that the American people understand the extent of the damage. We have many questions concerning the sanity of a government supposedly "of the people and for the people" that would allow the carnage we were exposed to. I try to believe some form of socialist democracy is preferable to all other systems of government and economics, but we have concluded that either the U.S. has a democratic system and the populace willingly endorsed the horrors of the war or the U.S. doesn't have a democratic system and only a minority create the decisions that determine policy. It is difficult for us to believe in the former because many of us can't accept that so many Americans could be so ignorant of reality. Many of us conclude the latter
and that prospect makes the U.S. more dangerous than we might have believed. Many peoples believe that the U.S. is willing supporter of democracy and self-determination. We believed that also. We now know that democracy and self-determination are secondary to the world capitalist profits, not unlike the U.S.S.R., no? We were encouraged by the dissent in the late sixties and seventies, but we are not hearing those voices any longer. From our conversation, I know I have no need to barrage you with statistics... you seem to know the numbers as well as I do. However terrible those numbers reflecting death and destruction may indicate, there is much more.... Of course, during the war across Southeast Asia, we were faced daily with the physical confrontation and all that entails. Simultaneously, the U.S. waged a devious war on us... one that divided our peoples and pitted them against each other, one that splintered our culture into fragments, one that destroyed our religions... our very meaning in life. Even if the United States was willing to help with the reconstruction (which it hasn't), things would never be the same. Today, our farmers still lose legs or lives because of your saturation bombs in the fields; today our forests and rivers are ruined; today our peoples are still divided; today the U.S. still imposes economic sanctions, political oppression, and constant harassment of our government. All in the name of fighting communism. So powerful a legislative body still doesn't understand the difference between economic and political systems. They seem to view the world as American and other

Interview 7

A friend and co-worker of the woman in Interview 6, this twenty-four year old male was working as a teacher of "cultural orientation" in the refugee camp at Nong Khai.

My friend has been speaking and has covered many points I would make. I would be inclined to state things differently... simply because I no longer feel the hate I felt earlier. There isn't time in our world for hate... it takes away much of the constructive energy we need to survive. That, however, does not absolve the United States in my mind, from the responsibility for the destruction it created. Certainly, one point that seems to have been given little attention is the nature of war. You have a
very powerful war-creating mechanism structure that we are powerless to deal with. It consists not only of the actual technology... the machines of war... then, too, the control of the international banks and a great deal of the press. In addition, people throughout the world have been educated through the Westernization of their sensibilities to believe the U.S. is for self-determination. Thus you make war in the name of peace-making? It is difficult to understand why the Americans do not seem to realize what they do to other peoples, other lands, other cultures. Your people brag about your diversity, your freedoms, your institutions... yet you deny others the opportunity to create their own meaningful institutions. In effect... you enjoy what you enjoy at the expense of the rest of humanity. I do not hate you personally for this... but I will fight against your country's way as long as I live. All humans deserve those freedoms... on their own terms, not on terms dictated by the U.S.A. or by the U.S.S.R. either. You can keep both of those systems as far as I am concerned. Both have created enormous suffering and problems for the world. As mean, as oppressive as the U.S.S.R. is, it does far less to contribute to the misery of Third World people than the U.S. The U.S. has much more power, many more resources, and it is ironfisted. You are free to come here and talk to us... but we could never come to your country and state our views. You know that. Many of the intellectuals here suspect there isn't as free an exchange of debate in the U.S.A... despite what your Radio Free American broadcasts. If you were to listen to U.S. and to Russian propaganda... all you'd have to do is scramble the names here and there and you'd find them both saying about the same thing. We aren't fooled by either of you. We know we are pawns in a much larger game. We want something better than either of you have to offer... and we want a part in the creation of it. Otherwise it will have no meaning to us. Both the U.S. and Russia were born of the West... you know very little about us. You view us as inferior human beings... you make war on us for your own selfish reasons. We will survive... even if you don't think so. The time may come when you may need us. I hope our people respond with more generosity than you have treated us. I hope they remember that for all of the inhuman treatment you have given other peoples... you are still to be considered as human beings. It may be quite the difficult proposition to keep that viewpoint alive. We have suffered too much through your hands to have us believe otherwise.
Interview 8

This woman, now working for the United States State Department, had a long history as a Peace Corps volunteer and then later as a supervisor for Peace Corps volunteers in Thailand. She was candid during her interview and was one of the few State Department people willing to invest some time in the discussion of the refugee situation in Thailand.

Well, we've experienced a lot with cultural orientation over the past few years... but, I think we're heading in the right direction now... people are teaching more realistic things... the importance of a job, the way to fill out applications, etc. This way the refugees know how to begin to access the system. I haven't been back in the States for several years... I understand things have changed a bit... but when you think about it, a large country like the U.S. isn't going to change that quickly in a short time. American people have big hearts... people from the U.S. have always responded to the plight of the needy... with the President's emphasis on volunteerism that has been heightened and brought to international focus. The refugees have to understand they are going to an entirely different world... they can't act the way they did in their respective countries... in the U.S.A. there are more complex laws, different expectations of the citizens, stricter rules relating to sanitation, far more involved than what most of the refugees are used to... let's face it, our technology has created a lifestyle that is more advanced than most Asians experience... it's our job to see to it that these unfortunate people are prepared to make the transition from almost primitive conditions and lifestyles to the most advanced technological societies on the planet. That's a difficult task... I'm very proud to be one of the Americans doing my small part in this process... it isn't easy being away from the cultural surroundings you are familiar with. However, it's worth the sacrifice... in a few years many of these people, particularly the young, will be like any other American... you won't be able to pick them out of a crowd and say, "there's a refugee"... isn't that great... they have a lot of potentiality and many of
them will make it successfully in the U.S. granted, they may have to take a job they don’t like in the beginning... however, that isn't any different from what other refugees have had to experience... it's almost a part of American tradition that they go through these stages... haven't studies indicated that by the second and third generation all this is forgotten... they are already into the mainstream by then. That's what happened to the Italians, the Blacks, Germans and others... in the long run, they all enjoy the benefits of being American. I try to get them really psyched up... you know, really positive about going to a better, safe, cleaner world... no more camps, enough to eat, prospects for their children. They really respond to that. I relate to them on the human level... I think they appreciate that kind of involvement.

Interview 9

A brief conversation with another State Department official, a white male in his late fifties, produced the following statement. He has lived in Thailand or Vietnam for over fifteen years.

We've learned a great deal from the process and the experiment in Southeast Asia... it has been a long, difficult road... initially we weren't prepared to deal with the sheer numbers of refugees that crossed into free Thailand, free Malaysia, and free Indonesia... the good, positive aspect of this is that we've generated models that we are beginning to use in Africa... and possibly soon on a limited basis in the Caribbean. This is extremely difficult work, complex, with constantly shifting needs, personnel, and political conditions. I believe we've done a fairly good job given the circumstances we've had to deal with. One has to be objective... not judgemental when assessing our role over here.

Interview 10

This is a part of a conversation with a Thai merchant in northwest Thailand. Ethnic Chinese in origin, he owns a hotel
and another small business in Chiang Mai.

Oh, we didn't have any war here in Thailand. Many refugees came here because there was no war here. We are a peaceful country. We work hard. The U.S. favors us because of this. We are a country to trust. The communists would take away my property. We work hard for this property. No war came here because of the U.S. Those other countries made bad mistakes. Our little Lao brothers did not listen to us. Now they have nothing. They are refugees. Tell me, what does a refugee have? My sons are alive. They are healthy, they go to school. I will have grandchildren some day. This is why I work so hard. This is why I believe in the U.S.A. The others will not have this. They were foolish. They listened to the intellectuals. No one is free. All people are bound by some things. Birth, then sickness, life problems, and then one and all die. Is it not better to be alive than to be dead? The smart stay alive the best way they can. This is why we call the Lao "little brother" ... they are like children sometimes. They can't see the way we see... we help them by giving them work now that they have lost everything, but we can't help them all. This is too bad. You listen to me. I know. If you don't believe me look at my house, my restaurant, my animals. Who has this if they are communist? Do not believe everything you hear... let your eyes tell you. You see, I am right. This is a better life... not so hard. It is my hope it stays this way for my family.

Interview 11

A brief statement by a stewardess from Hong Kong who has worked on international flights carrying refugees to the United States follows.

I don't know much about these refugees... all I do know is they cause a lot of crime in our city [Hong Kong]. They are many problems... both Vietnamese groups are continually fighting each other. You know what they do... they "sell" their children to the merchants to work... isn't that awful?! Now the authorities are moving all of them away from the city center to a small island that used to be an army base... then we won't have to worry about them being around decent people.
Interview 12

This stewardess had a different perspective than the previous woman. A British national, she was based with an airline in Bangkok. She had made three international flights from Thailand to the Philippines with large groups of refugees in the process of resettlement.

I've found most of the people to be very gentle, very polite and respectful. I've seen many people get on to the aircraft for the very first time. We try to relax them, to make them feel comfortable. There is a great tension before takeoff and on landing... especially with the old people. You can see many of them very, very frightened. A smile or a gentle touch on the shoulder is very reassuring for these people. Other times it's really exciting to see people experiment with new food, the bathrooms, or moving the seats. On a flight of that nature I learn so much. I watch faces and they tell me so much. These people are very brave. They leave their whole world behind... everything they know... everything they love... Sometimes I can feel the great emotions they are experiencing. Only once in a great while have we really had a problem. Most of the time it's a result of fear, confusion, or ignorance. As I said, I have learned so much from these flights. A lot of personnel won't work these flights....

Interview 13

The following account was part of a series of conversations held with a Laotian refugee hoping to come to the United States where some of his family and friends had already arrived in the Seattle area.

I come from District Xieng Khouang. My family were farmers... nice fields, beautiful fields. We had two houses, one my sister and her husband lived in... my grandfather built
it... it was very old, mostly wood darkened by age. We also grew vegetables and fruits and we owned buffalo. The village had many buffalo, ducks, and chickens. My father told us that once our village was very peaceful. There were many festivals... people were happy. We had rice to sell, people were always clearing new land and people prospered. A few years after I was born, I am told that peaceful life ended... the airplanes and the guns arrived... they could be heard from far away... everyone was very frightened. We didn't know what to do or what we had done to cause this. Many airplanes flew across the sky... some alone... many together... big ones and little ones... all kinds. Later they bomb our village... almost everything was burned or broken... even some airplanes shot the buffalos. I don't know why they did that... many people were dead. My sister was outside in the rice field and her legs were blown away. She was a good sister... she worked very hard, was generous and kind. I take care of her children... her husband is dead too, he was killed later when he was gathering wood in the forest. Many of my friends are dead... we left that village... we moved many times and then came to Vientiane... other friends came before us... we stayed with them. I took a new wife... my mother died and my baby brother, too... later we came to Bon Venai and then to Panat Nikom. My wife and cousins sell the things we sewed... we are still here waiting... a long time. I am learning English for when I come to your country. Maybe then I can have a farm... we will have plenty of food... and our children will grow healthy. See, very skinny here... not enough food. Maybe I will see you in your country. I want to go to Seattle... there I have friends who say it is a much better life. I hope for that day.

The preceding thirteen statements are a representative sample of those I was privileged to gather in Thailand. As late as 1983, with already almost three-quarters of a million Southeast Asian refugees in the United States, and with greater numbers dispersed throughout the world, no single individual -- from camp administrators to "cultural orientation" teachers -- could give me an adequate explanation of what was going on in the camps. Despite attempts by American and other international groups to
bring some cohesiveness to the situation, each camp, and often individual programs within a given camp operated with a great deal of autonomy. "Experts" will tell you that there exist cohesive curriculums and integrated language and "cultural orientation" components. That is true, to some degree, if one is speaking of the paper process.

First-hand examination and evaluation of these curriculums, programs, and experiences as the refugees were exposed to them and as the Thai teachers attempted to teach Lao refugees about American culture in English (which is a second language for teacher and refugee alike) indicated to this researcher that this process, at its very best, is most confusing for the refugee. This process reduced the possibility of transferring anything but the most fundamental of tasks as the refugee eventually dealt with the reality of living in the United States, as opposed to the myths internalized before arrival. The disparity between the simulated "cultural" experience in the camps and the actuality in the United States created ludicrous, if not detrimental experiences for the refugee. The situation was further aggravated by the use of poorly trained teachers. I recall sitting in on one classroom session where a Thai teacher, with the greatest sincerity, proceeded to explain that a correspondence school is a place where one learns to correspond -- to write. A literal definition right out of Webster's. I witnessed Thai teachers hitting the hands of confused students or shouting an order at people who were unresponsive. I was appalled that Americans in
charge of programs would turn their heads to abuses by Thai soldiers and police; "This is the way it is here," I was told. In addition, I saw Thai teachers asking refugees what kind of job they would like in the United States. A long list composed almost exclusively of professional occupations -- doctor, lawyer, teacher, etc. -- was far from the real experience that awaited the refugee in the United States. These kinds of expectations generated by foreign nationals and Americans out of touch with the reality of being a refugee in the United States could never be fulfilled as the Lao resettled in American communities. Furthermore, it complicated the task that resettlement facilitators at home had to deal with. As of late 1982, articulation between refugee workers at home and those in the camps was virtually non-existent. More often than not, various stages of the refugee process were viewed by the individuals involved as separate and unrelated entities. A holistic perspective on the part of the administrators responsible for the education process in the refugee camps in Thailand appeared to be lacking, and was one of the greatest weaknesses of the system. Attempts during 1983 to develop articulation between camps and stateside workers came too late and were not extensive enough.

On a personal and experiential level, I was aghast at the environmental and sanitary conditions in the camps. Crowded and often dangerous housing, inadequate diet, lack of competent medical care, absence of counseling for individuals arriving from war zones who were suffering cultural shock as well as from
personal loss, and insensitivity compounded by ethnocentricity
on the part of international workers contributed to a bizarre
and unhealthy situation for human beings. I have documented
these aspects of the camp experience as part of the ethno-
graphic film process contributing to a holistic pictoral record
of the Laotian refugee's journey from homeland to resettlement.

A last note: as I had experienced in the American community
working with Laotian refugees, I also encountered a fraction of
the personnel in the camps who, beyond language and culture,
reached out as human beings to the refugee population. These
individuals, like their American counterparts at home, were an
inspiration to observe as they faced the almost impossible task
of reassuring, comforting, supporting, challenging a population
that was highly stressed, often confused, painfully lonely, long-
ing for their homeland and friends, and vulnerable beyond imagi-
nation. Unfortunately, these individuals were too few, burned
out, or were closed out by other "professionals" in the camps.
Besides having to deal with all of the complexities generated by
the camp situation, they had to deal with roadblocks and resist-
ance on the part of American and Thai bureaucrats and administra-
tors whose career investments in the refugee resettlement process
took priority over the needs of the refugees.

Noam Chomsky, writing for the Indochina Chronicle
(April, 1976) articulates the way I responded to the evidence of
my country's involvement in Southeast Asia:
... the American record in Indochina can be captured in three words: lawlessness, savagery, and stupidity, in that order.... Intellectual apologists for state violence have begun to focus on the stupidity... translating that into bad policy....125

Beyond the stupidity, lies the greater questions of lawlessness and savagery. As I witnessed the ravaged lands, the ravaged human beings, I asked myself just what is it that places the United States in a special category where it is not held responsible for the violence, destruction, and terror it perpetrated upon these human beings. It would seem, as Chomsky further elaborates, that "... as long as these doctrines hold sway, there is every reason to expect a re-enactment of the tragedy of Vietnam...."126

On the plane home I wondered if my countrypersons truly understood what role and to what extent their government played in the devastation in Southeast Asia. Could they possibly know the intensity to which hate for our government has grown among Third World countries? Do they know that by keeping silent they give support and longevity to those perverted policies which have so drastically altered the lives of the Laotian people?
The experiences in Southeast Asia changed my perspective on the land of my birth. The experience served as a mirror, a device through which I could obtain a different perspective on the manner in which North American culture impacts the world in which we live.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

The qualitative work of Anthropology brings a needed dimension to the almost completely quantitative studies of psychology, sociology, and economics carried out in the domain of education.\(^1\)

Qualitative researchers try to interact with their subjects in a natural, unobtrusive, and non-threatening manner.\(...\)
\[\text{... if you treat people as research subjects, they will act as research subjects, which is differently than they usually act.}^2\]

The purpose of this study was to investigate and interpret the post-camp period of newly arrived Laotian refugees. The methodological approach was drawn from the field of cultural anthropology and the study was designed to provide an ethnographic account of the refugee experiences during the initial stages of acculturation and assimilation. The principal research technique used to compile data for ethnography was participant observation. This method was selected with three factors in mind:

1. The strength and tradition of participant observation as a research technique in cultural anthropology;

2. The place of ethnographic research within the spectrum of educational research; and

3. The appropriateness of the research methodology to the recording of the post-camp period of Laotian refugees.
The ethnographic design was evolving and flexible. The preparation of a field plan was intended to generate soft data that are descriptive in nature and include personal documents, life histories, field notes, case studies, ecological and environmental observations. The ethnographic fieldwork was a co-operative process in that the researcher worked with the interpreters and informants in order to transcribe and record. Data were collected with the intention of gaining a clear, first-hand understanding of the refugee process. The design was broad with the specific intent of allowing open-ended exploration.

Stage I: Preparation for Fieldwork and Pilot Project

1. Literature search;
2. Initial identification, contact, and introduction to the Laotian community, including three months in a pilot study to prepare for long-term fieldwork;
3. Census development and analysis of population demographics;
4. Development of field strategy based on initial findings of pilot study;
5. Initiating ethnographic film documentation.

Stage II: Fieldwork

The strategy at this stage was to review important elements in the development, structure, and functioning of the Laotian community and to generate oral biographies and additional
1. Continued observation and recording of environmental factors in the community: housing, location in relationship to other members of the larger community, and nutrition;

2. Continued documentation and analysis of family structures, members of family with regard to age, sex, occupation, roles, interactions, educational status, command of English;

3. Continued observation and recording of human relationships: family, friends, sponsors, and the American community;

4. Observation of Laotian community politics with emphasis on identification of leaders;

5. Analysis of refugee interaction with the larger community network of services and agencies to include:
   a. refugee adjustment process;
   b. structures, services, community support systems accessed;
   c. employment;
   d. educational opportunities;
   e. cultural adjustments;
   f. medical practices; and
   g. special problems related to this process;

6. Observation and recording of Laotian awareness of North American culture and American awareness of Laotian culture;

7. Conducting informal, open-ended interviews;
Stage III: Final Analysis of Data - Concluding Fieldwork

The strategy at this stage was to initiate the final analysis of data, interactions, interpretations, and evolving relationships, to bring to a conclusion open-ended interviews, and the preparation and submission of findings and conclusions to the doctoral committee in the form of the initial draft of this study.

The Site

Eugene, Oregon, is a middle-sized metropolitan area with a population of about two hundred thousand. The ancestors of its European-American majority settled the region in the middle of the last century after displacing the aboriginal population. This city, not unlike the rest of Oregon, is characterized by a low percentage of non-white minorities. As the county seat, Eugene boasts of a recent multi-million dollar urban renewal project which has restructured the center of the city with tree-lined shopping and entertainment facilities.

In the area there are three major school districts, a state university, a community college, and numerous independent trade-professional schools. A complex set of human service agencies -- local, county, state, and federal -- attend to the needs
of the populace. A clean city, located along the banks of the Willamette River, Eugene has numerous parks, recreation areas, and wilderness sites both within and close to the major urban area. It has been named one of America's most livable small cities.

Laotian Refugees

The Laotian refugee population of Eugene was composed of two hundred and six individuals. Both nuclear and large extended families contributed to nine cluster groups of families composed of relatives and close friends. These individuals were from two ethno-linguistic groups: ethnic Lao (Lao Lum), and Mien (Yao). The ethnic Lao began arriving in late 1978 and the Mien arrived in 1979. The Laotian people originated from the provinces of Vientiane, Khammouane, Savannakhet, Saravane, and Champassak. The Mien population originated in the provinces of Phong Saly and China's southern province of Yunnan.

The greater percentage of the Lao Lum originated in Vientiane and Champassak. Those families and individuals from Vientiane were usually well educated in comparison with the rest of the Lao population. The province of Vientiane is the seat of the old French colonial capital, which is also named Vientiane. With a population around two hundred thousand, similar in size to Eugene, the individuals from the capitol were somewhat urbanized. Many of the men had been employed in the civil service with the French, Americans, or the Royal Lao Government.
A number were multi-lingual, speaking Lao, and alternately some Thai, French, Vietnamese, and English. The greater percentage of the adults had attended primary school grades one through six, and many had also attended some of the secondary school grades six through nine. In addition, a few had specialized training in the military, civil service, or at the lycee.

The people from Champassak, in the south of Laos, originated from a rural background. Provincial and less educated than their eastern counterparts, the men nevertheless had more education than the women. Still, few men had gone beyond primary school. Almost all of the women had no formal educational experiences. The schooling provided in this rural area came from Buddhist monks who taught on the village level within a tradition dating back thousands of years. A Theravada Buddhist country, Laos' traditional education has been centered in the village wat. This education is oriented to practical needs, primarily those related to functioning within rural Lao society.

The Mien population of Eugene originated from an entirely different tradition than that of the Lao Lum. Having lived close to the Chinese border, they represented about five percent of the Laotian population before the 1975-1981 diaspora. They are closer in identification to their cultural and linguistic relatives in Yunnan than to the Lao Lum. Arriving in 1979 with a great deal of local support and publicity, they have enjoyed a more successful economic transition than the rest of the Laotian community. In addition, they consider themselves a part of larger families
of Mien living throughout the Pacific Northwest and maintain frequent interaction with these groups. A few of the male-heads-of household spoke Lao and Chinese. Most of the women received no formal education. Their educational problems were unique and they posed a challenge for local school personnel in having come from a pre-literate tradition. Americans tended to notice them more because of their exotic and interesting dress. They, more than the other Lao, fit American stereotypes of the refugee population. During the time this study was conducted, they comprised six households which together formed one large extended family.

Demographics

Community Census, 1983 (statistics from June 1982 - June 1983)

Number of Individuals in Community ...................... 206
   Males ........................................ 124
   Females .................................... 82

Number of Adults, Sixteen and Older .................... 107
   Males ........................................ 63
   Females .................................... 44

Number of Children Fifteen and Under .................. 99
   Males ........................................ 61
   Females .................................... 38

Number of Single Unaccompanied Minors Under 21 ........ 0

Number of Families .................................... 67

Number of Extended Families .............................. 9
Education

Community college or high school classrooms in Lane County have often provided Laotian refugees with their first explanations and explorations of North American culture. The educational experiences available to adult refugees in Eugene have been largely restricted to the above-mentioned community institutions. This local process offers a wide range of traditional programs, from basic English as a Second Language and pre-vocational training for the non-literate to more sophisticated programs tailored to individual needs.

Seventy-eight percent of the male Laotian refugees and eighty-six percent of the female Laotian refugees received less than a high school education in their homeland prior to resettlement. The majority of these individuals had not studied English before.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Less Than</th>
<th>More Than</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1

EDUCATION IN LAOS IN PERCENTAGES
TABLE 2

LOCAL INSTITUTIONS WHERE REFUGEES HAVE STUDIED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eighty-six percent of the Laotian population have studied at one time or another in community college programs. A number of younger students, fourteen percent, have studied in the high schools. As of yet no Lao has graduated from high school and no local Lao refugees have been enrolled at the state university located in Eugene.

TABLE 3

EDUCATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS - LANGUAGE BY PERCENTAGES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Speak Functional English</th>
<th>Read/Write English</th>
<th>Literate in Native Language</th>
<th>Attended One Year or More of ESL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since resettlement in Eugene, sixty-six percent of the males and seventy percent of the females have studied English as a Second Language for at least one year. Only twelve percent of the men and eight percent of the women read and write English as of 1983. Fifty-seven percent of the men and thirty-eight percent
of the women were literate in their native language.

**Employment**

Obtaining employment has been one of the most difficult problems for the Laotian community members. Laotian refugees originate from a culture where the work ethic and value system are significantly different from North American values. Many individuals have had problems making the necessary adjustments expected by American employers. Integration into the American workforce was additionally hampered by the language barrier. These difficulties aggravated a tension expressed throughout the local job market during a period of disturbing economic recession in 1982-1983.

**TABLE 4**

**REFUGEE EMPLOYMENT PROFILE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed, full- or part-time</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed, full-time</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed, part-time</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These figures reflect the general patterns during the 1982-1983 economic recession.*
### TABLE 5
REFUGEE OCCUPATIONS BY PERCENT*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational Status</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Collar</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Collar</td>
<td>36.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>59.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on averages for all adult males and females over sixteen years of age in the Laotian community between the years 1981 and 1983.

The majority of the employed Laotian community, thirty-six and a half percent, have worked as blue collar workers ranging from dishwashing and motel cleaning to janitorial and cooking jobs. Unfortunately, due to the limited nature of local employment opportunities, work generally centered around wood products and related industries. Many of the skills and occupations learned in Laos were not transferrable to the new community setting. A representative list of skills and occupations refugees brought with them reads as follows:
### Occupations and Skills in Native Country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bank Auditor</th>
<th>Photographer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bank Teller-Clerk</td>
<td>Policeman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautician</td>
<td>Priest (Buddhist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brick Layer</td>
<td>Sculptor/Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td>Seamstress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Servant</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial Fisherman</td>
<td>School Teacher (Lycee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction Worker</td>
<td>School Teacher (Primary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrician</td>
<td>Soldier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital Worker</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>Tenant Farmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landed Farmer</td>
<td>Translator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual Laborer</td>
<td>University Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>Watch Maker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel Manager</td>
<td>Welder</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Occupations and Skills Acquired in the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assembly Line - Factory</th>
<th>Electrostatic Printer/Assembler</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Babysitting</td>
<td>Educational Aide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet Maker</td>
<td>Fast Food Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannery Worker</td>
<td>Flagman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Manager/Counselor</td>
<td>Florist/Greenhouse Worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>Forestry Service Crew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dishwasher</td>
<td>Garbage/Sanitation Worker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Occupations and Skills Acquired in the United States - (cont.)

Gardeners
General Restaurant Help
General Utility
Library Assistant
Maids - Hotels, Motels
Maintainence - Industrial
Nutritional Aide
Packer/Truck Loader
Pantry Worker
Park/Recreation Assistant
Road Grader
Secretary/Clerk
Self-Employed Craftsman
Shoe Clerk
Social Service Aide
Toy Factory Employee
Translator
Tree Planter
Tree Thinner
Vegetable, Fruit, Nut Picker
Veterinarian's Assistant
Warehouse Worker
Wood Products Worker

Over time, many individuals acquired two or more of the skills above as seasonal, part-time, or full-time job opportunities arose. New job acquisition was facilitated by on-the-job training through the local community college as well.

TABLE 6

PERCENTAGE OF REFUGEES HOMEBOUND OR UNEMPLOYED SINCE ARRIVAL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Homebound</th>
<th>Unemployed*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This does not count occasional day labor field picking jobs.
A substantial percentage of the community has yet to find employment. Language barriers, physical infirmity, psychological problems, and a tight job market all contributed to the problem of unemployment.

Due to a comprehensive pre-vocational and pre-employment program coupled with job development services initiated by the local community college in 1983, some Laotian refugees have begun to find employment. Significantly, at the close of 1983 over thirty-five percent of the Laotian community had left or was in the process of leaving Eugene for areas with better employment prospects. State Adult and Family Services officials encouraged secondary migration to states with better programs and services. Most moved on to California where they had friends or family, where the state provides for refugee transition, and where over forty percent of this country's Southeast Asian refugee population is located. At the close of 1983, fifty-nine percent of the Laoyians were still seeking stable employment.

Environmental Situation

### TABLE 7

**ENVIRONMENTAL STATISTICS OF ADULT COMMUNITY MEMBERS BY PERCENTAGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Homeowners</th>
<th>Renters</th>
<th>Car Owners</th>
<th>Motorcycle</th>
<th>Medical Insurance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In Laos</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eugene</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All of the Laotian community rent apartments or houses. To this date no family has purchased a home. This is in great contrast to the percent of individuals who owned their own homes in Laos. Most of the Laotians, forty-eight percent, own cars. Again, in marked contrast to the situation in their homeland. However, many of the members of the community, forty-six percent, owned motorbikes or motorcycles in Laos. Few had medical insurance in Eugene and none in Laos.

TABLE 8

ORIGINAl SPONSORS AND CURRENT STATUS OF CONTACT BY PERCENTAGE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sponsor</th>
<th>Percent of Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Churches</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Family</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laotian Family</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laotian Friend</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status of Contact</th>
<th>Percent of Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active Sponsor</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inactive Sponsor</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A high percentage of the Laotian refugees have lost contact or maintain very little contact with their original sponsors. Only twelve percent of the population still maintains strong ties with their American sponsors. Many of the refugees were sponsored by church groups who now maintain a minimal con-
tact. Secondary migration has played a significant role in the separation of these relationships. Sponsor burn-out has had some impact as well.

Respondants and informants interviewed during ethnographic fieldwork participated with full consent. All of the members of the local Laotian community were interviewed during the years of 1982-1983. The profiles and demographics presented in this chapter are representative of the community during that period.

I was left with many thoughts when one Laotian refugee asked me,

...for what reason do you put down all these numbers? How can these numbers tell the Americans how we are as humans, as people? I do not understand the American importance of numbers. If you are to know anything about the Lao you must start with the heart and stop the counting....

Interview with a Laotian refugee during the early days of fieldwork, 1982
CHAPTER IV

NEW WORLD / OLD MEMORIES

Even the birds sound different here; they sing in a different language....
Lao refugee, 1983

Oh, that I could go home, now I know that can never be....
Lao refugee, 1982

I am dead, and I am alive... those parts of me, Lao and American, have a hard time living together....
Lao refugee, 1983

There are two sections to this chapter; each reflects a different facet of the refugee experience. These data and biographies are the result of an anthropological field study conducted during the last three years in Lao refugee communities in Lane County, Oregon. These oral histories in Sections I and II are an expression of the refugee process as perceived by those who traveled its varied landscapes -- social, psychological, and ideological as well as geographical. Eight Lao translators and scores of informants contributed to the compilation of these data. The individuals contributing did so with full consent. They are adults, respected by their family and friends, exhibiting a clear grasp of the complexity of their experiences. They are justifiably proud of their past, of being Lao, and of their survival here. At the same time, many have reached the point in acculturation where they are questioning what has happened to them and
what the future holds for their lives, their children, their dreams and aspirations.

Once the fundamental conditions of confidentiality and respect were clearly understood, Lao men and women, in the privacy of their own homes, among trusted friends, spoke freely, struggled with difficult questions, released anger, dealt with painful memories -- as they reflected upon their experiences as refugees, on the harsh realities of adjusting to their place in American culture, and on the long range questions of survival in a foreign land. As always with humans from a different cultural orientation, speaking through a different language, accommodations had to be made.

My sole intent and role as ethnographer was to act as a recorder and transmitter of their perceptions, as well as to attempt to understand. Rarely have we listened to what the refugees have had to say about their experiences. The media have generally portrayed refugees in a collective sense -- as a faceless mass of statistics, a nameless sea of bodies descending the stairs of modern aircraft to enter their "new country," as recipients of American generosity to be counted among the waves of immigrants who have come to the United States of America and, lastly, as a testimonial to America's commitment to respond to the "needy" as they flee from rampant communism.

For the refugee, there is a different perspective, that of the individual, the already complete adult human being having
to deal with additional dimensions to existence. The condition of being a refugee is a reality the press, the academicians, the statisticians and others have barely touched on. Refugees left Laos for a multitude of complex reasons. Most of those reasons have not been explored by the media. As media coverage has shifted elsewhere, Americans appear to have forgotten... or are unwilling to deal with... the fact that these individuals are refugees from a war experience. Their being here is a direct result of over thirty-five years of a ruthless military and economic devastation of the social, political, environmental, and economic structures of Laos. The role of the United States in that process is well documented. Responsibility for those actions as well as continued American economic and trade restrictions on Laos have yet to be fully examined and acknowledged by the United States government.

These histories touch upon the complexity of the refugee experience: the problems of adjusting to a new culture while simultaneously coping with the loss of the primary culture, support groups, and status; the difficulties of trying to identify and then to accept a new set of values and a totally different lifestyle; struggling to survive during a period of adverse and fluctuating economic conditions in the United States; attempting to understand American expectations and perceptions of the Lao refugee; adjusting expectations of the new culture and society with the harsh and sometimes hostile realities of living here as
a refugee; and finally, coming to grips with the ultimate probability of never going home, never being "Lao" again, and never being quite like "Americans."

As a matter of obligation, out of fundamental consideration and respect, the oral biographies in Section I appear unaltered as they were offered by the various speakers. Section II is the profile of an entire Lao refugee family. The final products are the results of the combined efforts of translators, of informants, and of the researcher. Over the course of time, through informal, open-ended interviews, individuals were requested to comment on three separate areas of the refugee experience: life in Laos prior to making the decision to leave, life and experiences in the refugee camps, and life as a newly arrived refugee in the United States. Every adult member of the community was interviewed as a part of the process of developing accurate demographics. The following thirty-three biographies were constructed as a result of as few as one or as many as fifteen sessions with a given individual. As months grew into years, both the translators and informants became more comfortable with the process. As time moved on, more and more adults began to build a repertoire of words in English and experiences in America. This growth was reflected in the quality of the interviews during the latter stages of fieldwork.
A thirty-four year old mother of five children, this Lao Lum woman originates from the province of Vientiane. Both she and her husband have maintained part-time work since arrival in the United States.

We came as a family... my husband, daughter, and sons... we left our country because of the bombing... what could we do?... no schools... our farm broken... some relatives dead... everyone fighting... this is no way to live... we didn't want to leave... there was no other way... there was nothing left... one cousin said there was better opportunity in America... we thought about this... we saw many Americans in Laos... many things they did we didn't understand... they were all healthy and rich... they wore nice clothes... they had big cars... everyone treated them special... we took a chance... the new government wasn't bad but it made everyone work very hard... they promised us land once they dug up all the bombs... some of our friends waited... we left... the Thai soldier took our money and a little jewelry... we hid some and they didn't see it... we put it inside the diaper of the baby... this helped us in the camps... there wasn't enough water or food... we waited and waited... three years we waited... we couldn't go back... we were sorry we left... then we got sponsors and came to your country... they did not like us... we did not know many things about the American life... we were afraid... we were farmers... we know little about what to do here... some other people were nice... they talked and show us what to do... we are so ashamed to have the American see us do something the old way... we try hard to do everything like the American... We went to learn English... they show us many things... we laughed at some of our mistakes... now we know better... they were the best to us... even when we couldn't talk they smiled... we weren't afraid of them... they were kind... we will never forget that... because of them we are learning... they show us that American can be kind... have a heart... you tell them that for us... you tell them because we can't... because we are only refugees... we have a small apartment now... my husband works part-time... our children go to school... we do not have much money... no car... we are glad to be here... our children have a new life... we tell them to study hard... speak the English... We want them to be American... there is the future... they do not remember Lao... that is
o.k... they will not be sad in their heart like we old one sometime....

2.

This Lao Lum man, age twenty-four, has recently relocated to California because of layoffs on his job. Only a few days after the layoff, the "American" woman he married, who is the mother of his daughter, left him to live with another man. Discouraged and emotionally drained, he left with his daughter for a larger Laotian community in Stockton, California. There he has friends and has become part of an extended family where he believes he has found a supportive environment to rear his daughter in the "Lao way." Before he left he stated that the "American" woman had robbed him of all the money he had saved, of the family life he loved and needed, and of his heart.

I don't know what to say to you... I have never done anything important... I lived in Laos all my life until I was eighteen... I didn't live in the capitol, but Savannakhet. I lived in many temples... I moved about... I left Lao at eighteen... I was two and one-half years in the camps... life was difficult... I worked there... that way no one had to bother me... and I didn't depend on anyone else... I am married... I have a baby child... I left because of the war... there wasn't any future... not enough food... no gas... everything broken down... I want a home... a family... peace of mind... my own garden... I didn't want war and more death... that was what was left of my Lao... What do I know of politics... Communists, Americans... all of them... they had a price for the little man like me to pay... what happened in Lao is gone... I left that there... I saw much... war has so many ugly faces... it is a new life here.... not easy... but I didn't expect that... I have a job... a wife... and no one troubles me... I trouble no one... what I can do for someone else... I do... I learned this in the temples [Buddhist]... this has worked well for me here... the one good thing I have learned is how valuable friends
and family are... more than governments or money or anything else ... Despite all I am a wealthy man for my friends and for my family... I have my health... What more could I ask for? I don't have more to say... talking too much can get you into a lot of trouble... so can asking a lot of questions... I've learned that... I am alive... for that most of all I am lucky... I have a garden, too... you will stay and eat with us, yes?

3.

Twenty-nine years old and originating from the area around Vientiane, this Lao Lum man left his wife and two children in Laos. In the time since he has been in the United States, he has married another Lao woman and they have two children. Despite persistent efforts to locate full-time employment, he has been frustrated by finding only occasional part-time work.

I left Laos in 1978... I came with my mother, two younger brothers, one sister, and cousins... before leaving I was a motorcycle repairman... I went to school for seven years and then was in the army... there I learned mechanics... Our family owned several houses and we all had small businesses. While the Americans were there we made much money... things were good... my brother worked for the U.S. Embassy... we lived nearby... we thought we had a great future... when the Americans left we were forced to give away some of our land and the new government took all of our houses except the one we lived in... actually, some of our relatives took some of the houses... we couldn't get parts for the business... food and gasoline were hard to get... my brother was sent to the country to work on a farm because the government said he had made money off the Lao people and was on the side of the Americans... we worked for what we had... we didn't believe that the farmers who lost their land in the war should get our land... some of the farmers went back to their old land and the government helped them... it was no fun... everyone was expected to do extra work to rebuild the country... lots of night clubs and other activities were stopped... what a plain life... we saw no future... we planned to leave... my grandmother and some cousins stayed in our house... we said we were going to visit relatives in the south... when we went there we kept on going... life in the camp was difficult... especially at night it was very dangerous... we tried to stay together... the Thailand guards
were very mean... for no reason... there is much I could say but I won't... that is gone... our family got broken up... some came to the U.S. and some went to the Philippines... I have been here two years now... one of my brothers, my sister, and my mother are here... on the way we got separated from one brother and some cousins... we hope they are in the U.S. and that we find them... we worry much for them... My life has changed... we are very poor... we try hard... we belong to the Christian church... we do not smoke or drink... I am worried for finding work... a man should be able to support his family... they tell us times are hard here right now... that many Americans are out of work... we did not expect this... we thought everyone in the U.S. had a job... we did not expect to find the same problems that we left in our country... Who would have dreamed that? That's o.k... we believe everything will get better... we have met many good people here... our neighbors treat us well... they help us when we don't understand something... they say we are now Americans... this is a clean city... we fish... we go to the park... I married a woman... her husband died in the camp... our children are learning English very good... somehow we will make it... you know, the American people are great... another thing... governments are the same everywhere... wherever you are... its the people who count... once the American people were good to us we had great hope that everything will be o.k... governments... I have no use for them... they always forget the people... well, what questions do you have? [None, I'd rather have you tell me what you think is important; its your story]... well... most important now is work... I want to work... I want to have a house again... I want to bring my family together... this is important for a man to have his family around him... Do you know what I mean? This is good this writing you will do... later we will forget much of this... putting it in history will help us to remember... you remember... you promised to forget my name... this story is between us without my name... When you were here before you made me think of many things... my mind has been busy... some things I can't tell you... not so secret... instead, it hurts too much to remember... I am glad we talk... there is much inside I don't have the words for... now, I have to be very strong... I can't think of the past... when I do, I am sometimes confused... that is why I don't drink... my mind becomes confused and the thoughts hurt... my hope is to find work... any kind of work....
4.

This Lao Lum man, in his late fifties, has recently found part-time janitorial employment as his first "American" job. He is presently attempting to cope with radical changes in roles and in the structure of his family as acculturation begins to take effect. He has had initial complications on the job as he has difficulty taking orders from young Americans who do not respect his age.

We like you... we like America... this is our new life... we don't talk too much about the past... Lao was our old country... it was far away... very different... hard to explain... I work for many years at the American Embassy... I sort mail... open the mail from the communist country... send to the supervisor... they paid good... I had a big house... we have many American friends... when they leave we leave too... we do not like the new government... we wait in the camp for many year... then we come to the United States... we have the big family... one son and his wife stay in Lao to keep our house... the other are here... now I try to learn English... very hard... We go to the church... the people help us... they send clothes and food... they help with the problems... I worry for the job... we have many children... sometimes my wife is sick... I will do any work... there is much to learn here... I am not a young man... I try any job... here I am the refugee... not like in my own country where I am a man... here I am the refugee... this is hard... I can not speak the English so good... I can not say the words in my mind to you... I am like the little child in English... we can not talk as the man... I have not the words in your English... maybe some other time later... when I speak more English we can talk the politics... history... religion... I know these things... I feel very uncomfortable to use the translator... he is a good man... a good friend... but we use different words... he is younger... we do not say things in the same way... he is very important here... he is our mouth and ears... we trust him... I hope next year or sometime I can talk to you as a man... I enjoy this talk... I am very interested in the whole world... I like to know very many things... In my country we have many people to our house... we talk... my wife cook good food... here we have people
to our house... I can not talk very too much... this is very hard... I have something to say... I have the questions... I have no way to say many thing... it is much better now... when I first came I was almost crazy... I am already a man and I could not talk for myself... this was the very hard thing... I am very sorry I did not learn the English at the Embassy... they did not like us to speak the language... those Americans were very different... my neighbors are not the same... very friendly... very good to us... very helpful... they come to our house to eat the Lao food... they take us in the car... they explain for us when we can not speak the right answer... they are the very good friend... they are good with the children... their children come here... they do not have the bad racial feeling... we learn very much from them... we miss Lao too much sometimes... there we know what to do, what to say, where to go... we are lucky to be here... many die in the war... some die in the refugee camp... I hope for the good job soon... there are many in my family... the man must work for the food, the clothes, the rent, too many things... we are happy to be in your country... maybe soon I am lucky to find the very good job... because you are here my wife has made some special Lao food... we want you to try... this way you know a little more about our people... our ways... they are good, too... we Lao are good people... we will talk later... maybe my son will have something to say to you... He say he has to think more before he talks... after we eat or maybe next time, o.k?

5.

This forty-one year old Lao Lum man is currently attempting to learn English as he struggles by on part-time and seasonal landscape jobs. Because he has adult children in the United States, both he and his wife have escaped poverty. The supplementary income received from the family has given the parents a more comfortable living experience than many of the other Laotians in the community.

I had a small business outside Vientiane... we sold ice... we were never very rich... we were not poor... we owned a small farm that came from my uncle's family...
Others worked the farm and we took part of the crop... we had a radio... please excuse my bad English... I am ashamed... there is no way to my many thoughts out of my head into English... I speak Lao, Thai, Chinese, and some French... now I am learning English... When I can, I will answer in English... otherwise, my friend here will help us both... I think your Lao is better than my English... I have thought about your questions and about my life in the time after I spoke to you... First, let me describe my country... it was beautiful... many flowers, good farms... there were rich and poor... many big temples... celebrations... we had our own way of living life... it was different from the French or American way... even the very rich [Lao] were Lao first when the French were in power behind the king... the Americans changed our nation... they brought with them many discoveries... toasters... television... and different ways for people to act... much money... they were very powerful... you always knew where they were... I cannot lie... I liked much of their discoveries... I wanted both... to be Lao and to have some of the American way... many people said this was not possible... some in our family wanted to stay out of the American war... you know, the one in Vietnam... we were having our own war... the Americans took sides and then it seemed to be like everything was upside down... everyone had to be on a side... I didn't want that... I didn't want the communist way... Remember last time you said all stories were private.?. [Yes] O.K., is that the rule now? [Yes] O.K., then I didn't want the American way... we (my wife, too) wanted some of the good things... but we wanted to stay Lao... that was not for us to have... one side or the other... so, we knew the Americans were bigger... it wasn't so bad in Vientiane... the war in the North and other parts of the country was awful... relatives told me of bombs everyday and sometimes at night... they had bombs that fell and then more bombs came out of their inside... this caused many deaths and much destruction to people and animals and the land... also there was fire and gas... the others weren't all communists... at first they wanted an independent Lao... you know, our own government... it almost went that way but we didn't quite make it... the Americans helped some people and they were big... the communists were there, too... the war went on and on... we got food and other things flown in by the Americans and then in the country people started to grow less food... How could they? It was war... everyone began taking sides and no one trusted anyone... it was a crazy life... we couldn't live that way... at first many refugees came in from the countryside... we never thought we'd be
like them... By the end of the war twenty-seven people were living in our house... all relatives... their farms gone... then we heard the Americans were leaving... we couldn't believe it... What would we do?... we were on their side... we knew if they left things would be rough... they left... there was almost no food... little medicine... all kinds of problems... the new government couldn't repair all the war damage... it was too great... the Americans turned their backs on Lao... they weren't interested any more... many people were angry... confused... now what?... every chicken had to be counted under the new government... we knew they had to do this because there wasn't enough food... much farmland was destroyed... we didn't want to live this way... we had to leave... I want my children to live... so, you see, I did leave... I would like to go back if things change... right now I can't... this is now the country of my children... I don't know if it will ever be my country... I am a guest here... yes, a refugee... my side lost... it is another story about the camps... we escaped... we got out... another day we can talk... now, let's drink some beer... I want to show you photographs of my family....

6.

Twenty-six and the mother of two children, a third having died in the camps, this Lao Lum woman is illiterate in both her native language and English. She depends entirely upon her husband to provide for the family and to negotiate any business with the American community. She said her "...world has become very small..." since leaving her country. Her husband has worked full-time since arrival as a dishwasher in a local restaurant.

My story isn't much... We lived outside of Vientiane in the country... I am here because of my husband... he worked for the Americans... we made much money... we owned land, we had a car and a motorcycle... after the war the new government said we had to share... we did not want to do this... we left... While the Americans were there we had a good time... many parties... dancing... plenty of food... money to spend... after the war my husband had to take a new job... less money... not enough for gas... not enough food... We thought the United States would be a better
place... We couldn't live in Lao anymore... everything was a mess... we sold things and crossed the river... we lived only a half-mile from the river and came across at night... we had to be careful... both the Thai and the new government might kill us if we get caught... we were lucky... all of us made it... we [were] surprised... we got to the town and we have friends there... they take us to the camps... now we are poor here... no job... no money... many people in our apartment... the American don't like us... What to do? There is no place for us... in Lao... in America... this is sad... we try... maybe things get much better... we work hard... then the Americans can know we are a good people... we hope they will let us try with a job....

7.

This eighteen year-old "unaccompanied minor" is a typical of the many young Laotian refugees who resettled in the United States without family. More fortunate than other males in his peer group, he has a Laotian girlfriend and has become a peripheral member of her parents' extended family. Continuing with school and with part-time work, he is unsure as to his plans for the future.

I don't know too much... I was too young... I am only eighteen... I was thirteen when I left my country... we were wanting a new life... my father was not wanting to leave our country... he is the old way... my brother and I came away for a better life... there was no future for us... no chance for education... the country was in bad shape... the war messed it up... I miss my family... I'm here... I'm doing o.k... I have a girlfriend... I work part-time... I don't understand many things... I keep my mouth shut so people won't think I'm stupid... Maybe I'll go back... I don't know what's best... When I was in the camps I couldn't wait to get here... I had dreams... it's not the same... it's not easy here... sometimes I think I shouldn't have left... my father wanted me to get ahead... I'm here... I'm not always happy... I get confused... I worry I'm never going to be a part of things... If I go
back it could be that things have changed and I won't be a part of things there... who knows... I just hang in there... I know my brother will go back... he is saving now... he says he is too much Lao to become American... If they won't take him back he'll stay in Thailand... he hasn't learned much English... he is very lonely... if he goes... I don't know what I can do... Right now, I'm trying here... I learn many things... I study... I am a man now....

8.

This twenty year old Lao Lum male originates from the rural area near Champassak in the south of Laos. Despite enormous psychological battering, he has worked hard in school and on his part-time job. An active member of the community, he is "on hand" to help new families, to assist with translation, or to play a "tough" game of soccer. By keeping busy, he says that he has been able to escape the past.

I am seventeen... I have been here two and a half years... I spent five years in the refugee camp... I was about ten when we left our country... If you want the truth I will tell you a hard story... My mother and sister were killed by the Thai army... we left our farm when the American bomb burn everything... our buffalo, our chickens, and our father were all burned... one other brother died later from the burn... we traveled until they got us... they were screaming... they took off my clothes and used me for sex... I hurt and was bleeding... other farmers came and took me to their house... later they sold me to go to Bangkok... there for one year they sent me to the hotel room of the many foreigner for sex... one man bought me and took me with him... I ran away and got to the camp... there I learned the English... no one knew about the other... then I got sent to the Philippines and then to San Francisco... I have the Mormon sponsor... they were good... no fun... it was hard for me to stay there... the mother want to sleep with me... I don't like the sex... it hurt too much when they sold me to Bangkok... when I run away I decide never again... I rather die first... many time they beat me... I have a girlfriend here... When I finish school we will marry... I want children...
the family... the happy life... I want to be the father... I study very hard... I have many friends... they like me... I am happy to live in this city... here I sleep without worry... you have said if I tell you my story you will not tell my name... I know you are true to your word... the refugee is a hard life... now it is over... this is my new country... there is no war here... there is plenty of food... people are happy... there are many schools... there is much to learn... most of the time I feel good... I am happy for life... I like the dance and the music... only sometimes I am sad... I remember my mother on the ground... I think of our buffalo all burn... I see the face of the fat foreign man and the hand on me... then I am sad... I do not tell my girlfriend of this... someday I will forget all this... I will be the father... I will have the family... then I will be very happy... now I have a job as a dishwasher... I have much to learn of my new country... I have a television and listen to English... I try to speak the English every chance... I go to school... I am very busy... that is very good... this is a good future for me... I think I will never be this happy when I wait in the camp... I save a little money... I want a car... this is very good... that is all... that is the story of me....

A traditional Lao Lum woman in her late fifties, this person has refused to make any direct comments about her past. On the other hand... over the years I have been a frequent guest in her home and have subsequently learned through informal "family" conversations much about her past life, family, and her growing-up experience in Laos. Over time, she has served as a valuable informant regarding the daily comings and goings of the Laotian community as she is an indefatigable gossip.

Why do you ask of us? We know nothing... the American people do not need to know about Lao... it is a sad story... for me to tell would be bad for a new person here... what good to it? The Americans would think us bad... it is all dead... this is a new life... If you ask many questions you cause trouble for us... my husband says go away... we suffer much... in Lao... in the United States... we do not need more... you are a good man... I [am] surprised you ask me
to remember pain... that is all... my mouth is shut about that... come and eat with us... next time... do not ask questions....

10.

In his late fifties, this Lao Lum man has been unable to find employment in the United States. Over the past two years, he has watched the gap widen between his traditional Laotian family perspective and the "American" perspective newly acquired by his children. Fortunately, his wife has maintained part-time employment as a motel maid. In her late fifties, the work is exhausting but serves as the only means of income and the stabilizing factor keeping the family together.

While I was still a young man, the Americans came... they brought many new ideas into my life... it would never be the same for me again... I was not satisfied with Lao as it was... I was determined to be like the Americans... they were on top... I liked that... by working with them I got a good job... my children went to a good school... I wasn't rich, but I was very comfortable... living in Vientiane wasn't so bad... I was all on the American side... There were communists and there were nationalists as well... the Americans put them all together... Many Lao who disagreed with the Americans and who wanted to be neutral were called communists... this was not so... On the other hand, the nationalists were stupid to think they could remain neutral... I was for the Americans, they were my friends... they helped me... when the U.S. pulled out, we knew we had to leave... we disagreed with the new government... I don't believe in Socialism or Communism... to me, all people can never be equal... it is unnatural... Some are always more powerful than others... some have always been the top class... that is the natural law... We crossed the river... it was difficult then... we believed the Americans would be good to us... We took a lot of money with us... once in Thailand things changed... the soldiers took much of our money and my wife's jewelry... my oldest daughter was raped... then came hardship... we thought it would only be a short time before the Americans would come to help us out of the camps... this was not so... there was
little food or water in the camps... we were kept under

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guard... One of my daughters got very sick... although

she recovered, she will be crippled for life... I almost
died with worry... they treated us like animals... it was
very hard... we could not understand why we were treated
like this... we were friends... we even fought against
our own government... for the first time I thought maybe
I should have stayed in my country... later, we were
spared by the Mormons... they said no drinking, no
smoking, no coffee, no coca-cola... this was hard for

us... they laid down conditions... we had no choice...

America proved very different... we found out we weren't
really wanted here... I hardly speak the language...

they do not see me as a man... I mean an important man...

here I have become a common laborer... I will do this...
I need to feed my family... I don't like the way many

Americans feel about us... Of course, I have no say...
only to you... what are words?... you know, you intel-

lectuals were the downfall of my country... some of you
were for socialism... others buried your heads in the

books... nothing practical... no offense... but what power
have you?... the same as happened in my country could hap-

pen here... wise as many of you seem, you have little ex-
perience in the ways of the world... you are too comfort-
able... there is much crime here... no police to control
... they worry more about the traffic ticket than the

communists in the United States... [What did you expect
before you got here?]... Well, everyone to be rich...

you know, no hard work... houses for everyone... no
hunger and no poor... I have learned this is not so...
This was a great disappointment... What is the differ-
ence for me?... if I had stayed in my country, the new
government would have taken away much of my wealth...

here, I am considered too ignorant to get the kind of job
where I can improve myself... this is a great sadness...
What is the word? [Disillusioned] ... the journey has
changed me... now, I just want safety... I want to grow
old in peace... I don't care about much else... enough
food, a place to live... no one to bother me... Again,
I say, what good these words?... we have spent this time
talking... What have we accomplished?... the words of a
bitter man... How do you know I have even told you the


true? [I have no way of knowing]... and you will never

know... write down that I love this new country... this
is all anyone needs to know... this rainy place is good
for a man like me... it is how I feel about life now... bit-
ter tears... little sun... the frangipani will never
bloom for me again... my children are becoming American
... in time, they will not know me... already they are
ashamed of my ignorance... This is what it means, this
word, refugee... a dark spot that can never be washed away.
A thirty-two year old Lao Lum originating from the province of Champassak, this woman works part-time as a clerk for a local store. Gregarious, well-liked by the people she works with and by the people of the Laotian community, she recently has acquired an American boyfriend. She is now talking of "adopting" children.

We lived on a big farm in the south... we went to Bangkok every year... my father was rich, we had many lands... I went to school... I was very lucky... not all women get the education I got... I speak French, Lao, Thai, and some English now... We had a big house... wooden and part over the water... it was beautiful... I miss that house... at first we knew there was a war but it didn't hurt us too much... we had plenty of food and my father worked with the Americans... I was married four months... then my husband was killed in a boat that was bombed by the Americans... he was delivering rice... that is hard to remember... we had great plans for life... I wanted children... not long after that our cousins came from the north... there was much trouble... some of our people wanted to be independent... Father said it was impossible to be independent of the Americans... they were too big... my other brother and some relatives left and fought with those who wanted independence... life just wasn't the same... everyone was worried... my father said they could never come home... as time went on the war got pretty bad... many airplanes in the sky all day long... we couldn't plant... sometimes we had to work the fields at night... then Americans went crazy... they thought everyone was a communist... they bombed and bombed and bombed... then my father got mad, too... he began to help those who were fighting all the outsiders... the Americans didn't know this... he wasn't a communist... he loved Lao... My father and brother were both killed... one by bombs, the other by the military police... they took our house and I fled with other cousins... we crossed into Thailand... I had some money and a little jewelry... we got caught by the Thai police... one of my cousins was raped... two were killed... I was raped and beaten and part of my [breast] was cut off... now I can never have children... other refugees
found me and took care of me... one caught T.B. and died in the camp... in the camps we stayed together... it was hard... What do I say?... most of those things you wouldn't want to hear about or I won't tell you... it's hard to speak to a man about many things... Finally, I got to San Francisco, then another part of the country, then here... At first my sponsor was very good, but after a while I didn't want to stay home and clean their house... I wanted to learn the language... I wanted to be independent... maybe even marry again... I am still young... they were angry with me and said I should be ashamed of myself... they said they saved my life and do so much for me... the woman said more than the man... he always treated me like a little girl... he liked to touch my hair... even though I am a grown woman... coming here there was much, and still is, I don't understand... Some Americans have been very good friends... others not so... even most of my American friends treat me as not American... Often I am very lonely... I wish for smells and sounds and things I have known all my life... because there is much I do not know about America... I am like the child... I work here... I am going to school... I don't know what will come of me... the life of a woman here is strange... many live without family... this is hard for me... so many people are dead... this is the hardest thing... I am trying to be a Christian... they say this helps... I wait... nothing has happened to now... I wonder why I live... why me to live when so many die... this is a little of my story... I am tired now....

This Lao gentleman has asked me to be "careful" with the identification of his comments. I worked and interacted with him for over a year, and he shared an enormous amount of material relating to Laotian history, customs, and cultural idiosyncrasies. Obviously a member of the aristocracy in Laos, he seemed to have adjusted to leaving that behind as he created a new life in the United States.

You ask me to tell my life story... or whatever I wish to tell... I have been thinking about all of this since we spoke last... few of the Lao refugees will tell you
the true story... there are many reasons for this... there are many kinds of Lao refugees... just like your own people, they all see and tell the story of their experience very different... this is not unusual... you must not be naive if you are to see and to feel the true story... the farmer, the craftsman, the diplomat, each will see the same thing but will tell a very different account... only when you put them all together will you see the threads that lead to some truth... be careful what you ask... you may get answers to your questions instead of the truth about what happened... let the people tell from their own experience... there are many things you know about our people... the first secret is always to put your hand out first... especially in the case where you are the most important man... this lets them know you care... do not forget this... you will have a very difficult time with this work you propose... it is my advice that you spend some time with our people before you ask the questions... they have to learn to trust you... to feel your honesty... to feel comfortable with you... probably at this time there is no reason in their minds for them to tell you anything... they probably will not see this project in terms of history... what meaning does history have for the farmer? more likely he is concerned with the weather... the women may be more difficult than the men... they are not so used to telling about their private life to foreigners... Here we are guests... the good guest will keep his mouth shut and be respectful... this is our way... to get to the truth you will have to be very patient... you knew before you asked that my story would be different... because I came from a very important family, because I have been a leader, my experience and perspective are different... again this is just my experience... I will tell you some things... these you cannot write down for I am easily identified through them... when I am finished I will tell you a few more general things you can write down... there is much to say... maybe we can speak of governments... not a specific government, just the idea... I have seen many... at the heart of a good government is the heart... remembering to do whatever your job is with the human in mind... I believe there are many ways to do this... it would seem through the study of history that we often forget this... there is much discussion about what is good for human beings and further who will decide what is good and bad... still, I believe that if one truly listens to the heart and is honest about what he hears, there are things that all human beings know without having to be told... there is no excuse in this world for hunger, lack of medicine, illiteracy, and many other
such basic human needs and rights... most governments, the communist to the democratic have failed to address these concerns... communism and socialism have never appealed to me... We are allowed in our country to study all things... I prefer the integrated economy mixed with the basic democracy... if given the time to think, one can dream up many kinds of governments that might satisfactorily include these and be quite successful... We get caught up in systems and forget that systems should be used to improve the quality of our existence, not to tie us down... the philosophical question of whether we as humans purposely set ourselves up for failure by not choosing to remember past experience and mistakes has been intriguing for me for many years... a lifetime is very difficult to relate... I am no longer a young man... what I've seen, the things I have learned, the things I have thought of and wondered over would fill many books... over time I have come to think that if the cover to this experience which I call my own were to be stripped away, one would find the ordinary questions, problems, dilemmas that we all share in common as the human being... closer to the end of the path for this life I find I have barely moved along the path of awareness... having to be the refugee has reminded me of this fact... things change... if we get too caught up in the moment we can forget that there is a tomorrow... maybe tomorrow will catch up with us before we remember it is coming... it is not the guest... it comes to stay and changes life... sometimes it is good or bad from the individual viewpoint and experience... nevertheless it comes... for the big picture I believe we have very little control... for many areas of life and experience we have much control... it does not seem we have done very well even in the small areas that we can influence... if you wish to live then each time you are faced with a great change in your life you attempt to adjust... many do not wish to do this... they resist, maybe they are unaware they can adjust... whatever, that is the beginning of no longer living... we have spoken a long time tonight... I am pleased to be in your home... to speak to each other as human beings... the reaching out with the hand is very important... that is what my people need the most... once they know they are welcome, then they will have the strength to face whatever else... we are a strong people...
At forty-five and the single parent father of six children, this Lao Lum man from the province of Champassak has had a difficult time making ends meet. A recent widower, he has relentlessly searched for full-time work to make a decent salary. His sister serves as a surrogate mother for the children, and he has a large extended family of single Laotian men and friends who regard him as a "young elder."

We refugees talk of before and after... two times... before the Americans and after they got to Lao, then after the Americans left and before leaving my country... to go way back, I was born in the south and lived on a big farm... we were never hungry... we had food to sell and some to give to relatives and friends who don't have the big farm... we have eight children... I am the second son but the fifth child... my father was married before so we had three others with a different mother... we were all brothers and sisters... I went to school for ten years in my country... that is much school for my country... I speak French, Thai, and I work hard on the English now... My family was Buddhist... we didn't go to church on Sunday like here in the United States... it was different... what we believe is in our hearts... we wish the blessings of the triple gem on to everyone... even our enemies... the south is different from the north... we have close family with Thailand... before the Americans everyone looked to the French or went to Bangkok for the new idea... now, when the Americans came we looked to them... there was much trouble and much talk in our country... many wanted to be a country without the ties to anyone else... just good friendship with all country... others wanted the American side... others wanted the Chinese side... but many small people just couldn't understand it all... many were very confused... we saw much change... the airplane and the war did much damage... many people were confused that the same Americans who were very good to us in some way will at the same time destroy our country... I don't understand this... many good thing came to our people with the American... many bad came too... I can't say good or bad that they came... I am a guest in your country now, to criticize is not so good... after the Americans left, the new
government was very hard... we couldn't get many things... they said everyone had to work hard to fix our broken country... it was too hard... everything was count[ed]... you got to have just enough to get by... the rest was taken or taxed... there was no future for me... for my children... the new government said the Americans were making war with us... not with the bombs... with food and building things and no new machines... they said the Americans wouldn't give money to fix the war damage... we didn't believe this... we think the Americans would'nt do this... we know they are very rich and generous... we believe the new government to lie and keep all the money... there was very little when the Americans left... it was a sad time... we knew we could never go back to the old way... much had changed... we got the new way in our life and we needed those things now... I did not like the new government... we were sad with very little... we had to leave... you would be very sad to see our beautiful country so destroyed... we didn't want to wait for the new government to fix things... it was too hard... we leave for Thailand and hope the Americans take us to there... our children will have the school... we will have enough food... now I am here... away from all that sad thing... I hope for the job... I hope for the new life... maybe later I will go back to my old country when it is fix[ed]... now I wait for the job... we have no money... we have little to eat... I hope the American will help me... I think from my heart they will do this... we are a good people... we like the American... we are friend....

14.

A former school teacher in Laos, this Lao Lum man has relocated to California where a more equitable support system of benefits awaits the refugee who is unemployed and disabled. As leaders of the community, the loss of this family to the Laotians was hard felt. He was one of the few men acceptable to all factions in the community and was a valued friend and informant during my fieldwork experience.

I studied twelve years in Lao... I was an elementary school teacher, then a clerk in the army... I lived in the capitol city, Vientiane... I have five children...
I speak French, Lao, Thai, and I am struggling to learn English... it is a difficult language... the sounds and the structure are different... French is a help as the structure seem similar... I always wanted to be a teacher... there is excitement for me in watching young minds open like the flower... each petal part of the whole thing... each lesson... Our schools have been disrupted for many years... What will happen to our people?... Many of the young cannot read or write... What will the world think of the Lao people? We are an old people... Few Americans know of us except as the refugee... we are more... Let's just say that when the Americans came our world changed... it is difficult to explain... the American world is bright... many things came into Lao that we had never seen... movies, television... much more electricity... different foods and clothing... also, Americans live differently than the Lao... friendship, family, men and women are very different in the American world... some new things were good... others not... we never knew which ones were best... we made many mistakes... we forgot the basis of our religious beliefs... the middle path... we left that path... it is too late to go back... Lao is a distant mountain with a deep river in between... we cannot go back... I wonder how this came about... we wanted more and more after the Americans came... it all happened too fast... so many things are great about your country... medicine, education, plenty of food, health... now I think we wanted these same things for the Lao... but we wanted to stay Lao... this has not happened... by wanting these things we have had to become Americans... at the same time... not the same as Americans because we are the refugees... we will never know if we made the best choice... we can never go back... we left... it was too hard... most of all we left for our children... We hope things get better for our country... for our people... you must go there someday... even though much is destroyed... you will still see its great beauty... I was lucky... I spent only three months in the camps in Thailand and then went on to the Philippines for six months... Being a teacher... being able to help my people also helped me... At first, I went to another state for four months... a pig farmer sponsored my family... When we arrived we lived in an old cabin... it was cold... I went to work the next morning and so did my wife... twelve, fifteen hours a day... if I didn't work... I didn't get food for my children... It was very difficult... we were isolated... in a new country... the people thought we should be grateful like slaves... we expected to work, but not to be treated like slaves... we stole potato starts... my children went out and dug them at
night to survive... we had few clothes... everyone was confused... we couldn't speak the language... we didn't know what to do... months went by... in some ways the experience was harder on the mind than the camps... We didn't expect the Americans to be this way... My arm got caught in a mowing machine and was broken in several places... The farmer and his wife put ice on it... I was in great pain... still they made me work in the yard... In a couple of days I was taken to a hospital... my wife cried... she didn't know where I was going and thought I'd never come back... I felt the same way, too... They wouldn't let her come... she had to work in my place if the children were to eat... The doctor put my arm in a plastic bag filled with air... then we went to the hospital... they set it... Two days later he made me work again... I tried but it hurt more... In the meantime... my son-in-law [in Eugene] got a letter we wrote that a nurse mailed for me (the farmer didn't know)... he sent money to the nurse... she got us out... we took the bus... we were afraid but happy... it was a long ride... we didn't know what was ahead... Here we got a new sponsor... life is better... people are good... we are poor... we are willing to work... we don't mind being poor as long as we are treated as human beings... we have hope again... This is far away from all we know... the language is difficult... our children learn quickly... we try hard, too, because we know it is important to them... a part of us will always be Lao... my heart lives there... a part of us has become so many things... Thailand, the Philippines, and now Eugene... we have become more than Lao... Our children are Americans already... so different... We hope to remind them of where their parents and grandparents grew... we want them to understand they can be the best of Lao and American....

15.

A thirty-one year old mother of three and head of a large extended family, this woman and her husband have been fortunate enough to maintain the equivalent of full-time work between them. In addition, enterprising teens in the family are available for seasonal work picking nuts, beans, apples, strawberries, etc. Focusing on surviving in America, all of
their efforts are put towards maintaining the education of their children so that "they will get ahead."

We came to this place in the spring of May, two years ago... my heart felt so glad to see this beautiful green everywhere... my heart felt so glad and so sad... I thought of my home, our farm, the young green... much of that is gone... the airplanes and the soldier take it all away... But here again, my heart felt so happy... so I was smiling and crying... then we met our host family... we were afraid... how could they speak to us, and we to them? I hid in the bedroom for two hours because I didn't know what to do or say... I didn't want to look so stupid... I was afraid of everything... the bathroom, the food, the car, the dog, the shower, the dishwasher... Now when I tell this story we all laugh, but that is the real truth. I was so afraid... I didn't want to embarrass my husband... He speaks some English, so I unpacked... everyone else ate... later I came out for a while... they were all so happy to meet me... I didn't say much... inside I was happy... Slowly I became free... no longer afraid... I learned to take the bus, to shop, to do many things alone... I studied hard at L.C.C. [Lane Community College]... Mindy was my teacher... she told me that women here don't have to hide away. I didn't quite believe her... it didn't seem right... Now I understand... we all have new duties in this country... sometime I miss Lao... my family there... other things not here... most of the time I am o.k... too busy... the children in school, my husband works, we have other people living here in our house who have no work... we share what we can, that is the Lao way... I cook and do all the work... I am studying English, I belong to a church... they are good people, I go to the wat in Laos, but I never belonged to a church... The children learn English in school... they tell us something and we learn them... Just a little once in a while I feel sad deep inside when I think of something... maybe my sister or my mother... maybe something that reminds... then I just don't talk... I stay inside until I think about something else... we just try to live... to be a little happy... to see our children grow... right now that's enough for me....
16.

Twenty-two and illiterate, this young Lao Lum male arrived in the United States with almost no transferable work skills. In two years he has lived in six cities, moving from relative to relative who support his young family while he earnestly tries to find employment. With basic welfare grants expired, he lives in constant poverty and in fear of "future troubles."

I am new to Eugene... there are no jobs in Portland, so I come to here for work... I have a wife and a baby, I must work... That is what I want most of all... any kind of work I ask do... no matter what. Here I have friend and cousin... they are helping me... when I find a job I will help them back... I don't very well speak English. I understand more than I speak. I want to work bad... really... so bad... I am very sad not to work... a man needs work... this is what I want.

17.

Son of a Lao Lum man who worked for the Americans, this twenty year old Laotian male lives as part of an extended Laotian family in the United States. Enrolled in E.S.L. classes, he also works part-time as a custodian. More fortunate than a number of the other singles, there was a friendly Lao family, a former business partner of his father's, waiting to take him in as he negotiated resettlement. Formerly from the Vientiane area, he has eight years of school in Laos and had begun studying English there.

Because of the communist we came here... they took everything away. Not at first, but then after a while there was no good life for me... no future... only work... my father
was taken away to Sam Neva... there he worked very hard... too hard for a man of fifty... he had to help clean where the American bomb are in the field... very dangerous work... no pay... very little food... all punishment for all the extra money the American had give to him... while the American in Lao we are very lucky... my father make much money... Now [it] is all gone... nothing... he stay in Lao... we leave for a better future... more education... then I go back for a Laos wife and bring her to here... We have many houses... now only one... all the other the government keep, they say we need only one... We have to grow some food now... before we could buy... my two brother, they here... my sister they stay... we are afraid for trouble to come to them in the camp... I want my family to be here... Work is very, very hard to find here... no job... not enough money to pay rent, buy food, make car pay- ment, insurance, so many thing... I need the job... this is why I come to this country... to make a good new life... to save money... In Lao, I cannot save the money... not enough... Oh, the camp isn't too good, not so much food, clothes, good things... Wait many month to get out... the police very bad, very mean... take my gold Buddha image... not so very good luck for me... very hun- gry there... no money... I want to go to U.S.A... so now I am here. I hope for very good luck... I hope to learn many new thing... I worry about the job... can I do what they will ask? Sometimes, I [am] afraid they will not like me... now I live with another family... they are good. The wife, she cook... I go to school to study the English... very difficult... I try, I know very important is this English... If I speak enough I get the better job... some people in the United States are very much friendly... other do not see me. They do not smile or say hello... I think sometime they don't like my black hair... I try to look [like] the American... that way they like me... no trouble for me... a job and a better future... Sometime I want the house... not too big... I want the garden to grow the onion, the hot green pepper, the little one we like, the tomato... This I like very much... Now I have the car... not so new but work very good... no trouble the Japanese car... I want for the good job... I think this will happen for me... that is why I come to the U.S.A... for the new life... someday in the camp I think I am very wrong to leave my country... in my heart I have great pain... I miss my family and house and friend. Now I think it is o.k... this city is better than the camp... better than Lao... I have a good future... I wait... when the new good future come, I am the happiest man... all the bad is gone now... this I pray...
This sixty year old Lao Lum man had relatives from Vientiane who settled in Eugene. Many times over the two years in the field I had long conversations with him about life, Lao customs, and the Lao language. Each time he was careful to say "This is for your head and not for the writing...." Like many of the Lao I encountered, he felt very personal "explanations" were not to be written down. Through him I first clearly understood the relationship of the Lao on both sides of the Mekong River. A gracious host, he called me his "younger brother" and treated me as family, i.e., free to comment in private on anything from my bumbling command of Lao to questions of how American women were "in bed."

My story? I have not thought much about that... I am a busy man. A family... work... a wife... children... life is many things... too many to think about... let me see... We are farmers in Lao... we worked hard... we have many buffalo... a house... big, wood... my brothers, too, and their family live there... many children. This is good... they take care of the mother and father when old... this way we are not alone... not like America where the old are put away... I hope my children remember the Lao way... we all work hard... it o.k., this is the way things are... I am happy now... I work, we eat... no war here... plenty of food... children in school... they speak English good... almost like Americans... they help me... my wife don't speak... only Lao... she is good... we come from Lao together... same... too much bombs... no food... no school... fighting... new government no good... That's o.k... we leave, come here... American sponsors good... they help sometimes... I am not farmer here... wash dishes... this o.k... I want to work... English hard... not same sound... I try... don't understand... I work... don't think... just work... I [am] happy when I work, don't worry... no more Lao here, now... Lao gone... I die here... no Lao... that's it... come and eat... my wife cook because you come... enough talk... this our way... eat, forget problem... life very short... die young if worry much.

people, the new government was going to have too much of a struggle without American help... We were a poor country... who wants to spend a lifetime slaving for an idea that may never come about? I only have one life... I didn't want
A twenty-nine year old and father of three, this young Lao Lum man from the Vientiane area has been employed full-time since arrival. University-educated as well as having training in the family business, he was able to transfer work skills quickly and adapt to the expectations of American employers. Ex-post-facto, he has expressed regret that he didn't have more time to study English. Pragmatic and motivated, he has moved upward from dishwashing to custodial work and on to a supervisory position. With upward mobility he has increasingly referred to himself as a Lao-American and seldom socializes with the "refugee" community.

I came here for a new life... I learned English at the Lycee... I am not sorry to be here. I have a good job, not what I want yet, but a very good job... I have a family, children, my wife is happy... We know the life we knew in Laos is gone... Many of our people would go back... they don't understand the politics and history or economics... they miss their old lives and go through the motion of living here... they can't understand the culture. Some of us who were educated had the opportunity to learn Western ways, of course this helped us to adjust... these other refugees can't help being ignorant... What do they know? Time will change some of them... I associate with very few of them... my children will be Americans... this is the only way to be sure they survive... I have closed the book on my old country... everything we do is American... You know the old saying, "Do in Rome as the Romans do," the same applies to life here... It may seem hard to you, but what are my alternatives? I have a wife and a family... I had no chance left in Laos. Let's face it... regardless of their motivations, regardless of their commitment to the Lao people, the new government was going to have too much of a struggle without American help... We were a poor country... who wants to spend a lifetime slaving for an idea that may never come about? I only have one life... I didn't want
to do without... with the hope that someday there might be an independent Laos... All the politicians are the same... economics is the game... we little countries can do nothing without consent of the bigger ones. You have to be on one side or another... aligned with a big country to protect you... neutrality is foolish... with a country half destroyed... and no money for repairs... Why talk of neutrality? Neutrality can't feed people... we left by choice... I could have stayed... I wanted a better life and I am getting it... letters from Laos tell of food shortage and many other problems... Laos can't do anything with its back turned to the big powers... They will starve Laos to nothing... what a shame... You can see, I am not hungry, we have a comfortable home... my children are healthy... I have much here. I have no regrets... those that do are those that don't understand how America works... they still think as Lao's in America... that doesn't work... it all has to go. I think many people are unable to make that adjustment. It is a problem most people didn't think about before coming here. My brother had spent two years in Europe and he explained the problems he had. We spoke in length before we left our country... at first it was difficult but I expected that... with a little preparation we are better off... in just a few years I am now comfortable here... I am saving to bring the rest of my family here, not as refugees, but as legitimate immigrants... People came here expecting the easy life that Americans brought to Vientiane... money, good times... good jobs... they have been disappointed. I came here expecting difficulty... I wasn't disappointed. I am a university graduate and I washed dishes for six months... you have to prove yourself here. Nothing comes for free... later I became a janitor and then moved on in the company to a better job. I never complained... I never mentioned the university or the hardship or humiliation I was feeling to do this kind of work. That's why I have been successful... you can't be disappointed if you are realistic... the better opportunity was here, I took the chance... Don't get me wrong, I have no great faith in any political system... there's big money behind all of it... all those people in Laos working day after day to build a new world are in for a great disappointment... if a new and better world hasn't come about here in America, it won't happen anywhere... work, hard work, is the only way to survive... politicians come and go... great and little countries come and go... still we have to feed our families... that is what is lasting... survival is the main question for the small man... survival any way he can... that's why I'm here... to survive... that's a big word... it covers everything.
In his sixties, this elder Lao Lum man recalls much of the history of modern Laos and remembers the Americans since their arrival in the post-World War II period. His stories of the Lao life and his obvious delight over telling them were a rich source of cultural information. With a good sense of detail and context as well as a great curiosity about life in this new country, he is making adaptations much quicker than many of the younger Lao men. On the other hand, he is at an age free of worry from having to support a family.

I am an old man. I have lived a long time... sometimes my wife asks why I have lived so long and never been sick. I say because I always work hard, try to be generous, and find something good in every man... You ask me to talk about my life and about being the refugee... can you sit still for that long? Can you listen... or will you be writing? I am not sure of what this anthropology is. I understand it to be the story of what happened to my people and how we became the refugee. Tell me, why is a farang [white man], an American, to write this story... why not the Lao man? [Please understand, I am not writing this story, I am like the pen, you are the hand. What you say is the story!] It would be better for all of us if you tell the story... [I am only your helper with this task.] You must be very rich to have time to do all this writing. I am born in a small village many years ago. Some of what I tell you I am told by my parents... the rest is in my own words. My father was the farmer... in his day, most men were farmers. My father was Lao, my mother was Lao Issan... in those days we were all Lao. That changed, as many things in my lifetime. We have a good farm... everyone work very hard part of the year... the rest of the year we have a little easier. All of my life (until the Americans come), the French put the big hand on our country... many taxes... the oxen, the flint, even on the children. We have to lie about the number of children. I am lucky... my mother could read and write and she teach all of us. We never go to school, only the rich could go... there [were] very few schools.
I learn everything with my father... he teach me about farming, plants, and animals... and people. We go to the Wat [Buddhist shrine] and have celebrations. I want to know more. My oldest brother and his family live with my father. I go to work for a Chinese merchant... the Chinese own many businesses in Lao and Thailand... I save some money... go back to my village and start a small rice business. I marry and have seven children... Then the Nippons come and everybody talk about a free Lao. Many people... I think most... hate to have the French there. They make Vientiane the big city... make Vientiane more important than any other part of the country. Our part of the country is then put in a lower place. Many people talk of a free, independent Lao... no other country but our own to run our business... We fought out the Nippons and then were tired of the great French taxes. Let me think, about the end of July of 1945 we drive away the Nippons. All over the country a new government is happily coming about... we have a new constitution... the princes and other leaders want a free Lao... then again, some still want the French to stay and trouble begin. The French make the [Vientiane] king the leader over the whole country... they buy him with the army... they want to kill all those who make a separate Lao. They take our rice to feed the army, they make us work to build bridges and roads, we have no time to work our own farms or business... everybody is fighting... then we hear about communism... it is all very confusing... the French and the Americans call anyone not on their side communist... that was not so... many of us are not with the communist group... or the French and American group. What a fight... those are the busy days... you don't know who to trust... Those bastards the Thai join the Americans to bomb us... that's when the real trouble began... we knew we could send the French home, but the Americans? The Thai are a little people... they do mean things... they are not gracious... they turn on their own... you have to watch them all the time. Every knew the Americans to be tough... soon we found almost everyone except the French and American side working with the Neo Lao Itsala... not everyone agree on everything. Sometime in 1950 the Lao National Congress comes... the prince Souphanouvang is elected leader. Many groups support him... this committee brings the schools to many areas of the country for the first time. They bring medicine and new farming methods... Still I don't like some things they do but felt they could be talked to and to work with once the fighting is over... and they are for the Lao first... not other countries. We spend many years fighting... my children and grandchildren have no time for school. Some parts of the country are bombed harder... we don't know then that it was only a drop
of rain compared to the storm to come. In the middle of the 1950's, the Americans take over from the French... then come the bombs to many parts of the country. We are not against the Americans... we like them... we admired them... just want our own country... no one seem to understand this... more and more people move to the big city... the countryside is a mess... fighting here... fighting there... most of the destruction come from the airplanes... for many years they come every day... the airplane doesn't know a communist from a Lao, a Lao from a Frenchman... everything is destroyed when the bombs are drop... little ones, big ones... little peices of paper that burn... the jelly gasoline that burn the skin, the powder and the liquid that kill the trees and plants... many kinds of death... all from the air... we never know so much sadness can fall from the sky... still I live... my first wife die... my second wife is caught on fire when a plane drop bomb... my third wife I meet in the refugee camp... over the war years many people become thr refugee... first to the cities from the countryside, then from the cities across the border to Thailand.... Always I can remember my wife burns... no one help her... many nights she come to my head... even here in the U.S.A. I thought when I left Lao that would stay there... The refugee camp is very sad... everyone worry all the time... I am the old man... people help sometime... a little rice... some cigarette... and for two years I live in Thailand. I wait, so now I am here with my son and his family... this is very good... I am not alone... they are my family... they love me... I cannot work a big job, but I can still work... I plant the garden, I can cut the wood and do fix of things. I can watch the children... with the others, I remember the stories of our old country... our ways, our beliefs... I tell the stories... I know the songs... the people like that... they make me feel good because I know these things... I am not an American. I live in America... I will die here... this is the last stop on my life journey... I am Lao, I do not live there... I will not die in my country... my mind is sometimes there... What can I do? I have to take the day as it appears... I cannot change things... I am only a human being... If I had my say I'd be home on my farm, I would live in my country... hear the old songs and the old laguage... see the old things I know and that know me... but this is not so. Now I look at new things, hear a new language... do thing a different way... that's life... one day at a time now... My grandchildren, they know more about your country than me... I listen to them... they have good eyes... they are smart. They tell me everything... then my son will say, "How do you know that, father?" I don't tell, but my grandchildren are the teachers. Who knows? Every day
is a new surprise. I know more in my own country, here I know only a little. I don't have the whole life to learn over again... the others help... they are my eyes and ears... they tell how things are... this television, it is very good... I like it... I learn much about your country... I watch many things I don't understand... some things I don't know when to smile or laugh... but when the others laugh, I too laugh... it makes me happy, even if I don't understand. This is only a small piece of my life I am telling you... many things I once thought important are not now important to me... Next time we can talk more... I think now about many things... maybe another day you will come and we can talk more. I have many stories.

21.

Nineteen and learning English rapidly, this unaccompanied minor, sponsored by a local church, has worked part-time, off and on, since arrival in the United States. Overcoming many of the distractions young Lao men his age have fallen into as new arrivals, i.e., buying clothes, records, and other material things to "be like Americans," this young man has focused on learning the language and going to college. Described by his employer as an "excellent and trusted employee," he has his sights set on becoming an electrical engineer. Living with an American family and being one of the few Laotians who have been able to endure the severity of the changes in daily routine and perspective on life, he is rapidly assimilating and is distinctly different from most of the other Laotian youth.

Oh, what do I say? I don't know... I like music... I don't think too much about Lao or the camps... it is gone... I think sometime of my mother and father... I [have been] gone a long while... they don't know me...
I was a little boy, only children when I leave home...
My mother cry, my father send me away for a better life...
to Australia or to the U.S.A... no chance for me in Lao...
nothing left... too much hard work... not enough food...
I would have [to] go to the army some day. My father want
the better future for me... so I go to Thailand with my
cousins... I speak Thai so no problem... easy for me to
understand there. The Thai police took my money and watch
... one man took off my clothes and locked me in [a] room
by myself to wait... I lost my cousins and then another
boy was put in the same room... we had no clothes... for
two days we had to stay locked there... then the man say
we can make much money if we stay with him... he say some
men there will pay much money for us because we are young
... you understand what I mean? At first we both say no...
nothing like that... we got hit many times very hard...
then no food for one day... the other boy finally say yes
and they take him away... I never see him again... he tell
me when we are alone he is afraid of pain, afraid to die,
he want to live... even if he have to do what they ask...
I still say no... they hit me again and again... I hurt...
am very sore hurt... they do things to me I cannot say...
then I get my clothes back and the police send me to the
camp. There I was put with other Lao people... I never
tell anyone these thing... you know, I hate the Thai, they
are bad people... very mean... but I win... I am here...
I work in the camp... first to get wood and make a little
money... then to help clean building for the camp people.
I learn some little English... not too much... I hear that
many Lao come to the U.S.A... they say people write the
letter to tell of opportunity... This is where I will come,
too... a church sponsor me... they take me here... I know
nothing... I was afraid... I was happy... For two years
I have come here... now I know more... I went to L.C.C...
I work... I have a stereo and I love music... Oh, yes, I
have music... Sometime I wish there to be more Lao girls...
the American girls are not for me... very pretty, but not
the same as what I like... some American are very good
friend to me... like a new family... here I know Lao people
and they are nice to me... I am still young... my future yet
is unknown... I think I can stay here... learn more...
speak more English... get the good job... then, maybe find
a Lao wife. Sometime, not now... first to save my money,
buy a car... then maybe next year a girlfriend. My spon-
sor say I have time, yet... I am having to have time and
be here... now I know my father to be the right one...
this is what he want for me... I wish he could come here...
Maybe someday, yes? Who know the future?
22.

It took well over a year and a half to get this man to speak in my presence. He was thoroughly convinced I was employed by the C.I.A. A few months before the end of my fieldwork, he shook my hand and said, "Now I know you are not C.I.A." I asked him why, and he said that was his secret and some day he might tell me if he "can every trust" me.

He says he doesn't want to tell you anything about his life... he wants to know why you are doing this... he doesn't believe you... maybe you are the C.I.A. or the communist... He says this is his own business... he doesn't want anyone to know his life... it is his alone... He says he doesn't believe this anthropology will be of any help to the Lao people... He wants to know how much money you will get for this and what the Lao people get from this... He says no one will tell you the truth and you waste your time and theirs... he thinks you are strange and stupid... he won't speak any more as long as you are here... his wife will offer you some coffee, but he will not say any more.

23.

A former civil servant under the Royal Laotian Government, this man has worked part-time at various jobs since arrival. A lack of English and inability to do heavy manual labor at the age of forty-eight has handicapped his ability to obtain full-time employment. Optimistic when I first spoke to him, the last two years have been difficult as his ability to maintain discipline in his family and to contribute to their support has diminished. A marked change in attitude and motivation have set in after many frustrating failures.
I speak for myself and my wife... she will answer but I speak. We have the very good life in Vientiane for many years... very lucky... three house, farm, children in school, very good health... The American bring much money, a good job... with this new money our life is more comfortable. Otherwise we have to work the farm land and do many different things... without the American money our children will have no school... without the American money not enough gas or food... we work for the American... we don't want the communist... we want like the King to keep the American... we are small... with them we become big... I help with the U.S.A.I.D... so you know that? I am very proud... many people respect me because I am part of the American job... We have many American friend... they come to our house, eat, enjoy... life is so good... our city not bomb so bad like the country, but then the American leave... very quick... in a moment. What do we do? We are the good friend to them... we do as they ask... we help to fight the Pathet Lao communist... yet they leave. This is a very big trouble for me... everyone know I am for the American and the King... This is o.k. for the rich man... he send money to Thailand or to France... his family fly or leave by boat... they are all safe... me, I have no money to send out... only my houses and property... nothing left... I have to leave everything... only the clothes on my back and my family. I have about 350 baht [Thai currency, 22 baht = $1.00 U.S.] We are all so sad... we do not want to leave... we must... one of my children stay to live in my house... one of my nephew take another house... some land we give to good friend... me, I must go... they will not kill me, but I will have no good job... I will have to work hard in the labor because I am for the American... my sons will go to the army... before I pay so they don't go... I don't want this... I take them to Thailand... we all go... my wife will not stay in Lao if I am gone... we are married twenty years... I have some girlfriend but only one special wife... we come to Non Khai... there we are very poor... we know a friend in Non khai and he give us a little money... not too much... very little, it save our life... our baby die there... we are sad. All the other live... two years we are in the camp. Oh, it was bad... sometime I [am] depress... what can the man do? Wait, wait, wait. I even think maybe I make the mistake... maybe to stay better... I hear the story of people go back... some are o.k... the new government doesn't kill everyone after all. Maybe to stay better... my daughter write and say come back... other say no food, no gas, no job, everyone have to work very hard for a new country. The war do much damage... we stay in Thailand and wait... I [am] afraid to go back and work too hard... I [am] too old...
We go to the U.S.A. where life is easy... where there is much job... where there is plenty of food... no war... no hard work to build a new country, already build and strong... we wait... long time pass and we come here... the church is very good to us... we are very ignorant of what to do... we know nothing, everything is strange... sometime we laugh, sometime we cry... sometime we don't know what to do... many new thing... the church help us very much... find house, help with food, give me part-time job... my children go to school... we learn English... we meet many people... we suddenly have many new families... cousins, grandmother, friend to help... so we stay here alway... Later I lose my job... my wife go to work... so very hard to clean the motel... after a year many friend no longer come to say "hello"... to bring food... to explain what to do... Now two year here we have a few friend... the church still very good... very helpful... but we miss our friend at home in Lao... we miss the market... we do not know this language so well... we are different... our family change... each day the children become to like the American. They become to think like the American... I am now the strange man to them. They do not speak Lao too much... they do not talk too much to me... these words, this language come between our family. Everything is very expensive here. I own no house or land. Sometime I no have the work. I cannot give the children what they need... they do not look to me with the special favor of father... I am small to them... not important... the refugee... my daughter will not bring the friend here. She say we do not have the American custom. This very bad inside for me... very much hurt... in our country all people welcome to the house... more come, more happy we are... share with all. I think the children will be o.k. here... they learn the American way to do very quickly... in a few year when they finish school, when they are safe, maybe I go back to my country... I miss my country so much... better for me to be the street cleaner, the servant, in a place I know... there I am somebody... here I am nobody... nobody see me... nobody know my name. What good the house? What good to come here, U.S.A., if nobody know my name? Is this not the same as the dead ones?

A very young Laotian woman, this sixteen-year old high school student struggled through six interviews, with help from her family, to develop the following statements. Her comments
about the family and the changes the traditional Laotian family
is experiencing at the interface of cultures are both astute and
painfully honest.

It is hard to speak to you... first, because you are
American and from the university... and because you are a
man... and because you speak only a bit of Lao... my English
is not so good. I'm embarass, but I'll try. Sometime I
think about being a refugee... sometime not... I have many
American friends in high school. I am sixteen, everything
is usually o.k. when I am with the kids, but when I have to
go to someone house... or to the dance or party... I feel
very different, as much as I try, I am not the American.
Many things I don't understand... many things they don't
understand. In Lao it was different. I was in the school
and everyone did the same thing... we all understood...
lucky for me, my brothers and father went into the camp
with me. I was not alone. I cry many hours... many days...
after a while only on the inside... I miss everything...
most, my friend who I will never see again. We had a
big house... we were never hungry... I had good clothes...
then the Americans left and took all the money away and
my Dad had no job... in the camp we had no nothing... we
were very ashamed of not to have clean clothes... everyone
who saw must think we are the beggar... you know, very poor.
My mother felt so bad. This was not so in Lao, that is the
very honest truth. We have many people in our family here
because many cousins can't get jobs... my mother and father
try to feed everyone... they come to our house to eat...
just a little bit, but something for everyone. Sometimes
we are hungry... that's o.k. because we are better here
than in the camp. I have many dream... I want to have many
nice clothes like the American girls in school. I want some
new furniture for our house... I want my mother not to work
two jobs and my father to have one... everyone worry too
much here... worry about the car payment... worry about
enough money for rent... worry about enough food. In Lao
we relax more... we talk more and eat food with our friends...
we sing and dance... here we have not so much time for
friends. I want to finish high school and go to college...
maybe someday I will marry and have children... not until
school is finished. I don't want to be poor no more. You
know, I mean not to have enough money to enjoy life just a
little bit. I will work hard for that... I still dream
that all possible to be. They told us, who knows, anything
can happen in America... I will alway miss Lao... crazy
thing happen to us here... sometime my father is so un-
happy... I don't understand... he want to work... he is
not lazy... no job... his English isn't too hot. At home [in Laos] he was important, he worked every day... my mother didn't work... she cooked, helped with our school, shopped, and did women things. Here she is a maid... she has to clean the dirty hotel room every night. At first she would cry before leaving... then my father would feel sick. Now she says nothing... just go... but I know... her eye tells you she is sad... she walk slow to the door... we love her very much... she never complain... everything to everybody... nothing for her. My Dad is ashamed she has to do this... he feel no good... he hit us once, but we know he loves us... he waits all night for my mother to come home... he never sleep when she works... he just sits or talks with us. When we go to sleep he cleans, cooks, or does somethings for my mother... we pretend not to see him because he is doing woman's work... he wants to help... We all have hopes. My brother got a job, he helps some... my sister husband got a job, they help some. We all share... what else can we do? Everyone understand that things are not so good in America right now... the American is hard to find jobs, too... so we wait. Maybe by the time I am seventeen things will get much better. I have a boyfriend now... his family is strange, but nice. I feel good that someone thinks I am nice. It is then that I forget about being a refugee... when we walk or go shopping, or go to the movie, I walk proud... I feel good. I am like everyone else. My father tell me to enjoy being young... he says we get old very soon enough... Do you understand my English? [Yes, no problem.] o.k., I am speaking only two years... the language is so hard... the most worst of all things... what to do when you can't say what is in your mind and heart. Sometime the American think we don't like them because we don't say too much... not so... we just don't know the right word... we still feel... want people to hear... All in all... it is easy as time pass... more English, more speaking, more classes help us to figure out what to do and what to say. I think it will be much easy for me than my Mom and Dad... they find it hard to begin all over... for me, I am still at the beginning... I still have many dreams.

25.

A husband and wife, thirty-seven and forty-one, respectively, this couple has taken their family to California for security. He found some part-time work in the city while he was in Eugene, but with increasing difficulties straining the economy of the greater community, this sole source of income and self-
respect dried up. A recent letter from the husband indicates both he and his wife have found part-time work and all the children are doing well. Despite the economic success found in California, they miss the small community where they knew everyone.

We are happy and not so happy... happy to be here... very lucky to be alive... five of our nine children are still alive... we have apartment, some food, and we work, very hard work, but we are lucky to work. We have friends, Americans... our church helps us. Most of the time we are so happy. Only a little bit of the time we are unhappy. Some days we miss Lao, we look for old friends but they are not here to be found. We remember our dead children and relatives... I miss my kitchen and my house... the old way... the big family... the festivals... the wat and the market. I most of all miss my oldest daughter still in Lao... she is all alone without us... what can she do all alone? [Now the husband speaks] Me, I don't speak very good English... there are not many men here to talk with... business, politics, news, you know, what men talk about. I have few Lao friends here... my heart is very lonely for my old friends... my farm, the old times. I know we are very lucky to be here... please excuse that sometimes I am very lonely and unhappy. This I can't help... maybe when I can speak better your language I will not feel so very little as I do now. I miss feeling like a man... I have a very good wife, good American friends, for that I am a very lucky man. I try to forget about all the past... when I remember, my heart hurts, my head, too. I'm finished for now.

26.

Interviews twenty-six and twenty-seven are from the same family. This interview is of the father, who is around fifty years old. Both father and son speak passable English.

My children are happy here... they don't remember as much. They try all the new things... they are getting very smarter than their mother and father... The oldest son is unhappy... He cannot find an American woman who behaves and stays with the home and children like the Lao women... maybe he will
go back to Lao or to Thailand to find a wife and then come back here... the other children are young so they don't miss Lao so much... We have traveled for many years... now here [Eugene] is home to them... this is good. They speak English, study, and will be successful. I hope they marry Americans... the past is too much hurt to remember here... they have new American chances.

27.

This interview is of the twenty-nine year old son of the man in interview twenty-six.

I worked for the new government after the Americans left... believe me, I know all about it. Things were very bad... not enough food. I had to go to my mother's house to eat. We were paid very little. I was a policeman. Let me tell you, the government wasn't that bad... I mean... it tried to do things, but it didn't. Nothing worked. No gas, no food, no nothing, really. How can you live under a government like that? No nothing, you can't live on that... I liked their ideas for life... but they couldn't make them work. You can't eat ideas... nothing worked. Nothing. They tried... it just didn't work out... so we left. They didn't want people to leave... if they left, then nobody would be there to help put together things after the Americans left. I wanted the new government to be successful... it had many good ideas of the heart... food for everyone, jobs, no cheating, schools for everyone! They couldn't do this... many people left because they didn't want to share what they had. The war damage was bad, really bad... and of a sudden the Americans took all the money away... that's it... they said... we won't help the socialist... we thought maybe we could go it alone... we couldn't... America is a big country, they decided we couldn't have the kind of government we want... so, if I have to have it the American way, I might as well come to here where there is no destruction and a chance. In Lao, our people don't have a chance anymore. They say the Americans "lost" the war... but really we lost because everything we knew was destroyed.... Nothing was destroyed in America... only in Lao. So really, they have won because they haven't been made to pay the damage. We don't know too much about the United Nations... but if they were all for the people in the world, they would make the U.S.A. pay for the damage. Anyway, they don't, so what's the use? I'm here now... I have to do things different than there.
Here I have no opinion... I can't vote, I am a refugee. You know what that means... we don't have any say... we have to smile when we get stale bread and old clothes... sometimes too big or too small... some few Americans are very special... they don't see me as the refugee... only as the man, the friend... the human being... these people make my heart feel good. I love them because they don't have to do nothing for me... nothing... but they do. I would do that for them if they need in my country. That is the Lao way. Here, I'm not Lao, not American... sometimes it confuses me... you know? At first I just watched a lot to see what to do... how to act... not to be seen as a refugee. I made many mistakes. Now I am good at being an American... it is easier now than when I came to San Francisco first... Americans like Lao to smile a lot... and not say much. So I do this, except with my friends, with them I have opinions... I talk, I ask questions... those are the Americans I like the very most best. I'm still afraid of restaurants... otherwise I do o.k.... I'm going from this city... no jobs here... we are eating very little... For food, a little better than the camp but not much more... for freedom, anywhere here is better than the camp... so I'm going away. I will come back when I have money. I like this city... not too big, not too crowded, very clean, and not too many refugees. Here I have to learn more English, that I want. I like the community college [L.C.C.]... they saved my life many times by helping with problems... still, I have to go now... no jobs, you know... that's too hard... we need food, gas, money for shoes... maybe the future will be lucky... I think so... when I'm lucky I'll come back here to my friends.

28.

A single parent and a relatively unskilled worker, this Lao Lum woman, age thirty-three, has managed to survive as a maid and as a cook. Throughout the three years she has made time to continue to study English and has become fluent enough to survive in the world of work. A modest, self-sacrificing mother, she has transferred most of her hopes and dreams to the one son who lives with her. Simultaneously she has continued to search for her other son, writing letters to official agencies
and friends still in the camps, in the hope of finding him.

I have to think. I have been here three years now. My husband died in Laos... in Sam Neua where he was sent away to clean bombs the American drop. It burned deep into my heart. I have two children... with my brother and his wife and others we crossed the border to the camp, we had very little... The camp, it was very crowded and dirty... not enough water to keep clean... I was so embarrassed... Not like my own country where I had a big house, land, friends. What good is the house if you have no money to feed your children, no husband, no future? At first I prayed very hard for better things to happen... two times we moved because of war... many family and friend we now cannot find... the new government was too hard... everything changed... I liked the old way and the King. My husband was a friend of the General Nosavan. He knew him from a little boy. The family of Nosavan would not help me... they "didn't know me" anymore when I needed the help. Little food, two children, no husband... What could I do? My sister came to the U.S. in 1978. She wrote and said things were very different here but not so hard... jobs, food, no war. The government far away across the country in Washington... not in your yard counting the chickens. I gave my house to a cousin to keep. Someday I will go back when I save money. I was very lonely in the camp... and I am sometimes very lonely here. In the camp I cried many times... I was worried to come so far away to a new place. They said there was no rice in the U.S.A. and all the people eat sandwiches. I could not speak the English language so well. I was afraid the American would think I am stupid. Somehow I got here. My one son is separated and we are lost to him. My other son is here with me. I still look for my other son. I ask, I write the letters, someday I believe we will see him again. Someone in the camp at Panat Nikom said he was sent to Austrailia. He would be fifteen now. He was very handsome like his father. I came here... first to Pennsylvania. It was very cold. I never knew the snow, ice, and winter before. I did not know how to walk on the snow. I was afraid. Outside everything was gone... only snow... everywhere. My first job was to clean houses. It hurt to clean the other woman's house... but I was happy to make money... then I didn't have to be ashamed and worry about money from the government. I did not go to school in Pennsylvania. I had no friends. My sister send me money to come to here. We moved to here by bus and were very happy to be with family. Oh yes, I was so happy. Then she move to California. I like it
here. I work, I study. There is very much I do not understand... I watch television but I do not always understand. I hope some day to have another husband... no one yet. My son is in school. His teacher tell him to make decision for himself. I want to help him... this is the Lao way... he will not let me. He says he knows more about the U.S.A... he wants to be a singer. I want him to be some important man... to go to school, to take a good wife, have the good family. He wants to stay single... who ever heard of that strange way? This I don't understand. The camps change him. Before he was very good... he listened and was very respectful. In the camp he met too many bad people. Here, the good people do not talk with the refugee. In my country I was the good people. Americans do not understand this. There is no man here to talk to him... or to say no. He won't listen to me. I have no meaning as mother to him. He say "speak English" or he won't talk to me. He say "be American." This is very hard for me... very, very hard. Something I can't change. Something I don't know how to do. I am not the American. I am Lao. I am the refugee person. What do I do? There are many things I don't understand. I try. I try every day to learn more... I can't make him happy. He wants to go to California to live where the movie star. I don't want him to go... he is my only family here. I cook everything he love... still not happy. I go to the counselor, he cannot help. He doesn't understand the Lao way. I am too ashamed to tell too much. I hope everything is o.k. soon. I miss my other son, my house, my husband, my friend... here I have little. Food and job are not enough... my alone gets very big....

28.

Twenty-eight years old and originating from the area around Ubon in the middle of the country, this man works two jobs as he contributes to the support of his extended family. Like many Lao men, he is frustrated over the shortage of young Laotian women available for marriage in the refugee community.

I'm not sure I understand... I don't know what to say. I put in my mind your questions about Lao, the refugee and here. Nothing together... many thought... first of
my old home and family... as I think in the past when I used to be there... it seems so very nice and beautiful my country... here is beautiful but there is my home... where I was a little boy, where I knew many things so easy... not like here where I have to learn everything very new... We had a wood house... up high... you know how, with the many window... I lived in my mother's house with my wife, she was very good to us. We went there to live until we had a house of our own in the future... We were farmers, my brother worked for the American, he made the most money and bought a radio... We had the bull, chickens, and the other animals... we grew the rice, the field was beautiful and very green... nice to look at... it make me very happy... We caught fish, too. My wife left my home to go to an American... I was very unhappy and moved to another town with my uncle. He sold ice and had his own shop. Later we decided to go away with the American because the new government was very hard. No gas, not enough rice, no new American thing. They say we all have to work very hard. They come to our town and talk to everyone. They say everything will be very hard because the American and the Thai destroy our country. Some people were taken to the prison camp for a new education because they helped fight with the American or because they had too much more money than us. We decide to leave just because it was too hard. No future for me there. I want to come to the U.S.A. where all people are very rich... save much money... buy the nice car and house. I don't want to work hard in Lao for everyone else. No sir. Not that way with the communist... it makes everyone lazy... no profit for you... just for all. I spent one and one-half year in the camp. I knew nobody in the U.S.A., so I had to wait until a church would take me here. The Mormon take me here. After a while I go on my own because my custom is different. They were good to me... but, you know, no smoking, no beer... all that is what the Lao do. I like to drink beer and to smoke. So I come to here where I am far away. That way they do not see me drink and smoke. I still write to them and feel them as family. I am better here with my friend in Eugene. I am not yet again married... but maybe later. I don't understand American women. They are different. They don't want to cook or clean or have children... they are very expensive to have as the wife. First you must support them, buy nice things and do their work as well. This is not good. I want a Lao wife. When I save enough I can go to Thailand and get my kind of wife... some person to be good to me and understand my way. American woman don't even know how to cook rice... everything is sandwiches. Right now I have two jobs... as a dishwasher and in the factory. I also help my friend and his wife and three children because he has no job. I live with them.
They are my family here. We all help each other. She cook the food I know. We all understand each other. I don't think about the refugee much. Right now I worry about the future. What will happen when I get old and have no family? I know some day I will have to go home to my country... even if it is communist... because I cannot be an old man here where no one knows my way... now I work hard and save... later I will see what to do... This city is good to me, some people here are very good... I am doing o.k. now... Only when I think of Lao am I very sad... do you understand that? Lao is so very far away. Maybe I will see my country again some day. I would like that very much....

30.

This traditional Lao Lum woman is in her late sixties.

Her comments about her life in the United States shed some light on North American cultural values as they relate to the elderly.

My new life here is very hard... I am not hungry... I have the apartment with my family... I am healthy...

The hard is to know very little American... the language is very hard for an old woman... the city is very big and not like mt town... the store, the cars, the people do things very different from my way... No one here talks to me... they do the business but they do not say hello, how is your family... or ask the question of my friend at home who know me and know my way... I do not do anywhere very much... no one to sit and talk to... no one to visit, no temple, no shop to buy things in my own way...

The television speaks a different language... I do not know what is happening around me... I do not drive the car... my husband is dead... no one here to take care of me... my son and daughter are very good to me but not the same as having the husband or brother... Something I cannot buy here to cook... the stove is very different, too...

I am very old to learn so many new thing in this life... even the bird sound different here, they sing a different language... My old house was very big, my daughter and her husband lived with us... seven grandchildren... much land, cows, chicken, vegetable... I have much work to do there... clean, wash, cook, the garden, feed the animal, many thing each day... My daughter and granddaughter help me, too... we cook rice, some friend and other relative come to our house to eat... many cousin... my grandson.
catch many fish for us... no rent to pay... the taxes but no rent... it is our house... I do not want to leave this house... I always live there... I know the spirit... they good to us always... so very good... My husband and one son die for the army... then when the new government come they say some of our land must be taken to give away... they say I have too much land... I need it all... big family... some land for my grandchildren... they take some... After a time my other son and daughter go to Thailand, then my other daughter and her husband, then some grandchildren and cousin... some friend leave... then my daughter and her husband want to go... What can I do? First I say stay with me... they say go to live with my cousin in Savannakhet... no, I will stay... then I cry... they leave in the night... I cry so hard... everyone go... no one know where... I am old... the police come to look for my daughter's husband... they say he take money... later my friend and her husband go to the Thailand camp... I decide to go... I give my house to my cousin... his son stay there to live... I take a little money... they come with me to the camp... there I find my daughter and some other family and friend... everyone is poor... we are happy to be together... I am old but strong... my cousin in Thailand lend us some money... this help so we don't starve... now I come here... I did not know the world to be so different... this world is so small for me... I am not sick... only my heart burns for my old home... my friend... I know I cannot change this way... here I am... still, my heart burns for the thing I know... sometime when I dream I am happy... I see my old house, my town... I am here two years and one-half now... much is so very strange... I wish to be happy again some day... this I hope for... My grandchildren are happy here... they grow so big, so healthy... they grow different in the head than in Lao... some of this way I cannot understand... sometime they hurt my heart by what they say and do... my son tell me this is o.k... they do not want to hurt me... they must be American... I try to understand this... maybe in more years I will understand this American way... Oh, it is the very different way from the Lao way... from my way....

Question: Do you feel as though you are becoming American?

Only a little bit... almost all Lao still....
A fifty year old, former merchant in Laos, this man has had great difficulty finding a meaningful place in American society.

You asked for me to think of my home in Laos and why I left... you asked about the camps... and then the experience of the refugee in this new country... For a few weeks these questions have been on my mind... they are not easy questions... I have thought of many bad times... Some I cannot express... others would make no sense to anyone but myself... other things I, of course, could say to no one. My country was something I thought very little about until I made the decision to leave... before that time I was busy with life... never thinking I would live in any other country, even when times were the very worst of all... maybe I thought I might live in some other part of my own country.... We have talked at other times of the war... you know these things. I will try to tell, as you have asked, my own story. You know... as I have thought about these things since you asked last month... I have changed inside. This thinking has changed how I see myself. Now that I think about these things of my life... they become different from when I was just living them. To be doing something and to talk about something are quite different. My first thought of Laos is of my home... the house I grew in... the wood, the kitchen, the water not so far away. Oh, I loved that house... it was safe for a little boy. I had my mother to take care of me and my auntie as well. We were not very rich or very poor... I enjoyed to play and fish and be with other boys, my brothers and sister. Sometime I went to the field... we worked with my father and uncles... later my father no longer worked in the field... he advanced to a job working for the American company... this was good because he was getting older. I was young at the end of the World War II. Everyone was talking about what would happen to our country. The French were there a very long time. At that time our own country seem to be a good idea. I was young. I had thoughts of young women in my head more than politics... I secretly wanted to see the French go home. Many people my age spoke of a new country... a free country... all Lao. Of course, there were many worries... What of the Vietnamese... would they cause trouble? Could we win against the French? We would drink coffee or beer and talk late into the night.
At that time we didn't think too much about the American. We admired them... we heard stories of their country... automobiles, big homes, and no sickness. We saw them in the movie. We knew they were very powerful... even the communists weren't against them at that time. Everyone worried about the French or the Vietnamese. I studied communist thought in school... we were allowed that in our country, you know. I was lucky to be getting a very good education because my father worked for an American company. What I studied about the communist and the communist people I knew were very different situations. Many times I understood and in my heart, hoped for the communists. They helped many people... started schools, taught agriculture, bought medicine where only the Buddhist priest came before. There were many people in my country who were very poor... could not read or write... and many children died of sickness. In some parts of my country war did very great damage. The poor were with the communists and also many of the Yao [Mien]. When the French lost, the Americans came. It was different... there were some very High Lao who wanted them to help take the country from the communists. I believe these Lao didn't understand what would happen if they did this... they had good jobs, much land, they didn't want to give them up to the communists. Other Lao wanted the neutral government... this government didn't work... who can say why. Many men say the reason was this or that... I think it is because we listened to all the outsiders and each of them had a reason to talk into a Lao ear. This made some people greedy. We couldn't come to any agreement inside our Lao family. Over the years as a young man I was very confused... one month I wanted this, one month I wanted that... Our leaders all said confusing things... some we knew to be lies. Some people in our country became very rich... we could see that. My father made a good living... it changed my life. We became used to many good things that came without trouble. I cannot apologize for this... in some ways it made our life easier. Isn't that what we all want for our families? Only later, away from my country, after thought, do I see the price we paid for so much ease. I did not know I was changing then. I considered myself Lao... really, I was becoming like an American man. Inside... more and more... that's what I wanted to be. I never thought about that. Over many years our country was at war... during that time I married and became a father eleven times. Eight sons is a good record. My good feeling would become sorrow as some of my children became communist. Our family became divided... they argued with their own father. They accused me of "selling" the Lao
to foreigners. That hurt my heart. My wife cried many nights. Two of our sons and one daughter went away. How do these things happen? Of course I didn't listen to them at the time. Now one is dead and the others are far away... I lost everything. When the Americans left, I stayed. Oh, our country was a mess. I believe any side that won the war would have had many problems. There were not many good-paying jobs when the Americans left. The new government was very hard. They didn't like the criticism but the politics... they were very bad like the Vietnamese. They made big mistakes. They wanted change very quickly. They were angry and bitter... angry because the Americans gave no aid for the damage of the war. Everyone agreed this war was not good of the Americans. They were bitter because they won... but they had big problems. What they wanted to do with the revolution they could not because of the war mess. They couldn't get at the Americans... so they were very hard on those who were on their side before. I think many people would never have left the country if these hard ways had not come. I knew I had to leave. I hated the communists for being so hard... I wanted to stay, yet I knew I had to leave. Somehow all of the Lao failed... we failed to stay together as a family, and so we had no care. There was much bitter hurt. All those years of fighting we should have stayed together. Maybe things might be different now... I am so far away from my country but in my heart I am still Lao. I hate the communists and the Vietnamese for taking my country. Yet, as I have thought about it... I do understand why it has happened. We were not generous with each other... any of the sides. Somehow, down in my heart, when I arrived in Thailand, I knew I had made the wrong decision. I didn't want to face that. I didn't want to admit I had made mistakes. I wanted to believe the communists had caused this. Only later do I see we were all responsible. So, here I am. not a young man any more... I am faced with very difficult problems. Still, in some ways, I am lucky. My wife and some of my children are here... I have a place to live and food to eat... even so, I do not belong. I am lost here to learn this American life. When I left I felt for sure my dreams would come true in America and everything would be o.k. Even if I do have food and a house... there are other parts of me that have no food and are starving. The Lao in me will not die... it calls to me at night to go home. I cannot do this... I am afraid, I am stubborn... I do not want to live that hard life. Then, I do not wish to live this life... one where I am in a prison because I do not understand or belong. Right now I wait... my youngest son and his cousin will go back to Laos this year... they cannot stay here... they miss the Lao life. They will write and tell me if it is o.k., maybe I will go home...
If I have a house and some food, then I will go home. I do not want to die here in this strange place. You see, I have done many things in my life. This is just the part you asked me to speak about. As the refugee, I do not want your people to think I am a bad guest. I appreciate what my friends and neighbors here have done for me and other Lao. But I do not belong here... I am Lao... How is it I had to come this far away from my home to see it as it is? I was like the blind man before... just living without thinking. If many of us go home, maybe we can change the way things are. Now I will take less... maybe I should have seen this way before. If all the Lao had demanded a little less of each other and gave a little bit more to each other, we might have remained a family. The price I paid for having so many things was to lose everything... then to have to leave... then to have to be a dead man in a body that lives in another way of life. I still hate the communists... but maybe I can learn to live with them. Television has told me there is little peace anywhere in the world. All there bombs and wars and fighting. I thought if I came here I would never hear of that again... so you see, I was wrong again. Americans are people... they are not perfect... there are good and bad. I have seen the rich and the poor American people... everyone here is not rich or healthy. Everyone does not have the easy life... most of the refugee people have a very hard life here. I did not know this before... we Lao are as big as we thought the Americans to be. We are all people, we make mistakes... we do some good things... and the communists are here... and you seem to live with them. Oh, we have talked much tonight. There are many more thoughts in my mind... my tongue is tired. Maybe you will come to Laos if I go back. You will be welcome there. The Lao are good to the guest. If you go there your Lao will get to be very good very quickly....

32.

This twenty year old Lao Lum man from the area around Vientiane has in recent months requested return to his country through the United Nations.

How can I say to these questions? I am not educated. I think... but these are hard to make words for. I am young... many thing I remember, but not a story. Thing I remember... the light at the celebration and the many candle... the food... so many kind of thing not here...
150

my mother and sister... my father and my friend... my
dog, my father's horse... all of the wood and many open
window... the vegetable and to fish. My grandfather went
with me to fish... we went to the market and he smoke...
he buy for me something sweet. The buffalo were in the
field... the new rice plant was very green and beautiful.
Vientiane was a big city for me... we live in the country.
We did not have the car... we had a cart. I left Lao because
my friend go. My family was very unhappy... they say to stay.
I did not want to work so hard... I go to Thailand... we
hear on the radio Asia the Lao... they say it is a good life
in the United States... much money, good job, no problem.
This is good to me. Everyone in Lao work too hard for
almost nothing. The communist government did not take the
house. We had to give some chicken and food to other
people... I did not like this. I want to come to this
country. The refugee camp not so bad... not so good...
nothing to do... just to wait... many people sick. I am
very lucky... I am strong... no problem. I got skinny from
no good food... but I am o.k. I wait two year to come to
the U.S.A. When I come here it is different... very big...
very confusing... I go to E.S.L. and try to speak the English.
My sponsor say to take the job... so, I stop the school.
This make me sad... I want to learn to write the English.
I cannot write Lao very good. I need to work for the money.
How can I live with no money? I have a car... I have a
part-time job. I would like the wife... not enough Lao
women here. Maybe I will go to California next year to
find a Lao wife. Many Lao women in California... Stockton. Someday, when I save enough money, I go back to Laos.
That's o.k. for me.
I was not in the army... I did no
wrong. I can go back... not now... I want to be here for
one year... two year more. Later, when I have the children,
I will go back to Lao. My sons will be living in Laos.
My wife will be the Lao wife. I learn much in this country.
This will help my family when I go home. I send money home
to my father... I am welcome there. I am not afraid.

33.

As the seventeen year old son of a former civil servant
in Laos, this high school student is rapidly assimilating into
American life.

Convinced, at this point, that the only way to

get by is to act like an American, he refuses to speak Lao.
For him, "English only" is the way to learn about America.

This


has distressed his father, and a wide communication gap has
grown between them.

I am a teenager. I was young when we left our home. I
knew we were leaving. My father and uncles talked about
it. My father had a very good job before. He worked for
customs... when the communist government came to power he
lost his job and had to make less money. He was very angry. He
owned four or five houses... he had to give all except
ours to the government. I was in school when we left. I
studied English in Laos. We had a big house and plenty
of food... we had motorcycles. When we left, my father
sent some money to my uncle in Thailand... we sold some
things and gave some things to our friends. My brother
was in Thailand working. Before the communist came he
took much of my mother's jewelry and some money to Thai-
land. We took very little with us when we came across the
river. I was sad to leave my friends... but I was excited
to go so far away. We didn't tell our friends what day we
were leaving. We left at night... everyone was afraid to
get caught. At first we lived with my brother... then the
Thailand government said too many Lao were coming over and
they wouldn't let people get work permits. Then my mother
and father and three children went to the refugee camp.
Two sisters and one brother stayed with the family of my
older brother. We spent five months in the refugee camp.
There was little to do... no school for the children...
there was nowhere to go, not enough food... my mother cried.
My father was angry some days and hit us. Finally, we came
to the U.S.A. A church was our sponsor... they helped us
get a house. We go to that church. We are Christians now,
we are not Buddhist like in Thailand. My father has a job.
My mother works part of the time. I am in school... my
brother in Thailand sent us some of our money from selling
our mother's jewelry. We have two cars, we have colored
television. I want to go to college. My brother and his
wife are trying to come here now with the rest of our fam-
ily. They must come as immigrants... not as refugees.
Our church will try to help them. My father has told him
he must become a Christian if the church will help him.
I am an American now. I am not Lao. I changed my name to
an American one. All my friends call me this American name.
I never want to go back there. The people are ignorant, they
are poor and sometimes they are dirty. They do not have the
modern life we have here. This is so much better. Americans
are number one. I am an American now. I hate communists.
I will go back there and kill them some day. Then we can
free the Lao people from communism. My minister told me the
communists don't believe in God. Americans believe in God
and they are free. Americans are number one.
Section II: Profile of a Family

The extended Laotian refugee family in this profile consists of four households: a husband and wife who have separated for financial reasons, a daughter and her husband, a son and his wife, and a single son and his girlfriend. The wife of the first household, now in her late forties, lives in a separate apartment with five children who were born of her second husband, from whom she is separated for financial reasons. This man travels from household to household to stay with his "family." Included in this profile are the views of the eight adults mentioned above, as well as brief comments by some of the children, other extended family members, and friends. Three generations of Laotians are represented, covering a period of over seventy years. I have edited a great deal of material and consolidated interviews in order to restrict the focus to the experiences of this family. Indeed, due to the fluidity of the Lao community stemming from secondary migration patterns, I could have included additional materials involving people from other cities and Lao communities in the Pacific Northwest and California.

My intent in including the experiences of the members of one family was to provide multiple viewpoints and perspectives on the same questions I had asked the other adult members of the community to address in their life histories, while simultaneously recording the structure of the family during this post-camp transition period. In addition, I asked each member to comment on typical days in their lives as refugees -- in the
camps and in the United States. This, to the degree that is possible, provided subjective comments regarding their personalities and experiences, balanced with objective accounts of daily schedules and behavior.

This family, the members of their extended family, and their friends in the Lao community demonstrate the complex sets of characteristics which the refugee population has to deal with. The setting is as detailed in Chapter III, in a middle-sized city in the Pacific Northwest in the Willamette Valley. Most of the activity transpires in two housing complexes in a relatively small urban slum area. From the outside, these buildings appear to be exactly what they are: box-like structures of the late 1960's built to accommodate low-income families. Absentee or non-maintaining landlords have let these properties deteriorate. The outside of the buildings is clean from refuse, but grassy areas, shrubs, and trees have grown wild and are not tended on a regular basis. Surrounding the complex are a series of industrial businesses and a major thru-way.

The Mother:

This is a woman in her late forties. She is, by all appearances, typical of many of the older Lao women who have come to the United States. She generally maintains Lao dress, a white or colored blouse worn with the traditional si:n, or skirt. Conscious of her Lao background, she wears sandals or flat shoes, never sneakers or high heels. She never wears make-up, but wears
jewelry her sister was able to buy for her in Thailand.

She was difficult to talk with, shy of speaking with an American man as well as a teacher. Her son acted as translator, and after a dozen sessions we were able to put together this biography.

Like the other Laotians, she refused to speak with the tape recorder. She had made some notes before the final session.

I was born in Laos. My father was a farmer and a merchant. There were eleven children in my family and I was number nine. My mother and father were very good to us. The boys and girls went to school for four or five years. Then the girls didn't need to go anymore. I can read and write in Lao and speak some French. We did not learn English in our school, so when I came here I knew only a very few words.

My life in Laos was not so bad. We had animals, we had plenty of food, we had land in the country. We lived not far from Vientiane. My mother was part Chinese but we all call ourself Lao. Our house was wood -- high off the ground. My days as a young girl were not too hard. I helped to cook, I helped to sew, I helped with the vegetables. Sometimes when the rice is ready we all help in the field -- everyone. My family was like the old way, not like now with everything changing. We listened to our parent. We help with the old one. Some of my children do not do this here.

My mother did not go to work on a job. Her work was the family, the house, the market, and to make cloth. We would visit with other houses of relatives and friends. Women would go to the market. We saw some French and American women but they were different. They never spoke too much to us and they lived in a different place. They ate with the fork and not always together. They always ate at the same time everyday.

I liked the flowers of my country. Oh, so many and so many color. Not so expensive. Here, the flower are expensive. I grow some. We know there is a war and we know there are communists, but that does not bother us too much. My father sometime worry very much about the politics. We hear the men argue and fight for one general -- this one or that one. I was young, I had other thoughts of a husband and of my life. We were used to foreigners. My father wanted for all his children a French education. However, it was too expensive.
When I marry,* I found a handsome man. He work for the Lao government. He speak good French and has an o.k. education. We have a big wedding... much food, celebration. I am very happy. My father pay much for this marriage. We have a nice house. Nothing is wrong. For a few years we are very happy. My life becomes more difficult with more war. Who knows what is happening? My sons are going to have to fight so we sent them to Thailand to work and study. This way they will not be killed. This will make me very sad. This begins to see our family change and live away.

When the American are there we make much money. Life is easy... so many good things. We get free medicine from the clinic because my husband work with the government. We buy more land for each of our children when they get married. This I feel very happy about. I have some jewelry and we save some money. Not too much is hard for us. We are with Kong-le and also the Americans. We used to be with the French but they are gone so we have the Americans to help us. During this time my husband is very worried. He know that the Royal Army will not win. We begin to send some money, not much, to our family in Thailand. We think, maybe we will have to go there for a while someday. When the American leave we are very worried. My husband has a job but now makes less money. They take some of our land and houses away because we have too many. We want to wait and see so we do not go to Thailand.

Life is very hard now... not enough food, almost no gasoline for the motorcycle. We each can have only a little bit of things each month, not enough like we used to have. My husband is very depressed. He like to make money like when the Americans are here. He is very angry with the Vietnamese who come to help the new government. He say this is not good for Laos. He say these are the worst of the foreigners... too hard.

We listen to the radio [Radio Free America] and hear the refugee in America say they make much money. We think about this. We give two houses to our cousin. One daughter will stay in our house. We think maybe we will go to

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*This was her second marriage. She wouldn't comment on her first marriage, the marriage that produced her first three children.
Thailand and then to the U.S.A. to make some money until things get better. I am very worried but my husband says it o.k. Two sons are in Thailand. The rest will come with us and some friend. We are very secret. At night we go in the country and cross the river to Thailand. My husband has friends who will meet us. Something happen and the Thai police find us. They do not send us back because they know my husband work for the government before. They take our money and jewelry. This is very sad. We do not take too much with us... now everything is gone except 600 baht. They take us to the camp. Then many papers, questions. I am tired. We see a new life we did not expect. We build a house from the wood while we wait. It is a small and dark house. I am ashamed because we have very few of clothes. Not enough water is very hard to keep clean. This is not the way we like to be. We have so little.

My husband write to a friend in Thailand and he send some money. Things are a little better. From this time we wait. My husband and son go to classes of English every day. The women and children just wait. There are many fights and argument. People steal. Too many people in one small place. We cannot leave. We have to wait for permission from the U.S.A. Many sad thing happen in the camp. We live with too many people... very crowded, everyone unhappy, not enough food, not enough water, no jobs, no money. We wait to hope for a better life in America. Sad things are in our heads. We miss our house and our friends, our city.

Then we hear a church will sponsor my family. This is very good. So we are happy and we talk of many thing. My husband is so happy, too. We come first to California, then to here. We know nothing... we think everything will be o.k. with the Americans like when the Americans came to our country. We are very good to them... they bring much money. Our heads are very big with dreams of a better way for life. When we came here the church was very good. For one year it helped very much. My husband got a part-time job working with the trees. So my two sons did. Then we had a small house to rent... not enough rooms but we are very happy to have a home and to cook and have friend. I work a part-time job in the motel to clean.

Then the church does not help us anymore. We cannot be the Christian. We try. We like them very much. We are the Buddhist. We cannot change this. They were very nice but they no longer came to help us. My husband was hurt cutting the tree. He is forty-five and the work was very hard for him. He try and get very sick. They lay off my sons because
they do not speak the English so well. This is not true
but they do not fight the boss. I am the only one to
work for a while. I work all night and I am very sick
and tired. My husband is depressed and very angry. He
does not want me away every night. Everyone is unhappy.

We have been here three years now. Very much has changed.
My husband has no job yet. Sometime he works part-time...
but not so very much. Other days he stays in bed or he
drink the beer. He want to go back to Laos but that can-
not be. He does not want to stay here and be nothing.
He was a good man in Laos. Easy to live with... very
good father. Now he is very sad. I am sad for him and
my family. The Lao people are sad here. We cannot get
jobs to make enough money for good things. The husband
must move to another house to get the welfare to feed the
children. This is very bad. Not a father in the house
for the children is not so good. We move many times.
I am very lonely for my old life. I do not like to work
to clean the motel. I cannot do for my family what I
wish. My children play with bad children. They are bad
to their mother and father. They are learning not so
good things in the schools. They smoke the marijuana and
try to act like the soldier. They want clothes, money,
and new things we cannot buy for them. They change the
name to English. One son say he "hate" the Lao. We don't
mind him to try to be American. We hope he will not hate
us. They do not ask our advice for plans. They do not
care so much for us.

We did not go to the English class for too long because
we try to work and make the money. Now I am sorry. Too
late I know I want to learn more English. So you see, we
are here now. We are very poor. The Americans do not
welcome us. They see us as the poor refugee... not as
the friends they had in our country. This is hard for
our hearts to accept. We thought no one to be so poor
here. We thought there would be jobs. That's what the
radio said. Which way is best? We do not know. To stay
in Laos we would have to work very hard and have very
little. Here we cannot work and we have very little.
There we know the Lao language. This helps us. If things
change in my country, I will go home again. Now I know
how to live with very little so it no longer matters if
I have too much. It is my husband that cannot go home.
He hates the government and the Vietnamese. His heart
is all sad. For now we stay with him. My daughter and
her husband will go back in a few years. They are very
good to me. They help me very much. I am happy they live
near me. They give me grandsons.
My other children, except two, are more like the Americans. Maybe they will stay here. I worry so much. Our family is not the same. Everybody does something very different. Nobody knows what to do. This makes my heart so sad. Right now I wish for a job for my husband... a good job so that we can live in one house again... to have friends, to have my family. We don't understand why the Americans cannot help with the job. We will work very hard. I am not young anymore. I hope before I die I have some time to rest, to have my family and husband back, and not to worry so much. I am always too sick with worry.

Oh, yes, what I do every day. Nothing now. I have the welfare and no job. I wait and worry. I wash the clothes, I cook, I clean. I don't know where my children and husband are most of the time and I worry something bad is happening to them.

The Father:

This man is around forty-five years old. He came here three years ago with his family. He was a respected civil servant in his own country, earning almost ten times the salary of the average Lao while the Americans were there. He owned homes and land. He was supportive of the French and then later of the Americans. His sympathies were almost always to the extreme right of the political spectrum, believing in the King and the royal family. He was a nominal Buddhist. His stepson served as translator.

You are my friend so I tell you some of these things. I love my country very much. You know I hate the Vietnamese. They steal my country. They take everything. I hate them.

I was a very lucky man. I have the land and the house. I have the very good job. See, these are my papers. These tell you I was important. Look at my picture. Everything is very good for me. My father was the farmer. Not a little land but much land. I work hard, he send me to school to learn French. We do not study English then.
Only French and Lao and some Chinese. Almost everyone know Thai, too. I went to Thailand many times. Before 1975 it was so easy to cross the border. No problems. I have many friend in Thailand.

In my country I have a big house. Plenty of food all the time. My wife is a very good cook. Everyone welcome. Many American come there. We have many friends and relatives in Laos. They visit us. This is very good. We talk. We plan. We try to make the future good for our children. I send all my children to school, the girls, too. This way they learn French and English to get a good job. Then when I am old I will have some help from them. No worry for me. I work very hard to do this. I am not afraid to work for my family and friend. They like me. They respect me. I feel good.

It is a long story of the war. So many things I am with. This does not go so very well for us. When the American leave we think that could never happen. How can they leave us? Then there were no jobs for us to make enough money. The Vietnamese come to steal our country. They tell the communist those men who work with Americans have too much land and money. They take some of my land. I am very smart first and give each relative some land and a house. This way I cannot own too much. They take everyone's money in the bank and give only a little back. They say the general and the rich people take all the gold from our country when they leave. They say we must keep all of the money in the bank to help the country, feed everyone and to run the government. I hate this. I work hard for my money. Now it is all gone. What can I do? I hate it so very much.

I keep my old job... they say I get one-fourth [my previous salary] now because there is not enough money to pay. It is very hard to get the rice, the chicken, the gasoline. Everything is just a little bit. Everything is counted. This is a crazy life. How can you live like that? That government cannot do anything. What a crazy mess. We do not want to leave our country. We love our country. I am afraid to take my family to so far away. Then we hear the Radio America. Lao people say you can have much money, a good job, no problems in the U.S.A. They say come here. That's right.

*Historically, the border between Laos and Thailand was open. Due to pressure from the United States and increased refugee migration, the border was closed in 1975.
They invite us to leave the communist country. What are we to think? The American bring much money to Laos. We believe them when they say life is so good here. We think about this. Then we decide to go. This is not so easy. We worry much... all the time. It is hard to leave your country, your friend, the things you know in your heart from being a little boy until now.

We give everything away. That's o.k. We know we will be better in the United States. We have friends in Thailand. They will meet us there when we cross the river. This did not happen. The soldier find us. I tell them I am a civil servant. I tell them. They laugh and say everyone say that. Still, they take our money but do not hurt us. So now... no money, no house, nothing. I do not tell my wife but I am so depressed. O.K. We go to the camp.

The camp is where I learn some little English. We don't do too much. I don't understand much. All these thing they say in class I can't picture in my head. I go anyway. The Thai treat us like the servant. I am not the servant in my own country. I say nothing. I want to get to America. I close my mouth. In my heart I hate them, too. We need some help... nothing. I try to keep my family together. Then we know we will come to America. I want to send my sons for more education. I hope for a good job because I work hard. On the airplane my mind is very confused... you know, happy... sad... many different thoughts. My wife I want something special for. She is very good... no complaint. She help, she say everything is o.k.

Three years now, Rob, three years. You know what happens to the refugee here. You see. They do not have to tell you how sad. How poor. I have no job... no chances to make my family safe. First my wife has to work... this makes me angry and sad. I do not want this. I am the man. Then we have to move to another house to get money. My family is everywhere. One son here, one son there, my wife in another house. I have no job. What is here for me? The American invite me here. You have to believe me when I say this. I would not come if I didn't believe their good invitation. Then they forgot me.

Here I am nothing. Not a man, not a father, not a husband. Many days I feel crazy. I do not want to be the dishwasher. Why do that? It does not pay me, it does not help my family. No one knows I am a man. Some day, forgive me friend, I hate this country, too. I hate being
alive. This is hard for me. What can I do? Nothing to do is hard for a man to do. Look around my house. What do you see? Not even a television. The man shouldn't live this way. I cannot read the paper. The language is very hard for me. When I walk outside no one says the "hello". I am dead and I am also alive inside the dead man. I don't know how to think like the American. My children do not respect me very well. I cannot help them. I beg from my family for food, for money, for clothes.

In my country I was a man. Then change and I have nothing. Here I have nothing. Now I don't know what to think. I pray. I think. I watch. I don't know... I don't know. Maybe I will go back there someday. Maybe if the Vietnamese leave. I don't know yet. Maybe a better life will come here. My mind is not clear on these things. I have to wait.

The Elder Daughter:

This woman is the third child of her mother's first marriage. The mother left her first child, the older sister of this woman, in Laos, where she lives with her husband and three children in the family house, keeping some of the family property. The third child, this daughter in the profile, came with her mother to America. She was accompanied by her husband and one child born in a refugee camp in Northeast Thailand. They now have a second son born in the United States. She is well educated by Lao standards, speaking passable French and English. Her language skills are valuable to other refugees in the community as they struggle with language problems. This ability landed her a job very quickly with a local social service agency. Although traditional Lao in behavior, she has overcome an initial shyness with the public and with men to work effectively in the community. She deals mainly with women, women's problems, and with children.
She has been instrumental in helping families deal with the schools and with health problems. Like her mother, she dresses in the traditional Lao si:n and blouse. She wears no make-up.

You know my family. I grew up near Vientiane in a nice house. My mother did not work there. I had a very happy young life. I learned all the women's things and I went to school. My father was very liberal to let the girls get so much education. He felt we could do it. I enjoyed school but I was very quiet. Sometimes my older sister would answer for me. I was very shy to everyone. My sister talked much. People said I was pretty but I don't really think so.

In my house, there was much talk of politics. I don't think you can see my father as he was at home in Laos. His experience here has been very difficult and very sad. He was very good to everyone. When he made much money he made everyone welcome in our house. He loved people to come. We had others, what you call extended family, living in our house. All the women helped with the cooking, the cleaning, and all that. We shopped almost every day. When I was very young, we did not have a refrigerator or good electricity. Later we did and then we didn't have to shop for everything every day. Still, we liked to shop... we saw other people, talked, and that was very good because we didn't have the telephone. We did a lot of visiting to other friends and relatives.

As I said, we heard much talk of politics in our home. Mostly of some Lao history, of our generals and armies, and some of the French and Americans. My father was not as quiet as he is now. He read the French and the Lao paper. He read the Bangkok paper. He went to Thailand. He knew many things of our history. He worked for the government. The women listen a lot and we heard many things. This was almost every night.

My mother was a housewife. That is something very different from here. She was in charge of the house and the finances. It has more prestige to be a good wife in Laos than here. She is a very good mother. She would do extra work if we had to study. She was glad all the children were learning in school. She didn't have the same opportunity. They say when she was a young woman she was very beautiful and when my father first saw her, he wanted her to be his wife. She laughs when we say this but I know it makes her happy. She still likes to look good when she leaves the house. She always told us to be neat and clean.
My brothers are all very different. The older two or three I can talk to and we are friends. The younger ones are more and more like Americans. Let me explain that being the refugee is very difficult. Your whole life changes but you don't know that when you leave your country. Everyone in the family is now changed. First, both my parents did not find here what they had hoped. Worst of all is my father who cannot find a job that makes him feel good. It has bothered him to see the family all broken up in different homes. He drinks sometimes and used to hit my mother. Now, because of some counseling, he will not do that. Instead, he becomes very quiet and says very little. He was on the American side and no one could say anything about the Americans in our house in Laos. He couldn't believe they just left. He could never accept the new government. When he heard Radio America he decided to go there for a new life. He felt the Americans would treat him well because he had helped them in Laos. This, you know, has not happened.

My mother has had to go to work. They have no common home. They have many problems, life is very hard, and they do not understand many things. So, my brothers, the younger and the older, have given them many problems. Only one, the oldest, gives them any help. He has worked hard to keep the family together in one way or another. He does things sometime the Lao way and this is not so good here. My other brother thinks of his life, his girlfriend, he is like an American. He thinks it's the oldest one who is to take care of the parents. At first he would give no help... but now, he helps a little because there is a great need. The younger brothers are very confused. They don't know if they are a Lao or American. They cannot be either. A couple try very hard to be like their American friends. They took American names. They say they will never go back to Laos, that they live here, that they are Americans now. Because I have been in the schools I understand this. My parents do not understand very well and they are hurt.

I was happy at home in my country. When my parents said they would leave I decided to stay. Things were hard. We had very little compared to before but I didn't want to leave. My husband had a job and I felt we would be o.k. My father gave us one of his houses. We didn't pay rent. We had a garden and some rice fields in the country. We had a motorcycle and we could have anything of my father's when he left. Then my husband decided to go. We argued. He heard there was much money in America. Finally I said he could not go without me. So we left. I have not been happy about that. Here I work too hard. I always worry. My husband works hard but I still worry. There is never enough
money. I am afraid for anyone to be sick. I worry very much for my young children. I want to go back to Laos before they get too old. My husband agrees there also. I do not want half my family here and half my family in Laos. I don't think my father can ever go back. I think my mother will stay with him.

There are so many problems here. Different from those at home. There we were worried for money, for enough food, but my husband had a job and we owned a house. Here I must live in a small apartment... we do not own a house. We have not made enough money to save. We wonder if we will be punished if we go back. Everyone says they hate the communists when they go to the camp or come here. We know this is the right thing to say. Actually they are talking about the government. Many Lao people here worked for that government. I can't say too much. In my father's case he really does hate the government.

Working with Americans has been very difficult for me. My husband doesn't like me to work so much. He doesn't want me talking to so many strangers. He is afraid I will become like American women. I know I won't. I am Lao. Many Americans say to me, "Tell that Lao boy his hair is too greasy, he must wash it." Sometimes they say we smell, or our homes are too dirty, or we shouldn't do this or that. They cannot understand how hard it is to do everything the American way. I do my job and I am quiet, but I hurt when I hear these things. In the schools they say all people in America are equal. I know this doesn't mean the refugee. Sometimes people talk slow or in part English before waiting to see if I understand English. Sometimes I laugh inside.

I have been very sure to be a good wife... to keep my husband... to have my children know a Lao father. I try to help my mother and father and brothers. My husband is good with this. He is very good to my family. Sometimes he is the only one to go every night for a few minutes to talk to my father, to bring cigarettes, to see if he is o.k. I am lucky with my husband. So, even if I have to leave Laos, I am lucky. I pray we will go back there someday. I try every day to visit my mother or to bring her here.

We don't own very much. We have a stereo and a television. Not too much clothes. Lao people do not have too much furniture in their homes. We like to sit on the rug. My family still eats the Lao food. Only in public are we like the Americans. Then we don't eat too much or say too much. Right now we are all hoping for a good job for my father so that the family can move into one house. Too many bad things
happen with the children, the father and the mother all living in different homes. My mother and father are sometimes very lonely. I worry for everyone and sometimes I am sick from that.

The Elder Daughter's Husband

He has worked full- or part-time since he arrived, in various jobs including construction, janitorial work, and now in a factory. He is in his late twenties and speaks minimal English. Known as a hard worker, this man dislikes his wife having to work. They have a car, rent payments, and general expenses for a household of four plus extended family members. He is generous and well-like by everyone. He is healthy and takes pride in his good health and in being a hard worker. Although not educated, he has respect for education. He wants a better education, but work keeps him busy.

I came here because the radio said we could make good money and not have to put up with the communist government. I wanted to come for fun, too, because I was tired of all the problems in my country. One night when my friends said they were going, I said I would go. Just like that. My wife didn't want me to go. I said stay here for a couple of years and I'll come back with a lot of money. I had a job but didn't get much money. I worked for an American company and they stayed. She said, "If you go, I go."

So... we left. My house is still there with my younger brother in it. I can go back when I want to. The camps were bad. Then I thought I made a mistake to leave. Too late. Then I came here and soon I knew it was wrong to leave. I work very hard here for nothing. You know I still have great trouble with English. I cannot read. There I knew everything. To tell the truth, it was very hard with the new government. We all know that it wasn't their fault. Our country was pretty messed up. When the
American left, when many people left, there weren't enough people to do everything. Then we didn't have enough for two years. There wasn't enough food. Everyone was always hungry. Gee, I don't know. I guess I was crazy, but I just wanted to leave. When we heard the American radio say there was a better life, I just said "Let's go."

Now I'm not so young. I have traveled. I have seen many things I could not believe. Here I see so many unhappy Lao people. I know almost everyone wants to go home. Most of the time we don't talk about it. My wife and I will go home in a few years. Maybe sooner. I don't know yet. I am confused about many things. I am sad to see my father-in-law so unhappy. He was not like that before. He was very generous to me. Even though I'm not so educated, he treats me like one of his sons. I try to be good to him now.

The young kids are doing crazy things. I watch and don't know what to do. No one helps them. Who can? The Americans think everyone is o.k. because we don't say much. When we complain, or when we worry and go to welfare, they say we are trying to cheat the Americans. They count every penny. They are not generous. They make us feel like we are the beggars. I will not go there. Other Americans think our women are for them. They have no respect for the way we think of our wives. That is why we do not take them to many American parties. We take our family only to the safe places.

I enjoy my car here. I like my stereo player very much. Each one I will not take home [to Laos] so now I will enjoy them. I have a very good wife. She takes very good care of me. I look at other beautiful women... you know that is natural to think when you see a beautiful woman. Still, I don't cheat. She is good for me. She came all the way here with me. I always have her as my friend. She gave me two sons. I am very proud of her. I want to take them back to my country.

Lao families just keep moving... here, there. That is because we do not belong to this country, we are not Americans. Few men here act to me as an equal friend. Some are friendly, but not as an equal man. In my country we always treat the American person very well. Special things to eat when they come to our house. We are always glad to know them. Here, too. When Americans come to our house we try to do something nice. We know this is their country. We want them to enjoy us. Do not think we are bad guests.
here because I say these many things. I know now that
I belong to my country. Americans have their country.
I don't know why I thought I could be an American, I am
Lao. See what happens when you are young and foolish?
Who thinks about these things when they are so young?
Now I know. While I am here I will try my best to learn
everything. When I go home I will know a lot....

The Oldest Son:

This man is in his late twenties. For the average Lao
he is generally well educated. He speaks fluent Lao, Thai, good
French and English. He is the second child of the mother's first
marriage. He left a "wife" in Laos. He lived five years in
Thailand. He lives with a girlfriend he sometimes calls his
"wife." Because of his relatively strong command of English,
he initially found himself helping as a translator for the family
and the community. For a couple of years he has worked with a
local social service agency dealing with refugee transition.
He dresses casually, almost "preppy" at times, and is described
by his friends as generous and easy-going.

You should have asked me all these questions first before
I knew you and worked with you. You are my friend... some
things are easy to say to you and some things not. You know
many things about me and my family, and we have done so many
things together. I have translated for you and taught you
our customs. You have slept in my house and eaten our food
the Lao way. You have been to our country. All the times
I translated the others' stories I didn't realize how dif-
ficult it was to think this out. For two weeks I have
worried I cannot do it.

I won't say too much about our home or my growing up...
you have heard that from the others. For me, almost every-
thing was o.k. until I went to the Lycee. Before that I
hadn't bothered too much with politics. The things my
friends discussed there were very different from the things
discussed in my father's house. Exactly the opposite. It never occurred to me that the Americans might be part of the problem. I never knew too much about world politics. I believed what my father said and what his friends said as the truth. Then other students and some teachers talk about communism and capitalism. This was very hard to understand. I became very confused and very depressed. I did not want to believe what I was hearing. Even some of the monks say this.

The Americans were my great heroes. Since 1965 that's who I wanted to be like. I dressed like them. I learned English. I went to places where Americans went. I listened and watched. Everything they did was very interesting. They had nice clothes, cars, motorcycles. The women were beautiful. So, I got a motorcycle. At the Lycee all of that changed. Maybe I began to grow up. One friend said I lived in a world of dreams. The Americans are only people. I wanted to learn much more. I read and listened and tried to figure out what was happening. Our political situation was so confusing. Only later, after discussing with you about our history, did I realize everyone there was confused and pressured. Our leaders had little experience with world politics.

I did not know how hard the United States worked to manage and shape our politics in a way comfortable for them. I did know of Vietnamese involvement because of my father's hate for them. Anyway, the Lao people really lost. By not allowing us to select our own leaders, to develop a simple economic system suitable for our needs, to select the leaders we loved who wanted a neutral Laos, we lost it all. These were difficult years for me. In many ways I was sympathetic with much of what the Pathet Lao said... particularly about the need for a lao system for the Lao people and for education for everyone. Everyone was fighting and no one trusted anyone. I believe we could have achieved our dreams of an independent Laos without all of that interference.

Oh, I almost went crazy trying to figure it out. I drank a lot of beer in those days, staying late into the night to talk. You know I was with Kong-le. He was in the middle and he was loved by the people. When he went to the Pathet Lao I didn't know what to do. Before that I believed some of the things the communists said were o.k., but I was with the Americans. Then he said many of the rich sold us out to the Americans and the Thai. Now what? I had to stop and think a lot. You know that there was much trouble in my country by that time. Every week new stories, new problems. Politics kept changing. No one knew the truth from
lies. Life was very crazy for us. Many of the Thai Issan [Lao] were beginning to say that the Americans should be thrown out of Thailand, too. So, what was a big fight in the Lao family over who would control the government became a bigger fight between the Americans and others. Let's face the fact, the Americans were strong, rich, and everyone knew it. When they were around, you had to be on their side. They controlled many things, jobs, and even the army. One time they stopped foreign aid to the army when the government of Souvanna Phouma wanted to be neutral and the country almost fell apart. By controlling our money, they controlled great parts of our country... and our politicians. The Pathet Lao pointed this out all of the time and said, "See, you aren't free, you are under the Americans."

Most Americans don't know that a very high percentage of the people were for a free, neutral Laos. Many supported the Pathet Lao, but they had many real problems with the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese have been around a long time and we knew them well. It's the Americans we didn't know well. If we had known some of the things we know now, maybe life would be very different. So most of my family stayed with the Americans. When they left, there were so many problems. First, who would believe they could be beaten? In some ways I was proud of the Pathet Lao for hanging in there and winning. Then I worried about what would happen. The Americans had said we would all be killed if the Pathet Lao won. This was not so... but many of the former leaders and military men were sent to re-education camps. Life was hard there. Since they had screwed things up, from the Pathet Lao point of view, they should be willing to work hard to change it all. Until they showed a willingness, nothing was done for them. They were the very last priority. As you know, just now, eight years later, still some people are in the camps. We have heard the Lao government has said let them go to America if they want, we don't need them. Many of these men could never accept a socialist government, they were too high, too rich, too powerful to now have to consult the average people about what they want. They believe by education and birth they know more and should be the leaders.

So, when the Americans left, the country was really in trouble... not so much because of a socialist government but because of the war damage, of all the internal refugees, of neglect of crops and roads and everything else. Many rich persons took a great deal of money out of the
country and left with the Americans. There were so many
things to do and nothing to do them with. Our family stayed,
believe it or not. My brother and I were in Thailand for a
few years to study and save money in case of problems at
home and if my father had to leave. We went back, hoping
the new government would be o.k. Even though my father
hated the Vietnamese who were helping the new government,
he didn't want to leave our country. We are Lao. Between
1975 and 1978 things were really bad. The government was
very slow to fix things up. They said the United States
and Thailand were working against them in the international
banks and the U.S. refused to give any aid for war damage.
We were a small, poor country. So, everyone had to do with-
out. Food, gasoline, everything was scarce. At first we
blamed it on the communists. Now I know that it just wasn't
there. Not enough of anything. Almost everyone in the
world forgot about Laos. People were disgusted. Then the
Radio Free America began to broadcast, saying life is better
in the U.S. We heard Lao's speaking about how they made
good money in the U.S. Thousands of people thought a lot
about this. Then too, you know we had those three years
of almost no rain. This was very hard on everyone. Not
enough rice is a very serious thing in Laos.

Well, you know what happened from there. People were dis-
gusted... life was too hard in Laos. We wanted more.
Nothing was going very well. So we came here. We really
thought the Lao government would never make it. Now we
get letters saying that things are still quite hard... but
getting better. We really didn't know this. All those
years of war made people very tired. The new government
said we must be strong to build our new country. We must
sacrifice. We must not lose what we have worked so hard
and suffered to win. People were tired. The better life
was supposed to be in America.

When we came to the United States we were all very sur-
prised. The church was good to us at first, but telling
us not to smoke and drink was not so good. We just couldn't
become Christian or Mormon. I haven't had it so hard here.
I worked at different jobs... loading trucks, planting trees,
until I got a good one. I work hard. But I came here with
English. Most of the Lao have not been so fortunate. Still,
in my heart I have suffered very deeply also.

There are two things I can say. First, the Lao men feel
very bad here. We are not equal. Everyone treats us as
refugees... different than other people. It is hard to be
normal and to be a friend when people treat you different.
Then... many of us were not close friends in Laos. Here we are the only Lao and we have to be friends with each other. There are no good programs for Lao men. We all need a lot of help. Dishwashing jobs and loading beer trucks are not what we thought we would have to do for the rest of our lives. We were more than this at home. There are many problems when you can't find a good job, when you can't find Lao women to marry and have a family, when even the married men have to live in separate houses in order to survive. Most of the men here were on the American side. They feel cheated by what they are given, all they want is opportunity. Why should anyone care if all you can ever be is a dishwasher or a janitor? We drink a lot to forget this. We enjoy life while we can. Who knows what will happen on tomorrow? We have seen a lot of change.

For me, it has been the same and also different than the other Lao men. When I became a translator it made me more. All the time... anytime... people call my house. I go... to the hospital, to jobs, for anything that is needed. I try very hard to help everyone all the time. My people always come to me. Sometimes I am very tired. Then, the Americans expect me to know everything, explain everything, do anything anytime they ask... whether I like it or not. Everyone forgets about me, my life, my needs. I am a human being too. As a Lao, I still cannot explain all the Laos, what every Lao does, to the American. Also, I am sometimes having the same problems as everyone else. Yes, I have problems, even if I don't say so. I miss my country. I miss my way. It is hard having to be like an American all the time. I can never relax. You know, I got my dream... I'm here. Now I know I should have been satisfied with being Lao. I intend to finish my education here. To learn as much as possible. But then I think I will go back... if not to Laos then to Thailand. Language and culture are more than words and more than the outlines we get in cultural orientation. They are a way of living. American and Lao ways of living are very different. Some things I like very much about both. But I am Lao for whatever I may look like at work. I guess I just want to say that people seem to forget that I am not perfect. I make mistakes and I have much to learn. I must learn your ways. You do not have to learn mine. How is that equality?

Being here is not all bad. I do not wish to say that. Some Americans try very hard to be good to us. But we are always reminded we are different. We know people can't lead our lives and do everything for us. But why did the
United States invite us here with promises and then make us feel very low when we ask for these promises. Maybe all the Lao weren't unhappy with Laos and wouldn't have come here if they hadn't thought this to be a better life. Is it not better to be at home, among friends, where you know the language... even if you are poor? That is better than to be in a strange land where you are poor, can't speak the language, have few friends, and are not really welcome. I have very bad depressions sometimes and I worry about my people, my family, my life, what is happening. I want to be happy, have a family, have enough food. We all worry about getting sick or dying... it is too expensive in your country. We are thankful for what our friends here have done, but we don't belong to your country, we have to go to our own home. Down deep in my heart I worry that may not be able to happen.

The last thing I feel I need to say about my life is that when I have been your interpreter and translator, I have seen and heard so many things about my people, our country, the war, politics, and about being here that my head is filled. I have gotten to see through everyone's eyes. I have become a part of each of the Lao here and also very separate from them. When you first came I didn't believe you. I didn't understand what you meant when you said by listening to each person's view... telling each story from their own mind... we could see a bigger story. Now I know. I am so sad sometimes, Rob. I am so sad to see and hear all these things. It is very hard for me. I feel like a very old man in my head and heart when I think of these things. I am not the same. Some part of me looks at the Lao and at the Americans and is always asking questions about what is happening. When you are gone, who will I talk to about these things? I say, when we go back to our country you must come. Then you will really see the whole picture. There is a part I cannot give you here. You must go there to be a part of it. You must go to the camps. Then you will see it all. If I had a good education here and was important, I would write a book or make a film. I would have everyone tell that we don't need to kill or to war, that we should each have our own country, that

*Eventually, in 1982, I would have the opportunity to travel to the refugee camps in Thailand.*
there should be enough food and clothing for everyone. I think I have seen enough food and clothing here wasted to give to all the Lao people. No one way of living is right. My teacher, a monk in Laos, told me the story that all the flowers of the garden manage to live together. They are not all the same. Different colors, different sizes, some alone and some in groups. People can be like that, too. I often wonder why we don't know that. It seems so simple.

My mind is very tired right now. It is hard to believe that all this time has gone by. That we have talked to so many people. Done so many things. We have become friends. You know, some people here say you will be like the other Americans. In time, when this story is finished, you will forget us. You will be important and we will still be refugees. I don't think that is so. Like me, you are changed. I can tell by the way you listen, the way you speak, by the movement of your eyes, by the way you ask fewer questions and still know what is happening with the Lao. I know, although you have not said, you feel some of our disappointment and sadness. At one point, you know, we were worried for you. Sometimes you began to think and act like the refugee. You were arguing with other Americans for us. We were afraid for you. You know how the mind can go crazy when you get that way. You are special to us because you know these things. Your heart has deepened. It is bigger. So, I say you will not forget. You cannot because a little piece of Laos is now inside you. I am this way too with America. When I go back, a little piece of me is America. If only we could... all the people of the world... have a little piece of each other in our hearts. Then no more refugees. Everybody could be happy at home.

One of the Younger Brothers:

This young man is typically faced with the kind of choices the young Lao must make in the schools. In his early teens, he struggles back and forth from being a Lao refugee and being a young person in America and wanting to be a part of things -- to be liked and accepted by his peers. He is in constant argument with his family, plays with what his mother calls
"bad boys" and is disrespectful. He is small for his age, and darker than many of the Lao. He has picked up a repertoire of "swear" words and uses them frequently. There have been many problems with his teachers and he has already had one minor encounter with the local police.

I do what I want. I am me. Sometimes I use my Lao name. Sometimes I use my American name. I am tough. I take care of myself. I get what I want. I can do the schoolwork but I'm not so interested. Some things interest me. Then I try hard. Other time I do what I like. Maybe in a year or two I will go back to Laos. Anyway, you know that the Americans think we are the refugees. We don't know anything. The teachers and other people sometimes talk to us like we are six years old. Boy, I get tired of that. Just because we don't speak English so well doesn't mean we are stupid. Look at my Dad. He is very smart but everyone here makes him seem to be ignorant. He was very good to us in Laos. Here he can't do much. Nobody gives him a chance. My other brother thinks he's American already. He's nuts. I go to the same school. He just doesn't see people still call him a refugee, even if he has nice clothes on. Only the bad girls want to have a refugee as a friend... not the good ones everyone likes.

I have some friends here. Some Mexican, some blacks, and some white ones. They all think I'm tough. I have to be or they treat me like a refugee. Everyone thinks the refugee way is the same as the Lao way. This isn't true. All they know is what they see. Our people are very different in Laos. I don't know a lot about the government, but I know the people are different. We have a good time there. We had a big house and friends and we knew everything. My Dad was important. We had many people and friends come to our house. Everybody would eat and talk. This doesn't happen here. Many of the people are depressed. They hide from the Americans. They are ashamed they don't have houses and things anymore. They don't act the way they did in Laos. They don't have enough money. They worry about rent and bills. There are many fights. Maybe everyone likes my brother better because he acts American and says he is American. I know how sad he feels, too. He liked this girl and she would laugh at his name. So he changed his name. No change in her. That's what I mean.
She still thinks he is a refugee. Well, I'm just me. If they don't like me, it's o.k. If they get tough I'll kick their ass. That's right. I don't like that. But I'm young. I don't want to become depressed and sad like my big brother's friends.

I think I will go back to Laos someday. Just to see how I do there. I want to go back to my country for a year or two and see my old friends and where I can speak Lao without worrying who is listening. Then, if I do stay there, I want to go to the community college and have a landscape business. This could help my Dad, he is very good at that. This could help him to feel proud again and to have all our family together again. Right now, I want to have some fun. I don't think that's so wrong. Even though some people say I am bad... I stay out late or smoke some pot once in a while... I am not bad. I know what bad is. The Americans haven't seen how bad some people were in the camps. I saw many bad things. I won't do those things.

I know I am skinny and have different eyes and black hair. So what. I don't want to be like all those television people. I'm not a punker, either. Inside I am a good person. People who really know me can tell that inside I am good. I try to help at home. I don't yell at my mother or father. I don't steal. I have some dreams for the future but I am not telling anyone right now. I have to wait and see. Besides, I'm young, man, I need some time. I have many things to learn. Not just what the American teachers think is important. When I agreed to talk to you I was going to give you this story I wrote for English class in school. I thought you were going to ask me how much I liked being in America. That's the first thing everyone asks. No one asks did I like my own country. Everyone asks about the communists. Well, this story I wrote isn't true. I got a B+ because the teacher liked what I said. Never once did he ask about me. How I feel, just me. Well, I'm telling you about me. I'm the most important to me.

I think a lot and even though I don't say so to my teachers, I read the papers and magazines almost everyday. My Dad can't explain many things to me. My older brother works hard to bring in money. When we have time to talk we discover that both of us are learning different things and we tell each other. He is now going to the community college and working. We explain a lot to our Dad but he gets impatient. He is used to knowing a lot more and he feels small to ask us.
Well, what else? I think it's sort of crazy that you write all this stuff. I only told you a little bit about me. I don't want you to think that what I said is all of me. I can't tell you everything about myself... if I do that you have power over me. I don't know some things about myself yet, so I can't say much about that. Right now I'm waiting. I don't know what will happen to me. That's it for now. I can't help you with anything more. I have more thinking to do. That takes time. Sometimes long, sometimes quick. I have a crazy head. It doesn't always give me the answers when I want them. I'm getting by, day by day. Some of them are good, some not. How is your Lao coming? I just thought of a joke. Maybe I'll write a story like you are doing. Only I'll ask the questions to Americans. I wonder how they will feel, if they can answer. Maybe then they will understand that when people ask you a question, you don't have to answer. You don't have to give them anything. If you do, then it is a present. Writing it down isn't reason enough. Listening to it and thinking about it is just as important. We learn all these things about being equal in school. Then they put us in special classes for the dumb ones. They don't listen. They tell. So why talk? If others don't listen to your side there's no point in telling anything. You keep the rest inside to protect it. That's why some people think I'm tough.

Middle Brother:

This middle brother, for the sake of stability, has chosen to deny his Lao background. Ashamed of his parents and family, he keeps a separate identity away from home. Faced with difficult choices, he has put the past behind him. These decisions have created frictions between himself and his brothers. In addition, his parents feel they have lost him to the Americans. On the other hand, they believe this is the only way he will get ahead in the United States. He remains an outsider, isolated from his primary culture and not yet fully accepted by Americans.
I don't want to talk very much about Laos or the camps. I remember some things like our house, our family, friends I used to play with. I remember what things looked like... all green and brown... but different from the green and the brown of here. I had many friends. I liked the motorcycle of my big brother.

The camp I don't think about too much. I had a good time playing with my friends but sometimes I know bad things happen. I don't think much about that place now.

Here I am American. I have changed my country. Americans are the best. All my friends, except my cousin and my brothers, are Americans. I do American things. My hair-cut is American. I work part-time when I can to get the money to buy these things. I always try to talk in English. I have to try very hard every minute because many friends at school call me Lao. I know they think I am a refugee and not as high as the other Americans. I wish my skin was whiter and my hair not black. Black hair is no good. I can change this but not now because of my father. He doesn't understand anything at all. Really... they are too old and they think like they still live over there. We don't. We are here. I sit on a chair and eat at the table. I know how to go into the restaurant and order. I am not afraid. If you act afraid, people know you are a refugee.

I won't sleep in a bed with anyone anymore. Now I sleep on the floor. Americans don't sleep in the same bed. I shower every day, see, I brush my teeth and they are very white. Americans like this. Some girls do, too. They like me. This makes me feel very good. I watch everything and try to do everything just right. Everyone calls me by my American name. When they have to say my Lao name it is too hard. So now I don't say it.

Americans don't understand the Lao things of my family. I keep them away. I take the bus or walk. That way no one sees my father. Some of my family want to go back to Laos. If they go, I will stay here. They can't make me go back there. I am American and this is where I will stay. I will have a house and a car here. I want to go to college and be a doctor. Then people will like me.

When you came here I didn't want to have to talk to you. I hate questions. Everyone asks the refugees questions. I am not a refugee. If you let me say what I want to say like Americans do then I don't mind talking to you. So that's why I talk about America and not the other places.
They are not important to me. My older brother says some day they will be... I don't know that. I don't care. I have enough trouble right now trying hard to be American, to have my school friends like me, and to get the things I need. My father doesn't understand this. He won't even try to learn much English. He will always remain a refugee... ignorant, if he doesn't try. He can't stop me. I am strong in my mind about being American. Maybe I will go to the army when I'm older in a few years. I don't know yet.

There is indeed much more to the story of the individuals in Section I and to this family than the interviews and statements convey. Because they are still in the process of adjusting to and coping with the struggle to maintain the basic physiological survival needs, there has been little time for them to think about what was lost when they left home, and what has yet to be secured here to compensate for that loss. It is apparent that almost all of the members of the Lao community suffer from a loss of primary culture context, i.e., an environment where the things they know, the behaviors they have learned, the responses that have worked, the institutions they have been "schooled" to deal with, all have meaning. There is a tremendous feeling of loss over not being able to "read." Many of the men were literate in Lao and French. Not being able to read denies them access to information and the status that information carries with it, which they used to enjoy. Denied this, heads of families and parents find their roles and their power diminished, and children are often given no direction within the home pertinent to American culture. This is a highly stressed population and many of its members have not developed the internal mechanisms to cope
with that stress.

The Lao Family:

The paradigm for the family carried with the exodus from Laos is varied. Lebar and Suddard (1960) characterize the "ideal" arrangement in the Lao setting as consisting of a nuclear family not unlike the model we find in the United States. They note that the extended form of the family is not uncommon. The family unit is generally represented by the male head who in turn represents the family in village politics and business. The wife runs the household and the finances of the home and generally has considerable say over the management of family finances. Married sons and daughters may live with either set of parents until they can afford a home of their own. Work is usually divided along lines of sex: the men do the heavy work in the fields, besides hunting and fishing; the women concentrate on the domestic tasks. All members of the family generally help with planting, transplanting, and harvesting.

I found the same models existing in the households of the Lao refugee community. However, almost all of these households, with only a few exceptions, were extended families. This arrangement compensated for the break-up of nuclear families as the result of resettlement and facilitated the inclusion of singles into family units where they could live and adjust within a support structure familiar to them. Roles, however, have and continue to undergo profound changes.
Due to the impact of the recession of the early 1980s, it was nearly impossible for many of the male heads of household to find employment. Many found part-time or seasonal work, but this would not support the family. On the other hand, over fifty percent of the women in the community found work as domestics in order to supplement family income. As women often became the sole breadwinners for long periods of time their exposure to the greater community increased. They began to interact with more Americans and to learn more English, and began to break the traditional pattern of working everything out with their husbands as well. The men, in particular the age group over thirty-five, have been the last to begin to accommodate to the new system. They are the group that has learned the least amount of English, and ostensibly have had the most difficulty with cross-cultural adjustments.

One Lao refugee characterized the traditional Lao family during this interview:

The family is important to the Lao. It is almost everything to us. We teach our children to be polite and to respect the older people. Even the younger children have respect for the older children. We love our children. The father is the head of the family. The mother is also important. They are responsible for how the children learn about life. When there is trouble, this is where the child comes for help. Many of our children live with us after they get married. This gives them a start on life. We like to have many people in the home. Sometimes even we have family members who we call "cousins" or "aunts" and "uncles." They may not be related but because we like them we call them that. The young ones learn at home how to cook or how to plant. The home and the family
are very important. It disturbs us that it is not quite the same in the United States. We see changes that hurt us. Many American children do not obey or listen to their parents. Their parents do not teach them. They give them to the school to be taught everything. This is not our way.

Family structures continue to change as the children begin to acculturate, as some Lao men marry American women, and as single men and often entire households shift residences from one state to another in search of employment. Many of the original Lao refugees who arrived between 1979 and 1982 have moved to California where the welfare system is more compatible with adjustment problems, and where there is a much larger Lao population to draw on for support in times of need.
Figure 2. Illustration by Praphan Sriscuta, Faculty of Humanities, Sri-Nakharin-Virote University, Bangkhaem, Thailand.
CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, RECOLLECTIONS

We were worried for you. Sometimes you began to think
and act like the refugee. You were arguing with other
Americans for us, we were afraid for you. You know the
mind can go crazy when you get that way....

Laotian refugee, 1983

When I go back, a little piece of me is America. If only
we could... all the people of the world have a little piece
of each other in our hearts....

Laotian refugee, 1982

Now I understand that it isn't only the Lao who are
children to the American way. Also, the Americans are
children to the Lao way... but now, we are here in your
country, so we appear as the children....

Laotian refugee, 1982

Why am I here? Today it all appears ugly and confusing.
The customs, the language, the problems, the whole damned
process of doing fieldwork is becoming a strain. I can't
figure out why I left the security of the university to
do this....

Field Journal, 1981

The central purpose of this study was to investigate
and interpret the post-camp, pre-acculturation period of the
refugee population from Laos residing in Eugene, Oregon. The
specific objectives of the study were to: research the history
related to the out-migration of the Laotian refugees; review
literature relative to the post-camp, pre-acculturation period
for Laotian refugees and to record the historical antecedents
relevant to the refugee process; identify the Lao population,
live in the community, conduct open-ended interviews, generate demographics, and record the refugee experiences in accordance with accepted ethnographic methodology; record for historical purposes the uniqueness of the events of the post-camp period while that process was transpiring; and provide recommendations for guidelines for anthropologists, educators, and social service providers as they attempt to understand and to assist the Laotian refugees during acculturation.

This was the record of a journey, not of someone else's, but of my own. It remains a brief transcript outlining the events that transpired as a result of continuous anthropological fieldwork during the years 1981-1983 when I attempted to partially acculturate and to "live" the experiences of Laotian refugees who had come to one small corner of the United States of America. Furthermore, it was the concurrent chronicle of an agonizing internal struggle which radically altered my perspective on American culture, on our species, and on my own life. This internal conflict generated by the fieldwork experiences was a catalyst for the following questions which lay heavily on my mind as I reflected upon what occurred during that period:

- By what right are we educators and anthropologists empowered with the privilege of 'studying' the intimate lives of other human beings who, as new arrivals in a society which devastated their homeland, are dependent on our goodwill?

- Once we researchers probe, question, interpret, and then record the final product clothed in the respectability of academic objectivity, by what right and to what purpose do we lay open the naked reality of other human beings for the privileged to examine? What will we do with this knowledge? How will these human beings gain by our use of it?
Beyond the question of morality in research, how does one begin to understand and to justify being a member of a powerful educational system and a respected anthropological tradition that, quite simply, refuses to recognize or examine their respective contributions to the devastation our society perpetrated on the cultures of Southeast Asia?

Lastly, beyond the horrors I have found my own society to have been party to in the devastation of Laos, what has the educational process done to me, and to other Americans? As we remain silent, our technological society continues to participate in the devastation of other pre-technological cultures, using the same old excuses.

The work that appears in Chapter V was conducted in the anthropological spirit of reflexivity. This tradition in anthropology, the discipline which gave birth to ethnography, is critical to understanding this thesis. Within this context, the events and experiences which impact the ethnographer become a crucial part of the fieldwork and analysis. The emphasis on participant observation interaction with informants and translators, and the unique product which they produce, creates the framework for understanding the total fieldwork experience. I bear full responsibility for the tone, focus, and emphasis of the material as presented.

Analysis

Two years in the field required a marriage of anthropology and education as I was involved in the process of using ethnographic research to identify the participant structures which reflected the Laotians' post-camp experiences. This generated a variety of questions and perspectives which enhanced my involvement and, I believe, brought me closer to the experiences of the
Laotians. Analysis was a reflection of the total endeavor which included the perspectives and experiences of the ethnographer.

Adult Laotian refugees were faced with a variety of decisions and problems as they encountered American society. They were forced to make choices for themselves and their families between what they knew worked in Laos and systems in the United States with which they were almost totally unfamiliar. The process of choosing between the old and the new proved most difficult for many adults. In particular, inadequate schooling and lack of information often led to disastrous choices. This was, I determined, a key factor which few community organizations identified. Refugees generally accepted they had much to learn about the United States. Unfortunately, the schools, social service agencies, and community structures weakened both the greater educational experience and the formal schooling by usually failing to include, compare, and build upon the previous life experiences of the Lao adults as they attempted to learn about and to integrate with the mainstream culture; it is difficult to make choices without knowing what the choices are and what the consequences of those choices will be.

I found that only a small percentage of the professionals in the community had been trained to work with adults, and even a smaller number who had even the remotest understanding of Laotian culture. Many, in the words of one Adult and Family Services worker, maintained the attitude that

... they have to adjust to our culture. I'm not here to teach them anything. I'm a steward of the public monies....
Other educators, human service personnel, and bureaucrats approached the refugee population with a sterile efficiency which demonstrated a general ignorance of the extreme difficulty Lao refugees have in approaching bureaucrats or understanding how to gain access to our human service programs. They were often discouraged by the lack of help forthcoming from the individuals and agencies upon whom they were dependent for critical information. It was difficult for me to explain the lack of a "generous nature" which the Americans failed to demonstrate but which, at least at first, the Lao people expected to encounter.

Government Agencies

Local government agencies, in particular the Adult and Family Services programs, which most of the refugees depended upon for services during their first eighteen months here, proved time and time again to be indifferent in their treatment of the refugees. Bi-lingual translators were employed who, as trained agents of the program, literally spied on families, reported additional income, and created both a fear of and dislike for other agencies and for the government. This greatly colored the initial educational process as refugees worked at figuring out how our society operates. One refugee said to me,

I will not go there. They have no respect for me. Believe me, they make me feel so small. They check every penny, expecting us to be lying. This is what the communists did when they took over our country. They counted every chicken. That's why I came here, to get away from that. So, what's the difference?
This kind of institutionalized insensitivity, the rigid application of the letter of the law, created an atmosphere where vital information sought from the Lao by supportive refugee service providers could not be obtained. Refugees learned to be cautious. Even though they were often ignorant of the law, they developed a fear and mistrust of bureaucrats and avoided them whenever possible. Time and again, the difficulty of adjusting to this new cultural situation was exacerbated to the point of despair as government employees either failed outright to do their job as mandated by the Refugee Act of 1980, or stretched the interpretation of the law to the disadvantage of the refugees. The structure of these American institutions frustrated and prohibited the kinds of human interaction with which the Laotian people were familiar.

In one instance, a particular Laotian family was singled out for excess scrutiny, abuse, and neglect as the bias of Adult and Family Services personnel filtered down into the politics of the Lao community. One family member explained,

They don't like our family. We have an old family argument with their translator. They say she is Lao. We know she is Vietnamese who speaks Lao. There is a great difference between the two which Americans do not understand. So, they give us a hard time. What can we do? My father won't go there. We need some things but he won't go there. They said bad things about our family to everyone. They think whatever the translator says is true because they know nothing about our people and our way of doing things....

I personally witnessed many acts of ignorance, callousness, and an inflexibility that characterized bureaucratic efficiency to
the point of caricature. Because of this, individuals lost benefits, people went hungry, families were deprived of medical attention. It was not uncommon to keep a refugee waiting for hours while "other priorities" were taken care of. Paperwork took precedence over human beings. This was incomprehensible to the various needy individuals. Time and time again, the Lao mentioned the lack of "heart" in the way American officials conducted business.

Two incidents which I witnessed graphically illustrate these points. The first entailed a meeting of local social service personnel, Adult and Family Services personnel, and a statewide team of cross-cultural experts who had come to the community to assist with resettlement problems. One of the Adult and Family Services personnel put his feet up on the desk as he spoke to a Lao man from the state team. Culturally, there could not be a greater insult to a Lao. Professionally, in American culture, it is extremely rude. This man was indifferent to the fact that, by any standard of measurement, the Lao man he was speaking to was his superior. The Lao gentleman spoke five languages, studied in France, and had been an international diplomat. To the provincial American social service worker, he was only another refugee. With this kind of ignorance, how can one expect respect from the refugee community? The Lao man later said to me,

Don't worry about it. I know you were angry with him. Remember, my job here is to help my people. So, I have to put up with this ignorance. It is difficult, but that is the position we are in here. We need the services of
this agency. My pride is not worth the price of losing these services for people who are in great need of them....

The second incident also took place in a city-wide meeting of service providers. Bi-lingual translators from upper-class Vietnamese families, neither having languished in refugee camps, both having flown over during 1975 when the upper middle-class and the rich left with American help, represented Adult and Family Services. Trained by Adult and Family Services to work with later arrivals, they were making fun of the Lao as "lower" than the other refugees. Their jokes about cleanliness and ignorance were shared by the American A.F.S. personnel present. These are the same translators upon whom American supervisors depended for information about the Lao community that impacted the decisions they made concerning Lao lives and resettlement opportunities. The economic power these individuals held was enormous. If they did not like certain people or families, they would not translate for them.

Across the Lao community, the majority of the members related to the agency that was theoretically there to help them with adjustment through fear and suspicion. The Adult and Family Services people had great power over the lives of the refugees. They could have a person declared qualified for "survival" funding, or they could declare a cut-off or a sanction (loss of funds for a period to teach responsibility.) They could deny education programs, a medical card, or emergency assistance. They could deny access to programs by failing to have essential information
translated. These possibilities became commonplace occurrences for the Laotians. The overwhelming impression I was left with was that these public assistance programs were more of a reflection of the struggle between the federal and state governments to see which one could do less, than a response to the needs of the refugees. These bureaucrats, painfully untrained to understand the needs or the culture of the Laotians, neatly arranged and rearranged the lives of the refugees to conform to the regulations and restrictions of the agency. The Laotians had no choice but to conform, to change, to accommodate. Ultimately, many could not, and they paid a steep price. Every refugee paid some price in this process of accommodation. Few Americans realized the extent. It was a one-way street for the refugees until they learned to develop a public face and an aggressive posture when dealing with bureaucrats. Few Laotians seemed prepared to do this during the post-camp period.

The Schools

Most of the adults over sixteen either attended the local high schools or the community college. In general, I found a positive attitude among the Lao towards the local schooling process. Comments relating to the performance of the teachers or the effectiveness of the facilities ranged from approval to deep appreciation. However, this raises the question of what real basis of comparison the Lao had for making these judgements. One has to examine the antecedent educational process they were familiar with to place these appraisals in context.
The educational tradition the refugees carried with them is characterized by Chagnon and Rumph (1983) as "centered around the village wat." It is a record of male-centered education with a heavy emphasis on traditional Buddhist values. Informal consent on the part of the Lao elite, who filled most of the administrative positions during the French colonial period, contributed to an appalling neglect of the educational needs of the majority of the Lao people. With the coming of independence in 1953, there occurred a parallel development in education. The Royal Lao Government clung tenaciously to the old French system which required instruction in French while Lao was treated as a foreign language. However, at this same time we find the Pathet Lao reaching out to the rural populace and creating a new system which focused on adult literacy as well as on the formation of primary schools in which Lao was the instructional language and where Lao history, politics, and customs were taught.

Chagnon and Rumph further delineate the situation in 1975 as the new government assumed leadership:

Less than 20% had completed six years of schooling; less than 2% had finished the full twelve years... there was a critical shortage of qualified, experienced Laotian teachers. In addition, thirty years of war had seriously impacted the education of the few that accessed the system....

On the local level in the United States, the programs in the community college were where all of the adults attending school were concentrated. These programs focused on language training and acquisition as well as on some cultural orientation sequences which were designed to expedite the mandate of the
Reagan Administration which emphasized rapid assimilation into the work force. As a staff member at the community college, I found the educators willing, but the system generally unable to provide the specific in-depth training the Lao population required to build bridges cross-culturally. The structural bureaucracies of these institutions were not developed to allow for the flexibility and sensitivity required to respond to the delicate needs of cultural interfacing. Many of the Lao were sent to work immediately upon arrival in 1978 and 1979 by their sponsors, and thus never had the opportunity to attend school. This was a bitter bone of contention among the Laotians as expressed in this statement:

I did everything I was asked. The others didn't do that... they went to school. I worked in a mill. Now the government says I can't learn English because I'm here over eighteen months. This isn't fair. Once I was laid off the new employer won't give me a job because I have bad English. I can't have a job because I can't speak so good. What do I do now?

I had the opportunity, as a teacher trainer and as a member of a regional team of educators, to compare the educational programs of this particular city to other cities with a Laotian refugee population. To a great degree, the high school and elementary schools were entities unto themselves. Special classes were designed for the teaching of English as a Second Language. In comparison with other schools, they were average. Programs were focused on the Vietnamese population which reflected a problem nation-wide in dealing with the Laotians. Cultural and psychological needs of non-Vietnamese ethnic groups, such as the Lao and
the Cambodians, were often ignored. Laotian students had to compete with Chinese-Vietnamese, who were often the model students. The different needs of each population were not adequately addressed in materials, teaching strategies, or other pertinent areas. As in other schools across the nation, the question was raised as to how much preparation the local educators could have had as they were faced with a burgeoning Lao population between 1978 and 1979.

Compared with other schools of the same size as those in this community, Laotian bi-lingual translators were used relatively early on the local level. However, they were also the first victims of budget cuts.

A fundamental problem arises as we explore just what class of people were employed as translators. Often enough a different class of individuals, usually those who benefitted the most by the American presence in Laos and who possessed a strong affinity for French culture, were enlisted to interpret for the others. Culturally, these individuals were viewed as bureaucrats and elitists, and were often unable to elicit truthful information from members of the refugee community. Although viewed as bonafide Laotians, these translators took on a quasi-American status and were placed in a special category of relationships within the Lao community.

Despite a barrage of special events arranged by some of the "special" programs for refugees in the public school system, the community was well aware of an "us" and "them" attitude. One of the Lao men put it this way:
We don't talk to the teacher in our country about school. That's their job. I have another job. It would not be right to go there and question.... We become embarrassed and ashamed when they ask of things we don't know....

Often American educators perceived this as not caring on the part of the Lao. This was demonstrative of the great gaps in both communication and cultural understanding which separated American teachers who had not had Laotian cultural orientation from Laotians who had not developed an understanding of American cultural structures. What disturbed me was the fact that the Laotians were expected to make the adjustments for both parties involved in the process. Often parents were inclined to tell the teacher that there were no problems. Parents in the refugee households often received notes from the school explaining programs and/or homework. What local educators failed to realize was that the context was often missing. The Lao parents had not received training or had not been here long enough to understand the particular value Americans place on school behavior and competition. They, too, needed orientation for the process of becoming American parents and for the special roles of American parents in relationship to the schools. Lao parents had been repeatedly called on to make choices and/or to give support for a cultural process or institution they did not understand.

Assumptions that the American style of teaching and learning was the best way to support the Laotians while they attempted to acculturate have yet to be examined and proven effective. Although a number of Lao youth have acquired a greater
degree of proficiency in English, none have graduated from high school. Future longitudinal studies may reveal more about the impact of current methodology and programs in the public schools.

The buildings and the teachers were impressive to the new refugee. Since most Laotians did not come here with an understanding of American culture and what to expect from the school system, they generally accepted that what the schools were doing was right and that the burden lay with them, as refugees, to respond appropriately. In the words of one Lao adult,

I don't know all these things. My children are learning different things than I know of. Somethings they do I don't like. Our children are losing respect for their parents. They do not ask for our help about life questions. This is not the Lao way. We sometimes don't know how much of the American way to let them learn. What if we go home to Laos? They can't forget everything Lao. My husband says we are in America now. These teachers are educated. They know what is right for America. So, we have to do it that way. The children must learn how to be Americans....

To a lesser degree than in government agencies, but to an appalling degree for educators entrusted with the complex task of "schooling" refugees, I found a significant lack of preparation concerning the teaching of the adult and of Laotian culture among local educators. I found a corresponding lack of preparation on the part of most educators in the basic understanding of their own culture, the role of education in the acculturation process, and to what purpose they were doing what they thought they were doing in the classroom. Often courses were taught with the specific class content as the priority, rather than a focus on class content in context and as a part of the holistic adjustment process for
the refugee. In fact, many teachers contributed directly to refugee confusion.

This does not, however, diminish the individual efforts of numerous professionals who, despite an inadequate reception on the part of the system and a callous execution of legalities by some community programs, managed to create some meaningful experience for the refugee population and for themselves during the acculturation process. The real educators were the single identifiable force in the American community that the refugee community could consistently look to for help. The term "my teacher" had a very special meaning and place in the vocabulary of the refugee. Anyone who had taken time to become involved, who had seen the few but extraordinary teachers who sought out help to understand the "Lao way" and attempted to respect the refugee adults as full human beings knew the joy of cultural interfacing and mutual attempts to understand each other. Each grew as a cooperative educative experience unfolded. Those precious few provided a haven, a shoulder to lean on, a helping hand. They were the ones who, as one Lao leader suggested, "... put their hands out first."

These people were an inspiration for me as I watched them teach and share beyond the limitations of schooling process. They learned about Lao food, Lao customs, and, to the best of their ability, about the Lao as they perceived themselves. Simultaneously they expected and helped the Lao to do the same in relation to them and to American culture. They asked the Lao to reflect on their needs, to express their frustrations, to explain and to examine what they experienced. They took chances, they became
involved. They did not restrict themselves to one method, they used many and were flexible and pragmatic as the process required. One could easily identify those educators, for they were those to whom the refugees returned after classes were long concluded, over certain holidays, or any given morning with a plate of spring rolls or some small gift. They brought their "new" children to show to their "old" teacher, and in time of distress, need, or confusion it was often this teacher, this friend they called on for direction. That voice on the other end of the line, that smile while greeting established a life-line that was of major importance to the refugee. Having taken the time to learn to say hello in the native language and to remember the real name of the students as well as to pronounce it correctly was the glue that held many a refugee together during a period in which many of the strongest became unglued. One refugee clearly stated,

No one will ever know how good I felt when I heard my teacher say "good morning" in my language. Then I knew he cared. Then I knew he understood how hard it is to learn a new language. Then I used to tell him a new Lao word and I felt like a real person. Then we could laugh if he made mistakes. There was no blame, just to learn. He helped me, too, to understand that being a man is different here. You know the ways of these things are different in my country also. These things were very hard for me to understand. Really, only an American can explain the American way of doing things. If this doesn't happen, we don't know what to do, how to act, what to look for. So, then we do things the way we know. We talked about this. He told me how important it was for my wife to go to school. Now my wife and me can talk with these things to my children's teachers. We didn't do things this way at home. At home, the teacher is the expert. Here in America, everyone says what they think. This teacher taught me more than words, more than we could find in the dictionary. He helped me to understand. He is a friend....
Changing traditional patterns of education and interaction was a challenge for the Lao as well as for Americans. This process changed the entire community. Due to a long history of inadequate education during the French colonial period, the Lao were unable to develop a strong competitive educational value. Only a small class of elites were educated. They had a monopoly on knowledge and power. Now that has changed. Unfortunately, that change began to take place at a quicker pace for the children than for the adults. The young were quick to recognize education as a tool for upward mobility. Because they were required to be in school, they were exposed to the educational system on a daily basis. The adults, often enough, sacrificed their own potential so that the children would "get ahead." This meant that the parents sought work as a first priority. Indeed, our government required them to do so.

Health Services

Unique to the community was the county health team. Two nurses, understaffed and overworked, took on the formidable task of identifying the health problems of the refugees, informing the local health service community about uncommon and often unheard-of illnesses, and of educating the refugee community to American cultural expectations and conceptions of health. They had the additional task of educating American doctors and health personnel of the special problems of the Lao refugees as well as of their cultural attitudes towards health and health care:
The doctors finally gave us the green light and asked us to help with identifying problems. Many refugees were afraid of doctors, preferring home remedies....

Some doctors were afraid of refugees. They held cultural prejudices. They were afraid of contracting diseases....

At first we had a difficult time getting doctors to treat patients. Many still refuse to take on refugee clients....

A list of the range of treatments this team dealt with covers the spectrum from malaria and hepatitis B to multiple intestinal parasites. On home visits these women basically dealt with or referred to the social service community the health needs of the Laotians:

I didn't speak any Lao. We became real good with sign language. We drew clocks to inform them of the times they had to take medicine. An interpreter wasn't always available. Even when an interpreter was available, few have been trained in cross-cultural explanation of medical terminology. Try explaining T.B. or iron deficiency in the blood when there are no comparable terms in the language. Sophisticated equipment and medicines often generated a fear. We had no control over them once we left the home. Sometimes they would take all the medicine at once, instead of daily. Sometimes they would mix medicines and old herbal medicine treatments.... However, they always treated us well, with respect and great kindness....

Traditionally, the Laotian people bathe daily. They associated this ritual with being physically and spiritually clean. However, their understanding of germs was entirely different than in the West. Lebar and Suddard (1960) indicate that prevailing food-handling techniques and eating habits have been sources of infections. Lack of refrigeration in Laos as well as the consumption of raw pork and raw fish contributed to parasite
infections. They found that studies of school age children determined that "over 70% were infected with one or more parasites."\(^2\)

The custom of serving meals in a common bowl and dipping hands into the communal bowl created additional problems. Even though hands were washed before and after, the water used was often contaminated. The Laotian refugees carried or acquired many of these parasites on their journey to the United States. As one of the county nurses observed,

As the years have gone by, we have more materials in translation and we do have more interpreters. Health, however, is related to so many facets of life. Sickness is not the only aspect. Preventive medicine and cleanliness by American cultural standards are also important. Strange enough, the people coming in from the refugee camps in the past year are bringing more health problems than before....

Often parasites located in an individual could not be identified, as they were totally new to the American body of medical knowledge. This created both fear and frustration on the part of local physicians. As a consequence, some refused to work with refugee patients.

Beyond the health problems mentioned earlier, two important categories were almost entirely overlooked. Firstly, it was important to recognize that all of the refugees suffered periodically as a result of the psychological adjustments that had to be made while adapting to American culture and values. This was further complicated in cases where the whole range of psychological disorders found in any population were transferred cross-culturally as Lao and American interface. No effort has been
attempted at this point which addresses these needs. It is common knowledge that refugees suffered from loss of language, culture, familiar environment, and prestige. Furthermore, those individuals who spent a prolonged period of time in refugee camps had an additional set of problems to overcome. The totality of these complications have yet to be isolated or addressed.

According to one health nurse,

Questions have been raised if we are even capable of identifying all of the psychological complications that the average refugee experiences as he or she faces adjusting to American life. There is also the question of what each one has to give up. How much can a given individual give up? We know each person is different. We don't have any scale of measurement in order to identify expectations! In many ways each of the refugees must experience schizophrenia to some degree as they try to figure out what's happening to them. We have no way of identifying or responding to these irregularities. Everything we do is hit or miss. I've spent a lot of hours agonizing over the problems we encounter and cannot respond to. Then, I suppose, there are all of those we can't identify and never see....

The second area of concern is nutrition and diet. The transition from traditional foods, shopping, storage, and balanced diet to shopping in American stores, buying prepared foods, and dealing with the plethora of "junk food" available was enormous and difficult. The whole range of problems that developed around diet and nutrition have to be understood within a new cultural context. This was not transmitted in an understandable manner to the local refugees in the initial period. One nutritionist conducting a survey of the dietary practices of the Laotians in Eugene was aghast as she found pregnant
women consuming more candy bars and coca-cola than vegetables and meat.

Overall, this area of the refugee experience was probably the most neglected. Important factors to consider were financial problems -- good food is expensive; lack of education and information translated into the native language was also a problem, as was the lack of skilled health workers trained to deal with the complexities of cross-cultural health problems and adjustments, and the low priority of health and health-related problems in relation to other problems associated with resettlement that the government decided to address.

At the conclusion of the study, there were still no Lao doctors available to the community, even though there were Lao doctors in Portland. There were no real health education programs in the community. The county health program had been reduced by one-fourth and was expecting additional cuts:

We haven't even begun to deal with the real problems like dental care. Who can afford it? Many people need medicines they cannot afford....

The degree of frustration expressed by those health workers was only surpassed by their commitment. They were among the invisible members of the community who, in spite of a bureaucratic and callous system, have impacted, aided, and nurtured the refugee transition process.

Neighbors, Co-workers

In contrast to the formal human services agencies which
officially deal with the refugee community, a unique and unpredictable phenomenon appeared time and again as Laotians and Americans interfaced in the local setting. Despite a lack of knowledge of each other's cultures and of the politics involved in the refugee process, and beset with language differences and an inability to communicate in depth, many Lao people met Americans who were sensitive, considerate, helpful, and often protective.

It was these individuals who went with the refugees to the welfare office and left feeling the same frustrations in relation to the bureaucracy as did the refugees. It was these individuals who drove Lao families to the market or took them to church.

Hundreds of times I witnessed human beings from two very different cultures struggle to understand each other as they were thrust into close proximity to each other as neighbors. Comments by Americans relating to this experience captured the complexity and intensity of these exchanges that occurred on a daily basis:

This is all very strange for us. We didn't know any Laotians before they moved next door. At first we were worried. You know, we heard a lot of stories about their eating dogs and cats, about the diseases they have, and about the way they live over there. We thought maybe they didn't know how to use toilets. So we just kept to ourselves.

They were only here a couple of days and the wife came over with some egg rolls. We didn't understand too much she said, we all did a lot of head-nodding and smiling. It was really awkward. Then she left and we weren't really sure about eating them. You know, maybe they cooked a dog or something. My daughter goes to school with some of them. She said she had them at school and they were good. So we ate them. No one died as you can see.

My wife and myself began to talk things over. We decided to bring them back some filberts from my brother's farm and some mint. Hell, we couldn't have done anything
better. It really made them happy. The woman asked for some mint roots and we got her more. She planted them in a pot by her door. She also planted other stuff. Other neighbors began to see they were just pretty normal people -- they speak a different language, they look a little different, but they are good people. We began to talk more. Believe it or not, we even helped them with English and things. I never thought I'd be teaching anyone anything. I was a bad student in school.

They've been here a neighbors almost two years now. We've been over there, they've eaten here. Last Christmas we had them here. We had a good time. When they had their Lao New Year celebration, we went to it. In fact, I remember seeing you there. All in all, if I had to say anything, I'd say it this way: I think these people have really been screwed here. We went to the A.F.S. with them and they really treated these people awful. I gave them a piece of my mind. This guy works hard, he's a janitor. In his country he was some sort of official. He's not too proud to work. When I saw that I knew he was O.K. He'd do anything for you. She works part-time. She cooks, sews clothes, has a garden, and they are clean. You can eat off the floors over there. That's not what we expected. Our kids get along O.K.

All in all we don't have any problem with them. I know some of these people come over here and have real problems adjusting. It hasn't been easy for these people but they hang in there. As we can talk more English together I find they are really O.K. As I said, it was pretty hard at first. Did you know they fought on our side over there? Hell, we ought to be doing everything we can for them. They lost everything. My wife and me thought that if that happened to us we don't know if we could go to some foreign place and start over. These people got a lot of courage. I'm glad I know them... oh yeah, my dog is still alive. We laugh at how stupid we were to worry about that....

Another American summed it up this way:

Hey, I'm not going to say that everything is alright living next to these people. There are a lot of problems. They tend to have a lot of visitors, they have a lot of gatherings on weekends -- they all seem to come to this one apartment. We went over and talked to them and it was no real problem. The guy understood. They're fairly quiet most of the time now.
I had an attitude. I still do in some ways. My son was over there. These people don't really bother no one. They helped me change a tire one day. Another time I was invited to one of their celebrations. I went over and had a couple of beers. It was strange. Everyone was talking in their language. Those who spoke some English spoke to me. They treated me special there. I didn't stay long but I was glad I went over. Inside their house was like anyone else's. It was clean. That made me feel a little better. I don't worry about them living next door. I know if I need anything they'd give me a hand. They are a generous people. Real easy going. Hell, they can hold their beer. Their ways are different. They cook a lot of different food. I used to think all those smells were strange but now I don't even notice it.

Last spring I was sick and the guy next door had his wife send me over some food -- rice and meat. I thought, few Americans would do that for a neighbor they hardly know. I'm not saying we're close friends. I'm just saying they are pretty ordinary people when you get to know them. One thing -- they are real good to their kids. I guess they all lost a lot of family during the war and they love what kids they have. I watch them as a family and it reminds me of the way things were when I was a kid in Ohio. The family is really important to them. They weren't so bad once you get to know them a bit....

This spirit also manifested itself in several projects I was priviliged to be a part of while working with the Laotian community. For example, many Americans worked with the family garden project which helped to establish family garden plots for the Lao to grow fresh vegetables like they had done in Laos. Americans with no previous exposure to the Lao worked side by side to till, to plant, and to grow food. This type of experience transcended the barriers a given culture may construct and reduced the process to a common, well understood denominator. Humans were learning from other humans, sharing and enjoying. In the final analysis, after all was said and done, I believe
it was those kinds of experiences that helped most to sustain the Lao during this difficult period of adjustment. Unfortunately, there were not enough of these encounters.

City Agencies

At the conclusion of this study, the city of Eugene had yet to develop any effective system to deal with refugee problems during resettlement. Although refugees had to appear in the courts, interact with police, firemen, landlords, and tax collectors, no official translators had been hired by the city to insure that the rights of the Laotians were protected and that adequate information was gathered when decisions were made. Instead, the city chose to rely on community college translators, when available, to help solve problems. These translators were already working overtime for their community. As a result, most of the time no translator was present to represent the needs or perspective of the refugee. This caused enormous problems and generated anxiety and hostility towards refugees on the part of civil servants and city personnel who could not communicate with refugees when problems occurred. An excerpt from my field notes of October 1982 illustrates this problem:

Being in court with a refugee is a Kafkaesque experience. The judge asks questions, the refugee nods, smiles, and looks at me. The judge looks at him, looks at me, and asks if I can communicate the question. We talk. The judge asks another question. The same process transpires all over again. Fifty-five minutes of this kind of interaction transpires. Then the judge asks if the Lao has anything to say. Confused, fearful, not understanding, he lets out with a barrage in Lao. A stunned and confused
judge lets him finish. Then he looks at me and says, "What did he say?" Another conference. Frustration all around. All this over a simple traffic violation that happened because a policeman couldn't understand what the Lao was trying to explain....

This was a simple case. The judge finally gave him the minimum fine, more out of frustration than an understanding of the problem. The inability of city agencies and personnel to respond to the basic needs of the Laotians created enormous adjustment problems.

Those responsible for the resettlement process seemed to have overlooked the American community on the local level. Instead, they put a great deal of time, energy, and dollars into relatively ineffective educational programs which emphasized rapid assimilation into the work force. I remain convinced that a broader educational experience, effective public relations, emphasis on problem solving and decision making in context, as well as opportunity for involvement by Americans in the community might have helped to make the post-camp period for the Lao less painful. The human factor was greatly underestimated. Community education and mechanisms for realistic acculturation did not exist. The courts, the police department, and the fire department remain as blatant examples of this neglect. In the courts, justice speaks English only.

The few human beings who extended a hand to the Lao were not enough to counteract the many with prejudices, with erroneous understandings of the Lao, with an unwillingness to give the Lao
a chance to adjust, with an axe to gring or ignorance to overcome. The latter were, by far, more numerous than the few who took a chance. Community, knowing one was a part of the life of one’s neighbors, was an essential aspect of the traditional Lao experience. Not being accepted by many Americans, being left on the periphery of American life, while coping with the loss of traditional community caused great mental anguish and feelings of isolation for many Lao. One young man stated the problem in this way:

To me, every American lives in a lot of little worlds, sort of like boxes. The American goes from box to box to do whatever he has to do... church, school, home. They don’t mix together very much. You can see the new baby in the glass cage... and the dead also go into a box. In Laos it was not that way. Everything was together. Neighbors had a special place. It was one big box instead of many little ones here. It is easy to be very alone here. I don’t like this too much. It makes my heart sad. For this thing, I miss my country....

Conclusions

Fieldwork with the Laotian refugee population during their post-camp interfacing with North American culture generated the following conclusions:

A. The resettlement process frustrated both refugees and Americans in the following areas as cultural interfacing unfolded:

1. The complicated bureaucratic structures and personnel of American governmental agencies, social service projects, and the schools were unprepared for the influx
of Laotians. This created tensions which inhibited the smooth transmission of essential knowledge during this initial adjustment period.

2. Most agency personnel were not prepared to identify the cultural or psychological differences between Laotians and other Southeast Asians. Laotians, more often than not, were treated as if they were Vietnamese. This contributed to erroneous assumptions on the part of Americans working with Laotians in the schools and in the community. Erroneous assumptions led to the transmission of inadequate or incorrect information.

3. Synchronicity of action, perception, or thought between members of the two cultures rarely occurred.

4. Laotians arrived in the United States with high expectations for success, reinforced by American promises made in Laos or by American personnel in the refugee camps. Reconciling the myth with the realities of living in the United States as a refugee was difficult and depressing.

5. Families and relatives were not kept intact during the refugee resettlement process. Becoming more aware of relatives or friends resettled in another part of the United States often led to secondary migration. This movement disrupted initial ties with Americans and frustrated sponsors and other members of the American community.
6. Sponsors of refugees had almost no preparation for that role. Responsibilities were not clearly defined by the government. Idealism over being a sponsor became submerged by the complexity of involvement required when dealing with refugees. Many sponsors burned out or lost interest within the first year. This often left refugees without essential contacts and advocates within the American community.

7. Different and/or conflicting value systems between refugees and sponsors created both frictions and disillusionment. The expectations Christian denominations had for Buddhist Laotians were frequently unrealistic and impossible for the Laotians to adjust to. Prohibitions on smoking, drinking beer, and coffee or coca-cola were almost universally rejected by the refugee population.

8. Americans immediately began to identify groups of Laotians living in one locale as a "community." In fact, most of the refugees were thrown together by the circumstances of resettlement and were not a community by the usual definition. Americans expected the Lao to respond through internal community structures that were not present. The Laotians were, in fact, undergoing experiences where they were just beginning to think about and to identify the process of organizing internal self-help mechanisms.
9. American bureaucrats did not leave time for leaders to emerge who understood American culture. Instead, they often relied on the leaders from the old country who, in many cases, were too old or were unwilling to lead the Lao communities through the necessary steps for successful acculturation.

10. Too many Laotian refugees arrived too quickly during the period from 1978 until 1982. This strained already tight budgets during a time when the economy of the United States in general, and Oregon in particular was undergoing a severe recession.

11. The city of Eugene failed to establish translation services which were essential to insuring the basic rights of the refugees as they attempted to access the courts, city services, and other agencies.

12. Inadequate health screening in the refugee camps exacerbated the problems the medical community experienced as new diseases, problems, and concepts of health had to be dealt with by both Laotians and Americans. The city almost totally neglected this critical area.

13. Expectations by the schools and social service agencies were often unrealistic. Laotians were expected to make choices and decisions about matters for which they lacked adequate information. Often they were expected to respond
to situations or materials that were not translated or that had no previous cultural context for them.

14. Social service regulations and American definitions of the family tended to break down traditional Laotian structures as well as eliminate traditional self-help mechanisms within the community.

15. Time, and relation to time created major problems for Laotians and Americans alike as the Laotians were expected to adjust to the American definition and perception of time.

16. Superficial changes in Laotian dress or social behavior were mistaken by Americans as evidence of basic acculturation, which led to assumptions that the Laotians were ready for complex roles at work or in the community. In fact, it needs to be demonstrated that the Laotians have even begun to acquire an understanding of the deep cultural meanings, structures, and behaviors essential for survival in American society.

17. Enormous language barriers need to be overcome. The Laotians, quite simply, have not had enough time to obtain adequate language training and fluency.

18. Laotians were disappointed with the level of American response to their needs. They had expected American
people to be more generous. They often found the governmental agencies and bureaucrats to be mean and lacking in the heart they had hoped and expected Americans to display.

19. Laotians were faced with an entirely new spectrum of values. Choices were difficult to make. Often there was no choice. This was particularly difficult for older Laotians as they simultaneously observed the young becoming Americans at a rapid pace and the dissolution of the extended family rapidly approaching. They perceived the American family structure as weaker and less sensitive to the elderly.

20. Laotian adults needed training with decision making in the American cultural context.

21. Laotians were in need of understanding the roles of parents and expectations of parents in relation to the rest of American society.

22. The process of being a refugee forced adults, worried over the success of their children, to sacrifice their own learning potential in order that their children might succeed.

23. Work was invariably a priority over education. The Laotians were well aware of the economic situation in the United States and feared not being able to support
their families here.

24. The agencies responsible for resettlement and the local institutions responsible for training and schooling failed to consider the Laotians' previous experience as adults. Consequently, the adults were frequently treated as inferior or as children. This was confusing as well as demeaning for the refugee adult.

25. Consumer education was sorely lacking as Laotians grappled with the problems of what to buy, how to buy, when to buy, as well as with the American system of currency, banking, and saving for the future.

26. Community educators, high school personnel, and community service personnel expressed frustration over the lack of articulation with cultural experts on the university level. They viewed the university as a repository for valuable expertise that was not often available to them on the local level.

3. Challenges lie ahead for the Laotians and the Americans in the following areas:

1. Laotians seek to keep the family unit intact while American values assault it. The Lao have a great respect for the elderly, something they found lacking in American culture. They had difficulty accepting the independence and lack of responsibility for the parents
on the part of American youth. Laotians found the American custom of putting old folks in institutions abhorrent.

2. Laotians are working at developing community structures, self-help mechanisms within the community, and a trust for other factions within the Laotian population.

3. Laotians are adjusting to new roles in American society while deciding what portion of traditional Laotian values and culture to retain.

4. Laotians are examining parenting in a new society. They are seeking ways to keep relationships between child and parent viable, between family and society alive.

5. Americans must develop programs focused on in-depth education of the Laotians in the critical areas of physical and psychological health.

6. Americans and Laotians have much to learn about each others' culture and system of values: many Americans have yet to accept Laotian refugees as equal human beings.

7. Americans and Laotians must work together to develop community bi-lingual and bi-cultural teams that will attempt to solve some of the problems and adjustments created by the acculturation process.
8. Americans and Laotians are re-examining their original assumptions and expectations of each other as they share with each other the responsibility for creating a successful acculturation experience. This includes further exploration of the physiological and psychological aspects of adjusting to each other.

9. Laotians have to become more involved with the American community. Americans have to reach out with a helping hand when that happens. That help must come in a form other than a basic material response.

10. Americans must accept the fact that the pivotal role the United States played in the devastation of Laos was real.

11. American educators and anthropologists need to develop strategies and materials for teaching that transmit culturally specific assumptions about how the English language is spoken and used.

Recommendations

Recommendations are always difficult to make in a situation such as this. Ex-post-facto they come very late to a resettlement process which is well underway. As a result of research into the historical aspects of refugee resettlement as well as the data and experiences generated by the fieldwork activity, the following recommendations are made:
1. It is recommended that adult educators have substantial multi-cultural and cross-cultural training as a part of certification and degree requirements. This would include a basic examination of American culture and the role of schooling in the acculturation process.

2. It is recommended that the university, as a resource for the community, needs to provide workshops and ongoing staff training for social service providers and community college educators as they examine American culture, the role they play in the acculturation process, and as they examine at least the more fundamental structures of the cultures of the ethnic groups they work with.

3. It is recommended that the university develop comprehensive programs for staff development training on the community college and high school levels. The extensive cross-cultural expertise available on the university level might alleviate some of the problems of cultural interfacing experienced on the local level.

4. It is recommended that the community college needs to re-evaluate the status of the refugee population and to develop stronger programs based on their current needs. There is a dire need for adult education focused on realistic training, cultural orientation and adjustment, and on-going language training offered in a meaningful
and appropriate context.

5. It is recommended that the community college identify educational methodology and structures which incorporate on-going analysis of the needs of their clientele. As the Lao people become more sophisticated in their understanding of American culture, new problems, questions, and needs are generated.

6. It is recommended that all sectors of the greater American community need to encourage and support the Lao community as they grapple with developing internal self-help mechanisms. A stable, long-range support system that is refugee-based is a critical need as the five year period until full citizenship passes quickly.

7. It is recommended that the university, community college, city and federal government might significantly aid the acculturation process in a positive manner by providing some program of comprehensive leadership training. This training might help the recently formed Lao Mutual Assistance Association survive.

8. It is recommended that Laotians have to begin to take more responsibility for their own process, and Americans must encourage this in a positive manner while maintaining crucial support systems during the acculturation period. By including Lao leaders in decision making
areas for the programs that impact their community, the greater American community will also be including them in the responsibility for keeping that process realistic and humane.

9. It is recommended that support be developed for the Lao community to acquire the services of a Lao-speaking doctor to attend to the sick. There is enough of a clientele here to warrant a one-day-a-week clinic by Lao doctors from Portland. Local county health people have offered rent-free space if this could be expedited.

10. It is recommended that there be developed a comprehensive mental health service program for the community. Innumerable mental health problems related to acculturation are just beginning to surface and be identified. The local community has no program for dealing with these problems. No individual or family counselor is available who is trained in the area of cross-cultural and resettlement problems. There is a demonstrated need for a comprehensive program such as this. Even part-time professional help from the greater Portland area might alleviate this problem. Alcohol, crisis, and financial counseling are also a dire need in the Lao community.

11. Lao women and men, with the help of American women and men, need to develop support structures for adults in
the Lao community. The Lao women are more receptive to other women as teachers and counselors while the same situation applies to Lao men.

12. It is recommended that adequate programs for nutrition, basic home health care, and personal health and hygiene need to be developed for the entire community. Health para-professionals need to be trained and selected from the Lao community so that long-range structures and skills are established within the Lao community and thus easily accessed by members. American medical personnel need specific training as to the medical problems, needs, and fears the Laotians experience during the initial stages of acculturation.

13. It is recommended that community educational structures be developed which promote the positive aspects of resettlement. The citizenry of the greater community are in need of some education related to the on-going development and status of the refugees. Periodic newspaper articles focused on refugee successes might open up more opportunities in the private sector for refugees.

14. It is recommended that university nutrition experts work with the leadership of the Lao community to expedite nutritional studies in order to help the Lao balance meals, understand nutritional values of various
American foods, and develop an understanding of the adjustments in eating patterns that are necessary as they change cultural environments.

15. It is recommended that programs be developed to help the Lao adjust to stress and stress management in American society. It was apparent that stress, both short- and long-term, impacted adjustment negatively at various times.

16. Educators might begin to use educational television programs as a method of reaching the homebound, housewives, and the elderly. Language, nutritional, and other information could be transmitted in this manner. A home setting would allow the entire family to participate.

17. Both Americans and Laotians must recognize that this period of transition is both difficult and unpredictable. The long-range results of cultural interfacing will not be known for some time to come.

Recollections from the Field, 1981-1984

In retrospect, daily experiences are often consumed and then transformed by post-facto analysis. Despite a detailed field journal, the attempts to encapsulate the events that transpired during and as a result of my fieldwork with the Laotian community between 1981 and 1983 are at best smooth stones cast across the surface of a deep river, creating ripples that expand, interact, and then become absorbed by the subtle and ever-changing flow of time. Comments made by various Laotians relating to our exchanges
express this more succinctly:

When you watch us, how do you know what is the truth and what is not the truth of the Lao way? Maybe we want you to know a certain thing, so we do a certain thing. You may not even know what the real thing is we wish to hide. Sometimes I think that as you watch us, you do as we do. If we laugh, you smile. We do this, too... you know, when we watch T.V. When we are with Americans, if everyone else laughs, we laugh. Even if we don't understand. Now I understand that it isn't only the Lao who are children to the American way. Also, the Americans are children to the Lao way. If you ever go to my country you will understand what I mean. But now... we are in your country, so we appear as the children....

If only we could speak as men. Two men shouldn't have to have a third man between them as they speak of things from the heart. This is very difficult for me not to speak English. The words are very different... they mean things of America... not of my country. Only the words of my country can tell you what I have to say when I speak from the heart....

I cannot pretend to understand the Lao Lhum or to speak for their experiences. Hemmed in by both the educational and perceptual focus of my own culture, the fieldwork became an expression of my meandering, interfacing, and occasional glimpses of "otherness" as I briefly entered into the lives of the Laotian refugees. Simultaneously, they were striving to bring meaning and order to their initial experiences within American society:

Right now we are very poor... we try hard... we belong to the Christian church... we do not smoke or drink... I am worried for finding work... a man should be able to support his family... they tell us times are hard here right now... that many Americans are out of work... We did not expect this... we thought everyone in the United States had a job... We did not expect to find the same problems that we left in our own country... Who would have dreamed that?
Like ripples generated by the skipping stones, our circles of experience converged, allowing for intermittent synchronicity. Nevertheless, whatever I had thought I had come in search of soon became secondary to the immediate realities of being an anthropologist and an educator, a member of a privileged class having the option to study another set of human beings totally dependent upon the class I represent. One Lao man, expressing some confusion while attempting to comprehend fieldwork and seeming to perceive it as not having to work for a living stated: "You must be awfully rich to have time to learn how to read and write so that you can 'watch' for a living...." Initially, the participant observer had no real place in the community. My first task, despite a well-circulated letter written in Lao and in English, was to convey to the Lao people what I was attempting to accomplish.

In the beginning, it was quickly apparent that my presence was an additional burden to a people beset with adjustment problems. During the post-camp period, the refugee population faced a series of on-going orientations and dilemmas which at best complicated daily life and at worst presented seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Individuals and families experienced rapid developmental and cultural changes; they attempted to straddle the gap between an essentially agricultural experience in Laos and the technological experience in the United States while simultaneously attempting to recover from a war and the subsequent confinement in Thai refugee camps or those in Malaysia or the Philippines; roles changed; Americans had complex and
often confusing expectations and perceptions of refugees and the refugee experience; the Laotian refugees were physically distinct from other new Americans and bear the stigmas attached to the Southeast Asian war; and lastly, on a more personal level, they struggled to develop some identity that bound those experiences and facilitated immediate direction as well as long-range survival.

If one was to understand the Laotian refugee resettlement experience in context, it became critical that an examination of the historical antecedents from which this process developed be included in any discussion. To separate the events of America's Southeast Asian war during the period 1954-1975 from the resulting exodus, diaspora of refugees, the process of resettlement and cultural interfacing would deprive those experiences of their historical meaning as well as lead one to conclude that being a Laotian refugee in the United States was an isolated phenomena rather than the consequence of a more complex global process.

In preparation for the fieldwork, two years of preliminary research, a pilot study in the Laotian community, and extensive preparatory coursework provided direction for the eventual long-term study. During those years, and in the four preceding them, I had been active with the refugee process in the Pacific Northwest as a trainer of educators and social service personnel working with refugees, as editor for a model of Refugee Survival Competencies developed by a team of Pacific Northwest Community College educators and representatives from social service agencies,
as a curriculum specialist, as a media consultant for the preparation of English as a Second Language videotapes to be used in Southeast Asian refugee camps and, finally, as a cross-cultural consultant regarding the refugee population's process of interfacing with American culture. Those experiences helped to identify a specific target population, to focus on appropriate background information, to consult with representatives of the Lao community as a proposal for research was developed, to identify an appropriate site, and finally to select a research methodology appropriate to the refugee process and the questions related to it.

During the early stages of fieldwork I found myself struggling to focus on and to record the developments that were transpiring in the lives of the Laotians. Despite a battery of anthropology and education courses, a reasonably flexible field plan, and the feeling that I was prepared for this experience, it began to occur to me that very little could have prepared me for the extent of involvement that intensive participant observation requires of the researcher. My field notes of late 1981 reflect the beginning of a shift in consciousness as I began to struggle with my role, with the question of traditional definitions of objectivity, and with what I was attempting to accomplish:

I'm here. I'm watching -- often twelve to fifteen hours a day. I'm recording what I see and I've generated a couple of hundred pages of notes, observations, and questions. I'm feeling extremely frustrated and isolated as I spend most of my time with the Laot. After the initial excitement of moving to a new town, I'm faced with the reality of getting to know
the Lao. I'm damned scared of failing, of missing the essential points, of getting too involved and losing my objectivity. All of the romantic notions of fieldwork quickly vanishing, I find the Laotians difficult to deal with. Gestures, relationships, habits are all very confusing. They answer my questions politely, but then lapse into Lao to discuss them without including me. I am often left with the feeling that I am entertaining them. My translator-informant does a lot of interpretation. He doesn't always translate exactly what people are saying to me. He says he's protecting me. Our relationship is awkward. I know I'm not getting to the heart of things. I find myself doing all the mechanical things... almost obsessed with the process of gathering demographics and personal data in order to balance the frustration I feel over not communicating as a human being. Numbers, locations, institutions, structures are all fine -- but I came here to be a part of the human experience and I know I'm an outsider. I've taken refuge in my notes, charts, geneologies...

The first few months in the field yielded an ever-growing body of demographic data, the greater part of which was reflected in Chapter III of this study. In other areas, I struggled with myself and my training as I attempted to assess what I was doing and what was happening to me. Attempting to be a quasi-Lao left me stretched between two worlds. In time, I began to realize that the transition from normal everyday comings and goings at the university to immersion into intensive fieldwork impacts the researcher's life and perceptions. Over those long, lonely Christmas holidays I came to the conclusion that I could no longer "look in" from a safe distance, hidden behind the false objectivity I believed my tools provided. In the final analysis, I was the instrument that had to be made functional. I realized that I had to take chances and lay aside my fears of "too much" involvement. My field notes of Christmas Day 1981 record the circumstances that I believe led to this breakthrough:
It's Christmas Day. I spent the greater part of the morning with a Lao family. I was invited over for some food and when I arrived I found my host plus several extended family members sitting about talking. Sticky rice (naa), vegetables, hot sauce (nampla), and some sweet cakes were served on a mat in the middle of the living room floor. The women prepared the food -- the men ate and talked separately. I asked of the holidays at this time of the year in Laos. It was explained to me that many people have celebrated a holiday at Christmas time since the French came to their country over a hundred years ago. It was more of a secular holiday for the Lao than a religious one. We spoke of American Christmas -- the different ways in which it is celebrated. There were some questions concerning the appropriateness of gifts -- to whom one gives gifts. In Laos, it was explained, the boss at work, policeman, and other officials were sometimes given gifts. One individual explained that the Lao here would get together, cook some food, drink and talk -- glad to have a little time off from work, if employed. He explained some of the other people would feel very bad (baw di) because there were many unemployed and could not afford to celebrate much. Some of the people 'bought' or made gifts for sponsors and for American friends. In this particular household there were none of the trappings of Christmas, e.g., wrapped gifts, Christmas tree, lighted candles, etc.

Thought, recorded later that afternoon, reflected back upon the phenomenon related to holidays.

I thought this afternoon about being able to afford a holiday. Strange enough, the depth and extent of the poverty these people are experiencing is not always visible. Americans have a tendency to think in extremes where poverty is concerned. If you aren't obviously destitute, or if you have not lost all of your pride or find it difficult to express your needs, then it is generally assumed all is O.K. A classic case is one of the translators I have worked with. He dresses fairly well, although I know most of his clothes come from Salvation Army stores. He lives in a rented house and drives a fairly new model car. He is employed. To see him on the street or at his place of work, one would not realize he lives marginally. One finds his $500-600 salary is the major source of support for over thirteen individuals, not including those extended family members that come and go because they have no food. In addition, there is some food stamp help and one partial welfare payment. Rent is $375, the car payment is $150. The car is necessary for the job,
for transportation, and for emergencies. In the final
analysis, the family eats very little. Rice is the staple.
Meat is seldom seen on the table. The family survives
without medical care, afraid to get sick or to have to go
to the hospital. They are in constant fear of being evicted
because of non-payment of rent. Because they have been over
here eighteen months, the family's benefits have been reduced
to minimal levels, certainly not enough to feed, clothe, and
provide the necessities for seven active children of school
age. Sacrifices are made on the part of the adults so that
the children are properly dressed for school and for inter-
acting with the American community. One individual told
me, "I put the paper [cardboard] in the hole of my shoe...
you see, no one can see this when I walk... only see the
top...."

The translator referred to previously is considered one
of the more successful Lao by the local American social
service community. Americans don't see the behind-the-
scenes story. He has too much pride to share his problems
with his employers. He does the same work as his American
counterpart, but he makes less than one third of the salary
of the other. In effect he is the resident Lao expert on
the staff of the institution where he works. He receives
no benefits; the American does. He has been called upon at
all times of the day and night to translate with no fee in-
volved. Local police, courts, etc., feel free to call upon
him, so they can "understand his community." He has become
tired, close to burned-out. His co-workers forget that he,
too, is dealing with the same adjustment problems of other
refugees. He wants to go to school, but he can't afford it.
He worries how his family will eat. Few of these concerns
are apparent to the local human service community.

The house I visited this Christmas Day was sparsely furnished.
One couch, a chair, a television set. The kitchen had a table
and two chairs. Almost everyone sits on the floor rather
than the furniture. On the wall was a poster advertising a
local beer, some National Geographic magazine pictures of Laos,
and a Buddha tucked into a corner shelf. The floor was car-
peted with a wool rug. The television was in constant use,
the sound turned off while people were engaged in serious
talk. Over thirteen people sleep in the two bedrooms and on
the living room floor. The house was clean, even by the
strictest of American standards. Needless to say, it was
always crowded. There was very little privacy, and people
were forced by the necessities of survival to adjust to very
limited personal space. At the moment, the parents in the
house aren't sure if they will be able to "stay under the
roof." New welfare cuts have devastated the extended family
unit and they are penalized for having other adults living in the household. In essence, they are penalized for sharing in their traditional manner. Many cannot make it on their own.

My notes further indicate that during that period I had thought a great deal about the Christmas rituals of our culture, of watching from within the Lao structure from a totally different perspective. I felt it to be an empty ritual, lacking much sense or meaning when viewed from the outside. I was alone, caught between the rituals of Christmas and the rituals of fieldwork. Neither made complete sense to me at that time. I wondered why I was there, what I was doing, and what of value would come out of this schizophrenic process.

The year 1982 presented a host of new opportunities that would ultimately enhance and expand my fieldwork experiences. By the early months of the year, as a result of the development of a close relationship with my primary informant-interpreter, I made friends within the Lao community. However, the primary obstacle that seemed insurmountable was explaining to the Lao the meaning of participant observation, anthropology, and the dissertation process. There was just no place for someone like me in the schematic of their daily lives. I felt like an exotic pet, wondering just who was studying whom. Later on I would find out that some of the members of the community thought I was part of the Central Intelligence Agency, sent to spy on them. One friend finally told me he had thought that "... you were a secret spy for the A.F.S. [Adult and Family Services] who watched what we were doing with our welfare money"; others thought I was a
policeman, another thought I was a member of the army, and so on. This would change, as in February 1982 I was hired as a consultant to the Lane Community College Refugee Program where I was to work part-time to help develop a cross-cultural community team dealing with refugee problems and concerns during the post-camp adjustment period. This new role provided the opportunity to become more involved, with the emphasis on participation.

As a member of the Eugene social service community, with a readily identifiable role, I became more acceptable to the Laotians. I had a specific role, and relationships could be formalized within a context that was understandable to the refugee population. I was no longer just an anthropologist-educator (something which generated a lot of suspicion) writing a story about the Laotians. As one Lao man said,

No one tell the truth to story writers. Everyone thinks over the story and tells it like he think it sound best. He tell it so he always look so good... Everyone is a story writer....

I became Mr. Rob, the counselor, the person who would help to explain the American way and to assist with adjustment problems. This role served as a visa for exploring the remnants of Laotian culture the refugees tried to maintain within American culture. It also provided avenues of access to home, community interactions, and areas of privileged activity that were exclusive to the role of counselor. This daily exposure and growing
insight helped me to sort out the various and complex elements which composed the refugee experience and contributed to the greater synergetic process they were expected to deal with. Slowly, over the months and years, I became accepted as an integral part of that experience. Early in the process I decided to hold off on the survey questions and formal open-ended interviews. Instead, I intended to develop a rapport and a comfort level around my presence in the community. In addition, I wanted to ascertain, to as great an extent as possible, that the community understood what I was trying to accomplish, and to generate dialogue while simultaneously providing individuals with the time to think about their experiences as refugees.

Over time, it became a familiar sight to have me about, asking questions or participating in "men's talk" which often covered the whole spectrum of life experiences from politics and religion to what qualities a "good" woman must possess. The fact that I was studying Laotian language and culture was taken as a community project and responsibility. People became involved with me, eager to teach, to share, as well as to offer feedback and suggestions on my language acquisition. They wanted to be sure I was learning the "Lao" way of doing things. By this time, I was working with three translators and a variety of informants in order to accommodate various factions in the community. People preferred their "friends" as translators. This sometimes created confusing transcriptual problems. Clarification depended upon my personal relationship with the translator and his command of English. However, in every case, I double- or cross-checked with
other informants and translators to clarify and/or to verify translated materials and my understanding of them. Both translators and informants became more attuned to the tasks as we worked closely together. This was reflected through better transcriptions as the project developed.

The intensive involvement within the Lao community created profoundly deep personal relationships which were crucial to the documentation and experiences recorded in this study. As a counselor, job developer, and community organizer, I spent untold hours involved in a wide range of community activities, which included weddings, parties, family gatherings, attendance in court, emergency visits to the hospitals and clinics, intercession with difficult and often hostile government-social service agencies and a variety of other activities. On a personal level, I spent thousands of hours talking to people individually or in small groups about their problems, about the difficulties related to American culture, about frustrations and disappointments, and about homesickness generally felt around the time of special Laotian holidays or at times of crisis. Death and sickness seemed to be a catalyst for a fear of dying in America, "... a place far from home." A brief notation from my field journal during 1983 captured the essence of one such moment:

I was surprised to find so many Lao at the hospital. Several were in the waiting room, some visiting, and I had met several outside the hospital watching the children for those who were inside visiting. Everyone knew she was dying -- I realized I was the only American there as I entered the room. For a relatively tall Laotian woman,
she looked like a small child wrapped in a white sheet. This yellow-brown Laotian woman was a direct contrast to the sterility of the room. Six people were standing around, not talking, just to be there with her when she died. Every:once in a while someone would go to hold her hand. She didn't remember me. She looked up as someone whispered in her ear and gave me a brief smile. I thought of my own mother, of death, and what it must be like to die away from what is familiar and known. The Laotian men and women created a buffer zone of reality, a common denominator for her to relate to as she died. This small group of human beings lent a warmth and personal touch to a sterile and frightening environment. She spoke once in Lao to one woman and it was later translated for me as "... she said she is going home to Laos soon. She knows her spirit will go there to be with her friends and family. She said she is tired and can't work to stay alive in America any more... she is happy to go home...."

Realizing it was important that I had come but also aware that I didn't belong -- that I was an outsider -- I left after a discreet visit. This moment was distinctly Lao, for the Lao as they shared communally the death of a loved friend in an alien environment....

The loss was quiet, the pain was internalized, life went on within the refugee community. One could not afford the luxury of extended personal grief. Three days after she died I was invited to a small meal in her honor, "not a celebration and not a wake." Over forty adults came together to talk, to share, to be mutually reinforced. Discussion was mostly centered on life in the United States and its problems, and on the question of "going home." There was discussion of the "new" government in Laos, their hatred for communism and loss of their property. With her death, a household and a family struggled to stay together. The husband and children did not have the familiar traditional structures of their home culture to support them during the period of loss. One felt an uncommon wisdom in that room.
that night, a wisdom wrought of trial by fire. I could not help but think of how much we have to learn from these people about life, about our species, and about ourselves. I also wondered if our entirely different perspectives on life, our different cultural experiences, and the lack of mutually understood and identified points in time and space were conducive to open dialogue or would allow a sharing of that wisdom.

In time I came to understand that beneath the reality of surface impressions of the Lao existed a landscape and a geography expressive of their primary culture and experiences which engaged in a continual dance with the new culture of America. These encounters generated all sorts of clues and signals which indicated that synchronicity between the two cultures was a rare experience. My heart, my ears, my intuitions were often as important to the process of recording and analyzing as were my eyes. Configurations of friendships and relationships, the willingness to speak openly or within a group, change in dress or appearance, acceptance or rejection of new ideas and experiences would change according to time and event. Any situation had to be viewed from a variety of vantage points, including, sometimes, the events of the far distant past as well as aspirations for the future. I had to constantly look for the "other" things that illuminated that process. Directly impacting my role and any information I received was at best a mistrust and at worst a lingering disappointment with the Euro-American. As close as we became, these feelings, combined with unemployment and an
increasing inability to keep families together created an environment where the truth of any matter was difficult to come by. The fragile nature of the post-camp state created a lingering tension. Across the board, almost every adult Laotian I knew found some difficulty understanding the behavior of Americans and feared telling too much.

As friends and as individuals, we shared the questions and struggled for understandings of adjustment to a new culture. Over beer, over coffee, across the desk, working in the garden, walking along the river, moving furniture, barbecuing chicken, in numerous settings and in various psychological and emotional states, we struggled to bring meaning to what was transpiring on a daily basis. Ultimately, across the parameters that cultures construct, it was individuals who dealt with the process of understanding, accepting, and effectively communicating with each other. Sometimes we were successful, other times drew a blank or a stand-off.

The very first acceptance of me by the community best illustrates the differences in culture and the difficulties generated by the interfacing process. My field notes detail that first night of being on the inside:

It's winter. The rain is crashing with those big, cold drops that February rains in Oregon are known for. I'm having a quick coffee before going to a gathering at the home of one of the Lao leaders. I'm not quite sure what to expect. I've been a friend of his son for months -- he's been my closest and most reliable informant. This is the first time I've been invited to their home. He made it clear that I'd be the only American there, hinting there were things for me to learn and see that he
couldn't speak of directly. I'm feeling anxious, hoping that I handle things well. I'll write my impressions down later.

[Later that evening] Well, I'm home... it's about 2:30 a.m. I went there tonight with "demographic" knowledge of the family members and most of the people present. I knew their ages, past occupations, basic political sympathies, and a host of current adjustment problems. I knew that the mother in this household was from a "higher" family than the father. He had been a civil servant in Laos and both were considered rich in relation to the average Lao. All of their children were schooled in English, French, and Lao, which automatically made them part of the five percent of Laotians who received that kind of education during the French or American colonial periods.

I didn't bring a notebook tonight. My translator advised I just come and be a part of things, to watch, enjoy, and then we would talk it over later. Pulling up to the curb in front of the house my stomach was tight. My friend came to the door as I rang the bell. I had passed through a white pickett fence, across a well-groomed lawn with rose bushes as I was on my way to the front porch. Just like any other suburban house, ran through my mind. As I entered, two younger brothers of my Lao friend, whom I had met before, greeted me first in Lao and then in English. Everyone was helping me to speak Lao. Suh-by dee [hello] ... Hi, Rob.... The hallway to the house was lined with shoes and coats. I took off mine as well. As I entered the living room there were about thirty men sitting on the floor around a series of woven mats. On the mats were food, beer, cigarettes, etc. As many were smoking, the room was heavy with clouded smoke. People were talking and only a few heads raised as I entered.

My friend took me over to his Dad where I was greeted and asked to sit down. Several others stopped and said hello; I knew almost everyone in the room. I had met with them for one reason or another over the months, under varying circumstances. Seeing them together, as a group, was a totally new experience. I was immediately aware of being the outsider.

With typical Lao politeness, a bottle of good whiskey was produced and in the Lao custom, each man took a little whiskey from a communal glass, drank, and then turned the glass upside down to show due respect. This was repeated across the room one-by-one until all the men had toasted me. My friend's father took the bottle from person to person.
Later, I was to learn that I should have been the person to do that. In time, as I grew in understanding of Lao custom, this ritual and others would become secondhand. Fortunately, due to some planning on the part of my translator-friend, I had brought a bottle of good whiskey [Johnny Walker Red] with me to the gathering. [Needless to say, I was happy to be one of the later arrivals. Eventually I would have the experience of arriving earlier and having to drink a little bit (now neung) of whiskey with each new arrival. It certainly is a good way to keep the researcher from asking too many questions or from being too observant. It is also an excellent device through which tension is reduced.]

The room was painted white. There were no pictures on the walls. In one corner a two foot Buddha was placed on a stool. Fresh flowers and fruit were on a tray before the statue. A candle was lit in a small red glass. Later I was told the television couch and chair had been moved out to make people more comfortable.

The natural rhythm of the evening continued and groups or individuals conversed about life, politics, and daily experiences. The women and girls stayed in the kitchen, cooking, talking, and occasionally bringing food to the living room. This was to be a special occasion for me as it would be the first time I heard the Kene -- a bamboo reed instrument special to the Laotians. Occasionally one of the younger men would play a song and people would stop to listen. At those moments, I watched faces -- away in thought, smiling, tuned to the sounds of the Kene echoing across the room. This experience transcended the living room of a suburban family home in America. I felt moved across time and space to another place far distant -- the smells of the food, the sound of the Kene, the men sitting close and talking around the reed mats, for a brief moment maintaining touch with and reinforcing their primary cultural realities.

As the evening wore on, I became increasingly cognizant of a shift in focus. Discussion became more serious and in a rather spontaneous manner, the host finally said he had invited me here so that we could talk about being Lao:

Mr., Rob has asked us to help him understand Lao people... Lao language... Lao ways. [Discussion centered on what was the best possible manner short of going to Laos to live. A series of comments were made by individuals present]:

You can't really know Laos here. We are Laos, yet we are sometimes different here....
Everything is changed in Laos. Laos is gone to us.... How do we tell anyone what it was before the wars... it was so beautiful... we had everything we needed....

Maybe the best way is for each of us to tell a little bit of our own lives, of where we lived, and what happened. This will help Mr. Rob....

My translator-informant, by making the latter statement, brought a bit of focus to the discussion. His Dad started with a story that lasted well over two hours -- individuals interrupted, clarified, confirmed, and I found the first of my oral biographies emerging. Talk was lively, animated, and contagious. This group process, which we would repeat dozens of times during the next year and a half, became a catalyst for exploring issues, defusing frustrations, clarifying confusions, and reconciling different perspectives. It helped to develop a sense of trust, confidentiality, and a willingness, within the confines of the communal experience, to touch on subjects and areas of experience that were personal and which left the individual vulnerable. Throughout the evening we took a good look at Laos from their perspective.

Before going home, one Lao man asked, again, why I was writing all this. I attempted to explain that their experiences and perspectives were important, that if they were recorded now then they wouldn't be lost to their grandchildren who would be American and not Laotian. This way the grandparents and the grandchildren might be able to understand each other. I explained that the more perspectives we had on Laos, on the camps, on the war, on coming and adjusting to America, the better we could deal with helping Laotians and Americans adjust to each other. One man interrupted me and said, "We are all like the puzzle. Mr. Rob must see many of the pieces. Then he puts them together to get the big picture. Then we can all look at it, too...." I realized that no one in the room had the full story. This helped to center my efforts and to reinforce my feelings that the oral history approach would be invaluable. Much of what I heard either contradicted the readings, the anthropological studies, the accounts of the war, or touched on areas that these reports had not and could not have included. What left me feeling excited was the fact that the community [at this point, men] felt this project to be useful.

Later on, more than a year later, one of the participants would tell me:
I'm eighteen. I learned more about my country and what happened in these talks than I knew at home. I was fourteen when we left. Earlier we didn't have these talks because everyone was afraid of the war and too busy. Now I know more. I want to go home someday and do some things in Laos. I feel cheated that I can't do them. I didn't know so much or maybe I wouldn't have come here. I have no grandmother or grandfather, no animals, no farm, no house, and only my father. My mother is dead. I don't know how to be American or Lao. I have to go back to Laos before I can know. Then I will decide what way to be....

Another man commented,

This talk, it disturbs me. I didn't know I could miss my country so much. Maybe it isn't big or important, but it is my country. Here I am like a visitor in a strange house. I cannot relax... I must always watch to be respectful, to do the right thing... there is no place to be myself. To be with people like me. This makes me very tired to never relax... [and finally] ... Many things I have heard my friends say that also happened to me, especially how I feel inside now... while these things of the refugee were happening I did not think about them because they kept me very busy doing them... now I think about them... I am different to myself as I think about them....

I believe I had my first real experience within the family, the extended family, and the Lao community that revealed the Lao were struggling to keep aspects of their primary culture alive under extraordinarily adverse circumstances. During the remainder of my fieldwork, this particular evening would serve as the model, the moment when I first identified the underlying structure of this community. The complexity of these relationships, the importance of interpersonal dynamics and their importance to the process of acculturation, the critical role the extended family played in maintaining some sort of social stability during the post-camp period of transition became key "pieces" in the puzzle of the refugee process.
As fieldwork progressed over the first year, I became excited over being part of a process which was, for me, a new approach to the recording of history. My relationship to the task of writing about these events was developing along parallel experiential lines. The Lao decided what was important in their lives and I was privileged to record it as they lived, felt, and shared their interpretations of it. These are interpretations and experiences of ordinary men and women who have rarely been taken seriously or considered important. This is the process that Kozol (1981) refers to as "history from the bottom up," the workers, the family members, the people who have struggled for a living. The value and the credibility of these histories lies in the fact that the individuals of the Lao community decided what was important from their perspective. Ironically, in the process of realizing that they indeed had something to say and that their comments were important, they often prefaced stories with comments such as:

Oh, I've never done anything important....

I was only a farmer in my country....

I have not had as big an education as you....

One of the critical problems was to convince refugee people that what they had to say was extremely valuable. I believe that once this was perceived as a means to make a contribution to their community, they invested a great deal of time, energy, and thought to the task of organizing their experiences into a sequence
of events that made sense to them and which I could record. For
many of the adults I worked with, this was the first time in their
life that they had been called upon to review their own experi-
ences and to account for them in some manner. The very act of
self-examination was always a difficult endeavor. The honesty
and openness with which these human beings shared the details
of their experiences was humbling. Each of these human beings
was generous with time, patience, and understanding as we strug-
gled through the process of interpretation and translation.

Often, as I read back what I had written or asked for
clarification or additional comments, people would reflect upon
parts of their presentation or focus in on some comment or event
through statements such as:

I see my self differently now...
I was very lucky in my life in Laos, I didn't know that then...
I didn't understand the war, the camps, or coming to America...
I was a bad child. My mother and father gave me everything.
I'm very happy my children are not as bad as I was....

There was a healthy ability to laugh at oneself and sometimes at
the ironies that life produces. At the same time, it appeared that
everyone I spoke with was aware of the seriousness and the complex-
ity of the process that began with the decision to leave home in
Laos and ended in this community. Finally, as one woman confided
to me:

... many of these Lao I do not like too much. If we
were at home in Laos, I would not talk to them or have
them come to my house. But now we are the only Lao here.
So we have to help each other, we have to stay together. We fight a lot. We still need each other....

I came to the realization that what Americans had labeled the Lao community was, in reality, not a community at all. It was a group of widely diverse individuals and families who shared in common the decision to leave their primary culture, even though the reasons leading to that decision were different. Ultimately, time and events would find them thrust together into a new situation where they had to attempt to be supportive of each other for basic reasons of survival. In the beginning, they were not a community. They were displaced Laotians with little personal relationship to each other.

Excerpt from My Field Journal, Spring 1983

Children are standing in the doorways and on the front porch -- playing, watching families and food arrive -- everyone dressed in best clothes -- then watch as I edge my old station wagon between two newer model cars -- the old me being a familiar sight. I'm feeling tight and apprehensive -- a strange mood for a person who has been "at home" in the Lao community for the past couple of years. The struggle is internal. I realize this will be one of the final large gatherings I will be attending for a while. The necessity to complete this fieldwork and to remove myself is beginning to create conflicts.

I know all of the faces that will be waiting inside -- they are friends with whom I have worked, prayed, played during this period of transition from Lao to American culture. Not so long ago I found myself so involved that I was contemplating marrying a Lao woman. Feelers out to the family in the traditional manner were positive. Today -- of all days -- when I have been extended the singular honor of being invited hours earlier than other guests to be present at and take part in intimate family and community celebrations, I feel most like an outsider. I'm aware of this special honor while
simultaneously trying to suppress the awareness that despite this honor, I am the one who views myself as the intruder, or at best an outsider....

I'm carrying fruit and flowers -- partially in respect for time-old Lao custom and, certainly, to demonstrate a respect for my "teachers" -- purple and white, lilac and sno-ball, fresh from my garden. The fruits have been carefully selected to include the varieties the Lao enjoy. I'm socially correct -- yet consciously uncomfortable. In many ways I'm afraid to let go of my fieldwork. At the same moment I realize it's basically over. I know that eventually I will have to remove myself and return to the world from where I originate.

At the door -- some of the teenagers are gathered in a small group -- mostly young men -- talking and socializing, waiting for special or favorite relatives and friends to arrive. Some are dressed in designer jeans -- flash -- mostly the young males. A friend comes forward extending his hand to say hello to "Mr. Rob" -- the name the Lao community gave me in the early stages of fieldwork. Others take my hand -- come over -- touch my shoulder -- smile. There is an air of festivity about the crowd of people. Young as they are -- given their already intense immersion into American culture, I am struck at how uniquely Lao, how incredibly gentle they are as they welcome and attempt to make me feel at home. I scan the eyes and smiles and find a bit of the tenseness abating. I unconsciously slip into their world.

From inside the living room -- my friend and major informant -- moves toward me through the crowd. We are old friends -- this fieldwork experience thrusting both of us together as we mutually explored the Lao refugee and the American during this interfacing of cultures. It has changed both of us in irrevocable ways. The task of identifying, perceiving, translating, and interpreting has been co-celebrated. Any final product will be a result of this unique relationship. He smiles -- indicates he is "really glad" I brought flowers -- testimonial to his correct choice of friends and successful attempt to "educate" me to the Lao manner of doing things. Significantly, I hadn't been asked to bring anything. The Buddhist monk had arrived from Portland earlier in the day. Since he was "more important" than the one who was originally supposed to come, more people were coming and the host didn't have enough flowers. These would help him to save face.
Since there are no daughters, the host's oldest son takes the fruit and flowers -- filling in for the mother who is suffering from post-camp schizophrenia. She is "quiet" today -- focusing on the priest. I, too, focus on the monk who is seated on an ochre piece of cloth. All of the furniture has been cleared from the room and it takes on the aspects of a large temple hall. The wall-to-wall carpeting on the floor has been covered by bamboo mats. This scene strikes me as a classic example demonstrating the Lao refugee condition in the United States -- a juxtaposition of the "old way" carefully inserted into a modern suburban house -- the former generally accommodating the realities of the latter -- rough edges apparent when looked for.

I sit on the floor near to men my age. Not all the way up front with the elder men and not at the far back with the teenagers. Generally people are seated in a semi-circle with the monk at the center of the two ends. They have come to celebrate a late "Lao New Year" and to participate in a respite from the constant effort to adjust to the American way. The monk is chanting. There are two large statues of the Buddha -- one of bronze and one about three feet high of wood. Numerous smaller images line the floor to be blessed and returned to niches in the home. Papers with special writings and some Lao money are burned in a bronze dish. This, as is explained to me, is symbolic of the dispersal of the old -- cleaning out the old year to get ready for the new. More prayers -- some in chorus by the group -- and the ashes are placed in a huge bowl -- (here a stainless steel kitchen bowl replaces the decorated bowls used in Laos) -- all except the two large Buddhas are immersed in the "holy" water. More prayers and chanting. For a brief period -- I forget I am in a small house in Oregon -- I am carried back to the kinds of ceremonies I witnessed in Southeast Asia months earlier.

Then the monk takes a long-stemmed purple iris and dips it in "holy" water -- he proceeds to travel around the room, dipping the flower in the water and sprinkling a few drops on each person while praying for a "good year, good health." As it began -- so it comes to a quiet ending. Soon the priest stops to make a general prayer and then leaves the room. He is going to visit a small group who have separated themselves from the larger Lao community and refuse to come to this house. The sandaled feet, ochre sheet, bare legs, and shaven head suddenly seem totally out of context in this living room. Soon he is gone -- replaced by a more party-like atmosphere. People exchange fruit, hard-boiled eggs, wish each other luck. Special strings called bati are tied around each other's wrists and the wrists of teachers and respected members of the community. This binds the individual spirit to the higher community spirit.
Shortly American guests begin to arrive. Beer and whiskey arrive at this point as well. Food preparation begins in the kitchen -- women talk, laugh, sing, and chop meat and vegetables. American music is put on the stereo and it is loud. The younger people are enjoying the change in pace. Some of the older people look bewildered -- like the monk they are out of context in this setting. After a bit of socializing, drinking beer and some whiskey, people sit down across the room in preparation for a few "speeches" before dinner. Guests are formally welcomed. The old year is briefly summarized. Then gone. The new year begins with endless rounds of food and lots of laughter.

The ensuing months witnessed my gradual withdrawal from the Lao community. Formal duties in the social service world were carefully transferred either to Laotians or caring Americans. In order to reflect upon the experience, to gather my thoughts in final preparation for completing the dissertation, and in order to come back into my own world, I had to step out of the fieldwork experience. I stood, for a brief moment, at the razor's edge where two cultures interfaced. I watched them work on each other, begin to negotiate, and sometimes have to forfeit precious landscapes. I came in search of -- was touched -- and at the very conclusion of my part in the process, realized I had only a momentary window on the world of the refugee. More so, I came away with different perspectives on my own culture and on myself.

For the Lao, the process of acculturation and accommodation continues. Lao community members still struggle with the language and with obtaining adequate language training; minimal occupational skills still prevent many Lao men from acquiring jobs in a local economy that is still distressed; family structures continue to change as traditional social interaction,
traditional roles and control have to be discarded or modified to accommodate the new culture; health and mental health problems are enormous and for the most part have yet to be addressed; a heavily skewed population with too many young males is creating tension and frustration within the community; some alcohol and physical abuse problems have begun to emerge as rejection, failure, and poverty have to be faced; overcrowded homes and diminished welfare grants exacerbate fears of being evicted, of not having enough food, of getting sick; abandonment or disillusionment on the part of most sponsors has isolated many refugees from their "American families"; heavy cuts in school and community college programs further isolate those refugees who want and need additional training; lack of internal mechanisms as well as traditional loose-knit community organizations fail to provide strong advocacy for refugee problems from within the refugee community; and burn-out and disillusionment on the part of the committed social service advocates is further decimating the ranks of external support in the greater community.

I have had the luxury of being able to step out of and watch acculturation continue to unfold. As one friend in the Lao community said to me,

At home I was a man, a person. I had a full life. Here I am a refugee -- only part of a man... only part of a life....

The results of this experience are not an end. Rather, they are part of the greater continuum which constitutes the learning process. As a human being I went out to encounter other human beings. This
furthered my efforts to understand myself and the culture from which I come. While we attempted to clarify who we were and how we perceived things, a greater framework of reference was born of that synthesis. In the field, I was forced to interact and clarify; that method created other responses and reactions. One changes, one is changed through the act of compromising and attempting to understand. Empathy and objectivity are forged into a new tool. One explores, one is explored. The total effect produces information and experiences unique to each field-worker and the other human beings encountered. In the words of one Lao,

We do what we can. We look. We listen. We think. We try. We are not always so right. We make the mistake sometime, but our heart is not wanting to hurt. What can I say? Don't you know we Lao are just like you in many ways? Yellow or white... so what! Underneath the skin we are the human being. Is that not enough to know? All this studying for such a simple answer... we all know it if we look to our heart. Sometimes we human beings are pretty stupid!

It would seem, somewhere beyond the antecedents and events that have transpired since 1945 which have contributed to some common history shared by Laotians and Americans, there are lessons to be learned about life and the human condition. Beyond ideologies, beyond the lies of the politicians, beyond the attempt at home to beat criticism of the Southeast Asian war into the ground, beyond the devastation of the land and the people of Laos, beyond the suffering and death in the name of nation and national interest, beyond the refugee camps and the
very condition of being a refugee... we must raise questions as to the choices we have made that have created these events and situations. We must learn from these experiences so that wiser choices will be made in the future. It would seem, in retrospect, that we would have learned something that will be of value as we negotiate the present and prepare for the future. If we cannot and do not apply what is to be learned to our own lives, to our own cultural process and the institutions by which it is governed and sustained, then we will repeat the harsh lessons and the great human suffering which have characterized American involvement in the Southeast Asian war and the subsequent creation of a million refugees.
EPILOGUE

Update, Spring 1984

-- The Laotian community has established its first community newsletter;

-- Over the past year, more than forty percent of the community has relocated to areas where jobs are available;

-- The local Laotian community has initiated contact with the larger Laotian community in Portland;

-- Last summer's successful pilot garden project has served as a catalyst for a larger project planned for this summer;

-- March 1984 saw the first attempts by the university to become involved with the Laotians;

-- A nutrition specialist has begun to work with the pregnant Laotian women;

-- Splinter groups within the Laotian community are inhibiting real growth of the community as a unit;

-- Lack of jobs and language barriers remain at critical levels;

-- Some Laotians have requested information related to the United Nations procedure for repatriation of Laotians to Laos;
-- Funds are drying up on the federal level for most resettlement projects;

-- The post-camp period continues, Laotians and Americans trying to manage as best they can with the realization that the past few years have only been the tip of the iceberg as far as acculturation is concerned;

-- I am back working with the Lao community in a different capacity as our first community bilingual/bicultural team identifies and prepares for the needs and potential problems of the next stages in the acculturation and assimilation process.

-- As the last revisions of the thesis go to the graduate school, I am struck with difficulty I have had conducting an ethnographic study within the parameters of a research tradition at Oregon State University which is primarily quantitative. Qualitative research, human beings, cultural interfacing, life experiences, becoming partially socialized into the ways of another culture, the place of the researcher in the field experience become lost within a system which places its primary emphasis on significant differences, reflected hypotheses, and the statistical paradigms drawn from the physical sciences. Over the years, I found myself waging a constant battle to survive as a researcher and to remain credible as an
academician as I have had to divert precious energy needed for this study to a constant defense of the methodology. In the final analysis, I decided that it was not my responsibility to educate other scholars on the epistemology of ethnography, as there exists a strong body of literature and an old tradition which does that task superbly. The task of entering into the life ways of another culture requires more of the individual than traditional quantitative research. With qualitative research, the human being must put himself on the line and enter previously uncharted human landscapes. This is often painful, lonely, and frightening. This process does not provide the safety of the library or the laboratory. Human beings are often unpredictable and almost always open-ended. Scientific objectivity has a limited place in the world of human events and human feelings. It is an artificial construct valuable within the confines of science, but not to be extended to the whole of human experience.

I found it difficult to survive at a university where funding is only available for the quantitative endeavor. I keep speculating what it might have been like to devote the full energies of three years to the sole privilege of the research experience. I hope the time will come when the university will place equal value on numerous avenues of research. It would seem evident that a broader spectrum of research methodology would generate dialogue
within the university community and enhance the efforts and the role of the university within the greater human community.
CHAPTER I


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CHAPTER III


CHAPTER V


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Figure 3. Illustration by Praphan Srisouta
APPENDICES
Major Ethnic Groups in Laos

Legend

- Thai-Lao
- Other Thai
- Hmong
- Lolo
- Man
- Lao Theung
APPENDIX C

Dear Friend in The Lao Community,

I am a doctoral candidate from the department of Adult Education at Oregon State University. You may also know or have heard of me from my position as cross-cultural counselor at Lane Community College in Eugene.

Presently, I am attempting to understand and to record the experience of the Lao people as you adjust to life in the United States. As a North American, I realize that the only way your story will be told is to have you tell it as you understand it to have happened.

I hope that the information from this survey and questionnaire will help to record your experiences, that some record is begun for your children and grandchildren to read, and that this effort will contribute to a greater understanding on the part of North Americans of your people and your culture. Your participation is voluntary and strictly confidential. Names, addresses and personal information will not be used without your consent.

I will be assisted in this effort by Vieng Savath, translator and counselor at Lane Community College. I am dependent upon him to act as my voice because my understanding of your language is limited. He has my trust and confidence.

It is my desire that the information we gather during this project will result in a doctoral dissertation that reflects your experience and is worthy of your time and effort.

Gratefully,

Rob Proudfoot
Dear Friends:

I am sorry to say that today I am a messenger of bad news. The federal government has decided to change the rules which have allowed you to receive cash and medical assistance during the first three years of your residency in the United States. Beginning May 1, 1982, special cash and medical assistance will only be available for your first year and one-half (18 months) after arrival. At the end of that time, you may continue to receive cash and medical assistance if you are eligible under the same rules that are used for all other Oregonians. Unfortunately, most of you do not meet those rules and will lose your assistance after a year and one-half. For those of you here less than 18 months, one of the special provisions that allowed employed refugees to keep a part of their income from employment ($30 plus one-third earned income disregard) has also been eliminated.

I would like to take a moment now to explain the federal government's action and then to discuss some of your options if you lose assistance.

The economy of the United States is not in good condition. The federal government has been spending more money than it receives from taxpayers each year. Congress and the President are now trying to lower that spending. As a result, many programs and services are being reduced or eliminated. Many poor and needy Americans will not receive services or benefits that were available in the past. The Refugee Program is one of just dozens of programs that have been selected by the federal government to be cut. While I don't necessarily agree with all of the federal government's decisions on program reductions, I do support the goal they are trying to achieve of a balanced federal budget. The challenge we face together is how to address your problems now that federal funding is to be reduced.

State and local agency staff, as well as many other concerned Oregonians, have done a lot of planning and work over the last few months so that we can help after your public assistance ends. For this I am very appreciative. I must be honest with you, though. Most of this help will be small compared to your needs. Your opportunities for training and for jobs in Oregon without federal funding are very limited. While the federal government did not

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER