

From the Hills of Laos to the San Gorgonio Pass; A History of the Hmong Community in Banning

Banning has historically been a town of pioneering settlers. After original native peoples, principally the Cahuilla, settled in the area, White/European settlers began arriving in the late 1880s, followed closely by Mexican-American immigrants. The African-American community began developing in the 1950s, followed by Lao and Hmong people from Laos in the late 1970s.

The Hmong have been a people without a country for thousands of years, forcefully driven from their homelands, first in China and more recently in Laos, a long sliver of a country situated between Vietnam and Thailand. The Hmong have lived in higher elevations because of their fear that the country they settled in would eventually turn against them and attempt to harm them. By living in higher elevations they could keep a lower and safer profile and not be perceived as a threat to the local communities of that country. During the Vietnam War the Hmong people of Laos were recruited by the U.S. Military as part of an anti-communist force in the hilly areas of Laos, where they farmed the fertile soil of the region.

After the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam in 1975, the U.S. accepted more than 110,000 Laotian highlander Hmong as refugees. Many of the first Hmong who arrived in Southern California settled in the San Diego, Santa Ana and Long Beach areas. As they ventured outside of those areas they discovered Banning. The rocky hills bordering the north and south sides of the San Gorgonio Pass reminded them of some of the hilly areas of Laos, their former homeland, and the lower housing costs compared to Orange County were attractive. The Hmong would often have one or two families move into a particular area of the U. S. and if after awhile it seemed to be a good location they would in turn become sponsors for relatives still waiting to immigrate.

The Hmong immigrated into Banning in the same pioneer tradition as early White settlers in the San Gorgonio Pass. They settled in a region foreign to them, not knowing what challenges they would be faced with, but drawing on that same resolve that sustained the pioneers before them. The language and cultural barriers were nearly insurmountable for many of the refugees who were at the mercy of the communities they settled in. Banning, like most areas receiving Hmong families was ill-prepared in understanding the cultural complexities of their new and growing population of immigrants, however a spirit of goodwill was often an overriding factor.

One interesting aspect of the Hmong immigration to the San Gorgonio Pass is that some of the first Hmong arrivals in the early 1980s were allowed to live on the Morongo Reservation. An individual who owned approximately 20 acres of land on the reservation made arrangements for some Hmong families to build or rent on the land. Bee Yang and his wife, Kayoua, were the

first Hmong to arrive in Banning in 1980. After living for a short time in Banning they moved their family onto the Morongo Reservation and lived there for over twenty years.

Several members of Banning's Hmong community responded to the library's request for assistance in researching the history of the Hmong and their arrival in Banning. Chang Moua came to the U.S. from Laos in 1976, and moved to Banning in 1981. During this same time period approximately 100,000 Lao people (the native people of Laos) immigrated to the United States and many Lao also relocated in Banning. Chang is an active member of the Hmong Christian Mission Alliance Church and explained some of the traditions of the Hmong New Year's Festival.

According to Chang, the Hmong New Year's Festival is celebrated at different times of the year, depending on the community. While the Banning Hmong community celebrates its New Year's during Thanksgiving Week at Reppier Park, other Hmong communities, such as the large one in Fresno, may have their New Year's Festivals later in the year, closer to Christmas. This is designed to enable the various Hmong communities to attend each other's festivals and not have them conflict with each other. The New Year's Festivals are noted for the colorful costumes of their participants and are filled with performances of Hmong dance and music.

One of the objectives of the Hmong New Year's Festival is to get the young and old people together and for some young men to look for a prospective bride. "Ball Tossing" between young men and women is a traditional courting ritual. A ball is thrown back and forth between two lines of participants. The ball tossing may eventually lead to conversations between a couple and possibly later, a more serious relationship.

Bee Yang, not to be confused with the first Bee Yang mentioned in this article, is a second grade school teacher at Hoffer Elementary. Bee came to Banning in 1995. Bee also remembers that some of the earliest Hmong families in the area lived on the Morongo Reservation and were accepted there. The first area in Banning to be densely populated by Hmong was between Barbour and Westward off of Eighth Street. The Hmong in Banning have referred to this area as "Hmongtown."

Bee discussed the music and musical instruments of the Hmong culture. In Bee's words, "Hmong music can be used as a communication channel. Many of the instruments are used to create a musical language in courting practices between men and women. Older generations of Hmong men and women are very shy. Therefore, music was a means to tie the knot of shyness and embrace tradition. As with all music it calms or excites the mood by the type of music it is and how it is played. Presently, most of the younger generation no longer uses the musical instruments as a means of courting. Now they use the internet."

To play Hmong music correctly it must be taken seriously and played with a sense of purpose. Those who are accomplished on the Hmong violin, flute and Ncas can actually “talk” through the music and that musical language can be heard and understood by others who know how to play those instruments. The Ncas is a thin strip of wood or brass with a blade cut out from it. It makes a buzzing sound similar to the Western “Jew’s harp” or “jaw harp,” and can be altered with the shaping of the mouth cavity. Because of the personal nature of “talking” through the instrument most Hmong instruments are played solo, with no accompaniment.

The “Qeej” (pronounced Kang) is a bamboo reed instrument important in Hmong culture. It is most often used to guide departed spirits after the death of a loved one and can be played for several days during funeral ceremonies. The Hmong people have traditionally practiced ancestral worship and since arriving in the United States many have adopted Christianity. According to Bee, “Though these two religious ways are different, the Hmong people mutually respect each other regardless of the religion they choose to guide their faith.”

Va Moua is a Banning resident who plays several Hmong instruments. Va came to Long Beach from Laos in 1985 and later moved to Banning. Va explained that Hmong last names are clan names like; Moua, Yang, Her, Lee, Xiong, Vue, Hang, Thao, Chang, and Vang. Va says there are approximately 1500 to 1600 Hmong people currently living in Banning. He says there are some Hmong families now living in Beaumont as well. Va is the President of the Hmong Archives and Culture Center in Banning and has been instrumental in sharing the Hmong culture with the San Geronimo Pass. Through Va’s efforts the Hmong Archives and Culture Center has recently donated a Qeej and Hmong flute to the Banning Public Library.

Many Banning residents were aware of the early struggles of the Hmong community who were trying to assimilate into a new culture with a difficult and challenging language to learn. In the spirit of humanity they assisted these early families. Several elementary teachers have been mentioned as being instrumental in guiding Hmong children into Western culture. Shelley Wildman, an elementary teacher at Hoffer Elementary, is often mentioned by Hmong people who were her students and succeeded due to her mentoring and nurturing.

Christine Richardson taught some of the first Hmong students at Coombs Intermediate School and had an “ESL Choir” in an effort to help them develop their English skills. Using music to teach children English was a helpful tool for the Banning Unified School District. Christine later taught Hmong students at the elementary level. She remembers the difficulties for these children who were brought into a completely foreign culture, needing to learn a new language. She also remembers a Hmong gentleman coming to the school and demonstrating his ability to play music with a single blade of grass. He would flatten the grass out and somehow blow through it to get the sound.

Christine shared a story about a garden started in Banning by some members of her church, the early members of Calvary Chapel of the Pass. Church members Bill and Peggy Dugger were concerned about the distressed state of some of the Hmong who had relocated in Banning. Peggy was a schoolteacher at Central Elementary and became familiar with many of the Hmong children and their families. The poverty level was high in these early years and members of Calvary Chapel of the Pass came up with a plan to assist Banning's Hmong families.

A young couple in the church owned a 14 acre section of land in Banning, north of Gilman and west of the remnants of the St. Boniface School. The acreage was not being developed at the time and the couple offered the land to be used for a large garden. Several people donated equipment and supplies for irrigation. Bill Dugger provided the tractor power and plowed the land to ready it for planting. A. C. Dysart donated irrigation pipe to bring water to the site. A steady supply of chicken manure was procured from a chicken ranch in Cherry Valley and soon the land was planted with a variety of vegetables. Ly Vong and Vue Her were managers of the garden site. As many as 70 families were involved in the farming and harvesting of this vegetable garden for about three years until the water source was no longer available. An attempt was made to move the garden to Cabazon but it never prospered like the Banning garden. During this time several local markets also donated food items to needy Hmong families, including bread from Hadley's Fruit Orchards.

A second generation of Hmong in the United States has taken them to the status they have strived for. There are currently approximately 180,000 Hmong in the United States. The largest Hmong populations are in California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Michigan, although nearly every state in 2011 has a Hmong presence. Two Hmong-Americans were recently elected to the Minnesota state legislature. Hmong students in Banning have achieved great success with high grades and many awards at Banning High School. Many have continued on with college and are pursuing careers that sometimes require them to leave the San Geronio Pass.

The Hmong name can be translated into "people" or "a free people." These resilient and adaptive people have survived through centuries of displacement and have now found a new homeland, the United States. As is the case with many transplanted cultures the Hmong struggle between their traditional world and the modern Western world, but in the relative short span of 30 years they have found a way to prosper in their new country while still honoring their rich heritage. Banning is fortunate to have played a part in this pioneering story of the Hmong.

(Special thanks to Bee Yang (elder), Va Moua, Chang Moua, Bee Yang (junior), Christine Richardson, Bill Dugger and Maxine Vrooman for their assistance in the research for this article).

