

Refugees Thrive in Iowa

Indochinese Families Are Adapting to a New Life

By Joel D. Weisman

Special to The Washington Post

DES MOINES—Monroe grade school principal Steve Lipovac asked the third grade class, "What have you learned by having Cam Ngoc Lienh in your class?"

"It's allowed us all to be teachers," said Steven Rogers.

"She gets to learn way more than us—'cause she doesn't know a lot of stuff," complained Sean Miller.

"She's taught us that houses in Laos are built up on sticks, off the ground," said Holly Howe.

Lienh, 11, one of eight children of former Laotian Maj. Cam Ngoc Ngiem, smiled proudly.

"Why are the houses built on sticks off the ground, Lienh?" asked the principal.

"Cause it rains and often wet there," she explained shyly.

In many Iowa schools, factories and farms, and even in a Des Moines ghetto, Iowans are learning about an unusual group of Indochinese refugees.

The Cam family is part of a refugee group known as the Tai Dam, or the black Tais, who plan to make Iowa their fourth home in 30 years.

Once inhabitants of one of 12 states of the Tai Federation in North Vietnam, near the China border, the black Tais were driven to Hanoi after the battle of Dienbienphu in 1954 and then to northern Laos. They eventually migrated to the large Laotian city of

Vientiane, fleeing that city when Laos followed South Vietnam and Cambodia in falling to the Communists.

The black Tais got their name because the women wore black dresses. In other states of the old Tai Federation, women wore other colors. "There were red Tai, white Tai and green Tai and what have you," explained Colleen Schearer, state director of the refugee program.

A total of 633 black Tai have settled in Iowa and "so far, so good," said Mrs. Schearer.

"I like Iowa okay," said Cam, Lienh's father, as he cleaned an engine on a stripped-down American car at a body shop on 6th Street. "Iowa good to Tai Dam," he added.

The major works in the body shop with his oldest son, Kham Souan, 20.

"They work pretty hard when they understand what they're told to do," said their boss, Kelly Green. The major was told to remove an engine, but dismantled it first. "Maybe that's how they do it in Laos, but not in Des Moines," Green said. "He also once threw away some tools by accident."

Cam's son, however, has been lauded by fellow workers for his "nice sanding touch" and his willingness to join his co-workers in throwing snowballs in the city's first major storm.

In the Cam family five other children besides Lienh are in public schools. A seventh is

retarded and will be enrolled in a special school. The major and his eldest son got jobs through a member of the Grace United Methodist Church, the family's sponsor, who drives them to work daily until they learn to use public transportation.

Things have not been quite as easy for other families. In Ankeny, north of Des Moines, Nguyen Van Done, 45, was without work for two months and stayed home in a one-bedroom apartment with his wife, adult son, daughter-in-law and grandchild, watching programs he did not understand on a used television which later broke.

The family's original sponsors, Randall and Michelle Dillon, say many landlords refused to rent to the family and that there were no jobs available because of Done's poor English, even though Done is an experienced carpenter. In Laos, the Done family lived in a comfortable five-bedroom house.

Last week Done finally got a job as a furniture designer's assistant. "I hope I have enough business to keep him working," said Jim Castle, 27. "I really hired him because I thought it was just wrong no one else would," added Castle, who operates his business from his garage.

Seven refugee families with 64 people live in a neat, refurbished 14-unit apartment building, a stark contrast to surrounding decayed and abandoned inner city structures.

The building is owned by the Gateway Opportunity Center, funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity and created to serve the city's poor population.

"Now it's the poor helping the poor—and doing okay thus far," said Arzania Williams, the center's director.

Williams has persuaded the local supermarket (Sherman's Super Value) owner to stock large bags of Laotian rice, has begun English classes for the refugee children, and has escorted adults on job interviews. Nine of 30 adults now have jobs.

"If they want to make it, we're specialists in seeing that people who want to can survive," Williams said after a tour of the building, where the temperature is kept "in the 80s so they don't get sick in this cold weather."

Several families have been placed on Iowa farms. Schearer, the Iowa refugee program director, said one worker found heavy straw bales and dairy farming equipment "too much to handle because of his small constitution" and has left his farm job.

But members of the Lo Van Phuong family, now living on the Atkins family farm near Exira, a community of 1,200 in southwest Iowa, like the rural life.

"They're coming along just great," said Lillian Atkins. "We hope to build and then rent them a house on the farm. They love the work and we've talked them into naming their baby an American name."

The Washington Post

GENERAL NEWS
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THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25, 1975

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Kham Souan Ngiem, 20, works in Des Moines body shop.



Vietnamese child carries boards in apartment building.

Photos by Perre Pederson