

Narrator: Houa Moua  
Interviewer: Gretchen Seidling  
Date: October 7, 2011  
Place: Eau Claire, WI  
Duration: 22:59

SEIDLING: We'll start talking a little bit about your occupation. You are retired?

MOUA: Yes, I am retired.

SEIDLING: And what did you do before your retirement?

MOUA: I was a health aide and the job title is Bilingual Health Interpreter at the City County Health Department of Eau Claire.

SEIDLING: For how long?

MOUA: For twenty-four years.

SEIDLING: Can you tell me a little about the house you live in and why you live here, in this location?

MOUA: We enjoy this neighborhood very much because it is located near the school and we love children. We like to listen to their voices, their play in the back of the school. It's nice to see children.

SEIDLING: So you are across the street from Manz School.

MOUA: Yes, yes and a good neighbor, too.

SEIDLING: Do you stay connected with your friends and family in Laos?

MOUA: Yes, we do.

SEIDLING: By phone, email....

MOUA: By writing and phone.

SEIDLING: What do you tell them about life in Eau Claire?

MOUA: Cold! Cold! And we work hard.

SEIDLING: Do they ask you at all about Eau Claire?

MOUA: They do not ask how we live, they ask for money. [Laughter]

SEIDLING: Do you have plans in the future to go to Laos?

MOUA: Yes, we do.

SEIDLING: Soon, or do you think it will be...

MOUA: We are thinking about soon, if we can.

SEIDLING: Do you watch Hmong videos?

MOUA: Yes, we do.

SEIDLING: What are some of your favorites and why?

MOUA: Hmong video, folk song, music, and folk tales. It is my language, and they play familiar music, songs, and folk tales that we have in the legend for hundreds of years just in verbal, and now they make into movies. It is fun to watch.

SEIDLING: Can you tell me some of your hobbies?

MOUA: My hobby, I like to read and write and watching movies, comedies.

SEIDLING: I see you have some sewing here. Is sewing a hobby, or...

MOUA: Yeah, sewing is my hobby, too.

SEIDLING: What about outdoor activities, are you active outside?

MOUA: I do walk a little, and I go to the YMCA for water aerobics every day.

SEIDLING: Why did you begin writing?

MOUA: Because writing is fun. You can write your thoughts that you need to share, or your thoughts that you keep for yourself.

SEIDLING: I know you wrote a book, at least one. I've seen that. How does the Hmong community react to your writing?

MOUA: Most Hmong, they are impressed but they do not know how to read. Only the young people or younger generation know how to read. And they are very impressed.

SEIDLING: They are interested in the stories that you write down?

MOUA: Yes, right.

SEIDLING: You mentioned that you do keep a diary that you're not showing anyone?

MOUA: Yes, I have myself. I have a lot of diary books.

SEIDLING: Do you know and use the written Hmong alphabet?

MOUA Yes, I do.

SEIDLING: How common is it for the Hmong people to learn and use the Hmong written language?

MOUA: I think now it is very common. Depends on who you are, if you go to church it is much more needed. They need to read and write songs.

SEIDLING: Are the young people learning to write in Hmong?

MOUA: Not all, only a few young learn how to read and write. Not all young Hmong children have time to learn.

SEIDLING: Tell me a little bit about some of the changes in the Hmong language since coming to America. How is the younger generation combining....

MOUA: We mix language. Whatever comes out in our thoughts or minds, a word. So we use foreign languages between Laos, Thai, English, Hmong. It is all mixed.

SEIDLING: Do you think if the younger generation would go back to visit in Laos, they would be understood?

MOUA: Yes, I think they would, maybe some words not able to, because today we have different dialect from different town or country, too. Maybe some words would be kind of confused, but most would understand.

SEIDLING: How is what you eat in Eau Claire different from what you had in Laos in the camps?

MOUA: We used to grow our own food, like rice, corn, all kinds of vegetables, and raise our own animals. Here everything you buy, including rice. We can grow corn in the summer and vegetables in the summer, but most things we grow here we only do in the summer, and otherwise we make some preserves. We eat from can or from frozen. So compare from there and here, even the same food is from different way.

SEIDLING: Do you still make and eat traditional foods?

MOUA: Yes, we do.

SEIDLING: Which ones are...

MOUA: Rice, meats, fruits, vegetables.

SEIDLING: Using traditional recipes?

MOUA: Yes.

SEIDLING: Is that pretty regular in your life?

MOUA: Yes, pretty much regular in our lifestyle. Even here we have lived thirty-five years, we still eat the same food.

SEIDLING: Tell me the ones that are for special occasions.

MOUA: For special occasions – egg rolls, chicken stuffing, turkey, and rice patties. I will show you. [Retrieves Rice Patty] This is rice patty.

SEIDLING: Are special foods still prepared for women who have just given birth?

MOUA: Yes...

SEIDLING: Still doing that tradition?

MOUA: Yes, yes.

SEIDLING: Please tell me about some of your traditions. The Hmong, the American or the “mix” of the two, that are still being carried on.

MOUA: Repeat again.

SEIDLING: Some of your traditions. The question is, are they Hmong, American, or a mix of the two, and which traditions are from the past that stayed alive?

MOUA: Don't know “tradition”... which tradition?

SEIDLING: I think we could probably use the Hmong New Year as an example. Some of the traditional things that you do?

MOUA: We still keep partial tradition. For example, like a New Year and like a wedding or funeral.

SEIDLING: What are some of the traditions that may have disappeared?

MOUA: All of those have disappeared partially. We say traditional Hmong New Year, but it is not that traditional anymore. We say traditional wedding, but it is not ALL tradition. It has some change in it. OK, for example, here is a traditional New Year: we don't spend money. Now, New Year Time we say traditional New Year and we have all kinds of vendors. They sell produce, they sell [inaudible], they sell game, which is not traditional anymore. But the word tradition, we keep that yet. We still dress up, and we still do ball tossing. So we have some mixed, and it is not really tradition anymore. Anything.

SEIDLING: How has the crafting, or the sewing changed among the Hmong?

MOUA: It has been changed. For example, a long time ago our color was colorful, and now they are adapting to colorful and we have some dull color. Later on you can see the two different, colorful and dull color. We made color adapted to this Western. We converted the craft; instead of just wear, we increasing into like a tablecloth, or pillow case, or hanging, or bed spread, things like that.

SEIDLING: If you're comfortable can you tell me about your religious or spiritual life?

MOUA: Yes, we are now Christians, and we believe in God.

SEIDLING: So your religion has changed.

MOUA: Yeah, we had a big change thirty five years ago, when we came to Eau Claire. We used to practice those ancestor beliefs, or what you call animism, and now we just go to church. My father was a Shaman and now we have pastors.

SEIDLING: What are your experiences with the non-Hmong people in the area?

MOUA: Now, I feel like it's more acceptable and welcome. Even though they do not have the welcome, I kind of let it go.

SEIDLING: Is it different now, or is it still somewhat similar to when you first came here?

MOUA: I think it is different now. Before, we first came if there were a little child, a little Caucasian, three or five years old child, they would ask their mom about me... "What is that?" And now they don't ask that question anymore. If they would ask, they would say "who is that?"... not "what is that" ... it is different.

SEIDLING: What was you and your family's reaction to the events of 9/11?

MOUA: Oh, terrible. Terrible. I have a nine year and it hit me. It took me ten days and ten nights completely is lost, falling to bed. Unable to wake up, or to get up. All I do, just to eat and use the bathroom and go back to sleep. Sleep all day and all night. It took me hard.

SEIDLING: Did it bring back, maybe, memories from your time in Laos?

MOUA: Yes, yes, yes.

SEIDLING: As a person who immigrated here, how do you feel about the current debates on the immigration issues that we are having now?

MOUA: If we think back two hundred, three hundred years ago, we all migration to this country. And to those who had prohibit or make rigid rules to make much difficult. They just forgot where they are coming from, and they forgot where their parents coming from. If we think all the people here accept the American Indian, that they are the original people. Some came here a couple of years ago, some like us they came here thirty five years ago, and some of you might come here maybe three hundred years ago...or one hundred years ago. It is a different length of time, but we all came from different countries to the United States.

SEIDLING: Are there any harsh feelings against the Hmong people because of the hunting accident a couple of years ago up north?

MOUA: I don't see it myself. I don't see anything different. It was after that, I retired. I retired before that accident.

SEIDLING: So, your thoughts on that are? Do you have any thoughts on that accident, or what happened?

MOUA: I do not know what to say, I don't know what to think. I just find it very odd, I do not know how to think.

SEIDLING: Has adjusting to the American life become easier for the more recent Hmong families and immigrants who have come?

MOUA: Yes. Much easier for the most recently because we be here before them and we already face the new life and we guide them, we lead them, we help them.

SEIDLING: Is the number of Hmong who plan to return to Laos decreasing?

MOUA: No, I never known anybody who want to go back to Laos to live. I never known anyone here.

SEIDLING: Are the Hmong people still kind of moving around the country, as they were right after they came?

MOUA: Yes, they do. Even though you see a lot of settlement in one place, but if you're asking "oh, your face is non familiar to me, you must be new. Are you here [for] student, or work?" Only work, we move here for work or they will say we are here for student. So people still moving from places to places.

SEIDLING: Do you have any experience with, have you been working with the new Hmong?

MOUA: New Hmong??

SEIDLING: The new immigrant Hmong. Have you been working with them?

MOUA: Even though I'm not fully working with pay, I still involve a lot of daily activities, yes I do. I visit them, get close contact, we still friend.

SEIDLING: I have my one last question. Does America feel like home now and why?

MOUA: Yes. It feel like home now because I live here longer than my life back in Laos. When I came here I was twenty two and I am fifty eight. That mean I live here longer than I live in Laos, so here is home now. And you ... we live always in Eau Claire. We never moved anywhere in the United States. We always live here especially in the south side of town so we see all the new bridges, new buildings, new streets, all of those changed. We saw from the beginning, thirty five years ago. Eau Claire has a lot of change and even though you live here you feel like home because you become an active "person," not Hmong but just a community person.

SEIDLING: Is there anything else you would like to say? Anything to add to what we talked about?

MOUA: I think today our people here have more concrete feeling, life for example: those who have interest still have good farmers and they do good selling at the farmer's market. Those who have interest doing in business, they have a few local business in town and those who have interest for education, there were a few received doctors' degree, and they work at their profession job, and different from before. I see we have reduced family size. More people now have a reduced family size

from large family to small family. I see a lot of things change before a lot of people used to live in the low, low public housing and now more people own their own home and some Hmong even have units for rent for other people who can own off their own property that they can rent from. So I see a lot of things change.

SEIDLING: Do you have any photographs do you want to maybe share...I see you've got some clothing and I did not bring my camera. Do you have any pictures of some of the things you sew that you might like to contribute, or not. If you don't that's fine.

MOUA: Oh, pictures, I have a lot of pictures, but I don't know how many picture you would like to take.