Vietnamese American Oral History Project UC Irvine

Narrator: TAM VAN MONG
Interviewer: Jennifer Mong
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JM: This is Jennifer Mong with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine. Today is Sunday April 26, 2015. I will be interviewing Mr. Tam Van Mong in his home in Garden Grove, California. So what is your name?

TVM: My name is Tam. Last name M - o - n - g.

JM: Mong?

TVM: Yes.

JM: Where were you born?

TVM: I was born in Vietnam.

JM: What city?

TVM: Ha Tien.

JM: What is your date of birth?

TVM: I was born on March 30, 1962.

JM: What is the origin of your last name?

TVM: Uh- Mong. M-o-n-g.

JM: Is it Chinese?

TVM: Ah, well, my father and my great great grandfather is Chinese.

JM: Oh do you identify yourself as Chinese?

TVM: No, I’m not.

JM: Ok. Can you describe your hometown for me?
TVM: Uh, I live in. I born in Ha Tien, Vietnam. My hometown is too small, but mostly for the travel, uh they have the beautiful place with the beach and the beautiful rice fields. I love it. It’s my hometown.

JM: Tell me some of your childhood memories.

TVM: Uh, the most is when I’m in the third grade, one of the day, after the big rain, after I get off from the school with my friend and I catch the fish on the side of the street. So I get all the dirty with my white shirt and my black short at that time. So it make me fun, but when I get home, my mom yell at me and I had to release the fish. So that is the most memory of when I were young.

JM: At home how did you celebrate Tet?

TVM: The home celebrate? What celebrate is it?

JM: At home. In your house. With your family.

TVM: Usually, it celebrate for the new year. Chinese New Year and the most is uh for uh it it, at that time, in my town, it not too many celebrate birthday or something, so we just lived through with that. So I think the new year is the most important for the celebrate.

JM: Did you have a lot of food?

TVM: Uh -

JM: Fireworks?

TVM: Uhh….At that time, yeah the food. I think that the food is okay. You mean the fireworks in the new year? Yeah I have fireworks in new year too.

JM: Ok. What jobs have you had in Vietnam?

TVM: No, that were when I were young. I were study only, so I just help my family. They just do the, they do some of the, they do the restaurant so I used to help them and I used to go to
school in the afternoon I helped them in the morning. Then I go to morning class then I help
them in the afternoon.

JM: What kind of restaurant was it?

TVM: That, they serve the rice noodles.

JM: Oh.

TVM: Yeah.

JM: Do you have any special stories that your family members have told you in the past?

TVM: Oh yeah. Um. When -- In the ‘78, when the time I- I almost they almost give to a ---boat?

In Vietnam, they tell me, you have to leave they don’t want it. My father and my mom, they
don’t want me to be in the communist army. That one, when I was almost 15, they already
prepare for me to escape the Vietnam and go to the camp.

JM: What occupations did your parents have?

TVM: Uh- just the- they just do they uh- little restaurant for the living. To support the family.

JM: What kind of traditions do you maintain for your ancestors?


JM: How did the Vietnam War affect your community?

TVM: Hm, that a lot. That a lot affect. When - I remember when I were the fourth grade. When I
were fourth grade, when I were playing on the street with all my friends, but the rocket from the
other side, they start to rocket to my town. During that time I play outside, away from my house,
about 400 feet, but uh when I live with the war, I-I know the sound of the rockets started then all
of my friends and me to lay down until the rocket blow up, hit the ground then blow up, and then
we start to run. Each one don’t have to say nothing, and we just run home for safe. And well that
the Vietnam War, it a lot. Scary. Sometime in the night time, when all the family were sleeping,
the other side rocket the communist, start to put the rocket, and then all my parents have to wake me up and go slide under the bed in the middle of the house.

JM: Ok. How did the Vietnam War affect your family?

TVM: Hm, it not affect to my family, because my family is uh- my older brother he not joining the army because he’s a handicap. And then, my second brother he not join the army also so he just uh he afraid to go to the army so it not affect at all. My family were the business family. Like normal the- all the family they help. So the war did not affect, but the war affect around the neighborhood. So some the neighborhood they had their parent or their brother go to the war and then they get killed in the war.

JM: Did the war affect your family’s restaurant?

TVM: Well, it not really because sometime they put the, the hit the rocket and then all the people have to get out the town in the morning. So that day, we don’t make the money and all the rice noodles have to destroy for the next day. For the business next day.

JM: How were you involved in the war?

TVM: I was not in the war at that time because at that time I were like very young. Like 8, 10, or 12.

JM: Were you ever held by enemy forces or were any family members held by enemy forces during the Vietnam War?

TVM: No. Not at all.

JM: Do you have any disabilities, or does your family have any disabilities resulting from the war?

TVM: No.

JM: Where were you during the last days of the war?
TVM: The last day of the war, you mean April 30, 1975?

JM: Yes.

TVM: Oh that day make me- on that day it - When I were 13 years old it was the very first day, in about 7am, it make me, it make my life, I feel my life is terrible when I see the communist flag go to my town. And a lot of the jungle holding the flag and go on the street. At that time, when I were 13, I know my life will be changed. And that’s all. I was confused all day long to the next day. So the people, some people happy, some people is scary, and some people is worried. But we don’t know what worry is it. At that time, something and later on about 10am, I knew it, I had another relative go to the other side the communist side. They come out and another one, I surprise then later. About three or four months later I asked my brother, “Who is that? Who that people?” Then at that time, my brother told me, “Oh that is the son of my uncle. So that is the son of my brother of my father. So in my life, thirteen years, so I know it I have another, my relative over there. But, when I see him, well, I’m not really happy. But the happy thing is that he is still alive. I’m happy for him. But on the first day, May in 1975, it make my life something, something is horrible. I can’t believe it. I know my life will be changing in the future, but I don’t know what happen going on.

JM: Did your parents tell you anything, their feelings about the Fall of Saigon?

TVM: No. My parents didn’t say nothing. My parents always sacred because in Vietnam at that time, the people say something against the government, they may get in trouble. So that’s why, my father always kept silence and don’t say nothing. I guess later on, I found out maybe because he has the son of brother go to the communist side that’s why he kept silence as long as he can. So in thirteen years, in May 1st 1975, that’s when I know more relatives for me. The guy, he showed up. So my parents, not talk too much about the war or the army or something.
JM: How about your mom?

TVM: My mom is the same thing. In Vietnam at that time, my mom is, she doesn’t say much to care for the family, because the father always took control. So he told my mom what to do, that’s all. But, I remember my mom is one thing, before 1975 it make me never forget in my life. One day, I help my parent in the morning. The principal of the school of the Chinese school come to tell my brother, he the handicap, he stay home. He come over and tell my brother that I’m the one that is picking or doing something to his school, but I’m not. So when I helped my parent to clean up the restaurant, then we put something home. At that time my dad, he got the bicycle and got home first. He got home first so my brother tell him about what the situation I got the principal of the Chinese school come over to tell him that and he told my dad. Guess what. When I got home, I carry things in and then he slapped me. Twice. Real hard. Real hard. So I have to stand thirty minutes...Well, emotions.

JM: What did the Chinese principal say?

TVM: Oh, he said I’m at his school and do things bad. But I’m not and he slapped me. I have to stand like thirty minutes so I come back. I shaking all about thirty minutes. So I said I have to make clear this situation. I’m not doing it. But I tell my dad, he don’t believe me. After that, I go to school and my mom is stand up. The principal come over and to apologize for that And my mom keep yelling. My mom always side of me. On my side. That’s the most I remember. My mom.

JM: So did you make the decision to leave Vietnam or parents push you to leave Vietnam?

TVM: Oh my parents, push me to leave Vietnam because my parents don’t want me like my brother be in army. So they prepare when I was 15. At that time when I was 15, or 14 we had to
make the ID. Like the ID. So when I had to make the ID, and my mom and dad already prepare for me to leave. To give me to the boat to leave.

JM: What process was it for you to make the ID? Was it a long process?

TVM: No, just fill out a few papers and just take the picture and that’s all.

JM: Did you leave with other family members?

TVM: What you mean?

JM: Did you leave with other family members?

TVM: At that time?

JM: Yes.

TVM: No at that time I just live with my family.

JM: Did you leave by boat with your family members?

TVM: Oh, no, when I leave in around August or September of 1978. I leave by myself only.

JM: So what was it like leaving your home? And your country? What were your feelings?

TVM: That place with the family. About that time, when I were sixteen year old. When I were young. That with the family, Was wonderful. I don’t have to worry about the food or the living at all or anything at all. Just go to school, eat, and play.

JM: Like, when you finally left on the boat, how did you feel?

TVM: Oh when I left in the boat to escape?

JM: Yes, did you go with any family members?

TVM: No, only by myself at that time.

JM: Ok.

TVM: When I were sixteen I don’t know, I don’t know what I’m doing for. And how it’s dangerous for about it.
JM: How did you know where to go?

TVM: They just let me go and then some of that in 1978, some people already live here in the United States, they send the letter back to the country where they tell their family oh they will be living over here back to go to back to school. So that’s why my parent told me, “Oh you have to leave” and then I leave later on. Little part by little part. After I leaving, some of my family members leaving but they not successful. They always get caught by the government there.

JM: What possessions did you bring with you?

TVM: Well, at that time, I cannot bring too many things because we just leave it, as much as notified, nobody can know what you do. If you do something, like you carry this and that, they will spot you, “Oh you want to escape.” Because my age, is almost go to the army you know? At that time. Anybody’s life is nervous, scary. They don’t know what the future is going on. They may take all your family put in the mountain, take all your house, and everything. It, that’s why I think most people want to escape Vietnam at that time.

JM: Did you bring a lot of clothes?

TVM: Oh

JM: Pictures?

TVM: No, I just wear - When I left I just wear one jeans, one t-shirt, and one shirt. That was all.

JM: No money with you?

TVM: Oh yes, some jewelry when I wear on that. One necklace, one watch, one ring.

JM: What happened to the family members that weren’t so successful at escaping?

TVM: They always get in trouble when they just started. Then they will get caught. All my brothers and sister.

JM: Were they sent back home?
TVM: Yeah, some get caught they get stuck in the prison, like a couple of months. And some get back home after that night. It not go through. A lot happen to my family after that. After I leave, my sister, my older sister left also. She not success. When they find out they know the boat will be escape and then my sister is so scared to get escape and go to the jail. So she just suicide and jumped in the water. And then she died at that night. When I get to the refugee camp about six months later, I heard that bad news for my sister. So, that’s very hard, that’s very hard time when I left when I jumped into the boat. And I go - get to the Thailand. A lot of things changed my life. And I know a lot more of that on the way, it’s dangerous. I have four or five time pirate get to my boat. The first time the pirate get to my boat, they get all my money. My jewelry. Like I have necklace, watch, ring. The most, I still want to get back. But I don’t know where. That was the souvenir from my mom to give to me. The two yellow fish of my necklace. Still until now I want to get it back but I don’t know where. They get them all like that. That one. On the way to get to the camp, there, too many things happen on my boat. I remember the last time the pirate jumped to my boat, they get all the men in one side to their boat. And all the ladies and girls, on my own boat. So they moved all the men and the boys to their boat. And then with one man with a gun, always point to all the men there. They told the men to take all the clothes out. They just left underwear for every boy and men. Sit in the sun from 6:30 in the morning - I guess, that’s when the sun just started coming up. And I guess about four hours, they just let us sit in the sun without shirt and only underwear on the boat. And I guess that was for four hours. Everyone get thirsty but they scared, don’t wanna tell them to give them water to drink, because middle of the ocean. They took them to the small island. They go on a small island. They checked all the money, get all the money, and jewelry, and gold, they take them all in. And they give like fifty gallon of water for them and they just left the boat and they go. This is lucky. If they go to their
boat or throw the boat, we all dead. We are lucky. And then they show the way go into the camp. When we go into the camp, that is another story. It was a big time for me where I go to live with?

JM: Where was your camp?

TVM: In Leam Sing Refugee Camp. In Leam Sing - Chantibury, Thailand. The first day, okay it were the escape the communist, it were a success already. Now the second one I get off from the boat and where am I going to sleep, where am I going to live? Lucky I have my friend, he left before me with the same town and he bring me to his house, you know to his little camp there to live with him. And then, there the funny time. Where we have to split it. To who is cooking today and the next day and anybody do one time a day. The first day was a funny time. I never forget to. The first time I was cooking and then I cooking, it’s funny.

JM: Why was it funny?

TVM: Huh? I cook the rice, it like, half - half it not cooked, half it really cooked, half it really burnt. Three steps like that. Because I really don’t know how to cook. I just boil it and I just see them. And I fry the fish, oh my gosh, it were like, terrible. When they fry the fish, the whole fish right? But I don’t know how to fry it. I put the oil, put fire there, firewood in there, but I kept turning the fish. It got hot. The bone go on one side, all the fish meat go on one side. And I take it out to eat. All the friends are laughing. They’re like, “Oh no, no more. You no more go into the kitchen, you do just get the water only. Just bring the water from the fountain. Every day we get the water from the fountain. A lot of fun in the camp. I lived fourteen months in the camp and -

JM: How many people were in your camp?

TVM: At that time, like about, first when I came, four hundred people only. But day after day, they go up to like almost fifteen hundred people in the camp, small camp. That too much crowded there. And too much crowded and that fun. I really remember my family. When the first
few months is the Chinese New Year there. I really cried. I really cried. I missed my family. The very first year away from home. By myself. I remember all my family members. And then I have to go to there. I go to school to learn English. Then I help the people, to build the house, to build the temple, to build the church. Go up to the mountain. Chop the bamboo tree and carry down to the camp. All my friends always help the people. All my friends didn’t have family members. Only single at that time. And we were young and healthy. We help the old people, you know they don’t have the son or daughter with them. They just too old people, like forty or fifty they can’t do that, but we build the house for them. We build the church, we build the temple, it more fun.

JM: Did you get paid?

TVM: No. We don’t get paid at all. We just get there to help them because we helped them. First, we do that, it just help right? And we just got the soda to drink. Ahhh, that’s good soda over there. We don’t have the money. No family members support. We don’t have money at all. We like to drink soda, but we don’t have money at all to buy it. Some of the friends do bad things. They took the rice to sell to make the money, sell for the Thailand store in the camp. But I see that and I tell them, “No, can’t do that”. I rather hungry, but I can’t do that. Some of the friends they don’t understand me, but later on, a couple of weeks later they go through and they talk to me back at that time. I remember. I don’t know when. That when I were young like ‘78 is uh sixteen years old at that time. Yeah. I were sixteen that time.

JM: Did the camp provide you with enough food and water?

TVM: Oh, the food provide and the water and the rice, but the food is not enough for the young man and the young boy to eat. Because they have two chicken about that much.

JM: About a handful?
TVM: Yeah, for two days only. And one, two fish for a week.

JM: About six inches of fish?

TVM: Yeah. But rice. We have a lot of rice to eat. So that’s why. So - Then I work in the camp for, you know, every Tuesday and Thursday, they have the supply from outside, the meat come in and I’m just there to call the name of the family like that. Some of the family members have the money so they don’t eat that. So then if they don’t eat that. I tell them to leave to the side. Later on, at the end of the day, I took it home for them to make it the food for the rest of the week. That’s what we living in the camp. Very tough, but we don’t have the money but we live through that for fourteen months in the camp. Amazing, I don’t know. Amazing.

JM: So did you find family through these strangers you met at the camp? Were they family to you?

TVM: Yeah, they were family to me because we all lived in the same town and we all missed it. It’s not the same school in the same town, but we lived there and we see each other and we love each other we worry each other.

JM: You said you were learning English, who were teaching English?

TVM: Hmmm, one of the American pastor. The Seventh Day Adventist Pastor. Uh, he come there every Tuesday and Thursday. He bring the mail from the outside. Then he have the class for the people in the camp.

JM: How were the classes divided? By age? Or by groups?

TVM: It’s not age or group, nothing, just anybody get in there to learn. The most at the time, they don’t learn English in Vietnam. Some of the people if they are high education, they know it, they learn English and French. So that’s better for them. But the most people, they don’t have the English in Vietnam. So that’s why they come in the camp, they have to learn English for the
future. They will go and like US, Canada, or France. Whatever. They have to learn the second language.

JM: How would news travel in and out of the camp? Through letters? Word of mouth?

TVM: How do I travel around the camp?

JM: How do you get information from Vietnam or other family members? How did other people get information?

TVM: Oh, after when I get to camp, I get the first letter from my family about six months later. Six months later I get the letter. Sent from my family members. But at that time, we just know it, the new people come to the camp and they ask, “Hey how’s my family doing and how are people living there?” At that time, the letter takes too long. The government will control that letter. Sometimes they don’t give the letter to your family. They just throw it away. And that’s about it. I guess that’s how I know about my family.

JM: While at the camp, how did you cope with your feelings?

TVM: Sometime in the middle of the night, I just sit with them, singing and but I worry about when I will go to the United States. When I decided to go to the United States. And month after month I am waiting and waiting til the government approved. After I get approved, more than a year I get approved. Because I don’t have any relatives here and my age is sixteen years old, it’s a minor. Then the government had to take care a lot. When I get here, I was almost eighteen years old in 1980.

JM: Where did you land? What part of the US did you land?

TVM: First I come to the US is from LAX.

JM: So they flew you over?
TVM: Oh, yeah. So first I get to the LAX, I stopped. So I left the camp by the bus. From Bangkok, I flew to Japan. Korea. Stopped in Korea. Really cold. Funny, no one wanted to get out from the plane to get to the bus. No one wanted to get out of the plane. It was really cold. And I wear only just very thin jacket. What the government give to them. One jacket. One sweater. To wear it to keep you warm because it’s too cold. At that time, it was the winter time. Because Thailand is very hot. But this side is very cold.

JM: So you were in Korea, then you went to LAX?

TVM: Yeah. The last part I think is Korea. I stopped in Japan also.

JM: Did the government fund all of that? Was it a program?

TVM: Yeah, that program but later on when I go to work, study, and go to work, but I have to pay them back. Pay back the money for the plane.

JM: Once you were in California?

TVM: Yeah,

JM: You had to pay back--?

TVM: I had to pay back like, at that time, like $350 for the trip. From Thailand to LAX.

JM: Do you remember what the program was called? What kind of grant they gave you? Or loan?

TVM: Mmm, long time. I forget that program. But that the government program.

JM: The US government?

TVM: Yeah. It was the US Government program. So they just give you that. And when you get the job, everything, and they request you to pay it back.

JM: How long did it take you to pay it back?
TVM: Well, it’s about three years. Three years. Because I come here, I collect the assistance program. Welfare Assistance Program for a couple of months only. And the people just asking me, “What you think? You want to go to school or work?” I have to go to work because the first month is okay for me because the Seventh Day Adventist is sponsor for me, I have that like a couple hundred. I have that fund from their church. And after that I had to pay for the rent, pay for the food, I leave. So I don’t get nothing. So about three or four months later, I go to adult school. Go to learn English.

TVM: So about three or four months later, I go to adult school and learn in the morning and afternoon. Six months. Then the people tell me. If you like that, “You don’t get it. You have to go to work.” Then that another time tough time for me. I always remember my family, but now I have to do my own. To pay. Who pay for me? So I decide to work, but no experience, nothing. They work in the. I go to work in the assembly line. The first company I work was in Kennedy Company Assembly. The company Kennedy in Monrovia. It was $3.25 an hour. Well I worked there for about six months and I thought I can’t live like that. It’s my future. Just not that. And I worked there six months and I decided to quit.

JM: When you arrived in California, who picked you up at LAX?

TVM: Oh, my relative, my relative. It’s not the family. Relative, but not really close so he picked me up at LAX.

JM: So when did you arrive to the US?

TVM: What?

JM: What day did you arrive?

TVM: Oh, January 18, 1980.

JM: Where did you first settle? What city?
TVM: Glendale, California. Near LAX.

JM: What were some of your first experiences in America? What were your first impressions?

TVM: I think like, after I start to work in the assembly line, it make me look all the age is 40 or 35 to 40, at that age, I look around. It nothing like young boy like me. Eighteen, working in that company. And I think myself, it not fit for me. I’m still young. I should do something. That was my first experience for that and then I quit the job. I quit the job and I go, at that time, I know a little bit of English because I go day and evening and morning class to go to learn English. So I decide to quit that job and then I go to learn the machine job.

JM: What were some of the challenges you experienced with starting a new life here?

TVM: After I quit the job. I go to learn the machine job. And then I graduate that and go to the national technical school for six months. I get my diploma for that, one for machine shop one for the CEC. Diploma. Since then, I really started my life. It helped me get more money than what just get it. And I’m happy with the job of what I’m doing.

JM: How do you feel about your decision to come to the United States today?

TVM: For myself, I think it’s good. I’m happy with that. Even my life, sometime it struggle with the family. Living here. But I’m finally happy with living here. Because I get the respect. Respect the people. Respect the church. Respect at work. The life is not too much stress like before. I’m okay with the life, my life right now. So my job is still get more money every year and I have some money left for my future. So that’s what I love it my life, so when I retire I get some money left for my work right now. So I left some money for 41K and I’m happy with my life. My first daughter will be graduating in June. That’s the most that make me happy.

JM: Have you ever encountered racism?

TVM: I don’t see it at all.
JM: When you first arrived?

TVM: I don’t see it at all. I see all the nice people, that’s all.

JM: Do you still have family members in Vietnam?

TVM: Pardon?

JM: Do you still have family members in Vietnam?

TVM: Oh yeah.

JM: How do you contact them or how do you keep in contact with them?

TVM: Well, right now, easy. Because the technology. But before in 1990, I just sent the letter and the letter go to Vietnam. When I receive the letter back, it’s about six months. When they tell me anything happen there, it’s already over. Like I asked them “how about this uncle”. They say oh he’s fine. But the next letter, I received, they’re already gone because of the old age and because life you know.

JM: Do you have any family members that do not get along because of their positions and beliefs in the Vietnam War?

TVM: I don’t have problems with that.

JM: Are there any songs or images that remind you of Vietnam?

TVM: Oh yeah. The most song is my town is lucky they have one song by a singer called “Ha Tien”. That’s the song it’s for my home town. And the second one is the song for the Vietnam anthem. When they have festivals or anything, that’s the song I usually sing every morning when I were little in Vietnam when I go to school. Yup.

JM: Did you visit Vietnam after you left?

TVM: Yeah I come back Vietnam after fourteen years I come back. The very first time in fourteen years.
JM: Were you by yourself?

TVM: No at that time, I came back with my wife.

JM: Why did you return to Vietnam?

TVM: Why? Because I want to go to meet all of my family members

JM: Were you the only family member that successfully escaped to the US?

TVM: Pardon?

JM: Were you the only family member to go to the US?

TVM: Yeah

JM: Did you try bringing some family members over?

TVM: I try sometime. When I got the American citizenship, I wanted to bring my dad and my mom over but they can’t leave because my mom, her mom know about what I’m going to do to sponsor for my dad and my mom over. Then she said to my mom, “Oh you leave me?” so that’s why my mom doesn’t want to leave since then. So the papers turn over. That’s why they’re all in Vietnam right now.

JM: Did your family members express that they wanted to come over and live here?

TVM: Yeah. A lot. Everyone would want to. But they don’t have the chance.

JM: Why don’t they have any chances?

TVM: I think because they all have the main problem is they don’t have money to come over. I want to make paper but it took too long and they already have successes. They have a business over there and they have big houses. Most of my family members they are okay with living there. What they do, they have the income. And they all have the son and daughter and memory there.

JM: Have they expressed any hate for the government?
TVM: Before 1980, yeah they still wanted to escape, but after 1990, they are stable. So they don’t want to leave.

JM: Do you think a lot has changed in Vietnam since you left?

TVM: the law?

JM: A lot. A lot has changed in Vietnam.

TVM: Yea of course there are changes. A little. Not much. They change because the law change. That’s why I came to see my family. After fourteen years. After fourteen years.

JM: In what ways has it not changed in your opinion?

TVM: More freedom.

JM: What kind of freedom?

TVM: Most is freedom for the meeting, for people to talk for what they want to talk, or if they don’t agree with the government, they can’t demonstrate. But they don’t let people demonstrate over there. If you talk or you say against the government, you will get caught. But not only you. But your whole family. It can destroy your whole family. That’s the whole communist. I don’t trust the government. I come back to visit my family for fun. Tell me I live over there, no. Some of the people come here and after they get successful, they get the business over there. For me I don’t. Not communist for me. I hate it. I hate the government. That government makes me loss. Big loss. My sister.

JM: Lost your older sister?

TVM: Yeah.

JM: How did you receive the news that she committed suicide. Was it through word of mouth?

TVM: No, the people tell me and after that, the family member never told me. I just sent the letter to ask them for like three years later.
JM: So you found out. Where were you?

TVM: Three years later. I found out when they let me know. I’m already over here in California. And my first graduation at the National Technical School. I think my family members don’t want me to know about that maybe it’ll make me sad or something when I tell them I already graduate that and they’re happy and they let me know that. I knew about that situation when I was in Thailand camp. I knew six months later, I heard that bad news. Yeah. So.

JM: What other memories do you have from the Thai camp?

TVM: A lot. I remember a lot of things. The good and bad things. The bad thing is one of the family member uncle, he don’t know nothing but the uncle just play the volleyball and he say he’s tired. And they took the medicine to make him feel better. But it’s no luck. When he put the needle in, his uncle get shock and the effect of the medicine is he dead right away after what, half an hour when the ambulance come over to take him over, he already dead. That’s the thing I won’t forget. Another thing is in the camp, this is really tough. This is really tough for my life. The guy in the house when we lived about 4-5 people in the house. Because we live by the beach, you know. Go down to the beach, go down to any little stones, like that, around the beach. You know little thing like the shell or little fish, they hide around the rocks, around that. And all that around the beach is dirty. You get cut easily and you can get cut easily on the rocks. One time I go to catch it, but I really scared but I can’t do anything because it’s my turn to go with him. I get cut on my legs a lot sometime with my hand. Because I have to catch the fish like that. Little fish. But at that time, we have nothing to eat. So, it was tough, but it goes through. It go through.

JM: How was the environment like for families in the camps? Younger children?

TVM: In my camp? You mean the other family?
JM: Yeah, the other family you saw.

TVM: Oh, there were all kind. Some kids are newborn, and they born there, they live there. And sometimes they don’t have success to the interview and so I guess they get stuck there for four or five years. And all the kids, my boat, I live in my small boat. 92 people in my boat. But only, not too many kids. The smallest kid was about five years old. For about three or four only

JM: What were the conditions of your boat? Traveling there?

TVM: My boat is ok. About 100 feet long, about that big. About 25 feet wide. 92 people in there. Terrible.

JM: How many times were you attacked by Thai Pirates?

TVM: Five. About four or five times.

JM: Did anyone die from their attacks?

TVM: No, no one.

JM: No one?

TVM: No. No one. It lucky. Some of the other boats yea, they do, But my boat is lucky.

JM: So the males were divided onto one side, to the other boat. Do you know what happened to the females?

TVM: We don’t know. We don’t know what happened to the female on the boat. But I think that’s ok for all the females. They don’t get raped or what. I don’t think so. Never know. Because all the ladies and young girls on my boat and all the men, they moved all the men, husbands and young boys and the men in their boat. And I don’t know. About three or four hours

JM: So that happened five times?

TVM: Four or five times.

JM: The same thing?
TVM: The first one, they just come to my boat and the very first one. All my jewelry and gold that my mom gave to me was already gone. I put them in the pocket of my jean like that. Put the needle. They took the needle away. And they say, “Oh, that’s it”. What am I going to do now? And then, I get seasick on the way, two days, on the boat. They almost throw me onto the ocean. They thought me dead. But I’m not dead. But I’m really seasick on the boat. Then some guy, he touched my nose and I’m still breathing. Later on, I get to the camp and they just told me, “Oh I almost throw you on the beach. Thought you were already dead!” It’s a lot of story. A lot of story.

JM: What happened the third time?

TVM: The third time, the same thing. They just come in and get all the people and money and clothes and whatever. They took it then they left.

JM: How violent were they? Did they use weapons?

TVM: Oh yeah! The pirate weapons you see in Disneyland! Like that! Knife, hammer, all like that. Exactly.

JM: Do you consider yourself lucky for surviving all of those attacks and landing in a refugee camp?

TVM: Yeah I feel that it’s lucky. If all the last four or five times, if they, Sometimes they hit the people by the hammer. They just bang you to the head and they throw you into the ocean. I went through with four times or five times with that but, it’s not violent. They don’t do anything. They just get the money, gold, watch, like that, and then they leave.

JM: How would you describe your time? Your traveling time?

TVM: It’s about seventy-two hours. From beginning to get to Thailand.

JM: Seventy-two hours? Only?
TVM: Yeah.

JM: Your boat went pretty quickly.

TVM: It’s not. It’s not too far from my town to go to the camp. If we go straight and don’t get lost, then it doesn’t take too long. It take one day or nothing.

JM: Did you have a captain on the boat, is that how you navigated there?

TVM: Yeah, we have that. But all the captain they took it and throw it away.

JM: What life lessons have you learned from your journey to the US about your family, survival, and hard work?

TVM: My journey to the US? I think it is really hard work. My journey to go from, when I left my family and go to Thailand camp and go over here. For me, it was hard work. Really hard work. To survive life. I have to work hard and take care of myself and take care of the family after it’s been like ten years. So it’s about it.

JM: Did you suffer from emotional stress when you first arrived in the US?

TVM: Oh yeah, that’s the emotional for me. After five years, after five years, then I guess when I start to get my diploma. When I work. It made me feel okay and stable. So I can have the car, and then I can have some money to get something to send my family to my family members for the food you know? But stress for the family, yes. Until now sometime, they’re in my dreams. My bad dreams about that. The really stress happened for the first five years when I lived in California.

JM: How did you cope with the stress? Did you have friends?

TVM: Yeah, I have friends.

JM: How did you find emotional support?
TVM: So, the most is I-after I go to work then I go to school to learn more English at adult school after work. And do some weekend, some of my friends together, have a sit together and talk. Have a cup of beer and sing to each other. Five years later, I have new friends over here. About 6 or 7 friends here you know? That’s less stress for me. From then on and on, we live through with it.

JM: Do you still keep in touch with friends from the refugee camps? Or when you first landed here?

TVM: Oh yeah, the first year or first two years, we still contact each other. And then after that, they all over. They just move you know? They move here and there and we just lost the phone number. We don’t know where they’re living. Sometimes it’s just, “Oh see another one and ask about the other.” At that time, it’s not easy for the phone. No cell phone at all. We lost the phone contact, that’s it. We live in the United States, it’s big. California or Ohio or Nevada or whatever or New York, and then we don’t know where are they now. I hope they’re doing ok and are successful.

JM: Is there anything you’d like to add about your experience during the war or?

TVM: Experience on the war? I really see the war, about that time, for me, is terrible. That’s all.

JM: Did you see any American soldiers in your hometown?

TVM: When I were in second grade, the Americans come over to play basketball in my hometown. And he’s big. At that time I see he’s big and funny.

JM: So you didn’t see any American personnel? American soldiers there?

TVM: Yeah, they’re American soldiers, but on their break times or something in the evening. Maybe they do their job already and then they, have time running out [to play].

JM: During your time on the boat, did you see other boats too? Out in the sea?
TVM: No.

JM: Did you see any US boats on the sea?

TVM: No. Some of them, but not my boat.

JM: Is there anything you’d like to add about the refugee camp? Any other experiences about the refugee camp that you’d like to share?

TVM: The refugee camp, now I think they closed a long time ago. But at the refugee camp-my experience there? You mean the experience for life?

JM: Experience in general. Anything else you’d like to add?

TVM: Well in the camp, we have to just live in there and wait and wait for the US government to come over and interview and wait. And respect each other.

JM: Was there any violence in the refugee camp with each other?

TVM: I saw one time, that was violent, when the - one of the policeman of the Vietnam government with the boat and they took him out to the volleyball place. The volleyball court, place. To beat him. But at that time, I was involved too. But I saw that it was not right. That the people took the person there because they do the officer of the communist. I think that’s not right.

JM: So the Vietnamese government police came?

TVM: Yeah, they escaped on the boat. That mean they escape. They already don’t believe with what their position is. We have to forgive them. I think that’s not right [beating up the police officer]

JM: And why were they beating up the people?

TVM: Because at that time, the people living - escape from Vietnam, they hate the communist government.
JM: Oh, so the police came and the people from the refugee camp started to beat up the police?

TVM: No, I mean, that guy were the policeman of the communist government. And then somehow, I don’t know how, he get to the refugee camp and then somehow the people in the refugee camp found out he’s a communist. He’s the communist police. And the person of the camp announced it and took them to the volleyball court and tell the people there. And all the guys came and beat him up.

JM: Did he die?

TVM: Almost died. Almost died. Just that the whole people beat him up for almost three minutes. The people at that time, just one kick and how many people kick him for three minutes. After three minutes, the camp, whoever in charge, told them to stop that’s all. I feel sorry for that guy.

JM: Any other violent memories from the refugee camp?

TVM: That is the most I remember. But they have too many things. Sometimes the guard of the camp they come over to bother all the beautiful women in the camp, but we sometimes, all my friends come over, stop at that time to talk in the night. Like 10 or 11 that night and we already leave. And see, all the Thailand come over, to bother that two beautiful lady and all my friends just come there and sit in front and talk, you know. And they just cook the tea for them and just talking or singing until everything is clear. I usually one or two in the midnight, stay and hang around the people. Sometimes some of the bad guy jump over to the camp to get something, do something bad to the lady or the young girls.

JM: And then what would happen?

TVM: Since that’s the most is the beautiful girl and ladies, day after day, they have some country take them and they leave. Later on, not much of the trouble any more. I remember that and at the
time I almost leaving the camp, to go to the United States, I go to the father of the church there. All my friends come over and tell him and he give like $20 at that time. $100 from Thailand. Because he said, whoever don’t have the relative and almost have to leave the camp to go the US and everything, come to him and he give $100 to get clothes or something. We don’t have clothes. We don’t have good clothes to go on the airplane. Because we don’t have money. We just use to old clothes. Some people they just leave the clothes, they go to the US or Canada and we go and then we try them on, “Oh it fit me, ok I take it”. Take that and wear it. And I do the same thing, I left my old clothes for other people. A lot of thing. A lot of good things. A lot of bad things. The funny is I live by myself there. I don’t hear my parents say go to sleep or do this do that, don’t do this, don’t do that. Awake from 1 or 2 o’clock in the morning as long is one thing. All I know is I have to build one church one temple, some houses. Go to volunteer in the mountain and chop bamboo to build. Nice, huh?

JM: yeah

TVM: is there anything else you’d like to ask about your experience in the US?

TVM: Keep working hard and you will have it. If you don’t go to learn, you don’t want to learn, you don’t get it. It is the freedom and to get the future what you want, you can have it. You have to work hard and then you will get everything if you want it. You want to be good, you have to go to school and learn it. Everything. You want everything, there is opportunity for you.

JM: Thank you for your time

TVM: Ok thank you.

--End of Transcript--