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Bui, Lieng Van Oral History Interview: Sesquicentennial of Holland, "150 Stories for 150 Years"

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Oral History Interview with
Lieng Van Bui

Conducted May 23, 1997
by Duane Booie

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
Interview with Lieng Van Bui
May 23, 1997
Interviewer: Duane Booi

DB: Lieng, it's been nice to meet you this morning. As I've explained, we're going to talk a bit about your history, what brought you here, about your childhood, and everything we can think of in connection with the 150 stories for the 150 years, the sesquicentennial, of Holland. Why don't we just start back at the beginning, where you were born, when, maybe tell us something about your family, about your brothers and sisters, your home, games you played, anything you can think of about your early life.

LB: My name is Lieng. I was born in Kien an, North Vietnam and my parents moved to the south in 1954 when the war had ended. France and Vietnam were fighting all over there, and the history is that in ____, and after the French ____ _ defeated. At that time, the government said whoever wanted to could move south. During that time, I was born. I didn't know much about it. I had heard something like that. My parents moved to the south and I am the oldest son in a family of seven.

DB: How many brothers or sisters?

LB: We had four brothers and three sisters.

DB: Are they still in Vietnam?

LB: All of our family and relatives are around the United States, all over here.

DB: What year did you come over here?

LB: 1975. When the fighting started getting worse in 1975, April of 1975, we did try to get away from the fighting. We didn't know we'd come over here, until we saw out to the Olsen, and we saw the helicopter pick up some people from Saigon and fly out to the Olsen.

DB: You saw that?

LB: Yes, I saw that. It continued to go out to the Olsen, and I saw the ship pick up people, and we got around it, and finally we got close to them, and they said, we will pick you up. At the time, I knew it, that the weather was pretty bad. We did get around the ship. So many people and a lot of boats around that big ship, and then a lot of ships around, too, at that time, the cargo ships.

DB: Was it a United States ship?

LB: Yes.

DB: It was there for the purpose of picking up refugees?

LB: During that time I really didn't know that was it, you know. That was an empty ship, for cargo. But when the people were there, they just picked them up. That's all I knew at that time.

DB: So you didn't take that ship, but how did you get out of Vietnam eventually?

LB: Later, when the storm got better we got on board. That ship, it carried 8,000 people. We stayed in that ship for 24 hours without food, because the ship didn't have enough.

DB: It wasn't meant as a ship to take people and it was overloaded.

LB: Yes. 8,000 people on the ship, you know, it's pretty big.

DB: Where did you land with the ship?

LB: For a while we were on the ship, for a week, because they were still picking people to transfer out to a different ship. After they said, you have to move to different ship so we can support you with food. That way, I got in the other ship and we stayed there for a week. We were only able to eat one full meal a day because there were so many people on the ship.

DB: Did you go first to the Philippines, and then come to the United States?

LB: No, we stopped at the island called Guam.

DB: Oh yes, Guam. That's a United States territorial...

LB: We stayed there for three days. We did all the paper work before we flew to the United States.

DB: So you had permission to enter the United States before you ever arrived on the shores here, then?

LB: Yes, yes. We had all the paper work. And when we get into United States, first we got to Arkansas, Fort Chaffee Arkansas, that military base. All the people were in there.

DB: Right, there was point at which the people first came until they were then sent to whatever city they were going to live in. Was your whole family with you then, your mother, father, and all your brothers and sisters?

LB: Yes, all of my family.

DB: Fortunately, you all got out.

LB: Yeah, all together.

DB: You, of course, lived there during the war. Did you have a home, a place you would call home? Or were you on the move a lot to keep away from the military action?

LB: We had a home, yes. My home, my real home, my family home when I was a child, I used to live in Dong Xuyen Phan-Thiet, that area. That city we lived in when I was a child. I grew up in a poor family, and I didn't finish high school, but I went to work to help my family, to support them.

DB: So you went through grade school, but not high school. Did most of the boys and girls that age go through high school? Or was it not very common to go to high school?

LB: Some, they finish high school. Some, they didn't have the chance to do that. That time, all I know is, I was young and in a poor family and we worked to survive.

DB: Were you involved with the church there? What religious background would you have had in Vietnam?

LB: I am a traditional Catholic. All the town, my family and my grandparents were also Catholic.

DB: There were Catholic missionaries that started the school there, perhaps?

LB: Yes.

DB: Is that the school you attended? Would it have been a Catholic School in grade school?

LB: Yes.

DB: That's interesting. There are so many things I'm sure you could tell us about your childhood. It'd be hard for me to ask too many intelligent questions, I guess, but

considering the time period that you grew up, did you have fun as a child? Did you have games that you played and did you go to parties and did you date girls and that sort of thing?

LB: Yes. When I was a child, the fun I had was to play with car. We tried to make some military jeeps with some dry dirt. That thing, I know. But when I got a little bit older, I knew how to swim, and I swam pretty good.

DB: Would you be swimming in the ocean there, did you have a pool?

LB: I lived close to the river, so I swam across the river. The river was about a mile across.

DB: Which river is it?

LB: That was in 1965. I don't know the name of it. It's called Song Phu Hai. It was clear, for a long time, and I don't remember...

DB: I just wondered if it was a major river that we might of heard of from the war.

LB: No, not really. It's a small town. Most of the time when I was young, I'd swim across the river to play for fun. When I got to be 15, I started to thinking it was time I had a girlfriend, or had a friendship and talk or sometimes go to the movies or something like that. I moved to a different city. I usually lived in Phanthiet, They call it Bing Thuan.

DB: When you came to the United States, did you know people here, and did you have to tell somebody when you came into the United States, in immigration, that there was a particular family waiting for you in some city?

LB: No, not at all. During that time, we had come over here through immigration, but

we didn't know anybody in the United States at all during that time. The government helped us to get everybody in a big group and help us on to a military camp. To begin, we got to the United States and got into Fort Chaffe, Arkansas. We had a lot of people there, with our friends, some of them I knew, and our family. We stayed there for six months to wait for a sponsor, because we had to have a sponsor. The government, during that time, offered anybody to sponsor any of us in the camp.

DB: So who was your sponsor?

LB: St. Francis De Sales Church sponsored our family.

DB: OK. Not an individual, the church did? Did you come from Arkansas directly to Holland, Michigan.

LB: Yes, we had a church sponsor, our family. They got us from Arkansas to Holland, Michigan.

DB: So it was a church who decided where you would begin your life in the United States then?

LB: Yes, because during that time, we didn't have anybody or friends on our side, we had to have somebody sponsor us.

DB: When you got to Holland, was there somebody at Our Lady of the Lake or St. Francis Church to help you?

LB: During that time, we only had Francis De Sales. They were responsible for us, to help us get a job and to get to school, how to learn English, and all that stuff. Because, during that time, I didn't speak any English at all. I had five months in the camp, but during that time, I didn't go to school, until I got out here and I really

needed it to talk with someone to understand or to be able to communicate to each other. That time, I was beginning to listen to all the tapes I brought with me, because at that time I thought I made need it some day. I was beginning to listen and I would see some feedback from what I listened to.

DB: Did they have courses in English right at the church, or did they arrange for you to go to a school?

LB: They arranged me to go to community school, and they also got someone to come over to the apartment to help us to learn English. That way it helped a lot.

DB: How did you get connected with Padnos, then? Was that through the church also?

LB: Yes. I came to Holland in the winter. I remember, December 12, 1975, just before Christmas, I came over. Here it kind of surprised me when I saw all white and snow. I was really confused when I get off the airplane and I didn't know what that thing... It made me really surprised. But how I got the job, the church had somebody to help us to get the job. I got the job in Padnos, and began to work in 1976, February 1976.

DB: You've been there ever since, so Padnos has been good to you and helped you?

LB: Yes, Padnos is very kind and they gave me an opportunity to do a lot of things, and I'm very appreciative. The company does for me and provides me with all the kindness to help me to begin to come to today. I'm very loyal to the company.

DB: Well, it works both ways, I'm sure you do a lot for them, so they can do a lot for you. You certainly have a beautiful home here, and it looks to me like you've come a long way in the period of time you've been here in the United States.

LB: Yes. At the beginning, it was a little bit difficult. But, I continued to work with it and learned how to save money, and we came out pretty good.

DB: Where did you meet your wife?

LB: I meet my wife in a different city. I live in Phan Thiet, and when I grew up and went to work on a fishing boat. My wife's home town, Vung-Tall, I'll make an example, something like from here to Chicago. I went to work around, and I met my wife during that time, pretty young, 14. When I was 15 years old, I worked for one of my relatives, and I met my wife, and we'd play some games, something like cooking, like that.

DB: But you weren't married when you came to the United States, were you?

LB: Yes, I was.

DB: Oh, you were? Then her family, some of her family, was with the group that came over with you. And they live in this area then, too?

LB: Yes. They live in a different state, not all in Holland area, but in a different state. To begin, my story with my wife is we played games, cook dinner and like that. I looked at her, and I was thinking, I said, maybe someday I may marry her. I looked at her and already I felt in love with her, already in the beginning. During that time, my heart told me she was the one. For a while, I went to work around there. Later, I went to work with her parents. Her parents had a fishing boat, so they needed people to work. At that time, her parents needed someone to work for them, so I come over to work for them. At that time I really wanted to, because I wanted to find out how my wife and all this.

DB: To learn something of her history, of her family?

LB: Yes. Later, I worked for a while and we found something, we agreed something, and could live together. Two year later, we got married. We got married in 1972. After three years, we had a baby.

DB: So that was just before you came over? So you had one little girl when you arrived in the United States?

LB: Yes, just before I came over, my wife just had a little girl for fifteen days, and she got in the ship. She just had a fifteen, fourteen day old baby. In the 24 hours, we didn't have anything to eat, and she kept feeding. I struggled to find the food, it was very scary. That night I really struggled to try and find something for her to eat. She was breast feeding. My wife only had fourteen day old baby and got in a ship like that, it so crowded with people. It was very scary. That day I never forgot, never. Because, our family struggled to try to get in the ship, and my wife had only a baby fourteen days.

DB: Yes, that would be a very frightening thing, I'm sure. How many children do you have now?

LB: I have three children. The oldest one just finished four years of college and also is married.

DB: Is that right? You don't look old enough.

LB: I married when I was 18. So she just finished her college. She just finished college and she decided. She dated with, right now my son-in-law, but that time he was her boyfriend, maybe two years.

DB: What college did she attend?

LB: University of Michigan. I have two other sons. One of the youngest, ____, is going to college this fall, at Alma College. He'll be attending art school.

DB: That is interesting. When you came to Holland, and maybe through this 21, 22 years that you've been here, how were you accepted by the old-timers in Holland when you first came, and has that changed through the years?

LB: Holland, it changed a lot. The city grew bigger, and is crowded now. The beginning of Holland, it was a small town when I came here, very private, quiet, not much going on. I was very comfortable and Holland is a beautiful city compared to different cities. Everywhere I go, always I come back to Holland. It's a peaceful area to live and raise a family.

DB: Were the people here kind to you?

LB: Yes, they were very kind. For example, I lived around here, and all my neighborhood loves me a lot and they treat me very kind and they like me around. Whoever I meet, they are very kind with me all the time. Now, the city, it's growing pretty big. All the road repair and everything. It just is a happening city to my eye. I go to California and some different states, Texas, Florida. But, I come back to Holland. It very beautiful in the summer.

DB: Your children didn't go to Hope, they're going to the University of Michigan and Alma, and that's fine. But I wonder, for your family and for you now, do you recognize benefits from Hope College, from living in a college town. Do you attend sports events, for instance, basketball or football, at Hope College, or go to any of

the plays.

LB: My younger brother, he went to Hope College. He finished four years of college at Hope, a long time ago. He works for Mayor Donnelly, and he does a very job, he got a good job there.

DB: Do you get involved here with any of the service organizations like the Salvation Army or Good Samaritans, or groups maybe from the Catholic Church that continue to help others in the neighborhood, are you actively involved with any of those?

LB: Yeah, I'm actually involved in helping a Vietnamese Catholic choir in Holland here. It's just a small group, to work with young people and help them, some stuff they need.

DB: That's at St. Francis Church?

LB: Yes. Sometimes, I set up the stuff, or whenever we set up something to raise money to help something or somebody, to call the group and to do some cooking or cleaning or to set up the room or hook up the stereo or set up the thing for the choir, to get involved, to help. One of my friends, they call me the brother or something like that. But at all that, I help around.

DB: That's great. It's nice to help others that way. You're familiar with the community center they're talking about building with the performing arts center and the sports arena. They're talking about where it might be located right in Holland or outside of Holland a little. Do you have any feeling about that? Is it an important thing in your life to have that kind of facility improve over the one that we now have?

LB: Holland, it's growing bigger. We may need something to improve it better and

someday for the future we have to look forward to do something better.

DB: I didn't know whether you were a sport enthusiast, if you go to the basketball games.

LB: My sport is volleyball, soccer. The only thing I learned a little bit about is ping pong, tennis. A little bit. I'm not very good in the sports at all.

DB: But growing up in a warm country, you never learned to ice skate, did you. So a skating arena wouldn't interest you too much.

LB: No. (laughs) I have been roller skating. Yes. A little bit, on a rink . But it's hard to find time to play here a little bit, run around, go roller skating. When I began to over here, now, I can't do it too well.

DB: Have you ever gone back to your old home in Vietnam since you first arrived in the united States?

LB: No, I haven't.

DB: Do you still have friends that you had or family members there that you correspond with?

LB: All my family members and relatives are in the United States, all came over to the United States. None stayed. My family is very small, so I got all of them in the boat and got over here.

DB: Probably the lives that your children have now and what they might expect in the future is quite different from what they would have expected had they stayed in Vietnam.

LB: Yes, they had a lot of good stuff around them, and they didn't know much about the stuff we had over there in our country. Over here, everything is so easy. If you're

willing to work for it, you get it. This is a free country, and a lot of things you can do without the government telling you not to.

DB: Do you think the people who have been there all their lives, perhaps don't appreciate the United States as much as you do?

LB: Sometimes they didn't take advantage and they didn't know too much of something. I came over here and I know something I didn't have before. Now I am able to work for it and I achieved that goal I set. Some people over here, they didn't see that, and they didn't take advantage and sometimes they forget what it's all about. They don't appreciate what they have.

DB: Well, I'm sure that's one of the reasons you're a good worker at Padnos, also, and they appreciate your work.

LB: Yes, the company provides me with the equipment and all the stuff and the time, and I'm willing to work hard for them and they give back to us something. It's all in the heart, and the money they pay us is pretty good.

DB: Anything else that you can think of that you'd like to tell us about for posterity, something we haven't talked about? I'll tell you what, if not, we appreciate you sharing all this with us. It's very interesting and very different from the life that so many of the people whose parents and grandparents grew up in the Holland area, the kind of a story that they would be able to tell, so we appreciate you sharing this. You will be getting a copy of this, and anything else you think of that you really would have like to said, you can do it at that time. So I think we'll just conclude the interview then.

LB: OK. Thank you.