

Peter Yang

Peter Yang lived in Nan Chieng in the Vientiane Province. He attended school in the city of Vientiane. He left Laos in 1975 and in 1976 he came to Ohio. Peter moved to Wausau in 1990. He is the Chief Operating Officer of the Wausau Area Hmong Mutual Association.



I am interviewing Peter Yang who is the head of the Wausau Area Hmong Mutual Association today and I will be asking him some questions. How old are you Mr. Yang?

Probably about 28, (laughter) not twenty, 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 (laughter). Could we start with some early memories you have, what are your 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 the 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 I went to school for about four, 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 our whole region. Then we had to leave everything behind, our home, our farms.

So in '71 they took over Xieng Koang?

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

First of all?

Yes. Then we had to escape to, 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. That was very difficult. My family had the opportunity to move to Vientiane 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, um 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 its 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 t 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 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 escape. We knew the safe 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, you know...for hours... so that 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 make bamboo rice stick and when they were cooking the bamboo rice stick, the bamboo blow 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 o'clock 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 say - listen, listen. It was just one 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?

[laughter] 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, 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 a captain and the other one was the one that injured his eye. My brothers sat down together they always talk, they frequently talk 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 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 off topic but, some of the Hmong fought on the side of the communist. Is there still resentment today against-

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 could not afford to pay for the taxes. They had to sell the children to earn, to get the money so that, just so that they could pay 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 the worst memory you have of Laos?

Of the war?

Yes.

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

You moved away from the fighting sooner than-

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

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

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

Who's idea was it for leaving, because didn't you leave pretty soon in comparison to a lot of other...

I think it was my brother's idea. My parents were farmers so they were doing farming 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 think most people just thought that we would move to Thailand temporarily until the situation was better and then we could come back and that wasn't the case. It was my eldest brother's idea that the family should 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 Vang Pao, the Hmong leader also transported his army officers and his family from the Hmong headquarters, I mean headquarter in Long Chieng to Thailand.

You left at the exact same that 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 of the 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 motor boat because my brother and his family...all my brothers and their families and my parents were left. They were gone. They were across to 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 actually 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. (laughter) 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 were you treated by the Thai people?

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 built 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.

So was he working with General Vang Pao or was he in a different region.

Yes, he was working under General Vang Pao.

Was Jerry Walker one of the people that helped to identify...

Yes, he was there and he was the person that most Hmong people know well. He also know the Hmong people well so that he could identify most of the Hmong leaders and knew all of the American advisors too. So he knew my brother.

Did you all get to go?

Yes.

Do you remember your parents, were they excited about going?

I guess anything is better than going back to face the Communists and face Communism and possible persecution or prison. We knew that we were not safe to go back, and we wouldn't have peace and the war was going on for so long. Ever since I could remember the war was going on already. When I was a teenager, the war was still going on so it seems like there was no peace. There was just constant moving and fighting and so anyplace that we could seek peace and freedom and democracy, we felt that was better than going back and living in Thailand. So we agreed to come to America. We didn't know what was going to be here for us. We knew that we wouldn't have to face Communism. We wouldn't have to worry about fighting or being persecuted. We have that freedom. Hopefully the educational opportunities were . . . we heard a lot about America in Laos.

Good or bad?

Good. Always good. The opportunity to come to America was a welcome opportunity.

Is your brother's view of General Vang Pao pretty positive? Most of the things I've read or people I've talked to have a pretty positive view, than every so often you get a little different view. Do you want to share that with me?

Yes, my brother, my eldest brother, he had two different positions. He was one of their more educated Hmong person in the late, early 1960's. So he had his own view about the country and about leading the Hmong people, but he also work under General Vang Pao during the war and so he worked quite closely with General Vang Pao. I think he has his own view about the war and about leading the Hmong people. Even today, we have different view of how to lead the Hmong people in America or in Laos. We feel that we are in America now and we should focus on life in America, helping to make life more successful for the Hmong people in America. Once we are successful in this country, we can provide support to the people in Laos or to some of the poor Hmong people of the world, where everybody will enjoy peace, freedom and democracy. Rather than to advocate about going back to take over Laos now or many, many years ago. I think that seems to be General Vang Pao's position all along. Many years and he's still doing that. Personally I just feel that it's probably not the way I would do it, you know, if I'm in a position to lead. I would probably do something different.

You're married now?

Yes.

When did you get married? And can you tell me about your wife? Did you meet her there or here?

Yes, I've been married for about four years. I met my wife here in Wausau. We've been married about four years. We haven't had any children yet.

When did she come over?

She came in 1987. So she has been here for about eleven years.

Was she in the refugee camp for a long time?

She didn't leave until... I think maybe 1985 or 1986. Her whole family decided to stay in Laos because her father was in the army troop and I guess people kept telling the communist soldiers that he was in the army working under U. S. General Vang Pao. So the communist soldier keep coming to question him about what he did and so he felt that he wouldn't be safe if he continued living in Laos so he took his family and left Laos in, I think, 1985 or 1986 - I can't quite remember. They didn't stay very long in the camp, they stayed for a about a year before they came to America because they had a daughter and her husband who already came to America. It was easy for them to fill application to sponsor.

Was your wife's experience in the camp the same as yours? Or worse?

She said when she was living in Laos they didn't really have bad experience. During the escape from Laos to Thailand they had a very, very bad experience. They had to move through the jungles day and night and had to be quiet. They were shot at I think. She said that they were shot at a couple times. Mostly a very scary moment. They had some Hmong people who had been to the refugee camp back in Thailand who went and helped guide her family in Laos to escape.

Did your wife ever have any experiences with the use of chemical weapons in her village or where she was living?

No, I don't remember my wife saying anything so I guess her family didn't have that experience. My older sister lived in Laos and because the communist soldiers came and accused my brother-in-law of wrong doing, they had no choice but to escape to the jungle and join the resistance movement. They did that for several years - probably three or four years where they ate anything that they could find - leaves, shoots, whatever they could find to survive. They said that they could remember the airplanes flying over them and then drop something like rain and then pretty soon, a few days later you see yellow holes through all of the leaves and they were sure it was something being dropped from the plane and they couldn't tell what. And you know, she's been sick. Up until today, she's still sick. Nobody can diagnose what's wrong with her. We feel it is because those kind of living conditions that they had gone through. They probably ate something in the jungle which had chemicals in it which were dropped by the plane or drank the water that had the chemicals in it. *Now, is your sister here?*

Yes, she's here too.

The policy of sending the Hmong back to Laos? How do you feel about that policy?

I think it's been twenty one or actually up to twenty three years since they left Laos and since the Communists took over Laos and we left. Personally, I think it's time to think about what we need to do with ourselves and our lives and the Hmong people. We can't stay in the refugee camps forever. We have to either go back or come to a third country. If Thailand would allow those who don't want to go to a third country, to go back and remain in Thailand it would be great. There's got to be something for them to do. We can't lock them up in the camp and expect them to live that way for the rest of their lives, it's not good for their children, it's not good for the country that has been supporting them. But I think I would support the idea of going back to Laos if they don't want to come to a third country. We want to make sure that if they return to Laos there will be a support system available for them. Initially, maybe the first couple of years after they come, they can reestablish their life and be able to be successful again. I guess I would support that. Unless Thailand would allow them to stay there and be able to become Thai citizens eventually. That doesn't seem like it is going to happen so as long as we can make sure that there is safety and peace for the people who are going back, I would support that idea.

Are there relatives of yours who are still in Laos?

Yes. We still have many, many relatives in Laos.

Do you have contact with them? Or what do they say the conditions are like?

Yes, we do have contact with them. I think the government is much more open now than many years ago. People are allowed to go back and forth to visit their family members who live in another part of Laos. It's safer now that the government is opening it's door to people in a free country, especially from Europe and America. The people are given a gift of being able to own their own farms again. Not like everything has to be run by the state like it used to. What we know is that this time not much freedom and democracy in terms of freedom of speech and religion and prayers, there is not much freedom.

What was the hardest thing for you when you came to Wisconsin or to the United States?

I guess language. The language is always the most difficult part of going to a different country. With America, even though we learned many years of French we didn't really have the opportunity to speak French. Learning in school but not having anybody to talk to is different. That helped us in terms of learning English and picking up the English language. It was a little easier for us, but I can

remember it was really difficult especially the first couple of years when I first attended school in the United States. A lot of time I knew what the teacher was talking about but I didn't know how to communicate with the teacher. I didn't know exactly what to do in terms of their assignments, so it was difficult. Especially the first few years.

How long did it take you before you really felt like you have a pretty good grasp of the language?

Four years. I mean even today, the language is still very difficult, but it's getting easier. I know that it will always be difficult for us because we learned English when we were much older. It really helps to start school at a young age.

What do you think relations are like right now in Wausau, between the Hmong and the Non-Hmong populations?

I moved to Wausau in 1990 and before that I also came to visit my family. I came in 1984 and stayed a summer here and then went back to Ohio to go to school. I came back in 1990 to live permanently. I think Wausau has come a long way in terms of working with the Hmong community and the Southeast Asian community. More people are receptive to having the Southeast Asian population in the Wausau area. One thing I find, especially working here, is that Wausau does have a lot of support. There are a lot of caring people. A lot of community leaders, a lot of people in the community who care about the community, who care about life here in the city, who would like it to be better for their future generation. At the same time, they are working very hard to help the Hmong people, the Southeast Asian people to integrate into the community. Sometimes we can't quite move or transition as fast as people would like to and I think that sometimes frustrates us a little. I think we've come a long way and I see that the future looks quite bright for the Wausau community and for the Hmong people in terms of integrating into the community and being a part of the Wausau community.

Thank you. I appreciate your time. This has been very helpful.