

Laotian Americans in King County and Washington State

Americans whose families are originally from Laos are usually identified by their ethnic group, from among 48 ethnic groups within Laos. Minority ethnic groups include highland peoples such as the Hmong and Mien who migrated from China to Laos in the 19th century; highland Kmhmu people who are native to Laos; and ethnic Chinese and ethnic Vietnamese people. A large percentage of Hmong people in particular became refugees; Hmong Americans became quite well-known for their assistance to the U.S. during the Vietnam War, and their cultural traditions. There are also small communities in the U.S. and in Washington state of other highland peoples of Laos.

The Lao people, who live in the lowlands of Laos and in Thailand, are the majority group that gave the nation of Laos its name. Lao people living in the U.S. are referred to as Lao American, but sometimes as Laotian American. This term Laotian-American is a bit tricky, as it can refer to someone who is ethnic Lao, but it can also refer to someone who comes from the country of Laos but is from another ethnic group, such as the Hmong.

Census information and more numbers

	Census 2000, population in the USA	Community Survey 2005, population in the USA	Community Survey 2005, WA State*
Lao American population	167,792	193,247	10,638
Hmong American population	170,049	183,265	1,380

<http://www.hmongstudies.org/2005AmericanCommunitySurveySoutheastAsianAmericans.html>

According to the 2000 Census, the populations of Lao Americans and Hmong Americans were roughly similar at that time, as seen in the table above. Both communities had grown by the 2005 American Community Survey, the Lao Americans more quickly, but with their total populations still roughly similar. However, within Washington state, the situation is quite different from the U.S. as a whole. Washington ranks 4th in the U.S. in its number of Lao-American residents, while the largest proportion of Hmong Americans live in the Midwest.

In Washington state, the majority of Hmong Americans live in King County, both in Seattle and in rural areas of the county, with a smaller community in Spokane. The majority of Southeast Asian refugees as a whole (including Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Thai Americans, in addition to those from Laos) live in King, Snohomish and Pierce counties, with smaller communities in Bellingham, Spokane and Vancouver. ¹

¹ "Southeast Asians in Washington State," Commission on Asian Pacific Affairs Newsletter, May 2000.
<http://www.capaa.wa.gov/resources/index.shtml>

History of Laotian-Americans in Washington State

During the Vietnam War in the 1960s, the U.S. fought a secret war in neighboring Laos, and much of the country was bombed heavily for about ten years. By 1970, one out of five people in Laos had already left as refugees, although it would be several more years before they were able to relocate to the U.S. in any significant numbers. The lowland Lao people immigrated to the U.S. earlier on, mostly between 1979 to 1982.² Lao people had been primarily rural people at home in lowland Laos, but once in the U.S., 96% settled in cities, for access to the kind of jobs and services they needed.³

In the early 1980s, a large second wave of refugees from Southeast Asia included many of the highland peoples from the mountains of Laos, who were not safe in the continuing conflict. After U.S. forces left in 1975, a new government had taken over in Laos and sought revenge on Hmong people and others who had assisted the U.S. One-third of the Hmong people were killed, and another third (tens of thousands of Hmong people), escaped to Thailand and lived in refugee camps for several years, waiting for opportunities to resettle in other countries. When the U.S. allowed more Southeast Asian refugees beginning in 1980, the first Hmong people arrived in the U.S. From 1980 until 1994, about 83,000 Hmong people moved to the US. Unlike Lao Americans in King County, who are concentrated in Seattle, Hmong Americans live in both Seattle and rural areas of King County. Other highland peoples who came as refugees to the U.S. and Washington state included the Mien (approximately 1000 people in Washington state as of 2000), and the Kmhmu who were native to Laos (about 300 people in Washington state as of 2000).⁴

Cultural Background

Refugees from Laos left an agricultural country, where rice is the major crop, followed by corn, coffee and other vegetables, supplemented by raising livestock. Much of the agriculture is subsistence farming, a life of growing one's own food, in addition to gathering, hunting, and fishing. Some people cut bamboo to make houses, furniture, and all sorts of implements, from cooking utensils to fishing traps and baskets [link to artist]. People in Laos eat a lot of "sticky" rice (glutinous rice) along with the spicy cuisine, but do eat some non-glutinous rice also. For Hmong and Kmhmu people, pork is also a

² Takami, David. HistoryLink.org Essay 894 "Southeast Asian Americans: Laotians"
http://historyink.org/essays/output.cfm?file_id=894

³ "Southeast Asians in Washington State," *Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs Newsletter*, May 2000, vol. 1, issue 1. <http://www.capaa.wa.gov/resources/index.shtml>

⁴ Minato, Ryan. "Hmong Americans," *Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs Newsletter*, May 2004, vol. 5, issue 3. <http://www.capaa.wa.gov/resources/index.shtml>

staple of their diet. In the U.S., many of us have enjoyed Lao food in Thai restaurants, although it isn't named as such on the menus.

The Lao language is a tonal language, with words recognized partly by their tones: high, mid, low, rising or falling. The Lao writing system is phonetic, spelling words exactly according to their sounds (unlike English!). It is related to, but also distinct from, Cambodian and Thai writing systems. Khmhu people are related to Cambodian (Khmer) people, and the languages are similar. The Hmong language is spoken in three dialects, and uses eight tones. It was not a written language until the 1950s, when a few missionaries devised a system using letters from the English alphabet, even though the sounds are quite different from English

A majority of people from Laos are Buddhist, following the Theravadan tradition that is also practiced in Cambodia, Thailand and Burma. Buddhism originally spread to Southeast Asia from India, and in Laos, Buddhism is infused with local beliefs. Many people, especially highland peoples, also know a world of spirits, sometimes known as animist belief. In the U.S., some immigrants from Laos have become Christian.

Lao people are known for their exquisite woven textiles, such as those traditionally worn by women as skirts and shawls. While fine weaving has been revived and is now exported from Laos, these traditions were too intricate, time-consuming and dependent on looms for refugees to bring to the U.S. Meanwhile, the needlework of Hmong women was more portable, and is produced and sold widely in the U.S. The Lunar New Year celebrated by Hmong Americans (such as the festival at Seattle Center) is an occasion for wearing and seeing traditional embroidered clothing. Music and dance traditions of various communities from Laos are performed in Washington State and King County; ceremonial singing traditions and the bamboo mouth organ (known as *khaen* or *khene* among the Lao, and the related *qeej* among Hmong people) are especially significant.

Challenges for the Community

Arriving in the U.S. after many years of the severe trauma of war and refugee camps, refugees from Laos have had difficult challenges in resettlement. For highland peoples, who had lived primarily by subsistence farming in isolated areas without roads or electricity, the transition to living in the U.S. was extreme.

Few refugees from Laos spoke English before arriving in the U.S., and language difficulties added to the community's isolation in the U.S. For adults with limited English, there have been few job possibilities or economic opportunities. Hmong Americans continue to have the greatest challenges with language of any Asian-American group. In East King County schools, many English Language Learners are Hmong American students. Meanwhile, in the Seattle schools of King County, many of the English Language Learners are Lao Americans.

Since the 1980s, many Hmong Americans in King County farm on a small scale. Usually farming provides a second income, in addition to other jobs. Many of them sell flowers and vegetables at farmers markets, including the Pike Place Market in Seattle, where half the farmers are Hmong! Hmong farmers are among those who work to preserve farming in the Puget Sound area, and promote local produce.⁵

Sources

Background Note: *Laos: Profile*. U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2770.htm>

Bankston, Carl L. III. "Laotian Americans" <http://www.everyculture.com/multi/Ha-La/Laotian-Americans.html>

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Further Resources

Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. New York: Penguin Books U.S.A., 1989.

The following Laotian and Hmong American traditional artists in King County can be found on the searchable database, *Folk & Traditional Artists in Washington State*:

- 1) Chia Xeng Cha
- 2) Nhia Yia Heu
- 3) Sengvilay Viengpheth

⁵ Evans, Steve, "Hmong Farming," *Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs Newsletter*, May 2004, vol. 5, issue 3. <http://www.capaa.wa.gov/resources/index.shtml>