

The San Joaquin Historian

A Short History of the

Southeast Asian

Immigration

to San Joaquin County



A Publication of the San Joaquin County Historical Society and Museum

Summer 2003

Vol. XVII - Number 2

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Published by The San Joaquin County Historical Society, Inc.

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A Short History of the Southeast Asian Immigration to San Joaquin County

Those who have lived in our county during the last twenty-eight years---and especially those who attended school during that period---witnessed a remarkable change in this area's cultural profile. As recently as 1970, the local population of Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians could be numbered on the fingers of one pair of hands. Today that population constitutes more than ten percent of all individuals living in the county. The details of how this change has come about and what it has meant to all peoples who have experienced it is only just beginning to be examined by historians. The author hopes that, in the next few years, this article will stimulate members of the Southeast Asian community to interview their own first generation settlers and to begin writing an English language version of this important element of our local history.

About the Author

Don Walker has been Archivist/Librarian at the San Joaquin County Museum since 1989. Walker processed, organized and created finding aids for all books and manuscript collections in the Museum's Kennedy Library. He has published articles on a number of local history topics and has been editor of the *San Joaquin Historian* since 2001.

A Short History of Southeast Asian Immigration to San Joaquin County

Immigration of Southeast Asians to San Joaquin County began in 1975 when non-Communist South Vietnam fell to Communist invaders from North Vietnam. Many educated, wealthy Vietnamese fled at this time as part of the U.S. military evacuation of their country. By the end of 1975 about 130,000 of this contingent were settled in America. California absorbed the greatest share with about 23% of the total and San Joaquin County received about 600 Vietnamese.

Indochinese who ultimately reached the United States faced hostility from a citizenry eager to forget the recent divisive Vietnam War. These attitudes were compounded by straightened economic conditions which were partly a result of increasing crude oil prices during the mid 1970s. A Gallup Poll taken in May 1975 showed that 54% of Americans opposed admission of Vietnamese refugees.

Organized opposition to the settlement of Indochinese in this county was presented by a citizens' group called the Poverty Rights Action Center. On May 11, 1975, this group petitioned the County Board of Supervisors and California Governor Jerry Brown to prevent location of any refugees in the San Joaquin Valley. The group's leader, Robert Cromin demanded to know, "just what assurance do we have that these people... have been medically screened."

The United Farm Workers also opposed mass immigration from South East Asia, fearing that the new immigrants would become exploited "scab" labor to the detriment of the local Hispanic population. In July 1975, union leader, Cesar Chavez, charged that one large egg ranch in Stanislaus County was already employing Vietnamese labor at unpardonably low wages.

Despite this local opposition, groups of Vietnamese began to arrive under various forms of sponsorship. The United States Catholic Conference and other church-affiliated agencies carefully selected and settled the immigrants. The USCC brought 405 Indochinese to San Joaquin County in 1975/76 and 1450 more between 1977 and 1979. Typically, early local sponsoring agencies found the families apartments, food, clothing, and transportation, as needed. Sponsors also helped the new arrivals find employment. In Ripon, the Christian Reform Church took charge of at least ten families, while in Manteca, the Samaritan Center, sponsored by Catholic charities, located forty-six individuals. The sponsors received \$500 per person in relocation aid from the U.S. government.

A five-part *Stockton Record* series (July 1977) reported in detail on the various instances of success and failure of the relocation program. Although the United States Catholic Conference tried to select only people who knew some English and had had past dealings with Americans, and though 40% of

those chosen had been professional men in Vietnam, many of the chosen experienced difficulties in adjusting their skills to American requirements.

One early success story was that of Dr. Quynh Nguyen, a French-educated former Saigon University law professor. Soon after his arrival in San Joaquin County, Dr. Nguyen was hired by the Stockton Unified School District to set up its secondary level bilingual education program. Another early success was Father Peter Minh, a former Saigon high school principal. Minh became a priest at St. Mary's Catholic Church. One of his duties there was to publish a newsletter for all county Vietnamese.

More typical, however, is the story of Nonh Vien. Vien had been a pharmacist in Vietnam, but upon arrival in Stockton, he discovered that he must finish coursework and pass a professional board examination to be licensed in California. It took Vien nine years to accomplish this while he worked ten hour days as a chicken processor.

While the Vietnamese elite tried their luck in America, many "ordinary citizens" remained behind, thinking that they could live with the Communists and participate in the task of rebuilding their war-devastated nations. These people soon discovered, however, that the new government expected them to work long hours in labor gangs for little money; that it recruited their children and neighbors to spy on them; and, that it intended to close

down Buddhist temples and to suppress other religious activities.

As a result, thousands more Vietnamese, began to flee their country by boat, some heading for Thailand and others for Hong Kong or the Philippines. This exodus of "boat people" became such a stampede that by 1978 the governments of Malaysia and Thailand were refusing them permission to land.

As these immigrants, too, began to reach our shores, local private sponsorships began to fail because they simply couldn't cope with all of the physical, psychological, language and employment needs of the increasing flow of refugees.

The number of Vietnamese in San Joaquin County doubled in 1977 and over the next two years rose by nearly 1,500 more. Only one of ten in this second wave was able to find work. The union seniority system disqualified new arrivals from cannery work, while the permanent pre-existing pool of farm laborers effectively blocked them from work in the fields. Thus, government welfare agencies provided for the needs of 90% of the Vietnamese "boat people."

In the fall of 1975 there were thirty-five Vietnamese students in the Stockton Unified School District and forty at San Joaquin Delta College. By 1980 Stockton Unified had nearly 1000 Vietnamese enrollees.

The schools struggled to cope with the scarcity of Vietnamese-speaking teachers and the lack of primary language instructional materials.

Children received forty minutes of English as a Second Language (ESL) training per day, while their parents were taught "survival skills" in five three hour afternoon sessions weekly. The adult curriculum included sessions on appliance use, bill paying, welfare regulations and basic English vocabulary. One woman, according to the *Record*, would go home each day and tell six others in her apartment complex what she had learned in school. The ESL programs required many native-speaker aides but were federally funded only for the first three years of their existence.

Beginning in 1980 large contingents of immigrants from Laos and Cambodia also began arriving in San Joaquin County. Most had escaped their countries on foot and had fled to Thailand where they were kept in refugee camps until American sponsors could be found for them. By the end of the 1980s this third wave of immigrants had raised the Indochinese population of the county to about 31,300. This total represented 11.1% of all Southeast Asians in California and constituted a ten-fold increase in the Indochinese population of the county in somewhat less than fifteen years. Of the total number, 10,329 were Vietnamese, 10,955 were Cambodians, and 8,451 were Laotians.

The increased demands on local social and educational services during this decade were nearly unimaginable. Stockton Unified School District's 1989 ESL population swelled to four times 1981 levels, while Lincoln (Stockton) and Lodi School districts each saw Indochinese school populations top 1,000 students for the first time. Lodi's 1989 Southeast Asian student tally (1,106) represented seven percent of the total student population.

Throughout the 1980s schools hired as many liaison officers as they could with native-speaking skills. These aides spent much of their time avoiding cultural misunderstandings between parents and teachers, administrators and counselors. In 1989 there were 178 such aides in the Stockton Unified School District who were paid between \$6.70 and \$9.44 per hour to work three-and-a-half hours per day. Colonial Heights School in Stockton's Lincoln District had four aides who each visited six classes in five hours. Administrators in Stockton Unified believed that 426 aides were needed, but staffing at that level would have cost the district five times the \$1.8 million it could afford.

Many problems between schools and families and between individual family members beset the immigrant community at this time. Because they spoke no English, it was hard for the parents to be involved in their children's school experience. Learning problems were often

misdiagnosed due to language failures. Families were often in conflict because the children had employment opportunities while the parents had none. Worst of all, the children suffered identity crises because they didn't feel comfortable in their parents' world, but, at the same time, they had little involvement with non-immigrant families.

Thus it was that in 1988 Stockton Unified began offering high school level courses in Cambodian, Lao, Hmong and Vietnamese, for the purpose of preparing bilingual teachers. The district was also paying both tuition and book

costs of Southeast Asian college students who were willing to commit to becoming bilingual teachers.

Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), for which families qualify after two years in the community, was responsible in 1989 for 20,681 San Joaquin County individuals. Typically, a couple with four dependent children received about \$900 per month from the AFDC. Seventy percent of the Indochinese community was unemployed, but Laura Williams, Chief of the California Office of





Vietnamese Buddhist Temple, Fremont Street, Stockton

Refugee Services, noted that the rate of dependency among the Hmong had dropped from 90.4% to only 70% after two years. Williams also observed that the welfare rate for Indochinese who had been in the county since 1975 was only 48%.

During this period, programs were also launched to assist new refugees to develop job skills. One such program, the San Joaquin Refugee Assistance Program, which was funded to serve 2,000 persons, contracted with government agencies to provide job training, English classes and remedial education. Two hundred sixty-eight immigrants completed training and got jobs through SJRAP in 1988. The cost per placement was about

\$4,500, which included books, child care, transportation, and administrative expenses. Funding for this agency was always shaky, since it was pegged to the number of new arrivals in the county.

Other service associations such as the Refugee Resource Center, the Charterhouse Center and the Lao Family Community Inc., provided translation and taxi services, counseling, and advice about shopping, phone use, plumbing and various domestic issues.

Still another program, sponsored by the State Office of Refugee Resettlement, paid Laotian, Blong Lor, to teach his compatriots irrigation systems and proper use of

pesticides for growing okra, zucchini, and long beans on small communal garden plots provided by the city, churches and private individuals. Lor, and his assistant Yee Lo, also taught nutrition, budgeting, lease negotiation, and how to cook American foods.

In a 1989 *Record* article, Michael Fitzgerald profiled a typical recipient of these services. His subject, Nheth Hak, had been a farmer in Cambodia. He spoke no English and was illiterate. Hak lived with his wife and six children, ages six months to twenty years, in a two bedroom apartment. The apartment was furnished with one old couch, a television/vcr, and a refrigerator. The family ate on the floor and slept on mats. Their only source of income was their AFDC checks. The Haks got some transportation from an adult daughter who assembled

electronic components for minimum wage, but had a car. Mr. Hak attended English classes every afternoon from 3 until 5 in his apartment complex. When Fitzgerald interviewed him, he was learning the English names of foods.

By the time of the Hak interview, considerable Indochinese community infrastructure had sprung up in Stockton. Several markets, restaurants, furniture, clothing, and video stores had appeared and some had survived. Vietnamese Buddhist Priest, Thich Minh Dat, had founded the first Indochinese Buddhist Temple in San Joaquin County (1984) and a multi-lingual newspaper, *The Indochinese News*, funded by the San Joaquin County Refugee Assistance Program, had begun publication (1985).



Portion of SE-Asian shopping center, Hammer Lane, Stockton

Stockton Indochinese neighborhoods had also come into existence. One extended along the south side of March Lane between Pershing Avenue and McGaw Street. Another occupied several blocks along the north side of Hammer Lane between Lower Sacramento Road and West Lane. This area also featured a Southeast Asian shopping center. The Park Village Apartments, opposite Oak Park, were home to more than 300 Cambodians.

Individual Indochinese communities had also begun to reach out to the non-immigrant community---to share and celebrate their cultures with the majority. As early as 1984, the Lao Khmu Association sponsored a Khmu New Year Family Festival at the San Joaquin County Fairgrounds. Folk crafts, dances, toys, games, and food were featured. Association President, Khampheang Khoonsrivong, stated that the purposes of this event were to teach the community about Lao traditions and to teach young American-born Laotians the same.

In December 1988, 1000 Laotians attended a Fairgrounds New Year celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of the construction in Laos of the Huang Vientiane Buddhist Temple. In March of the same year, the State of California sponsored Refugee Mutual Assistance Associations Recognition Week, a celebration of the roles that 321 organizations had played in assisting the 30,000 Southeast Asians then estimated to be living in San Joaquin County.

The nationally-reported horror of Stockton's Cleveland School shootings (January 1989) cast a pall over what had, until that date, been a positive community struggle toward the assimilation of large numbers of new immigrants. A disturbed young man, Patrick Edward Purdy, entered the schoolyard at Cleveland Elementary and opened fire on the children at recess. Purdy killed five students and wounded sixteen more, including one teacher, before killing himself. It was later revealed that he had read racist tracts and had probably chosen Cleveland because he had heard that the school had a large Asian population.

Community prejudice had taken many forms during the first fifteen years of Indochinese immigration: students reported schoolyard scuffles with bullies, while their parents experienced minor vandalism to their cars, or inflated real estate fees and deposits; but, no previous incidents had involved deadly violence. Immigrant parents suddenly became very concerned for the safety of their children in county schools. Some families moved to more rural locations in North Carolina and elsewhere.

Fortunately, the decade of the 1990s was not entirely spent running from the shock of the Cleveland School shootings. The first generation of Indochinese-Americans had reached adulthood and began to take its place in the mainstream of San Joaquin County society.

In 1990, a group of 200 Cambodians formed an organization called Apsara, and, with assistance from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, purchased and began to renovate the apartments they had lived in for many years.

By 1995 there were over 40,000 Indochinese in the county, but only 40% of them were on welfare. Fifteen were pharmacists, several were physicians, and many others had become successful businessmen and women. During the 1990s the University of the Pacific elected its first Vietnamese student body president and all of the local high schools were represented by Southeast Asian class officers and valedictorians.

Since 1975 Stockton had become home to four Buddhist temples, a Hmong weaving association, a Southeast Asian car dealership, and, the city was regularly celebrating Cambodian, Lao, Hmong, and Vietnamese New Years. The Indochinese belief that the education of their children would be the solution to their dilemma was beginning to prove true.

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More on the continuing story of W.H. Cressy...

For readers of the last issue (Spring 2003) of the *Historian* your editor wishes to relate information respecting W.H. Cressy, painter of "View of Stockton, 1849," which has come to light since we last went to press. I have found several documents in the San Joaquin County Deed Books which concern Mr. Cressy and which establish, among other things, his first name and his country of origin.

The earliest document bearing Cressy's name is found in *Book A of Deeds, Vol. 2* (pg. 115) and is dated June 7, 1851. This item is the deed to a 73 acre farm near Stockton Slough purchased by **William H. Cressy** from one F.J. Stephens for \$1000. Since we have no index to our Deed Books, I have not yet been able to discover when Cressy or his heirs subsequently sold this land. The document tells us not only Cressy's given name, but also that he was a man of some means, for lots in Stockton were selling at that time for \$25.

Another document mentioning William H. Cressy appears in *Book A of Deeds, Vol. 4* (pg. 244). This item, dated April 22, 1854, states that Cressy sold certain Stockton city

lots [in Block 11] on behalf of Carolina and Florentin Cressy of Chile. The deed characterizes W.H. Cressy as being "**of the Republic of Chili**" and as acting as the other Cressys' "attorney in fact." Since this transaction is recorded as having taken place in San Francisco, we know that William H. Cressy was in California in April 1854, but, it is possible that he returned to Chile shortly afterward and that he had already been back to Chile since his brief residence in Stockton. It is interesting to speculate on the identity of Carolina and Florentin Cressy. Were they the artist's children, his siblings, or even, perhaps, his parents? We take the expression "attorney in fact" to mean simply that William Cressy had his relatives' power of attorney, not that he was an attorney by profession. Still, it would be interesting to discover more about Cressy's professional activities, and so, now we must begin our search for more information in Chilean archives!

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