

## Tong Xeng Thao

*Tong Xeng Thao was the first Hmong to arrive in Wausau. In Laos, his occupation was fishery. Tong stated, "Family is fine. Everyone is proud to be alive. Many people around us are nice to us." Tong works at the Wausau Area Hmong Mutual Association.*



*How old are you?*

50.

*What is your occupation?*

I am a (couldn't hear).

*Do you have any educational background?*

No education back in the old country. I was only about sixth grade. When I went to become a (couldn't hear) NTC, and then I went about five years to college, but I don't get my degree yet. I don't finish my school, but I thought my family need some, financial support family, so I had to quit. Go back to work.

*Do you have any brothers or sisters?*

I have only one sister left now, I had three brothers.

*What were their names, and ages?*

Four brothers and two sisters but they all died at an early age. So, right now only myself and my older sister. The life we were living was....

*Where were you born?*

We were born in Laos in Xieng Khouang.

*What was your home-homeland like when you were living there? The government, economy, or the living conditions?*

We had small numbers of population in the country, we had a lot of empty land. We were Hmong people; we lived on the hill, and we farmed family by family. We didn't really have an occupation in the city like this country.

*Why did your family and yourself leave your homeland?*

Because the communists took over the country.

*Was it difficult for you and your family to move to the U.S.?*

Yes, really difficult.

*Why was it difficult?*

Difficult because a lot of people come over to the camp and they had to interview and see...they put people into categories who classify our people and see who you were and in what category. You will be able to go to other country or you had to stay in Thailand.

*How did you leave your homeland, by a boat or did you walk?*

Usually we took a bus from where we live to close to the border...Thailand. And that is the capital city of Laos. Then we hire somebody to bring us by boat across to Thailand.

*Did you cross the Mekong river?*

Yes.

*Was it very difficult?*

No, not difficult because I have to pay some money to those people and they get commission from Thai people and Laotian people. And they bring me to the boat and then Thai people already on the shore. I got in a boat and they just started back to Thailand, that's all.

*Did you come directly to the United States?*

No, I had to stay in the camp for three day and three night. Then to second camp for oh, about five, six months, and then we went to a new camp for another three or four months. Total, I stay in Thailand about ten months, before I come to the United States.

*What were some of the most difficult parts of your journey to the U.S.?*

The journey to the U.S. was not difficult. Only the time I left home to Vientiane, the capital of Laos. That was the spot on the route with soldiers right there, they had a gate and you had to get permission before they opened the gate for you to pass. That part was the most difficult for me. The first day, after that not very difficult anymore.

*What was your first impressions of the United States?*

What do you mean impressions?

*What you thought of it at first?*

The first thing I really know is that United States is a wonderful country. When I got to Wausau in April, 1996 there is no leaf on the trees. That was the first time I ever see that in my lifetime. In the old country we had green leaf all year round. Instead of fall, and spring, and summer like this. So, it was kind of strange for me at first, and the culture, the weather, the language, everything.

*Did your family experience any discrimination upon your arrival?*

No, we were the first family who came to Wausau back in 1976, and there's no discrimination to our family because everywhere I go people welcome me. They say nice things to me and my family. Discrimination happens after our small community getting bigger, after the 80's.

*Did you know a lot of people in the U.S. or Central Wisconsin before moving to Wisconsin?*

No, I didn't know anyone in Wisconsin. Some American people who came to Laos I know, but when I get to U.S. I didn't know where they were.

*How did you decide that you wanted to move to Wisconsin?*

I didn't decide to move to Wisconsin, I came right to Wausau and stay here for almost 22 years.

*Were you financially assisted by relatives or other agencies upon your arrival?*

I came to Wausau sponsored by Trinity Lutheran Church and they helped me provide facility at the house that I live. They provided food, I also got hired only three weeks after I got to Wausau, and I got a job, and I support my family since then until now.

*How did you learn to go grocery shopping?*

That was no stranger to me because I was a waiter at an American restaurant in Laos for two years. I know most every kind of food in U.S. The trouble is I just didn't have car, and nobody take me to the store. When I got to the grocery store I know what I want and have no trouble with American money because I was using it for two years in Laos.

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

When I first came somebody ordered the newspaper for me for couple years. I read the newspaper and looked at the price of houses go up and up. I really was itching to get a house of my own. I really needed to look for a job that you get paid enough to purchase a house. That's my biggest dream and challenge for me at first.

*In what ways did you and your family change after arriving in Wisconsin?*

We changed real slowly, we had one son about four years old at the time, he went to school and learned. I also had two teenage kids with me that is my cousin and one was my uncle and they went to school. They were younger and picked up things faster and they like to change the way of thinking, the way of living faster than my wife and I. We're older and take more time for us to learn and change our way of living.

*How are the members of your ethnic group different in Central Wisconsin than you would have been in your homeland?*

Here there are all kinds of regulations you have to follow. Besides that, You have to be aware that no matter where you go you have to think about not breaking the law in this country.

*What customs do you still maintain from your culture like the foods that you eat, habits, your dress, your language, phrases?*

Most everything we still keep. We don't know about our children but, our generation will keep everything possible. It's something we can not use here but we still remember, we still have in our mind.

*Are most of your friends in your same ethnic background?*

No, some were farmers, some were soldiers, some were kind of government official, some were policemen, some were you call...MP I forgot the name, like a policeman but working with soldier not working with civilian, MP, I forgot what was in the name similar to policeman but two different thing. When you are policeman you working with population in the city but if I am that kind of person then I working with only soldier that is doing something wrong. I am the one who puts them in prison or whatever they can judge.

*I know what you are talking about, but I can't get the word out-*

I think they are just like a soldier but they have some kind (couldn't hear). MP or LPM or what...I forgot. Some other people might be helicopter pilots or other pilot in Vietnam.

*How do other people view your ethnic group? How do they talk to you or what do they think about you coming here?*

You mean Hmong people coming here?

Yes.

I think they have different ideas, some really said to be here, some still missing the country a lot, some feel good here. Some feel bad about having to learn this culture, and all kinds of people here.

*What language do you speak at home with your family and friends?*

At home, we speak Hmong.

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

Talking about culture, its not easy to say because there are a lot of things. I am talking about marriage, kind of difficult to do, I would like to preserve and also our children, our children like somebody dying, go to the funeral I don't really know about that part I would like to make easier (couldn't hear) people in the United States. And what I like but um, I would like a relationship between family, and family distant family or you-in-law, I would like to preserve because um...in this country a lot of time a son-in-law call mother just her name, by name, and do not call like we call mother and father all the time. And we would like to preserve that, and cousin, brother, extended family we feel important to us and a clan's last name. So....

*What do you think Central Wisconsin will be like 20 years from now in regards to your ethnic group?*

I have no idea, I don't know, I can not predict anything.

*What do you think it means to be an American?*

Well, you're talking about fighting and shooting each other over a (couldn't hear) war. I think right here should be (couldn't hear) really get to leave by talking about and you can not learn anything that you don't have educate, you get education background, and that's a really, people really think about. Pretty hard to live here.

*What were you feeling when you were leaving your homeland?*

Totally lost everything, and you really feel bad, you don't know where to go, and you're thinking about having no future. Where will be leaving until this time? Feel bad, you don't know what to say.

*Thank you.*