

6-14-1994

Singhanath, Vondgeuane 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., "Singhanath, Vondgeuane Oral History Interview (Laotian): Asian and African American Residents of Holland" (1994). *Asian and African American Residents of Holland*. Paper 10.

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/min_res/10

Published in: 1994 - *Asian and African American Residents of Holland (H88-0234)* - Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project, June 14, 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
Vongdeuane Singhanath
Laotian Resident

Conducted June 14 and July 1, 1994
by Donna M. Rottier

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

DR: What I'm going to be doing is just asking you a list of questions I've prepared which I'll ask everyone. You can feel free to talk about them as much as you like. I need to start out first with a few formal things. So, this is Donna Rottier and the date is June 14, 1994, and I am interviewing Vong Singhanath in his home in Holland, Michigan. Could you please repeat your full name?

VS: Vongdeuane Singhanath.

DR: Could you please state your current address?

VS: 171 Aniline Avenue. That's in Holland, Michigan. The zip code is 49424.

DR: Your date of birth?

VS: [date removed], 1967.

DR: Where were you born?

VS: Laos.

DR: When did you first move to Holland?

VS: We first moved to Holland back in 1980.

DR: Could you begin by describing a little about Laos and what it was like to grow up there?

VS: We lived in a small community. I lived pretty close to the capital. We have a lot of freedom and it's pretty peaceful. I would go to school. We wear a uniform. We walk to school every day with a lot of friends. It was a lot fun; back then I think school was more fun because I have a lot of friends. Everybody would go to school at 8:00 and we would walk to school together

and at noon we would come back home to eat. We take a shower and would go back at 1:00 again until 5:00. We have the same teacher all year long and everybody will study in the same class who are in the same grade. One teacher will teach math, art, history, biology, and other class all years long to the same students. I was a junior going to be a senior when I left Laos.

You know everyone in your neighborhood, in a small community. Everyone is very nice, friendly, and helpful. Whenever you need help with anything, they will be there to help. After the Communists took over in 1975, then the people start leaving, or escape. I like to use the word escape because we *escaped* from Laos to Thailand. In Thailand they had a campus, a refugee camp, but not just for the Laotian people. They have the Cambodian, Vietnamese, and different types of refugees who want to stay in Thailand. On that campus they have total control on you. You have your paper and they know that you are a refugee. Only a refugee can stay on campus.

DR: Why did your family leave Laos?

VS: When the Communists took over, I had a little bit of an idea of what the Communist does. Everything had changed; you lost your freedom. You don't have much freedom at all. Everything is changing. You can't even go outside at night because you feel that you are being watched, at night. You can't talk about anything; you don't have freedom of speech. You don't have

freedom of anything. That is what when the Communists took over. Sometimes when you have a bigger house, and it happened in the country, too. When you have a bigger house and you have a small family, you have to accept the soldier live with you. You don't have anything to say about that. That's the choice they make for you.

DR: How did you get from Laos to Thailand?

VS: We swam. My dad escaped first. He is a policeman and he knew what was going on ahead and did not want to stay for them to relocate him, like his friend. People who work for the government, they will relocate you other place far away from your home and you won't be able to see or communicate with your own family for a long time, maybe five years or longer. Then they will bring their people in the city to replace you. My dad was aware of what's going on, so he escaped without telling anybody. When you escape, you can't trust anybody, because before you make it to Thailand, if someone says, they can call you and then you're in big trouble. He had to make it to Thailand. He escaped, and about five years later, we followed him. He didn't even tell our family this; we didn't know anything about that.

By the way, I have three older brothers and three older sisters. We all escaped at different times. My dad came first and then my third brother came with his friend, then my second brother, and then after that my second brother go back to get me

and my sister. My sister worked in an office. She came back home and she asked me if I wanted to go to Thailand. I had been thinking about that before but never realized it would be this soon. People who make it to a third country, they write back home and say they have a lot of freedom. I dreamed about living in the United States before I came to the United States. Some people who escape make it to Thailand safe and some get shot down, die. People talk about that and if you want to go, you have to make that pretty risky decision. If you want to go, it's going to be a risk.

We decided, we'll leave one day. My brother, who made it to Thailand first, went back to Laos a couple times to help people escape. Other people pay him, because he has to risk his life. He can make money at the same time. He went back for my sister and I. His friend contacted my sister--"your brother, he's going to pick you up. If you want to go, you have less than twenty-four hours to make the decision." My sister go home after work and get dressed and ask me if I want go to Thailand. I said, "Okay." Get dressed; we can't tell anybody. We left home about 7:00 p.m. My sister and I ride the bicycle to meet with my brother who been waiting for us. Our friends that ask, "Where are you going?" "Oh, we're just going to the party." When we met our brother, we have to wait because that day it was a pretty beautiful day and it was a bright day, and full moon. We wait until the moon would go down.

I think at midnight we tried to escape. At first they told me, there's going to be a boat, a crew or something, to take us, because I don't know how to swim! Then, too bad, because they have some soldiers who guard the border of the Mekong River all day long, because they know that people escape every day. When you got there, they said, "Strip off your clothes to your underwear," because if you swim, you have too much clothes, that's going to be too heavy for you. We said, "Where's the boat?" They got a big plastic balloon and they said put your clothes inside and they blow up the balloon. They said, this one got one, and my sister. If we stay together, we're going to make it.

At that time, I think it was in August, the Mekong River, that's pretty long, too, because in the summer, if you go down to so an area, you can walk, it's not too deep. So we started, not to mention the moon, we ran and ran in front of the soldiers. They yell at us, "Come back, Come back!" My brother said, don't look back, don't look back. Keep going. Keep going!" I keep closing my eyes. It was pretty risky. I'm wondering, are they going to shoot us? Normally, they call you back, and if you don't come back, they shoot. But I guess we were pretty lucky that we don't get shot.

We make it to the deeper side, and now we have to start swimming. Since we thought that the soldiers would not follow us, so we stayed in the water, because we have a lot of trees, too,

and we stay in there because the moon is pretty bright, like daylight. You can see through just like daylight. And we have to wait until 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. until the moon goes down and it's getting dark. After a couple hours waiting, we were ready to try to make the move. I didn't know how to swim. My brother and another guy kind of pushed me and my sister. They said, "just kick your legs." I just hold the balloon and kick my legs. While I was in the water I was thinking, because it gets pretty tired kicking your legs for so long, because the current pushes you back to Laos. You try to make it and then the current pushes you back. I was kind of wondering, what happens if I let go, when I kick? And I can't feel anything because I think the water is pretty deep. I can't feel any bottom. I never go into the water before. Even in the summer, people go to the beach and all that stuff. I heard that there are alligators, you know. I never stepped foot in the water for so long.

We tried to put out signal for help from Thai police, they try to get the lighter so when the policemen from the other side, from Thailand, if you make it to a certain area past some area of Laos, the Laos soldiers won't be able to do anything to you. If you signal then that you need help, the boats with the police will come and pick you up. We tried and tried to get the light. It got pretty wet, and we didn't make it and then the current keep pushing us back and back further and further. I'm pretty scared

because sometime the current in this area between Thailand and Laos gets real close, it's real narrow and you can see through, it doesn't take that long.

But somehow after two or three hours you make it to Thailand, and because we have to stay under, when you go in Thailand, and the police didn't see you. You normally report to the police--I am here and I'm a refugee. You're kind of illegal aliens, just like the Mexican people in here. We slept in Thai people's home, and in the morning my brother would pay them. We hid in their home one night and two days. We had to pay a lot of money. The friend of my brother knew those people. We also have to pay some money to my brother's friend, too. It's kind of risky, too, when you try to pay a person or a taxi driver because the Thai police check on the street for your I.D. for illegal. At that time there were a lot of illegal people staying there. We pay our way out without being caught. My brother had been in a refugee camp before, he knows how to get in. We get in the refugee camp without any legal papers. We have to spend a lot of money which my dad and my brother who were living in Michigan and worked send us money to pay for food, clothing, and everything. My sister and I live in the refugee camp for six to seven months without the legal right. We brought someone else's I.D. or used their name to get food. We also meet many new friends in campus and meet our old friends from Laos who also escape and now living in campus.

Even staying in a refugee camp, you still need some kind of legal papers that you are a resident of that refugee camp. One year later, the soldiers decided to check over the refugees to see if they have illegal. If you are an illegal alien, please report to them. They have about twenty or thirty soldiers with three soldier trucks and they walk around to see, checking each apartment. It was pretty scary that we see a soldier go to each apartment to check to see if you are legal. We got pretty scared and we asked our friends, "What are we going to do now, because we are illegal?" Our friends did not know we were illegal until we ask them that day. They said, go ahead and report it. It's pretty embarrassing. You have a lot of people standing on the street and watching you and you decide to go and report it and then you have about twenty people who sit on the back of the truck. They drive around the campus, everybody seeing you. It was very embarrassing.

After that they put us in jail, a jail cell for refugees. They have the place, a kind of jail where they can interview you and all that stuff. People say they're going to take you back to Laos. If you decide to come back again, you have to swim back to Thailand, and if you make it, then they will let you stay. If you don't, then you have to go back to Laos. That alone is kind of scary. The next morning they took a lot of pictures and they were in the noon paper. We were in the noon paper for being illegal

aliens. I have never stayed in jail before. My sister and I stayed in jail for I think about three weeks. I couldn't even sleep. It was pretty terrible when you're staying in a jail cell. They have two jail cells, one for men and one for women. Sometimes they will call the women in their office at night to do what who knows, then they will get raped. I was pretty scared for my sister. She and I stayed in separate jail. Thank Buddha nothing happened to her.

DR: How did you go about getting your legal papers?

VS: It takes money, too, you have to pay a lot of your way out. If the people don't have a way out, you stay in there until they feel, that okay, you don't have the money or you would have paid by now. Then they send you to the second camp for more interview. In this one, you don't have that much freedom, because you sleep wherever you find your own sleeping space. There are about two or three hundred people sleeping there. This one we stay two or three months, and if you have some money, you still take longer to get the legal paper done before you go to a refugee camp. We stayed there two or three months. There's no apartment, there's no campus. Sometimes they sleep in the ground, in the dirt, because first come first serve on the space.

DR: How many members of your family in total escaped from Laos?

VS: Total, we escaped different times. Me and my sister escaped together. My father first, my third brother, my second brother,

then me and my sister, and after that my brother went back for my other sister and my brother and his family. We came different times. We came to the United States at different times, too.

DR: Do you still have family in Laos today?

VS: I still have one, my eldest sister, she's staying there still, back in Laos, and one niece and two nephews. I don't think she wanted to come to the United States, too much risk.

DR: How long did you stay in Thailand and how did you come to move to the United States?

VS: I stayed in Thailand about one-and-a-half years. When I was on campus about a year or so, half of our refugee camp was on fire. Luckily, no one got hurt or died in the fire. We lost everything--food, clothing, and a place to stay. The next morning my family and half of the campus did not have much food to eat, water to drink, and clothes to wear. We and everyone else had no place to live for two weeks. We have to live in the school for three to four months until they rebuild a new home for us. We were lucky, too, to be able to stay in school because it was summertime and all students were on a summer vacation. We were also pretty lucky to come to the United States sooner, too. My father and brother who lived in Flint, Michigan for three years, with the church, helped to sponsor me, my brother, and my two sisters to come to the United States. I lived in Flint when we

came here. We lived there about six months or less. Then we moved to Holland, because my dad knew somebody from Holland.

DR: What did you expect to find before you moved to Holland?

VS: I don't expect much of anything because that was about ten years ago, and we didn't know much English. Plus, my dad was the head of the household in the family. Wherever he decided to go, we were just glad to be in the United States, because we just have so much freedom. Everything was so much better, compared to what we went through for the past two years. We don't know what to expect that much. We just followed the family. Even when we moved to Holland, we don't have our own apartment. We stayed with my dad's friend for a couple months. Even my sister, we don't have any jobs. My dad's still on welfare, being on welfare and helping us for the first year.

DR: You mentioned your dad's friend. Did you know anyone else before you came to Holland?

VS: No. We don't know anybody at all. My sister doesn't know anybody. It's only my dad, kind of knew somebody who said Holland is good, everything is good, so my dad decided to move to Holland. We just have to go with him, and go along with wherever he decides to go because he'd been here in the United States about five years, longer than we had, so we didn't know much of anything. We don't know anybody at all, so we just follow him and go wherever he goes.

DR: How did you go about finding a place to live in Holland?

VS: The friend of my father, her name is Thongwan [LeaumChampassak]. Right now she works at West Ottawa, assistant for the bilingual people. She's been helping people just like myself. You have the new Laotian people coming, who don't know much of the English. She's helping them run the papers and all that stuff. She'd been helping us tremendously, helping write a paper, and apply for school and what school to go to.

DR: Where was the first house that you lived in?

VS: I think Eighth Street. There used to be an Eberhard, back in, past Waverly, even past Waverly further. I think now it's the gas station. My dad's friend has a large family themselves and their house is a big house in the hill that's on Waverly, to live in for three or four months, because we had no place to stay.

DR: How long have you lived in this house you're currently living in?

VS: It's about six or seven years now. We've been moving a lot, from apartment to apartment. For the first three years my dad decided to move to Detroit. Because they say, you know Holland, you know who the people are. That place is better and all that. We were still underaged, me and my other sister, younger. We were moving here for one year, and then my older sister and my brother decided to stay here because they have a job. They were over eighteen and they say, "I don't have to follow you. You want to go, go." We went to Detroit for one year. I didn't like it that much. I

didn't like the school because a lot of black people. I don't mind the black people, but they make fun of you, and you can call them something--I learned a lot of English bad words--I called them everything I can think of but it just doesn't affect them. It's just like you've been talking nice to them. I call them what I do and tell the teacher about what other student been treating me, been making fun of me. They can't do anything about that. So I don't like it at all. Even I walk to school, it's about a half an hour walk to school and you pass all these black houses. I don't mind blacks, but they make all this fun of you. After school, even in school, in class, you can't even concentrate, can't study.

DR: Did you find some of those same feelings once you moved to Holland?

VS: No. Even though I don't have that much friends in Holland, but I don't feel people make fun of you. They kind of mind their own business. I went to Holland High School. The first year we skipped a lot of class, some class, too, because of due to our age. When I first came to Holland, I was in ESL. My English was still not that good. We didn't take a normal class. We had a special tutor that would teach us. I don't remember what grade I was in ESL in the school because I just didn't know much of anything. After that they moved me to junior high school. I think I went back after ESL, we moved to Detroit. And then we

came back, and then my brother helped me to apply at Holland Junior High School, in ninth grade. After that I studied and somehow I moved to tenth. When I went to Holland High School, the tenth grade, a sophomore, I decided it gets pretty serious. I understand English a little bit better, what's going on.

DR: How many years have you gone to school in the United States?

VS: I started ninth grade; I started in the middle of the year. And then three-and-a-half years. My sophomore, junior, and senior I went a full year, full-time student. I study real hard. I have my own goal, too. I said I'm going to speak English and be able to communicate with people, so I do whatever it takes. I read a lot of books. That's how I lost my eyesight. I read a lot of books; try to understand. I don't know; maybe when I read a book, I don't have enough light. In my senior year, I lost my eyesight; when I sit in the back, I can't see the blackboard. That's the worst thing. Normally my family doesn't wear glasses at all. People got good eyesight.

DR: What was your first job in Holland?

VS: My first job in Holland was working at Great Lakes Manufactured Homes as accountant after I received my BA from Davenport College in 1989. I didn't have the first job until after I finished high school. Then I decided to go to college because I wanted to improve my English. I don't want to work in a factory, I said to myself. Because my family would support me, I didn't have to go

to work after I finish high school, and get a job. I said, this is my choice. It's the first time in my life that I make my own choice. Especially traditional, the parents, they say, "This is what you need to study, you need to go to college." Back in Laos my dad used to say, "This is your major, you're going to study on days, go to college, I'm going to pay for everything." After I finished high school, I decided I'm going to go to college. I wanted to stay on campus so I can speak English with other American people daily. That's how to improve my English.

DR: Where did you go to college?

VS: Davenport College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I thought Davenport is kind of small, just like high school. I thought, I won't feel left out, I will feel just like high school again. If I go to a bigger university, my grade point average is okay, but my English skills needs improvement. I don't want to go to a four-year college. I know that at a four-year college you have to take a lot of extra classes before you go to your major, but if I decide to go in two years, I didn't need that.

The first two years were pretty difficult because I decided to major in accounting. I thought a number is something I can understand better. But I never take any accounting in high school because a friend of mine told me that she got a "D" on accounting. I didn't want my grade point average to go down or college won't accept me. So I decided to major in accounting. In the first

class I didn't even know what's debt and credit, but I believe in myself, that I've come this far. I studied, I had a tutor. I went to tutoring every day, every night, every hour that they have possibly. I study a lot. I go to tutor a lot. I believe in myself that I'm going to stick to that. I've been through a lot of difficult time, and normally I don't get used to making my own decisions and say what's going on, how my grade point average is not that good. I don't understand. In the class I can't call home. That's the first, I learned so much about myself, about making the decisions. I had my own freedom. Normally I don't have that. People used to tell me, you do this and you do that. Now I make my own decisions. But every mistake I make, then I can't blame anybody else. That is one thing I enjoy the most, that I'm able to make my own decisions.

After my first two years, I thought it's pretty quick and I want to go for two more years. So I go for two more years and get a bachelors degree. At that time Davenport in 1985 only had a two year program. After 1987 they have a four year degree for accounting and computer and business management. They don't have a bachelors program at that time. So I applied for two more years and got my bachelors. I do a lot of work study at Davenport College, at the computer lab, assistant, helping them do a lot of tutoring on Lotus, and helping other students.

DR: You went there for four years?

VS: I went there for four years. I graduated 1989 with my bachelors. After that, that's when I got my first job. I worked in Grand Rapids because I'd worked there part time during my last year at Davenport College. It's my first job and they've been helping me a lot.

DR: Where is that?

VS: It's located at Cascade and 28th Street. It's computer software. The pay's not that high, but I got to get experience. I worked there for five months. They decided to move because they have their headquarters in another state, Phoenix, Arizona. They said the communications, the commute--they have to call a telephone and everything else--it costs too much and they didn't bring much income to the location, so they decided to move to Phoenix. I was without a job, so I was pretty lucky and I called Davenport and said, this week is going to be my last week; I need another job.

Another advertising in downtown, J.W. Messner is opening, in accounts receivable. I went for an interview. I said it was going to be my last job. I have another job offer as a computer operations at Roger's Department Store. The same day I went to apply for J.W. Messner's accounting and I apply and I talked to them and I got a job interview. I talked to my tutor. I get pretty close to them and ask them a lot of questions and I say I want to work with company, who can I call. In the same day I called them back and said I got another job offer. I didn't get a

job offer yet, but I told them I got a job offer, but I want to work with your company, what is my chances in working with your company? I was the first person she interviewed. She just said your chances are good. She decided the same day. She called me back; she didn't interview anybody else. I was pretty lucky. That's how I get one job to another. I accepted a job at J.W. Messner. I got an offer of the job the same day she called me back. So I started. After that job I just continued with this new job as account assistant. I worked for an advertising company. I learned so much on this job. I communicate with people daily, because it's a full advertising service. You do a lot of daily communication every day instead of sit in front of the computer and key in your number. It's kind of neat. I like it, because I enjoy talking to people so much.

After I worked there for one year, I decided to commute because on the weekend it's kind of lonely when you stay in an apartment by yourself. In G.R. I don't have my own car. At that time I used my sister's car. On the weekends they came to pick me up a lot. I walked to work; it's located in downtown Grand Rapids, about a ten-minute walk to work from my apartment. I asked Davenport, "Do you have any accounting jobs in Holland? I want to work part-time. Maybe I can work part-time on the weekends." After one year later they have a job. It's not

supposed to be an accounting job, it's supposed to be a consulting assistant, part time. I went for a job interview.

DR: What company was that for?

VS: Great Lakes Manufactured Homes. That's on Waverly across from K mart, before. I talked to their consultant and the manager--the owner of the company hired him as a full-time consultant for this company. He interviewed me first. If he liked me, then he would let me talk to the boss. He said it might turn into a full-time job because they have accounting software for three years and nobody know how to use it. If you want to take the challenge, then you can have a job appointment with the boss, the owner. I said, "I am interested in this job; I want to move to Holland."

The next day I scheduled for a job interview. We talked about an hour. This one was somewhat informal, somewhat formal/informal because he asked a lot of business questions. I don't mind answering them, because I have nothing to hide. The more he know me personally, the better the chance he will get to know me and say, this is the type of person I want. At first I didn't realize it was going to be a full-time job. He said, you're going to take over the accounting department. We're going to send you to Davenport, Iowa for training in the computer, then you're going to make it work. They bought this software three years ago and never used it. They just used everything manually. I take this job because it is something challenging. I want to

learn because I have to do accounts payable and receivable, financial statement, and everything else. I thought, I will take this job. That's the first job in Holland.

I work with Great Lakes Manufactured Homes pretty close for two years. I got the computer to work after one year because we have four or five checking accounts and it's complicated. After I worked there for pretty close to two years, there's a lot of things happening. I thought I lost my integrity. It's not what I planned, the everyday challenge. I saw a lot of things going on. I feel that I was asked to do certain things that he shouldn't ask me to do. I resigned from my position in 1992 because of unethical reasons.

DR: How long did it take you to find another job?

VS: I still can't find an accounting job. After one year, that's December 1992 to 1993 December, for the whole year I can't find an accounting job. I decided, I'll work in a factory anyway. I decided to work in a factory just for temporary service, so I worked for different companies. I don't like it when people been working for a temporary service agency six months or longer before they get hired on. People who been working for them six or seven months with no insurance. For temporary service they make a good deal of good money on our hard work. I know that I am a good worker, and if you can't see that, I'm going to leave. I don't care how much they pay because I feel sorry for other people. I

don't like it when I see that people have to work even a year-and-a-half before they get hired on permanently. I worked at Prince for one month. After that I got a job interview. One month later they hired me for a factory job in the molding department. I worked first shift for one day, second shift for three weeks, and then come to third shift. Because when you work there and are a newcomer, you have no choice. It's close to my house, Lakewood. But then when I got in the company, I like it a lot--the teamwork, your job is so secure. It's up to you. They let people go easily here at Prince. If they know that you do a wonderful job and do the best you can, then you don't have anything to worry about.

DR: What type of work do you do there?

VS: I operate the molding injection machines. We have seventeen or eighteen machines. Each day you do a different machine. Normally you operate two machines, then the next day you do a different machine. They build small parts for car dealers, like cup holder, for G.M., Ford, and other car companies.

DR: How long do you plan on working there? Are you still looking for an accounting job?

VS: Yes. Right now I feel that Prince, I know that they do a lot of promotion within the company, but they don't advertise it. Unless you know somebody that they have a job opening, then you have a better chance of getting to the office. They don't promote it. Other people, other branches, don't want to lose you. They know

that I have an accounting degree, but they don't want to help you to go further. They said that most of the people stay working in the factory five, six years before they move to a different position. I understand then what makes this different than accounting, because if you want to be a supervisor or manager of that plant, then you have to learn that job real good.

[End of Tape One, Side One]

[Portion of Interview lost due to malfunctioning Equipment]

[Tape One, Side Two]

DR: The last question I asked you was, what about you or your experiences do you think should be shared with people around you?

VS: That I have a good sense of humor, and I have confidence in myself and believe in myself. I always want to help out others no matter what. I only think of other people first. Since I'm single I guess I can have more time to spend on people. I especially want to help people stay in school and especially high school students. They need a role model, someone who has confidence. Because when you go to school and if you want to focus on school, then it's nice that you have someone to support you one hundred percent no matter what instead of just you to say okay the system is wrong. I want someone who can give you an option or support you one hundred percent instead of make decisions for you. I like to do

that. I do whatever it takes to help other people because I feel pretty happy, or feel good about myself when I help people because if I can get the laughter or the smile from other people, that is the only choice I need. That's why I think I enjoy doing lab assistant at Davenport College because every time I help people, that's the only way you can get to know people, too. You help them out, and they get to know you and say thank you. That's the only word you need, is thank you. That's one thing that I want people to remember.

DR: That's the end of my questions. Is there anything else you would like to share?

VS: I think I've said everything. I appreciate it.

DR: Yes, thank you very much.

[Casual Conversation]

VS: That's one of our traditional things. Other people come to the home, you welcome people with open arms. Normally in our country you always ask people when we eat or stay home to eat some lunch or dinner. On May 28th, 1994, at the Holland Civic Center we have our first Lao Culture Expose. We invited a lot of people; we spent a lot of money to cook food for free. People can go for free. We ask for donations. We have our dance, and entertainment, a show at night, and we can have people to dance. A lot of people dress up in our traditional Lao--women grass skirt, nice skirt, men wear traditional clothing. I was the

master of the ceremony; I do a lot of speaking and translating. That's why I want to speak out as much as I can by joining the group and the association, do different stuff so I can improve my English and understand different things from different people, points of view. Then I can gain that knowledge. We expect a lot of Americans to turn out because we do some promotion on that. We have less people turn out to learn about our culture.

Also, I just learned that the Laotian head is the most sacred place in our body. One should not touch people's head, that's a no-no. And the feet, is the last sacred thing. When we see people touching their head, we don't like that. That's kind of disrespect, when you touch people's head. When you're walking in front of elderly people, especially older people talking, when you walk past them you have to "excuse me," and you always bow and walk slowly past them. That's the way you respect them. We still see that. You don't see that from the younger generation; they don't know that. When older people sit down and stretch out their legs, you don't walk across their legs. You "Excuse me," then they put their legs in, then you bow, lower your body, and walk past them nice. Older people see that and they know that you are a good person, that you respect other people. Thank you very much.

[End of First Interview: June 14, 1994]

[Second Interview: July 1, 1994]

[Tape Two, Side One]

DR: The date is July 1, 1994. This is Donna Rottier interviewing Vong Singhanath in his home in Holland, Michigan. I think last time we recorded most of what you said about escaping from Laos, and coming to Holland, your school and your work. This time I'd like to talk about what was missing on the second side of the tape, which was the Laotian community in Holland, the Lao Community Association, your religion, and Holland's attitudes about Asians, basically the Holland community. So, could you begin by describing the Lao Community Association, what it is, what it does?

VS: The Lao Community Association of Holland was founded in 1980. We try to promote Lao cultural, education, religion, and understanding among ourselves and the community at large. Our association organized as a non-profit among our community, but we didn't have non-profit status. It's legal, as most other non-profit will be just organized among their own community first. We want our people to get to know each other and help each other out among our members. For example, when we have a death in the family, we try to use that money we have in our organization. We use that money, maybe ten or fifteen percent of what we have in our account, try to support that family, to pay for the funeral,

for the service, anything they need, and all members will donate money to help them out also. That's mostly what we did back in 1980 to 1990. We organized a lot of parties to do fund raising about three to four times per year.

Every four years we elect a new president to serve as a board director. We just selected a new president in 1992, I believe, July of 1992. The new president has different goals, and he has a different plan. He also selected mostly new people to work with him. I am also one of the members. I am the secretary of the Lao Community Association of Holland. So we decided to get the legal status. We hired a lawyer. We get all our bylaws and all the legal paperwork to get our non-profit status from the State of Michigan, so we can ask to fund our programs from different foundations. We received our non-profit status September 29, 1993. That's when we were legally recognized as non-profit status. We can do a lot of things.

Our goal is to help promote our education, culture, sport, and recreation activities in the Lao community in the greater Holland area--Holland, Zeeland, Hamilton, Grand Haven, and Muskegon--and the people in West Michigan. That's our goal, but we have not done that yet. We want to help our community, but also help the community at large at the same time. A lot of teenagers right now get into a lot of trouble with the law. If you can help and maybe control or do something to help our people

understand about law, about things living in the United States, in Holland, so they won't get into trouble, at the same time this is going to help the community at large. Right now we are still applying for a non-profit from different foundations so we can receive the funding. Our goal is to help other people, too.

This year is the first time that we have taught the Lao language to the young children, at West Ottawa school. A lot of children can speak and understand Laos, but they cannot read or write their own language. West Ottawa is working with us, helping support us in giving the classroom. We can use that school at night, two nights a week. This is the first time we've done this. It was a three month period, January to March of 1993. We had a great turnout and about thirty-five students. We have three classes, children from age to five up to twelve would be the first class; then twelve to fifteen; and fifteen to eighteen. It's basically to teach them to understand how to read in Laos, what is the alphabet, and how to read and write, besides just be able to speak in Laos. It's very successful; we have a pretty good turnout, but we still need a lot of money to help support that. West Ottawa has supported, provided facilities, and help us in any way they can.

Next year we plan to have at least two or three semesters, because the first year turned out pretty good. We don't do that much promotion. We have one American person that took that class.

She's about seventeen or eighteen. After the semester is ended, they have a party and show what the children have learned for the past three months. When I see American people can speak and can read in Laos, that shows me that there's interest in that. My goal someday is to have a Lao language class be taught at Community Education. Holland city is very diverse and different nationalities in the area speak different languages besides Spanish and all that. Hopefully we have one or two persons teach in Laos to American people at Holland Community Ed. Besides teaching Laos, teaching our background and our history, what type of people we are. If people are interested, and would like to learn about our language, about our nationality, then they would be able to do that. Some point of time, hopefully we could do that.

DR: How big is the Lao Community Association? How many members are there?

VS: We have about pretty close to 130 families. Some families are pretty large. The total is pretty close to, I think, about 1000 people at least, because 130 families. A lot of the Laotian people right now have stayed and live in Holland, in the greater Holland area. They tend to stay in here because of the jobs. A lot of people, I think pretty close to fifty percent, are homeowners, because they have the security, they have a good job, have built their family in here. Back in 1980, we had less than

twenty families living in the Holland area, but because there are more jobs in Holland, many people are moving from other states to live in the Holland and Zeeland area. People start moving from bigger cities. In bigger cities you have a lot of trouble. They have different reasons for the job purpose. A lot of people who work in here who buy a house, and other people from different states come to visit at first and then they try to get a job. Once they get a job, they begin to stay in Holland. It is a pretty peaceful city and many families plan to live in Holland for a long, long time.

DR: How many Laotian people live in Holland? Do you have an idea?

VS: I think it's about seventy or eighty families just in the Holland area themselves. I know a lot of people bought a house, in the North side especially. They move from other states, and they got a good job, they buy a house. Some people are still living in the apartment, but they hope someday to own a house themselves. It's pretty big, fifty to seventy households. That's a lot compared to four or five years ago.

DR: Do most of these families stay in Holland?

VS: Yes, most of these people live in Holland area. Many families also like living in Holland a lot because it's a very nice place, peaceful, quiet. The jobs, they pay pretty good. The economy is good. The living standard is not that expensive compared to what they pay and everything else.

DR: Do you have much contact with Asian people from other Asian countries?

VS: The only contact I have is when we have the party. Me myself, we don't have that much contact, only like when we have our fund-raising party, each time we have about three or four hundred people attending our party. We have different nationalities--Cambodian, Vietnamese, American people--because the teenagers, they have friends and they invite their friends. It's word of mouth, too. People attend one party, and the next time we have a party, we get more and more. That's the only time we get to contact other people. And when I join the government relations committee at the meeting, I get a chance to meet different people, like Mexican people, and Vietnamese, and Chinese, and black people who are members of that association.

DR: Is the Lao Community Association mainly made up of Laotian people or are there other nationalities, too?

VS: Yes, it's made up mainly for the Laotian people. But hopefully someday we can get other nationalities to join our association. Each year, due to certain circumstances, we think differently. Like this is our first year that we get our non-profit status. We do things differently. We don't plan to have that many parties because sometimes parties can cause trouble. We plan to get the money and get our own office and help our people and help other people who need help in many ways. One thing we do differently

this year is an association representative will go to our members' homes to visit them if they have a baby or are in the hospital, or if something bad has happened to them. We have a representative of our organization go to visit, bring some flowers, and ask them how they are doing. That's something different than before. Before, the only time we get a chance to visit our members, is when they got a death in the family, then we go to pay respect. That's the only time. Now when you have a baby, or you're in the hospital for one or two days, we have some people in our organization go to visit with flowers.

DR: What do you think is Holland's attitude toward Laotians, or Asians in general?

VS: I think more people begin to be accepting of our Asian community than before. We have our dancer, for example, our traditional Laotian dancer. They went to dance at many different shows for American people to see, like West Ottawa High School. They have dance. And about two months ago we have volunteer people from the Holland City Hall, they have the banquet for all these volunteers. We have about three or four hundred people who volunteer for the whole year, been invited to go to this banquet because the mayor will pay a special thanks to all those people who have helped Holland, volunteer their time to help Holland. They have a show and let people know what's going on. So we go more outside, people kind of know what's going on, and because of our non-profit

status, we can do things more publicly now. I get involved in different organizations outside my group to get to know what other people are doing, what other organizations are doing, what the city of Holland is doing, so I could get involved. Besides our Lao Association, we want to make people in Holland recognize that this is a diverse city.

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

VS: When we talk about racial discrimination, to me it's kind of difficult to recognize unless somebody does something forcefully, like say something like, "I'm not going to sit with you because you are Asian." Sometimes people, you have a friend who might make a joke, because I don't take things seriously unless they mean it without laughing or without joking. But here and there you see some jokes. People say things that they might not mean. So you can't take everything that people say to you seriously. That doesn't mean that you can take and think that they are racist, they discriminated against me.

But me personally, I don't see that in Holland. Sometimes the media, when things happen between the teenagers. Teenagers right now, they have different groups of themselves, because teenagers are teenagers, and they want to belong in their own group or in their own nationality. They don't want to get involved. But some people still, we have Laotian teenagers, the

Laotian people have Mexican friends, Vietnamese friends, Cambodian friends, American friends. But the media seems, when things happen--for example back two weeks ago, when the Hispanic teenager got killed by blacks--and the media takes everything out of proportion, that they have racism between Asians and blacks and Hispanics.

I think the media would like to make a big deal about everything. When a bad thing happens in the media, they try to make it even bigger. But when a good thing happens--like when we had our Laos Culture Expose back two weeks ago, that we want American people to know that we are existing--they don't make a big deal about that. When we do something, when we meet, when we try to organize our own multi-culture thing, do something positively, the media in Holland doesn't help to support that, saying okay, this is something positive that Holland is working on. I think the media makes things even worse than what they are. We have a lot of people working to get involved. We are going to have our multi-culture, next year we plan to have different people, different nationalities involved. Like in Grand Rapids they have many festivals. In Holland we plan to do that because we want to be recognized. We want people to know that we are existing in Holland.

DR: What do you think needs to be done so that the media will recognize more of the positive things that you are doing?

VS: I think the media needs to get involved and needs to, besides thinking of trying to sell their paper, think to support people in Holland, find out about themselves, for example how many organizations that we have different diverse, like Laotian people, Vietnamese people, and get to know them. We have the Vietnamese people, we have the Laotian people, the Hispanic people--what are they doing in their organizations? Do they do anything special? Do they do anything positive to make their community or the Holland community better? I think the media, if they get to know, like for example, what we are doing right now, I think we are working to a positive way. If the media can make a big impact on this, because sometimes we try, we do a lot of meeting with our different organizations, try to make things differently. We do things differently, but if the media gets involved and promotes our association, what we plan to do with it, they will make an impact for the people reading the paper, that these organizations are doing something.

But right now I say that it is improving. I think 1993, 1994, and the year after that is going to be a good year. Two weeks ago I attended the Macatawa Area Coordinating Council (MACE). They invited people from government, to attorney, to township superintendent, to plan to do for the Macatawa areas in the year 2010. What do we want to see improving in the Macatawa area? People are working to the positive way. Even in our

meeting, every subject we discussed, the diverse was also mentioned every time because of our Holland city, so people can try to understand other people, other cultures that are existing. And beside that they have meeting and see, we try to help improve our crime and that the police give to that. I think this is a stepping stone for our Holland community, to getting better. Every time they do something they include, they mention the diverse community, that we need to include these different nationalities.

The Holland Chamber is doing something different. This is the first time that they want to sponsor, that a lot of business people, like the banker want to help and involve the different nationalities, like the Hispanics, Vietnamese, Laotian people, to get more, to understand them better, so they can help. The Holland Chamber will sponsor a different program, that they will talk about different issues. If anybody is interested in starting your own business and learn something different in Holland, this is the free program for them to get involved. Now more business want to focus on us--what I mean by "us" is the different nationalities, the Asian people and the Mexican people. They want to get us involved. That's something positive that we are working on right now.

DR: Could you describe the way your family celebrates special holidays or traditions?

VS: Back in our country we have so many holidays, but even our special holiday, the people at work they don't get the day off, but it's just a special holiday. We have a lot of Buddhist holidays that we go to the temple to celebrate. But in our country each community will have their own temple, too. We have a lot of temples, and you are free to go to any temple you want. If this month you will go to this temple, the next month you can go to any temple. Nobody's going to say anything.

We have, I don't know the name of it, a special holiday, but each holiday we celebrate in the temple. We bring the food to the monk, and give the food to the monk to eat. After the monk finishes eating, he will benedict to us each time we go to the temple. We have a lot of people each time we have our religious holiday, we have hundreds and hundreds of people.

In our country people go to the temple. Some people go to the temple every day, because that's the only day they can go to our Buddha--or God, that's the same thing. Some people do that on a special holiday. Other people would take the effort to go. The reason people go there daily, because the monk doesn't have any food, so we have to bring him some food. We believe that whenever we bring him some food, the food will be passed on to our family or anybody that we want because then you wish that this food I'll give you and I want it to go to this person, that person. At the same time, the food, whatever you give, every time you do some

giving, it's not to the monk or to anybody except giving. That means that when you pass away, that the food, the clothing, everything, it's going to be there for you. It makes people want to give, want to do something nice.

Therefore we believe that in our religion, whatever bad thing you've done, for example, you might have killed people or do something bad, cheating, lies, or anything bad. Then, even though you might not pay now, when you die, you don't know where you will go, but you still have to pay then. Even though God said he might forgive you, just kind of make you feel good, "Oh I've been forgiving." But who knows when you pass away, you might have to still pay that punishment. But we believe in that. I believe that whatever you have done, killed people even, God is not forgiven you. I think you still have to pay your dues. Every time, everybody doing something.

That's why, hopefully, in our religion, we teaching people that whatever bad thing you do, even though you are forgiven, you still have to pay that punishment. At the same time, try to do something good. The nice thing you have done is going to be there for you. That's why people will not try to do bad things and say, "Oh, God's going to forgive me." That's not how our Buddhist teachings are. The monk teaches us to do the nice thing, the best thing you can do all the time, without getting something back, because when you give something, you don't expect something back.

Every father who has done a bad thing in their lifetime has to pay the punishment in heaven. If your son becomes a monk, it will help and give your father and give him an incentive to reduce that punishment for your father. That's why people have said when you become a man, you have to become a monk before you get married. Because when you get married, you don't have that much time, then you really lost concentration. When you become a monk, you need the total concentration, without thinking about anything, just concentrate and get to know the Buddha, learn about our God better. That's payback to your dad. Then your dad will be happy. That's our tradition that's been brought down.

DR: How has your religion or the way that you practice it changed from when you lived in Laos to now when you live in the U.S.?

VS: In my opinion it has changed. Back in our country, we don't have that much rumor about the monk. The monk just likes to preach, and have paid their lifetime to be a monk and study about our religion. They try to preach something to the people so they can understand what God tries to teach you. And that is the person who will tell people what you should do, and teach you something good. But right now, money talks. Each state has their own temple. But even the Thai and the Laotian monks, they have pretty bad reputations right now. When I go to the temple, I feel so good to hear the benedictions or something that the monk is preaching, something that I can learn. I know about it, but

sometimes you need to be reminded what you have done good or what you have done bad, so you can change it. You go to learn, and you feel so good about giving. It's like people have said, they go to church to make them feel good.

We just go voluntarily. People don't force us, don't come to your home, "Hey, you missed to go to temple this week, or last week." You go whenever you want to go. The monks will always be there, to help you, to support you, just like a preacher, to give you some advice, any good advice. In here, because the money talks, I see that the monks, they have a lot of money because people go to the temple and donate some money, because as I've said, whatever you give, the money, the food you give is going to be there for you. It's giving to anybody; it doesn't have to be to the monk. It's to make you feel much better. But then you have a rumor that the monks do certain things to the money. They give a bad name to our Buddha and to our monks. That money's supposed to promote the temple, make the temple better, promote our religion instead of use that as personal money, send it to their family. Because this is a third country, even the monks have other family and they have to send it back to their family. The way they been preaching, the way they been acting is kind of different than the monks in our country. The monk in our country doesn't touch the money or spend the money very much. But

because, I guess the living standard, the way of life in the United States is different than the way of life in our country.

When I go to the temple here, I don't feel comfortable going in, because knowing that whatever I give is not going to be passed to my mother or the people who pass away, because this monk doesn't do what he's supposed to do. So whatever I give kind of makes me uncomfortable. That's not good because when the monk's preaching, whenever you give one dollar, fifty cents, you don't expect something back and you don't think, "Oh, I want this money to go to Dad." You know that the monk's going to do something good. But now in the United States, the rumor say certain monks do something bad to our religion. Some people have a light ear and they might believe in that and that might stop them from going to the temple. That's the negative thing about the temple in the United States compared to Laotian.

DR: Where is the nearest temple from Holland?

VS: The nearest temple, we have a small one in Michigan. That's about a two hour drive from here. But the people from Holland, Zeeland have been going to that temple on our religious holidays or other state where they have a temple. We have been trying for the past five or eight years, trying to get the monk into Holland and have a temple. Because every time the monk comes to visit, we have many people show up to pay respect and talk to the monk. We don't have a temple here in Holland because there are a lot of people

who disagree. Just all these rumors, all these things that people don't want to make any commitment. If we have a family that has enough money to say, "Okay, I'm going to do it myself. You can come when you want to come, but I'm not going to ask you for the money to support, to pay for the rent for that thing," then we might have the temple in Holland.

DR: Do you hope then someday to have a temple in Holland?

VS: Yes, I hope someday to have a temple in Holland because we have a large community and a lot of people in Holland, Zeeland. If we have the monk and the temple close to home, you can go every day to talk to the monk. It makes us feel much better when we talking to the monk. He has a lot of experience. Just the same thing, the monk is the same as the normal people, but the difference is he makes the commitment. He lives by certain rules. The monk is not supposed to get married, is not supposed to touch the female. The female can't get close to the monk. Women pay high, high respect to the monk. We still have a few good monks, who have moved from Laos.

DR: I don't know much about it, but are the majority of Laotian people Buddhist?

VS: Yes, they are. I think right now it is about ninety percent of the people are Buddhist. Ten percent of that have turned to believe in other religion. They have their own church, on 16th, on the South side. Most of the people are from Hamilton. They

have about ten families, and they try to promote God. One thing, sometimes it's kind of bad to talk about these people in a bad way, but this is how I see it. That people, they have been Buddhist all their life, until they come to the Holland city and they go to church. They have their own church now. I feel that those people who go to Lao Church do something--it's not against the Buddha, it's just against a lot of people in Holland--and have a negative, bad thing about them. When you are Buddhist, you do certain things. You have different traditions. We celebrate our special religious holidays. Those people are just totally against everything that we have done, that they have done in the past. When they believe in God, and they stopped believing in Buddha completely, I think that is bad, in my opinion. It's bad because even the people in Holland who attend church and believe in God still accept their own religion, too.

But that group of people, they have a bad name. My sister-in-law said, if you don't go to church, if you are missing to go to church, they will call you at home, ask you, why you don't go to church. That's a totally different thing in our Buddhist religion. We have the temple and you know that. It's totally up to you, when you go, whenever you want to go. You don't have to go if you don't want to go. For a whole year you don't have to go. But in the church they call you if you are missing; if they don't see your face, then Monday they call you. That's something

bad, they take away your freedom. To me, that freedom, you can do anything you want to do. Even though they can go to church every day, go to temple every day. But after they come back, they do something opposite of what they have learned. That doesn't mean that person is not good because they go to church or go to temple every day. What you learn, what you have experienced, it's what's inside you that counts and how you act if you will say a lot of what you have learned by going to the temple or to the church.

DR: Have those people changed their beliefs and feelings since they come to the U.S.?

VS: Yes. Some people try to recruit other people to go to their church. The people from Holland/Zeeland don't go to that church because of the way they've been preaching, the way they've been teaching; they've totally cut off their previous beliefs. I think you can learn both ways. To me, you can learn both religions and combine them. Because our religion, as I mentioned, that is variation. But we might have the same message to our own people, not to cheat, to lie, not to commit adultery. That's the same message. If you combine that religion, it expands your experience, makes you a better person, instead of okay rejecting these, I'm going to just accepting these. That's what they've been doing, just accepting only one religion, "God," and they reject everything. My dad believes strongly in Buddha. He's not against them if they don't talk down about our religion. But he

defends our Buddha real good. Those people have been Buddhists for a long time, but then suddenly they are Christian, and they still talk bad things about the Buddha.

DR: Obviously Buddhism is a minority religion in America. What do you think is the best way to preserve it?

VS: The best way is just that people continue to believe in our Buddha and continue to believe and also teach to their children and grandchildren about our religion. Whenever we have a chance, we will go to the nearest temple to celebrate our special holiday. And teach to anyone and everyone who is interested in learning about our religion and promote our religion in a good way so other people would like to learn and know about what the Buddha is about.

To preserve that, when you get a chance, try to go to temple. And if people might misunderstand or don't understand about our religion, other nationalities or other people ask about that, then you will be able to tell them the best you know about that. A positive way instead of negative way. That's the way to conserve that. To get people to accept. It's up to the people, because we are not asking people to accept our religion. But if you want to learn, we are not saying, "Okay, because you believe in God, you can't learn." We are pretty happy to see that people are interested in getting to know our religion. We are still happy to see that people, even though they might not believe in that, are

asking and get to know about that. That's something that we get people to understand our religion.

DR: Holland has a reputation as being a very conservative, Christian community. Do you ever experience negative feelings about that?

VS: No, I don't. To live my life better, sometimes just to ignore, and don't make a big deal of everything other people said about you. Because they are not throwing the egg, or doing something, because you are different nationalities, you believe in different things. If people write a bad note or mail some bad mail, or throw something to our house because we are Asian people, that's something I will not ignore. That's a negative thing. The Laotian people who live in Holland for the past eight or nine years, I don't hear people say, "Oh, these white people, they throw the egg, and say bad name, saying something bad, saying they want us to move out from their community." I don't see that in Holland. I don't see that at all. I just mind my own business. If people want to get to know us as a neighbor, as a friend, then we are happy with open arms to let them get to know us.

DR: That's all the questions I can remember that we talked about last time.

VS: Okay. Thank you so much for taking off your busy schedule to interview me and thank you for asking me to share my stories as an example to the Holland community. I hope when other people read

this story, they will understand better about Asian people. I
thank you again, Donna.