

Midwest by southeast: Aircraft manufacturing and the journey to Lao community building in  
Wichita, Kansas, 1975—1995

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## **Abstract**

In May of 1975, a refugee crisis began as the wars in Southeast Asia came to a close. When the communist Pathet Lao overthrew the Laotian monarchy and established a new country, hundreds of thousands of Laotians were made into refugees and fled their country. The ethnic Lao, separate from the northern Hmong tribespeople, were among the 1.1 million Southeast Asians resettled in the United States beginning in 1975. Though they share similarities with fellow Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong refugees, the ethnic Lao have often had their histories overlooked, which this thesis seeks to rectify. It discusses the long journey of ethnic Lao refugees from their homeland to Wichita, Kansas, showing them as actors in their stories rather than victims acted upon. It begins with the role the United States had in turning refugees into refugees, their experiences in refugee camps, and the legislation which allowed them entry into the country. Once here, they struggled to adapt while finding jobs and building their lives amidst the country's devastating economic recession. This thesis asserts that coveted aircraft jobs in Wichita, "the Air Capital of the World," provided security to ethnic Lao refugees and helped them to build a distinctly Lao American community in the American heartland.

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## Introduction

Upon taking office in 1974, Gerald Ford inherited the Vietnam crisis – inadequately dubbed, for the neighboring countries of Cambodia and Laos were part of this conflict. Under his tenure, the war was ending, and it soon became clear that a massive refugee crisis was underway. Supporting him throughout these trials was his Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, himself a refugee from Hitler’s Germany decades earlier.

President Ford expressed his humanitarian aims in admitting refugees, most notably in his speech to the Joint Session of Congress in April of 1975, just a month before the Fall of Saigon. To bolster his message, he called for evacuating Americans remaining in Vietnam alongside thousands of refugees: “I must, of course, consider the safety of nearly six thousand Americans who remain in South Vietnam, and tens of thousands of South Vietnamese employees... whose lives, with their dependents, are in grave peril.”<sup>1</sup> Ford was careful to frame Vietnamese refugees as the United States’ innocent allies, caught in the crossfire of democracy and communism. They needed the United States to help them, or else communism may win. However, it was only Vietnamese that were originally considered as “refugees.”

But what about the refugees from Laos, who gathered in Thai refugee camps? Though often overlooked, ethnic Lao refugees were equally as affected by the American wars in Southeast Asia. The ethnic Lao lived in the southern parts of the country, and as such are also referred to as “lowland Lao.” To the north, in the mountains, were the Hmong ethnic group, who

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Ford, “President Ford’s Address to the Joint Session of Congress” (speech, Washington, DC, April 10, 1975), Gerald R. Ford Library,

<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/1252280excerpt.pdf>.

were closely allied with Americans during the Secret War in Laos. Though Hmong bore the brunt of persecution by the communist Pathet Lao, who overtook the country in late 1975, the ethnic Lao also feared for their lives – both from communists and the American presence, which fanned the flames of the small country’s growing refugee crisis.

In the grand scheme of Southeast Asian refugee admissions, the Lao are only a small fraction. Over 1.1 million Southeast Asians have been resettled in the United States since 1975, making them the largest refugee group to enter the country – larger than Syrians or Ukrainians, well-known in recent news. Beginning in 1975 and through the peak of immigration in the 1980s, approximately 125,000 ethnic Lao refugees resettled in the United States.<sup>2</sup> By the year 2000, nearly 200,000 people of Lao descent were living in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Their large number, and the legislation passed to ensure their entry, can be seen as a success; it is especially impressive considering how the debate on immigration rages on to this day, as seen along the United States–Mexico border.

Though refugees were resettled across the country by their sponsors, many went to California. Looking at the cities with the top ten Lao and Lao American populations, five of them are in California; Kansas is not on the list at all.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, a small population ended

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<sup>2</sup> Pamela A. De Voe, “Lao,” in *Case Studies in Diversity: Refugees in America in the 1990s*, ed. David Haines (Westport: Praeger, 1997), 107.

<sup>3</sup> Carl L. Bankston III and Danielle Antoinette Hidalgo, “Southeast Asia: Laos, Cambodia, Thailand,” in *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration Since 1965* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 624.

<sup>4</sup> Abby Budiman, “Laotians in the U.S. Fact Sheet,” Pew Research Center, Washington DC (April 29, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-sheet/asian-americans-laotians-in-the-u-s/#top-10-u-s-metropolitan-areas-by-laotian-population-2019>.

up in the American heartland in Wichita, Kansas, and built a community here. Wichita, Kansas, known as the “Air Capital of the World” for its abundance of aircraft factories, fostered the growth and development of the Lao community in the city.

In *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, Bruce J. Schulman argues that the “long 1970s,” lasting from 1969 to 1984, was the “most significant watershed of modern U.S. history, the beginning of our own time.”<sup>5</sup> Schulman specifically highlights the marked changes in race relations, religion, family life, and politics – and though he does not touch on the role of immigration, aiding in these changes was the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees into the United States during the long 1970s. Southeast Asian resettlement was massive, and their continued entry into the country is what helps to make Asian Americans the fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States in modern-day.<sup>6</sup>

Beginning in the 1980s, nearly a decade after the Fall of Saigon, historians began publishing works on Southeast Asian resettlement to the United States. In the works of scholars such as Gil Loescher and John A. Scanlan, Southeast Asians, or the Indochinese as they were often called in these older texts, are often examined as a part of the larger picture of immigration history, placed within the context of the post-Cold War era.<sup>7</sup> The “Indochinese” were part of the

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), xiii.

<sup>6</sup> Abby Budiman and Neil G. Ruiz, “Asian Americans are the Fastest-Growing Racial or Ethnic Group in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, Washington, DC (April 9, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/04/09/asian-americans-are-the-fastest-growing-racial-or-ethnic-group-in-the-u-s/>.

<sup>7</sup> Gil Loescher and John A. Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America’s Half-Open Door, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

wave of “new refugees” who came to the United States post-1965, which was comprised of many non-white migrants. Though this older research is significant, “Indochinese” is no longer the preferred term, as it is a holdover from France’s colonial control of the territory known as French Indochina until the nations achieved freedom after World War II.

In studying refugee legislation, historians tend to look at the issue from the top-down. The focus is on the lawmakers and the laws, and their motivations for policy decisions. Were politicians like Gerald Ford true humanitarians or were they motivated to look good in the face of a Cold War loss – or even a little bit of both? Alongside these questions, legislative scholars debate whether or not these laws were spurred by domestic policy or foreign policy concerns.<sup>8</sup> Though these are important questions, by focusing on the reasons for policy, they overlook the effect that policy had on the refugees for whom it provided. While thankful for the policies that allowed them to resettle in the United States, the reasons why had less influence on refugees’ daily lives in the country.

Scholarship on the Southeast Asians refugees themselves tends to focus on Vietnamese, Hmong, and Cambodians. These groups entered in much larger numbers and were faced with persecution more recognizable to the American populace – the Viet Cong and the genocidal Khmer Rouge loom much larger in memory than the Pathet Lao, communists from a country that many people have never even heard of. As the Laotian Civil War coincided with the Vietnam War, their plight is often conflated with those of other Southeast Asian refugees. However, the

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<sup>8</sup> Carl J. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees During the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 4-5; Loescher and Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness*, xv-xvi.

circumstances of their flight from Laos and their arrival to the United States differs from the other ethnic groups.

Research on the state of Kansas continues this trend of following Vietnamese refugees. Most of it focuses on western Kansas, exploring the meatpacking plants of Garden City. These works importantly note that factory work was the main source of employment available to refugee workers, who often lacked the English skills and educational attainment for more white-collar employment. As such, meatpacking became a large employer of refugees not only in Garden City, but across the Great Plains region.<sup>9</sup>

Moving to Wichita specifically, very little academic work highlights the plight of Southeast Asian refugees, and one exception includes “Del Norte Meets Little Saigon.” These scholars show how Wichita’s Broadway Street became a hub of ethnic entrepreneurship after incoming refugees found that they struggled in the traditional workforce.<sup>10</sup> However, entrepreneurship, though an important part of immigrant labor, is not the only means of their employment in Wichita, nor is meatpacking. A gap in the research of Wichita’s refugee communities is the role that aircraft factories played. Being the “Air Capital of the World” and home to aviation giants such as Cessna and Boeing, Wichita’s economy has always been dominated by aircraft companies. Not only did the big aircraft companies exist, but many smaller

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<sup>9</sup> Louise Lampere, Alex Stepick, and Guillermo J. Grenier, *Newcomers in the Workplace: Immigrants and the Restructuring of the U.S. Economy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Kristy Nabhan-Warren, *Meatpacking America: How Migration, Work, and Faith Unite and Divide the Heartland* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Jay M. Price, Sue Abdinnour, and David T. Hughes, “Del Norte Meets Little Saigon: Ethnic Entrepreneurship on Broadway Avenue in Wichita, Kansas, 1970–2015,” *Enterprise & Society* 17, no. 3 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1017/eso.2016.76>.

companies in Wichita acted as subcontractors to them. As such, I show that the aviation industry contributed to the development of Wichita's Lao community, anchoring it in place to make the city a strong destination for other Lao and Lao American people.

The story of Lao refugees in Wichita remains, then, a piecemeal one. Their small number, not just in Wichita but also nationally, helps obscure their presence and their history. When explaining their ethnic identity, Laotian refugees are often forced to give an entire history lesson to help separate themselves from the more recognizable Vietnamese refugees, who – in the United States, at least – have an entire war named for them.<sup>11</sup> To see this in action, one only has to look at the first season of American cartoon *King of the Hill*. In the seventh episode of the first season, which premiered in 1997, protagonist Hank Hill's new neighbors, the Souphanousinphones, are from Laos. However, Hank and his friends continually ask neighbor Kahn Souphanousinphone, "Are you Chinese or Japanese?" despite being told that Kahn is Lao. In response, Kahn rants, "We Laotian, from Laos, stupid! It's a landlocked country in Southeast Asia. It's between Vietnam and Thailand, okay. Population 4.7 million."<sup>12</sup> While a joke in the show, it is also a reality for many Lao Americans. The struggle to know – and remember – these moments remain, outside of being reduced to cheap foreigner jokes. As such, Ethnic Studies

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<sup>11</sup> Frank Shong, "Laotian Americans' Stories are Obscured by History. That's Why We Need Ethnic Studies," *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-08-25/southeast-asia-histories-ethnic-studies-curriculum>.

<sup>12</sup> *King of the Hill*, season 1, episode 7, "Westie Side Story," directed by Brian Sheesley, written by Glenn Berger and Jonathan Aibel, featuring Mike Judge and Kathy Najimy, aired 03/02/1997, in broadcast syndication, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/957dab3b-d49f-47e6-8c76-31a27a006e51>.

scholar Khatharya Um argues, “The struggle to remember for many of history’s battered subjects is therefore also a struggle for relevance.”<sup>13</sup>

American media coverage from the time period falls into the trap of portraying refugees as what scholar Yen Le Espiritu calls “passive objects of sympathy.”<sup>14</sup> Wichita’s main newspaper, *The Wichita Eagle* (in its various iterations including *The Wichita Beacon* and the combined *The Wichita Beacon and Eagle*) covered the resettlement of refugees in its city. These papers related the struggles of refugees, the horrors of refugee camps, and the difficulties of adjusting to life in the United States; however, the perspective is from that of Wichita’s white population, and the Lao experience, when that perspective is even provided, is filtered through that white American lens. Furthermore, in these early days of resettlement, they lived in the United States without the security of citizenship and may have felt like they had to say what Americans wanted to hear.

Critical Refugee Studies aims to humanize refugees – and its most important tenet is to take refugees at their word.<sup>15</sup> The Critical Refugee Studies Collective, or CRS Collective, recognizes that refugee imagery is limited, freezing refugees in time at their moment of trauma, and showing how the West “saved” them.<sup>16</sup> Following their lead, I attempt to center the refugees themselves and the ways in which they use their agency to create lives and communities in the

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<sup>13</sup> Khatharya Um, “Exiled Memory: History, Identity, and Remembering in Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Diaspora,” *positions: asia critique* 20, no. 3 (2012), 834. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/483980>.

<sup>14</sup> Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 64.

<sup>15</sup> Yen Le Espiritu, Lan Duong, Ma Vang, Victor Bascara, and Khatharya Um, *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022).

<sup>16</sup> Espiritu, Duong, Vang, Bascara, and Um, *Departures*, 124-25.

United States. Though legislation creates the means for resettlement in the United States, it is important to see how legislation worked for and was navigated by the people it affected. Often, the stories of Lao refugees in United States are overshadowed by the narrative pushed by the American media – when spoken about, they are spoken of in terms of “assimilable” or “unassimilable.” In reality, most tried to keep their heads down, work hard, and hold onto whatever cultural ties they could.

Leading scholar and member of the CRS Collective Yen Le Espiritu encourages using refugees as a “source of knowledge.”<sup>17</sup> To place their perspective at the forefront, I have interviewed three Lao refugees who came to Wichita between the years 1975 and 1995 and worked at aircraft companies. These fifteen years were the time of highest admissions from Southeast Asia. Based on where sponsors took refugees, some of these sites would become places of secondary migration, and these areas of the country would become centers of Lao and Southeast Asian community building. Wichita, with aircraft, became one of these communities.

Fifty years later, with many of them now feeling secure as United States citizens, they may feel able to be more honest. Combining the American narrative with the first-person perspective of Lao Wichitans will create a fuller picture of why and how the Wichita community was formed alongside the development of aircraft manufacturing into the twenty-first century.

To show how a Lao American community formed in Wichita, Kansas, I begin with the story of original displacement. Chapter One follows the refugee journey from the events that spurred their escapes to the refugee camps that held them until resettlement or repatriation were

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<sup>17</sup> Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 186.

offered to them. Pivoting to the United States, the refugee legislation was surprisingly quick to respond in this crisis; however, the federal government left resettlement in the hands of voluntary agencies, which slowed down the process. Through this, it shows how refugees were made into refugees, and how the United States was culpable for it, while also minimizing their culpability through refugee admissions. Chapter Two shows the journey to community building once Lao refugees began arriving in Wichita. Newspaper coverage shows the reaction to incoming refugees and the conditions of the US economy. Because Wichita's economy relies heavily on aircraft, these became sought after jobs for Lao workers. Once finding jobs that provided for their families, they began the work of community building, setting down roots for the Lao Americans of today.

Mimi Thi Nguyen writes of refugees as subjects of the “gift of freedom” – something they are expected to be thankful for, even though American violence made them refugees, and Americans swooping into save them from that violence is meant to absolve them. She portrays refugees as subjects to the American gift twice – first as an object of intervention, and second as an object of deliverance.<sup>18</sup> The first chapter shows the ways in which refugees are objects of intervention and deliverance for the American governments; however, by exploring the ways they have built their community within and without American culture, this expands on the typical refugee narrative. In relaying the Lao experience in their own words, this shows how Lao refugees, in Wichita and beyond, were actors rather than mere subjects of American policy and American charity.

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<sup>18</sup> Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham: Duke University Press: 2012), 23.

## Chapter 1 - The Path to America

For months leading to the Fall of Saigon, American news headlines foretold the end of the Vietnam War. On May 1, 1975, emblazoned on the front page of the *New York Times* was the leading story: “Communists Take Over Saigon; U.S. Rescue Fleet is Picking Up Vietnamese Who Fled in Boats.”<sup>19</sup> The war was done and lost, and a refugee crisis unlike anything the United States had ever dealt with was underway — with the American government looking especially hard at those from South Vietnam, who they had ardently supported against the Viet Cong. Across the border in Laos, the communist Pathet Lao were also about to land the death blow against the Lao Royalists. They emerged victorious and took over in December 1975. Though the birth of the new nation, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, was reported on the front page with the headline, “Coalition Regime in Laos Abolished: Communists End Monarchy and Announce Creation of a People's Republic Coalition Regime in Laos Abolished,” the story was much less prominently displayed, tucked away in a corner with the bulk of the story relegated to the tenth page.<sup>20</sup> Once considered a key country in the Cold War struggle against communism, Laos and its people were easily overlooked in the aftermath. Such was the fate of Lao refugees then, and so they remain in American public memory to this day.

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<sup>19</sup> George Esper, “Communists Take Over Saigon; U.S. Rescue Fleet is Picking Up Vietnamese Who Fled in Boats,” *New York Times*, May 1, 1975,

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/world/asia/050175vietnam-city-ap.html>.

<sup>20</sup> “Coalition Regime in Laos Abolished: Communists End Monarchy and Announce Creation of a People's Republic,” *New York Times*, December 4, 1975,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1975/12/04/archives/coalition-regime-in-laos-abolished-communists-end-monarchy-and.html>.

However, being forgotten did not stop the Lao from seeking refuge in the United States. Over 500,000 found it. Of those, approximately 1,000 made a community in Wichita, Kansas. Getting to Wichita, however, was not a simple, linear journey. The distance from Laos to Kansas is over 8,000 miles, and the journey there was even longer for the refugees. Escaping Laos was only the beginning. First, refugees had to become refugees — victims of displacement, wartime violence, and persecution. Upon fleeing their country, they struggled to survive in refugee camps, often for many years, as they awaited a sponsor to bring them to the United States.

On the other hand, in the United States, new legislation had to be created to pave the way for refugee admissions. Previous legislation was insufficient for the needs of hundreds of thousands of needy refugees. Furthermore, voluntary agencies, also known as VOLAGs, were brought into work with sponsors to bring over refugees and help support their adjustment to the United States. Only after this did refugees enter the country and finally begin community building.

### **Becoming Refugees**

To begin the story of refugee resettlement, it is important to understand how they were made into refugees in the first place. In the case of Southeast Asia – and more specifically Laos – part of the blame can be shifted to the United States. After helping to make them refugees, the United States was obliged to clean up its own mess, and thus creating the need for refugee admissions in the first place.

This small, unassuming country had only three million people when the United States first looked its way. Then, and now, the landlocked nation is one of the poorest countries in the region. In any other circumstances, it would have been an overlooked backwater. Yet, the United

States viewed it as an essential battleground in the fight against communism, as far back as the Eisenhower administration. Laos was considered a foothold into Southeast Asia, and a crucial piece of the “domino theory” that dominated Cold War thinking—that if Laos were to fall, so too would everyone else around them. Eisenhower was the earliest to voice these fears, and it carried throughout successive presidential administrations.<sup>21</sup> These fears about Southeast Asia were exacerbated by the communist takeover of China in the decades prior to the Vietnam War breaking out. Communism was creeping through Laos in two obvious ways: the communist Pathet Lao were working to take over the country amidst the Laotian Civil War, while parts of the Viet Cong’s network of roads and trails cut through the country near the Plain of Jars in central Laos.

Attempting to disrupt the Vietnamese, the United States decided a bombing campaign was in order, though they never officially went to war with Laos and instead partook in covert operations now remembered as the Secret War. Between the years 1964 to 1973, Laos was devastated by the two million tons of bombs dropped by the United States. Scarcely a piece of the countryside was left unscathed as bombs fell the equivalent of every eight minutes, twenty-four hours a day, for all nine of those years. Entire villages were destroyed in the Plain of Jars, and by the end of 1973, it is estimated that a third of the Laotian population were displaced and turned into refugees.<sup>22</sup> Of these millions harmed by the bombings, some still to this day with all

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<sup>21</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, President's News Conference, April 7, 1954, American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/233655>.

<sup>22</sup> Carolyn Woods Eisenberg, *Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 506.

of the unexploded ordinance, most were undoubtedly non-combatants in any conflict – Vietnam, Civil War, Secret War, or otherwise.

Despite this devastating and disastrous effort by the United States and their allies to secure Laos as an anti-communist foothold in Southeast Asia, the communist Pathet Lao finally conquered the last of the country in 1975. It was not only American-aligned Hmong who were forced to flee, but also what was left of the Royal Lao Army. This included the ethnic, or lowland, Lao people, culturally distinct from the Hmong in the north.

The obligation borne of this devastation spurred United States legislation to admit these refugees into the country. Whether it was American guilt, true humanitarianism, or a means of saving face on the international stage that allowed refugees into the country ultimately does not matter – to the refugees, the why does not matter so much as the fact that they were admitted. They would do anything under any laws required of them for their own safety, as the CRS Collective argues, “[R]efugees and asylum seekers are aware of their relationship to the law and submit to its requirements intentionally whenever possible in the hope of attaining protection.”<sup>23</sup>

Coming from a land-locked country bordered by fellow war-torn Cambodia and Vietnam and prevented by mountains and military activity from moving north to China, lowland Lao refugees could flee only in one direction: to Thailand, which bordered them to the west, and was only a river away. In the first week of May, following the Fall of Saigon, reports estimated over 2,000 Lao fled their country.<sup>24</sup> It was a notoriously dangerous journey. It involved crossing the

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<sup>23</sup> Espiritu, Duong, Vang, Bascara, and Um, *Departures*, 52-3.

<sup>24</sup> Associated Press, “Thousands Flee Laos in Fear of Pro-Red Takeover,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, May 11, 1975.

Mekong River, the lifeblood waters of Southeast Asia, a river in some places wide and placid and in others filled with waterfalls and ferocious rapids.

By the end of 1975, once the Pathet Lao had taken full control of Laos, over 10,000 lowlanders had made the journey to Thailand. Even one member of the Lao royal family, Prince Panya, braved the perilous trip swimming across the Mekong, which took him over an hour.<sup>25</sup> Admissions continued over the next few years, before peaking in 1978. This year saw a surge of ethnic Lao refugees reaching 50,000, and in total, nearly 400,000 Laotians (including Hmong) fled to Thailand.<sup>26</sup> The large number of refugees can be attributed to a number of factors. One of the great fears, especially for those who had fought against the communists in the war, was the threat of re-education camps.<sup>27</sup> It was to these camps where the Pathet Lao sent several members of the Laotian royal family, including King Savang Vatthana, his queen, and his heir, in 1977, where they eventually died on unconfirmed days and in unconfirmed circumstances.<sup>28</sup> One Lao refugee named Nok Phommachanh, who eventually settled in Wichita, recalled his eight months imprisoned in the re-education camps, where he was “forced to dig tunnels, build roads and learn a new philosophy,” that philosophy being the greatness of communism.<sup>29</sup> However, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees shared the same concern with Thailand: that the ethnic

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<sup>25</sup> “Refugees a Problem for Thais,” *New York Times*, December 2, 1975,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1975/12/02/archives/refugees-a-problem-for-thais.html>.

<sup>26</sup> United States High Commissioner for Refugees, *The State of The World's Refugees 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 98.

<sup>27</sup> W. Courtland Robinson, “Laotian Refugees in Thailand,” in *Laos: Beyond the Revolution*, eds. Joseph J. Zasloff and Leonard Unger (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 218-21.

<sup>28</sup> Norman Peagam, “Laos Says its Former King is Being ‘Re-Educated,’” *New York Times*, March 29, 1977, <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/03/29/archives/laos-says-its-former-king-is-being-reeducated.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Beth Rosenberg, “Refugee Struggles Against Economy,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, August 1, 1983.

Lao fled for economic purposes, and took the “easy” way out by fleeing to camps just across the Mekong.<sup>30</sup>

Ethnic Lao refugees often ended up in one of two camps: Nong Khai or Ubon. Here, they awaited their fate: would they be resettled to a third country – or would they be repatriated back to the country from which they fled? Both the Ubon and Nong Khai camps were located just across the Mekong River. The Nong Khai camp was to the north, near Laos’s capital of Vientiane. At its peak, it held over 17,000 ethnic Lao refugees.<sup>31</sup> The Ubon camp was to the south, just across from Pakse, also provided refuge to many Cambodian refugees, since Cambodia was directly to the south. It was also the site of the Air Force base from which American planes flew out during the carpet bombing of Laos in the years before, done with the full support of the Thai government.<sup>32</sup>

Though these were the main two camps, Thailand had many other options for ethnic Lao. At its peak, there were twenty-one camps, many of which were consolidated or shut down as Thailand became more organized.<sup>33</sup> Eventually, these twenty-one camps became nine camps along the Thai-Lao and Thai-Cambodian borders.<sup>34</sup> These camps were supported by the United

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<sup>30</sup> United States High Commissioner for Refugees, *The State of The World's Refugees 2000*, 99.

<sup>31</sup> Mitchell Bonner, “A Visit to the Laotian Refugee Camp at Nong Khai, Thailand,” Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California. Accessed August 26, 2024.

<https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb900008z5/?brand=oac4&doc.view=mets>

<sup>32</sup> Eisenberg, *Fire and Rain*, 125.

S. Chantavanich and P. Rabe, “Thailand and the Indochinese Refugees: Fifteen Years of Compromise and Uncertainty,” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 18, no. 1 (1990): 71.

<https://doi.org/10.1163/080382490X00042>.

<sup>34</sup> Chantavanich and Rabe, “Thailand and the Indochinese Refugees,” 66–80.

Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), who coordinated aid to refugees.<sup>35</sup> When entering the camp, Lao refugees were technically considered “illegal immigrants.” Thailand did not, at least legally, consider these refugees to be refugees. The country did not sign any United Nations Conventions regarding refugees and could therefore treat those incoming however they wanted. Because of this, those that fled to Thailand before 1979 were considered “displaced persons” while those who came after were considered “illegal immigrants.”<sup>36</sup> However, Thai policy softened towards refugees from 1979 through 1980, as enforcement was difficult along the long Thai-Lao border. This became the peak years of resettlement to United States.<sup>37</sup>

When photographer Mitchell Bonner visited Nong Khai in 1981, he noted the ethnic Lao population there numbered approximately 17,000. The detention center was where they held these “illegal refugees” for early detainment. Bonner noted that it was a corrupt system. He observed that Thailand charged 500 baht to enter legally, but if they could not pay, they spent a month in the crude detention center. Once they had paid their fare or waited out their sentence, they joined the main camp. Though accommodations remained stark and barren throughout their years in the camp, the early days were especially lacking in luxuries. Bamboo huts were hastily thrown up to hold incoming refugees, before wooden shacks could be built.<sup>38</sup> Family compartments were built to hold roughly four to five people, though the large households

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<sup>35</sup> Chantavanich and Rabe, “Thailand and the Indochinese Refugees,” 72.

<sup>36</sup> Chantavanich and Rabe, “Thailand and the Indochinese Refugees,” 68.

<sup>37</sup> Chantavanich and Rabe, “Thailand and the Indochinese Refugees,” 69.

<sup>38</sup> Mitchell Bonner, “A Visit to the Laotian Refugee Camp at Nong Khai, Thailand,” Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California. Accessed August 26, 2024.

<https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb900008z5/?brand=oac4&doc.view=mets>.

typically outstripped this. The camp was also segregated between Lao and Hmong refugee families, a pond between them.

American charitable organizations were involved in refugee camp aid. The Catholic Relief Service took a prominent role at Nong Khai, running the small hospital in the detention camps, and feeding 600 children. Two nuns ran the hospital and dealt with leprosy and malaria and the various other ailments. They were there when the refugee camp burned in a fire and helped with relief in the aftermath.<sup>39</sup>

Nong Khai closed to incoming refugees in 1982. It was packed full, so claimed the Thai government, and refugees were rerouted to Ubon or Ban Vinai, though Ban Vinai's population leaned heavily towards the Hmong.<sup>40</sup> Ubon, then, became the main camp for ethnic Lao. At Ubon refugee camp, similar hardships persisted. By 1980, the camp housed nearly 40,000 refugees from Laos; these were the official numbers, but medical workers on the ground estimated that it could be even higher.<sup>41</sup> The camp was broken up into two areas: the detention center for initial entry, and the main camp quarters, where the refugees lived until they could find sponsorship in a third country or went back home.

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<sup>39</sup> "Laotian Refugees Made Homeless After Fire Destroys Largest Camp," *Catholic Advance* (Wichita, KS), March 13, 1980.

<sup>40</sup> Mitchell Bonner, "A Visit to the Laotian Refugee Camp at Nong Khai, Thailand," Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California. Accessed August 26, 2024.

<https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb900008z5/?brand=oac4&doc.view=mets>

<sup>41</sup> O'Sullivan, John, Geraldine O'Sullivan, and Shah Ebrahim. "Primary Health Care in Ubon Refugee Camp." *British Medical Journal* 280, no. 6216 (1980): 779.

As the site of Ubon was formerly a US Air Force ammunition dump, the land was flattened and easily built upon. Accommodations were either self-constructed bamboo and grass huts, or United Nations-built wooden barns meant to house 500 people.<sup>42</sup> In these barns, families would be allotted a singular room. Despite seeking asylum from tyranny, the restrictions in the camps often made life difficult on a day-to-day basis for refugees. Refugees were required to have passes to get in and out of the camp for any reasons, such as employment or medical needs, as Ubon did not have a fully equipped hospital. These passes could be either temporary or permanent.

First Lady Rosalynn Carter visited several Thai refugee camps in 1979, specifically seeking more information on the plight of Cambodians escaping genocide. However, her visit also included a stop at Ubon, where she was introduced to many Lao refugees. One young refugee asked of her, “Why does America take so few Laotians?”<sup>43</sup> Her answer to this question, if there was one, was not recorded. Lao refugees, who appeared to many as more like economic refugees, was less of a concern than Cambodia’s Killing Fields or Vietnamese boat people who died by the thousands at sea. Of all the suffering she witnessed, she said, “Emotionally, it’s overwhelming. As a wife, as a mother, as a human being, it’s devastating.”<sup>44</sup> Though First Lady

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<sup>42</sup> O’Sullivan, O’Sullivan, and Ebrahim, “Primary Health Care in Ubon Refugee Camp,” 779.

<sup>43</sup> John Burgess, “Mrs. Carter: Camp ‘Overwhelming,’” *Washington Post*, November 9, 1979. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/11/10/mrs-carter-camp-overwhelming/4ed753aa-b6de-45f7-aa6c-c94295d40df0/>.

<sup>44</sup> Henry Kamm, “Mrs. Carter Visits Thai Camp: ‘It’s Like Nothing I’ve Seen,’” *New York Times*, November 10, 1979, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/11/10/archives/mrs-carter-visits-thai-camp-its-like-nothing-ive-seen-buying-from.html>.

Carter's visit with Cambodian refugees took the forefront, her brief visit at Ubon was nevertheless important at shining a light on the Lao plight.

Admittedly, Lao refugees fared slightly better than the other ethnic groups in comparison, since they are similar both linguistically and culturally. In the centuries prior to French colonial rule, the borders of former Lao and Thai kingdoms overlapped at various points. In contrast, the Thai were known for their distrust of Vietnamese refugees, in part due to Vietnamese refugees supporting communist insurgency in Thailand back in the 1950s.<sup>45</sup> As a result, Vietnamese were the lowest priority for resettlement, according to Thai officials – though the United States disagreed and took them in large numbers from refugee camps across Asia.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, the conditions in the refugee camps were still brutal for the Lao, as it was for refugees of any ethnic background, and they too spent several years there waiting, if they ever were admitted at all. At the very least, despite deprivations, the Lao were generally spared forcible repatriation to Laos at gunpoint, which was a fate thrust upon many unwilling Vietnamese, Hmong, and Cambodians in much larger numbers.<sup>47</sup> In one case, upon being forced back across the Mekong in the daylight, Thai authorities reported seeing the Pathet Lao gun down a Laotian mother and her two daughters.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, the experiences of all refugees, no matter their ethnic background, was one of trauma.

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<sup>45</sup> “Indochina: Redoubling the Refugees’ Woes,” *Time*, June 26, 1978,

<https://time.com/archive/6849985/indochina-redoubling-the-refugees-woes/>.

<sup>46</sup> Kamm, “Thailand Finds Refugees a Growing Problem.”

<sup>47</sup> United States High Commissioner for Refugees, *The State of The World's Refugees 2000*, 85.

<sup>48</sup> Henry Kamm, “3 Sent Back to Laos Reported Shot,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1978,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1978/02/25/archives/3-sent-back-to-laos-reported-shot.html>.

Refugees fleeing to the Philippines, who would have mostly been Vietnamese, were “prepared” for life in America. They received a crash course in English and American economics to aid in their adjustment to the United States once arriving.<sup>49</sup> In contrast, Lao, Hmong, and Cambodian refugees on the Thai-Lao and Thai-Cambodian borders faced much more rudimentary conditions, and less hands-on preparations for the realities of the United States. English classes were available, but hardly mandatory, and when children are hungry and the parents working, that leaves little time for anything other than survival. Comparatively, the resettlement rate was much lower for Lao than Vietnamese and Cambodians – twenty six percent for Laotians (though, admittedly, this includes Hmong), compared the fifty-nine percent for Cambodians and seventy-two percent for Vietnamese.<sup>50</sup>

Countries such as Thailand, which bordered communist-besieged Cambodia and Laos, were faced with an influx of refugees. As Thailand’s Interior Minister Samak Sundaravei remarked, “We are unlucky to have the three countries close to us.”<sup>51</sup> While considered one of the more stable countries in Southeast Asia today, Thailand was in the 1970s still a developing country, with its own military and political conflicts coinciding with the refugee crisis. Other officials in Thailand made no attempt to hide their displeasure at their role in the refugee crisis,

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<sup>49</sup> James W. Tollefson, *Alien Winds: The Reeducation of America’s Indochinese Refugees* (New York: Praeger, 1989).

<sup>50</sup> William Chapman, “Laotian Refugees Fear Thailand Camp Dead End,” *New York Times*, August 5, 1979, <https://www.waonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/08/06/laotian-refugees-fear-thailand-camp-dead-end/69e81b7f-2ddd-4690-a23e-b4da41844baa/>.

<sup>51</sup> Henry Kamm, “Thailand Finds Refugees a Growing Problem: 80,000 Wait in Camps for Permanent Resettlement but Few Find Homes,” *New York Times*, July 1, 1977, <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/07/01/archives/thailand-finds-indochinese-refugees-a-growing-problem-80000-wait-in.html>.

with one stating that the refugee problem was “entirely an American responsibility because it was an American war. Yet we're the ones who must accept the brunt of the problem, just because we're in geographic proximity.”<sup>52</sup> Though Thailand was generally supportive of US military action during the war, as it was the Thai bases from which American planes flew out, they did not appreciate the mess left behind for them to deal with.

The pressure was on the West to accept these refugees and get them out of Thailand's hair, which the West did with much success. Countries including Canada, France, and Australia notably took in large numbers of Southeast Asians, numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Ultimately, though, the United States bore the brunt of admissions, taking in more than every other country combined.<sup>53</sup>

This pressure from Thailand was something that President Ford was clearly aware of. Ford's address to the Joint Sessions of Congress in April of 1975 made it clear that, while refugee admissions had a humanitarian outcome, it was only one byproduct of these policies. He warned pointedly that US alliances in the region with “free states” could suffer if Americans were seen as unreliable: “I am also mindful of our posture towards the rest of the world, and particularly on our future relations with the free states of Asia. These nations must not think for a minute that the United States is pulling out on them or intends to abandon them to aggression.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Lewis M. Simons, “Thailand Finds Refugee Flow an Overwhelming Burden,” *Washington Post*, December 10, 1977, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1977/12/10/thailand-finds-refugee-flow-an-overwhelming-burden/1961a7a3-d74d-4cd9-906c-86f3e2766e34/>.

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/asia/sites/asia/files/legacy-pdf/3ebf9bad0.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> Gerald Ford, “President Ford's Address to the Joint Session of Congress” (speech, Washington, DC, April 10, 1975), Gerald Ford Presidential Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/1252280excerpt.pdf>.

As much goodwill as President Ford declared, his words made clear that, for all his desire to present a humanitarian image to the world, there were other very large concerns that he had to grapple with. If the United States had helped make these people into refugees, they could deal with the aftermath.

As the incoming tide of refugees into Thailand from Laos and Cambodia slowed, and as refugee resettlement began emptying the camps, Thailand began to close their Thai-Lao border camps in the early 1990s. However, not everyone was fortunate enough to gain sponsorship and resettlement in a third country. Becoming refugees was only the first step of the long journey. While languishing in refugee camps, it was then up to third countries to choose whether or not to allow their entry. To do so, first legislation had to be created and approved.

### **A Legislative History of Refugee Admissions: 1962—1980**

By mid-April of 1975, the President and his Cabinet realized that the fallout from the war, which had not yet officially ended, though was considered hopeless, would generate a large number of refugees. Though they recognized that over a million people were endangered, Kissinger identified approximately 174,000 people who needed to get out of Vietnam because they were regarded as being in “overwhelming jeopardy” from the incoming Communist regime.<sup>55</sup> By the time Saigon fell to the Viet Cong, evacuations were fully underway. Only around 130,000 would end up being evacuated in the chaotic spring of 1975, comprising the first

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<sup>55</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between Ford, Kissinger, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 14, 1975, box 10, Memoranda of Conversation - Ford Administration, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1553026.pdf>.

of three waves of Southeast Asian refugee admissions.<sup>56</sup> This first group of 130,000 tended to be Vietnamese allies of American forces, employed by them in various roles. They were also generally more educated than those waves that followed, which included the more famous “boat people.”<sup>57</sup>

The current legislation of the time, however, could not meet the growing refugee crisis's demands, nor was previous legislation adequate to meet the increasing demand. In the early twentieth century, as different groups of immigrants and refugees came, legislation was created to meet their needs – or as the National Origins Quota in 1924 dictated, deny them entry. In 1952, the McCarran-Walter Act upheld the national origins quota. However, as the Cold War and its various conflicts dragged on, the refugees created from it showed there was a recognizable need for reforming American immigration policies.

The most important piece of legislation was the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (INA) which was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Immigration scholars pay particular attention to this piece of legislation, as it overhauled previous immigration laws and paved the way for modern immigration law.<sup>58</sup> Until 1965, the United States had a national origins quota system, allowing only a certain number of immigrants from each country to enter. Instead, the INA created a preference system. The INA prioritized family reunification, allowing

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<sup>56</sup> Charlotte J. Moore, *Review of U.S. Refugee Resettlement Programs and Policies*, CRS Report No. 80-S522-10 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 1980), 13, <https://congressional-proquest-com.er.lib.k-state.edu/congressional/docview/t21.d22.crs-1980-epw-0054?accountid=11789>.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Strand and Woodrow Jones, Jr., *Indochinese Refugees in America: Problems of Adaptation and Assimilation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985), 109.

<sup>58</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 96-97; Mary C. Waters, Reed Ueda, and Helen B. Marrow, *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration Since 1965* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

in “the children, spouses, and parents of a citizen of the United States.” However, immigration was not unlimited, with annual caps on immigration still in place; however, this cap did not discriminate on race or ethnicity. Supporters of this act were clear that the INA would not open the floodgates. Furthermore, in terms of preference, refugees were in seventh place out of seven.<sup>59</sup> Despite the INA’s importance in American immigration history, it could not meet the needs of incoming Southeast Asian refugees in 1975.

A few years later in 1968, as more people sought refuge worldwide amidst various Cold War crises, the United States ratified the *United Nations Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. The *Protocol* upheld the meaning of refugee that the United Nations had defined in 1951: “Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”<sup>60</sup> When the United States ratified the *Protocol*, there was an attempt to make a legislative change. However, the various Senate sub-committees relating to refugees and immigration were unable to move any bills forward for large-scale, comprehensive action.

Nevertheless, the INA and continued support for change set the stage for continued immigration reform in the United States into the 1970s. The imminent end of the Vietnam War

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<sup>59</sup> *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965*, Public Law 89-236, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 79-718 (1965).

<sup>60</sup> *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, July 28, 1951, 189 U.N.T.S. 150.; *Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, Jan. 31, 1967, 19 U.S.T. 6223; 606 U.N.T.S. 267.

spurred Congress into action. Within weeks of the Fall of Saigon, the United States pushed legislation through to begin the admissions process. In the 1970s, refugee admissions was a topic on which politicians were able to reach across the aisle and come together. The looming specter of communism was perhaps a unifying enough force to bring together a group of otherwise diametrically opposed Americans.

Opposition to the Immigration and Nationality Act, the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act (IMRAA) receives far less attention from immigration scholars, despite its importance to the story of Southeast Asian refugee admissions. The IMRAA was introduced in the House of Representatives on May 7, 1975, sponsored by Peter Rodino, Jr (D-New Jersey). This piece of legislation was introduced only a week after the Fall of Saigon, but a refugee crisis was anticipated long before. Historians have identified two main camps of politicians who emerged in the debate over refugee admissions, but I intend to use the names coined by Carl Bon Tempo: the “liberalizers,” those who generally supported refugee admissions, and the “restrictionists,” who generally sought to keep America for Americans already here.<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, the liberalizers and the restrictionists did not adhere strictly to a liberal/conservative or Democratic/Republican binary. The liberalizer and restrictionist divide can be seen in the Congressional debates over the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act.

IMRAA sponsor Rodino’s rationale for refugee admittance was based—at least in his speech to his fellow Representatives—on a premise of humanitarianism: “We must do this because it is the only right thing to do. We are a nation of immigrants, and when we reject our

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<sup>61</sup> Loescher and Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness*, xv-xvi.; Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 2.

humble foreign origins we will have ended our reason for being as a nation. We must pass this bill, not merely for the refugees, but for ourselves, for it is to ourselves that we must finally be true.”<sup>62</sup> Among the liberalizer camp, this was a common rationale. Many representatives invoked the image of the Statue of Liberty as the “Mother of Exiles,” framing America as a place of refuge for the world’s needy – and especially the world’s needy who were fleeing communism. Throughout the Cold War, historians have highlighted how American anti-Communism was linked with patriotism.<sup>63</sup> Even though the 1970s was a couple of decades past the height of the Red Scare, the United States nevertheless remained locked into their Cold War contest.

Though the goodwill of these politicians cannot be discounted, it is nevertheless worth noting that refugee admissions, to some extent, were going to happen no matter what. By the time debates for this bill hit the floor, President Ford had already authorized the parole of the first 130,000 Vietnamese refugees.<sup>64</sup> The question at the heart of these debates, then, was why and how the United States would fund it. The fundamental dilemma, as defined by Chairman Joshua Eilberg (D-Pennsylvania) of the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and International Law, was how much to spend, and what exactly it needed to be spent on: “By authorizing funds to assist in the resettlement of refugees we are replacing ‘weapons of wars’ with funds for transportation to safe havens, health care, food and blankets and most importantly an opportunity for new life in this country—a life of dignity and hope.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975*, HR 6755, 94<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> sess., *Congressional Record* 121 (May 14, 1975), 14339.

<sup>63</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 8.

<sup>64</sup> Moore, *Review of U.S. Refugee Resettlement Programs and Policies*, 13.

<sup>65</sup> *Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975*, 14339.

The proposed bill was hashed out over three separate hearings in the House over the course of two weeks. Throughout this, not one politician, at least in the polite company of their fellow Congressman, declared their outright opposition to refugees. Even the most conservative politicians admitted that the refugee crisis was a tragedy. That did not mean they would support refugees coming to the United States, though. The number one argument against refugee admissions was economic. The United States was in the middle of a recession, with the highest unemployment in decades. One of the most vocal restrictionists was Representative Bud Shuster (R-Pennsylvania). His refusal to support the IMRAA stemmed from his worry about spending an exorbitant sum on non-Americans: “I have searched my soul in trying to find a way to be able to support this legislation, but as I have done so I keep coming back to the haunting question of how in God’s name can I support \$500 million over the next 14 months in refugee aid, worthy as it is, when I believe that the spending path we are on may well destroy America?”<sup>66</sup>

Representative John Conyers, Jr. (D-Michigan), the longest serving African American member of Congress, also joined the restrictionist camp. He questioned the legitimacy of the refugees’ status as refugees, particularly the extent to which they would be in harm’s way by remaining in their country: “[The citizens of Detroit] are not at all certain that the more than 100,000 persons just brought in from Vietnam are really political refugees in the accurate sense of the word. We are bringing in thousands of children who certainly are not fleeing from persecution. And we are bringing in adults whose lives were no more endangered than the relatives they left behind.”<sup>67</sup> Conyers was a liberal man, a Civil Rights activist present at the

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<sup>66</sup> *Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975*, 14346.

<sup>67</sup> *Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975*, 14348.

famous Selma march, and always a proponent of helping the disadvantaged. Yet he disagreed with the idea of aiding another disadvantaged group, the Southeast Asians, and he supported this stance because the proposed legislation could redirect resources away from other American ethnic minorities: “In fact, it is precisely my support for Asians, Mexicans, Latino Americans, and Black Americans, who for so long have been excluded from justice and equality and meaningful assistance to opportunity, which compels me to take this stand.”<sup>68</sup> Conyers, like many liberalizers, was concerned with domestic issues, yet his feelings on the matter caused him to join the restrictionist camp. The United States home front was already fraught with racial and economic debates, and people like Conyers felt Americans had to first help themselves before they could help anyone else. Foreign policy concerns such as refugee aid were therefore off the table.

The House’s final roll call came in 381 yea votes and 31 nay votes.<sup>69</sup> Moving forward to the Senate, only two Senators voted no.<sup>70</sup> Chinese American Senator Hiram Fong (R-Hawaii) identified with the refugees’ plight, saying, “These refugees committed and dedicated their own lives and futures to a struggle which the people of the United States supported and made sacrifices for.”<sup>71</sup> In general, Asian-American Congresspeople fell into the liberalizer camp – Fong among them, alongside Japanese American Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii). Though Fong and Inouye stood on opposite sides of the aisle, their Asian-American identities seemed to influence their alignment on this issue. Though they did not belong to the same ethnic group, the 1970s

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<sup>68</sup> *Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975*, 14348.

<sup>69</sup> *Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975*, 14372.

<sup>70</sup> *Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975*, 14864.

<sup>71</sup> *Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975*, 14854.

and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement created an “Asian American” identity, allowing for racial solidarity beyond the old divides of “Chinese American” vs “Japanese American.”<sup>72</sup>

Within three weeks, on May 23, 1975, the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act was signed into law by President Ford.

The IMRAA importantly defined what it meant to be a refugee as a Southeast Asian, declaring them to be “Aliens who (A) because of persecution or fear of persecution on account of race, religion, or political opinion, fled from Cambodia or Vietnam; (B) cannot return there because of fear of persecution on account of race, religion, or political opinion; and (C) are in urgent need of assistance for the essentials of life.”<sup>73</sup> This falls in line with the *United Nations Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, which the United States had ratified back in 1968. Persecution or the fear of persecution was the key criterion. Left unsaid but implied by the larger Cold War context of the time period was that this persecution came at the hands of communism.

Left out of the IMRAA in 1975 were refugees from Laos, who were already enroute to Thai refugee camps. Part of this was that the Royal Lao government had not yet fallen, though the end was near, as the refugees could sense. The Pathet Lao did not fully take over until December of 1975. Months later, the IMRAA was eventually amended in early 1976 to include

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<sup>72</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1998), 502-508.

<sup>73</sup> Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975, Pub. L. No. 94-23, 89 Stat. 87 (1975).

the Lao people, both ethnic Lao and Hmong.<sup>74</sup> Because of this delay in accepting them, Lao arrivals did not pick up until the second and third waves of Southeast Asian immigration.

In 1977, Jimmy Carter took the reins of the United States from Gerald Ford. President Carter's administration continued the work of the previous administration supporting and resettling refugees, even expanding beyond Southeast Asians. Carter echoed what previous president Gerald Ford had to say about refugees: "Our country will do its utmost to ease the plight of stranded refugees from Indochina and from Lebanon and of released political prisoners from Cuba and from elsewhere. I hope that we will always stand ready to welcome more than our fair share of those who flee their homelands because of racial, religious, or political oppression."<sup>75</sup> However, the limitations of current legislation began to reveal themselves, and it became abundantly clear that the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act was not enough to deal with it all.

As five years of admissions approached, the number of desperate refugees had not gone down, and instead continued to grow. Furthermore, it was not only Southeast Asian refugees who were on the rise. Alongside Southeast Asians, Cubans began looking for refuge in larger numbers in the United States than they had back in the early 1960s. With the various conflicts and crises over the course of the twentieth century making people into refugees, the American

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<sup>74</sup> Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 Amendment, Pub. L. No. 94-313, 90 Stat. 691 (1976).

<sup>75</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," (speech, Washington DC, December 6, 1978), Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d101>.

government recognized the need to create better refugee legislation. These concerns led to the passing of the Refugee Act of 1980.

The sponsor of the original bill was Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA), who had been chairman of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Refugees from 1965 to 1968 and continued to press for legislative change that made little progress for the next fifteen years. The opportunity for the new Refugee Act came when Kennedy was made the chairman of the Judiciary Committee in 1978. 1978 kickstarted the third wave of Southeast Asian refugee admissions to the United States, and the law developed to meet them.

The 1980 Refugee Act broadly defined a refugee as any displaced person who cannot return to the country from which they came “because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”<sup>76</sup> Communism was taken out of the requirements for those seeking refugee status. This fell more in line with the United Nations’ understanding of refugees, a definition that the United States had supported in 1968 when they ratified the United Nations Protocol for Relating the Status of Refugees. Under the terms of the Refugee Act, a limit on the annual number of refugees admitted was set to 50,000 per year, for the years of 1980 and 1981.<sup>77</sup> The most important thing that the Refugee Act of 1980 did for incoming refugees was give them resident-alien status. Prior to the Act, all Southeast Asians entered the country as parolees. This change gave them more security, and also allowed for them to apply for citizenship after their seven years of residence. With the passing of the Refugee Act also came two new offices meant

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<sup>76</sup> Refugee Act of 1980, Pub. L. No. 96-212, 94 Stat. 102 (1980).

<sup>77</sup> Refugee Act of 1980, Pub. L. No. 96-212, 94 Stat. 102 (1980).

to help with refugee issues: the Office of U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs and the Office of Refugee Resettlement. At the federal level, they provided better support to the voluntary agencies doing the hard work of sponsorship and resettlement.

Permission from the United States to enter the country was only the beginning; actually coming to the country was another grueling matter. Though the IMRAA amendment and the Refugee Act opened the door to large-scale Lao admissions, most had to wait several years in the refugee camps awaiting approval – outlasting the span of the original Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act that originally allowed them. Even after that, some never were resettled, and the UNHCR found that over 3,000 ethnic Lao were repatriated back to Laos between 1981 and 1989. This was actually the preferred option for Thailand and many Western countries amidst the compassion fatigue and financial drain.<sup>78</sup> For dedicated refugee advocates, however, they continued the hard work of providing aid, and resettlement was underway. With legislation passed, the bulk of the federal government’s work was done, and it was time for voluntary agencies and sponsors to take the lead in resettlement.

### **Coming to America: Voluntary Agencies and Sponsors**

After coming to the United States, the exact path of Lao refugees becomes more difficult to track on a large scale. Refugees from Southeast Asia tend to be lumped together as a collective, despite their many differences. Even in dealing with refugees from Laos, it can be difficult to distinguish between the Lao and the Hmong people of the northern mountains, since many reports categorize them both as “Laotian.” In fact, to this day, the US Census marks the

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<sup>78</sup> Chantavanich and Rabe, “Thailand and the Indochinese Refugees,” 77.

Lao and Hmong people both as “Laotian.” However, I will refer to the ethnic Lao as “Lao” to maintain clarity.

1975 was a whirlwind year for resettlement, with the beginning of the first wave of admissions. However, these early ones were mostly from Vietnam, the allies of the American military who faced the most pressing danger from the Viet Cong. The second wave of admissions, beginning around 1977 or 1978, is when Lao admissions took off. This second wave was the time of largest entry for any of the Southeast Asian groups.

Though legislation allowed for admissions, the government took a step back and allowed voluntary agencies, or VOLAGs, to take the lead on resettlement. Support for the VOLAGs can be found in the IMRAA and the Refugee Act of 1980. VOLAGs were a crucial part of refugee admissions. VOLAGs paired refugees with potential sponsors. The idea was to spread refugees out across the country, in order to have as little an impact on the communities they were entering as possible, especially amidst the American economic crisis of the 1970s. Too many together, it was feared, would overwhelm a community’s limited resources, especially its welfare resources. Furthermore, they believed that this would also help the refugees by preventing them from clinging too closely to their original cultures. By immersion into American culture and language, it would better assimilate them – when assimilation was still considered a worthy goal, as opposed to the erasure of heritage.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Robbie Curry and Martin Donsky, “We are Still Homesick,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, October 7, 1979.

Most of this work was self-funded by VOLAGs while the government took a relatively hands-off approach. It required a lot of effort and charity to be unpaid social workers.<sup>80</sup> This is why the sponsorship work was undertaken mainly by religious organizations. VOLAGs have a long history in the United States of resettling incoming refugees and immigrants. One of the earliest was the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, founded in 1881. Later, as Nazism grew in power into the 1930s, Protestant and Catholic aid societies helped German refugees.<sup>81</sup> However, the scale of these earlier resettlements was much smaller in scale than the incoming Southeast Asians. In these earlier situations, it was those from the same ethnic or religious community helping their own out. However, as Southeast Asian refugees sought asylum, there was not a co-ethnic community available in the United States already to help them; neither Buddhists nor other Southeast Asians, of which there were very few, could help. As such, the brunt of sponsorship work for Southeast Asians was undertaken by Christian religious groups.

Many VOLAGs took part in refugee admissions across the country, but in looking at how resettlement happened in Wichita, Kansas, two groups led the charge of sponsorship: the Catholic Charities for the Wichita Diocese and the Lutheran Social Service. By May 8, the call went out for sponsorship of refugees. From Washington DC, the Inter-Agency Task Force coordinating refugee services pleaded, “We’re asking people to think of something they can offer

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<sup>80</sup> Eileen M. Mulhare, “Sponsored-Out: The Indochinese Refugee Resettlement of 1975,” *Practicing Anthropology* 9, no. 4 (1987): 14.

<sup>81</sup> Tamar Mott Forrest and Lawrence A. Brown, “Organization-Led Migration, Individual Choice, and Refugee Resettlement in the U.S.: Seeking Regularities,” *Geographical Review* 104, no. 1 (2014), 13-4. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1931-0846.2014.12002.x>.

– free rent, food or something that will help put these people on their feet.”<sup>82</sup> For the next several years, as resettlement continued, so too did the newspaper ads calling for help.

The Catholic Charities got their official start in Wichita in 1943. They were involved with many charitable works around town, especially regarding orphaned children, but they first became involved in refugee aid in the 1960s when Cubans needed help. Over 100 refugee children were resettled in the Wichita area through their efforts.<sup>83</sup> However, this number paled in comparison to the influx they faced with Southeast Asians. For the Catholic Charities, Father Robert K. Larson led the charge on sponsoring and resettling refugees in Wichita in 1975. He was an extremely public figure in refugee resettlement, quoted often in the papers as an expert on the subject. On the surface, he appeared as a great humanitarian, calling for community involvement; however, Father Larson was a predator who abused dozens of young boys, some of them allegedly the refugee children he claimed to be helping.<sup>84</sup> His crimes did not come to public attention until the early 2000s, and though he was a predator, he was nevertheless an important part of Wichita’s refugee history. As such, his many years of contribution to refugee admissions cannot be totally erased from the narrative, though his crimes must be kept in mind.

Regarding the resettlement process, Father Larson explained the Catholic Charities’ goals: “We are trying to avoid setting up just another temporary living program, such as what refugees have before they come here.”<sup>85</sup> Refugee camps, though they had provided necessary

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<sup>82</sup> “Sponsor a Refugee by Toll-Free Number,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, May 8, 1975.

<sup>83</sup> “With their Bishop,” *Catholic Advance*, September 14, 1962.

<sup>84</sup> Stan Finger, “Robert Larson, Priest Convicted of Molesting Altar Boys in Wichita Diocese, Dies,” *The Wichita (KS) Eagle*, September 5, 2014.

<sup>85</sup> Bob Heaton, “Local Agencies Helping Refugees.”

shelter for so many, were places of survival, not of living. Getting refugees to integrate in the Wichita community, with jobs, homes of their own, and their children in local schools would equal resettlement success. This means they had “made it.” “Making it” was not an easy process, and it was and remains a difficult journey for many Lao people.

Though the first wave of admissions had ended, as they began picking up again in 1976 – now with Lao refugees among the 10,000 refugees tapped for entry – the Catholic Charities appealed to devout Wichitans to act as sponsors or provide financial aid. This time, he specifically cited Lao refugees as among the needy.<sup>86</sup> As the second wave continued into the late 1970s, Father Larson continued to implore his fellow Catholics to help in whatever way they could, appealing to their desire to do good as Jesus did: “Most Americans seem to want to forget our involvement in Southeast Asia, but the suffering and cry of these refugee men, women, and children will not go away.”<sup>87</sup> By 1978, the Catholic VOLAG had brought over 1,000 Southeast Asian refugees to the Wichita area.<sup>88</sup> More would continue to pour over the next decade. This was a tremendous effort on the behalf of the Catholic Charities, as the money and manpower required to support this was immense.

The Lutheran Social Service in Wichita also began the resettlement process in 1975. In light of the refugee crisis, Donald J. Brehm, formerly the executive director of Wichita’s Lutheran Social Service, took over as the Lutheran VOLAG’s district coordinator for Kansas and

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<sup>86</sup> “More Sponsors Requested for Laotians and Cambodians,” *Catholic Advance* (Wichita, KS), May 13, 1976.

<sup>87</sup> Robert K. Larson, “Boat Case Pleas Heard in Wichita,” *Catholic Advance* (Wichita, KS), July 27, 1978.

<sup>88</sup> Larson, “Boat Case Pleas Heard in Wichita.”

Oklahoma. By the end of June, Brehm was asked by congregations to help resettle 50 families. “Families” was the key word — at this time, sponsorship focused on families, and the Lutheran services were not yet accepting individuals.<sup>89</sup> This idea was reflected in the era’s legislation, which was focused on reunification. With them, an entire congregation would sponsor refugee families and work together to aid in adjustment. Congregations looking to sponsor had to fulfill three requirements: provide housing (temporary or permanent), the guarantee of a job in the area, and a commitment by the congregation to give ongoing support to the family until self-sufficiency was acquired.<sup>90</sup>

The Catholic Charities took up most of the space in the news, as they resettled the largest number of refugee families in the area, but that was by design for the Lutheran Social Service. Though the ultimate goal of self-sufficiency remained, their approach different from the Catholics. It was more hands-on, with direct involvement from members of the congregation. Connie Strand, the Lutheran Social Service’s Refugee Resettlement Coordinator in Wichita, explained that a more comprehensive method was more beneficial: “These people show the refugees love and concern, share joys and sorrows, and provide for their physical needs – for the emotional needs of the refugees are as significant as their material needs.”<sup>91</sup> Another place they differed was on the matter of English language acquirement. While the Catholic Charities focused on English learning before job searching, Strand argued that English could be acquired along the way: “[P]ersonal motivation is needed for leaning and remaining in class. Motivation can come through job experience, and some refugees feel a need for several months of

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<sup>89</sup> Bob Heaton, “Local Agencies Helping Refugees,” *Wichita (KS) Beacon*, May 22, 1975.

<sup>90</sup> Gary Shupp, “Vietnamese Refugees Filling Voids,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, June 11, 1975.

<sup>91</sup> Connie Strand, “Self-Sufficiency for Refugees,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, October 24, 1979.

adjustment before beginning English training.”<sup>92</sup> By doing this, the hope was that self-sufficiency would be gained earlier and that dependence on welfare would be curbed. Ultimately, though, a large percentage of Southeast Asian refugee families depended on welfare to help them.

In May 1979, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam established the Orderly Departure Program.<sup>93</sup> This set a clearer plan of action for Vietnamese refugees, but Laos and Cambodia had no such programs to ease the way for refugees. Instead, ways to prevent their arrival were implemented. Thailand adopted a policy of “humane deterrence” by making camps as barebones as possible, further dehumanizing refugees in their lowest moments.

By the end of 1979, there were over 2,100 Southeast Asian refugees resettled in Wichita.<sup>94</sup> At this point, the city was still anticipating the arrival of more, as this was only the beginning of the second wave. As these refugees adjusted to life throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and established good lives for themselves, many soon became sponsors. Families were often split up, as fleeing in the middle night meant they often had to leave behind extended family. As a result of this separation, many Lao who came in the first two waves later sponsored

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<sup>92</sup> Connie Strand, “Self-Sufficiency for Refugees.”

<sup>93</sup> Judith Kumin, “Orderly Departure from Vietnam: Cold War Anomaly or Humanitarian Innovation?” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>94</sup> Robbie Curry and Martin Donsky, “‘We are Still Homesick:’ Wichita Now Home to 2,100 Indochinese,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle and Beacon*, October 7, 1979,

<https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-wichita-eagle-1979-october-7-part/132744889/>.

their parents and siblings after becoming American citizens. Because of this, VOLAGs were required less and less going into the late 1980s and early 1990s.

## **Conclusion**

The first half of the journey could take nearly twenty years, as resettlement of these original refugees did not end until the 1990s. It was a long and difficult path to the United States, as they waited in refugee camps for the United States to make legal provisions for their admissions, and then also wait for voluntary agencies to gather the resources necessary for their sponsorship.

To leave the story here would, though, would trap these Lao refugees at their lowest point. At this time, they are figures of desperation, dependent on the West's mercy. However, the refugee's story does not end at admissions. It is not happily-ever-after when they get the plane tickets in their hand, and this narrative does a disservice to them. Once coming to the United States, the ball is in their court. How they play it out and build a life is not a reflection of American humanitarianism, but of their perseverance.

## Chapter 2 - The American Welcome

Refugee studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu, when looking at news coverage of the Fall of Saigon's twenty-fifth anniversary, noted a striking trend among the stories, which she described as "we-win-even-when-we-lose syndrome." In 1975, while the war seemed most definitely lost, a new spin in the decades after gave validation to the mess made in Southeast Asia. The story of Americans and Vietnamese refugees, then, came to the forefront, and she argues: "As the purported rescuers and rescued respectively, they together reposition the United States and its (white male) citizens as savior of Vietnam's 'runaways,' and thus as the ultimate victor of the Vietnam War."<sup>95</sup> This narrative discounts the hard work that Southeast Asians put into making lives for themselves in the United States. As history shows, Americans were not terribly excited to receive the Southeast Asians in the first place, so they have little place to declare themselves the saviors. The story of Lao refugees in Wichita shows the community they forged for themselves, and even though they had a lot of help along the way, it was their own self-motivation and their own agency driving them forward.

How refugees were made into refugees is clear – the United States dealt a devastating blow to the people of Laos and their ability to support themselves at home. News coverage may have shown how they received a lukewarm reception by Americans amidst the country's financial crisis, but Lao refugees nevertheless made their way to Wichita. Wichita, Kansas was

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<sup>95</sup> Yen Le Espiritu, "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon,'" *America Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2006): 330.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2006.0042>.

well-situated for refugees due to its aircraft industry, which anchored a refugee community in the city and allowed it to grow and thrive.

### **The American Response**

As evacuations began in the month leading up to the Fall of Saigon, the United States braced itself for an influx of refugees from Southeast Asia. This was not the first group of Cold War refugees that the United States had accepted; in the decades before, the country had welcomed Soviet Jews, Hungarians, and Cubans, among others. Yet, it was different this time with Southeast Asians.<sup>96</sup>

The reaction within the United States was unfavorable towards this new group of refugees, and it gives a taste of what incoming refugees were walking into. According to a 1975 Harris poll, when asked if they believed refugees should be allowed to live in the United States, many people were against it or unsure: 37 percent were in favor, 49 percent opposed, and 14 percent were unsure.<sup>97</sup> A few years later, amidst peak admissions, a 1979 Gallup poll surveyed 1,491 people. The results echoed the earlier poll: 54 percent were against admission, with only 36 percent in favor.<sup>98</sup> Though it was not an overwhelming response to the negative, it nevertheless shows the uncertainty that Americans felt in the face of yet another refugee crisis.

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<sup>96</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 133.

<sup>97</sup> “U.S. Public Seldom has Welcomed Refugees into Country,” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (November 19, 2015), <http://pewrsr.ch/1YiEq6W>.

<sup>98</sup> Douglass E. Kneeland, “Wide Hostility Found to Vietnamese Influx,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/05/02/archives/wide-hostility-found-to-vietnamese-influx-hostility-found-across.html?smid=url-share>.

In the years leading up to 1975, the people of the United States had been on the receiving end of news about countries from Southeast Asia, Laos included. What was interesting was the way that Laos and its people were portrayed, which could help explain why Americans were reluctant to accept them. Historian Seth Jacobs traces the news coverage of Laos beginning in the 1950s and shows how American news media was extremely derisive and racist towards the Lao people. The most common portrayal he found was that of Lao soldiers as weak and pathetic, akin to children who needed the protection of Americans. Henry Luce, one of the most famous news moguls of the twentieth century, thought of Laos as a “pathetic joke.”<sup>99</sup>

There are many reasons that the American population feared an influx of refugees. The Vietnam War was not the only problem of the 1970s facing the American people. Fresh off the 1973 oil crisis, the United States slid into an economic recession. Stagflation meant that high unemployment – up to a national average of 9.2 percent by June of 1975 – and high inflation devastated the American people.<sup>100</sup> By 1979, the inflation rate had hit 11.3 percent.<sup>101</sup> Many were concerned that refugees would only cause the country’s economic situation to worsen. In immigration and refugee studies, this fear of “they will steal our jobs” is a common refrain, though it has been shown to be false, with refugees instead taking menial-wage jobs that no one else wants. Southeast Asian refugees, even those of formerly high standing, such as doctors and

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<sup>99</sup> Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Cornell University Press, 2012), 222.

<sup>100</sup> Edwin L. Dale, Jr., “U.S., Jobless Rate Up to 9.2% in May, Highest Since '41,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/06/07/archives/us-jobless-rate-up-to-92-in-may-highest-since-41-but-employment.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Schulman, *The Seventies*, 132.

government officials, found themselves as members of the American working class, reduced from their old heights to working as janitors and maids.<sup>102</sup>

Furthermore, the 1970s saw a welfare crisis. From 1960 to 1975, welfare recipients doubled to 14 million people receiving aid.<sup>103</sup> Most refugees did qualify for welfare upon arrival, and many Americans feared that the refugees would further drain the country's resources by utilizing it. These fears can help us understand why restrictionist Congressmen took such strong economic stances in an attempt to soothe their constituents' fears.

These kinds of stories were shared in Wichita. However, despite the country's financial crisis, Wichita news recognized that the city was in a better economic place than most.<sup>104</sup> In the 1970s, Wichita's aircraft industry was booming. When refugees first arrived, Wichita was starting to create components for what would become their most famous plane: the 737.<sup>105</sup> Compared to the country's national average, Kansas unemployment peaked around five percent in 1975, in part thanks to aircraft manufacturing.<sup>106</sup> Despite the economic downturn, the demand for airplanes remained high. This did not stop Wichitans from worrying about refugees on welfare or not paying their taxes. In a letter to the editor, one local wrote, "Those sickening

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<sup>102</sup> Robert L. Bach and Jennifer B. Bach, "Employment Patterns of Southeast Asian Refugees," *Monthly Labor Review* 103, no. 10 (1980): 31–38.

<sup>103</sup> Schulman, *The Seventies*, 32.

<sup>104</sup> Robbie Curry and Martin Donsky, "Refugees' Presence at Home a Grim Reminder for Veteran," *Wichita (KS) Eagle and Beacon*, October 9, 1979, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-wichita-beacon-1979-october-9-par/132747854/>.

<sup>105</sup> Frank Joseph Rowe and Craig H. Miner, *Borne on the South Wind: A Century of Aviation in Kansas* (Wichita, KS: Wichita Eagle and Beacon Publishing Company, 1994), 215-16.

<sup>106</sup> "More Kansans Working," *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, June 23, 1975.

Vietnamese are tax-free moochers who come over here to take over our church halls free, and get rent-free homes from parishioners (dumb) like me.”<sup>107</sup>

Wichita’s financial situation could not save refugees, however. There was also the matter of race. Of course, racism against Asians was nothing new in the United States – after all, the Chinese were the first group of people to be outright banned because of their race by the country with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, and other groups of immigrants were later discriminated against by the National Origins Quota in 1924.<sup>108</sup> However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, some East Asians had managed to shed this image, and instead found themselves as the new “model minority” through their educational and career successes, earning them a stereotype that, though it is positive, causes more net harm to the Asian American community as a whole.

This group of Southeast Asian refugees would be one of the largest non-white groups to ever be resettled in the United States. Though other Asian entrants to the United States were changing some of white America’s views on them, this new group of refugees seemed to invoke old imagery of the “yellow peril.”<sup>109</sup> Asians and Asian Americans were, and remain, an easy group to discriminate against; because of their physical appearances, they are considered unable to totally assimilate into American culture. Their faces and undeniably Asian features give them

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<sup>107</sup> Kathyleen Saiz, letter to the editor, *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, January 26, 1979.

<sup>108</sup> Erika Lee, *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Beth Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>109</sup> Madeline Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

an “otherness” that cannot be erased, despite however many generations they may have lived in the United States. They are seen as the “perpetual foreigner” or the “foreigner within.”<sup>110</sup>

Furthermore, the incoming refugees were visibly indistinguishable from the enemy that American soldiers fought against. American veterans of Vietnam often struggled with adapting back to life at home, and seeing the incoming refugees could be jarring. One Vietnam veteran from Wichita readily admitted that he did not distinguish between South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese—they looked the same and were therefore the same to him. To the *Wichita Beacon*, he said, “We gave them 50,000 dead men and another 300,000 wounded. What more do they want . . . None of them should have been brought over here.”<sup>111</sup> The writers noted that most resentments came from American war veterans. According to the 1980 Census, there were nearly 87,000 veterans of the Vietnam Era living in Kansas.<sup>112</sup>

This was the America that Lao refugees entered— a place that thought of their country and people as a joke, now made into a burden. With previous negative press, in a time of economic downturn, and fresh off a losing war to people that looked like them, incoming Southeast Asians faced an uphill battle to find acceptance and community in the United States. When presented to a heavily white city such as Wichita, it was time for them to get to work and make it for themselves.

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<sup>110</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 5-6.

<sup>111</sup> Robbie Curry and Martin Donsky, “Refugees’ Presence at Home a Grim Reminder for Veteran,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle and Beacon*, October 9, 1979.

<sup>112</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population*.

## **The First Jobs: Meatpacking and Service Labor**

The end goal of sponsorship was to ensure the refugees in their care could find jobs and become self-sufficient. However, economic self-sufficiency was not an easy task for most. Finding work in a country where they did not speak the language was a challenge, and it limited their options, which were already extremely limited in a time of economic recession.

Many immigrants had elementary level educations and nothing more, so they were barely literate in their own native language, let alone English. In comparison to other Asian ethnic groups, Lao continue to have one of the lowest English proficiency rates in the United States at only 44.3 percent.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, few of the early refugees achieved higher education back in their home or attained one after coming to the United States. As of 2019, over half of foreign-born Laotians have only acquired a high school education or less.<sup>114</sup> This lack of educational attainment is what keeps them from the higher-paying engineering jobs of aircraft and limiting them to the manufacturing side, which still pay well, but are hourly positions rather than salaried.

For those that did have high-ranking jobs or educations back in Laos, they came to the United States to find that their qualifications meant nothing. One Lao refugee in Wichita is an example of this: Bounleung Mounivong was an agricultural engineer back home, but could only

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<sup>113</sup> Pamela A. De Voe, “The Role of Ethnic Leaders in the Refugee Community: A Case Study of the Lowland Lao in the American Midwest,” in *Emerging Voices: Experiences of Underrepresented Asian Americans*, ed. Huping Ling (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 56.

<sup>114</sup> “Educational Attainment of Laotian Population in the U.S., 2019,” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (April 29, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/chart/educational-attainment-of-laotian-population-in-the-u-s-2019/>.

find work as a spot welder in Wichita, a position that does not require the same level of education or training that he had acquired back home.<sup>115</sup>

Lao refugees often ended up in labor-heavy and menial positions – a situation extremely common for all kinds of Asian immigrants who came to the United States following the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. On a national level, Asian workers came to be seen as low-wage, service sector workers, with few opportunities to rise beyond that – a situation historian Lisa Lowe refers to as “occupationally ghetto-ized.”<sup>116</sup> In the early years of resettlement in Wichita, these were the types of jobs they were finding, as well. The earliest job opportunities available to them were either meatpacking plants, restaurants, or other service positions. In Wichita, these position paid workers approximately four dollars per hour, only one dollar and ten cents above the minimum wage in 1980. On average, by 1990, the Lao Americans’ average per capita income was only \$5,597 compared the national per capita income at \$14,143.<sup>117</sup> Though Wichita would provide better opportunities for many Lao refugees, the Lao remain as one of the poorest Asian groups in the United States, a part of the 2.3 million Asian Americans living in poverty.<sup>118</sup> Lao Wichitans faced this poverty as well. In 1983, estimates ranged upwards of 5,000 Southeast Asians living in Sedgwick County. Of these, 2,438 relied on some kind of welfare.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Curry and Donsky, “Making It.”

<sup>116</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 162.

<sup>117</sup> US Census Bureau, “We the American: Asians.” Commerce Department, December 31, 1992.

<https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GOVPUB-C3-PURL-gpo172978>.

<sup>118</sup> Ziyao Tian and Neil G. Ruiz, “Key Facts About Asian Americans Living in Poverty,” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (March 27, 2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/03/27/key-facts-about-asian-americans-living-in-poverty/>.

<sup>119</sup> Susan Edgerley, “Refugees to Get Job Aid,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, August 1, 1983.

Though it does not distinguish by ethnic group, Lao were likely included in this number, though to what extent is unknown.

One of the earliest jobs available to incoming refugees was meatpacking. In 1974, Kansas Beef Industries merged with Missouri Beef Packers to create MBPXL, the headquarters of which were located in Wichita, Kansas. MBPXL was, for a few years, a major employer in the refugee community. Meatpacking is a brutal and dangerous, even today, and injuries small and large are a daily occurrence thanks to the sharp tools and exposure to biohazards.<sup>120</sup> According to Chanthy Mounivong, who had a brother unfairly treated in meatpacking, white workers would take advantage of refugee workers. She told the *Wichita Beacon* that her brother was forced to take on his coworkers' workloads on top of his own, surmising that they thought, "Let this dumb guy do it because he do not speak English."<sup>121</sup> Of course, MBPXL denied these allegations.

However, in April of 1980, MBPXL announced that it would close its cattle slaughter plant in Wichita and move operations to Dodge City, a city over two and a half hours away. Though the fabrication plant in Wichita remained open, nearly 200 workers out of 1,100 were laid off because of this move.<sup>122</sup> Some chose to follow the meatpacking plants to Dodge City. For those who chose to stay in Wichita in a community they had toiled so hard to make a life in, that left aircraft as the main manufacturing job left for refugee workers.

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<sup>120</sup> Michael Holtz, "Six Months Inside One of America's Most Dangerous Injuries," *Atlantic*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/07/meatpacking-plant-dodge-city/619011/>.

<sup>121</sup> Curry and Donsky, "Making It," *Wichita (KS) Beacon*.

<sup>122</sup> Mark Cowing, "MBPXL Laying Off About 170," *Wichita (KS) Beacon*, April 18, 1980.

## Wichita: “The Air Capital of the World”

According to the 1970 Census, Wichita had a population of 276,554.<sup>123</sup> Anchoring the population were the aircraft factories employing large segments of the population. By 1980, it grew to 279,272.<sup>124</sup> Though the population only grew by roughly 3,000 people in those 10 years, the lowest amount in censuses over the span of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a large contributing factor was the incoming Southeast Asian refugee population. Lao refugees were counted under “Other Asian,” alongside Cambodians, Hmong, and any other unlisted country. Based on the 1980 Census, 2,860 “Other Asians” immigrated to Kansas between the years of 1975 and 1980.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, 1980 was a turning point for Southeast Asian refugees personally — this was the first year that any of them would be able to qualify for US citizenship.<sup>126</sup>

As a state, Kansas has a long history of aviation greatness. For example, Clyde Cessna was a native of Rago. He, along with other aviation innovators, made their way to Wichita, where the first known plane was built in 1917.<sup>127</sup> The city was home to the time’s aviation giants, with Cessna, Boeing, and Beech being among the most profitable. Because of this, Wichita became known as the “Air Capital of the World” in the 1920s.<sup>128</sup> There were a few decades in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when this was undoubtedly true – WWII was a defining moment for the city’s aircraft industry. In the few short years of the war, thousands of planes came out of the city’s factories. Ultimately, though, the work of aircraft is a cyclical business. The ebb and flow

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<sup>123</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1970 Census of Population* (Washington D.C., 1971).

<sup>124</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population*.

<sup>125</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population*.

<sup>126</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population*.

<sup>127</sup> Rowe and Miner, *Borne on the South Wind*, 53.

<sup>128</sup> Rowe and Miner, *Borne on the South Wind*, 72.

of demand can bring great highs and unlimited overtime or massive layoffs. Nevertheless, Wichita secured its place as a bastion of the aviation world.

The combination of aviation innovators in Wichita and its strategic location for defense earned the city and its manufacturers a whole host of contracts throughout the war, but the companies proved to have staying power.<sup>129</sup> Of course, part of that “strategic defense” came from the Midwest’s relative lack of Asians and Asian Americans (specifically those of Japanese descent). Though Korea and Vietnam War production never did reach the heights of World War II, business nevertheless boomed throughout these war years. During the Vietnam War, when planes were heavily used in bombing campaigns across Southeast Asia, military contracts were a boon to aircraft companies. Boeing B-52s flew in 126,615 combat sorties by mid-1973.<sup>130</sup>

1970 was a pivotal year for the aircraft industry, and thus for Wichita. The Jet Age was in full swing, and air travel was accessible and affordable for people in ways it never had been before. Aiding in this travel revolution was the iconic 747, the first of the jumbo-jets and once known as the “Queen of the Skies,” built until Boeing ended its production in 2022.<sup>131</sup> Demand was high for these products, and Wichita’s factories rose to it.

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<sup>129</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America Since the 1950s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 222.

<sup>130</sup> “Boeing B-52D Stratofortress,” National Museum of the United States Air Force™, accessed October 2, 2024, <https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Museum-Exhibits/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/195815/>.

<sup>131</sup> Niki Popli, “Photos: How the Boeing 747 Went from ‘Queen of the Skies’ to a Humble Cargo Plane,” *Time*, January 31, 2023, <https://time.com/6251758/boeing-747-airplane-last-delivery-photos/>.

Just five short years later, when the first refugees arrived in Wichita, Kansas, the city's aircraft industry was in an upturn, booming despite the country's unemployment struggle. Even in downtimes, aircraft companies were – and continue to be – the city's largest employers. Beech and Cessna dominated non-military aircraft, while Boeing had steady and profitable military contracts thanks to their B-52 bomber.<sup>132</sup> The post-Vietnam War peak came in 1979, the year of heaviest arrivals. Boeing alone had 13,000 employees in their Wichita plant.<sup>133</sup>

Though there were many options, including meatpacking, the most desirable of the jobs were those in the aircraft industry. The wages were especially competitive in terms of unskilled labor. As such, refugee workers often took whatever training and education they could acquire in hopes of getting a leg up. In 1979, the *Wichita Eagle* reported that there were approximately 175 refugees taking CETA training courses for metalworking, with the end goal of working in aircraft; another 100 had previously passed and gotten jobs in the industry, including manufacturers such as Boeing, Cessna, Beech, and Learjet.<sup>134</sup> Aside from CETA training, the Wichita Area Vocational-Technical Center was a place many refugees turned to for job training. In 1982, one-quarter of the center's students were Southeast Asian. For under \$400, thanks to the state paying for upwards of 85 percent of educational costs, refugees could learn a skill related to manufacturing: welding, sheet metal work, machine shop operations, or drafting, among

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<sup>132</sup> Rowe and Miner, *Borne on the South Wind*, 208-15.

<sup>133</sup> Rowe and Miner, *Borne on the South Wind*, 216.

<sup>134</sup> Robbie Curry and Martin Donsky, "Making It: Wichita's Need for Workers Lures Refugees Willing to Start at Bottom," *Wichita (KS) Beacon*, October 10, 1979.

others.<sup>135</sup> Khanha, husband of interviewee Gayle Phothirat, attended Vo-Tech while trying to support his family.

When Gayle Phothirat came to the United States, she was only twenty-one years old, but she had with her a husband and toddler daughter. She gave birth to her son not long after arriving. Though Gayle quickly acquired a job in an electronics shop, she soon found that \$3.25 per hour was not enough to support her small family. A cousin of hers helped her get a job at Burnham Products. Burnham Products offered her \$5.75 per hour, which was two dollars than her previous job. Also appealing about Burnham, she noted, was the many other Asian employees at this company as well, who helped ease her transition.<sup>136</sup>

Balancing school and work was difficult, though, as Gayle recalls. After working a full day shift, she had to go to school after to improve her English and earn her GED. She knew the end goal of providing a good life for her family would be worth it, but it came with a sacrifice. She recalls how all this work interfered with her family life: “My kid back then, she complained that... I worked too much, but sometimes we don’t have a whole lot of choice... And also, sometimes, when I work ten hours, come home, I still have to go school because I want my English to get better.”<sup>137</sup> However, with a family to feed, she and her husband had no choice in the matter.

The city also had a vested interest in finding refugees employment. Welfare was costing Sedgwick County greatly, and the county looked to the federal government for help. In July of

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<sup>135</sup> Nunzio Lupo, “Vo-Tech is Their Hope,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, March 9, 1982.

<sup>136</sup> Gayle Phothirat, in discussion with the author, Wichita, Kansas, September 23, 2024.

<sup>137</sup> Gayle Phothirat, in discussion with the author, Wichita, Kansas, September 23, 2024.

1983, Kansas's Social and Rehabilitation Services in Wichita received a federal grant for \$540,500 to help Southeast Asian refugees find work in Sedgwick County. The grant was to help find 200 refugees jobs, which would save \$664,000 in welfare payments. Half of the money was allotted for wage subsidies, English classes, and bilingual supervisors.<sup>138</sup> It was an extremely successful program and exceeded the expectations it originally set out with. 700 Southeast Asians, including 265 who had been on welfare, found employment. Due to these impressive results, the federal government agreed to pay another grant to extend the program through 1986.<sup>139</sup>

As a result of the high rate of welfare being consumed by refugees, the city offered tax incentives to employers who hired people that were also welfare recipients.<sup>140</sup> The hope was that, along with jobs training, this would help get Lao people hired – which it did, though not necessarily for the incentivized reasons. Though there was no way of knowing exactly who a welfare recipient was, it was not uncommon for refugees to receive it. The refugees' sponsors also emphasized these economic benefits to employers when trying to help their charges. In 1981, the *Catholic Advance* laid out clearly that hiring Southeast Asian refugees would make employers eligible for Target Jobs Tax Credits, which gave employers a tax credit of up to \$3,000 in the first year of work and up to \$1,500 for the second. This was not the only benefit, so claimed refugee advocates, and the newspaper also highlighted, "Indochinese are not afraid to work, are eager to please, and will try to do what the employer wants." At the time, the Catholic

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<sup>138</sup> Susan Edgerley, "Refugees to Get Job Aid," *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, August 1, 1983.

<sup>139</sup> Beth Rosenberg, "Grant Aids Asians in Melting Pot," *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, July 28, 1985.

<sup>140</sup> Robbie Curry and Martin Donsky, "Making It: Wichita's Need for Workers Lures Refugees Willing to Start at Bottom," *Wichita (KS) Beacon*, October 10, 1979.

Charities identified thirty refugees who were ready to begin work immediately, with enough language ability and skill to function.<sup>141</sup>

Looking through obituaries of Lao people in the *Wichita Eagle*, the jobs available to them in the 1970s and 1980s becomes clear. Job titles range from “assembler” to “machinist” at companies like Cessna, Boeing, or these companies’ subcontractors such as Milling Precision Tool Corp.<sup>142</sup> These were common jobs on the “unskilled” manufacturing side of aircraft, as they did not require any advanced degrees as pre-requisites. Sometimes, training was even available on the job, depending on how desperate aircraft companies were for warm bodies on the factory floor.

The number of Asian workers in aircraft became a source of contention. One white Wichita aircraft worker complained about the abundance of Southeast Asian workers, claiming, “I was turned down because a Vietnamese got the job first, and he didn’t even speak English.”<sup>143</sup> Others also observed the number of refugee workers in aircraft, writing letters to the editor of the *Wichita Eagle*. One woman wrote in, “After the refugees live on welfare awhile, they run out to the big airplane factories and get hired on because they’re Oriental.”<sup>144</sup> While it is true that Sedgwick County was invested in getting refugees hired, to the point of offering incentives to companies, there was no way for companies to know if the refugees they hired were on welfare

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<sup>141</sup> “Catholic Charities Program Seeks Employers for Refugees,” *Catholic Advance* (Wichita, KS), November 12, 1981.

<sup>142</sup> Obituary of Sichanch Vilayvanh, *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, May 14, 1996; Obituary of Liane Phommarath, *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, October 27, 1998; Obituary of Saries Bouphasouth, *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, January 28, 2004; Obituary of Khamfong Phommachanh, *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, December 14, 2008.

<sup>143</sup> Curry and Donsky, “Refugees’ Presence.”

<sup>144</sup> Beverly Brown, letter to the editor, *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, January 26, 1979.

at all. Furthermore, it was noted that many companies did not fully take advantage of the incentives provided by the federal grant – in the first year, only eleven employers even asked for partial reimbursement for their training costs, and in 1985, there was still little action taken by employers.<sup>145</sup>

Sociologist Monica Trieu found that the search for employment has been the leading cause of secondary migration to the Midwest, and Wichita is no exception to these findings.<sup>146</sup> Nok Phommachanh previously lived in Montana and Missouri, but it was the promise of a job in aircraft that drew him and his family to Wichita. Once coming to Wichita, he joined the dozens of other Lao refugees in job training, on the search for a better life.<sup>147</sup> Part of his job training most likely would have been funded under Sedgwick County’s federal grant. Another example is interviewee Somphet Kayarath. His sponsor first took him to Buffalo, New York, but he and his family moved around to several different cities in California while looking for work, including San Jose, Sacramento, and Chico, before he eventually moved to Wichita.<sup>148</sup>

However, it was not only the big companies such as Boeing that provided aircraft jobs in Wichita. Wichita had many companies who often built small parts for the aircraft companies, such as Burnham Products or Milling Precision Tool Corp. These subcontractors often provided a steppingstone to a larger company, such as in the case of all three interviewees, who spent time at Burnham prior to Boeing and learned some ropes of aircraft.

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<sup>145</sup> Rosenberg, “Grant Helps Asians.”

<sup>146</sup> Monica Trieu, *Fighting Invisibility*, 39.

<sup>147</sup> Beth Rosenberg, “Laotian Struggles Against Economy,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, August 1, 1983.

<sup>148</sup> Somphet Kayarath, in interview with the author, September 22, 2024.

By the 1990s, Wichita's aircraft industry had regained its footing. The industry weathered this downturn, and the Lao community remained firmly in place, even continuing to grow. Just under 700 Lao people were living in Wichita by 1990.<sup>149</sup> Many of these new incomers were now moving to Wichita through secondary migration, as the reputation of the Wichita Lao community grew.

Vieng Souvannasy came to Wichita in 1981, leaving behind his family in Chico, California. It was not a destination of his choosing. Rather, he followed his friends to Wichita, where they were told there would be jobs. At first, he worked at a printing company. However, he soon transitioned to aircraft work in 1983. It was his connections that helped him get the job at Burnham Products, a subcontractor for Boeing: "Some guy, he gave me opportunity... Hire me as a label entry, as helper." Eventually, he worked his way up to preparing fiberglass parts for painting. He was good enough to become a manager. The greatest perk of the job, though, was the paycheck, which he recalled while laughing: "The pay was pretty good."<sup>150</sup> That pay, alongside Vieng's position as a manager, convinced his stepbrother to join him in Wichita.

Vieng's stepbrother Somphet Kayarath soon followed him to Wichita from Chico in 1985. Back in Chico, the unemployment rate was still high in 1985, peaking at 9.3 percent. Young people, minorities, and those in low-income positions were hit the hardest – which on all fronts accurately describes Lao refugee workers like Vieng and Somphet.<sup>151</sup> When his family

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<sup>149</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population, General Population Characteristics: Kansas*.

<sup>150</sup> Vieng Souvannasy, in discussion with the author, Wichita, Kansas, July 13, 2024.

<sup>151</sup> "October Unemployment Year's Lowest, But Rate Expected to Begin Climbing," *Enterprise Record* (Chico, CA), December 15, 1985.; "Change in Wage Law Needed," *Enterprise-Record* (Chico, CA), December 20, 1985.

joined him in Wichita three years later, his father and younger sister joined him working at Burnham Products and later Boeing.

While Burnham was a good starting point for this group, Boeing was a definite upgrade. According to Gayle, “In small company, it’s not like easy, like you work for big company...For a small company, they have no respect for you... Every day is not good notes. I mean sometimes, two, three times meeting. For Boeing, you know, they respect you, and then... you get better pay.”<sup>152</sup> While high wages were the best thing about the job, having the respect and a better work-life balance that came with aircraft made the industry a very desirable option for refugee workers.

It has been a good life in the United States, according to Vieng. He has five children, a successful career, and now a successful retirement. Reflecting back on his long aviation career, however, Vieng admits, “If I can go back, you know... I probably wouldn’t work aircraft... I probably could be like a medical field.”<sup>153</sup> But life did not provide those options fifty years ago, even though he had been a university student back in Laos. That is the takeaway of the story of the first Lao in the United States, then – they worked hard, in roles they never would have chosen, because these were the fastest and easiest options to provide for their families. For many of them, that is an acceptable trade-off for the better life they sought.

### **Community Building in South Wichita**

In a letter to the editor published in 1983, one Wichita local wrote of the refugee influx and how the United States has given refugees “the chance to live and thrive in a free society,

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<sup>152</sup> Gayle Phothirat, in discussion with the author, Wichita, Kansas, September 23, 2024.

<sup>153</sup> Vieng Souvannasy, in discussion with the author, Wichita, Kansas, July 13, 2024.

keeping their culture intact. If they would expend their energies in becoming Americans, we all would benefit. The ones who want to return, let them go back.”<sup>154</sup> Another writer echoed these thoughts, saying, “They wouldn’t extend us the same courtesies if we were over there.”<sup>155</sup> In both cases, the writers overlooked the role of US politics in making these people into refugees. Their statements validate gender and women’s scholar Mimi Thi Nguyen’s criticism of the gratitude expected from refugees: “What special significance does this act carry from a refugee, especially *this* refugee from *that* tarnished war of American ambition? Why are we—those of us who have received this precious, poisonous gift of freedom—obliged to thank? What powers oblige us?”<sup>156</sup> That is not to say that there is no gratitude, because a safe haven was welcome. Somphet said, “I would life’s good. I don’t want to go back. I don’t want to change anything.”<sup>157</sup> However, while they were thankful for the lives they built in Wichita, they did not give up on what makes them Lao either. Things were not perfect, and no one can claim that they are. Despite this, the Lao adapted and built a community that was distinctly Lao American. Finding jobs in aircraft, allowing many families to have at least one family member earning a living wage, made it possible for Lao refugees to set roots down in Wichita.

The highest concentration of Asian Americans is on the coasts of the country, though Southeast Asians were not part of this number until 1975. Prior to this, there were occasional Southeast Asians in the country, but there was no migration in significant numbers. One of these

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<sup>154</sup> Joyce Schmidt, letter to the editor, *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, July 19, 1983.

<sup>155</sup> Albertine Jennings, letter to the editor, *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, July 19, 1983.

<sup>156</sup> Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>157</sup> Somphet Kayarath, in discussion with the author, Wichita, Kansas, September 22, 2024.

early Southeast Asians visitors to the United States was none other than Vietnamese communist leader Ho Chi Minh himself, from whom later refugees fled. In 1912, he acquired a job as laborer in New York, where he remained for several months.<sup>158</sup> What few Southeast Asians lived here would most likely be attached to American military personnel or in the country for educational purposes, as many elite Southeast Asian children were sent to school in the United States. This was the case of escapee Prince Panya, who attended Harvard before the Laotian Civil War.<sup>159</sup> In contrast, the Midwest is often thought of as a white place; however, this image discounts not only the indigenous peoples that white settlers forcibly displaced, but also the contributions of non-white migrants to the region's development. Multiculturalism has had a strong impact, still seen to this day, especially in German and Swedish settled area. Though Asians would have been a rarer sight, they would not have been totally unfamiliar to the people of Wichita, Kansas, either. By 1880, the first Chinese were living and working in Wichita as launderers. While few in number, they were victimized by the Chinese Exclusion Act just as readily as their counterparts on the coasts, albeit with less overt violence.<sup>160</sup> By 1917, the Pan-American Cafe was open and serving customers; a couple years later the Holly Cafe opened as well. They were both operated by Chinese immigrants and were operational until the 1960s.<sup>161</sup> Though the numbers are few, Kansas actually has the fourth highest number on non-Vietnamese

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<sup>158</sup> Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (United Kingdom: Random House, 2012), 11.

<sup>159</sup> Associated Press, "Phouma's Son Swims to Refuge," *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, November 27, 1975.

<sup>160</sup> Julie Courtwright, "A Slave to Yellow Peril: The 1886 Chinese Ouster Attempt in Wichita, Kansas, With an Updated Introduction," *Great Plains Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2021).

<https://doi.org/10.1353/gpq.2021.0034>.

<sup>161</sup> Denise Neil, *Classic Restaurants of Wichita* (Charleston, SC: The American Palate, 2021), 28-30, 34-36.

Asian Americans in the Midwest.<sup>162</sup> The population of Asians in Kansas remained small, though, until the 1970s. In the 1970 Census, Asians were still counted as “Other,” and they numbered at approximately 17,533 in Kansas.<sup>163</sup> Among them would have been the descendants of the original Chinese settlers, newly entering Cold War Chinese, and Korean wives, and adopted children.

Though Asians and Asian Americans are often thought of as urban people, scholars have shown that they were a growing population of the suburbs by the 1970s.<sup>164</sup> Originally, suburbs were meant to be white spaces, and whites did successfully keep non-whites out. However, as civil rights debates raged on throughout the 1970s, that segregation was harder to legally uphold. As immigration, especially non-white immigration, increased following the Immigration Act of 1965, they began to fill out the suburbs as well as the cities. Incoming Lao refugees contributed to this growing suburbanization of Asian America, which can be seen in the case of Wichita.

Most Lao refugees came to the United States with very little. As such, their accommodations were often less than ideal. Low-income neighborhoods were desirable, not only for their lower price but also for their proximity to factory work. The most popular of these communities was Oaklawn-Sunview, located on the southeast end of Wichita. These neighborhoods were located just a couple miles away from the campuses of different aircraft companies.

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<sup>162</sup> Monica Trieu, *Fighting Invisibility: Asian Americans in the Midwest* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2023), 25.

<sup>163</sup> U.S. Census Bureau,

<sup>164</sup> Becky M. Nicolaidis, “Introduction: Asian American Suburban History,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 34, no. 2 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerethnhist.34.2.0005>.

Oaklawn-Sunview was originally developed in 1951, and 1,034 homes were built. It was designed to house approximately 4,000 people, mostly aircraft workers and their families, who were busy building airplanes amidst the Korean War. It was meant only to be temporary wartime housing, and by the time the war was over in the 1960s, Oaklawn-Sunview was a community falling into disrepair.<sup>165</sup> The neighborhood's story was supposed to end here.

However, Oaklawn-Sunview found new life as refugees were coming into the city. With over a thousand homes just in these neighborhoods, there were plenty for Lao families to choose from. Though this would not be anyone's first choice in Wichita – the East and West ends of towns are more affluent and desirable – the prices were relatively affordable, especially considering its proximity to good workplaces, and this appealed to many incoming refugees. In 1975, rent for a two-to-three-bedroom Oaklawn-Sunview home was advertised as low as \$107 per month in the newspapers. To buy one of these homes was advertised at \$7,900 cash down.<sup>166</sup> Over the next two decades, rent in the Oaklawn-Sunview neighborhoods went up to the range of \$230 to \$310 per month.<sup>167</sup> With the introduction of Lao families to the area, the neighborhoods soon grew more diverse.

Oaklawn, Sunview, and neighboring Planeview in South Wichita were well-known as “bad” neighborhoods. High crime rates plagued the area, which law enforcement described as “Eventually, many Asian youths became perpetrators of the crimes, as well. Refugee students

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<sup>165</sup> Wichita-Sedgwick County Metropolitan Area Planning Commission, “Oaklawn-Sunview Neighborhood Revitalization Plan,” April 9, 2002, <https://www.wichita.gov/DocumentCenter/View/9146>.

<sup>166</sup> S-J Properties Co., advertisement, *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, July 19, 1975; S-J Properties Co., advertisement, *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, January 11, 1975.

<sup>167</sup> Janet Halfmann, “Oaklawn's Facelift Welcomed by Some,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, November 17, 1981.

commonly fell through the cracks due to language and culture barriers, and became part of the school-to-prison pipeline. In one example, a Lao refugee teenager Sakone Donesay, who had joined a gang, eventually murdered a police officer.<sup>168</sup>

As a low-income neighborhood, it also was not as taken care of by the city. The neighborhood was notorious for sewage backups throughout the 1970s. However, there were many positives to the area, as well. It was a neighborhood that provided good opportunities, even with limited financial means. The nearby factories were favorable places of employment, and some of the schools offered English as a Second Language. ESL programs started in local schools in 1976, from elementary to high school. Southeast High School, closest to the Oaklawn-Sunview neighborhoods, had an ESL program which was so popular that it filled up in the 1980 school year.<sup>169</sup> Students had to be re-routed to other schools to find language support services. For the younger children, as it is with all children, language acquisition was much easier for them. In one case, after only ten weeks of ESL classes, Wichita fifth-grader Phonepraseuth Vilaysong was reading at a second-grade level and was the main translator for both his fellow Lao students and his family.<sup>170</sup>

By 1990, the Oaklawn-Sunview community was 8.1 percent Asian.<sup>171</sup> Considering Wichita was only 2.5 percent Asian at that time, this helps to show how Asian Americans were

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<sup>168</sup> Donald Williams, "Journey's Bad Ending," *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, February 11, 1996.

<sup>169</sup> Robbie Curry, "Foreign Students, Schools Want to Leap Language Barrier," *Wichita (KS) Beacon*, June 3, 1980.

<sup>170</sup> Jim Straughn, "10 Weeks in States, Laotian Already Acts as Translator," *Wichita (KS) Beacon*, January 8, 1980.

<sup>171</sup> Wichita-Sedgwick County Metropolitan Area Planning Commission, "Oaklawn-Sunview Neighborhood Revitalization Plan," April 9, 2002, <https://www.wichita.gov/DocumentCenter/View/9146>.

more heavily concentrated in this area of town.<sup>172</sup> Though this was not the only neighborhood they found themselves living in, and though many moved away as they made more money, the case of Oaklawn-Sunview provides an important insight into early community building in Wichita.

Homes in Oaklawn-Sunview were built with two to three bedrooms, meant for an average American nuclear family. However, it would not be unusual to see three generations in one of these homes. One study found that, by the mid-1990s, non-Vietnamese Southeast Asian refugee families had more members of a household family than other ethnic and racial minorities in the United States.<sup>173</sup> On a national average, incoming Lao households were comprised of approximately 6.9 individuals in the 1970s and 1980s; in Wichita, by 1990, the average household size was down to around 4.5 people, which was more in line with the white American average.<sup>174</sup> Part of this can be attributed to the fact that, nearly fifteen years after arriving in the United States, families grew more prosperous and children were able to move out and start households of their own.

Though socioeconomic status played a part in multigenerational households, cultural expectations also kept families in close quarters. In more traditional households, for example, women do not leave until they are married, even as adults. Elderly parents or grandparents live

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<sup>172</sup> Hurst Laviana and Brent D. Wistrom, “Census Finds Wichita, Suburbs More Diverse,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, March 27, 2011.

<sup>173</sup> Kiyong Lee, *Southeast Asian Families and Pooled Labor*, 56.

<sup>174</sup> Gail P. Kelly, “Coping with America: Refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1970s and 1980s,” *AAPSS*, 487 (1986), 142. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1931-0846.2014.12002.x>; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population, General Population Characteristics: Kansas*.

with their adult children, often in the care of their daughters, as an expectation of filial piety – as the traditional Lao culture they left behind would have been an authoritative, patriarchal, authoritarian society. This was more common among the first generation of Lao, and things continue to change away from these traditional views – much to the dismay of the elders – among the second and third generation of children, who were born in refugee camps or here in the United States.<sup>175</sup> The expectations of filial piety can be found in interviewee Somphet Kayarath’s family. He lives with his elderly parents, who require extensive medical care, as well as an English translator, after a lifetime of hardships in Laos and in the United States. Interviewee Gayle also took care of her father until his death, and her sister – much more newly arrived than her to the United States – relies on her for help, especially with English translation. Family comes first to the early arrivals. However, the Americanization of the youth is inevitable thanks to their exposure in schools.

The issue of housing was solved by the low-income neighborhoods of South Wichita, but other markers more clearly show that a Lao American community was rooting firmly into place. Aside from education, that leaves Lao-run businesses and Lao Buddhist religion. Lao-run businesses and a Lao temple developed outwards in South Wichita, with the aircraft companies as the focal point for community development.

From Oaklawn, the Lao community expanded outwards into South Wichita. Immigrant entrepreneurship has always been a focus of interest, dating back as far as the 1880s in Wichita with Chinese launderers. When work could not be found – or as it was with the Chinese, denied

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<sup>175</sup> Daniel F. Detzner, *Elder Voices: Southeast Asian Families in the United States* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2004).

on basis of race – immigrants would make their own work. Gayle numbered among these Lao entrepreneurs, as she ran a store with her husband. After a full day’s shift at Burnham or Boeing, she would work until 10PM in her store.<sup>176</sup> There is enough of an extended Southeast Asian community in Wichita, that when combined with Vietnamese and Cambodian run establishments, there exists what Urban Studies scholar Willow Lung-Amam refers to as “Asian malls.” Asian malls are defined as suburban strip malls filled predominantly with Asian storefronts and restaurants.<sup>177</sup> In Wichita, these clusters of Asian storefronts can be found on Broadway Street or Hillside Avenue.

Gayle’s store, called Four Star Asian Market, used to be in an Asian mall on Hillside, next to a Thai market and a restaurant. She has since left the entrepreneurship life, but it used to be a bustling storefront. Though Gayle’s Lao store is closed, others still endure. The Asian market is the bedrock of Asian American communities, as they provide the food that is familiar and comforting. As long as they can get their hands on sticky rice, the most important of Southeast Asia’s food staples, a home can be made. These Asian businesses intermingled on Broadway and in Hillside with other ethnic businesses, including Latino and Black American, so while the Asian malls were limited, it might be more apt to say there was an abundance of “ethnic malls.”

Finally, to discuss the permanence of the community built in Wichita, one has to look at the role of religion. The temple, known as a *wat* in the Lao language, would have been the center

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<sup>176</sup> Gayle Phothirat, in discussion with the author, Wichita, Kansas, September 23, 2024.

<sup>177</sup> Willow Lung-Amam, *Trespassers? Asian Americans and the Battle for Suburbia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 99.

of the community back in Laos. The monks were a daily part of life, as each day civilians would take part in the alms-giving ceremony known as *dak bat*, in which the monks take donations for their daily allotment of rice. As they have taken a vow of poverty, this is the only way they eat. In the United States, however, where the Lao community is spread far and wide, the tradition is unsustainable in original form. To make this tradition viable while living in the US, a *dak bat* is hosted at the temple in Wichita once a month.

The Lao Buddhist Association of Kansas formed the temple in 1981, shortly after coming to Wichita. There were not many people, as it was the early years of resettlement, but it laid an important piece of foundation for the Lao community to develop from. For many years, the Lao Buddhists had to meet in varying locations, since there was no permanent location for the temple. Meeting locations included multiple Oaklawn rentals, duplexes, and at one point, even a barn.<sup>178</sup> Lao Wichitan Kham Vilaysing emphasized the need for the temple to the community: “We came here, we don't have nothing. We have to have someplace for a monk to stay, a place for our customs.”<sup>179</sup> To keep their culture alive, they made the temple happen, wherever and whenever they could. In 1988, they purchased land in South Wichita at the intersection of Pawnee and Greenwich Roads. 1991 marked the first year they celebrated Lao New Year, a solar new year set in April, on their property, though a full temple had yet to be built.<sup>180</sup>

For the Buddhist community to stay strong, especially as the younger generations move further away from traditions, this kind of proactive response is necessary. Over 500 families

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<sup>178</sup> Joe Rodriguez, “After Years, Buddhist Temple Finds a Home,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle* (Wichita, KS), April 10, 2003.

<sup>179</sup> Susan L. Rife, “Tournament Benefits Lao Temple,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, July 21, 1991.

<sup>180</sup> Jennifer Comes, “Renewal Time Hundreds Come to Local Temple to Celebrate Laotian New Year,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, April 27, 1992.

relied on the temple by 1992, one of the few Lao Buddhist temples in the state of Kansas then, or now.<sup>181</sup> Since there are so few Lao people in Wichita, members have to be actively engaged or the community risks being lost. This active engagement is so important because the temple functions on donations from temple goers or payments to get into festival events. Often, attendees will donate hundreds of dollars per visit. Between monthly *dak bat* events, special holidays like New Year's, and yearly festivals, thousands of people – Lao and non-Lao – visit the temple. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are raised annually. The money is put back into the temple and the community.

For the elders who fear their culture is dying, the temple was their hope. It socialized their children with fellow Lao children and allowed elders to meet and share their stories. One elderly Lao refugee, Ou Sounakane, shared his concerns about the future of Buddhism in America: "In Laos, a teenager can go to temple. Here, he can get a job and he's too busy to go to the temple."<sup>182</sup> However, there was light at the end of the tunnel, as the temple is still going strong today. The Lao community's place in Wichita was officially sealed on April 12, 2003, with the grand opening of the Lao Buddhist temple.<sup>183</sup> The property bought back in 1988 finally had a temple, and there was at last a recognizable physical marker of their community, solidifying their presence in Wichita. Though there is no "Little Vientiane" like there is a "Little Saigon," the community nevertheless remains intact.

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<sup>181</sup> Comes, "Renewal Time."

<sup>182</sup> Tom Schaefer, "Worshippers Fear Youths Will Not Learn Their Asian Heritage," *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, August 6, 1988.

<sup>183</sup> Joe Rodriguez, "After Years, Buddhist Temple."

Reactions to all of this community building were mixed. However, the most vehement reactions in Wichita could be found in the newspapers, where people did not sugarcoat their grievances – calling refugees everything from “tax-moochers,” “spies,” among other ethnic slurs. Though their names were attached, perhaps some level of anonymity gave them confidence to admit their true feelings. “Midwest nice” is a common stereotype applied to Kansans: polite, non-confrontational, and passive aggressive, which all seem to be applicable to the feelings of many around the time of resettlement. Refugees in the Wichita area did not experience racist violence in the way that Asian Americans elsewhere in the country faced. Perhaps because the citizens were more “Midwest nice” and funneled the depth of their anger into the written word instead. Violence across the country against Asian Americans erupted at various points, one example being the murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man who was beaten to death in response to massive layoffs in the automobile industry – whose killers never faced a day in prison.<sup>184</sup>

Though there was much negativity reported, humanity can reveal the best of itself in times of hardship. Many of the refugees reported kind interactions with their neighbors. Gayle’s neighbors, for example, mowed her lawn when she worked fifteen or more hours a day, without ever saying a word to her or expecting any kind of compensation. She only found out when she caught them one day.<sup>185</sup> In a letter to the editor, responding to the hateful rhetoric of others, one Wichitan even admitted that exposure to refugees changed his mind about them. In beginning,

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<sup>184</sup> Fox Butterfield, “Violent Incidents Against Asian-Americans Seen as Part of Racist Pattern,” *New York Times*, August 13, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/08/31/us/violent-incidents-against-asian-americans-seen-as-part-of-racist-pattern.html>.

<sup>185</sup> Gayle Phothirat, in discussion with the author, Wichita, Kansas, September 23, 2024.

wrote Stacy Smith, he thought of them as “Vietcong collaborators who... stabbed America(ns) in the back” and parasites “whose only purpose in life was to live off my tax dollars.” He admitted to regularly using Asian slurs as well, many of which referenced other Asian ethnic groups. After working with them, he reflected: “How dumb can a man be?”<sup>186</sup> Small things like this, such as little acts of kindness or an open mind, show that despite all the bad press, once refugees were in a neighborhood, they could fit in. Furthermore, they could fit in without compromising their core cultural values.

Though neighborhoods like Oaklawn and Sunview are considered the “bad neighborhoods,” they are still home. Gayle admits the same: “All my kids grow up in this area, and I like it now.”<sup>187</sup> This neighborhood provided shelter to refugees fifty years ago when they needed homes, and that fact is not taken for granted. Over the years, Somphet moved around the country to several cities, but has recently returned to Wichita. These other places had Lao communities too, more tight-knit even, but Wichita – his fourth city – and his parents’ house in Oaklawn remains home when he needs it most.

## **Conclusion**

Once coming to Wichita, Lao refugees had to find work. The Wichita they came into could be hostile to these new foreigners in their midst, as seen in the newspapers, both national and local. Poor news coverage, compounded by the economic crisis, set the stage for a poor welcome. Nevertheless, they persevered through it, because they had few other choices. Though

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<sup>186</sup> Stacy Smith, letter to the editor, *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, January 31, 1979.

<sup>187</sup> Gayle Phothirat, in discussion with the author, Wichita, Kansas, September 23, 2024.

unskilled labor was their main source of employment, many were able to find success outside the typical low-wage service sector and found it instead in manufacturing.

By 1990, the state of Kansas was recognized on a national level as a place well-suited for Lao refugees. This was due to a combination of factors, including the availability of employment (including the ease of acquiring it, especially with lower educational attainment), low cost of living, and the size of the co-ethnic community incoming immigrants would join.<sup>188</sup> The Lao Wichita community awaited with open arms. Though the image of the refugee as the displaced, perpetual foreigner still lingers, this analysis of community building shows how the Lao community of Wichita worked to root themselves into place. Though they had no choice about coming to the United States in the first place, they had the choice to make a home in Wichita – and they chose it.

In some ways, though, there is an irony to the Lao community relying so heavily on work in aircraft companies. After all, it was Boeing aircraft that was partly responsible for Laos's devastation during the war. The two most popular planes in used in operations such as Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger were manufactured, at least in part, by Boeing: the Lockheed AC-130 and the Boeing B-52 Stratofortress.<sup>189</sup> The merger with McDonnell Douglas, famous aerospace defense contractor, only solidified the military ties of the company going into modern day. In the decades after the bombings, there would be Lao workers building those same planes that helped turn them into refugees in the first place. The millions of tons of ordinance dropped by these

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<sup>188</sup> David North and Voradeth Ditthavong, *Profiles of Some Good Places for the Lao to Live in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: US Dept of Health and Human Services, Family Support Administration, Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1989), 46-7.

<sup>189</sup> Eisenberg, *Fire and Rain*, 129.

planes, much of it still unexploded, continue to kill and maim innocent Lao civilians to this day.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Michael Sullivan, “Laos’ Unexploded Bombs: Deadly Scrap Metal, Toys,” *National Public Radio*, March 5, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124346491>.; Lewis M. Simons, “The U.S. Promised Ukraine Cluster Bombs. In Laos, They Still Kill Civilians,” *National Public Radio*, July 11, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/11/1186949348/us-cluster-munitions-civilian-casualties-laos>.

## Conclusion

Scholar Daniel F. Detzner summed up the experiences of refugees in the United States well when he compared it to dropping a boulder into a lake: “After the shock of the initial impact, a series of waves form concentric circles that expand landward, ultimately engulfing the entire body of water and all that it touches in overlapping swells. Long after the direct impact, the waters remain unsettled.”<sup>191</sup> This also sums up the specific case of Lao Wichitans, as well. In the 8,000 miles from Laos to Kansas, Lao refugees had innumerable hardships to overcome to build their current community. Though they live good lives today, the echoes of the past still are felt.

However, these communities are under threat today. For those that have chosen or have been prevented from becoming United States citizens, the threat of deportation looms as a specter over families. Cambodians and Vietnamese have been deported in growing numbers in the past five years, though Laos is not yet accepting deportees.<sup>192</sup> Under the Donald Trump administration, though, efforts began to secure a treaty with Laos, which has yet to be realized. Thus, the story of these people, and of all refugees and asylum seekers looking for refuge in the United States, remains relevant to this day.

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<sup>191</sup> Detzner, *Elder Voices*, 23.

<sup>192</sup> Agnes Constante, “U.S. Funding Reintegration Program in Laos for Laotian and Hmong Refugees,” *NBC News*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/u-s-funding-reintegration-program-laos-laotian-hmong-refugees-n1136356>; Vivian Ho, “‘Like Becoming a Refugee Again’: They Paid for Their Crimes. The US deported Them Anyway,” *Guardian*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/17/cambodia-prison-sentence-deportation>.

As shown, the story of Lao Wichitans is fifty years in the making. Though their early journey of refugeehood – that snapshot in time of their most traumatic experiences – was difficult, their experiences once coming to American were also full of a different kind of trauma. Unable to speak the language of the country they had no choice in being resettled to, they had to quickly find jobs to sustain their families. When they found it in aircraft, it allowed them to settle and put down roots in the local community and form a co-ethnic community of their own. They spread out throughout South Wichita into local neighborhoods and schools, creating businesses and founding a temple on which to center their community.

Though large masses of Lao refugees are a thing of the past, many continue to come to this day. However, they no longer come from refugee camps; the camps on the Thai-Lao border were all closed by the mid-1990s, and the Thai temple Wat Tam Krabok sheltering them withdrew their support around 2004.<sup>193</sup> The war is long over, and nearly fifty years later, the threat of the communists is not as keenly felt as it once was. New arrivals are now generally classified as “immigrants” rather than as “refugees,” which means they do not have the same kind of protections under international law.<sup>194</sup> These days, immigration is fueled by economics as opposed to fear of persecution. Even though Laos remains a communist country under rule of the Pathet Lao, the more pressing concern for immigrants is that it is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia. Though some may call them “economic refugees,” they are not legally considered refugees, and therefore cannot claim the protections that come with “refugee” status.

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<sup>193</sup> “Southeast Asian American Journeys,” Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2020, 15, [https://www.searac.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SEARAC\\_NationalSnapshot\\_PrinterFriendly.pdf](https://www.searac.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SEARAC_NationalSnapshot_PrinterFriendly.pdf).

<sup>194</sup> Bankston III and Hidalgo, “Southeast Asia,” 627.

Immigrants are no longer funneled through refugee camps, and sponsors are no longer independent church groups. They are often the family members of those who first came in the 1970s and 1980s, and those original immigrants continue to sponsor new ones. As family reunification has spurred much migration, secondary migration from city to city is less crucial these days to finding belonging. The hard work of community building, while never truly complete, has created solid foundations in many cities across the United States. Incoming immigrants can now walk into a fully formed community with existing infrastructure, including a Buddhist temple now numbering half a dozen monks and half a dozen buildings.

Though Wichita's aircraft industry has seen major overhaul in the last thirty years, it remains the city's primary employer. And soon, Boeing will return, amidst growing concerns about the company's quality control and companywide strikes. Though Boeing sold its Wichita plants in 2005, it recently bought back its Wichita subsidiary Spirit Aerosystems. The planned return is sometime in 2025.<sup>195</sup> It is unknown, yet, how this will affect the local community – an upturn or a downturn? Gayle worries about their return: “I’m not sure it’s going to be a secure job for us... We will see.”<sup>196</sup> Nevertheless, this shows how aircraft manufacturing remains a strong industry in the city of Wichita – and Lao workers will be there for it.

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<sup>195</sup> Molly McMillin, “End of an Era: Boeing in the Final Stages of Leaving Wichita,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, August 8, 2014.; Dion Lefler, “Back to Being Boeing: \$8.3 Billion Deal to Buy Back Spirit Aerosystems Confirmed,” *Wichita (KS) Eagle*, July 1, 2024.

<sup>196</sup> Gayle Phothirat, in conversation with the author, Wichita, Kansas, September 23, 2024.

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