Boat people secure at Pickett Post dock

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PICKETT POST — A year ago, Toan Vy Quan and his family were "boat people."

Now, having celebrated the first anniversary of their arrival in this tiny Oconee County community, the Toan family has adjusted to an American lifestyle.

The transition for this family of Chinese ethnic background from Vietnam to the United States is still continuing, however.

Toan, his wife Ngo Thuy Vy, and his two sons, Toan Dang Khu and Toan Dang Tru, fled Vietnam as part of a massive refugee movement. After spending six months at a camp in Hong Kong, they arrived in this community on Sept. 27, 1979, with the help of the Bethel Presbyterian Church here.

At that time, the only word Quan could say in English was "hello."

Two Vietnamese women in Walhalla have helped the family learn basic English. For reference, a Vietnamese-English dictionary is kept by the coffee table in the living room.

The Toan boys, however, speak English moderately well and sometimes act as translators for their parents.

Speaking in choppy English, Toan said he is happy in his new home, which was made available to them by the church.

"Our church is my friend," said Toan.

With help from the small congregation, Toan found a job as a machinist in Fairfield. His wife works as a seamstress in Salem.

The Toan boys have been given American names — Jack for Khu and Joe for Tru. Both attend school at the Walhalla Elementary School.


The family is accustomed to accommodating their Chinese heritage to current American ways.

For example, Toan's wife cooks both Chinese and American food for the family. Rice remains a staple.

And Toan, with the help of church members, planted a garden of American vegetables and even watermelon.

The Presbyterian church continues to help the family in any way it can, according to Jack Stevenson, a Clemson University professor and part-time pastor.

The church celebrated the anniversary of the Toan family's arrival in Oconee County, which coincided with the church's celebration of its 175th year of continuous ministry.

Stevenson said it was a credit to the small congregation that it made a "tremendous commitment" to the Vietnamese family.