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Interview with
Ranong Silakhom
Laotian/Thai Resident

Conducted August 4, 1994
by Donna M. Rottier

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

DR: The date is August 4, 1994. This is Donna Rottier and I am interviewing Ranong Silakhom in his office in Holland, Michigan. Could you please repeat your full name for the record.

RS: My full name is Ranong Silakhom. Mostly people call me Long; my nickname is Long.

DR: Your current address.

RS: 3116 128th Avenue in Holland.

DR: And your date and place of birth.

RS: [date removed], 1947.

DR: Where were you born?

RS: I was born in Thailand.

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

RS: February 8, 1980.

DR: Could you describe a bit about growing up in Thailand and your life before you moved to the United States.

RS: I was born in Thailand and then I have education in Thailand. After high school I cannot find a job in Thailand, so it's easy to me to go to Laos because I live at the border with Laos and Thailand. The people who study in Thailand, go back to Laos, really get easy job. So I go in Laos. Okay, my mom is Laos, my dad is Thailand. So they can go across, something like that. I go and then I have a job in Laos and get married in Laos.

DR: How did you get from Laos to the United States?

RS: Because is difficult time. By that time is when the Communists, 1975. 1978 I'm still not really good over there. Because I work with the American people--I work in the hospital(?) that belongs to the American people. So I escaped from Laos to Thailand, and then be in the camp. I don't know where I can go. I cannot decide by myself by that time. I still looking for another country to move. The first choice where I can go, America, and then I come.

DR: Were you sponsored?

RS: By Niekerk Christian Reformed Church, in Holland, here.

DR: What sorts of things did your sponsor do to help you move into the community?

RS: I don't know anything about this before, so I just interview with the people in Thailand, for anywhere I can go. When I come in here, I am afraid, too, the first time. Because many people told me, if you go to America, you'll become Christian. I don't like Christian before, so I hate Christian. So I scared they will bring me to Christian. And then when I come in here, is the first two years I am difficult to live with this. After that I feel like God call me to work for Him. Let's praise the Lord! That's why I'm really happy now. It's changed, it's different.

DR: What was your religious background?

RS: Buddhist. My parents, all Buddhists. My wife's parents is Buddhist.

DR: What part of the city did you first live in?

RS: Vientiane. You mean in here?

DR: Yes, in Holland.

RS: Yes, in Holland right away, and then I never moved to anywhere.

DR: Had you studied English before you moved here?

RS: I studied a little bit in Thailand. Then I come in here, keep study in English. But I will tell you, English is difficult for me.

DR: It's a difficult language to learn.

RS: Yes, it's really, really difficult.

DR: Could you describe your first job in Holland.

RS: Yes, the sponsor give me many, many place job. First time I worked with the sponsor in the greenhouse. After that, go to landscaping with the sponsor. Then he give me a job in egg-packing. After that about two years, I have a good job in S-2 Yachts and move to Herman Miller. So I work in Herman Miller about ten years.

DR: Do you still work there now?

RS: No. I quit at Herman Miller and work with the church now.

DR: How long have you been working with the church.

RS: Since 1991. So for three-and-a-half years now.

DR: Could you describe a little bit about what you do here?

RS: I'm pastor of the Lao Church. We have attendance right now about one hundred people. Mostly I visit the new people who come in, or

visit all Lao people in here. The Lao Community right now is 210 families, about that. Mostly move in, not move out. Some move out, too, but mostly move in. 210 families around here. I visit them. Sometimes they have a problem with the kid, so we talk about this.

DR: Did you organize the Lao Church yourself?

RS: First thing I will tell you, I don't want to be the Christian. But the Christians helped me to organize this. I tell lie to the sponsor. I'm not Christian, but I say I am Christian, because I need something. Take the people coming here, right now if you don't want to be Christian, you can come in here and talk and study Bible somewhere. So first time, we have the Bible study with two or three houses, and after that about two or three months. Many people get together, so we go to the church, Niekerk Christian Reformed Church. We get together and worship with Niekerk Christian Reformed Church. After that we know about the Bible, and then we learn about the Bible. By that time I feel like God call me to be His servant. I tried to work and then I go study in there. Some people come to here and face-to-face study. We get the group together and then we get help from another people. Missionaries go to Thailand, go to Laos, and then they come back and get some idea. The pastor at Niekerk Christian Reformed Church and one man, his name is Jerome Deters, is really helpful to me to organize this group.

DR: The people who come to church here, would you say they are Christian or would you say they are still Buddhist?

RS: First thing, they Buddhist. When they come in here to study, they study, and then they Christian. They repent and then they are Christian. We still have four or five families which are not strong enough. They go both things right now. They go Buddhist and then come in here sometime and then go to Buddhist, too.

DR: What do you think about that--people who stay Buddhist or who don't completely become Christian?

RS: I'm sure in the future they can all repent, like us before, like me before. I support, too, when we study, when you study, and compare which one is the right thing.

DR: And how do you know personally which one *is* the right thing?

RS: By the acting. Not just talking, by the acting. They come fully, not absent in the church, they good tithes, offering, and then the way they live. Mostly the people here are good example to another people to become. We know it, we talking, talking, but the thing we do is acting, doing. Doing is better than talking.

DR: Now that you are Christian, how do you feel about your life as a Buddhist?

RS: I feel like I like to go back to Laos. February I go back to Laos and Thailand. When I go back, I know about this. I like to go back. So I encourage the people here to go back to Laos, to

Thailand. I plan to go back to Thailand this September, next month again.

DR: To visit?

RS: To get information about how to missionary, in Thailand first. Because right now Laos is not open for this. Thailand is open now. So I try to encourage the people to go back to their own country. I feel like God calls me to be the servant in Laos or Thailand.

DR: How many missionaries are there who go to Thailand?

RS: Right now Christian Reformed, none. Don't have it in Laos and Thailand Christian Reformed. But other denominations have it.

DR: What other things does your organization do? You mentioned working with families, and problems with children.

RS: The church grows. Not only mission in Thailand or Laos, but mission with Laos people around here, too, in the United States. I like to organize the people, call the people come to have education in here. They selected me to be the president of the Lao CRC, Christian Reformed in the United States. I call the people come in here and study in here and then go back to their own place. Now we start Christian Reformed about thirteen groups right now in America.

DR: In what other cities do they have the Laotian groups?

RS: We have in Iowa, Minnesota, California, Indiana. Just two in Michigan, Lansing and here.

DR: Why do you think Michigan is such a big center?

RS: Because the headquarters are here, in Grand Rapids. We have meetings every year in here.

DR: Are there more Laotian people who live in Michigan than in other states?

RS: No. Mostly in California, Florida.

RS: Do you think all the Laotian people in Holland can organize together as one Laotian community regardless of whether they are Christian or Buddhist or neither?

RS: Right now we have, they say it is Lao Community, in Holland. They try to get all the groups, all the people together into one group. Besides this, we have Buddhist group, Christian group, and another group that not go Christian, not go to Buddhist. The center is Lao Community. Buddhist, Christian, but some not come to this. They just live with the way they live.

DR: What needs to be done so all of those groups can come together?

RS: My job is don't call these people to this group, but my job is calling the people to know Jesus Christ. That's my job.

DR: Do you have children or other family that lives here in Holland with you?

RS: Yes, I have three children. The first one is a girl, so get married already. I have one grandson. They live in another house. Another boy just married Saturday.

DR: Congratulations.

RS: Thank you. Right now I have only one boy live with me. He's seventeen now. And my wife is working in Herman Miller.

DR: Have your children gone to school in Holland?

RS: Yes. At first when we come, we go to the Christian school. Right now there is only one still in school, so moved to the Ottawa school.

DR: What do you think about their experience with the schools in Holland? How do you feel about the education that they've gotten here?

RS: The quality is very good. I like it in here. I don't know how to answer to you because I don't have another school out of town. I don't know what's there, but I like the way the school in here is.

DR: You said your son used to go to the Christian school, but now goes to West Ottawa?

RS: Yes.

DR: Have you seen any differences in the Christian school and the public school?

RS: Yes, it's lots different. It's different between he's grown up or he's still young kid or not, I don't know. But when they're small, they go to Christian school and they listen very good to the parent. They learn about the religion or stuff like that. I like it, it's very good before. But when they move to Ottawa Christian School and then they grow up as teenagers, that's different.

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

RS: Just only New Years, and the birthday, New Years in the old tradition.

DR: Has the way you celebrate those changed from when you lived in Laos and Thailand?

RS: It is different because New Year over there is a hot day and here is a cold day, so the celebration is different. Usually we throw the water at the people. Right now we cannot throw the water in any way that will keep them warm.

DR: What sorts of hopes did you have for your family when you came here?

RS: My vision is we pray at least a long time already that I can move to Florida somewhere, work a couple years, or get experience, and then go to Thailand or Laos to be missionary. That's my vision.

DR: Was that your vision before you came here? Did you know that was what you were going to be doing?

RS: No. I don't think about this. My vision is changed, so when I come in here, I know nothing hope. Now it is different.

DR: How much contact do you have with Asians who have come from other countries who live in Holland?

RS: First time I don't contact with, just go to Lao. But now we contact with Cambodian and Vietnamese groups--only Christian. They have the Cambodian Christians--Pastor Socheth Na--and the Vietnamese Christians. Right now we work together. If I know the

people in Vietnam, I tell them here are the people that Vietnam coming and then leave, so we go together right now.

DR: What changes have you seen in Holland and in the Laotian population in Holland since you've been living here?

RS: Big change now. It's lots different. First when I come, where I live, only the cornfield. Right now it's all homes. It's a lot different. The companies are growing, and people moving. When I first here--I come the second Lao family in Holland--the first year is only seven families. See, right now, 210 families. It's growing now.

DR: Why do you think so many Laotian people are moving to Holland?

RS: The first thing is the job. So when the people move in, they got a job, they call another people--friend, or relative--move in, they get a job. I will tell you right now is the Lao people is not lazy people--when they've got a job, husband's working, wife's working, all working. Then they buy the new house. The Lao people right now have big homes, all over. Then when they come in here, and then they call another people coming, and get a job. Get a big house.

DR: Have you ever noticed or experienced prejudice or discrimination against you because you are Laotian or you are Asian?

RS: Yes, we get some, too, of this. Not in me, but we talking about this many, many times. When we go apply for a job, or the children go to school, or something like that, the people see the

black hair, or from Laos, make look like low. You understand what I said? They look down.

DR: Why do you think that is?

RS: The people, education is not the same. The Lao people who live in the city, education is high. But the people who live way down in the jungle do not have education. Some people who don't have good education go to work, but they don't know this number, number two, number three, but they're working by hand. That people make another people look down sometimes. The Lao people, it's the same idea--some people good, some people bad. But the bad people do something bad, so look all the people down, too.

DR: What do you think should be done in Holland to change that perception?

RS: We need to be done about that. I like to do that right now. We do like that right now. The church, the Buddhist group, and the Lao Community, we get together and have a meeting about this, too. We know right now is bad thing is Lao boy, go to gang or something like that. We try to get this group, no more for this thing. My job right now is to try to get the people to come to know the Lord and then teach them the good way to live.

DR: Why do you think these Laotian boys are joining gangs?

RS: The one thing we found is when the boy comes, the parents stick with the culture, and the culture is very strict. When they come in here, boy and girl, they have more freedom.

DR: Why do you think that because of that freedom, they join gangs?

RS: When I was a boy, I was afraid of my parents. My parents said so. I was afraid of my teacher. The teacher, the parents, when I don't listen to them, they do this (motions with arm). In here, though, they cannot do that. Say they have problem with the kid, when the parent hits them, and then go talk to the teacher, the teacher calls the police, and then the parent has a problem. That's one thing, too. Some family is okay, good; but some family they think that the boy, the girl don't listen to the parents. That's why. And in Holland, before, we don't have gangs. The people from California, from the big city, when the kids join to the gangs, then come in the small city and start it here. I don't know.

DR: What do we need to do to stop gangs in Holland?

RS: Before this one hour, I just talked to Bob from First Christian Reformed and talked about this--families who go join with the gang. We talk and talk and talk about how to stop this. This is my thing--if the boy and the girl, all the parents, don't know Jesus Christ, they think it's good, and they do it. That's my idea, my thought. For example, we see differently. The Christian family knows the Lord Jesus Christ, and they don't do it.

DR: How do you plan to go about reaching these families that have joined the gangs? How are you going to reach them and teach them what you want to teach them?

RS: The parents first right now. We receive the parents, call the parents to join with us, and tell them the love of Jesus Christ. Then invite them to come to church, and invite the boy and the girl, too. But mostly, it not work, because only parent come visit us, and the boy and the girl do not. We have one or two times called the police who have experience with the boy and the girl, with the gang, to talk here, to help the boy and girl.

DR: Do you have an idea of how big the gangs are in Holland, or how many people belong to them?

RS: I don't know exactly, but I still see, they get together. They pick up small boy or girl in the school who's somewhere, and sometimes they get the boy and the girl from our community, from Lao Church, who gets involved, too. I don't know how big, but I see the way they do it, the way they go, the way they have the family problems.

DR: Are gangs in Holland divided along ethnic lines?

RS: I understand that they don't mix together. But some groups mix together, too. Sometimes I see the Cambodian and the Lao get together. But I don't see the Vietnam and Lao and Cambodian. I think Vietnam is another group, Mexican is another group, Lao is another group, and Cambodian is another group. But some groups have Cambodian and Lao get together.

DR: On a positive side, what things do you think the Laotian people in Holland can offer the community of Holland in a positive way?

What can the Laotian people do to improve Holland as a community, or what can they give to Holland to make Holland a better place, a better community?

RS: The idea to get Holland to be good community, that's the question you ask. My idea is the religion. Go to the church. In Holland many, many is Christian. If they evangelism more than this, I like to see it be better in Holland. That's mine. In my group, too, I like to, eventually it's up to the people to know the Lord Jesus Christ. The same thing, if the people know Jesus Christ, is better where they're living. They can do, they can offer, all things there, they can love it.

DR: What do you think is the best thing about living in Holland, Michigan?

RS: Holland is not a big city. The first thing is good weather, the water around. I like it. The traffic is okay, not tall buildings, not many press, not stuff like that. Another thing is the people. Mostly people good to the people. Mostly people Christian here, so help each other. That's one thing that's good in here.

DR: Why have you stayed in Holland as long as you have? What has made you stay in Holland?

RS: My family first is here. I have my house in here, and my job here. I get many, many friends in here. That's the reason why I am staying. Mostly is the people, the church people. Niekirk

Christian Reformed Church is very nice people. Not only help by the spirit, but help me social, too.

DR: Do you still have family living in Thailand or Laos?

RS: Yes. My parents are there, my brother, my sister, all in Thailand. My wife's parents, sister, brother, in Laos.

DR: Have you had any members of your family come here after you moved here?

RS: No, just only my family. My wife's family just her, and my family just me.

DR: What one thing do you think people who will be reading this interview should know about you? Or what one thing would you like to be remembered by or as?

RS: I think that's all. That's all I have to say.

DR: Good. Well, thank you very much for sharing with me and taking the time to talk with me.

RS: Thank you very much for coming. I will tell you, too, I am really happy to help the people in Holland and to help the Lao people in here. I like to do that. I will tell you that I am sorry about my language, but I try to do it for the best. Thank you very much.