

VOICES OF LA CROSSE

HISTORY TOURS USING HEAR, HERE STORIES



Hmoob Immigration, Meaning, and Impact in La Crosse

Land Recognition Statement

This tour takes place on the occupied ancestral lands of the Ho-Chunk, who have stewarded this land since time immemorial.

The city of La Crosse occupies land that was once a prairie that was home to a band of Ho-Chunk. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act in attempt to forcibly and often violently remove Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands located east of the Mississippi River to occupied territory west of the river. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, the Federal Government conducted a series of six attempts to forcibly remove local Ho-Chunk by steamboat via the Mississippi River to reservations in Iowa, northern Minnesota, southwest Minnesota, South Dakota, and finally to Nebraska. The historic steamboat landing where this took place is now Spence Park in downtown La Crosse.

However, many of La Crosse's Ho-Chunk found their way back to their homeland here in La Crosse. and eventually the federal and local governments moved on to new strategies to eradicate Indigenous folks and culture from the newly established United States of America. As of 2016, Wisconsin was home to over 8,000 members of the Ho-Chunk Nation, about 230 of whom live in La Crosse County.

Introduction

This tour is part of the Voices of La Crosse History Tours, a collaborative project between the La Crosse Library Archives & Local History Department (LPLA), UW-La Crosse (UWL),

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and Hear, Here. If you are unfamiliar with these groups, Hear, Here is a project that collects first-person narratives—or stories—that take place in the downtown area. Each of these stories is then made accessible through street signs (like the one pictured right) that list a phone number to call. When you call the number, you can listen to a story that took place in the location where you are standing. The LPLA collects, preserves, and makes accessible local history for the community. Most of the research for these tours was done at the LPLA.

The Voices of La Crosse tours explore a variety of larger themes about the local community through personal narratives. The Voices of La Crosse Project was, in part, funded by the UWL Margins of Excellence Fund.

This tour focuses on the *Hmoob* (pronounced “Hmong”) experience. Each story featured on this tour represents different experiences, different lives, different themes, and different perspectives of the Hmoob immigrant experience in La Crosse. The first will be a poem about the Mississippi and Mekong Rivers, the second is about an anti-war protest, the third story expresses the emotions that pictures from the past can evoke, and the final storyteller remembers his first home in La Crosse. The stories all touch on themes of family, home, life-changes, and community.

Please note that much of the written history about Hmoob immigration to the US has been researched, written, and published by white scholars. If you wish to learn more about Hmoob history, try to locate resources created by Hmoob and Hmoob-American scholars to educate yourself from a non-US-centric perspective to eliminate biases and misinformation.

Stop 1: Mai Chao Duddeck and “Two Rivers”

Go to: Riverside Park, just south of the eagle statue in the middle of the roundabout

General Hmoob History

The Hmoob originated from south-central Eurasia and migrated into China thousands of

years ago.¹ For hundreds of years, the Hmoob faced violent cultural persecution in China and in the 1800s, many Hmoob people began migrating out of China and into Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. There, the Hmoob lived in small villages high in the mountains where they farmed and raised livestock.

In the 1890s, France colonized most of Southeast Asia. Under the French colonial tax system, the Hmoob were charged high taxes that they could not pay.² In 1920, many Hmoob villagers, led by an activist named Pa Chay Vue, resisted French colonizers.³ During this resistance, they created a “guerrilla force” (the *Chao Fa*, or ‘Mystical Warriors’), which would become important again later during the Vietnam War.⁴ During WWII, the Hmoob fought with the French and Laotians against the Imperial Japanese, who had occupied Laos.⁵ In the aftermath, from 1955 to 1975, the traditional Hmoob way of life was disrupted due to war and violence between the many occupiers and rulers that controlled Laos.

In the 1960s, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began training Hmoob men to aid the U.S. in the war against North Vietnam.⁶ This has become known as the Secret War. Approximately 60,000 Hmoob in Laos aided the U.S. during its involvement in the Vietnam War. Hmoob soldiers helped save downed pilots and disrupted supply-lines, among other things. When the U.S. abandoned the war effort in 1975, North Vietnamese communist forces persecuted the Hmoob for aiding the U.S. military.

Large groups of Hmoob fled into the jungle to hide as they made their way to Thailand. The journey to escape Laos was very dangerous. Vengeful authorities sought out those fleeing and the final hurdle before leaving Laos was to cross the very dangerous Mekong River into Thailand. Families crossed together with the elderly, infants, injured persons, and small children. Many perished during this journey.

Many Hmoob remained in Thai refugee camps for years, separated from both family as well as their homes and farmland. Slowly, the U.S., Canada, Australia, and France began the

process of resettling the refugees. The situation was very complicated because the U.S. would not readily admit that it had carried out militaristic actions outside of Vietnam in Laos during the war. The CIA involvement with the Secret War was released years later.

The first Hmoob refugees arrived in La Crosse in 1975. By 1982, there were approximately 800 Southeast Asian refugees in La Crosse, 600 of which were Hmoob. Today, the largest racially diverse demographic in the La Crosse area is the Hmoob people, at nearly 5% of the total population. Many Hmoob ended up in La Crosse because several church groups in the area worked to sponsor families in their transition from Southeast Asia to the United States.

LISTEN: Mai Chao Duddeck's Hear, Here story

Phone Number: 1-844-432-7529, Location #1, Story #9

Transcript: hearherelacrosse.org/stories/mai-chao

Mai Chao Duddeck's poem, "Two Rivers," compares her experience in America with her mother's experience in Laos.⁷ She uses the Mississippi and Mekong Rivers as focal points of her and her mother's stories. Duddeck's poem was an honorable mention for the 2017 *Hear, Here* Poetry Contest.

Stop 2: Xong Xiong and Anti-War Protest

Go to: 505 King St.

Southeast Asian Immigrants

Initially, the needs of the many refugees coming into La Crosse from Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand were not being met. These immigrants had vastly different cultures, lifestyles, languages, educational levels, etc. In 1982, a group of agencies and individuals, concerned about the resettlement of the refugees, formed the La Crosse County Refugee Task Force. Leaders of the Hmoob and Cambodian communities joined the Task Force and were instrumental in making the needs of the refugees known.

To meet the needs of the increasing refugee population, the La Crosse Area Hmong Mutual

Assistance Association, Inc. (HMAA; now the Hmoob Cultural and Community Agency, the HCCA) was formed in December 1982. At that time, the mission of the agency was to serve as an educational and charitable organization assisting refugees' adjustment to life in the U.S. The HMAA implemented programs, advocated for appropriate services from other agencies, and coordinated refugee services, many of which continue 40 years later under the HCCA. The organization also continues to host La Crosse's Hmong New Year festivals, which began in the 1980s and are annual celebrations at the end of the harvest season. The HCCA also does education outreach to teach grade schoolers Hmoob history.

Xong Xiong was hired as the Executive Director of HCCA in 2010 and was the first woman hired to lead any of the 14 Hmong Mutual Assistance Associations in the state of Wisconsin.⁸ In 2016, Xiong and other community members started a new non-profit called Cia Siab, Inc. to fill a gap in "culturally specific and holistic programming and services."⁹

LISTEN: Xong Xiong's Hear, Here story

Phone Number: 1-844-432-7529, Location #6, Story #4

Transcript (and audio): hearherelacrosse.org/stories/xong-xiong

NOTE: due to multiple stories at this location, Xong's story is only available thru phone lines on Tu., Thu., Sat., Sun. However, it is still accessible on the website at all times.

In the spring of 2007, Xong Xiong and a small group of other UWL students and La Crosse community members staged a sit-in at U.S. Representative Ron Kind's Office, which was located on 5th Avenue. Congressman Kind had voted in support of U.S. military presence in Iraq in 2002. The protesters aimed to convince Kind of opposing future funding of the war.¹⁰

Stop 3: ChongCher Lee and Photographs

Go to: 901 State St.

Refugee Camps

The largest refugee camp was called the Ban Vinai Holding Center, which was in Thailand from 1975-1992, and covered about 400 acres. It existed for nearly 20 years as outside governments worked to resettle refugees during the Hmoob diaspora. In 1986, the

population at Ban Vinai peaked at about 43,000 people. The living quarters were makeshift shacks built by refugees living there and there was no electricity, running water, or sewage disposal. The Thai government closed the camp in 1992 after many refugees were resettled around the world, but many chose to come to the U.S.¹¹ The average length of time that people lived in the camp was seven years.¹²

LISTEN: ChongCher Lee's Hear, Here story

Phone Number: 1-844-432-7529, Location #6, Story #9

Transcript: hearherelacrosse.org/stories/chongcher-lee

ChongCher Lee is the owner of Hmong's Golden Egg Rolls.¹³ His wife Tia Yang and her sisters-in-law opened the restaurant in 2001. Inside the restaurant hangs an image of the Ban Vinai refugee camp, where ChongCher lived before coming to the U.S. in 1976. When Lee came here, he went to Logan High School and went on to study Chemistry at UW-La Crosse. After being laid off as a quality controller at City Brewery in 2004, Lee bought into the restaurant, joining his wife.¹⁴

Stop 4: Nauhoua (Tony) Yang and His First Home in La Crosse

Go to: 1018 Pine St.

Reception in La Crosse

When Hmoob refugees first arrived in La Crosse, the U.S. government had still not yet admitted to the military actions in the Secret War. This would not happen until 1997. Because of this, misinformation about the refugees circulated in communities like La Crosse, where they had come because local church organizations had volunteered to be sponsors.

The first mention of Hmoob refugees in the *La Crosse Tribune* was in 1975. The article described a family of seven had arrived in La Crosse and were seeking jobs.¹⁵ This article, along with the next 10 years of news coverage referred to the refugees as "Viets," "Viet



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Refugees,” or “Indochinese.” This media coverage only attributed to xenophobia and racism that was common in the U.S. after the Vietnam War. This language directly associated the Hmoob refugees with the North Vietnamese, who they fought against alongside the U.S. military.

LISTEN: Nauhoua (Tony) Yang's Hear, Here story

Phone Number: 1-844-432-7529, Location #8, Story #3

Transcript: hearherelacrosse.org/stories/nauhoua-yang

NOTE: there is currently no sign for this tour up in its original location, but the phone number still works; just dial the number while standing at 1018 Pine St., which is where Nauhoua's story takes place.

Nauhoua Yang lived in a refugee camp in Thailand as a child before he came to La Crosse in 1987.¹⁶ In his story, he expressed the excitement of living with electricity, doors, and locks, and seeing running cars and tall buildings on the streets. Today, Nauhoua works for the La Crosse School District as a Cultural Liason. He also has been involved with the HCCA.

Suggested further reading:

- *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, by Kao Kalia Yang

Yang came to the U.S. as a child with her family. Her parents fell in love during their escape from North Vietnamese authorities in Laos. When they got to Thailand, they lived in the Ban Vinai refugee camp, where Yang was born in 1981. When her family came to the U.S. six years later, they emigrated to St. Paul, Minnesota.

- *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*, by Chia Youyee Vang

Published in 2010, this was the first scholarly work that was written by a member of the Hmoob community. Vang explores her own migration, but also uses archival research and historical perspectives to portray the story of 130,000 Hmoob refugees who came to the U.S. in the 1970s-1990s.

Endnotes

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2. Koumarn, "The Hmongs of Laos, 1896-1978," pg. 4.
3. Mattison, Lo, and Scarseth, "Hmong Lives," xi.
4. Mattison, Lo, and Scarseth, "Hmong Lives," xi.
5. Kourmarn, "The Hmongs of Laos, 1896-1978," 5.
6. Kourmarn, "The Hmongs of Laos, 1896-1978," 10.
7. Mai Chao, audio, 00:02:01, *Hear, Here La Crosse*, accessed at <https://www.hearherelacrosse.org/stories/mai-chao/>
8. Xong Xiong, "Hmong center benefits entire community," *La Crosse Tribune*, December 5, 2010, D-7.
9. "Mission and History," About, Cia Siab, Inc. accessed August 25, 2019, <https://www.ciasiabinc.org/about>.
10. Reid Magney, "War protesters ticketed for trespassing at Kind's office," *La Crosse Tribune*, March 20, 2007, A-1.
11. "The Journey," The Split Horn, *Wisconsin Public Television*, accessed August 25, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/splithorn/story1.html>.
12. "A Visit to Ban Vinai, a former Refugee Camp site for the Hmong in Thailand," *SHB News*, September 19, 2016, accessed at <https://shrdo.com/a-visit-to-ban-vinai-a-former-refugee-camp-site-for-the-hmong-in-thailand/>.
13. ChongCher Lee, audio, 00:02:19, *Here, Hear La Crosse*, accessed at <https://www.hearherelacrosse.org/stories/chongcher-lee/>.
14. Dan Simmons "On a roll: Hmong's Golden Egg Rolls will celebrate 6 years in April," *La Crosse Tribune*, December 24, 2006, H-1.
15. Susan T. Hessel, "Viet Refugees Seek Jobs," *La Crosse Tribune*, June 5, 1975, in clipping file La Crosse -- Racial & Ethnic Identities -- Hmoob 1A, La Crosse Public Library Archives, La Crosse, Wisconsin.
16. Nauhoua Yang, audio, 00:01:27, *Hear, Here La Crosse*, accessed at <https://www.hearherelacrosse.org/stories/nauhoua-yang/>.