

## Peter Yang

*Peter Yang was a young boy during the war. His family was able to get out of Laos when Vang Pao left the country.*

***How old are you Mr. Yang?***

Probably about thirty-nine. The reason I'm a little bit skeptical about that is because my parents never kept track of my birth date.



***What region in Laos did you come from?***

We were living in Xieng Khouang province, which is the central part of Laos.

***Is there a specific village?***

Yes, Xieng Khouang is the province. We lived in a region called Phou Fa, but in 1971 when the Vietnamese took over our region, we had to move to another province called Luang Prabang. Then we went to Vientiane, where I attended school for three or four years until 1975 when we left the country.

***Did you come directly to Central Wisconsin?***

We went to the refugee camp in Thailand.

***After the camp, then you came to Wausau?***

We were sponsored by a church in Ohio. My family lived in Ohio until 1983. At the end of 1983 they moved to Wausau to join with another family member who came from Thailand and settled here.

***How long have you been the president of the...***

Well, my title is chief operating officer. I've been doing this for about three and a half years.

***Part of the purpose here is to give people a better understanding of what it was like in Laos when you were young and when the war was going on. So, if you could tell me as much as you can that would be exciting. Could we start with some early memories you have, what are you earliest memories of being in Laos?***

Well, I remember when I was still a young boy, my parents lived in a village. It was a small village out in the countryside in Laos where there was no school at all. My brother, my older brother and his family lived in another area where they had school. So one day my mother took me to visit my brother and his family and they kept me there to go to school. That's probably the best one I can remember because I didn't really like to stay with my brother... (laughter) his family, because I miss my parents. The war was going on at that time, but it was too far away from our village. Because my brother was the commander of the military in that region we knew what was going on in terms of the war and all that was going on.

***What year was this?***

It was probably about 1968 to 1970, yes 1970. So I was still very far away from our village.

***What was school like?***

The school was an elementary school. They had kindergarten to sixth grade. I started at kindergarten there, of course being a young boy at the time. I finish third grade and we had to escape our village because the fighting was getting closer to where we lived. We moved to a different place, a safer place and then you went to school for about four or five months until we had to move to another place. It was a constant moving for us. There was a lot of moving for my family and for all of the villagers in that region; it was going on for several years. IT was like, we lost a battle and then we won a battle back and then it was kind of back and forth for several years until 1971 when the communist North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao actually took over out whole region. Then we had to leave everything behind, our home, our farms.

***So in '71 they took over Xieng Khouang?***

Phou Fa, which in the region we lived...

***First of all?***

Yes. Then we had to escape too; well we walked for about seven days you know, day and night because there was no transportation. There was no road that you could get transportation to....

***And this walking, was it through mountains, jungles?***

Yes, mountains, jungles and small trails. We did that for about seven days, seven nights until we got to a village that we thought was safe and far away from the communists... all of the refugee would resettle there temporarily until we get word from the leaders as far as where we should resettle for sure. Then we were taken to a place where the Hmong people would live for a couple years. There was no farming opportunity for those people at the time. We left most of the Hmong people behind in that village. Because my brother was there, because he was a leader, he was able to take us to Vientiane, the city where I went to school. I went to school there for about a year and a half and came back to the village where most people had lived and I stayed there for a year and a half.

***Which village was it that you went back to?***

It's called, let's see, it's been a long time... it's called Phou Chia. We lived there for about a year and then the communists came closer so my family again and we went to live in Vientiane permanently, which is the capital. Before 1975, before we left Laos, they move out to the countryside again, but it's in the province of Vientiane, the Vientiane Province. My family, my parents were farming at the time in 1975 and the communists took over the whole country and we escaped by a boat crossing the Mekong River to Thailand.

***Your brother went with you when you escaped to Laos?***

Yes, I had four brothers, older brothers, and four sisters so there's nine children in my family. Three of my brothers were in the army. My eldest brother was a colonel in the army; he was a commander of one of their larger military groups in Laos so he knew what was going on. He knew we were going to lose the country and that we'd not be safe to live in Laos. So as soon as the communists took over the country we just left from Laos to Thailand.

***When you were talking about there was no farming in a couple of the spots that you lived in, how did you eat if you weren't able to stop and farm?***

Well those people were supplied, I guess that food was supplied by, probably by the United States you know, by the military headquarters. Most of the families had members who served in the military so when we escaped from place to place we received support such as rice and other food items. That's probably how we were able to survive for a few years.

***Were any of your family members killed?***

No, but during the escape when they took over our village Phoua Fa, my brother escaped, my brother and my uncle and some other people tried to escape. At the time we were hiding in the jungle and then some of the men went back to the village to protect or help, you know stay in the village to monitor whether or not there was anything going on. Then during the night, I remember probably about 2:00 in the morning, there was a lot of fighting and gun sounds going on. When we woke up and looked to the sky we saw the ammunitions flying just like the star flying and then we just escaped. We knew the sage route that we could go to and so my brother, my second oldest brother escaped from the village and on the way he got shot. The enemy threw a grenade to the group and then it hit one of the, I guess, shrapnel hit his eye, his right eye. He lost that eye. He's living in Wausau now and my uncle just disappeared. He probably got shot.

***You don't know where he is?***

No. Nobody could find him so I guess we had to leave. We left that place for so many days and we don't know what happened to him. We thought that maybe he died right away there or maybe he was taken somewhere. He was injured and taken someplace. We haven't been able to find out what happened to him. You know, he was shot there. So, my brother got injured and then we had to look for people to help him, kind of take his arm and guide him through the way we escaped, during the seven day escape just so that we could be far enough from the enemy and be able to call the plane to come and pick him up to the hospital and... after five days, we were able to get the plane to come down and pick him up and take him to the hospital. There was some, loss of lives at the time. People were scattered to different places. It was very scary.

***When you had to leave, was it that someone just came and said you had to leave or could you hear the fighting going on?***

Yes, you could hear the gun sounds, like the big cannon, plus you could see... when we first woke up, when we heard the noise and they said the army of the communist had taken over our village and you could see the noise of the gun fighting and when you looked through the village you could see bullets and ammunition flying in the sky for hours. We were away in the jungle and they didn't know that we were hiding there. So we, we just left from there.

***How old were you at that time? A teenager?***

Yes, I was probably a teenager. I know I was in third grade. So I was probably a teenager.

***It must have been really frightening to be listening to that and...***

Yes, it was very frightening and we had to leave everything behind. I remember I had a couple pairs of clothing on my back. We also had my niece at the time. My brother was injured. He

had a daughter who was probably about 2-3 years old. She couldn't walk very well so I had to carry her on my back through the jungle just so that everybody would be safe. It was not a very good experience, but a memorable experience. I can remember one time when we were resting in a jungle, we were resting and there were a lot of bamboos too. Bamboo trees, and sometime people cut bamboo and they made bamboo rice sticks and when they were cooking the bamboo rice stick, the bamboo blew up, blow up and it makes noise like gun fighting and suddenly you see people scatter all over the place.

***I don't understand what you mean by rice stick?***

It's like... there's some kind of bamboo that you put rice in and you cook it and then you get a bamboo rice, bamboo flavor on the rice. When we got to the jungle, it was probably 9:00 or 10:00 in the evening and everybody was so tired, exhausted and hungry that they decided to rest and get something, prepare something to eat...cut the bamboo and cook the rice, and then the bamboo blew up. Suddenly, everybody said the enemy is coming and so everybody scattered all over the place. I remember that I also carried a gun at the time. The first thing I did was that I went and got my gun. I found my gun and came and got in there right away. A thought came to my mind that I lose my family because everybody was going to be scattered to different places and different directions. But slowly people said listen, listen. It was just one big noise. Listen, pay attention and then slowly, it was just a bamboo blowing up. It was a big relief.

***Did they go back then and...?***

Yes, then they went back. Things like that happened along the way and you climb mountains, very, very high mountains. It took days to go up from the valley or the river to the mountain so that you could cross to the other side.

***Do you have any fun memories while you were growing up?***

Yes, I can remember when I had the opportunity to go to school, I had friends. I played with my friends.

***What kind of things did you play?***

Games, because the school was not always close by like in this country. It was far, farther away and it took maybe thirty minutes to an hour walk. Sometimes we would walk together with friends back to school. I mean walk back home from school. We played games like marble games and things like that. Those were good times when we were young. I went to school in Vientiane which, I think a lot of people didn't have that opportunity. I think I was really fortunate to be able to go to school with a lot of other people-- not just Hmong students but other students like Laotian, Vietnamese, some of the other...

***Did you learn to write Laotian, not Hmong?***

Yes.

***You learned how to write Laotian?***

Yes, because Laos was colonized by the French. When I first started school we learned French right away. We learned the alphabet like A, B, C,-- English alphabet and then we would learn how to write French, dictate...do dictations from French.. recite certain things, lessons in French and then at the same time we also learned Lao, so we...

***How many different languages do you speak?***

About five languages.

***What are they? French...***

French, Hmong, Lao, Thai, and English.

***Wow, pretty impressive. Let's get back to your brother. Did he ever talk about contact with the Americans? Does he talk today about promises that were made or how it was kept secret? Does he talk about that?***

I have three brothers living in Wausau. One was the captain and the other was the one that injured his eye. My brother s sat down together they always talk, they frequently speak about politics, politics and the war, the Hmong community or in Laos. Being the younger person in the family, I was not involved in the conversation directly, I always paid attention to what they were saying and show some interest in what they were saying. Those were the things that I learned from my family and my brothers, my older brothers. I guess I learned a lot through that, you know in terms of what the Hmong, how the Hmong people feel about the war, or whether or not they agree on certain things or issues in the Hmong community.

***This is a little bit off the topic, but some of the Hmong fought on the side of the communist. Is there still resentment today against them?***

I think so, yes. When the French came to Indochina and they colonized Indochina including Laos, they imposed very high taxes on the Hmong people. A lot of people couldn't afford to pay for the taxes. They had to sell the children to earn, to get money so they could pay the taxes to the French. So, a lot of people were against that idea so they took the side of the North Vietnamese and the communist... that's why there was a split among the Hmong. There was a group that joined the North Vietnamese side and a group that sided with the United States with the Royal Lao government. I think even today some of the Hmong people in this country probably don't feel 100% comfortable about the people who sided with the North Vietnamese even though there is more peace now in Laos. Because some of those people sided with the North Vietnamese they came back and fought against us.

***What is your scariest or worst memory of you have of Laos?***

Probably the escape I just described. That was probably the most horrible experience I remember and I probably will remember for the rest of my life. But if you compare my life to all the other people's life, I had a better life.

***You moved away from the fighting sooner-***

Yes, we were able to move away one step ahead of the enemy.

***Your father left with you? Your parents... when you crossed the Mekong?***

My parents left a couple days before I did because I was going to school.

***Whose idea was it for leaving? Because you didn't leave pretty soon in comparison to a lot of others.***

I think it was my brother's idea. My parents were farmers and my brother went to the village and say that the communist is going to take over the country so you will not be safe. Everybody should move to Thailand temporarily. Nobody knew what was going to happen once we moved to Thailand. I just thought we moved to Thailand temporarily until the situation was better, but that wasn't the case. It was my eldest brother's idea that the family move to Thailand.

***How many people were with you when you left with your brother and your parents? What size of group was that?***

At the same time my brother sent my family to Thailand, General Vao Pao, the Hmong leader also transported his army officers and his family from the Hmong headquarters; I mean headquarters in Long Chieng to Thailand.

***You left at the exact same time when he was doing that?***

Yes, the exact same time.

***Because your brother had information and knew that...***

Yes, instead of going to the headquarters and taking the plane we just decided to cross the Mekong River which is a lot closer anyway and we just met them in Thailand. So, it was easy for us compared to most other families that came much later.

***Did you cross it in some type of motorboat?***

Yes, a very small motorboat.

***And everyone made it safely?***

Yes.

***Did they have to take more than one trip back?***

When I came there were three or four of us in that motorboat because my brother and his family... all my brothers and their families and my parents were left. They were gone. They were across Thailand and so just a few people and me. When I got to Thailand I saw my parents and my family again.

***Which refugee camp did you go to, were any built at that time?***

No. When we got to Nong Khai, which is the city in the border of Laos, between Laos and Thailand next to the Mekong River, we stay there for a night and then we were transported by plane to an army training center called Nam Phong. It's called Nam Phong, it's a place for training and that's probably enough for 10,000 soldiers to be trained there. So they transported us to that center where we had about 12,000 Hmong refugees living in that center.

***Is that where General Vang Pao was?***

Yes, that's where General Vang Pao came also. We stay there for about six or seven months and then we were transported to Nong Khai, no not Nong Khai but Ban Vinai refugee camp where we practically build that camp from scratch. I know I remember I was paid to build many of

those buildings for the refugees. Even though I think we were teenagers at the time, we were old enough to be hired to work and they pay like 40 bat which is like \$2.00 a day. But there was something to earn money, something to do instead of staying home or staying in the camp, you couldn't really go anywhere.

***At that time, how did the Thai people treat you?***

We were treated better I think when we first came there because most of their families were army, I mean army officers, so we were treated well. They transported food there once every three days and the food was distributed to the families according to the size of the family, so we had enough food to eat. We didn't have clothes or anything but we had blankets and enough food to eat.

***When you first got there, before you built the buildings, where did you sleep?***

They have tents. They supply tents for us to stay temporarily until we could get the buildings built.

***Your memories about Ban Vinai? Are they good? Bad?***

I don't think we, it was just a place to stay. There was not much to do besides just staying in the camp. You couldn't go anywhere. When we lived in the camp it was surrounded by bamboo. What they do is they have the refugee families cut bamboo and fence the whole refugee camp with bamboo sticks. You really can't go anywhere. Even though people still sneak out of the camp. If they are caught then they would be punished. There wasn't much to do. It was real boring, there was no school available when we were living there. We left there early. We left in 1976 and we stayed there for nine months in Ban Vinai and then we left. I think later they build schools.

***Can you tell me the procedure that you went through to leave? Was it because of your brother?***

Yes, it was because of my brother. I guess the policy was that in order for a family to be eligible to come to the United States they would have to have a member who served in the military like my brother. My brother served in the military, but the brother that we came with also served in the military. He was a captain. You have to be able to identify your commander and the American person that advised your troops. I guess identify many of the Hmong army commanders and American advisors.

*This is a reprint of an interview with Peter Yang that was printed in Hmong Oral Histories*