

6-1-1994

## McIntosh, Mary Oral History Interview (American involved with the Vietnamese community): Asian and African American Residents of Holland

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### Recommended Citation

**Repository citation:** Rottier, Donna M., "McIntosh, Mary Oral History Interview (American involved with the Vietnamese community): Asian and African American Residents of Holland" (1994). *Asian and African American Residents of Holland*. Paper 7. [http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/min\\_res/7](http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/min_res/7)

**Published in:** 1994 - *Asian and African American Residents of Holland (H88-0234)* - Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project, June 1, 1994. Copyright © 1994 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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Interview with  
Mary M. McIntosh  
Holland Resident Involved with the Vietnamese Community

Conducted June 1, 1994  
by Donna M. Rottier

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

DR: Could you please state your full name?

MM: Mary M. McIntosh.

DR: Also your current address and your date and place of birth?

MM: My current address is 346 N. Lakeshore Drive in Holland. I was born in Mount Vernon, Ohio, and that would be eighty-six years this August 2nd.

DR: Thank-you. Could you begin by describing a bit about yourself--where you grew up and how you came to live in Holland, Michigan?

MM: I grew up in Mount Vernon, Ohio. I stayed in Mount Vernon when my family moved--my father was transferred to Maryland--so that I could finish school there. After I was graduated from high school, by that time my family had moved to Detroit, Michigan, so that's where I moved. So I had finished high school. I was seventeen in June and my birthday came up in August. I was married at twenty, in Detroit. My husband was transferred, about twelve or fourteen years after we were married, to Milwaukee. While I was in Milwaukee, my last child started school. I have five children. That gave me some freedom. We had a good transportation system and I became active in my church and then out into the community. In 1955 he was transferred back to Detroit. I was very unhappy leaving Milwaukee because I had enjoyed the community and had enjoyed the friends I had made there. But when I came back to Detroit it wasn't too long until I

got myself involved again. I was deeply involved in Detroit. My husband passed away in March of 1973. In the meantime we had bought this little cottage in Holland so we could bring our grandchildren here in the summertime. I had to make a decision where I was going to stay, and I chose to sell the house in Detroit and come to Holland.

DR: You said that you were deeply involved in Detroit. Was that involved in the church again, as in Milwaukee?

MM: It was in the church, and also the community. I was the state secretary of the Michigan Heart Association, which had nothing to do with church. I did the interviewing for the WICS program, that's Women in Community Service. I kept busy. I had no responsibilities at home except to prepare my husband's dinner. He supported my outside interests. At fifty-five I took driver's training; Charlie bought me a car and a whole new world opened up.

DR: How did you first become involved with the Vietnamese community in Holland?

MM: We'd had a meeting for the women of the church. One of the speakers was the head of the refugee program for the diocese of Grand Rapids. She spoke of the great need for the church and organizations to sponsor families. I went to my pastor, Father Nash of Our Lady of the Lake, and asked him if he didn't think our parish could help. He said, "Well, yes, but we'll have to take it to the membership and see how they feel about it." It was not

entirely unanimous but I felt I had enough support to proceed, so I went back and talked about it again. When you start something like that then they say you can be responsible, we will support you once you get involved.

It was so fascinating. I was meeting people from half way around the world that I had never met before. They were still learning English. It was quite a challenge. It was so different than anything I had ever done. I might say I got myself involved before I realized how deeply I was getting committed. The first family was a very nice family. I enjoyed the association. I rented a seven-room house for them and had it furnished. Unfortunately the family had a lot of pressure from their relatives who were living in California to come out to the West Coast. They made the decision and the family in California sent them the tickets. They were only here a little over three months when they left.

So I went to the parish again and I said we can have either the biggest garage sale that's ever held in Holland or we can take another family. The feeling was as long as the house is all furnished let's try another family, which we did. That family's still with us and I'm very pleased with the progress that they have made since they came here. When they came I didn't know my way around. You have to know how to get to places of employment, who is employing, etc. But they put up with me and they have done

very well and I'm very proud of their achievements. In three years they bought their own home. Before they moved, I had another family the diocesan office asked if I was willing to take, and the parish approved. They arrived the year after the second family.

That was the third family. Again we went through the routine of renting a house and getting it furnished so that it was ready for their arrival. That family also has done very well in the community. Once you get involved, it's just like a snowball; it keeps on going.

DR: How long ago was it that you began to get involved?

MM: February of 1984. The first family left in May and I think the second family came in August 1984. The following year the third family came in and as I said from then on I've practically lost track of the number of families that I have worked with. Not that the church has sponsored all of them. But what does happen is that you sponsor one family and then they sometimes sponsor relatives to come in after they get situated themselves. But when they sponsor relatives, you're going to do a lot of the work for them because the sponsoring family does not have the know-how.

DR: How is it that these families come to learn of Holland, Michigan? Why is it that they move here?

MM: Families come in. Like the first three or four families that came here were boat people. The next families left with the permission

of the Vietnamese government. They would come by plane as far as the Philippines or sometimes Malaysia. There they were interviewed by our government forces to clear them for coming into the United States, to get their background, and also to receive a physical to make sure they are in good health. If they have a relative over here, which has happened a couple times, the relative will say they will sponsor them and then they will bring them in and naturally bring them to Holland. Sometimes, I've also had an occasion or two where they have friends here in Holland and they came to another part of the country and were not happy there, largely because of the lack of employment, and this is very important for these people, to get a job and go to work. They've run into situations where they couldn't see employment to satisfy their family needs and maybe their friends here in Holland would say you come on to Holland and we'll take care of you and you'll be all right. So I could find out about it after the deed had been done, you might say. I was trying to tell somebody when they said, "How many families have you had?" I've lost track; I don't know. One family came in; he brought his friend in who lived down in Texas. His friend brought his niece and two nephews in, which was another family, and then he brought a woman he felt an obligation to. She had three children. This is the way it goes; you start with one family and as a result of that you find out you

have four or five. It was my decision to help the sponsoring family.

DR: Have you worked solely with Vietnamese families?

MM: The church sponsored seven families. When I talked to my pastor about taking a refugee family, I chose the Vietnamese people because the head of our refugee resettlement program for the diocese is a Vietnamese woman. Naturally she can converse in her own native language and I thought this would be a help for me, and it certainly was. She was very helpful also, coming out to talk to these people and explain things which they didn't understand. They would have a hard time understanding my explanation and sometimes I didn't fully understand their question.

DR: Could you describe the process a typical family goes through once they arrive in Holland?

MM: Once they arrive in Holland, I take them out for short runs around town, the first week, because the time adjustment, coming from the Far East, they want to sleep during the day and be up all night. It takes about a week, but in the meantime, I can run them over to the Social Security office, which doesn't take too long and clear them through that agency.

Then by the second week I take them to Social Services where they must go, and also to the Health Department which can be somewhat time consuming because they take a TB test and quite often they will show a positive reaction--not to say that they



have TB, but they have been exposed to it, and this could be in the camps; I don't know where the exposure comes from. But if they show a positive reaction, that means they must go into the county hospital in Grand Rapids for the X-rays. It kills a day when you take them in there, and then they have to go back to the Health Department again for the report from the hospital to receive the prescription for the medication, if that is prescribed. It takes a good month to get them cleared.

In the meantime I'm checking around to find out which plants around the Holland area are employing and who the person in charge is at the employment office, and also register them at MESC and temporary employment offices. After that I start taking them for interviews. When the first families came in I was very very fortunate in that I had estimated the time for their resettlement. It took the first month to get them through the agencies. It took them the second month before I had them placed in working position. By that time, they are pretty much on their own. They found out where the supermarket was and places around town which they needed to know. After you had one or two families here, I also would take them to meet the people that I knew so that they would have a social contact. I felt it was very important for them to have the telephone. And they really love that telephone. They call up their friends and talk to them and ask *them* questions which I couldn't answer.

By the time they were here three months and working, they were ready to make a down payment on some kind of a car. It may not be the best, but it was transportation. It wouldn't be too long after that and they were entirely independent. By the time they were here about three years, they buy their own home. They've all bought very nice homes and they have them nicely furnished. It's a real pleasure going around remembering what their circumstances were when they came in and where I see them today. And they *are* ambitious; that's the most important thing. I remember I had one family that came in and they were here for about two weeks and the husband said, "When I go to work?" I said, "We've got some things to do first, and then you can go to work. You're going to work; don't worry about that." They definitely do not want to be on welfare. They know about welfare when they come over, and they don't want welfare. We've never had a family that I've worked with that's been on welfare.

DR: How are the initial expenses, like medical bills and rent payments, financed?

MM: The medical bills, of course, are under social services that first year or until they're working and have insurance from their employer. The other expenses, once I get a place rented for them, I put a notice in the church paper and tell them what I need. The people in the parish have been very very good in responding to needs. It's amazing the number of things people have bought and

can no longer use: a table, chair, a sofa, or something. So I've been able to accept these items. When the first families came, after they had been cleared in the camp, they could express a preference for which country they would like to resettle in. Refugees have been sent to many of the United Nations countries that had forces in Vietnam. These people have been scattered all over the world. Should they ask for the United States, their name, age of family, ages, education, etc. is sent to the National Resettlement Office in New York. Unless the refugee family asks for an area in which they have a relative or friend, the national office will assign them to an agency such as our Diocesan Resettlement Office who will accept the family. The agency must in turn find a church or organization who will do the actual resettlement service. The National Resettlement Office will reimburse the sponsoring group up to \$1500 providing there is proof of expense. The church set up \$1500 for expenses, that included the rent, getting the telephone, and the gas, and all that sort of thing. I didn't pay the full amount for their deposit for the telephone and probably for the gas because I could see they were going to be working and I said, when you get your bill, you're going to get a little bit more because you're going to have to pay for having the service put in. That's worked out all right. The \$1500 is usually short of expense. The church has accepted the difference.

DR: It's obvious that you've been a tremendous help to some of these families. How do they respond to you when they first come?

MM: Well I think they look at this old lady and wonder what she can do! Because in their country, women are more homebound. They take care of the home and take care of the children and that's it. When they get to the age I was when they were coming here, they're able to sit in their chair and have the family care for them. They first would pass the word on to the others that it's okay, she'll do it. And they still are amazed. I had a family out here to see me on Sunday. They said, "In my country, women your age, they don't work, they don't do things like you do." They think it's because I've lived here in the United States, and that's why I'm stronger.

DR: What other cultural differences do you notice right away?

MM: The biggest thing is their food. For a while I didn't understand the things that they were looking for. They would tell me, but the Vietnamese word they used, I didn't understand. I would take them shopping around and try and show them what I thought they were looking for, and they would shake their head that wasn't it. Here again is the advantage when they had other Vietnamese to talk to. Then they would come back the next time and they would know what they wanted, filled out for me in English.

I wouldn't say it's a difference, but they are very family-oriented. Their children are extremely important to them and the

children must do well in school. I don't know whether they look at the grades and they mean anything to them or not, but they are very concerned that the children stay in school and learn. I've been real pleased at the number of them that, as the children become eligible, have gone into college and had some help there.

DR: How do you feel about the quality of education in the Holland schools?

MM: The first families I brought in went to the Washington school and I can't say enough in praise of the teachers they had at that school, because they were just outstanding. They were so good to those kids, helping them to adjust. I just couldn't say enough good things about them. Of course, I think when they get up to the high school age, then they meet their own friends and their own contacts and they're pursuing the type of education that appeals to the student. In other words what I'm talking about is choosing the classes that they want to be in. They take up a Spanish class, a Latin class. And by that time they have enough English background that they can handle it.

DR: Do most of the children go to the schools? Is that the norm, or are there exceptions?

MM: I have not had any exceptions. If you're talking about grade and high school. I have never had a problem with one of the families that I was working with where the children did not go to school when they were supposed to.

DR: How do you feel about bilingual education programs?

MM: I think they need a bilingual person within the school system because sometimes there are bound to be misunderstandings. I'm not talking about misunderstandings in a point of conflict. I'm talking just about understanding. So I think there needs to be somebody within the school system who can communicate. I don't think every school needs that person, but I think there needs to be one available to the school system. The hospital has called me a couple times for translators. I think they have a couple of my people on their list that they call now. Because a patient enters the hospital and they don't know what's happening and they can't talk to the doctor, and the doctor can't understand them if they respond to him.

DR: How much English do these families generally speak when they get here and how long does it take them to learn enough to be able to communicate?

MM: A lot of that depends on the family. I think the educational background they had in their own country is a help to them. Most all of them got some English. They tell me they studied English one day a week in school. Sometimes I have wondered about the accent of the English teacher because I couldn't understand what they were saying at all. But like here in our own country, if you go to the East Coast or the South there is an accent. When you hit the Midwest, we speak much more quickly than other parts of

the country. This they find very hard to understand because when they were taught English, the person who was teaching them speaks very slowly and gets each letter pronounced. When they come in, I take the adults over to Community Ed., and they get an English second language course. And that's been very very good, and the teachers there have been most helpful.

DR: Have you found that most Vietnamese families who move into Holland generally stay in Holland?

MM: I've only had that one family that moved out. Employment in Holland has been pretty good and they'll work at anything to get a job. After they're here for a while they may leave the place of employment where I got them in because they had a friend in another plant and they like the other plant better. But until they find something, they stay wherever they can start out.

DR: Do most of them start out in factory work?

MM: Thank God for Bil-Mar. They have employed a lot of Vietnamese people. With Bil-Mar, Request Food, and Tyson Food, all three have a good working force of Vietnamese. Prince Corporation hired my first refugee; some are at Haworth. Right now they're scattered generally around the city.

DR: In what sorts of ways have you seen these people become involved in any community activities?

MM: As far as community activities are concerned, I can't think of anything they have done as a family. Now the children are in the

parades during Tulip Time, and Dutch dancing. But community-wise I can't really think of anything. One of the things, women did not work in Vietnam; they work here. They try to stagger their shifts so that the children are not left home alone. They are very conscious of the welfare of the children. I think that limits the parents moving out to enter any type of community activity. They tend to stay more amongst their own people. But then they call me "Mother" and "Grandmother," so I'm part of the family.

DR: Is there a very strong sense of community between Vietnamese residents in Holland?

MM: I think there is. Again, I don't delve into their private lives and what they're doing. If they offer it to me, then that's the only way that I can tell you about it. I do think amongst themselves, they, as I've said, the telephone is marvelous, and I think they keep pretty good contact with friends.

DR: What about other Asian-American groups in Holland? Do you know of any support system that they have, such as a person like yourself who has been very influential in helping these families settle and get work?

MM: I have never worked with any. There's another woman here in town that I have met a couple times named Mary Schipper. I know she's worked with Asians from different countries, more than just the Vietnamese. And Ed Sternberg. I don't think there is any contact



between different Asians, the Vietnamese, the Laotians, or especially the Cambodians. I don't think there is much contact when they are in their native lands, and I don't think have much here. There's a difference in languages, too.

DR: Are there, that you know of, any Vietnamese organizations in Holland?

MM: As far as I know, there is none in Holland.

DR: What sorts of problems have these families encountered in moving into a community like Holland?

MM: They have been very impressed with the American people they've met here in Holland. They feel that the American people have been very helpful to them. They have a positive attitude toward our country anyhow, which is helpful. I have never heard them talk about other groups within Holland. They don't mingle with the other groups. Sometimes when they've been in a neighborhood where there's another group from another country, they have been a little cautious and uneasy. Sometimes, I was not too sure, but what the other group is the one to be causing the problem. Then the next thing to do in that case is to see if you can find them another place to live, and that usually solves it.

DR: Do you think it is a positive or a negative factor that these people maintain such a sense of community and don't necessarily become involved outside of that?

MM: I think one of the biggest things is first, the lack of time, because with both parents working and there's usually children involved. The second thing is the language barrier. They do learn their basic English very quickly at work. I've said sometimes I think they learn faster at work than they can at school because they have to use the words that are being spoken on the job. Sometimes they get the wrong interpretation maybe with a word here or there, but at least they have that word. I think that's the biggest thing. They are very proud of what of their children have done. Those are the things I think that you have to build on. Of course the children, very few of them can really remember coming from Vietnam. They'll have some vague memories maybe if they came by boat or something like that, but not, to say, like going to grandmother's house or going into the city or that sort of thing. I have never heard them mention these two.

DR: How do you think that Holland as a community has responded to these people?

MM: As a community I think they've been very very supportive of them. I don't hesitate, if I know someone who could be of service to them and the service is needed, there isn't anyone I have met in Holland that I wouldn't contact and ask. They have all been very good to me in that area. It is largely in the area of employment that I get out into the community trying to find them jobs.

DR: Have you noticed any antagonism from other working people toward Vietnamese people coming in and acquiring these jobs?

MM: Surprisingly the only time I ever heard that was an American who was interested in another group of people and made the comment, "Well, the Asians came in; they took all the jobs." But this was not Asian to Asian. It was an American who was interested in one group. She could not see the larger picture. Because you're interested in Vietnamese people it doesn't mean that you can take on the whole community; you've got to concentrate somewhere or you're going to be inadequate at what you're trying to do.

DR: Do you then consider that kind of feeling the exception?

MM: I don't think that is typical of the community.

DR: Have you noticed any other sorts of racial tension or discrimination?

MM: As I said, I had one family and there was another family from another country who lived a couple doors from them. They were very frightened. The thing to do is to get them out of the house and into another one. That solved the whole problem, but prior to that they were very uneasy. It went on for some little time before I was aware of it, but they're all right now.

DR: What areas of Holland do Vietnamese families generally move into?

MM: When they first come here, you have to rent where the rents are lower, so you rent along 12th Street, 13th, 14th, on both sides of River Avenue. As they move out and buy their own homes, then

there is a big move, and they're out in the better sections around town. A number of them live in the Holland Heights area, and many on this side of the city. Quite a few of them have gone to mobile homes.

DR: What sorts of changes have you seen in the last ten years that you've been working with Vietnamese families moving into Holland?

MM: I think the fact that there are others here who have made it is a big encouragement to any that have come in recently. They can see their own people here, that they have their own homes, they are nicely furnished, the kids are doing well in school, everybody is well-dressed, and they have ample food. Their preferences in food are much different than the American, and also it's a more economic and, I think, a more healthful diet than we have. I go to their homes sometimes and of course, when you go in, you have to eat something. I don't think any of them had butter or oleo. They'll get out the bread because they know that Americans all eat bread. So they'll get the bread, but there's nothing to put on top of it. Being a spoiled American, I want butter, and then maybe something else on top of that. But they are very hospitable and all I can say is it's just been a real pleasure working with them, seeing how they have tried with what you have been able to offer them.

DR: What do you feel the Asian-American community as a whole has to offer the city of Holland?

MM: Speaking again for the Vietnamese, I think they offer a good, solid family background. I think that's very important. I think their industry, to see what they've done getting ahead. I don't know how they've done it. I look at them and marvel. The fact that almost every one of them, by the time they're here three years, they own their own home. I surely could not have done it, so I am very impressed. They keep things up well; everything's very well maintained. The homes are always neat and clean.

DR: What do you see as some of the major challenges facing the Vietnamese living in Holland, Michigan?

MM: I don't like to think of Holland as a challenge to them here. I think going into the American culture. The very fact that they are from Asia, their appearance identifies them as a person non-American. Then when they have the language problem, I think it's probably their biggest handicap. They have not told me, but I have a feeling that sometimes there has been discrimination amongst the employees in a plant against a person. I was talking to a young fellow the other day, and I have a hunch that this is what he is running into. But these are isolated instances, and you don't know what the person's like until she's in front of you. But it isn't the community; the community has been very supportive. I can't complain about the Holland community.

DR: How do you see Holland changing as more and more Vietnamese families and other Asian families are moving in?

MM: I have thought about that sometimes, and I think it's very much like our own country was when we started bringing in the Europeans, when the Industrial Revolution started in this country and we needed cheap help from Europe. Now these people are not here as cheap help. They're getting the higher wages that are paid in the plants, which is good because they are using it, I think, very wisely. One of the things I think is very important for the American people to realize, and that is that these people pay taxes, like everybody else, and that they are contributing to the community and to the country. They all seem to be very satisfied and happy with what they have. I think their attitude towards the country and their attitude towards their family life makes them good citizens.

DR: Do most of them become American citizens?

MM: Yes. They have to be here six years before they can apply for citizenship. A number of mine have their citizenship now.

DR: What process do they have to go about to apply for citizenship?

MM: They are here six years, and I don't have to worry about them. I'll see them and they'll say, "Mary, I was to Detroit and I got my citizenship papers." Once they can handle things, they don't call on you to wait on them.

DR: What do you think is the most important or valuable part of your experience with Vietnamese families which you think people should know about?

MM: These people are good American citizens in the best interpretation of that word. I think they support the country, they are very grateful for what they have here, which they couldn't have had at home at the time. Their children are going to be excellent citizens and I think well-educated. They'll be able to help the country in the years ahead as we go into more of this computers and expansion of our foreign trade, all that sort of thing. I know one young man who was here to see me this week and he's starting college in the fall to concentrate on computers. I think this sort of a contribution to the country. They pretty well do marry within the Vietnamese community. I think the family life, which I have been very impressed with, is going to make a big difference.

DR: Do you ever see any conflict between children who have for the most part spent most of their life in the United States and their parents who came earlier and remember a great deal more about Vietnam?

MM: I hear them talking. One family that I'm thinking of, since you're asking that question, their daughter, I think she was finishing the eighth grade about that time, but she was the one that did all the talking between the real estate man and the father to explain what was taking place. She did all of that work for the family. I don't know, and I'm sure this has happened in other cases, but I was just more aware of that one. I think we're

switching something in the family structure this way because the children have the knowledge and the know-how and the parents don't. I've never been to Vietnam, but I would be inclined to think that the parents in Vietnam were more authoritative than they're able to be here. Except where it comes to education and taking care of the home, then they put the law down and it does work.

DR: What one question do you feel is most important for me to ask these Vietnamese families when I'll be interviewing them this summer?

MM: When you interview them this summer, I think the most important thing is to find out how they came to this country; why did they come to this country; what was their educational background before they left. The men, of course, most all of them were in the army, and I think you will find that most of them were officers in the army which shows that they were not just part of the rank and file. Another thing very important is there are a lot of American people who still do not realize that these people pay income tax. I ran into this just a couple weeks ago. I said something about one of my Vietnamese families just bought a new home. This girl said "Well, you know, both of them work and they have no income tax to pay." I asked, "Since when?" In other words, I think there are some people around Holland who feel that we are providing a gravy train for them and that's how they can get



ahead. And that nothing was done for the resident so they are handicapped. That type of attitude is not good; they need to know that we're all in this together. The Vietnamese take real pride in their homes; their homes are something of which they can be proud.

DR: I'm through my list of questions, but if there is anything you would like to talk more about or feel needs to be said, I would appreciate hearing that.

MM: I think these people are very impressed with the health care available and what we can do for children. Now, you're going out to visit the Xuong Tran family. They have a premature baby. I don't think that baby would have had a ghost of a chance had she been born in Vietnam. She only weighed two pounds. It was one of those things that just happened. The mother had had other children no problem at all, but this baby came very early.

(Pause) I think we've pretty well covered it.

[End of Interview]