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Asians and Arkansas Hill Folk Ease Mutual Misgivings



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Floy Lane with her clerk, Vu Viet Hai, in her store in Grannis, Ark., where the population is almost half Asian. Top: A Vietnamese woman working alongside Arkansans in a local poultry plant.

By ROY REED

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GRANNIS, Ark., Sept. 26—Mrs. Floy Lane, the storekeeper, has learned to like Oriental-style alimentary paste, which she cooks into a soup.

She has not tried the dried baby squid that also sits on her grocery shelves now. "I'm not going to, either," she says firmly.

The newcomers from Southeast Asia, for their part, have not got much past potatoes in their effort to adjust to the foods of their new home.

"I just can't eat American food," Hien Duc Nguyen, the teacher, confesses with a grin.

Cautious, selective acceptance has been the rule on both sides since 238 Vietnamese refugees moved here last November and instantly doubled the population of this western Arkansas hill town.

Mobile Homes for Asians

Whatever happens in the years ahead, it appears that this community will never again be the same. The coming of the Asians is forcing the white hill people of Polk County to confront an old, deep fear.

Polk is one of many traditionally all-white counties of the hill South that never allowed Negroes to move in. It was always handled unofficially. Self-appointed vigilantes simply collared any black person who happened along and

told him not to let the sun set on him in that county.

Only recently, a black cook imported by a white family near here was frightened away by white men who told her to move on.

A few Mexicans and Indians have lived in Grannis in recent years. Most came from nearby Oklahoma and Texas to work in Clift Lane's poultry processing plant, a sprawling factory that sits a few yards from the new post office and across route 71 from his mother's store.

Most of those outsiders had drifted away by last fall. Mr. Lane, always looking for a steady labor force, went to the refugee relocation center at Fort Chaffee, 100 miles north of here, and brought home 238 South Vietnamese. He established them in a mobile home park at the edge of town and put most of the adults to work in the plant.

About half the Vietnamese ("Vietnese," many here call them) have left, most to join relatives in New Orleans and Oklahoma City. Part of the slack has been taken up by about 80 Laotians who arrived in the summer.

The population of Grannis is now nearly half Asian. The native Americans are ahead by about 250 to 200.

Some natives speak openly of anti-Asian prejudice. The prejudice reportedly was fanned by an outbreak of thefts in the community after the Asians arrived. Several Vietnamese

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workers were arrested and fined for stealing chickens at the plant.

One rural man refuses to allow Vietnamese on his property because he says some of them stole things from him.

It is commonly believed that the Vietnamese who moved away included the troublemakers and that those who stayed are the better educated and more stable.

The Americans have been a little astonished to learn that many of the newcomers are college-educated. Hien Duc Nguyen, for example, speaks five languages and is an artist as well as a teacher. He worked for the South Vietnamese embassies in Singapore and Vientian before coming to the United States.

Barriers Between Groups

Race is not the only barrier separating the two groups here. There are also custom, taste and language.

The Asian children are learning English rapidly, the adults more slowly. Mr. Hien is teaching English to 36 adult Vietnamese and Laotians. The only American who seems to know any Vietnamese is a disabled veteran named Jesse Palmer, who was wounded in Vietnam.

A few American families exchange social visits with the Asians. But the two groups mostly stay to themselves except at work and school.

Community life for the Asians revolves around their new Roman Catholic Church. Mrs. Lane donated the land for the building.

The new Vietnamese priest conducts mass every afternoon. Most of the women and girls come to church wearing the floor-length Vietnamese garment that became familiar to Americans through

news and television pictures during the war.

The Vietnamese have had to change an important holiday, Tet, because it falls on a working day here. Melvin Sullivan, assistant to Mr. Lane, said they agreed to start celebrating the American New Year.

The younger Asians have picked up not only the new language but also new tastes more rapidly than have their elders. Many have begun to buy cars, television sets, stereo equipment and tape players. Like Americans, they buy on credit.

"Some of them don't pay their bills," Mrs. Lane, a peppery retired teacher, said. "But then, I've known a lot of Americans who don't pay their bills."

One potential problem will not have to be faced for a while. The Asians will not be eligible to vote for five years. No one is ready to think about what will happen to the town government when that time comes.

Perhaps it will be handled as it was in the schools. The American youngsters just moved over and made room. One extra teacher was hired.

Many of the newcomers were shopkeepers and military people back home. Some find it hard to adjust to the dirty, monotonous work in the poultry plant. And to the weather.

"They thought they were going to freeze to death last winter," Mr. Sullivan said. Sandals are giving way to shoes.

He said the Asians were making good workers. All around, he said, they are turning out to be about like Americans—some good, some bad.

"It's come true to me," he said, "that people are people, no matter where they're from."