

Houa Vue Moua
Phone Interview by Tim Pfaff
Topic: Resettlement in Eau Claire
August 5, 1997

NOTE: Transcription is nearly verbatim - I used "...." to indicate where I skipped some passages that were not relevant to my purpose. Later researchers my wish to listen to the tape for those segments. Most (90%) of our conversation is typed below.

Tim: Object theatre intro - why we are doing this - explanation. Marion Lang mentioned that you had a funny story about your sponsors bringing you jello when you first moved to Eau Claire (EC). Can you remember that story?

Houa: I think the story of jello, it's kind of strange. I don't mean to be exorping? my: . sponsors or my friends but I think it is a difference in culture. They don't know Hmong culture. They don't know what to prepare for us and we didn't know that that was food.

We first arrived to Eau Claire April 9th evening. They thought maybe our first food when we first came to EC would be eating something like ... more liquid or mild, so it doesn't get so hard on our stomach. So each of them brought a bowl of jello. Those jellos are colorful. They were kind of like red, yellows with fruit mixed, or blue jellos, purple jellos, green jellos, yellow/orange jellos. Each of them very, very generous to bring the jello for our family for the day. It was colorful, just like those crayons. It looked like a crayon pink color to me.

I don't recall having to eat anything like this back in Laos or in Thailand. We had something similar to those jellos when we make nab vam ["nong va," tapioka] but ... nab vam does not quite look that firm either. So I didn't know if that was food to eat or color to paint. And they say that it is good for us and they store it in the refrigerator. So it does not look like food to me. The only way we know that we maybe eat a bowl is it had pineapples, peaches or orange or grapes all mixed in the jello ... all mixed with those pinks.

So day after day all the jello is full in the refrigerator and we don't eat. We did not ask them what it's for. They do not ask us why we don't eat I can't remember what we did with the jello All I remember is there are so many bowls. Everyday they come, they bring more and more, fill up the racks.

Tim: Do you remember any other foods that were strange when you first came here?

Houa: Oh, yes, yes. The night that we first came, they make Campbell Soup. They opened a can of soup about 12 oz. and they put in the reheating cook pot but they throw the can away in the trash container. They reheat the Campbell Soup It was like a ring chicken noodle soup ... only one can. I like very much. That's the only food I like so far

for many days from the plane to EC. So Va Neng, Mai Xiong and me - we three eat all at once and we're looking forward to having more for future times but no one bring any more of those soup. We were craving for the soup and hungry for many foods, but the only food we like is the chicken noodle soup.

Days go by after days - I wasn't eating much and our friends at church said to Kay, "Why Houa is not eating much?" Kay said, "She doesn't eat because she doesn't like the food you brought over." They say, "Any food you remember that she will eat?" And Kay said, "Yes, she will eat if she find the food the day you first brought us in and you reheat on the stove."

They couldn't remember what they had cooked for us. They only remember the jello, and they thought, maybe the jello Each of them asking one another

Rose Seipel was the one opened the can and she reheat the can but she also brought jello too. So she cannot remember what she brought and what I like exactly. She couldn't remember And they ask me, if I see the picture of the food will I be able to recognize if not jello, and I say yes. If you show me what on the container or on the package that I can visualize and remember the shape or the look. I cannot smell it. But if my eyes see I will be able to identify and to tell.

So my friend, Maureen Noying, who was my grocery shopper took me for shopping. She let me wheel all over the South Randalls groceries. All the aisles - nothing look like the chicken Campbell soup. But the box of cereal Cheerios - the shape Cheerios look to be like a ring. It look like it's in the bowl. It look like food ... like the soup we had the very first night. I point my finger and say this box, probably look alike. Then she put into the cart and she paid for it. When we got home, I was waiting for her to go home then I can cook the cereal. After she left, I put water into the cook pan and then I let the water boil and put the cereal into the boiling hot water. All those cheerios smashed into like tea or coffee look. I taste - taste no salt, no sugar - no taste. They all smashed. It wasn't the way the Campbell Soup either. (laughs) If we eat raw, it doesn't have flavor. If we cook, they all smashed. Then what do we do.

A couple more days come, Dr. Young's wife - Clair Young - she came over and she said, "Oh, you've been so skinny Houa. You look awful. You have not been eating. What shall we find you for food." I show her the box - how I cooked - how it doesn't turn into soup. And she said, "Oh, that's good for you. But you need milk, not water." So she drove me over to the nearby grocery shopping center in Altoona and we bought a half gallon of milk. She said, "Oh that's good for you. It will taste very good, it's good for you. You need it."

I thought, maybe I need that milk for the ingredients because I had no idea it was milk. I did not know what it is. I just so excited. I wait until we get home then I thought this is the recipe and right ingredients to put the Campbell Soup together. And then she just opened the top of the half gallon of milk, and then she put some milk into the bowl and

pour some cereal over it. She used a spoon to stir and she say, "Good for you, eat it." I taste - very yucky! just like dog poop Anyway I was vomiting or nauseous or sick of it. I had never had milk before nothing in my life like that. I say no, that's no the way it used to be the first night either. She said "OK Houa, I run out of ideas." ... They don't know what to do. They don't remember what I really like for a long, long time ... two years later after I know how to read I read ... it says Chicken noodle Campbell Soup I reheat the can. It taste the same two years before I love so much That's a long time to wait for a can of soup (laughs)

Tim: Did that seem strange to you when you go to the grocery store, everything is in boxes and cans?

Houa: Right, very strange! I have no idea where it's coming from. I did not even know what is from a can until later on, than I recognize

Tim: The other story that I was curious about or heard you tell in a class once - the story of going to the Vocational School and pronoun class.

Houa: The name and the nouns. The Hmong name and the nouns. Like we say "you, me, my." (laughs) It was real funny. We thought "you" is a person's name, not you. Mi is a lady's name, it's not me, it's not Houa. You can be me. We had a very interesting time, very confusing time too It was real strange when we had very, very basic English, very beginning level. We just learn - what's your name. My name is Houa. And then the other 2-3 women - what's your name. My name is Yue. What's your name. My name in Mai We all learn our names. Now my name is Houa, there name is Mai, Yue, Chee.

Later on, we learn for further conversation. Say - This is my book. This is your book. Later on say - You say or You read. My gosh! How come? This isn't Mai' book, they say Yue book? Mai' book, how come is Yue' book? or Yue' car? or Yue' children? We don't hear the difference. We don't know the difference. We thought the Yue and the Mai - just our names. We did not know that that is English - me, and you and my - belongs to the persons. It took us so long to work on that conversation. The teacher did not know that we did not know. She did not have that knowledge of what we are missing. We did not have the knowledge

Tim: How long were you here before you started English classes?

Houa: We came here in May. I did not get into English class until July - so two months.

Tim: Had Kay picked up a little English during the war?

Houa: He actually had classes in Laos. He had a school - I think his college class - they had English and French - and then he also had working with American friends so he pick up English language from both school and work.

Tim: Just enough to get by?

Houa: Right. Just enough to get by. Our day - daily living practice English skills.

Tim: What would you think - I know this is hard to pick something out at the moment - what was the hardest thing about American life to get used to?

Houa: Almost everything. Language barrier is one. Culture barrier is other. The food, we all eating the same food, but a different cooking, or different preparations make the difference For example, we have foods anything sweet, like juice or apples, orange, or peaches, nectarines or grapes - we have those foods after lunch, or when the sunny day comes, or evening times when the weather is warmer we eat those sour sweet foods. We don't fruit for early morning, for breakfast. If we have those foods, it's causing us stomach problems. But rice - we have for morning. Or noodles - we have for morning. Or eggs, sausage and meat and chicken, pork, steak - we eat for breakfast. Once we came to this country. We don't understand why we can't eat rice or eat meat until later day. We must wait those for dinner time. We don't understand. We used to eat three meals in the day - same food I was craving for meats, for rice for breakfast. Our sponsors told us "That is not good for you. It's not good for the stomach. You should eat more like toast, bread or cereal for breakfast and save those foods for later." I was real irritated - I feel like it's a real strange culture. I wasn't adapting ... until later on. At first I did not know that this was their culture. I thought that it was real rude and real selfish. When they say no, it was hurting my feelings I just feel so upset. I told Kay you should work hard as you can, and bring home money. I need to eat the way I used to, the way I like because now they buy our food, they tell us what to eat and how to eat, when to eat. I don't like that idea at all. Kay soon - 2 months later - Kay found 2 part-time jobs. He was able to bring home income and we do our own grocery shopping. Than I was able to eat rice, meat, vegetables - morning, noon, evening. We hide.(laughs) We don't tell them. We don't buy any jello We bought cabbage, we bought a lot of cabbage. Broccoli was a new food for me, but I like it We bought a lot of yams, a lot of potatoes. And the way we cook potatos, we chopped into small and cooked into a potato soup or potato puree. We boiled the potato with chicken and we make potato broth. Our American friends say "No, no, no - that's not the way you cook potatos." They either talked to us how to make the mash potatos ... I taste - taste so yucky - taste like mud. (laughs) I did not like the way they show me how to cook. I say these American people don't know how to eat potatos. Those American people say "Oh, those Hmong people don't know how to cook potatos." When they make into French fries, I think it is too dry, and when they make into mashed potatos, I say they're too yucky I say, "We will cook when they're not here." (laughs)

Tim: So do you feel like you're at a spot in your life now where this is home?

Houa: Now? Everyday I feel a different way. Weather is good, my day is good, I feel home sweet home. If the weather is 40, 30 below degree - I feel I'm in hell. (laughs)

When I have to bundle - so many layers Otherwise I feel this is wonderful, I have a wonderful life In general, I'm happy here

I think it's just that everything is due to barriers. They don't know what we know. We don't know what they know. They always prepare the way they like for us. We always think they like the way we like. But it's just different. When I have so many negatives, I have good stories too Like the rice crispies cake. When I have for the first time. I say, "Oh my goodness, American people know how to eat rice cake. And they're so hard to make in Laos. If they are not your close, close, close cousin, you won't share because it takes so long to make it. Once we lived in America and they brought us those rice crispy cakes. We feel we are so lucky. They must take a long time to make this rice crispy cake and bring over to our home. Later on, we learned how to make it - it's just 5 minutes. So that make me wonder ... It's the easiest food we can make

[Goes on talks about green beans, gardens, etc.]

The way we make in Laos was not marshmallow. It was right from sugar can syrup. The way we used to make rice crispy cake it took 1-3 days You had to cut the sugar cane - chop into small pieces ... then you had to smash in a rice grinder ... then we have to steam the sugar cane into juice. After we steam into juice - the juice come out - then we have to cook very, very low heat in the huge pot. It will take 1-3 days to get just the sugar syrup. Then the rice, the rice you have to soak the rice, steam the rice, and let the rice cool, and then let the rice dry in the sun 1-3 days until real sunny-sun dry. The rice has to dry up hard Then we deep fry the dry rice in two pots, like a wok, then we will add the syrup and mix into rice cakes. That's how hard work it is. I thought we were the only people who work so hard to get this. When I saw Americans bring me the rice crispy cakes - I so pleased They must really like us. Maybe they learned that we don't like jello They must so respect my family because they took some special time to cook this special food.

NOTE: Below was added after I turned the tape off. I typed while she spoke so it is not verbatim.

I always feel uncomfortable calling people by their first name. Jack Olson, Andy Bohl, June Bohl My heart is not accepting their name. It is not ok for my mouth to slip out their first name. I thought I must call them by their title ... Pastor. In the Hmong culture you call someone Father which means two things. Any one higher than you in authority, you call father. I want to call them Mister, They don't want me to. I can say anything at all. I know for sure I cannot say you. I say Father but Pastor Bohl disagree with me. He say no, Houa, I'm not your Father. We fight all the way from the Technical School to the trailer park.