

7-18-1994

LeuamChampassak, Thongwan Oral History Interview (Laotian): Asian and African American Residents of Holland

Donna M. Rottier

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/min_res



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), and the [Oral History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Rottier, Donna M., "LeuamChampassak, Thongwan Oral History Interview (Laotian): Asian and African American Residents of Holland" (1994). *Asian and African American Residents of Holland*. Paper 6.

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/min_res/6

Published in: 1994 - *Asian and African American Residents of Holland (H88-0234)* - Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project, July 18, 1994. Copyright © 1994 Hope College, Holland, MI.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History Interviews at Digital Commons @ Hope College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Asian and African American Residents of Holland by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Hope College. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hope.edu.

Interview with
Thongwan LeumChampassak
Laotian Resident

Conducted July 18, 1994
by Donna M. Rottier

1994 Summer Oral History Project
The Asian-American Community in Holland, Michigan

Note regarding interview with Thongwan LeaumChampassak on July 18, 1994:

Due to the wishes of Ms. Champassak, the cassette tape of this interview was destroyed. This edited version of the transcript remains as sole evidence of the interview. While Ms. LeaumChampassak made certain major grammatical and stylistic modifications over the original transcript, she made no significant content revisions during editing and this version thus remains true to the original tape-recorded interview.

dmr
08/23/94

DR: The date is July 18, 1994. This is Donna Rottier. I am interviewing Thongwan LeaumChampassak in her home in Holland, Michigan. Could you please repeat your full name for the record?

TL: My name is Thongwan LeaumChampassak.

DR: Thank you. And your current address?

TL: My address is 258 W. 16th Street in Holland, Michigan, 49423.

DR: When and where were you born?

TL: I was born in Laos. My birthplace is Nam Nga, Luang Prabang, Laos. My birth date is [date removed], 1952.

DR: When did you first move to Holland, Michigan?

TL: February 15, 1979.

DR: Thank you. Could you begin then by describing a little bit about your life in Laos and growing up in Laos?

TL: My father is a farmer. We have a big family; we have ten brothers and sisters together. I was the second child in the family. In my country normally it would be the boy who would help the father to do all the farm jobs, whatever my dad did. But in our case, with ten of us, there's only one boy, he's young, and us, the older ones have to help my dad. I worked just like a man. Whatever came up for my dad, we have to help him. I would be with him all the time. At home I would be with my mom. So the only relationships we would have were with the family. At that point, up until 1964, my parents then decided--first of all with my

uncle, my mom's brother. He was a monk. He knew that we children never had any education or went to school. He asked another family, a relative who lived in the city, if it's okay for me to stay with them for one year to go there to study. They said fine. Then he asked my parents and he sent me to school that year. I went to school in the city for one year.

When I came back home, our country was in the war again. We had to escape to another area, and we came to the big city. At that time it's a very small city. When we came there, my mom gave birth to my tenth sister. We have nine sisters, and one brother. So, including myself, there were ten of us. When my sister turned ten-and-a-half months, my mom died. Then I took care of her. She's with us now. That's all my family life in the past. We were poor, but we were happy. We came to the city after my mom died, and moved to the big city where I met my husband. I got married in 1970 and I moved to the capital of Laos, Vientiane. I stayed there until 1976, when my husband escaped to the UN Refugee Camp in Nongkhai, Thailand. Eight months later, my two children and I followed him to the camp. We stayed there for two and-a-half years before we came here. I have six children. Three of them were born in Laos, one born in the camp, and two born here.

DR: How long were you in the camp in Thailand?

TL: Almost three years. We came in March 1976, and then we came here in February 1979.

DR: Were you sponsored by a group or an organization to come here?

TL: Yes. Our family, we have nine of us--my sister, my niece, my mother-in-law, my brother-in-law, and I have three children, my husband and I--all of us nine people. We were sponsored by Harderwyk Christian Reformed Church. Taking care of sponsorship was Mr. Jerry Hertel. We call him "Papa" and his wife, Alice, "Mama" now, since that time up to now before he told us that he prefers us to call him by his first name. But for respect--he supports us in everything--we call him "Papa," and his wife "Mama." We're still are members of his church from 1980 up to now.

DR: Did you know anything about Holland, Michigan, before you came here?

TL: No, nothing. I don't know anything about it. My husband knows something about America, but he doesn't know about Michigan. He came here in 1972 for army training with the Royal Laotian Army at Fort Knox. He has some friends from Kentucky now. He made good friends there. They both are school teachers. They teach at a Baptist boarding school. They still work there, I believe, if they didn't retire right now. They took him to church every Sunday while he was there at Fort Knox, Kentucky. He made profession of faith there. He thought they were a very nice family. The reason we get a sponsor and come to Holland, Michigan, was when we were interviewed in the camp with the

ambassador of the United Nations, they asked us what kind of a sponsor did we want. My husband said we needed a Christian sponsor. That's why we ended up coming to Holland. Later, we learned that Holland is a religious town. If he had known that it's very cold here, maybe he would have asked for California or Florida instead of coming to Michigan. He doesn't like the cold weather, but there is another side to the cold weather--the warm people. So we like it here.

DR: Was your husband Christian before he came to the United States the first time?

TL: I would say that he was Buddhist over there. But he had some missionary friends from America, missionaries who went over there to Laos. He made friends with them. They told him about Christianity. It seemed like it was everything that he wanted. Then he joined, me and my four children, over at Harderwyk Christian Reformed Church and made profession of faith. We became members at that time up to now.

DR: How is the way that you practice your religion now different than when you were growing up?

TL: For me it's not too much different. My uncle, he's still a monk right now over there. For the Buddhists, they teach people almost the same way in the Bible. We both believe in the caring and giving person. I think about the sponsorship right now. They are taking care of everything, a lot of responsibility for us. They

support my children go to school, to a private school. They pay for it. They helped us start everything. We just came here with one set of clothes in the beginning. We had nothing to carry, no possessions at all when we came. They had everything set up for us, for nine people. We never say enough thank-yous for all of their support. Following this example, whatever we can do, we are so happy, so overjoyed. In the way that we received so much from Harderwyk, we want to help other families or other people whose needs are like ours. That is our model in our mind and we keep that--how to rejoice in the happiness in giving to others. That's what my husband and I are trying.

When we came here, it was just a little town. We were the first Laotian family here. My husband told our sponsor that he wanted to meet some more friends, because in the army he always has some soldier friends. When he came here, he was alone. He cannot be alone and he asked our sponsor to ask another church to sponsor more Laotian families to come to this town. Now we have so many. From time to time when they came, we helped them out, because he knows how to speak English. When he started working, he worked second shift. In the morning, he was still sleeping, but they really needed interpreters at that time. I started learning English here at Holland Community Education on 15th Street, and graduated in 1990. My sponsor just put me on, "Okay, you go. You can do that. I will be with you." I just used my

broken English, whatever I learned from school, from friends. From that time on, I volunteered to help as an interpreter from 1980 up to now. I just did it day or night, whatever time I have. They keep me very busy with it, but I'm very happy to help out with all kinds of needs, going between doctors and patients, sponsors and refugees, and Health Department officials--all kinds of them, including even government paperwork--this kind of stuff.

DR: How much English did you know before you came here?

TL: In the beginning I just answer with my smile, and answer, "Yes," instead of "No," and use my hands and open the door. That's all I did for the first few months. Then I tried the best I can. I went to school every day. First we went to school with Dial-A-Ride--the whole family. Three weeks later my husband got a job with his brother. Then I had to stay home. The next-door teacher who taught the morning classes, she would come to pick me up in the mornings. She worked part time, and I'd go home with her in the afternoons. I had my baby, who sat on my lap while I studied. She was eleven months old. I held her in class because they don't have nursery yet, at that time. So that's how I learned. My children would go to school. My son was older; he went to the kindergarten. When he came home, we talked about it. We all tried not to say anything except English. It is so hard; it is very hard. But I tried the best I can. When I make mistakes I just laugh.

DR: And you've obviously done very well. What have been your children's experiences in school here in the United States?

TL: My son's first year, he was the only Asian in school. Every year he tried the best he can. Whatever he learned from school, he'd come home to teach us. He had some help with English for the first year.

DR: How old was he?

TL: He turned seven one month after we got here. He was born on [date removed], 1972. We came here February 15, just about one month and one week before his seventh birthday. He went to kindergarten and was seven years old. He loved to draw, loved cartoons on the T.V. He tried the best he can, and he'd go on every year. He graduated when he was nineteen, from Holland Christian High School. He has one more year to finish at Pepperdine.

DR: How do you think their education is different here in the United States than it would have been had you lived in Laos?

TL: For all my children this is the first education for them here. They never had school over there while I had one. It's hard for them at first in America, but it's easier than it is for me. They learn quicker, they remember, and everything they say doesn't have an accent. I am a different story from them. I have my Laotian background. They make friends very quick and they learn. After the second year, they adjusted and went straight through school like everyone else.

DR: Do your children also speak Laotian?

TL: For the first few years they still speak both English and Laotian. When they're between junior high and high school, they slid out some, but they still understand and speak straight-forward Laotian. But now my son goes back to that. He studies like he is in the dictionary. He can write a Laotian letter to us and he prefers to speak mostly Laotian back to Mom and Dad when he talks on the telephone. He's in California right now. For my two daughters here at home, they forget all of the speaking part. Now they just started to learn some more. Khan Kham will be a junior next year and my baby will be a freshman. I just started to teach Laotian class last year and I asked them to be there with us one night. They said they don't want to lose English because they don't want to let their grades go down. Either of them would be good if they wanted to be, but I won't force them to do that. If they want to study some time later, then they can study it. I wish they can keep both languages, though. They do understand Lao fully and answer me quickly in English. They can also speak limited Lao with a funny accent. It's funny for me because my husband's from the South, I'm from the North, and the two older brother and sister lived in the middle of Laos, in Vientiane. We have three tones of speaking because of that. The two little ones here, they don't know if they should follow Dad, or follow Mom, or

brother and sister. So when they speak, it has a really funny sound the way they pronounce it.

DR: Does your family celebrate any special Laotian holidays or traditions?

TL: We did have the Laotian New Year here in Holland. Most of the time it's a get-together with the family. Most of the time it's just my brother's and sister's families. I get into the Lao community some once in a while, whenever I have time to be with them. We have a Laotian New Year here in town once a year in April. All we do is the Laotian New Year, and get together here and there, for weddings. We have food like Laotian custom at home. And we do some stuff at church. More than that, we don't have much things to do out here. Lots of them forget, and most of them, they don't remember what happened in the past. It took them so long to be in the camp, have nothing over there, and then they come here and everything passes by and they don't have any memory about it at all.

DR: What do you think of that? Is that good or bad?

TL: In my opinion, it's bad for the kids in the Lao community of Holland. They don't know about their customs when the families do not have time to get together to celebrate. The adults don't do it because of their work schedule. The children who are born and raised here don't get to see even a New Year's celebration in

Holland. Most of the parents do try and keep their background and language still alive.

DR: Could you talk a little bit about your work and exactly what you do?

TL: I started working part-time for Holland Public Schools under Monika Giddy. I just worked six hours a week on Thursday and Friday afternoons and helped a lot with the students who just came here and are monolingual--they don't know any English at all. I helped them out, tutoring them, up until 1990. I graduated from the adult high school completion program. After I finished school (my husband was not working at that time--he worked for ten years, but that year is the year he got out), I asked Monika if I can get a full-time job from Holland Public Schools and she said she doesn't have a full-time job for me. Then, Mr. Ramirez, my boss right now, he needed a person like me to work there. He gave me a full-time job. I accepted that job and I work there now.

DR: Where is that?

TL: West Ottawa Public Schools, through the bilingual migrant program, as a bilingual assistant. For my first year of working at West Ottawa Public Schools, I worked in seven school buildings. I did Glerum, High School, Middle School, Pine Creek, Little Pine (kindergartners), Woodside, and Waukazoo. Seven schools for the first year made my schedule spread very thin. Then, the second year, we really needed more help because we had lots of Laotian

students, plus the Vietnamese and Cambodians. We also had some Taiwanese students, but most of them we give them help in English and we help them in their class. I don't need my Laotian to speak to Taiwanese or other Asians. I just speak with them in English and help them out, let them come along and get caught up with their own grades. My second year we cut down to five buildings because they cut out Waukazoo and Glerum for me. Last year I had my sister to help me out as a part-time assistant. Then they cut down to four buildings last year. They cut from seven to five and five to four. I stay in the Middle School and High School in the mornings at different hours throughout the week. Then I go to Pine Creek on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday; and Woodside School in the afternoon on Tuesday and Thursday.

The job they hired me to do is for the elementary school, but the need was so demanding at the High School and Middle School, that I had to work for these two buildings. I work with the students in their class so they know enough to get on with the mainstream classroom. Besides that I do translating between the school and the parents. I also make lots of phone calls and receive calls. They call me at 2:15 in the morning sometimes when they have an emergency. Many times it's at 6:00 in the morning before I leave to go to work. So, there is lots of home liaison (home visits), especially when the school needs parents' permission. Whatever needs to be done in each building for the

Asian families, they give it to me. That's what I do for them, been through all that.

DR: How many kids would you say you have helped?

TL: I work in a class of between twenty-eight and thirty students every year. But there are more outside of class through contact with families by setting up a meeting, talk about suspensions, whatever came up. I have over fifty students to work with that way. But overall, we had the first year 158 Asian students, last year 128. This year it's 115. So, I helped many of them, but some are just doing fine.

DR: What are the biggest challenges in your job?

TL: The toughest challenge is being counselor. A lot of the families who get in town call me, and want to work with me, to get advice about dealing with their kids. I stop once a week or once a month or more to talk to them. They all want to do good for their family. If they say, "I don't want to see her," then they just slip away. I just lost a few of them, but not much. But I still feel bad, even though just one student. I don't want none of them to drop out of school. I want them to turn around. They promise me they will come back to the adult school to finish the high school. They start working in a factory with their parents and they know that it's not easy to go back to school. I told them it's not just themselves who make mistakes; everybody makes mistakes. You know the things that you have to turn around, you

have to go back on track, to do it over again, it's really no problem at all. I just use myself in comparison to them all the time. I'm over forty, I'm still learning; you're just fourteen or fifteen years old, you have plenty of time to start it over.

Forget whatever you did in the past. If you used to do bad things in school that right now you know is wrong, stop and do the right things. You have plenty of time to do it over.

DR: What percentage of them drop out as opposed to the number that graduate?

TL: In my last three years, only six students dropped. The rest stay on or graduated. This year we have twelve seniors. Nine of them will continue in college. The three of them are looking for a job, to do some skill or attend trade school. One student will work for this year but will go back next year. I hope he does it.

DR: You said that you were the first Laotian family to come to Holland?

TL: At that time, yes.

DR: Do you have an idea of how many Laotian families live in Holland right now?

TL: We counted last year 135, with the ones who get married. Right now probably there would be more, because there's more moving in, and settling down, they get married and have their own family. There will probably be between 140 and 145, but I don't know exactly. We have so many right now. Most of them bought their

own house. I know that many came through their sponsor family. If they have five kids, they're all married now. One family there's seven children. They all get married, all have a family. They must be seven or eight right now. So, some extensions like that. Some families, two or three families stay together. I don't know how we count, if they are just one family, or three families. I know one of my friends right now, they have four families staying in one house. They have eighteen people in there. Sometimes they will have the same phone, living in the same address, but just one family. Most of them will be on the North side of town. Half of them bought their house through Farmers Home Administrations (FHAD) (state aid). The approved area is from Riley and out on the North side of town. That's why they are all out there. They also rent apartments out there, at Keystone and Vander Bar properties. All the kids go to the West Ottawa school district area. That's why we have more Laotians in the North side instead of in Holland. We have only a few in Holland. One family in Holland had eight children when they came. If all eight are married, then we have nine families from that one. There's just only one with a girlfriend, not married yet, but he has his own place now.

DR: How has the Laotian community changed in the years that you've lived here?

TL: The Lao community is growing. It started with my family at 702 East Eighth Street. Then, when more families were sponsored, they told their friends and relatives about Holland. We helped them get started in America. Some even lived with us until they found their own place and a job. We never had an empty house. They called our house the Laotian Hotel for a while.

The Laotians adjusted to America in different ways. Some are grateful to sponsors and believe in Christianity. Others want to keep their old religion (Buddhism) and culture. The third group is mixed. They have many different beliefs. Some believe in ancestor worship, evil spirits, reincarnation, and superstition.

They wanted to start a Lao Community organization and find a leader. Also, some of them started a Lao Community Church. Then, they divided. Some of them still believe in Buddhism. Some of them believe in Christianity and they said forget about Buddhism or talked bad about Buddhism. The people who believe in Buddhism, they got upset. They want to go to a temple, like in Detroit and in Rockford, Illinois. They go there because they believe in it and are happy about their religion. Besides that, there are the others who believe something else--reincarnation, ancestor worship. They don't go to church, they don't go to temple. When the Christian people try to tell the Buddhist people about Christianity, the Buddhists tell them "Don't talk to me about Christianity because I believe in Buddhism." When the Buddhists

try to tell their Christian friends, they are told, "Don't talk to me about Buddhism because I believe in Christianity." Some stuff like that.

It's the worse story. I've been studying how these people approach me when they come to me for help. They see me in three ways. Number one, they say I'm Buddhist. Number two, they say I'm a Christian woman. Number three, they say I'm everything. When they come to me, I have to think about that and be sensitive. I want to deal with it in the right way. I tell them to do whatever they feel is right for them, to make them happy--not something to hurt their feelings.

DR: You said that some people would say you're a Buddhist, some people would say you're a Christian. How would you describe yourself?

TL: I do not believe I belong to either group. But the way I believe, right now, I just do whatever is right day by day. God always said don't worry for tomorrow and don't keep yesterday in mind to bother you. Some would say that Buddhism is the same way, that if you worry too much, you have nothing done; you just take it one step at a time.

DR: What do you think is going to happen in the Laotian community in the future as they're becoming more and more split?

TL: I'm just afraid that it will turn out like everything else in history that has to do with religion and culture. That's why I try to make them understand each other and be united. Right now,

the Lao Community Organization say they are neutral. "We can unite all of you who want to join in the community," they say. But somewhere they're pushing their own sides very strong and want everybody to hear it.

I just like to combine all three. For me right now, whatever group comes to me, that need help from me, I don't mind whatever they say about their beliefs. I just go and help them at that time. If they don't need me, fine. If they need me, I want to help them out.

They don't want anybody to tell them what to do. I have the feeling that if they don't start understanding each other, the town is going to be fighting. It will affect the children as they grow up. They get divided by families. They don't want to talk to this family or to that family. They just keep dividing. I hope it's not going to be very bad. But someday in God's will, we'll unite all together and we'll understand each other. But I don't know the future. I just hope for something better, not something worse.

DR: Do you have much contact with Asians living in Holland who have come from other countries, outside of the school?

TL: I have some contact with Cambodians, Vietnamese, Thais, and some others. But I don't do very much with them. Mostly it's with the Asians in school and the Laotians in the community.

[End of Side One]

DR: Have you ever noticed or experienced yourself any discrimination or racial tension in Holland?

TL: Yes. But I don't get as bothered anymore because I'm someone who just gives up about this and believe that this is the way it is going to be. I'm not being defeatist, but it is so hard to change. I know some people feel it is better to separate the races. I just try to avoid them. But some of my friends get mad about this. Like one man, he's divorced, and has three kids. He's got a nice job and like it. He worked through a government agency that helped him pay for childcare. He worked second shift. He got along with his supervisor very well. But once his supervisor was on vacation and he had a hard time with his team work leader. They had some kind of communication problem. The leader's attitude seemed to him to be discriminating, didn't want to be by him, just didn't get along well. He left that job because of that.

Most of the Asian men, they prefer not to talk back, not to fight back with words. Instead of by words, they keep it inside until they blow up and then they fight with fists. That's how they get into trouble that way. Here in America, you're supposed to talk it out, so that the other understands, and shake hands and be friends. Then everything's settled. But for Asian guys, no it's not over. They feel very beaten and keep it deep down in their heart. They think, "Why do you hate me? That person will

never be my friend," and some stuff like that. But Asian women are different. We are more friendly, give up easily, we forget things, we forgive for what has happened. We try to push those problems out. You seldom get into trouble with a woman.

DR: Do you think anything can be done about those problems?

TL: I don't really have the answer for that. For me, I believe the way, even though in the neighborhoods here I can tell how they feel and how they act and the different racial. For our family, we just try not to have the problems. Whatever doesn't feel to fit us in, just go away, and hopefully someday we'll be, what do they call, united in the equal opportunity. But some people, it is hard for them to change. We cannot change people's minds.

DR: Do you think the biggest tension comes between Asian and Asian people, or Asian and American, or . . . ?

TL: It's the same for everybody, from what I understand now. Look at gangs, then it's quite simple. They have all kinds of them. They have Asian, they have black, they have white, they have everything together there. Then you talk about a criminal or like that, it just about picks every kind. If they have so much hatred for each other--you talk about me, I talk about you--it never ends. All you have to do is ask what should we have done? What should we do about it? Can we understand each other? Can we talk it out? What would make you happy? How can we take care of this problem? If we all come together this way, I think there will be less

pressure and we'll trust each other more. Right now we are just watching each other--what are you going to do to me? I'm prepared, I will try to protect myself--something like that. The way I see it, that's my opinion. I hope it's not going to be that way. Some areas it happens that way.

DR: What do you think Asian people, or Laotian people, specifically, have to offer the community of Holland?

TL: We just started here in Holland. We got involved with many organizations and agencies. We want to do something right for the community. We try to take care of our problems that make other problems. I have been asking for their support the last three years. I saw some support last year when we had ethnic nights, ethnic meeting, Asian parents meetings. We try to make them aware. In our country, we never had conferences. We don't have open house for school. All we had was just the last day of school, with the parents, the principal, everybody there, and gave the awards to the students and then went home. I was only in school for one year. Maybe they did more. I was always busy working, helping my dad. I don't know much about life in the cities or about the educational system. That's all we did. If they had a letter sent home or a phone call (we seldom call over there), but if they had a letter sent home over there, it would be about trouble.

That's so hard for them to understand here. The school calls to compliment the good work or to say something bad. It's all mixed up--they call for good, they call for bad. The parents don't understand it. But they get involved. We have open house and conference time two or three times a year. Each school is different. They ask, "If I go there, what should I ask? What should I say? I don't know what to talk about. I don't know what to ask." But they try to be there and talk with the teachers and take care of their kids.

DR: I'm through my list of questions. Is there anything you would like to add or you think I should have asked that I didn't?

TL: I hope that the Laotian Community will do more to help Holland to be a better place to live. To understand each other is an important step in uniting Laotians. Gang violence must be stopped. One way is to improve their education, both the parents and the children. Everyone must get involved to make it happen, especially parents volunteering in school in their free time. That is my hope and wish. Family relationships need to be established firmly. Parenting skills must be developed and improved. When the children know that their parents love and care for them, they will learn and become educated with skills and knowledge. The children need their parents and will want to stay out of trouble.

DR: I've asked all my questions and you've had a lot of very interesting things to say. Thank you very much.

TL: You're welcome.