

Oral History Interview  
Michigan History- Spring 2000  
Interviewee: Meng Sew  
Interviewer: Ashley M. Pries  
31 March 2000

AP: The first question I am going to ask you is what part of Cambodia are you from? I think you said that already- you were born in Ko Ki Thom, and then you moved to the city.

MS: Yes, and after that we moved to the city Phnom-Pengh.

AP: Can you describe your homeland and what it was like to live there?

MS: I loved to live in Cambodia because the temperature is warm all seasons- no snow, no winter, no wearing a heavy coat.

AP: Not like Michigan!

MS: No, not like Michigan- it's kind of really nice. We don't have a lot of allergies.

AP: If you were looking out the window, what kinds of things would you see?

MS: If I was looking out the window I saw a lot of fresh trees, a lot of green produce. It's a kind of wide land, you know, fresh air.

AP: Are there a lot of trees?

MS: Yes, there are a lot of trees in the village, but in the city you can see a lot of traffic, like cars and trucks and tricycles.

AP: What was it like to live there? Did you enjoy it there?

MS: I really enjoyed to live in Cambodia, but not in the war- before the war. After the war, we just don't want to live there anymore. The war that we been through for about 5 years when the communist leader, whoever captured us, and we worked for 16-18 hours a day without food. Yeah, that's not fun.

AP: Was that when they brought you together in places, is that where you worked? When they

brought your families together in places?

MS: During the war, in 1975, we never lived together. They separate you from the young aged, the teenager, between the men, women, mother, father- we never see each other.

AP: So, you didn't see your family?

MS: No, not at all.

AP: But you were all able to come back together again?

MS: Once in awhile. Whenever they didn't have nothing for us to do, they let everybody come to meet each other once in awhile, not everyday.

AP: What kind of work did you do?

MS: During that time, they taught us how to grow rice in the mud, in the water. They taught us how to grow corn and plant the banana trees, potatoes. All kinds of produce, we had to learn how do that. But, we had a hard time to learn, because we never been through like that.

AP: Why did you immigrate to the United States? Why did you come here and how did you get here?

MS: In 1979, when the Vietnamese soldiers came over to capture Cambodia- to help or... I don't know if they came to help or what, I don't know. So, we came out from the communists again. And then, I knew this guy who was a good friend to my oldest brother, and he told us that my oldest brother is in the United States now. No, in the Thailand jail. So we knew that he was smart and he can help us, so we escape again from Cambodia to the Thailand border. But the whole family, we had to separate into 3 groups - between the boys, we want all the boys over- then myself and my husband, and then the

next step- my sister, my mom and my youngest sister.

AP: Were you the only one that was married at that time?

MS: At that time, I married with my younger brother in Cambodia- we married the same night, the same day.

AP: So, why did you leave?

MS: Why did I leave from Cambodia then? It's still not safe yet, it still had a lot of killing. Shooting, yes we knew it was not safe so we tried to escape again. So, after we got to Thailand border, we saw a poster with my brother's picture in it so we know that we can go the United States now. The poster said his name, he got so many brothers and sisters still live somewhere, but here he is now in United States because the Catholic preacher went to Thailand jail to release him- that's why he sponsor my brother to the United States, to Indiana. And he wait for the preacher to sponsor all the rest of our family to the United States.

AP: So you saw that poster and that is how he found you? Did he know where you were at that time?

MS: No, he didn't know, but we saw his poster. He had his name and his address and that is how we contacted him. We went to the Red Cross to find him.

AP: What concerns did you have about leaving your country? Were you afraid of leaving the rest of your family behind? Or were you just concerned about finding a safer place to go?

MS: We just find a safe place to go to live, that's it.

AP: How did you get to the United States?

MS: My brother, the one that escaped from Cambodia first, he found a sponsor to sponsor our

family- that's how we got here.

AP: And then you just flew over? Did you have to get a visa or anything like that?

MS: I don't know how they did that because they had a group get together- they sponsor us. I don't know how they did that. So, we flew, but before we got to the United States, we have so many tests. They test us, you know. We dropped the test one time, that's why we got stuck for 2 years.

AP: Because you didn't pass the test?

MS: We didn't pass because we left another brother in Cambodia. [crying] We wanted to come together, we know how hard it is in Cambodia. We wanted to wait for our other brother in Cambodia. That's how we dropped the test. But he did not want to come.

AP: Is he still there?

MS: He still there. That's what I've been through - last year, I went back to try to help him and I almost got killed. I don't want to think about him anymore.

AP: Who did you travel to the United States with? You came here with your family, but who came with you? How many people?

MS: Only me, my husband, and Meyly.

AP: Why did you choose the United States and not another country, like Canada?

MS: The reason we chose the United States is because my brother was over here. We want to go where the family is.

AP: Where did you first go in the United States?

MS: We went to Indiana- Jeffersonville, Indiana.

AP: What was your impression of that place?

MS: We just feel so lucky that everything seemed like we live in heaven. When we got to the house, we got everything - furniture, a dishwasher, a washer and dryer. Everything just complete, like we had never seen before. We just so happy.

AP: What about the people there? Were they friendly?

MS: They were really, really friendly people in Indiana. Everywhere you walk they smile, they say hi to you. Because we were one family, the only Asian family that lived over there. They have another couple of families too, but they live in Louisville, Kentucky.

AP: Why did you settle in Holland, MI? What brought you here?

MS: What brought us here - because of job.

AP: So you heard about the job openings?

MS: Yes, we heard about Holland, MI, have a lot of job and they paid a high price too. That's why we here.

AP: What were your first impressions of Holland?

MS: About job, that's it.

AP: When you got here, what did you think of this town?

MS: It's kind of sad the first time we got here because we left all of the sponsors who sponsor us. They give us a good house, they tried to give us a good education. Not me, like my younger brother and sister. Ashley, I always forget what I say. [laugh] What did you ask me?

AP: What were your first impressions of Holland when you first got here?

MS: We saw a lot of industry and we feel that we can get a job, we can make money over here. But one thing we feel sad because we miss all the people who give us a good life, and

help us a lot. That's sad. We still sad right now.

AP: You still are?

MS: Yes, but after we live here awhile they come here to visit. They just say they so impressed by what we have done. That made us feel good.

AP: Can you describe some of the problems that you faced adjusting to life over here?

MS: Over here in Holland or in the United States?

AP: In the United States, or in Holland in general. What kind of problems have you faced?

MS: At first, it's kind of hard about language. When you go to work it's kind of hard to understand between and communicate. You don't understand and that makes you feel sad, but after you get to work for awhile, you get used to it and feel better and better.

AP: Did that help you to learn the language better, getting into a workplace and getting into the community a little bit?

MS: A lot, to go to work you learn a lot of different words. You learn how to work, you learn about your language, you learn how to get along with people. There are a lot of things you learn at work.

AP: What aspects of life here are different from your hometown?

MS: It's a big difference, because here you got your own TV, if you want to watch TV it's right over there. You want to go to grocery, you got your own car. In Cambodia you have to walk from distance to distance.

AP: Can you think of anything else that's different? Maybe even things like within your family? Is the way you raise your family here different from family structure there?

MS: It's a big different between family here and in Cambodia. In Cambodia you can discipline

your kids. You can spank, you can hit, you can make kids respect you. They don't have a choice to call police to come over to the house. They run away from home. Kids over there, they didn't do that. But over here in the United States, it's a lot of pressure, a lot of patience because you cannot spank your kids, you cannot discipline your kids. I saw some family like that, but I'm lucky- I have good two daughters. They never been a bother to me at all. But here when you hit kid, they can call police and police arrest parent. But over there no. But to discipline kid in Cambodia is different. Sometime it's hard, can make kids brain damaged because the parent always hit the kid with the hand or pull the ear, like spank too hard. It's not a good way to do that. One good way, one bad way, you know.

AP: Did you know a lot of people when you were in Cambodia? Did you have a lot of friends that you left?

MS: I had a lot, a lot of friends in Cambodia. Everywhere we went there is friend here, friend there, every place. You just never stay home. I had a lot of friends.

AP: Do you still have a lot of friends here? Have you gotten to know people?

MS: I do have in the United States, but not in the same town. Like they live in the United States, but in Holland I don't have any. It's kind of sad, but one thing you says sad, one thing you say all your family over here. Family come first.

AP: So a lot of your family live close to you?

MS: Yes, very close. Family live close, but friends live far away.

AP: Where were you first employed? And was it difficult to find employment when you got to the United States?

MS: We really did not have a hard time to find a job because we have wonderful sponsor who know where we can work, who know the owner of the company- so they put us to work over there. And they knew we know how to sew, that's why our first job is called Snowhill Drapery, we sew the drapery. That was our first job.

AP: Did you sew it by hand?

MS: We sew by machine, sewing machine.

AP: You told me a little bit before when we filled out that form about the jobs since you moved to Holland. How many different jobs, and what kind of jobs have you had since you've been in Holland?

MS: I been through a lot with Manpower and a lot of places before I got hired. They wanted to hire me too, but I just want to find a good job for me. I don't want to work from one place to place, but the first time when I work through Manpower I just say it's okay if this job is not good for my future. I just go to another job- I go from job to job through Manpower. But everywhere I work through Manpower they say they want to hire me because they said my English is not bad.

AP: How did the move effect you and your family? When you moved from Cambodia to the United States?

MS: Yes, it affect us a lot because of my father. I miss my father, we don't know if he still alive, or if he die or what, we don't know.

AP: You still don't know right now?

MS: We still don't know. He is just a wonderful father.

AP: What traditions did you bring with you that are still a part of your family?

MS: Just keep the family together and get together once a week or twice a week- like to cook, have dinner or lunch. That's all the traditions - birthday parties.

AP: What were some of the most difficult adjustments for you to make? We sort of talked about that already, maybe we'll just go to the next one.

Overall, how difficult was your transition into the Holland community?

MS: Holland is good place to live. It's good job, that's what I say again. Job, and we can make money easy to make a living, like buy a house. When you live in Indiana you can not afford to buy a house. They pay not enough like over here in Michigan.

AP: Why have you stayed in Holland instead of moving somewhere else?

MS: In Holland, I think is a good area, is good city to raise a kid. Good school, good college, and good job. Everything just good for us. It's not hard to raise the kid too- like another city they have a lot of gangs, or bad people, rob police, something like that.

AP: So because it's a smaller town, you like that?

MS: Smaller town, I like smaller town.

AP: How have you gotten involved in the community?

MS: How?

AP: Just through the workplace maybe?

MS: Yeah.

AP: Have you become part of any groups? Or do you go to church here?

MS: The first time when we got here, yes we went to church, but later on we feel different.

I don't know how to explain. We used to go to Presbyterian church in Indiana, we used to see our sponsor, the people over there are different than over here. But over here

everybody try to work hard. Everybody is different over here.

AP: The next question is do you have a church affiliation, and you said before that you joined the Presbyterian church when you got here. But you were a Buddhist when you were in Cambodia?

MS: We were, yes.

AP: That's the religion that you grew up with?

MS: Yes.

AP: Did you just give up that religion, that part of yourself, when you got here? Or do you think that your beliefs are still part of that?

MS: We believe, right now we are Christian, but when we want to go back to Buddha, it's kind of hard. It's different. I think we believe in Jesus more than Buddha. It's different now.

AP: What influenced your decision on what church to attend?

MS: You mean if I want to go to church, what church I...

AP: Yeah, what influences your decision?

MS: Presbyterian church.

AP: Because when you came here...

MS: Yes, when we came here. Our memory still over here, like it's difficult to go to another church. I don't know. But we went to Christian Reformed Church sometime too, and I have a friend who work the same place, who go to a Baptist church, but it kind of different.

AP: It's just different?

MS: Yes.

AP: This is about how Holland is becoming more culturally diverse. When you see new immigrants settling in Holland, how do you feel?

MS: When I see the new immigrant just came to Holland? I feel like they lucky. To Holland city they will be happy because it a small town it is not hard to make a living, and not hard to raise the kid. Number one is raise the kid. The big time.

AP: What are your feelings about the Dutch community?

MS: It's okay. It's not good or bad. Everybody is busy with their jobs, it's hard to communicate with our neighbors.

AP: Also about the Hispanic community. How do you feel about the Hispanic community?

MS: Hispanic community? I really don't have a lot of Spanish friends so I don't know much about that.

AP: And what are your feelings about the Asian community?

MS: Asian community, they okay.

AP: Would you say most of your friends here are from the Asian community?

MS: I have a mix of friends from different races. I go to work, there is different people so we can talk and make friends because we came from the same soil - the same country. Overall, I have many friends of different ethnicities.

AP: So you think it's easier for you to talk to people and to get to know people from the Asian community when you are at work?

MS: Yes, but to tell you the truth a lot of Asian, they said they go to work and they have problem at work, like things like that. I got along with everybody most of the time. It doesn't matter- black, or white, or Asian, or whatever.

AP: Do you see the different communities, do you see them facing similar problems or opportunities that you faced? Talking about the immigrants.

MS: Can you repeat again, Ashley?

AP: When you see new immigrants coming to Holland, do you see them facing the same problems that you did, or do they have the same opportunities that you did when you came here?

MS: If I see the new immigrant just came, I feel like they lucky. Because I seen a lot of the other immigrant went to another state, they have a hard time to find a job, or about the living. Sometime they live with a bad community, they didn't know what's going on, but here they new immigrants who came here seem like they knew each other before they move here, and they don't have any problem to find a job. They have each other.

AP: How do you feel about the Dutch heritage that Holland has tried to preserve?

MS: What does it mean - preserve?

AP: Because Holland was founded by the Dutch, they're trying to keep some of their heritage going within the community? How do you feel about that? About Tulip Time, they celebrate Tulip Time trying to preserve the heritage. What do you think about that?

MS: I think it's great they try to keep their own, how do you call - traditional? And make the city grow up a lot. It's good. It's great, we like it.

AP: Another question - what do you think about the Cinco de Mayo festival? I think that's like the Hispanic festival they have.

MS: I don't know much about it, Ashley. I never been to a Spanish festival, so I don't know what's going on.

AP: Okay, I'm not even sure about that one. Do you feel the community celebrates your heritage well?

MS: Can you explain that?

AP: Do you think that Holland tries to include the Asian perspective?

MS: I think they do now. Before I heard that they didn't, but now I think that they do. It's great, yeah. I don't know because at work it seems like everyone get together really good, and like Dutch dance. My daughter is Asian right, and she like to go to Dutch dance and they include her too. That's great. She's not Dutch!

AP: Have you experienced any discrimination in Holland?

MS: Yes, in everyday instances like in the stores, restaurants, etc. Nothing really intense, but it is present.

AP: Do you think that your children, do they try to keep some of their heritage, some of their Asian heritage or do they assimilate? Do you know what assimilate means?

MS: Yes, I think they do because they learn from the mom. They never throw away all that. So it's good to keep that.

AP: Do you teach them some things from your culture that you want them to hang on to?

MS: Yes, I do. I always do.

AP: What kinds of things?

MS: Like to learn how to respect, work hard, study hard to become something. In our country, before you send your kid to another country like France, Germany, or United States, you have to have a lot of money before you send you kid over here. So, I always told them this is the best country that you never seen. You always work hard, study hard, make a

good living. Education come first.

AP: Now Lisa is going to graduate this year- does she have plans to go on to college or to do something next year?

MS: Yes her plan, I think she going to go to University of Michigan.

AP: And Meyly is at Hope already. What do you think about that?

MS: I think it's wonderful. I'm lucky to have these two kids. They never give me any hard time at all.

AP: Do your children, do they speak Cambodian? I know Meyly, she speaks a couple of different languages.

MS: See, it's kind of hard in our country like the moms stay home and take care of the kids, only the father work right. So the kids have to speak a lot of languages like Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, French, whatever. But here in United States, you never have time to stay with your kids. The mom, the dad go to work different shifts like the situation right now, I always work second shift and my kid go to school, I go to work. We never have a good communicate together. So, the only time that we have time to communicate, only Saturday or Sunday, or my kid get sick. That's why I always speak Chinese or Cambodian. They understand, but they don't know how to talk much. But they understand all the Cambodian and Chinese. And Meyly, she speak some too.

AP: So those are the two languages other than English they speak, is Chinese and Cambodian?

MS: Cambodian and English yes.

AP: Lisa speaks those languages also, or she understands it?

MS: She understand all the Chinese, Cambodian, but to speak like Meyly is kind of hard.

Really slow and take time.

AP: Are your children interested in your heritage? I kind of asked that already. Do they ask you about your past, and about the country that you came from?

MS: Yes, they did. They always ask. They interested, they love it, and they just feel sad after we told them. That's why they keep study hard.

AP: What would you say to a friend who is considering moving to the United States? If you had friends in Cambodia that wanted to come, what would you tell them?

MS: I would just tell all welcome, this is a great country that you want to be.

AP: I guess then I'm just supposed to say thank you for doing this. And is there anything that you would like to tell me that I haven't covered? Anything that you think is important?

MS: Important? I don't know which one. About here or...

AP: Just about how you've adjusted to Holland, or how the diversity of Holland is changing, anything like that? Do you have any stories you want to tell?

MS: Not really, but Holland is nice town to live, to raise kids, to find job.

[tapes stops for awhile, then resumes]

AP: ... In 1975?

MS: Yes, in 1975, the time that they move us to live in the village, we live in the village about a month I think. So I found out that my father still alive. I have a friend who knew each other from a long time ago, he told us that my father still alive, that's why he and my brother, and me escape again to the city. And I think we got caught. They threw me and him in the jail for 21 days. No food, none.

AP: For 21 days?

MS: 21 days, and every midnight they question you like twelve, we don't know what time, but it seemed like around twelve, one o'clock they pull you to the office and ask the same questions every night. They question you but they never feed you. But good thing, that's why I believe in Jesus because we never had food, but every morning I saw a hen, you know a chicken lay egg, every morning the hen laid two eggs. We ate the fresh eggs every morning, and every time we ate we had diarrhea, you know. No good. That's a long story, I don't want to tell anymore.

AP: Okay, well thanks.