Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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Interviewer: Eric Chau
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EC: Today is Sunday, June 1st 2014. This is Eric Châu with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project and I am interviewing my dad, Nghí Mộc Châu. We are at his home in Long Beach, California.

EC: What is your name, date of birth, and place of birth?

NMC: My name is Nghí Mộc Châu. I was born on May 17, 1956.

EC: What are your parent’s names? Can you describe them?

NMC: My father’s name was Chau Hoa Long. My mother was Long Thi Bach. My father used to work for the district government there. My mother worked in the business trade. I lived with my family from the time I was little until the day I fled the country. I lived with my parents. I helped them work in the fields and I attended school up until the day I left Vietnam. I escaped in 1979.

EC: Tell me about some of your childhood memories.

NMC: I was still living with my family during the time the war was raging. Everyday we had to seek refuge in the underground shelters to escape the bombings. It was very dangerous.

EC: What types of industry did your native region have?

NMC: I lived in the delta region, and there were not yet any factories. The people there just worked in rice fields and small-scale trade. There were no roadways. The only way to travel all around the area or to other districts was on the waterways, since there were no roads.
EC: What were your neighbors like?

NMC: In both the place where I lived and the area around my home most of the people lived by farming. By farming I mean they worked in the rice fields. The people there were very honest and kind towards everyone around.

EC: What was your occupation in Vietnam?

NMC: I didn’t have a job when I was living in Vietnam. I just worked in the fields and helped my parents around the house and went to school.

EC: Describe your schooling in Vietnam. What level of education did you have? What were your teachers and peers like?

NMC: I finished high school in Vietnam. There were around 30 students in my class and we loved each other very much and we respected our teachers. I stopped going to school after completing high school.

EC: What was your experience on the farm like?

NMC: When I was little I worked in the rice fields although I didn’t know what to do, but I was still able to help my parents by tilling or harvesting the rice and I knew how to do many farming chores.

EC: Did the other members of your family all do chores like you did?

NMC: I was the main one. I helped out a lot more than my younger siblings since they were still little, while my older brother was in the army and didn’t live at home so I was the primary one who helped my parents work in the fields.

EC: At what age could men enter the army?

NMC: During the war in Vietnam it was mandatory for everyone to join the military at the age of 18. In 1975 I was barely old enough but it was not yet my month. When my time came in 1975
the Republic of Vietnam no longer existed, even though I was old enough by April of 1975, as I said before I was born in May of 1956. That was when I reached 18, but I didn’t join the military because I was no longer able to do so, since the country was no more by April 1975.

EC: How were your grandparents like?

NMC: My father, according to what he told me, said that my great-grandfather came over to Vietnam from China. My father, and his father before him, knew how to speak Chinese. My father studied it in school; therefore, he could speak Chinese much better than my other uncles who didn’t study Chinese. My father had 10 siblings altogether and nowadays there are still… (unintelligible) who passed away while there are some still living both in Vietnam and over here. I have 2 uncles who are living here.

EC: Where was your dad born? What did he do?

NMC: My father was born in Vietnam, yet both of my parents have now passed away this year, so they are no longer alive.

EC: What do you know about your family name, Chau?

NMC: As far as I know “Chau” is a Chinese surname, and as I had mentioned, my great-grandfather came over to Vietnam from China so my last name is Chau even though I don’t speak Chinese.

EC: Did you know how to speak Chinese when you were little?

NMC: No. I didn’t go to a Chinese school so I can’t speak Chinese. I only attended Vietnamese school. I can only speak Vietnamese, but not Chinese.

EC: How much education has your family had?

NMC: Everyone in my family went to school. My siblings and I all graduated from high school. That’s because there was no university there, just high school. The district where we lived during
the war only offered schooling up to the ninth grade. So we were only able to attend school until
the ninth grade.

EC: How did you and mom meet in America?

NMC: I met my wife at the house of an acquaintance of mine. She was living in Canada and
came down to visit a friend, so that’s how I met my wife and I married her in 1982.

EC: Do you have children? How many?

NMC: I have 3 children, 2 daughters and a son who is Eric, of course.

EC: Do you talk to them about your history?

NMC: Yes. I often tell them about my life in Vietnam and about coming over here.

EC: In Vietnam, or in the U.S., did your family ever organize any reunions? When? And where?

NMC: In Vietnam as well as in the U.S. we organize a get-together every year for all our
relatives over here to reunite such as during a death-anniversary ceremony to pray for our
ancestors where we invite everyone to come to the house to gather before and after the ceremony.
Usually everything concludes after only about 4 or 5 hours.

EC: How does your family celebrate traditional holidays?

NMC: Here we have several big holidays such as Tet (Lunar New Year). During our Vietnamese
Tet we pray to our forefathers. Making offerings to our grandparents, and burning incense sticks
on the altar, are a few of the main holiday rituals.

EC: Is there any difference between Tet in the United States and Tet in Vietnam?

NMC: Yes there are many differences. During Tet here in the U.S. there’s a festival. After
praying at our family altar we then have the festival. While in Vietnam there is no festival, we
just go from house to house wishing each other a happy new year, especially to visit our relatives,
and we play cards together with our family. It’s a lot of fun. Well-wishes for Tet, wearing new
clothes, putting on new clothes, wishing our elders longevity, and everywhere we go we drink and celebrate. We don’t have those things over here. All we have is going to the festival and even though we still go out to share Tet well-wishes it’s not as much fun as in Vietnam.

EC: Do you and your family follow any religion?
NMC: Just like my family from my great-grandfather down to my generation- we simply worship our ancestors. Every year we make offerings during their death anniversaries and during Tet. We also pray to Buddha although we are not as devout as the people who go to the temples. In my case I only go to the temple once a year. That is on the Buddha’s birthday and Tet. I only go to the temple on those days. Besides that I just pray before the ancestral altar in my home.

EC: Why don’t you go to the temple more often?
NMC: I want to go more often but my life over here is too hectic, so I can only go during the major holidays, but not the minor ones.

EC: Does your family have any relics or keepsakes? Such as pictures, statues, jewelry? Why are these items valuable to you? What’s the history behind them?
NMC: My family has a few mementos like the family journal that my uncle made, in which he wrote about all our important ancestors up to my generation (including facts) like where my ancestors came from, how my paternal grandfather lived growing up in Vietnam and how many children. In short all the Chau family ancestors up to present time are clearly recorded. Each household of the Chau family line recorded how many children and educational achievements, for example my family has 3 children, which is recorded in one of the volumes. So in the future when my 3 children return or my descendants come searching they will have these books to read and will understand where they come from because it clearly describes that in the book. From
my great-grandfather’s life to that of my grandfather, father, and then me and my children, it’s all clearly stated.

EC: Do you have any photo albums, scrapbooks, or home movies of family?

NMC: My uncle put together a book called ‘Chau Gia Toc’ (the Chau family records), recounting all the life-stories of my ancestors who came over from Laos down to me, and which describes clearly how many uncles and aunts, and how many children all the way to my generation. In this book one can read and learn all about my family and the Chau family line and my uncle made an extra volume to record the death of any Chau family member in the future so that the information will be concentrated in one place. Currently, all the graves in Vietnam belonging to the Chau family from the time of my great-grandfather until now, which number thirteen or so, are still over in Vietnam. All these gravesites are detailed in the book. These books have been archived so that later on our children and grandchildren will know about their roots and who their ancestors were. I still have this book.

EC: OK. Now I want to talk about the war. How did the war in Vietnam affect you and your community?

NMC: I think our community was greatly impacted by the war during that time. That’s because during that war there were many soldiers from both sides whose lives were sacrificed, and other losses. Meanwhile many people still harbor some ill will in their lives. It’s impossible to forget. That’s what I think, but I hope that in the future they will forget about all the death and suffering their families experienced.

EC: During the war, where did you live? What other places did you move to?
NMC: During the Vietnam war, when I was little, I still lived with my family. I lived with my parents and could not travel far. I just stayed in the local area and went to school there. I didn’t go anywhere far from home.

EC: What was your occupation during the war?

NMC: I said that during the war, I was very young. I was not yet 18 years old and I was going to school. I went to school and helped my parents work in the fields, just school and farming. I didn’t do any other work.

EC: Did you have any contact with American soldiers? What did you think about them?

NMC: I saw American soldiers who went over to Vietnam as advisors staying in the district I was in…(unintelligible) and I felt that the Americans went over there to help the Vietnamese soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam. I had a good opinion of them. I had no bad thoughts about Americans in that war.

EC: Were you ever arrested or held in prison by the enemy?

NMC: I myself wasn’t arrested but I had 3 or 4 uncles who after 75 were all arrested by the communists and imprisoned. Later on 2 of them came over here and now live close to me. I think that if people weren’t put in prisons back then than the country of Vietnam wouldn’t be like it is nowadays.

EC: How did you rebuild your life after the war? Why did you have to leave your country? How did you feel?

NMC: After the war I fled Vietnam in 1979. I stayed in Malaysia for 2 years as a refugee and was eventually allowed to come over to the United States so I feel very content.

EC: How did you get to Malaysia?
NMC: I left Vietnam in 1979. At that time I left on a boat with many people on board. I was lucky and arrived in Malaysia. There were many other boats traveling alongside ours. I found out that there were many people who were not as lucky as me who never landed. Because when I got to Malaysia I was… the Malaysian government at that time was no longer accepting people and they… they pulled me out to international waters (crying). To sum it up briefly, I did arrive in the United States. I was happy to have realized my dream. I’m sorry… I can’t say much.

EC: Why did you leave your homeland to come to America?

NMC: Because after 75 I lived in Vietnam until 79. During those 4 years of my life I felt like things couldn’t get any worse. Before 1975 I was still little but I already understood the meaning of life and liberty. So by 1979, I felt like I couldn’t live like that and found a way to escape. Then I went to Malaysia. I lived in Malaysia for 2 long years. But in the end I made it over here to America. So to repeat myself, I fulfilled the wish I had which was to come here to the USA.

EC: Did you bring any personal mementos over with you?

NMC: Before I left Vietnam I took along a few items like a small knife that my grandmother gave to me. But as soon as we left territorial waters, we were robbed by the Thais. After that I didn’t have anything left, just the clothes on my body when I got to Malaysia. I had nothing left.

EC: Did you and your family live in a refugee camp?

NMC: At that time I went all by myself. There was only me. I had to live in a Malaysian refugee camp for close to 2 years. That’s because I didn’t have priority status to get accepted by the American delegation. I didn’t have any relatives here so that’s why I had to wait so long. But in the end I was extremely happy because I was able to come over, and that was what I wanted.

EC: Why did you go to Malaysia alone?
NMC: Because we couldn’t all go. There was no way my family could go. So I went alone. That was the one way I was able to go. Actually I was incapable of arranging for my entire family to go together. At the time I simply fled. I left without anyone in my family knowing.

EC: Who stayed behind?

NMC: My parents as well as your aunts and uncles all stayed behind. I was the only one who fled the country.

EC: In Vietnam was anyone arrested and sent to a re-education camp?

NMC: Yes. My uncles were all imprisoned. One for 5 years, another 7 years, and another for 10 years; these days two of my uncles live in the United States and were sponsored by the American government. After April 30, 1975 there were very many people, including my uncles, father, and brother.

EC: What was life as a refugee like?

NMC: Living in a refugee camp was well…it was the same for me as with everyone else—extremely miserable. However, thanks to the high commission of the United Nations we are able to be here today, they helped us even though our life was miserable, yet for the time being they kept us alive while waiting to be resettled in a third country. I am very thankful to the United Nations high commission and the Malaysian government for allowing us to temporarily stay there before coming to the United States.

EC: How were you able to come to the U.S. from Malaysia?

NMC: I didn’t have relatives here so I didn’t have first priority in getting accepted to come into the United States. However, I was determined to wait until I could go to the United States. I didn’t go to any other country, including Canada which were easier to get accepted to, and didn’t impose as many conditions as the U.S., but I decided to wait. I waited until the American
government finally accepted us. Because I wanted to live in the United States and sure enough this is where I came.

EC: Where was the first place you lived? What did you do to earn a living? Did your family live in one place after coming here or did you move around to many locations?

NMC: When I first arrived in the United States, I was sponsored by a relative of a friend who was living here in the United States. The year was 1981 and I was living in Long Beach. I’ve lived in Long Beach ever since. During the period of time after I had just come over I received financial assistance from the government for medical and living costs. If I’m not mistaken it was $300 a month plus medical for 18 months. During those 18 months, we had to study English as well as learn a trade in order to live on our own when the 18 months were over. So after exactly 18 months, I had to live on my own and I was able to improve my life in this country. I’ve lived in Long Beach to this day, I haven’t live anywhere besides Long Beach.

EC: How were you able to establish a career in Southern California?

NMC: I came to Southern California with my sponsor. My sponsor was a relative of a friend of mine in Long Beach. I have lived in Long Beach until today.

EC: How do you feel now about your decision to come live in the United States?

NMC: I feel that my decision to wait until I could resettle in the United States was the right thing to do because I was, I had to live in the refugee camp for 2 long years waiting for the day I could come to the United States. I was living in a refugee camp for 2 years. I don’t feel like it was a waste of time since my life now is exactly what I had wished for.

EC: What do you feel was the hardest part of starting a new life?

NMC: The hardest thing for me when I first arrived in the United States was the language problem. The language was the hardest part. I was compelled to learn English, so I studied the
language and learn my trade at the same time. After 18 months in school my life became more stable.

EC: Did anybody help you to buy your house in the United States?

NMC: When I came here after 18 months, I went to work and learned a trade, which was welding. I worked and was able to buy a house, and I’ve already paid off the mortgage on it.

EC: How were you able to find a job?

NMC: I already said that I learned a trade and then looked for a job. I’ve been working ever since.

EC: Have you become an American citizen yet? Why?

NMC: I am an American citizen now and I like being a citizen of this country.

EC: Could you talk a little bit about your experience in gaining American citizenship?

NMC: For my American citizenship class, I think I needed to study listening and speaking in English. That was my experience. The most important thing was that I had to study, I had to know how to speak well enough to get by. So that’s what I learned.

EC: Do you go out to vote?

NMC: Yes. I go to vote every year.

EC: Over here do you call yourself American, Vietnamese, or Vietnamese-American?

NMC: I’m a Vietnamese-American so I always call myself a Vietnamese-American.

EC: Do you keep in contact with your family or relatives in Vietnam? If so, could you please tell me who they are? How you been back to Vietnam to visit them yet? What was your experience during your visit?

NMC: I still keep in touch. I have very many relatives living in Vietnam- uncles, aunts, and brothers and sisters, who I often call by phone to say hello. I have returned to Vietnam several
times now and I see that Vietnam is changing a lot. When I was in Vietnam, I saw that things might be changing or improving, but only in the cities or markets, while in the countryside like where I was from nothing had changed much from the olden days. The houses and people were no different. In the olden days people also lived ragged and difficult lives, and those were the things I saw.

EC: Could you tell me which songs or images cause you to remember Vietnam?

NMC: I miss Vietnam whenever I hear songs like the flag-raising anthem of Vietnam before ‘75. I can never forget.

EC: Do you often go down to Little Saigon?

NMC: Yes, I do so almost every week.

EC: What do you do there?

NMC: Sometimes I pass through while other times I stop off in Little Saigon to buy food during the week or whenever I have the chance to go down there.

EC: What are your thoughts about Little Saigon?

NMC: I think that Little Saigon helps Vietnamese people to remember Vietnam. When you go there you feel that you are Vietnamese, and no longer an American because of the activities, Vietnamese language, and businesses located there. It is a community.

EC: How you seen any changes in Little Saigon?

NMC: There have been many changes. When I first arrived in 1981, I went over to Little Saigon. At that time the right hand side of Magnolia Street near Bolsa Avenue was still open land. Little Saigon is a lot different now. Back then there was no Phuoc Loc Tho (Asian Garden Mall), just one or two Vietnamese markets. It wasn’t as built up like it is now. Streets like Brookhurst and Magnolia are completely different now than the way they were when I first came to the United
States. There are more Vietnamese people now than when I first arrived. Now you see so many of them when you go out there.

EC: How do you get news? Is it in English or in Vietnamese?

NMC: These days I do have some free time. I watch the news on Vietnamese television stations as well as on the American channels. Since I can also understand American speech somewhat, I watch TV in both languages.

EC: Have you ever encountered racism in America?

NMC: I have never met anyone who discriminated against me either at work or out in society. That’s something that I’ve never encountered.

EC: How has the Vietnamese community changed in America?

NMC: I really believe that Vietnamese-Americans, especially children like my own, should all learn Vietnamese because I want them to be Vietnamese people who can speak Vietnamese. Living in the United States, of course they must speak English, but when they return home I would like them to speak Vietnamese so that they will be able to speak more languages. It’s a benefit to them.

EC: Do you think that the Vietnamese community in America is more traditional than the Vietnamese in Vietnam are?

NMC: That I don’t know about, but I do know the Vietnamese living over here maintain certain traditions like wearing Vietnamese ao dai dresses on Vietnamese holidays such as the Mid-Autumn Festival (Tet Trung Thu) or the Lunar New Year (Tet). Everyone here tries to preserve Vietnamese traditions. In regards to Vietnam I haven’t had the opportunity to go back during Tet, neither during Tet nor any other holiday. I’m not in Vietnam, so I don’t know how it is.

EC: Are Republican or Democrat? And why?
NMC: I’m Republican. I’ve followed the Republican Party for about 15 years. That’s because I think the Republican Party takes a tough stance on communists. But lately it seems to me that the Republican Party has done some things, which aren’t good for the people like spending too much money (laughs). I still belong to the Republican Party even though I might end up changing parties in the future, but I still don’t know if I’ll change over or not.

EC: What do you think is the difference between the first generation and the second generation?

NMC: I think Vietnamese and American customs are completely different. In Vietnam they often discipline their children by hitting or yelling. While in the United States we cannot do those things. You cannot hit. Those are two different ways of teaching children. In school it’s the same way. In both cases it’s different in Vietnam, but we must follow the ways of the place where we live. I feel that if we live here than we must follow the laws over here. We shouldn’t apply Vietnamese methods by which to teach our children over here in the U.S., in any case the children here aren’t all that spoiled. When I adapt them to my way of living and way of teaching the children in my family I think it’s a good thing. We should hold on to whatever aspects of Vietnamese culture that we can, however some customs may not be applicable or have a place in this country.

EC: Can you tell me about the protests in Little Saigon that happened in 1999?

NMC: Yeah. I remember it very clearly. At that time a store owner put up a flag, his name was Mr. Tran Truong, he displayed a Vietnamese communist flag and a mortar helmet, and many of my fellow countrymen went there and protested for many days, including myself. I did so because I felt that those of us who came over didn’t want to see those images of Ho Chi Minh and the flags, everyone was already so afraid after having seen such images of death over there that when they came over here they didn’t want to have to see them again, they just wanted to
live happily. Now when I look back on those things, it reminds me of what we lost and how we lived under that flag. Nobody can accept that flag. As soon as they saw it they became upset and went down to protest. I did so also, since I share their point of view. I left that country therefore I didn’t want to see those things again in this country. They wouldn’t dare do that back in that country, they don’t even have that right. Here it is a free country, it’s different from living where there is no freedom.

EC: Why did you bring me, Cindy, and Ann to the protests?

NMC: (smiles) Since you remember seeing those images, and are bringing it up again, I’d like to say some more. At that time I brought you three young children along, you were only in 4th grade and didn’t yet know anything about it. But I hoped that later on you would understand that I left Vietnam because I didn’t want to live there during the time. So I left even though I knew it would be a very dangerous journey. Because when one escapes by sea, that person is no longer thinking about whether or not they will live. But I still went. So now that I have a family with children, I will still tell you so you know why I left, and why I took you to the protests, because that is my duty. However my children perceive things in the future than that is their right. That’s just the way I feel. And even now, when I go back to Vietnam, it is because I still have relatives there so I’ll return every now and then, but I can never stay in Vietnam to live.

EC: OK. Are there any other stories you would like to share?

NMC: Yes. I would like to take this opportunity to talk some more about my life. I am thankful to the United States for providing me with the life I have today. I have a happy family, my 3 children have all gone to college, that is one of my joys. Currently my life is like that of any other family, I go to work but I feel free, and have freedom. That freedom is important. This was the only country that could have helped me fulfill my wish before I left Vietnam. I would like to
thank this country for giving me a happy family life and allowing my children to become decent people, that will bring me happiness for the rest of my life. Thank you very much. (smiles)

EC: Thank you!