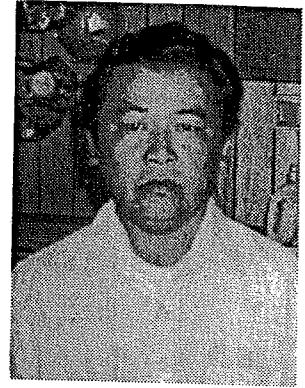


Chee Lee

*Chee Lee is from Nam Yen in the province of Vientiane. He left Laos in 1984 and had been involved in military service for the C.I.A. He has been in the Central Wisconsin region for three and a half years. He is married with eight children.*



[First question was not understood]

He said they lived in the woods, like a jungle. They would clear lands. They're farmers. That's the way of their living.

*How old were you when you left?*

He said he was 41, they've only been here in the United States for two years.

*Were you in Laos, and then Thailand?*

They lived in Laos, and they escaped to Thailand. From Thailand, they came here.

*How long did you live in Thailand?*

Nine years. They lived in Thailand for nine years.

*Why did you and your family leave Laos to begin with?*

The reason why they left Laos was the Vietnam War. They were soldiers, and the Laotians, or the Vietcong didn't like them. They pursued them because they helped soldiers for the USA, and they didn't like that. So they feared for their lives. That's why they left Laos.

*Were you a soldier?*

Yes, he was.

*How old were you when you were a soldier?*

Around 18 or 19 when he started being a soldier.

*Was it difficult for you and your family to move to the United States?*

Do you mean coming to the United States?

*Yea, from Thailand.*

He said it wasn't that difficult to fill out papers to immigrate here.

*How did you leave Laos? Was it by boat or walking?*

When they were fleeing, they did that by foot. Once they reached the Mekong River, the big river, there were some Laotian people there who had boats. They had to pay the Laotian people to get them across the river.

*Did you and your family experience any discrimination?*

Since they've been here they have not.

*Did you know a lot of people before moving here to Central Wisconsin?*

He has two brothers that are living here in Wausau. It was through their support they moved here.

*How long have your brothers lived here?*

Since 1986.

*What were some of the greatest challenges when you first came to Central Wisconsin?*

The most challenging thing that they experienced was the language. He does not speak English. If he just went down his block and turned the corner, he would not be able to know where he is or how to find his home. Driving is also a challenge. Otherwise, the biggest challenge is the language.

*In what ways has your family changed since coming to Wausau?*

Their lives are much different here than it was in Thailand. He said in Thailand they had very little food, very little money. They either had no clothes to wear or they were very old and worn. The only difficulty they really have is with the language. Otherwise, their life here is better. They have food to eat. They have cloths to wear. They have a home to stay in.

*How has the culture of the Hmong people changed in Wausau that was different in Laos?*

He said that back in the old country, they had a lot of traditions and customs. Since living in the United States, they have let go of more of the traditions and the customs. They are picking up more of the American culture. He says it's very different.

*How many family members came with you to America when you left Thailand?*

Only seven.

*Are these your children?*

Yes they are.

*What customs, habits and dress do you still maintain from when you lived in Laos?*

He said the food is basically still the same. They use to wear traditional Hmong cloths back in Thailand and in Laos, and now they dress the American way. The traditional dress is reserved for New Years and for special parties.

*What are some of the important Hmong holidays?*

We do have the traditional New Year. The Hmong people don't have other holidays. It is kind of like a holiday when someone is calling on the spirits of the old to come and help them. Like when they are christening their child's name, they would have all of the relatives over. Also when they call on the Shaman to bless the house.

*So, it is just when it's needed?*

Yes, only as needed.

*Are most of the people you know Hmong. Or, have you met any Americans?*

Basically no. All he knows is the Hmong people. He would like to have American friends, but it's just the language thing again. He can't speak English; otherwise, he would like American friends, also.

*What parts of your culture would you like to see preserved for the future?*

He would like to see people carry on the language. Some of them should learn how to eat the Hmong food and kids should learn to read and write Hmong. In our culture there are many traditions. In one day he couldn't tell you all of them because there are so many. What he would like to see preserved is the language, the reading, and the writing.

*What educational background do you have?*

His educational background is back in Laos, where he, learned Laotian and to read and write. It's like finishing the 6th grade. It depended on your families income. If your family had no money, they couldn't send you to school. After he finished that grade he became a soldier, got married and eventually took care of the farming. He took care of his family so he did not continue with his education.

*How do the Laotian people in Wausau view the Hmong?*

They view the Hmong as very good. They view the Hmong with respect because there are more Hmong here than Laotians.

*How many brothers and sisters do you have?*

Four brothers, including him there's four, two sisters in California.

*How many Hmong still practice the Hmong religion, or shamanism?*

There are many Hmong who still practice this. There are probably four or five shaman.

*In Wausau?*

In Wausau. This is a picture of the family when they were in Laos.

*How many years ago was this?*

Back in 1981.

*I've got to start taking pictures again. Thank you.*

This one is in Thailand, where he is helping some people sell their vegetables, and he is the one in the blue, and that is in 1989.

*What do you think are some of the most important things that Americans should know about the Hmong culture?*

One of the things that he would like the American community to know is our New Year's. The traditional New Year's back in Laos is like a big family gathering. It is a big family gathering where everyone goes out and does cloth ball throwing. It is a big feast. The American people should know why we are here. It is because of the Vietnam War. They were persecuted for helping the American soldiers fight against the Vietcong and communism. That is basically what he would like the American people to know.

*Do you feel that the Hmong veterans have received enough recognition from the American people or not?*

Not many people know that they were soldiers. The only recognition they have is all of the other soldiers. The American veterans that were in the war know.

*The American Vietnam veterans?*

Yes, only they would know the true story behind us.

*What do you like about American culture that is different than Hmong culture?*

They're still very ignorant about the American culture. So far, they like what the Americans are doing, it's just that they've been here a very short time. They don't know much, yet.

*How close is the Hmong community in Wausau?*

Within the Hmong community, it depends on the people who are close to each other. It's just like the clan system. Otherwise, the only way the Hmong people are close or have friendships with each other is when someone has a celebration. They call other clans to come join them. That's the only way the Hmong get along with closeness or friendship.

*What are your opinions about how the American government treated the Hmong in the past?*

They're so ignorant of the government. But so far, he thinks that the government here is good.

*That is all of my questions, I just want to take a few pictures.*