

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF THE BEGINNING OF MISSION WORK WITH THE HMONG
PEOPLES LIVING IN MANITOWOC, WI.



As seen by Loren Steele

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PROLOGUE:

The events described in this paper took place from December 1984 to August 1985 in roughly the chronological order in which they are set down. They took place while I, Loren Steele, was serving as vicar under pastor Arno Wolfgramm at First German Lutheran Church in Manitowoc.

I have told this story in the first person because that's how I saw it. Please, as a reader, do not get the impression that I am trying to build up my personal involvement in these events or am trying to take credit for any good that may have resulted. I use the first person only in the sense of being a witness on the scene as almighty God moved hearts through His Word.

I fear that much has been left out, but perhaps what else I have to say is more of personal interest rather than of historical interest.

The saga of the Hmong's odyssey to America and then to Manitowoc and then to faith in Jesus Christ reminds me of the words of Eph. 1:11, "In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will." These people would never have come to America where they heard the Gospel message were they not driven here by war, starvation, and fear of certain death. I can only think that God used these events to bring this remote mountain people into contact with His precious Word. That God allowed me to be a part of His plan can only remain a source of wonder. For that opportunity I am forever thankful.

The people in this account continue to live and practice their faith as of this writing, March 1986. May they continue to do so to their eternal salvation.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN:

Bullet wounds always look the same. Especially small caliber bullet wounds. The neat round holes made by bullets never look serious from the outside, but inside a body those angry pieces of lead cut a deadly path of destruction.

As I looked down at the still body of Khoua Song I saw one of those neat round holes in her face. Another was in her neck, and a third was positioned out of sight under her hospital gown. They brought back memories of another dark skinned person with those same neat round holes in his body. On that occasion I had knelt silently beside the man as he lay in a dirty inner city gutter and watched him slowly die. I did not speak the words that offer eternal life, and the man slipped into his eternity without hearing them. It would not be that way this time!

When I touched Khoua's hand her dark eyes slowly opened. Bending close I told her who I was and began to speak of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sins He offers. Finishing with a prayer, I asked if she had understood? She squeezed my hand in an almost imperceptible "Yes." I wiped her sweat beaded forehead and touched her hair, something one normally never does with an oriental, but conditions seemed to warrant a gesture of comfort, and custom be hanged. Her hair was gritty with dried blood that came away in flakes on my damp hand. I doubted that Khoua would live through the day, but I promised to return in the afternoon. Little did I know that this was the beginning of mission work with the Hmong peoples living in Manitowoc.

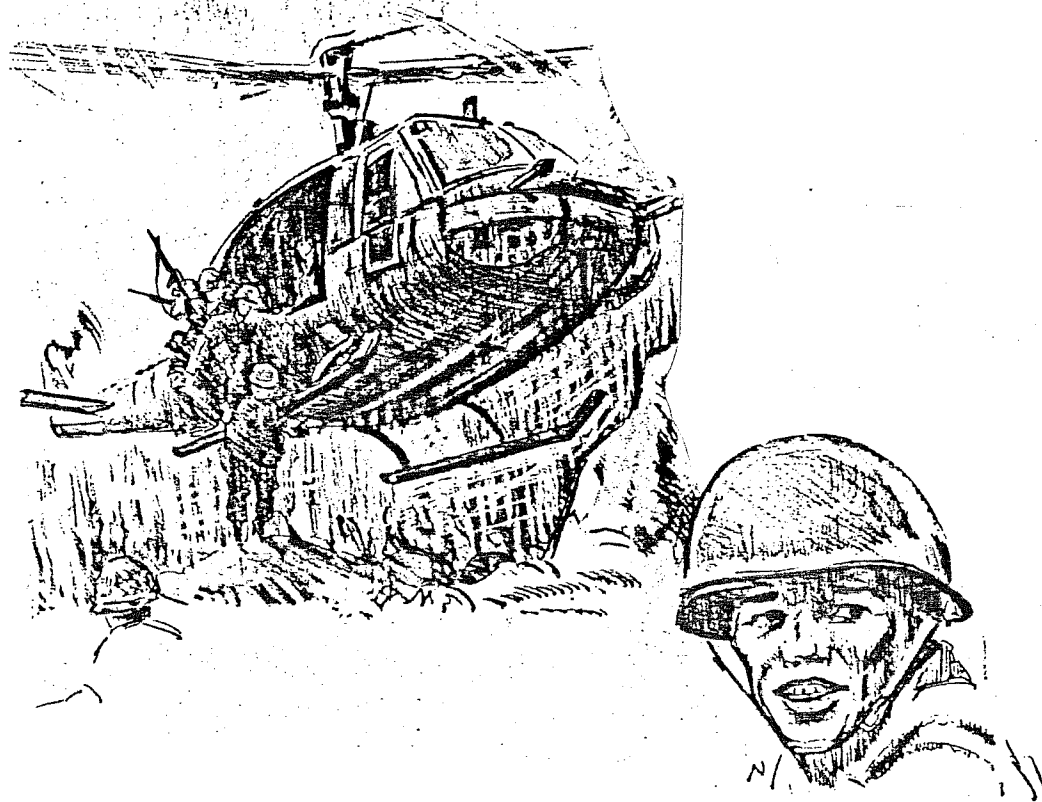
WHO ARE THE HMONG?

150 years ago a group of upperclass Chinese were driven out of

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China during a revolution. The Chinese called them "Meo," but these refugees called themselves Hmong (free men).

Their search for a new home brought them to the tropical mountain tops of Laos, where they set up a tribal community based on slash and burn agriculture. On these remote mountains they remained alone and isolated for over 100 years. Then came the Vietnam war.



In an effort to stop the North Vietnamese soldiers before they reached South Vietnam, the American C.I.A. clandestinely recruited Hmong men to wage guerrilla operations against the southbound communists. When the United States pulled out of Vietnam the Hmong were left without arms and surrounded by an enemy bent on their extermination. It became a flee or die situation very similar to their exodus from China 150 years before.

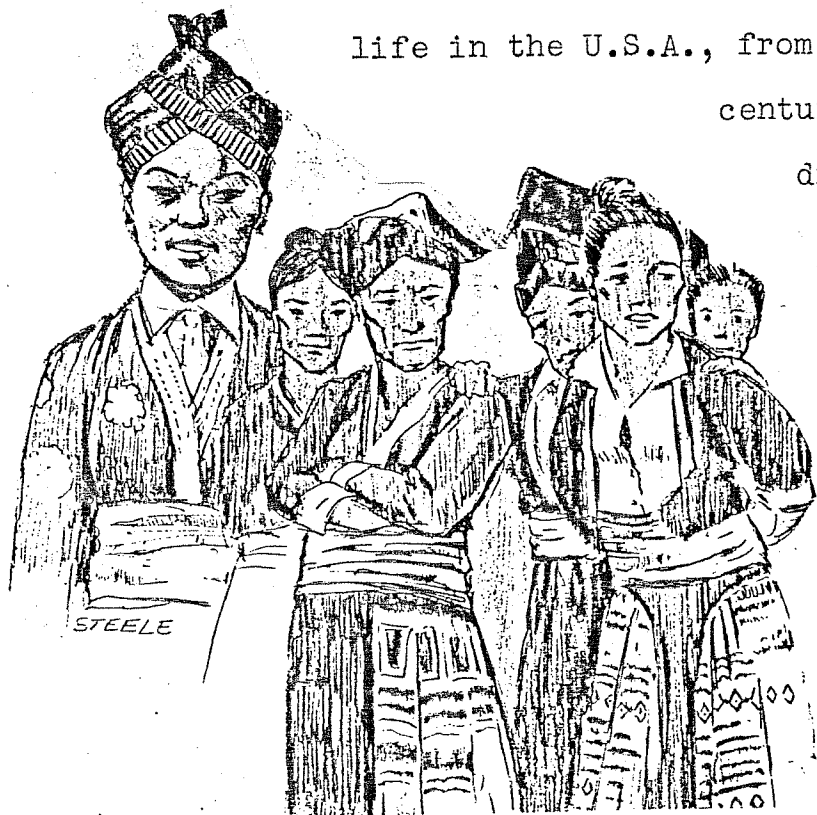
The story of their flight to the refugee camps of Thailand is one of death, danger, and starvation that would make a book in itself. From Thailand individuals and parts of families were flown to America under the U.S. government political refugee program and through individual and church sponsorships.

To understand these people and the whole Hmong mission story one has to keep in mind three things: First, the Hmong in Laos were separated from all contact with the 20th century by their isolated mountain environment. Unlike the Vietnamese, who lived in the lowlands, the Hmong did not know about high-speed living, big cities, packaged foods, cars, etc. Secondly, Hmong are a heathen people whose religion was (and for many still is) animism. And third, their community structure was based on tightly knit clans.

These three factors color everything in a Hmong's life in the U.S.A., from their bewilderment at 20th century living to the way they

dress and think. In other words, they are Hmong to the core, even though they want to become Americans.

The old ways and the klan structure of their micro-society are a security blanket to which they retreat from a world they cannot understand, a world in which they look different, speak different, and in which they



are frequently hated.

Hmong moved into Manitowoc for three reasons. One, it's small, and there is opportunity to find land on which to plant crops. Two, they can live within their meager incomes and not be forced into an inner-city ghetto situation (they are not a ghetto type people). Third, the Manitowoc-Cleveland area offers excellent opportunities to learn English, something they have come to realize is absolutely important for their Americanization.

MAY KUE'S STORE:

Logically, Khoua should have died, but she didn't. Her husband, Yhia, had been killed with a bullet between the eyes at the same time Khoua was shot. In one mad moment it seemed her entire life had been blown into hopeless despair. She lay on the brink of death, in a country still foreign to her, with four hungry children.

As she grew stronger I spent more and more time at her hospital bedside. The old religion of her people gave her no comfort, but the news of a Savior from sin, who loved her and cared about her and who was with her even now was a hope she desperately wanted to hear about.

It was during one of these devotion-instruction visits that I met Ger and May Kue. They had come to see Khoua. Ger worked as translator and counselor for the Hmong at a community college nearby. May was proprietress of "The Hmong Store." The Kues had been in America some years and were becoming established. They were friendly and glad to see someone else had an interest in Khoua.

Wanting to follow up on this initial contact with Kues, I stopped into their store on Washington Ave., a few days later. It was like stepping into the orient! At the front, moa (rice) was

piled in one hundred pound sacks to near ceiling height. Then came shelves of canned bamboo, coconut eyes, and other strange things. Still more shelves held red peppers (Hmong food is HOT!), mortar and pestles, bowls instead of plates for eating, and the large Tai knives that the women use for everything from chopping "ga" (chicken) to laban. Other shelves contained varieties of dried noodles and rice paper (a thin rice tortilla used for making the Hmong equivalent of egg rolls). Mango, guavas, and other tropical fruits and vegetables filled an ancient cooler at the rear, and throughout the store the tantalizing aroma of mysterious Asian herbs used for both food and medicine filled the air.

May Kue greeted me with a friendly, "I no think you come." She was dressed as all Hmong women in a long print skirt reaching to her ankles, thongs on her feet, and a Chinese blouse. Her long black hair was tied up in back and covered with a scarf. May is typically stocky with a round face that un-typically revealed her every mood. In her ears she wore the spiral gold earrings of the Hmong. Being one of the people God has blessed with a special zest for living, she likes everybody and everybody likes her. We talked and talked; of Khoua, the Hmong, and of Jesus. I ended with an invitation to church. She ended with an invitation to come back.



It soon became apparent that God had used Khoua's tragedy to unlock a normally locked door to the orient. My interest and concern for Khoua had made me and my religion very acceptable to the Hmong. Thus, I came more and more frequently to the Hmong store. As the

market for Hmong foods is limited to Hmongs, there were periods of relative quiet in the store when May Kue and I could discuss the Savior. Soon I was occupying a chair behind the counter on a regular basis as I tried to simplify the doctrines and words we Christians banter about without thought: salvation, forgiveness, Jesus, heaven and hell.

It wasn't long before I realized that the Hmong store was an ideal headquarters for evangelism and would play a big role in my work with the Hmong. Hmong came in on a regular basis, and after they had shopped, they passed the time of day. May would graciously introduce me as the "vicar who helped Khoua," and soon faces and names were becoming quite familiar, though language was becoming quite a problem. May spoke "passable" English, but many of the Hmong who came in did not. To convey the message of Jesus Christ to many of these people I would have to know the language. One day I asked May if she would teach me Hmong. She readily agreed and my time at the store suddenly doubled. I taught May and several others God's Word, and they taught me Hmong.

I'm afraid my language efforts brought many laughs, for Hmong is a tonal language like Mandarin, and a wrong inflection may change the meaning entirely. But laughter brings friendships, and soon six families were making a regular appearance at First German on Sundays.

THE FIRST HMCNG BIBLE CLASS:

One day I walked into the Hmong store to find a person I'd never seen before occupying my usual seat behind the counter. Her name was Za Khang. Za is one of those beauties whose oriental shyness only adds to her attractiveness. She is also one of those



people who attract misfortune.

May introduced me and set up another chair behind the counter. Za was husbandless and new to town. She had moved here in fear after two American men had kicked in the door of her Minnesota apartment and beaten her up in front of her two terrified children, Ka and Xoua.

She joined our Bible study.

In the ensuing weeks I labored much with Za in the Word. The idea of one God was a mystery to her, and she had never heard of Jesus Christ, sin, or judgment. Long and hard we labored over the concept of heaven and hell. But when I spoke of the "ju-plee" her face lit up in recognition. "Ju-plee" (spirit) she knew all about. "Yes vicar, spirits I know. There are spirits of the river, the trees, and the mountains," she said with all the pride of a struggling student who thinks she has at last understood. It wasn't my first inkling that a term was understood by the Hmong in a far different way than I intended, but it sure drove the point home. What I needed was a good Christian translator and a Hmong Bible class at church!!

A week later I found my translator. I was chewing one of May Kue's fortune cookies in the Hmong store when in came what seemed like a whole army of Hmong led by a tiny bow-legged man who looked to be just what he had once been, a rollicking soldier of fortune. He was Hang Ger, and the small army behind him was his family, ranging

from teenaged Lee and Ka to young Kong. Ten in all, plus Shang, his wife! Somewhere along his adventurous past Hang had learned and taken to Christianity, and his English was quite good. We talked and he promised to be in church on Sunday. He was there, complete with army, and came regularly after that. Soon my family was eating at his house and his family at ours. When I asked him if he would translate for a Hmong Bible class that I was starting he readily agreed.



The first class started in late February and had nearly a dozen adults in attendance. That meant there were also umteen Hmong kids in Sunday School. Each Hmong in the Bible class received a notebook to which I added lessons each week. Each lesson included a simplified Bible story, the text it was from in both Hmong and English, plus questions, answers, and a series of related drawings. All of this took hours of preparation each week but paid off many times over. I had often wondered if the Lord would make use of my art background in the ministry. This Bible class notebook proved an ideal opportunity.

Between my acting out Bible stories, Hang Ger translating, Charlene (my wife) babysitting, and the notebook, the class ^{went} well. I always made it a point to include a drawing of Hmongs as a spot illustration with each notebook lesson. The purpose of this was to constantly make the point that the God we were learning about was not just some American God as opposed to the Gods of the Hmong, but the one God of all people!

HMONG IN ADULT INFORMATION CLASS:

Hang, his two older daughters, plus May and a couple named Yao and Yer seemed to be fluent enough in English that I thought they could tackle the Adult Information Class. They were interested and agreed to come if Charlene and I would sit with them. These Hmong quickly grasp what was taught by pastor Wolfgramm. I backed up the classes with a tutoring session during the week. Hang Ger and his girls especially became like Bereans, wanting to know exactly where each passage was located in the Bible.

SLANT EYES AND THE MASTER RACE:

The Hmong in church did not go unnoticed. Their strange dress, dark skin and hair, stood out in sharp contrast to First German's Germanic membership. And, Hmong children did not know they were to sit still and quiet in church and were causing considerable distraction. Soon there were critical looks, then critical remarks. From the lecturn I could see what the problem was but was helpless to act. Thankfully, Charlene, Chanda (my oldest daughter), and a few others we enlisted came to the rescue.

We developed the following procedure. After Hmong Bible class we'd gather all the Hmong in the narthex. Charlene, Chanda, Lorelei (my youngest daughter), Coreless Lemke (a teacher), Lois Hoeft, Joan Wolfgramm, and Mrs. Reinecke would then "pick a Hmong" and sit with them. By spacing themselves between the Hmong they could teach the mothers to control their kids, and by pointing to the words in the hymnal these helpers soon had the Hmong following along on pages 5 and 15, and even singing Germanic hymns in beautiful oriental voices. There was much improvement and all seemed to be going well. But underneath, our good German brothers and sisters

were still bothered by these "slant-eyed heathens" invading "their" church.

Pastor Wolfgramm, who had encouraged my efforts with the Hmong, knew just how to handle his congregation. Before I started the Hmong Bible class he made sure the church council approved the idea by unanimous vote. He also had me speak to the Ladies Aid on a monthly basis, and scheduled a special Hmong informational night for the entire congregation. Here the film "Becoming Americans" was shown, and pastor and I both spoke on First German's opportunity for mission work right in Manitowoc. Next came a Hmong-American pot luck. As people began to know the Hmong and understand this was literally a "foreign" mission field, many got quite excited about it and attitudes began to change. Soon First German congregation was proud of what it was doing with the Hmong.

BIBLE CLASSES IN HOMES:

As is typical of mission work around the world, it was the women who first took an interest. But in the case of Hmong women, the decision to go to church is not their's to make. Several husbands simply refused to allow their wives to come. Others refused to stay home and take care of the kids Sunday morning, leaving mother with no choice but to stay home. Hmong men rule their women with an iron fist. Thus, home visits and individual or group Bible study became very important.

Since most of these visits were made to women like Ma, Mai, Me, Yer, and others whose husbands were at work or school, the personal interest of my wife and daughters was extremely helpful. Charlene was an almost constant companion on these visits and did

much to break the ice. Hmong women were eager to gain the friendship of an American woman who knew the ways of shopping and domestic life. Her value here cannot be overstressed. Neither can the value of my two daughters, Chanda and Lorelei, who also share our love of Asian peoples. They worked with the children, and got many coming to Sunday School and church. Joan Wolfgramm also joined us on occasion. As she was especially active in Sunday School she would bring along the Sunday School lessons to review and some songs to sing. The kids and the women enjoyed singing, and since Charlene and I are weak in this area Joan's help was duly appreciated.



A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO EVANGELISM:

We quickly found that friendship first, then Christ, was a key to success on evangelism calls. With the women Charlene shined, and has many joyous and humorous accounts to share. When we learned that the women were anxious to improve their English, but couldn't go to school because of their children, we took a different approach to making new contacts.

Charlene trained in the Labauch Literacy Program. This got her into new homes, ostensibly to teach home-bound wives English, but with the real motive of bringing people to Christ. It worked!

SKETCH BOOK RELIGION:

Practically from the beginning I found it helpful to the Hmong

if I'd sketch out in simple drawing or symbols what I was teaching. Soon I adopted the practice of carrying a Bible sized sketch book everywhere I went. It served a number of purposes. It bridged the language barrier (a picture is worth a thousand words), served as a vocable notebook for new Hmong vocables, and I'd use it for sketches of the Hmong people as an ice-breaker. But its most valuable use was always to illustrate the Bible truths I was teaching. These pages I'd always tear out and give to the people for future reference.

As an evangelism tool my "sketch book religion" had another distinct advantage. Orientals are not used to the direct approach that we Americans are. Direct looks, direct questions, and direct statements border on the offensive to them. The sketch book became the neutral third party, and literally the Holy Spirit "drew" many people into His Church.

THE DAMNED BAPTISTS:

Baptists and I have a relationship like that of a mongoose and a cobra. We seem to be natural enemies.

When I discovered the Bapartists were trying to cut in on "my" Hmong our mongoose-cobra relationship did not improve; especially when they wanted to win them away to their church with free movies (on secular things), volleyball, and the old "come do your traditional dances at our church" routine.

A big plus for us came when Yer Kuenouyen asked to be baptized along with her three children. She wanted this done publically during a regular church service as she'd seen the American children baptized. I gave her special instruction on the meaning of baptism, its blessings, and her obligations as a mother of baptized children.



It was a happy day when our first four Hmong baptisms took place in May. The Hmong at last were beginning to feel a part of our congregation and the congregation a part of the Hmong.

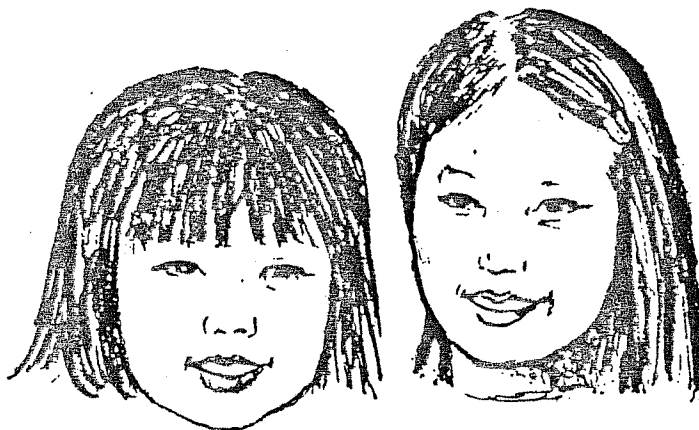
A second plus was May Kue. She and her husband Ger are very influential among the Hmong peoples, and she would not be turned toward the Baptists.

In the end, the Word, not the movies, held the greatest power!

SUNDAY SCHOOL, PRE-SCHOOL, AND VBS

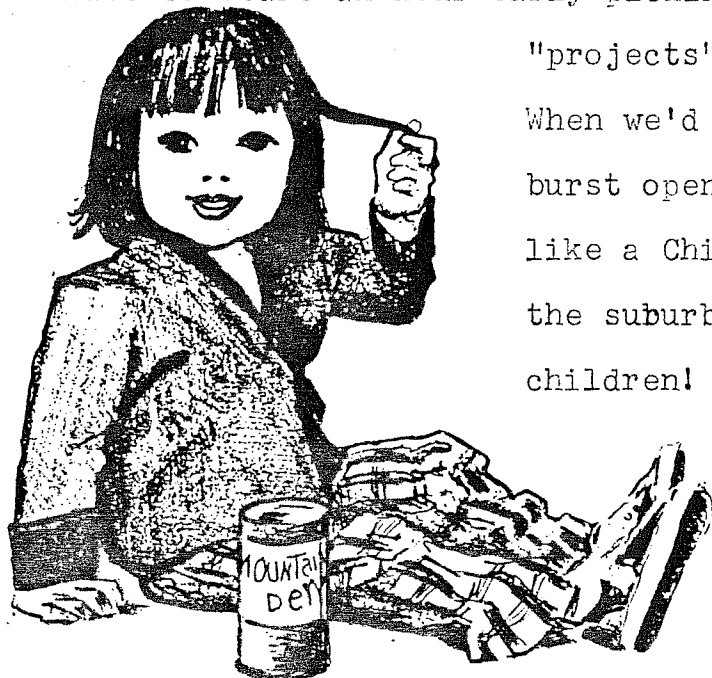
Children were easier to interest than adults. It wasn't long before we were bursting at the seams with Hmong children in Sunday School. When the end of May approached and regular Sunday School closed for the summer, pastor Wolfgramm thought it wise to continue the Hmong Bible class and continue with a special Hmong Sunday School. The Sunday

School was taught by Joan Wolfgramm. This she carried out with her



usual skill.

Joan is also head honcho for First German's Pre-School program. Among mother s, fathers, and children attended (Pre-School was planned for adult sections too). But it was at VBS that the harvest was plenty. Each morning Charlene and I would have to start an hour early picking up Among children from the



"projects" and various other parts of town.

When we'd arrive, four car doors would burst open and out would pour what looked like a Chinese fire drill. Charlene in the suburban would be carrying 18 Among children! I'd follow in the '68 Chev with

as many as I could carry. Then would come Mrs. Reich with another car jam packed. What a sight we made!

TROUBLES:

Of course everything didn't always go smoothly or work out as we planned. There were failures and set backs. And so we wouldn't get a big head and think it was because of our doing that some success was being made, God would sometimes scramble our best efforts. At other times doors opened so easily we again were reminded that we weren't the ones moving things. I told of some "successes"; now I'll tell of a failure. It wasn't the only one, but it was a big one.

"Just don't get shot, vicar," warned pastor Wolfgramm when I finished my weekly report on the Among. He had a point. It wasn't more than two weeks before that I had been shown a contract

to kill Khoua's husband for a price of \$5,000. He had done some work with the Green Bay vice squad on drug cases in the Asian section before moving to Manitowoc. One attempt had been made on his life in Green Bay, and he had moved to Manitowoc in fear. Now he was dead, shot between the eyes under circumstances that were mysterious at best.

When I saw the contract I had certain suspicions about a man named Nhia Koa Xiong. Nhia and I had now locked horns on another matter which brought forth pastor's words of warning.

I first met Nhia while making evangelism calls on Hmong living in the projects (better known as cardboard city). He was dressed in slacks, white shirt and tie—far different from the usual male Hmong dress of ill fitting St. Vincent de Paul mismatch. His black hair was slicked back (again unusual for Hmong) and his eyes were hidden by a pair of dark sun-glasses.

While most Hmong worked or went to school it seemed that Nhia's main occupation in life was strolling about the "projects" keeping an eye on the Hmong—like a snake probing through the weeds looking for an egg to suck. Though he was polite, he always gave me an uneasy feeling, so that I wondered what was really going on in his mind.

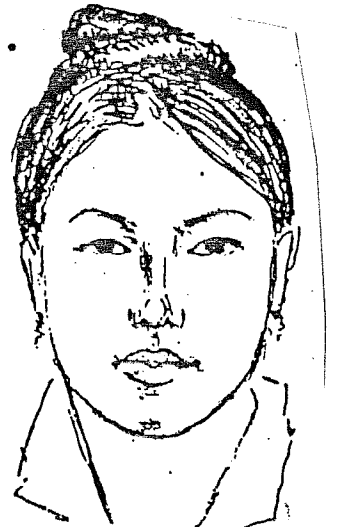


The Japanese have their Yakuza, the Vietnamese their On-Coop, the Chinese their Triads, all of which we would call the oriental equivalent of the Mafia. Nhia was such a man. He was head of the "family" in Manitowoc. No Hmong dared to cross him, and Nhia did as he chose.

All this seemed outside the sphere of my call until he did as he chose with Za. Over the past few months Za had become quite close to our family. She and Charlene were best of friends, her children and ours played together every chance they got, and she was most faithful in Bible class and church attendance. Then Nhia decided to add her to his harem.

If you think that forced polygamous "marriages" can't happen in the U.S.A., guess again. Such a marriage is done without a license, so it is recognized only by the Hmong people, and they know what's good for them so they keep their mouth shut outside their culture (Only by being as involved as I was with the Hmong was I permitted to secretly know what was going on).

Overnight Za changed. Her always happy and smiling face became a sad mask of grief. Frequently she was in tears. One day after Hmong Bible class she asked for help, but it turned out there was little I could do. When Za asked if I would go to the police with her and speak for her, Nhia took her out of circulation fast. For three



weeks she utterly disappeared. Then Nhia brought in some toughs from Milwaukee and all the Hmong got real scared. Once fear was instilled, Za reappeared, but on a very tight reign. To make a long and involved story short, (leaving out a few broken bones in

Hmong community), Za was stuck. And since I had opposed him, Nhia refused to let Za attend church again.

A NEW VICAR TO CARRY ON:

With his usual wisdom pastor Wolfgramm came up to me and said, "Vicar, you are going to be leaving us soon. We want the work with the Hmong to continue. What do you think about requesting our next vicar come early so he can get to know the Hmong before you leave?" It seemed a good idea.

Terry Reich came early as the new vicar and I set about introducing him to the Hmong. I didn't envy Terry in taking over. Hmong don't transfer allegiance at the drop of a hat as we do. It's like trying to get into Fort Knox when the doors are locked. To his great credit the mission work with the Hmong continues and continues to be fruitful.

REFLECTIONS:

Writing this account has brought back many memories, some sad, some joyful. In retrospect I can see where I made mistakes. I can also see God's hand in all the events. Truly, it was a wonderful, exciting privilege to be involved. I thank God for the opportunity, and thank Him for the Hmong who have eternal life in His free salvation. To God be the glory. To God be the credit.

His humble witness,

Loren Steele
Loren Steele
March 1986