



Hmong Foodways in Ramsey County

KRISTINA HER, PAGE 1

By the Numbers ...

For nearly fifty years, a large population of Hmong from Southeast Asia have called Ramsey County home. As the community grew, they brought seeds, planted gardens, opened grocery stores, joined co-ops to learn American farming practices, sold produce at farmers' markets, and opened innovative restaurants. Today, an integral part of the Hmong foodways community is the twelve-year-old Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA). This group of farmers owns 155 acres in nearby Dakota County and supplies fresh produce to Twin Cities' markets, schools, hospitals, and individual families. To learn more, see Kristina Her's cover story "Hmong Foodways in Ramsey County" on page 1.

Number of acres owned by HAFA:

155

Number of fruit, vegetable, herb, and flower varieties grown by HAFA farmers and sold to customers in the Twin Cities:

160

Percentage of Hmong American farmers among all farmers contributing to Twin Cities' markets:

50%

Number of years a typical farmer member at HAFA has been growing produce or flowers:

20

Typical plot size each farmer at HAFA works:

5-10 acres

SOURCES: Hmong American Farmers Association website, accessed July 2023, <https://www.hmongfarmers.com/>.

ON THE COVER



This exquisite Hmong village story cloth in the Minnesota Historical Society collections depicts the Hmong relationship with food and farms in Laos. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.

Contents

- 1 **Hmong Foodways in Ramsey County**
KRISTINA HER
- 11 *Growing Up at Fort Snelling*
Honoring the First Regiment of Minnesota Volunteer Infantry for Fifty Years
JOHN H. GUTHMANN
- 22 *Rolling through the Decades*
Roller Skating in Ramsey County
HEIDI HELLER
- 33 **A Tribute to John Watson Milton (1935-2023)**
JOHN M. LINDLEY
- 34 **Honoring WWII Codebreakers and the Founding of Engineering Research Associates**
DAVE BEAL, LOWELL BENSON, DON HALL, JAY PFAENDER, AND CHAD ROBERTS

Message from the Editorial Board

What defines us as a place or a people? The Civil War stamped the new state of Minnesota as the proud home of the First Regiment of the Minnesota Volunteer Infantry and shaped its future. Over 100 years later, Hmong refugees fleeing from war in Southeast Asia began arriving here, forever changing and enhancing the culture of Ramsey County. The struggles and triumphs of these disparate events are reflected in two of our articles this summer. Kristina Her writes lovingly of the important role that food has always played for the Hmong and how, after a rocky start, Hmong foodways thrive today in St. Paul and beyond. John Guthmann tells tales of his beloved *second* First Minnesota, a group of devoted reenactors faithful to the authentic experience of our original volunteer infantry. These and other articles in this issue offer insights into the many stories that define us.

Anne Field
Chair, Editorial Board

Corrections: In "A Slow Track to Nowhere: St. Paul's Downtown People Mover" (Spring 2023), Metropolitan Council Chairperson John Boland was misidentified. Also, Saint Paul City Council Member Vic Tedesco did not represent the West Side. At that time, council members were elected at-large and represented the entire city. RCHS regrets the errors.

The Ramsey County Historical Society thanks former Board Member James A. Stolpestad and affiliate AHS Legacy Fund for supporting the 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. Sincere thanks to The First Regiment of Minnesota Volunteer Infantry for their financial support.

Hmong Foodways in Ramsey County

KRISTINA HER

The Hmong people lived a peaceful, semi-nomadic life first in the plains and then in the more protective southern mountains of China. The majority were farmers. But after two centuries of oppression and conflict with the Chinese government, most Hmong had fled by 1854, making their way to Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. There, they continued to farm. Then, in the 1960s and '70s, many Hmong men and boys in Laos became soldiers, replacing garden hoes for weapons.¹

In January 1961, the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) formed a Special Guerilla Unit (SGU) made up of Hmong, Lao, Mien, and other minority groups. Throughout the Vietnam War, a section of the SGU assisted the CIA in northeastern Laos under General Vang Pao. These locals knew the trails and hideouts that could help the Americans gain traction in the war. The soldiers also rescued US military from the dense jungles. This clandestine operation, in which 40,000 Hmong fought, became known as the “Secret War.” In return for assistance, the US government promised military training, food, medicine, weapons, money to build schools, and, later, assurance they’d take care of the Hmong. However, in spring of 1975 when American military personnel left Laos, the Hmong who worked with them were left behind to defend themselves against communist regimes.²

In a brief, formal evacuation from May 12 through May 14, 1975, the US sent just three airplanes to carry 1,600 people (mostly Hmong military leaders and their kin) from Long Tieng Airbase in Laos through Nam Phong, a former military camp the US had used for training. There was not enough room for everyone. Families were separated. Those left behind escaped to the forests and embarked on the dangerous journey across the Mekong River to Thailand over decades.³

According to Lee Pao Xiong, director of the Center for Hmong Studies and instructor of Asian studies at Concordia University in St. Paul,

[o]ver 50,000 people died trying to escape to Thailand for safety. The Hmong had lost more people than they did in the war. Many drowned in the river, many were killed by communists, and many children were unintentionally poisoned with opium used in hopes of keeping them quiet while escaping. Children were also abandoned . . . because there wasn’t enough food and because their cries would give away the escapees’ position to the enemy. Children were [sometimes] too much of a burden for the parents [who] couldn’t risk getting caught. . . .⁴

Many of the Hmong who managed to board planes early on were able to resettle in Minnesota and other states willing to accept Southeast Asian refugees. What happened to the others? In late 1975, the UN-sponsored Ban Vinai Refugee Camp opened. It would become “home” to 48,000 Hmong and other refugees, until people could secure passage to distant countries. Because the Hmong belong to a collective culture and wanted to stay close to their leaders and families, many more Hmong followed the first sponsored refugees to the US. They brought little with them, but they did carry hope—and some—carried seeds.⁵

This article focuses on a few of the many “seed carriers” and other Hmong food “influencers” who came to Ramsey County. The problem was—at least for the very first arrivals—seeds don’t grow in the middle of a Minnesota winter.

Dang Her and Shoua Moua: Comfort Food

Dang Her and Shoua Moua were the first sponsored Hmong people to come to Minnesota—through the United Methodist Church of Anoka—on November 5, 1975. When the shy, scared couple arrived with their young son Touvi, Moua remembers, “It was [nearly winter] because the sun wasn’t visible to the eye.” She

was seven months pregnant. With such gloomy weather and the drastic change of lifestyle, Moua couldn't bear being so far away from everything she knew. "We could not go out. I always looked outside and cried constantly. I missed all my Hmong family members, comrades, and my Hmong community so much." Her and Moua had lost everything they were familiar with, and now they had to start anew. Thanks to US Agency for International Development (USAID) connections, they lived with sponsors—Scott and Mary DeLong—for two months.⁶

During Moua's pregnancy, their hosts shared American meals, including "comfort food," such as mashed potatoes and gravy. Moua hated the taste. It wasn't what she was used to, and it wasn't the proper nourishment to help grow her baby. She knew she needed meat, vegetables, and herbs. "At breakfast, they gave us two pieces of bread each and a little bit of oatmeal. . . . There were fruits on the table, but we were not sure if we were welcome to eat any, so we did not take any."⁷

We were so hungry. When my husband went to ESL class, he would go to the vending machine and get a Twinkie that came in a two-pack and bring it home. . . . We would share those Twinkies and drink a lot of water to make us full. It was all that we could afford.⁸

Baby Bill arrived in February—the first Hmong child born in Minnesota. "In our culture, we have our postpartum meal, the chicken diet, but our sponsors didn't know how to provide that for me when I had my baby." In the Hmong tradition, once a baby was born, the mother's first meal was "egg cooked in water." This was followed by a month of rest and a healing diet of *tshuaj Hmoob hau nqaij qaib* (boiled chicken soup with Hmong herbs).⁹

Soon after Moua gave birth, the family moved to their own place. The DeLongs were kind, and they and other people continued sending cooked food day and night. But, "we were not accustomed to their food yet . . . [and kept] thinking about our pot of white rice. After a certain time, our sponsors brought us to [American] grocery stores. . . . We bought the one-pound rice bag and used our small pot to cook the rice. [We were relieved] that we [would] not go hungry again."¹⁰

Before long, Her and Moua met a Lao man and his Chinese wife who had lived in Minnesota longer and knew their way around. "They started to take us to Asian stores. That was when we discovered that we can buy food to make *fawm* (a chicken or beef broth soup or pho with rice noodles) [and] *qhob poob* . . . (red curry chicken soup with noodle)," Moua said. With access to Hmong comfort food, Her and Moua began to settle in. They even purchased a

The First "Hmong Grocery" in Ramsey County Was Thai

Nine-year-old Lee Pao Xiong arrived in Minnesota in 1979 with his parents Song Khoua Xiong and Mee Vang, a few years after Dang Her and his family. In the early days, when the Xionsgs did not read or understand English, they searched American groceries for familiar foods. In Laos, US planes would airdrop canned meat for the hungry. The Xionsgs remembered this meat and found "familiar cans" in US stores. They were excited to eat something they "knew of" in this strange land. To their surprise, however, the "meat" turned out to be cat food. Today, after all these years, they laugh about the memory, but they still look closely at cans to make sure they know what they're getting.^a

So, what *could* they eat that was actually familiar? Eventually, Xiong and his family learned of a Thai woman living

in Little Canada, Minnesota. Xiong doesn't remember her name, but he and his family were grateful for her help, as were other Hmong families. Aware that American grocery stores sold few, if any, Asian food products, the woman occasionally drove to Chicago to purchase wholesale groceries to bring to St. Paul. She sold dry goods, including ramen and pho noodles, bamboo shoots, Thai candy, and canned goods, out of her small garage—comfort food. While there is no known documentation available, Xiong believes this makeshift market was the first or one of the first to serve Asian immigrants. The creative entrepreneur collected phone numbers and called her customers to let them know what she had in stock after each trip. It was "first come, first served," so people drove north as quickly as they could to shop.^b



Dang Her and Shoua Moua made news as the first sponsored family to arrive in Minnesota after spending six months in Nam Phong military camp in Thailand. Her told a *Minneapolis Star* reporter he'd grown up farming with relatives, raising chickens, rice, and corn, although he did not continue farming in the US. The couple and their two sons eventually moved to an apartment at Liberty Plaza on Marshall Avenue and Arundel Street, where a growing number of Hmong lived. In just four years, nearly 2,000 Hmong followed in the footsteps of Her, Moua, and others to the state—most settling in and around St. Paul. *Courtesy of Shoua Moua.*

used car so that they could go grocery shopping by themselves. After many months of work and saving, they were able to sponsor most of Her's extended family, who joined them in St. Paul.¹¹

Eventually, Her collaborated with other immigrants to open one of the earliest Hmong markets near Rice and Pennsylvania Streets in July 1981. They named it MA Oriental Grocery Store (Mong Association Oriental Grocery Store). There was not a lot of wholesale in St. Paul, and there was just one other Hmong store, so Her and his team drove to Chicago to purchase herbs, rice, and meat to help other struggling families find comfort in the familiarity of Hmong food.¹²

MA Oriental Grocery operated for several years. Today, Moua is grateful for the many Hmong markets and restaurants Hmong people have to choose from. There is a sense of being home where it is safe, familiar, and comfortable.

Early Farm to Table Efforts

In the early 1980s, federal grants helped universities and church organizations create



cooperative farm training programs. The plan was to teach interested Hmong “modern agricultural production methods.”¹³

Early on, two Minnesota projects emerged. The first—Hiawatha Valley Farm Cooperative (HVFC)—formed in 1981 under the auspices of the Christian-based Church World Services (CWS) Sponsorship and Refugee Program (SARP). A year later, the University of Minnesota's Agricultural Extension Service formed a similar project—Minnesota Agricultural Enterprise for New Americans (MAENA). The goal for both programs? “By learning American agriculture, [the participating Hmong will] become individual entrepreneurs and not be long term dependents on welfare.” Her, who, by 1983, was also director of the social services organization Lao Family Community of Minnesota, Inc., believed that such programs could be beneficial for members of the Hmong community.¹⁴

Grant money paid for seeds, training, land, equipment, paychecks, and other costs. Using some of that money, CWS purchased 1,300 acres near Homer in Winona County. Participants moved from the Twin Cities to the southeastern Minnesota farm with the expectation that they'd be trained, would own five acres, and make roughly \$10,000 three years in. The MAENA program, located in Farmington in Dakota County was closer, with an easier thirty-mile commute. Hmong farmers were projected to earn \$12,000 a year.¹⁵

When Hmong families first settled in Ramsey County, they had to navigate intimidatingly large, unfamiliar American grocery aisles, hoping to find produce and other food that would accommodate Hmong diets. Here, a young woman examines fruit to purchase for her family around 1981 at the Country Store, 351 N. Lexington Parkway. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*



Many Hmong farmed in Laos. Upon coming to the US, this group committed to learning English and American farming practices through a Minnesota Agricultural Enterprise for New Americans (MAENA) program overseen by University of Minnesota Extension.



The first year in the program, most planting was done by hand. The second year, the new American farmers began working with more mechanical equipment and tractors.

This MAENA field coordinator (*right*) worked directly with the farmers and field hands as a teacher and mentor.



Farm workers in the MAENA program prepared fresh produce for market. All images courtesy of the Xang Vang Collection at the Center for Hmong Studies.

The first year of the HVFC program (despite objections from a vocal but small group of local citizens) was relatively successful thanks to the work of nine Hmong farm hands and five support staff guided by American mentors. They planted and grew cucumbers, corn, string beans, and other vegetables and began working a small hog operation. An expanded hog operation was meant to increase the financial success of the farm the following year, but because a large portion of promised funding never materialized, this did not happen. The program shuttered.¹⁶

The university's MAENA project met with a little more success, with their focus solely on produce.

During the project's first year, a temporary processing and packaging facility was constructed one mile from the field site providing on-the-job training in sorting, washing, grading and packaging produce. Two marketing stalls were established at the Minneapolis Farmers' Market and four major wholesale outlets were contracted. . . . A co-op board was organized composed of five people, four of whom were Hmong.¹⁷

The second year, more mechanical and trucking equipment helped the group with their mission. But, funding gaps, the national farm crisis, and growing government aversion to

subsidies for immigrants brought this program down, as well.¹⁸

Eventually, however, some farmers and farm workers involved with HVFC pooled their resources, education, and determination to purchase seventy-three acres in Hugo, not far from St. Paul. They grew cucumbers and other produce and set up a cultural center and public gardens—with little help from overseers. They still used the HVFC name but created a “different approach to running a farm cooperative, one not solely focused on profit and self-sufficiency but on community needs and serving Hmong refugees in Minnesota and around the country, whether or not they were official members of the co-op.”¹⁹

Encouraged, four Hmong families bought their own small plots of land near the cooperative, including Lee Pao Xiong’s mother’s family—the Vangs. They farmed 100 acres, growing green beans, cucumbers, bell peppers, corn, and mustard greens. They were able to sell their products to people at the Minneapolis and Saint Paul Farmers’ Markets and attempted to sell them to grocery stores nearby.²⁰

Tong Vang: Uplifting Community

Tong Vang, an SGU soldier in Long Tieng, escaped Laos and eventually followed a cousin to Minnesota, thanks to sponsorship through the now closed Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church in June 1976. A few years after Vang arrived, he got involved with the HVFC mentioned above, serving as a Church World Service case worker for the refugee program.²¹

Around the same time and shortly before MA Oriental Grocery Store opened, Vang and thirty-five other Hmong families partnered to open LH Oriental Grocery Store (Lao and Hmong Oriental Grocery Store) at 173 Western Avenue. Vang served as the CEO and president. Each family secured between \$200 and \$1,000 as a one-time payment to help rent the 2,000-square-foot facility and purchase produce such as *zaub ntsuab* (mustard greens) and *tshuaj tsawg nqaij* (Hmong herbs).²²

When Vang first came to Minnesota, the only Asian store in St. Paul that sold rice was Kim’s Oriental Market on Snelling Avenue. But, as more and more Hmong relocated to the state, Kim’s elevated rice prices. The staple food

became unaffordable for most. This prompted Vang to open the store. There were challenges along the way because he and his Hmong partners knew little about business. Few had taken business courses, many did not go to school, and there was a lot to learn between retail stores and wholesale.²³

Vang and his team visited Chicago in a van to look for wholesale foods. They would purchase rice, dried noodles and fish, and soy sauce. LH served the community for about ten years. They offered candy, meat, canned food, pop, and cigarettes and sold vegetables including onion, cilantro, and mustard greens from local Hmong farmers in Minnesota. Later, they were able to source additional produce from Fresno, California.²⁴

Eventually, Vang and his partners had to close the store. He stated that that place was only rented and not owned. He and his investors purchased Laska Drug Store nearby and moved LH there. He maintained it for a while, increased staffing, and had more produce to sell. However, after a few years, he closed that store, too, and paid back the thirty-five investing families with the remaining money that the store made.²⁵

Vang did a lot to help the Hmong community with the farm co-op, through the co-op grocery



Thanks to early grocers like Tong Vang, Dang Her, and others, the community could celebrate special Hmong gatherings such as this wedding in the early 1980s with traditional foods they remembered from home. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

business, and as the founder and current national president of the nonprofit SGU Veterans and Families of USA, Inc. He is proud of how far the Hmong as a people have come and “how much we’ve grown since the war,” he said. “Though many were lost, we [have] gained more knowledge through the stories and the foods the Hmong people [have brought and] bring to us, here in St. Paul, Minnesota.”²⁶

To Market, To Market

Once the first wave of Hmong settled here, many planted the seeds they’d carried with them in personal gardens to help feed their

extended families—just as their ancestors did in the centuries prior when fleeing to safer refuge. According to Lee Pao Xiong, in the early 1980s, some gardeners moved to larger community gardens in Frogtown or other locations. Even Ramsey County Historical Society welcomed community gardeners—new Hmong Americans among them—to plant and cultivate produce on what is currently pasture and prairie at the historic Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights. One such grower was Xiong. Before long, the Hmong began selling their harvest at the Saint Paul Farmers’ Market downtown and at other open-air locations. Today, community gardens remain common, and for Hmong American veterans—some living with PTSD—spending time turning the soil and tending to vegetables is calming and gratifying.²⁷

Of course, farmers who wanted to make enough money to feed their families were looking for more land. They’d rent from the county, state, or private landowners—including in South Mendota Heights at a former cattle farm. Rarely, however, did these farmers, who’d learned and adapted to American farming practices over time, own the land.²⁸

And then there are the grocery stores and indoor markets. A lot has changed in more than forty-five years when just a few shops provided tropical fruits, herbs, vegetables, and meat to the growing Hmong community. A number of



Two youth help at the family produce stall at the Saint Paul Farmers’ Market in the 1980s. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*



Today, vendor Sue Lee runs Quality Produce at Hmong Village. She sources tropical fruits such as sweet Thai mangoes, rambutan, lychee, and longan from California and Florida. *Courtesy of Kristina Her.*

Hmong-owned groceries have come and gone, but, today, options are plentiful, with over sixteen Hmong or Hmong/Thai businesses serving Ramsey County—not including restaurants or clothing shops.

A few, such as HmongTown Marketplace and Hmong Village, are large warehouses filled with scores of individual vendor stalls. Some markets look more like traditional mom-and-pop groceries, including Noucheng Xiong's Golden Harvest, currently located at 900 Maryland Avenue E. Xiong came to the US in 1979 and eventually earned a mechanical engineering degree from the University of Minnesota. In the end, though, he was more interested in business and opened his grocery store in 1998. Xiong explained that although Golden Harvest is a great place for the Hmong and Asian community to find comfort foods, it's also an invitation to those who are not familiar with or wish to learn more about the different foods Hmong people eat. He wants his grocery store to be a destination for all people to experience and enjoy.²⁹

Landowners at Last

In 2011, siblings Pakou Hang and her brother, Janssen Hang, cofounded the Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA), inspired, in part, by their mother, Phoua Thao Hang, who'd come from Laos after the "Secret War" and worked for decades on area farms to sell produce at local markets. In 2013, the organization incorporated after a West Coast benefactor purchased a 155-acre farm in Dakota County, fifteen miles outside St. Paul. HAFA members rented plots and grew and sold bok choy, tomatoes, and flowers of every hue. HAFA hoped to eventually purchase the land and began raising money. In 2020, the Minnesota Legislature provided \$2 million toward that goal. In 2021, HAFA members raised the final \$500,000, and in October 2022, HAFA officially owned the land.³⁰

Reaching this milestone will help the non-profit continue to pursue its goal of "communitarianism." Even today, Hmong farmers face specific challenges—language barriers, land access, acquiring new business development skills, and learning about alternative markets, research, and training. Add to that the roadblocks all American farmers face—unpredictable and severe weather and market fluctuations.

Possible road construction encroaching on a portion of the farm is yet another threat.³¹

Still, HAFA believes "the best people to support Hmong farmers are Hmong farmers themselves. . . . We are all lifted up when those who are affected by an unfair food system lead the change we seek." HAFA farmers stay focused on their ultimate goal—providing fresh healthy food for Hmong families, customers at farmers' markets, and subscribers who participate in HAFA's community supported agriculture (CSA) weekly produce delivery. Just as importantly, they provide food to in-home childcare centers, schools, and hospitals.³²

Yia Vang: Sharing Hmong Food and Culture with All

Yia Vang is a young, renowned chef who competed against other top chefs on the Netflix cooking competition, *Iron Chef: Quest for an Iron Legend* in 2022. There's just one problem: Vang doesn't like to be called a chef. He would much rather be called a cook because that's what he does.³³

Vang was born in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand in 1984. He and other family members arrived in Wisconsin in 1988 with parents, Nhia Lor Vang and Pang Her. After college, Vang moved to Minneapolis and took a job as a dishwasher and then a cook at Spoon and Stable. And he noticed something. A lot of Hmong Americans lived in the Twin Cities. But where were the Hmong restaurants?³⁴

Vang got to work and opened a pop-up seven years ago. Since then, he and his thirty-person HillTribe team have created other pop-ups. One of these, Union Hmong Kitchen, is now permanently located inside Graze Provisions + Libations food hall at 520 N. Fourth Street in Minneapolis. His current pop-up is MOV at his HillTribe headquarters, also in Minneapolis. Visitors can try Vang's delicious Hmong food, including *galabaos* (steamed pork buns), at the Minnesota State Fair, as well.³⁵

As he began his culinary journey, Vang came to believe that there's more to Hmong food than comfort:

Food isn't the most important thing. It's about the connecting of the stories. And for me, it was connecting with my parents'

There's More!

To see a listing of Hmong groceries in Ramsey County and three traditional Hmong recipes, go to <https://rchs.com/publishing/catalog/https-rchs-com-p%E2%80%A6-hmong-foodways/>.





Yia Vang at work at Union Hmong Kitchen in Minneapolis. Courtesy of The Restaurant Project and photographer Lauren Cutshall.

stories through [the Hmong dishes]. . . they served us. Once you hear those stories, you can't unhear [them].³⁶

Vang believes that every dish has a narrative, and if we follow that long enough, we get to know the people behind those foods we eat. Vang uses *nqaij tsawg xyaw nrog zaub ntsuab* (simmer pork with mustard greens) as an example. This dish tells “the story of our parents learning how to make something out of nothing.”³⁷

“Being in the kitchen makes sense to me. The chaos in the kitchen makes sense to me. . . . Cooking a meal is simple because there's a start,

a middle, and an end.” This is where he escapes to—the comfort of his kitchen and creating food that adds to his parents' story. And when Vang discovered the Hmong markets in Ramsey County, he fell in love with the variety of foods offered. “The smell of the herbs and sauces and the look of the stores were like the language you speak.” He describes them as a “safety net, a safe ground” for his family.

Through his work, Vang has built relationships with the people at HAFA, The Good Acre, BIX Produce Company, Golden Harvest, and other local businesses. He even sources some produce from his parents' garden. Every year, they harvest it and send food to the restaurant.

With the support he has from these suppliers (and fans of his pop-ups, local and national television programs, and his gentle and cheery disposition), Vang's new restaurant, Vinai, which is named after the refugee camp he was born in and the place where his parents met, will open in northeast Minneapolis soon. He calls the venture “a love letter to my parents.” It's all about their story and how far they've come to find a better life and more opportunities. Vinai also will focus more on Hmong food as a whole by creating the atmosphere, the people, the hospitality, and the heart of the Hmong with their food. He paints us a picture of entering a Hmong home:

You are given a plate . . . and are invited to the table with all the food in the middle. To sit with each other and have a meal is the best experience we could have. [T]he Hmong culture does not limit how much you eat because that's the hospitality part. Food will come and go but the story with it stays with us. It's like saying, ‘I can't give you money but I can give you food.’ We get to experience the love and warmth it took to make such delicious food.³⁸

Think about it: Yia Vang's story and so many other Hmong histories here in the Twin Cities can be traced back to the late 1970s, with a handful of homesick refugees looking for comfort food to nourish them and remind them of their far-away homes. Today, home is where the heart (and food) is—right here in Minnesota.

Acknowledgments: Special thanks to Shoua Moua, Kristina Her's aunt; Cheng Her, Kristina's mother; and Tou Her, Kristina's father. Also appreciation to Tong Vang, Lee Pao Xiong, Noucheng Xiong, and Yia Vang for sharing their important histories.

Kristina Her is a recent graduate of Concordia University, St. Paul. She majored in English, with an emphasis in creative writing. Her was born in

St. Paul in 1999 and is a first-generation Hmong American along with her four older siblings. She hopes to pursue screenwriting and filmmaking to bring more representation to Hmong people and other communities. She loves all spicy foods and enjoys singing karaoke with her friends. Most of all, Her loves God and gives Him all the praise and glory for how far she and her family have come.

NOTES

1. Peter Ackerberg, "New roots in St. Paul: Laos nomads find U.S. life confusing," *Minneapolis Star*, January 3, 1979, 1, 12; Tom Hamburger and Eric Black, "Uprooted people in search of a home," *Star Tribune*, April 21, 1985, 30; "Hmong Clans," Hmong American Peace Academy, [https://www.myhapa.org/academics-2/general-info/hmong-culture-strengths/#:~:text=Hmong%20Clans&text=They%20include%3A%20Cha%20\(Chang\),economic%20security%20for%20each%20other](https://www.myhapa.org/academics-2/general-info/hmong-culture-strengths/#:~:text=Hmong%20Clans&text=They%20include%3A%20Cha%20(Chang),economic%20security%20for%20each%20other). Hmong people are represented by eighteen clans or tribes: Cha (Chang), Cheng, Chue, Fang, Hang, Her (Herr), Khang, Kong, Kue, Lee (Ly), Lor (Lo, Lao), Moua, Pha, Thao (Thor), Vang, Vue, Xiong, and Yang.

2. Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong in Minnesota* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008), 2-6; Lee Pao Xiong, interview with author, May 16, 2023. The Royal Lao Army divided the country into five military regions. As a former Royal Lao Armed Forces General, Vang Pao was in charge of Military Region 2. Here, the mostly Hmong unit fought against 40,000 North Vietnamese troops on behalf of the United States; General Vang Pao and James W. Lair, *The Special Guerilla Units (SGU) Service History* (St. Paul, MN: Special Guerilla Units Veterans and Families of USA, Inc., 2010), https://graphics.jsonline.com/jsi_news/documents/sgu_final_2.pdf.

3. Larry Clinton Thompson, *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975-1982* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2010), 47-50; High Commissioner for Refugees, *Brief on Ban Vinai Refugee Camp* (Bangkok, Thailand: United Nations, April 1, 1985), 1; Lee Pao Xiong. Nam Phong, the unofficial refugee camp, received Hmong fleeing Laos until the beginning of 1976. After that, the Hmong were relocated to Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, where people were processed for resettlement to third countries.

4. Lee Pao Xiong.

5. Lee Pao Xiong. "The first wave of people struggled the most with the language, but they had access to food and employment. The churches that sponsored some of the Hmong helped them [learn] English. . . find a job, and learn how to drive. There were also a

lot of military leaders in the first wave. . . who were well taken care of by the churches from 1975-1980. The second wave happened between 1980-1992. It's almost as though they were the forgotten middle child of the Hmong people. They were less educated, had [few] transferable skills, and it was difficult for them to find jobs. The third wave was 2000-2010, which made [these arrivals] the longest refugees in the camps. They were very dependent on those who came before them and/or on their sponsors because everyone had already been exposed to the American culture."

6. Shoua Moua, interview with author, April 8, 2023. Dang Her and Shoua Moua are the author's aunt and uncle. Her passed away in 2022; Joe Kimball, "First Hmong family arrived in Minnesota 40 years ago on Nov. 5," *MinnPost*, November 5, 2015; Frederick Melo, "They paved the way: Twin Cities family were Minnesota's first Hmong refugees, 40 years ago," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, December 6, 2015, <https://www.dglobe.com/news/they-paved-the-way-twin-cities-family-were-minnesotas-first-hmong-refugees-40-years-ago>. Her had worked with USAID in Laos, thus, he and his family were some of the first to escape Laos via Thailand. Author Kristina Her's father's family also arrived in 1975.

7. Moua.

8. Moua.

9. Moua; Joanne P. Ikeda, *Hmong American Food Practices, Customs, and Holidays* (Chicago: The American Dietetic Association, 1992), 3; Chia Youyee Vang, 18.

10. Moua.

11. Moua; Melo; Ackerberg, 12. Dang Her's first job was filing papers for a Plymouth-based travel company. He later worked at an auto parts store, helped open a grocery, and was a guidance counselor at St. Paul Vocational Technical Institute. Under his leadership, he and other Hmong formed the Hmong Association, which later became Lao Family Community of Minnesota, through the urging of General Vang Pao, to help Hmong learn English and settle into their Twin Cities' communities.

12. Moua; "MA Food Store," *St. Paul City Directory*

(St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co., 1985-86-1993), 81, 78, 71, 65, 44, 38 (no listing in 1990); "MA Food Store," *St. Paul Consumer Telephone Directory* (St. Paul: Northwestern Bell, 1982-1987), 331, 371, 491, 565, 476. A phone book first lists MA Food Store in 1981. The first city directory listings for the business appear in 1985 and continue through 1989. The address was 694 N. Rice Street (1985-1988, Dang Her) and 1133 Rice Street (1989, Dan Hawj). The store is also listed between 1991-1992 at 721 Jackson Street.

13. Cecelia M. Tsu, "'If You Want to Plow Your Field, Don't Kill Your Buffalo to Eat': Hmong Farm Cooperatives and Refugee Resettlement in 1980s Minnesota," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 36, no. 3 (Spring 2017): 41-43; "Articles of Incorporation of Hmong Farming Cooperative," xxxi; "Revised and Amended Training Program for New Americans: Addendum to Minnesota Agricultural Enterprise for New Americans Project Proposal," as quoted in Tsu; Dang Her, letter to Norman A. Brown, January 24, 1983, in MAENA files, as quoted by Tsu.

14. Tsu, 44-45; *Agricultural Extension Service Fact Sheet AD-FO-0420* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), 4.

15. Tsu, 46-48.

16. Tsu, 46-50; Bill McAuliffe, "Hmong farm project failed because it lacked capital," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, May 5, 1984, 1B, 13B; Len LaCara, "State scraps Hmong project," *Winona Daily Times*, May 4, 1984, 1.

17. Richard Sherman, "Hmong assume more leadership in year two of cooperative," *Extenovations* 5, no. 4 (August 1984): 2; See Xang Vang, *New Seeds in a New Land*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAO_7zJyYdE.

18. Tsu, 55-56.

19. Tsu, 64.

20. Lee Pao Xiong. The Vang family still retains ownership of the land today.

21. Tong Vang, interview with author, May 23, 2023; Don Stewart, "What will tomorrow bring?" *Winona Daily News*, May 5, 1984, 1.

22. Tong Vang; Chia Youyee Vang, 17; "L-H. Oriental Grocery Store Inc.," Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State, <https://mblsportal.sos.state.mn.us/Business/SearchDetails?filingGuid=be37df80-aad4-e011-a886-001ec94ffe7f>, January 25, 1988, updated May 31, 2023; "LH Oriental Grocery," *St. Paul City Directory* (St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co., 1982-1993), 64, 83, 69 81, 78, 71, 65, 44, 38 (no listing in 1990); *St. Paul Consumer Telephone Directory* (St. Paul: Northwestern Bell, 1983-1993), 371, 401, 565, 431, 604, 634, 664, 659, 650, 698. LH Oriental Grocery is listed in the city directory from 1982-1987 at 191 Western (Vang Xai Kong, owner and Sao Vang, manager (1988)) and 173 N. Western from 1989-1992 (Sao Vang, manager).

23. Tong Vang. Kim's Oriental Market still stands on Snelling Avenue.

24. Tong Vang.

25. Tong Vang.

26. Tong Vang; "SGU Veterans and Families of USA, Inc." Pro-Publica Non-Profit Explorer, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/721612652>. The nonprofit works with Hmong veterans to help with family reunification and "reconnection," funerals, and those who need help with immigration issues. According to the website, "We, truly, like to organize and know all the veterans who served during the Secret War in Laos." Tong Vang is also a veteran.

27. Lee Pao Xiong; Sammy Nelson, Mollie Spillman, and Terry Swanson, emails with editor regarding community gardens at Gibbs Farm in the 1980s, June 29, 2023.

28. Lee Pao Xiong.

29. Noucheng Xiong, interview with author, May 22, 2023.

30. Tom Meersman, "Land partnership provides a golden opportunity," *Pioneer Press*, September 13, 2014, D1-2; Laura Yuen, "Giving thanks for Hmong farmers," *Star Tribune*, November 24, 2021, E1, 3; "Phoua Thao Hang," *Pioneer Press*, <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/twincities/name/phoua-hang-obituary?id=36281687>; Isabel Saavedra-Weis, "St. Paul Farmer's Market honors vendor killed in stolen car crash on East Side," July 23, 2022, updated July 26, 2022, <https://www.twincities.com/2022/07/23/st-paul-farmers-market-honors-vendor-killed-in-stolen-car-crash-on-east-side/>.

31. "About Hafa," Hmong American Farmers Association website, <https://www.hmongfarmers.com/about-hafa/>; Erin Adler, "Road Needs Worry Hmong Farmers," *Star Tribune*, January 3, 2021, A1, A7.

32. "About Hafa," Zoë Jackson, "Where Farmers Can Do More Than Farm," *Star Tribune*, May 6, 2023, B1, B7.

33. Yia Vang, interview with author, May 17, 2023; "Episode 6: Battle Chili Peppers," *Iron Chef: Quest for an Iron Legend*, <https://www.netflix.com/title/81224668>.

34. Yia Vang; "About Chef Yia Vang," Union Hmong Kitchen website, <https://unionkitchenmn.com/about>.

35. "About Chef Yia Vang;" "Rice is Life: MOV," HillTribe website, <https://www.hilltribemn.com/mov>; Grace Birnstengall, "Union Hmong Kitchen becomes State Fair's first Hmong restaurant," *MPR*, August 29, 2022; Marielle Mohs, "How Union Hmong Kitchen is prepping for the Minnesota State Fair," *CBS Minnesota*, July 16, 2023.

36. Yia Vang.

37. Yia Vang.

38. Yia Vang.

Notes for Sidebar on page 2

a. Lee Pao Xiong, interview with author, May 16, 2023.

b. Lee Pao Xiong.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

President & CEO

Chad P. Roberts

Editor

Meredith Cummings

Editor Emeritus (2006-2018)

John Lindley

Founding Editor (1964-2006)

Virginia Brainard Kunz

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Board of Directors

Mari Oyanagi Eggum

Chair

Robert W. Mairs

First Vice Chair

Elizabeth J. Keyes

Second Vice Chair

Lorraine Griffin Johnson

Secretary

Marc J Manderscheid

Treasurer

Jo Emerson, Tim Glines, Judy Kishel, Debbie Lee, Joe Lutz, Allison Midden, Dixie Nelson, Peter Nguyen, Chad P. Roberts, Roxanne Sands, Ellen Turpin, Joe Twomey, July Vang, Glenn Wiessner, Helen Wilkie, Lee Pao Xiong

Directors Emeriti

W. Andrew Boss, George A. Mairs, Richard T.

Murphy Sr., Paul A. Verret

Editorial Board

Anne Field, *Chair*, Thomas H. Boyd, Anne Cowie, John Diers, Kate Dietrick, Renoir W. Gaither, John Guthmann, Lisa L. Heinrich, Kyle Imdieke, Laurie M. Murphy, Paul D. Nelson, Richard H. Nicholson, Jay Pfaender, David Riehle, Chad P. Roberts, Linda Schloff, Mark Taylor, Steve Trimble, Mary Lethert Wingerd, Matthew Wright

Honorary Advisory Board

William Finney, George Latimer, Joseph S. Micallef, Marvin J. Pertzik, James Reagan

Ramsey County Commissioners

Commissioner Trista MatasCastillo, *Chair*

Commissioner Nicole Joy Frethem

Commissioner Mary Jo McGuire

Commissioner Rena Moran

Commissioner Rafael E. Ortega

Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt

Commissioner Mai Chong Xiong

Ryan T. O'Connor, Manager, Ramsey County

Ramsey County History is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, Saint Paul, MN 55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 2023, Ramsey County Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-9758.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission from the publisher. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors.

RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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

The Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) strives to innovate, lead, and partner in preserving the knowledge of our community; deliver inspiring history programming; and incorporate local history in education.

The Society was established in 1949 to preserve the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, which the family acquired in 1849. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, the original programs told the story of the Gibbs family. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, RCHS also began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways, now telling the stories of the remarkable relationship between Jane Gibbs and the Dakota people of Heyáta Othúnwe (Cloud Man's Village).

In 1964, the Society began publishing its award-winning magazine *Ramsey County History*. In 1978, the organization moved to St. Paul's Landmark Center, a restored Federal Courts building on the National Register of Historic Places. An expansion of the Research Center was completed in 2010 and rededicated in 2016 as the Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center.

RCHS offers public programming for youth and adults. Visit www.rchs.com for details of upcoming History Revealed programs, summer camps, courthouse and depot tours, and more. The Society serves more than 15,000 students annually on field trips or through school outreach. Programs are made possible by donors, members, corporations, and foundations, all of whom we appreciate deeply. If you are not a member of RCHS, please join today and help bring history to life for more than 50,000 people every year.

Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, & Inclusion

RCHS is committed to ensuring it preserves and presents our county's history. As we continue our work to incorporate more culturally diverse histories, we have made a commitment to diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion that is based on this core idea: RCHS exists to serve ALL who call Ramsey County home. To learn more, please see www.rchs.com/about.

Acknowledging This Sacred Dakota Land

Mnisóta Makhóche, the land where the waters are so clear they reflect the clouds, extends beyond the modern borders of Minnesota and is the ancestral and contemporary homeland of the Dakhóta (Dakota) people. It is also home to the Anishinaabe and other Indigenous peoples, all who make up a vibrant community in Mnisóta Makhóche. RCHS acknowledges that its sites are located on and benefit from these sacred Dakota lands.

RCHS is committed to preserving our past, informing our present, and inspiring our future. Part of doing so is acknowledging the painful history and current challenges facing the Dakota people just as we celebrate the contributions of Dakota and other Indigenous peoples.

Find our full Land Acknowledgment Statement on our website, www.rchs.com. This includes actionable ways in which RCHS pledges to honor the Dakota and other Indigenous peoples of Mnisóta Makhóche.



www.rchs.com

info@rchs.com

(651) 222-0701



Pathways GALA

Benefiting children's hands-on educational programming



Photo credit: Jen Strom



Pathways Gala
Tuesday, September 12, 2023
Wabasha Street Caves

Join RCHS for a night of food, fun, and philanthropy at the Wabasha Street Caves, Saint Paul's famed prohibition-era hideaway for the most notorious gangsters of the '30s.

Enhance the evening with a unique Pathways Gala VIP Experience.

For event details and registration
rchs.com/event/pathways-gala
or call 651-222-0701

Gibbs Farm Fall Public Hours: Saturdays through October, 10am-4pm

Festivals:

Apple Festival

**Saturday, September 30
10am-2pm**

Enjoy music, tours of the apple orchard and historic buildings, fun apple crafts, and much more!



Halloween Trick-or-Treat Trail

**Saturday, October 28
12-6pm**

Our all-ages Steampunk Trick-or-Treat Trail is back! Pre-registration opens in September.



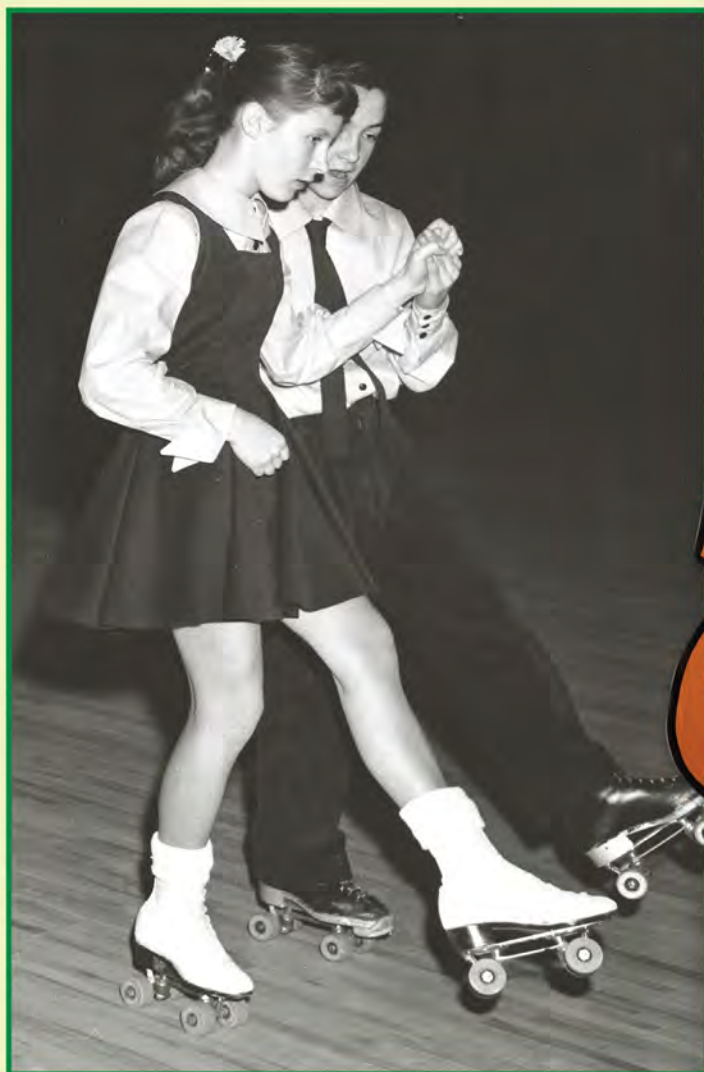
Adult Evening Events:

- **Early Harvest Grounds & Gardens Tour**
Tuesday, August 29, 5:30-7:30pm
- **Behind-the Scenes Farmhouse Tour**
Wednesday, September 6, 5:30-7:30pm
- **Late Summer Grounds & Gardens Tour**
Wednesday, September 20, 5:30-7:30pm



Details and tickets can be found on our website:

www.rchs.com



These young teens were members of St. Michael's Skating Club. Such clubs for devoted "rink rats" were popular in the 1950s and '60s. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

Rolling through the Decades

Roller Skating in Ramsey County

HEIDI HELLER, PAGE 22

