

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

#MinneAsianStories

**Illustrated Living History**

BERT LEE, YUSANAT TWAY, AND ZOUA VANG,  
PAGE 16

Ramsey County's 'Boy Problem'

# Snapshots of Boys Totem Town

BOBBIE SCOTT, PHD, PAGE 1



## By the Numbers . . .



The Coalition of Asian American Leaders (CAAL) started in 2013 as a network for Asian Minnesotan leaders to connect, learn, and act together to improve community life. CAAL uplifts and elevates Asian American leaders and issues, celebrates the rich diverse cultures and histories of Asian Minnesotans, and works to build a strong and inclusive Minnesota for all.

Number of Asian ethnic groups in Minnesota?

**42**

Asian population in Ramsey County as of 2017?

**84,000**

Average age of Asian Minnesotans?

**29**

Asian Minnesotan buying power today?

**\$4 billion**

Number of Asian Minnesotan leaders in CAAL's Network?

**2,500**

Number of CAAL #MinneAsianStories publications?

**1, with No. 2 debuting May 2020**

SOURCES: Coalition of Asian American Leaders and United States Census Bureau.

To learn more, see "#MinneAsianStories: Illustrated Living History," beginning on page 16.

## ON THE COVER

Boys Totem Town, a juvenile detention center in Ramsey County, closed its doors in 2019 after more than a century. Photos (left to right) courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society and Ramsey County, Minnesota.

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VERN SCHULTZ

## Message from the Editorial Board

Stories of youth are often the most compelling, and this issue opens a window into several of those in our county's history. Bobbie Scott details the one-hundred-year history of Boys Totem Town, which housed boys who had committed minor offenses in Ramsey County. In its early days, the detention facility provided important consistency in discipline and education for the boys, even though runaways were frequent. But as models for treating juvenile offenders changed and populations of color were overrepresented, Boys Totem Town became outmoded and finally closed its doors in 2019. This issue also includes engaging stories from three young Asian Americans—Bert Lee, Yusanat Tway, and Zoua Vang. These show daily living in different cultural settings in Ramsey County. Some of them were illustrated in a graphic booklet as part of #MinneAsianStories, a campaign of the Coalition of Asian American Leaders. Finally, Vern Schultz shares memories of his boyhood dream job, landed at age fourteen: a groundskeeper for the St. Paul Saints at Lexington Park in the 1940s. Among other duties, the ground crew scrambled to retrieve valuable hit-outside-the-park balls from such places as the Prom Ballroom parking lot and University Avenue!

*Anne Cowie*  
Chair, Editorial Board

The Ramsey County Historical Society thanks Board Member James A. Stolpestad and affiliate AHS Legacy Fund for supporting the updated design of this magazine. Publication of Ramsey County History is also supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr., and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon. Thanks also to the Coalition of Asian American Leaders for their financial support.

#MinneAsianStories

## Illustrated Living History

Minnesota's Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community established the Coalition of Asian American Leaders (CAAL) in 2013 to harness the "collective power of Asian Minnesotan leaders to improve the lives of community by connecting, learning, and acting together."<sup>1</sup> The group creates opportunities to weave relationships amongst the state's diverse AAPI leaders; focuses on the community's priority issues of education, economics, and immigration; supports civic and social justice leadership; and builds partners and alliances.<sup>2</sup>

As of 2017, 84,000 Asian Minnesotans called Ramsey County home.<sup>3</sup> Like everyone in this state, all carry rich histories of where they or their families came from, but they also are creating living histories. This community is preserving its many cultures through Hmong song poetry, Karen dances, Southeast Asian recipe books, YouTube videos, and, as you'll see in the following pages, short graphic (illustrated) stories that garner the interests and talents of the younger generation.

In 2018, CAAL invited its community members to write and share some of these living



*Courtesy of the Coalition of Asian American Leaders.*

histories as a part of their #MinneAsianStories campaign. These were then turned into a traveling exhibit, released online and on social media, and selected stories were illustrated in a graphic booklet. These stories share the diverse experiences of Asian Minnesotans, helping youth and communities see themselves and providing a platform for everyone to connect and learn together.<sup>4</sup> We'd like to highlight a few excerpts from CAAL's 2019 *This is Home* volume here. We believe Ramsey County grows richer and even more interesting with the addition of these stories to our collective history. Enjoy!

Community members and #MinneAsianStories contributors enjoyed the kickoff of Asian Pacific American Heritage Month at the Capitol in May 2019. *Courtesy of the Coalition of Asian American Leaders.*



# The Mystery of Bert Lee

BERT LEE, WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY XEE REITER



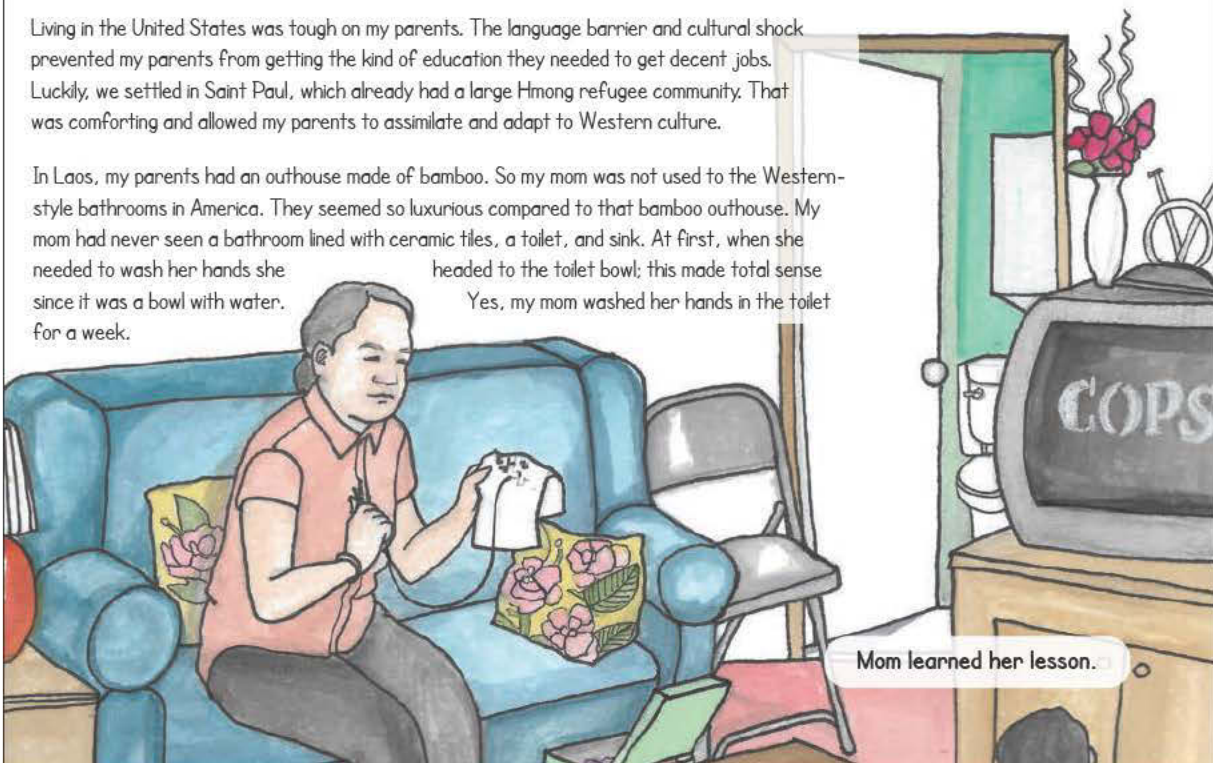
"Yog koj tis nws lub npe zoo ces nws ncaj ncees,  
yog koj tis nws lub npe phem ces nws tsis ncaj ncees."

My mother was tasked with giving me a worthy name.

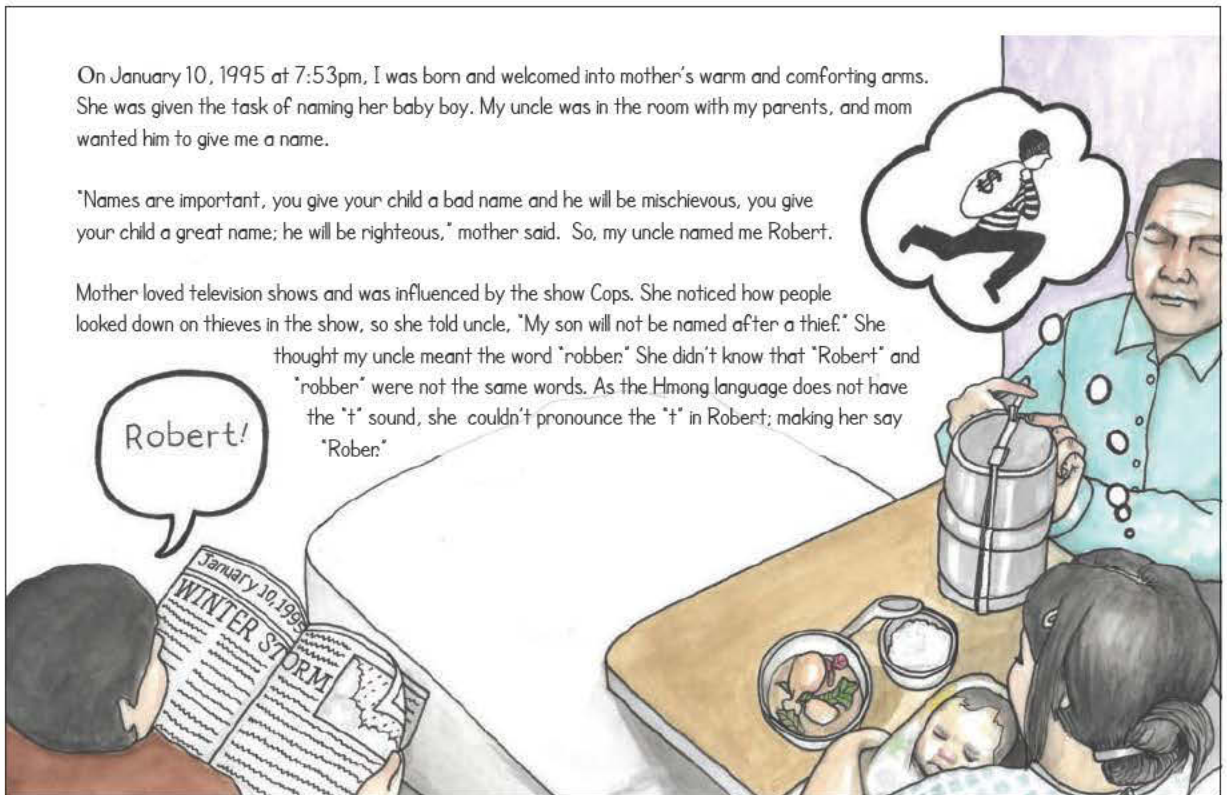
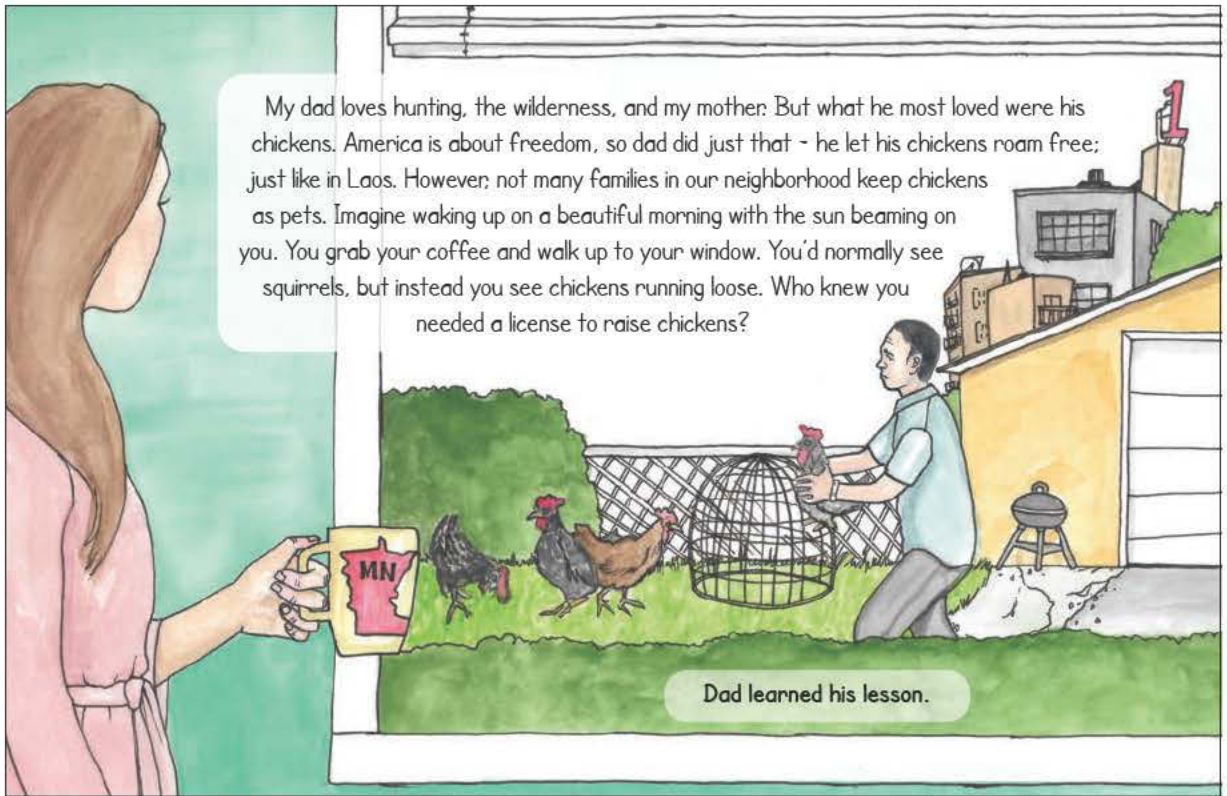
Let me first share my family's journey to the U.S. Laos was a land with the most precious and beautiful animals. It all changed in 1962 during the Secret War; when my dad joined the military at the age of 19. The horrific turn of events left my family no choice but to flee and cross the monstrous Mekong River. The loss of my dad's uncle was the price we paid crossing the river. My family resettled in Thailand for eight years before moving to America.

Living in the United States was tough on my parents. The language barrier and cultural shock prevented my parents from getting the kind of education they needed to get decent jobs. Luckily, we settled in Saint Paul, which already had a large Hmong refugee community. That was comforting and allowed my parents to assimilate and adapt to Western culture.

In Laos, my parents had an outhouse made of bamboo. So my mom was not used to the Western-style bathrooms in America. They seemed so luxurious compared to that bamboo outhouse. My mom had never seen a bathroom lined with ceramic tiles, a toilet, and sink. At first, when she needed to wash her hands she headed to the toilet bowl; this made total sense since it was a bowl with water. Yes, my mom washed her hands in the toilet for a week.



Mom learned her lesson.



That is how I got my name. Not a thief. Just Bert.



*Reprinted with permission by the Coalition of Asian American Leaders.<sup>5</sup>*




**Bert Lee** is a public speaker. He uses his talents as a graphic designer and dancer to teach students how to become effective communicators and craft compelling speeches through storytelling.



**Illustrator Xee Reiter** is a creator of art, mother of three, and lover of food. *Photos courtesy of the Coalition of Asian American Leaders.*


# We Make Anyplace Home

YUSANAT TWAY, WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY LILIAN REITER




In September 2007, my family immigrated from Thai refugee camps to Minnesota.

We rented a house in Saint Paul; three floors, three bedrooms, and one bathroom. I had five brothers and two sisters, which meant I did not get my own room. What a relief! my six year old self was scared at the thought of having to sleep in my own room.




In the refugee camps, I always slept surrounded by the security of my siblings.



On the first night we moved in, my whole family woke up at two in the morning, because our bodies had yet to adjust from moving across the globe.


I no longer had to wake up and tend to the domestic animals or stay up late doing homework with a candle.

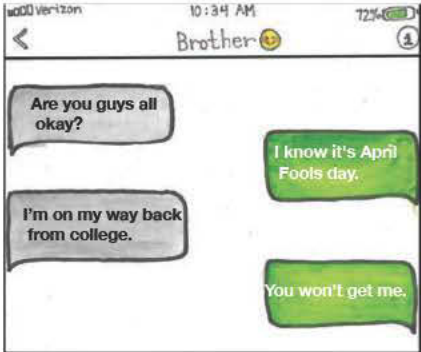
Home now had running water, electricity, cooking stoves, and all I had to worry about was my education.




This was my new home and I knew we were going to live here for a very long time.

On April 1st, 2015, I was hanging out with my best friend, when I started receiving texts from my cousin.






Verizon 10:34 AM 72%  
 Brother 😊  
 Are you guys all okay?  
 I know it's April Fools day.  
 I'm on my way back from college.  
 You won't get me.



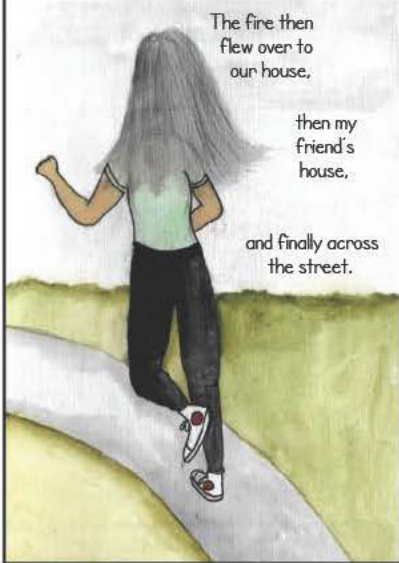
Are you guys okay?  
 Is it true?  
 Is your house on fire?



I was really thinking that they were all trying to trick me. I kept receiving texts from other relatives and friends. Finally, I checked the news and my house was surrounded by fire trucks.

My neighborhood was on fire. As soon as I saw my mom on the screen, I ran straight home.

That was the fastest I ever ran in my whole life. The fire started from a branch that fell on an electric wire power line which lit the house next door on fire to complete ashes.



The fire then flew over to our house,

then my friend's house,

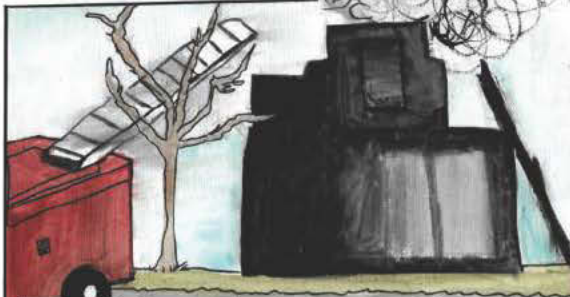
and finally across the street.

I remember my dad sighing in disbelief and saying,

"It is like we're refugees all over again."



We lost everything in that house, along with our cars, and all of our traditional Karen clothes. For a couple years, my mom could not go back to that neighborhood.



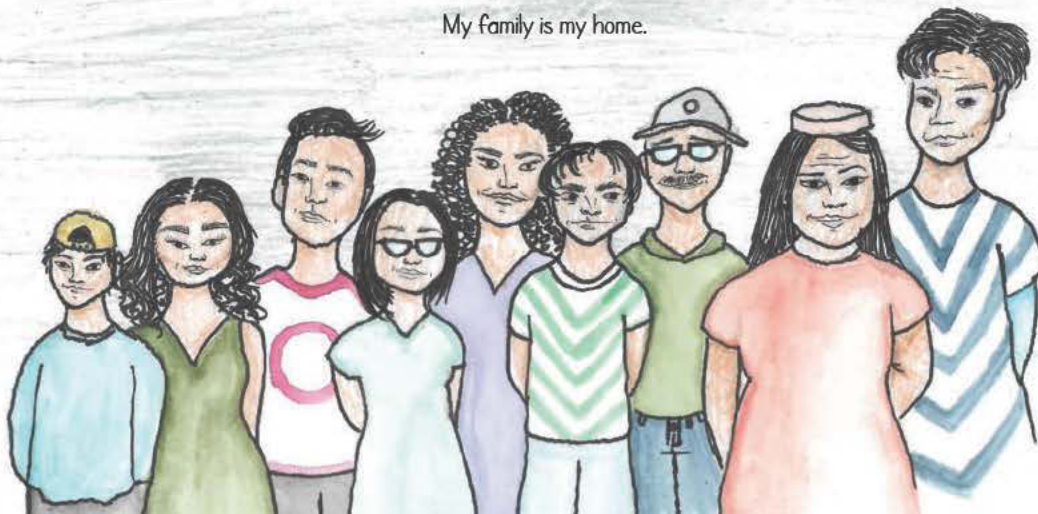
Our landlord let us stay in his other houses and we had to start from scratch all over again. My friend and her family moved to Wisconsin. I was tired from starting over again from houses, to friendships, to everything we've worked for. We lost our home.

As I reflected on everything I came to realize that home was more than a physical location.

From my parents running from war; to raising a family of eight kids in a refugee camp, to flying thousands of miles to a new foreign country all for their children; my family makes any place home.

Home is always the comfort, warmth, and safety that they brought.

My family is my home.



Reprinted with permission by the Coalition of Asian American Leaders.<sup>6</sup>





**Yusanat Tway** was born in a refugee camp on the border of Thailand and came to the United States as a Karen immigrant in 2007 at age six. She is a student at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities working on a double major in psychology and political science, with a minor in social justice. Yusanat aspires to become an advocate for international human rights.



**Illustrator Lilian Reiter** is an eighth-grader who loves to explore the arts through drawing and making music. She plays badminton and enjoys the outdoors. *Photos courtesy of the Coalition of Asian American Leaders.*

## Open Heart, Open Palate

ZOUA VANG

“You like Hmong girl? Eat it,” my mother said, politely challenging him.

I was twenty-six years old. Darrell was the first man I brought home. Darrell is Chinese and Japanese, born in California and grew up loving baseball. I am Hmong, born in the mountains of Laos and grew up having to learn English. We are both Asians, but we couldn’t have come from more different worlds.

Darrell asked, “Oh, what is that?”

“Cow stomach,” my mother said. “If you like Hmong girl, you have to eat it.”

I looked on, but other family members acted like they were watching TV. Their bodies were positioned elsewhere, but I knew their ears were all tuned into the show that was unfolding in the kitchen. Darrell stared at the bowl of steaming tripe. The pungent dish saturated the house.

Darrell responded nervously, “It looks different, a little grayish.”

I explained to him it looked different because it wasn’t the bleached honeycomb tripe he was used to seeing at Chinese dim sum. My mother’s tripe was harvested from a cow we had killed at the local slaughterhouse. I saw how her skilled hands clutched a small knife which masterfully danced with the tripe as she swiftly cleaned and cut it.

Her tripe dish was seasoned with only a dash of salt to ensure the natural odor and flavor lingered. Tripe is a delicacy. At Hmong parties, you can hear the elderly instructing those preparing the tripe not to clean it too well. Some believe tripe is best when there is a pronounced scent.

My mother anxiously waited for Darrell to start eating. Annoyed, she said, “If you don’t like Hmong girl, you don’t have to eat it.”

Zoua Vang’s then boyfriend, Darrell, was not initially happy to try the dish that sat in front of him. *Courtesy of the Coalition of Asian American Leaders.*



Darrell let out a nervous laugh. A bowl of rice was next to the bowl of tripe. He scooped rice onto his plate. Then, he slowly spooned a few pieces of tripe on his plate. Finally, he combined a lot of rice with a little tripe and as casually as possible, lifted the spoon into his mouth. He chewed. He swallowed.

"It's good," he said with an unconvincing smile.

My mother laughed. "Yes, it is very good," she said.

And just like that, Darrell pried his way into my mother's heart and began to make room for himself in the Hmong community. If you like a Hmong girl, having an open heart and open palate goes a long way. A year after Darrell passed that test, we were married in Hmong, Chinese, and "American" ceremonies.

Our children are Chinese, Japanese, and Hmong-American. They have grown up with Hmong Hu Pligs (spirit calling ceremonies),<sup>7</sup> Chinese red egg parties,<sup>8</sup> Japanese Obon Festivals,<sup>9</sup> and endless baseball games.

Asian Minnesotans may look alike, but we come from unique cultures and have rich stories. I wish our neighbors could see and appreciate



**Zoua Vang** is a storyteller, strategist, and advocate. She has spent more than two decades in the communications industry and was the first Hmong television journalist working in mainstream media in the United States. She now lives in Hugo, Minnesota, with her husband, Darrell, and three children. *Courtesy of the Coalition of Asian American Leaders.*

how blessed Minnesotans are to have such a diverse, vibrant, and thriving Asian American community. *Reprinted with permission by the Coalition of Asian American Leaders.*

**Acknowledgment:** Special thanks to the authors and illustrators of these stories and the Coalition of Asian American Leaders for granting Ramsey County Historical Society permission to reprint their work. To learn more, visit [www.caalmn.org](http://www.caalmn.org).

## NOTES

1. *This is Home: #MinneAsianStories 2019* (St. Paul, MN: Coalition of Asian American Leaders, 2019), 37.

2. *This is Home*, 37.

3. Wilder Research, report, commissioned by the Coalition of Asian American Leaders, 2017.

4. *This is Home*, i.

5. The translation of the Hmong sentence at the start of the story is: "Names are important; you give your child a bad name and he will be mischievous; you give your child a great name, he will be righteous;" From 1961 to 1975, the United States ran a Secret War in Laos to prevent the spread of communism. The US Central Intelligence Agency trained Hmong and other Laotian soldiers as surrogate troops to fight for US interests. After the Vietnam War when American troops departed Southeast Asia, Hmong soldiers and their families were left to fend for themselves; Wilder Research, report. About 48,000 Hmong lived in Ramsey County as of 2017.

6. According to CAAL, there are no concrete numbers for the Karen population at this time. However, 9,200 Burmese resided in Ramsey County in 2017. The Karen usually indicate Burmese in data, so some of the 9,200 are likely Karen; Reg Chapman, "Wind-Fueled Fire Claims 2 St. Paul Homes," *WCCO-TV*, April 1, 2015, accessed January 16, 2020, <https://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2015/04/01/wind-fueled-fire-claims-2-st-paul-homes/>.

7. Hu Plig (who pee) is a ceremony meant to help heal or prevent sickness.

8. Similar to Easter eggs, Chinese eggs are boiled and dyed red, a color symbolizing prosperity and good fortune. They are often served in celebration of a baby's first-year birthday.

9. Obon Festivals are observances to honor ancestors. Japanese Americans usually host cultural and food bazaars featuring art, cuisine, and Japanese American history. Paper lanterns are often released as night draws near. In St. Paul, the public can join what is known as the Lantern Lighting Festival in mid-August.

### Notes to Sidebar on p. 24

a. "About Asian Pacific American Heritage Month," Asian Pacific American Heritage Month website, accessed January 27, 2020, <https://asianpacificheritage.gov/about/>.

b. David Zander, "History and stories of Asians in Minnesota date back 130 years," *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, May 14, 2008.

c. Bo Thao-Urabe, correspondence with editor, January 25, 2020.

## Celebrate Asian Pacific American Heritage Month

### A Brief History of Asian Pacific American Heritage Month

Congress chose the month of May to commemorate the immigration of the first Japanese to the United States on May 7, 1843, and to mark the anniversary of the completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869.<sup>a</sup> In Minnesota, the first Asian person noted on record came to Duluth in 1875.<sup>b</sup>

Since then, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) have continued making Minnesota home. At almost 300,000 strong, Asian Minnesotans represent over forty different ethnic groups and are the fastest growing group here. Ramsey County is home to the largest AAPI population in the state.<sup>c</sup>

### #MinneAsianStories 2020

The Coalition of Asian American Leaders (CAAL) believes that there is not just one narrative that represents this diverse community; thus, they created #MinneAsianStories to uplift the diversity within their AAPI population.

This year's theme is "The Power of Me." Thirty-one stories capture the vibrancy, resilience, and complexities of this growing community and give Minnesotans a glimpse into the challenges, assets, and resourcefulness of the people.

### Join the Celebration May 1 at Landmark Center

One month is not long enough to honor all the experiences and contributions of the AAPI community, but May was intentionally chosen to celebrate and ensure that the cultures, histories, and stories are seen and heard.

Landmark Center proudly presents a free Celebration of Asian Pacific American Heritage and #MinneAsianStories, in partnership with CAAL and the Ramsey County Historical Society, on May 1 from 10:30 am to noon, 75 W. Fifth Street, in St. Paul. For more information or to reserve a seat, please go to <http://bit.ly/MAS2020Celebration> or call (651) 756-7210.



The Minnesota State Capitol served as the host site for last year's celebration. *Courtesy of the Coalition of Asian American Leaders.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future.

The mission statement of the Ramsey County Historical Society adopted by the Board of Directors on January 25, 2016.

The Ramsey County Historical Society's vision is to be widely recognized as an innovator, leader, and partner in preserving the knowledge of our community, delivering inspiring history programming, and using local history in education. Our mission of *preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future* guides this vision.

The Society began in 1949 when a group of citizens acquired and preserved the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, which the family had acquired in 1849. Following five years of restoration work, the Society opened the Gibbs Farm museum (listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974). Originally programs focused on telling the story of the pioneer life of the Gibbs family. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, the historic site also began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways, building additional structures, and dedicating outdoor spaces to tell these stories. The remarkable relationship of Jane Gibbs with the Dakota during her childhood in the 1830s and again as an adult encouraged RCHS to expand its interpretation of the Gibbs farm to both pioneer and Dakota life.

In 1964, the Society began publishing its award-winning magazine, *Ramsey County History*. In 1978, an expanded commitment from Ramsey County enabled the organization to move its library, archives, and administrative offices to downtown St. Paul's Landmark Center, a restored Federal Courts building on the National Register of Historic Places. An additional expansion of the Research Center was completed in 2010 to better serve the public and allow greater access to the Society's vast collection of historical archives and artifacts. In 2016, due to an endowment gift of \$1 million, the Research Center was rededicated as the Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center.

RCHS offers a wide variety of public programming for youth and adults. Please see [www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com) for details of upcoming History Revealed programs, summer camps at Gibbs Farm, courthouse and depot tours, and more. RCHS is a trusted education partner serving 15,000 students annually on field trips or through outreach programs in schools that bring to life the Gibbs Family as well as the Dakota people of Cloud Man's village. These programs are made possible by donors, members, corporations, and foundations, all of whom we appreciate deeply. If you are not yet a member of RCHS, please join today and help bring history to life for more than 50,000 people every year.

R.C.H.S.  
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

  
GIBBS FARM  
Pathways to Dakota & Pioneer Life  
Experience | Understand | Grow

Landmark Center, Coalition of Asian American Leaders,  
and Ramsey County Historical Society  
*invite you to a*

## Celebration of Asian Pacific American Heritage Month and #MinneAsianStories *at Landmark Center*

F.K. Weyerhaeuser Auditorium, 75 Fifth St W, Saint Paul MN 55102

Celebration & Reception - Friday, May 1, 2020, 10:00 am - 11:30 pm

Exhibition on display at Landmark Center from Friday, May 1 to Friday, May 8, 2020

Landmark Center, CAAL, and RCHS proudly present this Celebration and Exhibition to commemorate Asian Pacific American History Month and the release of the 2020 issue of #MinneAsianStories, a storytelling campaign celebrating the rich, diverse, and resilient stories about Minnesota's Asian American and Pacific Islander population.

May was designated as Asian Pacific American History Month by Congress to commemorate the immigration of the first Japanese people to the United States on May 7, 1843, and to mark the anniversary of the completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869.



For more info and to make reservations for the May 1 celebration:

<http://bit.ly/MAS2020Celebration> or 651-756-7210

Landmark Center exhibition open during regular public hours.  
Visit [landmarkcenter.org](http://landmarkcenter.org)

## Archaeology Presentations with Dr. Jeremy Nienow



### *Fish Creek Archaeology*

Tuesday, March 24, 7:00 pm

*In partnership with the Maplewood Historical Society*

Maplewood Library

3025 Southlawn Dr., Maplewood, MN 55109

### *Public Archaeology Projects*

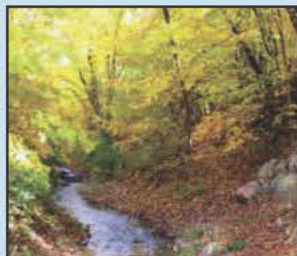
Thursday, June 18, 7:45 pm

Waldmann Brewery & Wurstery

445 Smith Ave N, Saint Paul, MN 55102

Registration requested.

*Programs are free and open to all.*



For more info on these  
and our other *History Revealed* programs for 2020  
and to make reservations:

[www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com) or 651-222-0701

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Young Vern Schultz loved everything baseball. Not only did he play the game every chance he could, he also worked as ground crew at Lexington Park for his beloved St. Paul Saints in the 1940s. *Courtesy of the Vern Schultz Collection. See story on page 25.*