

## Interview with Pham Thein Khoc

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Interpreter: Patrick Lam

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DePue: Welcome. Today is Monday, February 23, 2015. My name is Mark DePue, and I'm the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. And today I have a rare experience to look forward to. I'm gonna be interviewing a Vietnamese Army officer, and later on a Vietnamese boat person, and by the name of Pham Thein Khoc. Now, you say your name.

Khoc: Pham Thein Khoc. Pham Thein Khoc.

DePue: Okay. Now, Mr. Pham, you have to be patient with me today because I do not know Vietnamese, and I'm sure I will mispronounce a lot of things. But I am very happy to have you here to tell your story, and I also need to interview, introduce Patrick Lam. Good morning, Patrick.

Lam: Good morning, sir. Thanks for having me back.

DePue: And Patrick will be serving as our interpreter as we go through there, our translator. I just had the chance to interview Patrick as well about his own experience as a Vietnamese boat person, but there's a generation difference between these two gentlemen. And you were there, you grew up in Vietnam,

you served in the Vietnamese Army, so there's a lot for us to talk about this morning. What I want to start with is ask you when and where you were born.

Lam: I was born in Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu, Vietnam.

DePue: Is that close to Saigon?

Lam: About a hundred kilometers north of Saigon.

DePue: Where did you grow up?

Lam: He grew up in Saigon.

DePue: Tell me what your father did for a living.

Lam: He is just a pleasant, peasant.

Khoc: Agriculture.

Lam: Oh, agriculture. Farmer.

DePue: A farmer.

Lam: Yes.

DePue: And I don't know that you told us your birthday.

Lam: June 18, 1944.

DePue: So you were born in an interesting time during the Japanese occupation. I'm sure you don't remember that, but tell me what you do remember about growing up in South Vietnam in the 1950s and early 1960s. What was life like?

Lam: What's the mom would be selling, groceries, you know, selling things in the market, open, open door market to make a living.

DePue: Was your family primarily rice farming?

Lam: Oh, farming, but mostly they farmed potatoes.

DePue: Potatoes?

Lam: Yeah, sweet potatoes back then.

DePue: Any fish or chickens or hogs, pork?

Lam: Just very little, not a lot. If they run out of money they can use the livestock to bring in some, some, some money, but mainly it's, it's the crops.

DePue: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Lam: Three brothers and two sisters.

DePue: And where were you? Were you early or were you later in that?

Lam: He's, he's youngest one in the family.

DePue: Youngest? In America, that means he'd be spoiled.

Lam: That's right.

DePue: What was the family's religion?

Lam: Catholic? Catholic was the religion.

DePue: Both parents were Catholic?

Lam: Both parents were Catholic.

DePue: Did you, in your culture is it also important that you know grandparents and aunts and uncles, is that a large part, part of the larger family?

Lam: It's very important to know your, your relatives, aunts and uncles, all together.

DePue: Did they all live very close together?

Lam: Yes, back then, they, they lived close together, but now everybody kinda separated and went their own way.

DePue: Obviously.

Lam: Yes.

DePue: What is your earliest childhood memory, Mr. Pham?

Lam: Hmm. Okay. Now, I, he said that he remembered most when he was a kid going to school that his mom would give him a small amount of change in my pocket to, to spend, to buy little things that he need. Five dong is, it's I don't know how much it is worth back then, US dollar, is about fifty cents.

DePue: I would think that's a lot of money.

Lam: Yeah.

DePue: What did you buy?

Lam: Oh, ice, icicles, with, ice slurpees, you know, with, with flavored drinks on it. Because it's, I, I take it was hot, you know, in the area, so that's, that's the use by those.

DePue: Today here in Springfield it's below freezing. It was always hot where you grew up, I would think.

Lam: Two season, he said, it was just really hot or it was really wet.

DePue: Okay.

Lam: Yeah.

DePue: Tell me about the, the average, everyday food that the family ate.

Lam: Main, the main staple was rice along with some vegetables and some fish that were caught in, in, along the, the lakes and streams.

DePue: Okay, okay. Where did you attend school?

Lam: He's, he attended school in Saigon. The name is, it's, lycée, in Vietnamese it's **geituk**, Saigon, so.

DePue: This is a grade school?

Lam: He, he doesn't remember the name of the school, but it's at a, in a small village.

DePue: Okay, for a grade school.

Lam: For grade school, yes.

DePue: So what was the school that you attended in Saigon. Was that for high school?

Lam: Yes, high school was in Saigon.

DePue: Now your family lived a long way from downtown Saigon. Were you on your own when you went to school in Saigon?

Lam: Started out with riding horses, wagons to school every day. And then after that they saved enough money to buy him a bike to ride back and forth to school.

DePue: Going out? That's a long trip, isn't it?

Lam: Three kilometers to school, one way.

DePue: Thirty? Or three?

Lam: Three.

DePue: Three kilometers.

Lam: Yes.

DePue: Okay. Was this before Saigon, or even when you were in Saigon, when you went to school there?

Lam: In Saigon.

DePue: So, I thought the farm was along, a lot farther away from Saigon than that.

Lam: Oh, he said when he was up into nine years old he was not allowed to go to school because of the war and stuff. So he was not attending school back in his farm area. After nine then he was allowed to go, that's when he went to school.

DePue: Did your family move when you were nine years old?

Lam: They move around 1953, '54 into Saigon.

DePue: And that's interesting because 1954's basically the year that the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu, and then things were changing quite a bit. I'm sure there was a lot of people moving from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, but I don't know if, if you were experiencing any of that. You were still very young at that time.

Lam: He said, he doesn't remember a lot of people coming in or out of Saigon, but there were, just, bus, stuff like that, people trying to sneak back in Saigon, try to overthrow the current former government, Bảo Đại.

DePue: Yeah, Bảo Đại was the, I don't know, president at the time?

Lam: He was, he's a, he was king, royalty back then.

DePue: Do you remember hearing your parents, as a young child, talking about politics?

Khoc: No.

Lam: No, not at all.

DePue: Do you know what their views were at the time?

Lam: They said, the parents didn't accept the communism way of life, so they tried to move into Saigon to find more freedom.

DePue: When did you, where did you go to high school then? The name of that school?

- Lam: Okay. It's a name that I don't, it's just. He said Lycée Technique? Technical School?
- Khoc: Technical School.
- Lam: Lycée Technical School. It must have been a different name.
- DePue: That sounds like a French name.
- Lam: It's a school that was, developed by the French.
- DePue: Did you learn any French growing up?
- Lam: Was all French when he went to school, high school.
- DePue: Really?
- Lam: Yeah.
- DePue: Now you were, because you couldn't start until you were nine or ten years old, you must have been older than many of the students. Would that be right?
- Lam: He, he was older than the regular kids, but he was in an accelerated program.
- DePue: What, when you were in high school, this would have been middle of 1960s, what did you have for hopes and dreams for your future?
- Lam: He just, he wanted to become an engineer to help, you know, society build.
- DePue: Now I know that many Asian cultures, the parents put a lot of pressure on their children as well, and expect them to, to do very well. Is that what your parents wanted you to be, an engineer?
- Lam: He said when they were moving into, before moving to Saigon in '50, 1954, his dad passed away. So the family was left with just the mom, raised the kids, so they were not really concerned about long term, they were just trying to survive.
- DePue: They were poor.
- Lam: Just survive. Yes. Just, you know, day by day.
- DePue: Poor in a country that's torn apart by war.
- Lam: Yeah.
- DePue: When did you graduate from high school?
- Lam: Graduated in 1966.

- DePue: Did you go to college, or did you go into the military at that time?
- Lam: He did sign, register for college, he wanted to start that. But they, the draft started for the war, so he was drafted and could not continue with the college.
- DePue: Were you interested in being in the military, or you weren't, weren't interested in being the military?
- Lam: He said that, you know, there was so much war going on, fighting, that they would be happy to be part of the country to help fight for, for his country, but the plan was afterwards, hoping to go back to college when the war was over.
- DePue: Just like any American kid would wanna do, perhaps. Were you drafted in 1967?
- Lam: '67 as far as he can recall.
- DePue: And from our previous conversations it sounded like you went to officer training program, is that correct?
- Lam: Yes, that is correct.
- DePue: What was the school you went to?
- Lam: Saigontubei tulek. So tulek would be the last name on there.
- DePue: Okay.
- Lam: For that school.
- DePue: Why were you selected for officer training?
- Lam: Oh, he accelerated in his academic performances so they picked him to go to school.
- DePue: Did you have any choice of what branch you would serve in? Infantry? Engineer? Field artillery? Did you have a choice in that?
- Lam: Yes, oh, he was given a choice, yes. He chose engineering.
- DePue: Tell me about the, the school and the instructors that you had.
- Lam: They started out with, I guess, in America would be boot camp training, the battlefield, just, just like any, any army or military, for four or five months. Then after that, when they survive that, then they go into the actual training for the civil, civil engineering part of, of the military.
- DePue: Civil engineer? Or combat engineer?

- Lam: Combat engineer. To build bridges, to help the military with the fight.
- DePue: Road.
- Lam: Roads.
- DePue: Bridge construction, those kinds of things. Okay. Who were your instructors? Were they Vietnamese? Were they American? Were they a mixture?
- Lam: The instructors were also in the military, officials, officers that were in the military and then came back to, to help teach the younger generation.
- DePue: But Vietnamese?
- Lam: Vietnamese, yes.
- DePue: Did some of these Vietnamese officers, had they had training in the United States on, from the engineer school from the United States, do you know?
- Lam: Majority were from the US, that came, came from the US, educated in the US and came back and taught. Some from France also.
- DePue: Some from France.
- Lam: Some instructors were from France.
- DePue: But they're all Vietnamese?
- Lam: Yes. All Vietnamese? Yeah, all Vietnamese.
- DePue: When you were growing up, 1965 was the time period when American involvement in the, in the war really started to go up and up after 1965. But I wonder, as you were growing up, did you have many experiences with Americans?
- Lam: He, he said he remember that life was a lot better with Americans there in Saigon, was flourishing at the time. I guess the Americans there brought a lot of resources for, for, for them at the time. So it was better than without the Americans.
- DePue: Did you like those Americans when you first met them?
- Lam: Very happy. It's a different culture that they have never met before, different knowledge, different philosophy that they really like to learn from the Americans when they first met.
- DePue: When you went to your military training, I would think the South Vietnamese government would be very concerned that there weren't communists who started in the training with you. Was there any way that the government was



trying to identify who were loyal to South Vietnam and who were communists?

Lam: They have, you know, agents that would interview and interrogate those, to see which side of the government they were on, politics.

DePue: Would they interview your mother and your relatives as well?

Lam: He said they didn't ask them directly, but they would ask around, just interrogate around, other people.

DePue: But as I understand, most Vietnamese who were Catholic were not interested in communism at all, that they were, they were much more aligned with the South Vietnamese government. Is that correct?

Lam: They were against communism. They did not accept their way of life or philosophy.

DePue: How, how religious was your family, growing up?

Lam: Yes, very, very devoted.

DePue: When did you get your commission?

Lam: At the end of 1967, when he graduated.

DePue: Mr. Pham, that's an interesting time to get your commission. What was your first unit?

Lam: Regiment 10. The 10th regiment.

DePue: Tenth engineer regiment?

Lam: Yes, 10th engineer regiment.

DePue: And where was it based?

Lam: In Da Nang.

DePue: Now we've got maps here, and I, as Patrick, you know, we put together, it was an interesting conversation trying to track all of the different places that Mr. Pham was working, so. If we can see this first map here, perhaps, and identify the blue arrow there would be Da Nang, I believe. And so this is a long way away from Saigon and your family, isn't it?

Lam: Yes. Eight or nine hundred kilometers away.

DePue: Okay.

Lam: From what he can recall.

DePue: I think there's also a couple pictures we have. It would be good to see a picture of, Mr. Pham's mother on the left there. And this picture on the right is one of the very few pictures you have from your military experience, is that correct?

Lam: He said that after he escaped out of country, friends that he knew, people that liked him, gave him, opportunities to take pictures to, to show that he was, you know, that we was part of the military, just for memory.

DePue: Okay.

Lam: Yes.

DePue: But from the war itself, he hasn't very many pictures to show, or any pictures, really.

Lam: He, they did, but it's all lost over time.

DePue: What was your job, your first job once in the, once you got commissioned?

Lam: His first role was, he was in charge of, a group under him, about twenty soldiers.

DePue: An engineer platoon?

Lam: Yes, their role was to rebuild bridges that were blown up during the, the battle.

DePue: Did you, did your platoon go to various places in South Vietnam or mainly around Da Nang?

Lam: They, they were scattered around. They didn't stay just in Da Nang.

DePue: Okay.

Lam: Yeah.

DePue: Where else? Was it all part of the northern regions of South Vietnam?

Lam: As far they can go north, that they're allowed to from, from Da Nang.

DePue: Which would be Quảng Trị Province?

Lam: They went to Quảng Trị and beyond as well.

DePue: Well that means in North Vietnam.

- Lam: They saw, went up to as far as the, the, I don't know the river he said, Sông Bến Hải, that's a river name, they could see it but not reach it that far.
- DePue: You mean where the border was?
- Lam: Yes.
- DePue: So he was probably talking about Quảng Trị City, and there's, okay. January 30th of 1968, that's Tết celebration, right?
- Lam: Yes.
- DePue: And that's the beginning of the Tết Offensive, January 30th. What do you remember about the Tết Offensive?
- Lam: He, remember recently just graduated and then they transferred him to, location where just officers stayed, and that was when the Tết Offensive started, as soon as he got out school and transferred to that location.
- DePue: What do you remember about that day?
- Lam: He said remember, he heard on the radio, radio from, from London, they listened to that. Some informations were not very accurate, because they, said in this area was taken over, but actually it wasn't, so there were misleading information. But he was not observing directly the Tết Offensive.
- DePue: One of the hottest battles of the Tết offenses was in Huế. Were you ever, working in the Huế area?
- Lam: Not at that time. Later, after, after the Tết Offensive, that's when they transferred him there.
- DePue: When you went out with your platoon to do these jobs, did you generally have infantry support with you at the time?
- Lam: Yes, there were infantries along to help them, protect them.
- DePue: Do you remember, Mr. Pham, your first combat experience? Can you tell us about that?
- Lam: In the process of building, this was 1972, reconstruction roads, he almost got lost into, enemy territory, but luckily there was a soldier there that stopped him from continuing forward. So his platoon went back, and as soon as they stepped back, that was when it was hit hard, enemy right there.
- DePue: Did you have opportunity to work with American units?
- Lam: Yes, he did.

DePue: Was that a good experience? Did they treat you, did the Americans generally treat the Vietnamese units well?

Lam: Very, very well. Treat them very well.

DePue: How about Korean units? I know that the Koreans were in that general area, maybe a little bit south.

Lam: They didn't work together, but they did, his platoon did get lost into Korean territory. They took them, and interrogated them, make sure they're on the right side and then they were released. They treated them pretty much correctly.

DePue: What kind of equipment did your platoon have?

Lam: They had bulldozers to help, you know, flat out the land, I guess. It's, the equipments I asked him, said it's, it's from Vietnam, all those equipments was not US imported.

DePue: I would assume these were mainly American vehicles. Trucks and bulldozers and American manufacturer.

Lam: Oh, American-made, yes.

DePue: Now, Mr. Pham, I wonder if you remember and can tell us one or two stories from your first few years in the army from 1968 to 1972. Any stories that you especially remember?

Lam: His worst experience, I guess, that stuck with him the most was when he could observe the battle through a binocular that see Americans and, and enemies were confronting each other, and snipers, and people getting shot, left and right. That was one that stuck with him the most.

DePue: This was the time period, from 1968 all the way through the early 1970s when United States Army was pulling back and giving more and more control of the war to the Vietnamese units. Did you, did that sound like a good idea to you?

Lam: He felt it, it was good decision for Americans not to lose any more lives, but also, at the same time, it left them empty-handed as far as supplies, weaponries, and they didn't have any supplies after the Americans pulled out.

DePue: Was there, were the South Vietnamese, if you had the weapons and supplies, were the South Vietnamese soldiers good enough to fight?

Lam: Yeah, they said it would help them a lot. They witnessed, they understood how the VC, the, the enemy fought in, in the field, so they would be able to tackle that if they had the right weapons.

- DePue: Mr. Pham, did you understand what motivated the Viet Cong? Why they chose to go with communism instead of with the government?
- Lam: Two problems. One was that, they were farmers, so they didn't know who to follow, to listen, so the first government that came on board, educated them, so they just followed to that. Number two is they were forced to follow, that they didn't then they would, the family that left behind would suffer consequences, so they, they chose that route.
- DePue: In 1971, early 1972, did you think that you were winning the war?
- Lam: They thought they were winning toward the end of '72, from what he's heard and what he's observed.
- DePue: Now, different subject. When did you get married?
- Lam: Not quite exactly know what, remember what year, but around '69, '70.
- DePue: Where did you meet your wife?
- Lam: In Quảng Trị.
- DePue: In Quảng Trị City, or?
- Lam: Surrounding area, not exactly in the center.
- DePue: What is, what was your wife's name?
- Lam: **Nguyen Tui**. So that's last name first, so **Tui, Tui Nguyen**.
- DePue: Nguyen is a very common Vietnamese name, correct?
- Lam: Yes, yes.
- DePue: Tell me more about her. What was she doing when you met her?
- Lam: Her family was in, in sales, and he was, I guess on duty then, and that's how they met.
- DePue: Well, that sounds like a very innocent story.
- Lam: Yes.
- DePue: I'm sure there was more to it than that. When did you get married, then? In sometime in 1969, you say?
- Lam: Around '69.
- DePue: Where did she go to live after that?

- Lam: After he got married, his wife, went to nursing school in Da Nang.
- DePue: I'm curious. Did your mother and the rest of your family, were they at the wedding?
- Lam: It was just him and, and his, on his wife's side because his family was very far away at the time.
- DePue: Well, that's what happens in war, isn't it? That's unfortunate. Okay, 1972 is another important year in Vietnam War because that's the Easter, what Americans call, the Easter Offensive. And you'd already talked about one experience in '72 that was very, dangerous for you. Do you have any other memories about the Easter Offensive?
- Lam: He just remember a lot of explosion, canon fires, it was just pretty much, all over for the offensive.
- DePue: When we first met, you mentioned that you sometimes were involved with transporting supplies, and that there was at least one convoy that was attacked. Tell us about that? Does that sound familiar?
- Lam: What year, he was wanting to know what year are you referring to?
- DePue: Well I thought it was about this time, maybe it was later.
- Lam: He said his, his platoon luckily escaped that, that, I guess the summer, which is the Easter Offensive, so they, they didn't suffer a lot of casualty for his, his group, his platoon.
- DePue: Were you still in the same regiment?
- Lam: Yes, same regiment.
- DePue: Okay, that gets us to January of 1973, and at the end of January, the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, the Paris Peace Treaty between North Vietnam, the Viet Cong, the United States, and South Vietnam. And we've got a map we can look at here to see the shaded areas are the areas that were given control for the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. And so obviously it's an awful lot of the western mountainous regions where the coastline, in large part, is still under the control of the South Vietnamese government. My question for you, Mr. Pham, one, is where were you when the Peace Treaty was signed?
- Lam: He was in Hué at that time.
- DePue: What did you think about that treaty?

- Lam: Big failure, the enemy didn't observe that treaty. They had, they were forced to observe the treaty. They were not allowed to fire anymore, but the enemy continued to take over their territory against the treaty.
- DePue: How did you feel about the United States then, and the treaty that they forced on you?
- Lam: Very depressed. Pretty much giving up hope.
- DePue: Were you mad at the United States?
- Lam: Sorry, he's a little bit emotional right now. He said that, just thinking back that, it was very sad that, a small country like this being controlled by bigger country, taken advantage by bigger, you know, forces, force them to give up. And they wanted to fight for their freedom, but they were pretty much outnumbered and outsized and everything.
- DePue: So I would assume after the Peace Treaty, morale was very low, and expectations were that they wouldn't be able to win?
- Lam: They, they had no more leadership, no one there to back them up. So they were just retreating, as, as much as they could, just to survive what was left.
- DePue: Mr. Pham, the first time we met, you talked about seeing the North Vietnamese soldiers actually cross the border now, and you couldn't do anything about it. Is that correct?
- Lam: They saw the enemy invading their territory. They were told by the treaty they were not supposed to fight back, so basically they gave up, just watching the enemy slowly coming in and taking over their land.
- DePue: You also mentioned, you told me a story about listening to a VRC radio, and maybe you getting on that radio and talking to the enemy. Do you remember that story?
- Lam: He had a friend with connection to radio station would call him up and just kinda keep him posted on the enemy, where they were attacking and invading the land, basically.
- DePue: Did you see any of the, the prisoner exchange between American prisoners coming south, and South Vietnamese prisoners coming south, and North Vietnamese prisoners going north? Did you see or experience any of that?
- Lam: So they were assigned the duty of, of, transporting on a boat, the prisoners back and forth. So they, he did observe all that, yes.
- DePue: Did you personally observe some of the Americans coming back?

- Lam: He just observed the, the enemies, you know, he's transporting the enemies back and forth, but Americans were released somewhere else, returning a different location.
- DePue: So you were actually helping return North Vietnamese prisoners to the north, it sounds like.
- Lam: Yes.
- DePue: Let's get up to 1974, then, because I think you had a change of assignment in 1974, is that correct?
- Lam: Yes, he was transferred back to Saigon to, start another, I guess high-ranking official training.
- DePue: Well if it's the same kind of program as the United States Army, this would've been the engineer officer advanced course? Is that the course?
- Lam: Yes, it is.
- DePue: Okay, how long a course was that?
- Lam: At least six months for the course.
- DePue: All other, these were all Vietnamese officers, correct?
- Lam: Yes, correct.
- DePue: What was the mood of the, your, you and your fellow officers while you're going through this training?
- Lam: They, they had to study, but their sentiment was just very gloomy. They slowly saw Da Nang, Hue, slowly being invaded and taken over by the enemy, so there was, you know, they did what they had to do, but there wasn't much hope behind that.
- DePue: Did you transfer to a different unit after this school?
- Lam: Yes, he was transferred to a different one after that.
- DePue: What was that unit?
- Lam: Regiment 30. 30th Regiment, that was the new regiment that he was at.
- DePue: What was your rank by that time?
- Lam: First Lieutenant.
- DePue: First Lieutenant.



Lam: Yes.

DePue: And we don't have a picture of it, but I know you have a document from that class when you graduated that says you were First Lieutenant at the time and assigned to the thirtieth engineer regiment?

Lam: Yes, did have the paper.

DePue: Where now was that unit operating?

Lam: Near Saigon.

DePue: Now, early 1975 then, the communists launch their next big offensive, and that's obviously the one that's going to end the war. Do you have any memories of the fighting, then, in 1975?

Lam: He, he was supporting another, different regiment, different group at that time when that started.

DePue: I wonder if you can see the map here of, there we go. And what the big blue arrow should be pointing at, Xuan Lộc, is that correct? No, I think this is, yeah.

Lam: He's not sure, he's can't see that on the map.

DePue: Okay, that's fine. But Xuan Lộc, as I understand, was one of the main areas where the South Vietnamese Army did very well, 18th Division. Do you remember hearing about that? Were you involved with that?

Lam: He remember trying to protect 18th Regiment while they were pulling back, trying to place, mines in, in that area, eighteenth regiment. They were pulling back away from Xuan Lộc.

DePue: This was also the time when, after the Watergate and Richard Nixon was no longer president, and Congress, United States Congress, decided not to continue supporting at the same level that they had promised to support at the Peace Treaty in 1973. How did that, how did that affect what, what you had, and what, how the Vietnamese were able to fight? Did, did you have a shortage of supplies and equipment?

Lam: Oh, they were, told that they told to place four thousand mines, but with those there were only a thousand that had fuse. The rest did not have, so they were only able to work with a thousand mines instead of four thousand, so they were pretty much short, very short supply.

DePue: So that is an example, if you expand that for the entire South Vietnamese Army having the same problems?

- Lam: They, they were told that if they were gonna fight the enemy, they only were allowed to use so many that was left. They had to, save for other fights, so they were just limited in what they could use, everywhere. It was announced everywhere that they had to portion their weapons, basically, to fight.
- DePue: Were these North Vietnamese or Viet Cong that you were fighting at this time?
- Lam: Mostly Viet Cong that were fighting with them.
- DePue: Okay, in his area.
- Lam: Yes.
- DePue: Did the, North Vietnamese, do you know that they have tanks and heavy equipment and artillery by this time?
- Lam: The locals, the land, farmers would, rumors, pass rumors that, that enemies were bringing in a lot of weapons, tanks, and ammunitions, reinforcements, so he realized they were pretty much outnumbered.
- DePue: How about the South Vietnamese Air Force? Was it able to fly and dominate the air like they always had before?
- Lam: He say, he didn't see any planes at that time at all at that time, very little support from the air.
- DePue: I know that President Thiệu is he resigned in April 21<sup>st</sup> of 1975, and that a lot of Vietnamese have hard feelings about President Thiệu as well. Can you explain that?
- Lam: Hope was all gone after they, you know, saw his resignation, he announced to, to the Vietnamese people. It was just pretty much, you know, light at the end of the tunnel was gone, was no hope left from him and his, his regiment.
- DePue: April 30<sup>th</sup> is the last day that the images of the Americans evacuating the embassy, from the top of the embassy building, and the country collapses. So, Mr. Pham, by the end of April, 1975, you have some important decisions to make. Many of the South Vietnamese units formally surrendered. What did you do that that time?
- Lam: He left, I guess, the fight, the city, went into the mountain, the hills, just to avoid the confrontation, and just to try to live a, you know, an elusive, quiet, secluded life away from military, from government.
- DePue: Did you have your family with you at that time?

Lam: He did not report, the Vietnamese soldiers were told to report to the new government, but he did not. Then he took his family and escaped and went into the mountains.

DePue: Do you think most, was your decision very different from what most South Vietnamese soldiers did?

Lam: There were a lot, I mean, he just, couldn't get there at the percentage, right now, but he said a lot of people who did what he did. The others were afraid to do it.

DePue: Were you afraid to do it?

Lam: Afraid to disappear, so they reported in instead of.

DePue: Why did you do it?

Lam: He did, he, he said he took a risk because he did not want to go to prison camp. He knew that if they caught, if he surrendered, they would put him to, to prison camp.

DePue: Where did the family go?

Lam: He said Binh Tuy Hàm Tân, I'm not familiar with that region of Vietnam.

DePue: I think we have a map of this as well, if we can take a quick look at that. I believe this would be the blue arrow.

Lam: Yes, yes.

DePue: How big was your family by this time?

Lam: Him, his wife, and his two kids went with him.

DePue: What did you do for a living, then? How did you survive?

Lam: Farming, planting, potatoes to eat off.

DePue: Didn't somebody already own that piece of land that you were using?

Lam: Just pick an empty piece of land and start farming.

DePue: I would guess that this was not good farmland, then?

Lam: It was very bad land, but they didn't have a choice.

DePue: Was any of it good enough for growing rice?

- Lam: Rice still grew, but not enough. The land wasn't, the soil wasn't good enough, so they had to eat off a lot of, the potatoes that they grew. Sweet potato mostly at that time.
- DePue: Now, certainly all of your neighbors in that area, weren't they asking all kinds of questions? How you, where you came from? What your background was?
- Lam: They, they were very, you know, elusive, they just kinda stay away from everybody, just stay out of sight. And then over time people just kinda ignore that they were there.
- DePue: Now I know somewhere in your story, you changed your name, and I believe you changed your, your birthday as well. Was this when that occurred?
- Lam: At that time, when he was just living off the land with his family, he didn't change his name or anything like that. However, one day, someone came, the government came and arrested him. He did not, he doesn't know who reported him to the local official at that time.
- DePue: That would be, was that 1976 when you were arrested?
- Lam: At the end of '75 when he was arrested.
- DePue: Where did they take you?
- Lam: To a prisoner camp.
- DePue: Did they interrogate you?
- Lam: When he was captured and back to camp, they made him, they interrogated him, not tortured, but write down what he, his background and so forth on a piece of paper, and he thought it was done. But then they took the paper, and hours later, a few hours later took him out and made him write that again, to see if it matches the first time, see if he was lying or not, basically. So they kept on doing that until they get the truth out of him.
- DePue: But at that, initially you were not tortured?
- Lam: No torture.
- DePue: Where was the camp?
- Lam: Binh Thuan.
- DePue: Okay, and we have a, a map of the location and, looking at the pictures of the camp itself. Does this look similar to your camp?
- Lam: It looks similar, but the walls they built were not that open. It was built by the metal, frame.

- DePue: Now we had already looked at pictures earlier. How would you explain the, the walls of the prison that you had?
- Lam: It was the, they used metal sheets that was used for building landing pads.
- DePue: Air strips.
- Lam: Air strips. It was so tall that they were not allowed to see outside, nor the outside were allowed to see in.
- DePue: Did they have barbed wire along the top of the, the wall?
- Lam: Both sides had barbed wires. Inside and outside of that, that wall. Oh, there were, observing towers to watch on them, look over them.
- DePue: Now, if, for those soldiers who surrendered at the end of the war like they were told to, were they taken, taken to the same kind of camps?
- Lam: They, those who surrendered reported to them and they were also taken to a different place, but he didn't, doesn't remember seeing it. However, life was a lot easier for those who surrendered than those who escaped like him, so.
- DePue: Was this a prison camp, or a reeducation camp, or one and the same?
- Lam: Same. One and the same.
- DePue: Who were the prisoners? Were they all former officers?
- Lam: They separated in, different groups, different areas in the same camp, but different areas depending on their ranks, and having area for also just civilian that were captured as well. So they were separated.
- DePue: And these were all, would these all be categorized as enemies of the state?
- Lam: Just, all, saw them as enemies of the state. They told him straight that, that you're not here to be reeducated. You are our prisoners.
- DePue: Mr. Pham, what I'd like to have you do now is in as much detail as you can, tell us what a typical day was like for you at the camp. I would suggest that you divide this into two or three sections here.
- Lam: Okay. At the beginning, they were giving about a handful, a bowl full of rice, but later on, a month or so later, they were not giving rice anymore. They were giving, some kind of potato that was really bitter taste, that wasn't anything good compared to what they were given at first. This is what they got in the morning early on after they were given breakfast, then they had to go into the fields and work in the fields, labor work, pretty much.
- DePue: What were the fields? Was it rice?

- Lam: Oh, plant cotton.
- DePue: Did they give you the right kind of tools?
- Lam: Just, everyone were given a, farm instrument to work. Just one per person.
- DePue: Then did you get a lunch?
- Lam: They were given half an hour lunch and, again, just a bowl of rice, plain rice. And then, after half an hour lunch, return back to the fields and work some more after returning from, you know, lunch, to work in the fields, depending who was in charge at that time. If they were kind then they would let them leave at four or five, go back, but some of them, if they don't, they didn't like they would make you work longer, and torture, well, wouldn't say torture, but make them do more labor work in the fields.
- DePue: And what was for supper meal?
- Lam: They, again, at night, they were given a small bowl of rice. And I asked him what were they given to drink, and they said they had to go down to the wells that were around the area on the camp and wait, at night, when the water goes up, a little bit, and then use a small tin can to scoop it out and try to get clean water, and then collect it in a little canteen so they can bring it back to share it with the rest.
- DePue: No vegetables, no fish, no meat?
- Lam: No. Little salt, just give them salt to sprinkle with the rice to eat for flavoring, that was it.
- DePue: So not a diet that anyone could be expected to work all day long and survive on, I would think.
- Lam: There were people that fainted or, you know, lost consciousness because they were not, given enough nutrition to survive, so, no.
- DePue: What happened for those who did faint, who those who got sick? Was there a hospital or clinic of any type?
- Lam: Those who got sick were sent back to the, this, their sleeping quarters and, and were helped by the, their colleagues. Sometimes they snuck, they had medication, medicine hidden in them and then they were able to help, but basically no hospital, no clinics.
- DePue: What happened in the evenings, then? Did you go back to the fields? Did you go to training, or classes?

- Lam: They, after the work in the field to come back, depending on the time they were allowed to come back, they were allowed to clean up themselves whatever way they could. Then at nine o'clock, 9 PM, they all had to gather together and then just kinda explain and talk about what the day was like, criticize one another. I don't know they did that, but pretty much summary of the day. They wanna study, they wanna understand what you're thinking at that time.
- DePue: Did they want you to confess crimes, or talk about how bad the old government was, or your hopes for the new communist government? What did they want to hear from you?
- Lam: They wanted to hear if they were fighters or not, if they were giving up the whole situation. They wanted to hear from, you know, from the, the prisoners, what did they do to get the little relief from a day's work. And if they told them that, "Oh, I had to stop working, take a little breath of fresh air," they said that's wrong. They said that you have to continue to work even though if you're exhausted, it's the way of, of life now. That you have to work, work, and work, and can't think of fun time, can't think of relaxation whatsoever.
- DePue: What were you being told when you'd be released? Were you not told that you'd ever get out?
- Lam: No promises, only thing is that you have to learn our ways, and there's hope for you if you follow our ways.
- DePue: Were you expected to, if you saw something bad, tell on your fellow prisoners?
- Lam: Him, personally, he never did it, but there were people that wanted to please the government control and they turned their colleagues in.
- DePue: What, was there any punishment in the camp?
- Lam: If you didn't follow their way, disobey them, they will lock you and put you out under the sun, and lock you in a little metal container storage. Let you enjoy the heat, I guess.
- DePue: A hot box.
- Lam: Yes, hot box.
- DePue: Did you ever experience that?
- Lam: He said he was one of the, one who kept his cool and didn't express any anger. Those who were put out there under the sun were those who could not keep their frustration and anger and more and they spoke out, you know, and that's when they were punished for that.

DePue: As a Catholic, did you get any special treatment?

Lam: No. No special treatment.

DePue: What were the, your prisoners, or the, the, those who ran the camp, what were they saying about, religion?

Lam: They were told that, this one kid, a legend says that this one kid who's starving, praying to God and religion to, you know, supreme being, bringing, provide food. Nothing came, no one came. But when he prayed to Ho Chi Minh, all of a sudden out of the blue, somebody came by with food supply. So they were brainwashed to think that way, that, that the government is above religion.

DePue: Can you tell me more about the kinds of things that they were telling in these classes that they would run at night?

Lam: He said the classes last about, last about an hour, hour and a half after they interrogated everybody and got the feel of what they were thinking. They all had to go to sleep. If they had to use the restroom, they had to raise their hand, and if they tried to do it without raising their hand or get permission, they would be hunted down and, and shot.

DePue: Hunted down and shot?

Lam: Yes.

DePue: Did many people die in that camp?

Lam: Yes, there were a lot of killings. They would, they would not bury the bodies, they would just put the bodies on the, on the barbed wires just to display that that's what happened if you were to escape or retaliate against.

DePue: And let the bodies just rot on the wires?

Lam: They left the body up there just to show them they, he said he remember asking if we can get a cover to cover up the body, out of respect. They were not allowed to do that. And then at night, they don't know what happened at night, they just took the body away after that. But they usually displayed for the whole day, for those to watch.

DePue: How much weight did you lose in this camp?

Lam: He wasn't even thinking about that. He doesn't remember keeping track of that at all.

DePue: Were you, if you were thinking about food, what food were you dreaming about? Wishing you had?



Lam: Anything that comes to mind, especially when he was out working the fields, he would see little kids walking by with a small, with a small fruit in his hand, that's when they start craving for that. But there was nothing they could, could have done.

DePue: Did you have any contact with your family during that time?

Lam: At least six months he lost contact completely with his family.

DePue: Did they move or did they stay in that same area?

Lam: They moved, him and his, his, colleagues, the prisoners from different camps, from time to time, so they just kinda moved, relocate them from different areas.

DePue: Oh, from camp to camp?

Lam: Yeah.

DePue: Oh. How about your family? Did your family stay in the same place?

Lam: They stayed at same, original area where he was, was caught.

DePue: Well, you obviously were released. When were you released and why?

Lam: He, he was released between '67, '66, '67.

DePue: Oh, '76.

Lam: I'm sorry, the other way, yeah. The reason was UTI. He had UTI, he was, blood was coming out when he was urinating, and his feet were swelling up.

DePue: Okay, here, you're, you're talking like a doctor now.

Lam: Sorry, yeah, that was the reason he was released. He was, very sick, very ill, just not able to use the restroom.

DePue: So what is UTI?

Lam: Oh, kidney problems. Urinary tract infection.

DePue: Okay.

Lam: Yes.

DePue: So, you were released because you were no longer able to work?

Lam: Oh, he was no able, no longer able to work because of the illness that he had. And they worried that, reputation might spread, I don't know why, but,

reputation that they're, they're torturing prisoner, letting him die because of an illness. So they released him.

DePue: What did that feel like, when you got released?

Lam: He was happy that there's a chance that he could get treated for his condition, and there's a chance that he could live and see his family again.

DePue: Did you get together with your family right away after being released?

Lam: As soon as he was released, they gave him a little money to get a ticket to see his family, to return to his family right away by himself. There was, he was not escorted with any, by anyone.

DePue: Was your wife able to recognize you when you first met?

Lam: Yes, she was able to recognize him right away.

DePue: How had you changed because of that experience in the prison camp?

Lam: He learned from that, after that, reeducation camp, prison, that you should not express your feelings, you should keep it inside, should not be up front with how you really feel. Express whatever they wanted to hear, not what you really think.

DePue: What I'd like to do here, you've got a couple documents.

Lam: Yes.

DePue: You have one document that you were given at the time that you were released, and show that up on the screen here as well. And Patrick, if you can explain what this is and how, the information that's on here, because what it is, is basically instructions to who, the government officials wherever you go, of what you're expected to do, as I understand.

Lam: Yes, the first page you're looking at is just the release paper from the prison or reeducation camp. It says the date and where he was released. On the second one, says that the rules he has to follow. Once released, he's not free to go anywhere he wanted to go. He has to report to city official at, at any village or province that he attends, that he has to follow the rules, and, this is not, it's not a passport he can, where he can just freely, you know, roam the land. and then people are supposed to observe him wherever he goes, make sure he follows the new form of government, doesn't violate his, his, I guess this would be sort of like a parole paper. It doesn't allow you to free, sort of like a house arrest, where he has to present, report to every, every city official.

DePue: You also kept a document from your graduation from the advanced camp. And these are the only two documents, or one of few documents that you have

from this timeframe. Why did you keep these two documents as long as you did?

Lam: He kept these, but he kept it hidden away, there was another paper that he received that was kept by his friends, not by him. And they gave him later, when he requested it.

DePue: Because to be able to find it would get him in trouble?

Lam: Yes, absolutely correct.

DePue: I know you went back, you found your wife and, and started life again. Did you stay in that area?

Lam: After a year of living there, with that whole year, he didn't feel at peace. They made him report, frequent reports to the city official. His health was declining, so he decided to elude the government again and disappear.

DePue: Is that when the name change occurred?

Lam: Yes, that was when he decided to change his identity to avoid further detection from the government.

DePue: Isn't that a huge risk that you're taking at that time?

Lam: He said he was, life was so bad and miserable that he didn't care. Anything was better than just staying in that, that status quo. So he wasn't thinking of the risks, he was just, wanting to get out of that situation.

DePue: And were you, for that year after you were released, were you able to do any kind of work?

Lam: He said his health got better after he was returning home, but he couldn't work for that whole year back home, because of his, his health condition. But it improved because of better living standards, food, water, so it helped his kidney, so over time it improved. And then when he got healthier that's when he decided to, to disappear.

DePue: During that one year were you expected to do community service as well, of some type?

Lam: Yeah, he was still forced to go and work and to help, help rebuild the city, digging, you know, river, trench, planting things like that for the government.

DePue: Well, I think this is, we've been at this for quite a while, so this is probably a logical place to stop for today, and we'll continue what's a fascinating story and, I'm sure, in some cases, very difficult for us to, for you to be bringing back these memories. I appreciate your willingness to tell these stories, and

we'll pick this up in another session. Thank you very much, Mr. Pham. And thank you.

End of Session 1

## Interview with Pham Thein Khoc

# IM-V-L-2015-006.02

Interview # 2: March 2, 2015

Interviewer: Mark DePue

Interpreter: Patrick Lam

DePue: Welcome. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. And today I'm with Pham Thein Khoc. I think I got close to being right, is that correct?

Lam: Yes.

DePue: And I'm also with Patrick Lam. This is part two of our interview about Mr. Pham's experiences as both an officer in the Vietnamese Army and his long saga of living in Vietnam after the war and eventually escaping, becoming a refugee, and finding his way, finding your way to the United States. Today is Monday, March 2, 2015, just one week after we started this, so that's pretty good as far as we're concerned. Last time we talked, Mr. Pham, you had been released and you're living with your wife, and you're constantly being, what's the right word. The police are very interested, they're constantly checking up on you, is that correct?

Lam: Yes.

- DePue: What I want to start with, then, today, is in 1978, your decision to change your identity and move.
- Lam: Mr. Pham said that after being released, the government continued to monitor him, force him to do labor, free labor, for them, so he saw that was no future there, so he decided to change his identity to find some other means to escape.
- DePue: What would happen to you if they found out that you changed your identity and tried to hide from them?
- Lam: For sure they would be back in prison if he was caught.
- DePue: That's a huge risk for you to take, was it not?
- Lam: He said that's a risk he was willing to take at that time because of his health, the way they put him through it, you know, the labor that he was putting him through. So the risk was worth the freedom that he was looking for.
- DePue: What did you change your name to?
- Lam: His name, he changed his name to Thein Pham.
- DePue: So just changed one letter of your, your first name?
- Lam: He changed, yes he did, and also the date of birth was changed.
- DePue: So you changed your date of birth from what to what?
- Lam: He changed it to January 31, 1939.
- DePue: From 1944?
- Lam: Yes, from 1944.
- DePue: Did you also move the family?
- Lam: Yes, he left, he took his family to another province called Cà Mau.
- DePue: What's the province name?
- Khoc: C-A-M-A-U.
- Lam: C-A-M-A-U he said the province he went to.
- DePue: Now I have a map here. I might have gotten this wrong. I thought he had moved to, you had moved to Bạc Liêu.
- Lam: Oh, it's a smaller part of Cà Mau. Cà Mau is a bigger city.

- DePue: So is the red arrow the correct location for this? It would be west of Saigon?
- Lam: Actually, the blue arrow all the way down.
- DePue: So that's where you first moved. Did you know anybody in that area?
- Lam: Not a person.
- DePue: So how does somebody move to that area, don't all of the neighbors wonder where you came from and what your story is?
- Lam: He said that at the same time, luckily, there was a flood in the area, so he used that as an excuse that he was one of the victims of the flood, so he went for safety.
- DePue: What did you do for a living then?
- Lam: He worked cheap labor, digging trenches, just planting sugar canes to help the locals. In return they paid him rice just to eat for the food.
- DePue: Now one of the reasons that you wanted to flee or change your identity in the first place, I thought, is because your health was very poor.
- Lam: He said he had to work because if he didn't work and find a job, how would they feed, how would he feed his family? So he did what he could just to get enough to go by.
- DePue: Was your wife working as well?
- Lam: She helped the farmers sell pineapples, sugar cane, there was available back then just make, you know, a little money here and there.
- DePue: How many children did you have at that time?
- Lam: Only two kids at that time. He didn't have a third child until 1979, so it was just the two children.
- DePue: Were you gradually regaining your strength now that you're on a better diet at this time?
- Lam: He said later years after he left, he did regain his strength and his health slowly.
- DePue: How long did it take before you were back, what you would say, one hundred percent of your strength, that you were healthy again?
- Lam: About, it took him about eight, nine, nine and a half years to gain all of his health back.

DePue: Would you say there are still health things that had, that you're still suffering from because of that experience in the prison camp?

Lam: Yes, he did. He was eating whatever that was available in that camp. The result of that was, because him to have some lung issues, problems.

DePue: Continued to this day?

Lam: To this day, yes.

DePue: Now, I know that after a while, you decided to move the family back to the Saigon area. Is that correct?

Lam: He said about 1985, that was when he realized that the government were investigating or checking on the locals where he was staying at the time. So around '85, 1985, that's when he decided to move back to Saigon to avoid.

DePue: Just him or the entire family?

Lam: The whole family, so in other words, running away from the government searching for him.

DePue: When you were living in Bạc Liêu, did a lot of the people that lived in that area, were they sympathetic to the new government, or did most people just keep their mouths shut about what was going on?

Lam: It was complete silence. No one could say anything, or wanted to say anything about the government.

DePue: Why? Because you didn't know who you could trust?

Lam: He couldn't trust anyone at that time.

DePue: How large was your family when you moved back to Saigon?

Lam: Three, total of three kids and his wife.

DePue: It wasn't Saigon at that time. It was Ho Chi Minh City, it is still Ho Chi Minh City. As far as you're considered, is it Ho Chi Minh City or Saigon?

Lam: In his heart and mind, he still likes Saigon. He doesn't like the new name, Ho Chi Minh.

DePue: But I would imagine you can't dare call it Saigon after you move back to that area, can you?

Lam: The locals still like to use Saigon at that time. Only if you communicate with the government officials then you were forced to use Ho Chi Minh. But

behind closed doors and in villages and small homes, they still used the name Saigon.

DePue: What did you do for a living after you moved back?

Lam: He had to switch from farming to selling sawdust and tree barks just to make a living.

DePue: What was the market for sawdust? Why did people want sawdust?

Lam: It's a way to use for cooking, to start fire, kindles to start fire.

DePue: Where did you get the sawdust?

Lam: They had to travel at least a day in a canoe to go up to near the mountain to trees and then collect the sawdust and bring it back to Saigon.

DePue: So you were actually harvesting trees and grating the sawdust yourself?

Lam: He was the one to cut the trees, but he went up there and then they bought wholesale sawdust, and bring it back.

DePue: This is at a time when communism is already deeply rooted. Was it the government providing jobs for everybody?

Lam: There was no jobs that's offered by the government. You just had to find your own way to survive, anything that's out there.

DePue: By this time you said you had three children?

Lam: Yes.

DePue: What was your hope for your future and for your children's future in Vietnam at that time? What did you see as their future would be?

Lam: No hope at the time. Just live day by day, survive.

DePue: Even for your children?

Lam: Yes, even for his children.

DePue: I know that your daughter, Cory, was born in 1988, is that correct?

Lam: Yes.

DePue: So she's the fourth child?

Lam: Cory is the youngest one, the fourth one, born into 1988.



- DePue: Was it a little bit easier? Did you live a little bit better once you moved back to Saigon?
- Lam: He said pretty much the same. The biggest challenge was to avoid socializing with city officials, anybody like that that has to do with the government, just to kind of stay out of sight, plain sight.
- DePue: Did your neighbors, then did you feel more comfortable to talk about your feelings about the government with your neighbors, or still very much reserved and quiet about that?
- Lam: Yes, still avoiding, still not discussing the new government with neighbors or friends at that time.
- DePue: Now, you were raised a Catholic, correct?
- Lam: Yes, he was raised a Catholic.
- DePue: Were you still practicing your Catholic religion?
- Lam: Rarely did he get a chance to do that, but whenever during his travel to get the supplies to sell, the wholesale, if he runs into churches, then he'll stop it, but rarely did that happen.
- DePue: So there were still churches in South Vietnam at that time?
- Lam: Yes, there were still churches, but, again, he was trying to stay away from spotlight as much as possible.
- DePue: Did the government, then, check on people going to churches quite often? Did they discourage going to church, being religious?
- Lam: He personally was avoiding all that interaction with the government. He doesn't know, still now know how the government would handle that at that time.
- DePue: A couple hard questions, then. You're living in a society where you fear to talk about your true feelings. Do your children, at this time, know about your history, and do you talk about your feelings about the government with your children?
- Lam: He said he didn't discuss with his kids, but when the kids came back from school, the new, you know, educated with the new form of government, he kinda just let it slide and didn't go into details, and didn't express his view, what he thinks, what he thought about that at that time.
- DePue: Well then it sounds like the children were being exposed to, what we might call, some indoctrination at school?

- Lam: Yes. They were taught, educated the new way of life.
- DePue: So how did you know who to trust and who not to trust?
- Lam: Only person he could trust was his wife, nobody else.
- DePue: That leads, then, to your decision, I understand, Cory's born in 1988. Four children. Sounds like you're barely surviving. What because you to decide, in 1989, to leave the country?
- Lam: It was basically living in fear all that time. Any sight, if he caught sight of a city official walking through town, because fear in him, so that was the decision that he just had to go and find ways to find a better life.
- DePue: It's one thing to decide you have to leave the country, it's another thing to decide how you're going to do that. And then you have to trust some people, I would think, as you go through that. How did you find the people that you knew you could trust?
- Lam: He had to, I guess, hear from word of mouth that this person could be trusted, and then it came around to him that yes, you could trust this person. They had to agree that, make a deal that help him to go to Cambodia once he's over there, then the money that he left behind would be given to the right people that helped him escape. So it was an arrangement that was made.
- DePue: So had to pay money to do this?
- Lam: Yes.
- DePue: You decided that you wanted to take your son as well, your oldest son. Why?
- Lam: His plan was that, to get the oldest one, would go to a free country, get educated, make enough money and then come back and try to help rescue the family.
- DePue: Did you ever consider trying to take the entire family with you?
- Lam: A couple of things. One was that it was a risky trip, or journey, so he did not want to take the whole family and put everybody at risk. Number two was he didn't have the money to pay for the whole family to go.
- DePue: Did you know of other people in your neighborhood who suddenly disappeared one day?
- Lam: He didn't pay attention because, again, he himself was trying to hide and stay away from socializing with everybody, just to keep quiet.

- DePue: Did you ever hear of other people in your neighborhood who were suddenly arrested by the authorities and taken back to prison?
- Lam: He doesn't recall just because he was trying to stay away.
- DePue: Mr. Pham, what I'd like you to do now is describe how you got from Saigon to Cambodia in detail.
- Lam: He was told by the party that arranged the escape to meet at night, and then within an hour of meeting, they all got on a bus, and the bus went through the border of Vietnam and Cambodia. And he didn't know how they made the arrangement, but he was sure that it was through some kind of payment for the government, or for the gatekeeper, to let them through, go over the border.
- DePue: Who was the person you were arranging with?
- Lam: They didn't give details of who these people were. All he knew was that they promised they will make the arrangement for him to escape the country. He didn't ask.
- DePue: You've got to be thinking at the time, "I wonder if this is a government agent, if I'm giving money to somebody and then he's just gonna take me and arrest me."
- Lam: He was very afraid that this would be an undercover city official, but there wasn't any other option. And he thought that, well, they promised him that they wouldn't take the money until he's arrived to his destination, then they'll start collecting the money. So that was one of the reasons why he trusted them.
- DePue: Destination in Cambodia, or in, right at the border?
- Lam: He said the destination was in Thailand.
- DePue: So the money would only be paid once they got to Thailand.
- Lam: Thailand. And then he would send some kind of symbol, some kind of secret to let the people know he's got there, and then they'll give the money to the party.
- DePue: I'd like to have us show the map here of Vietnam, because I wanted to illustrate where the border crossing was. And I think it was where the green arrow is, is that correct?
- Lam: Yes, that's correct.
- DePue: How did you get from Saigon to that particular province? Châu Đốc Province?

- Lam: Yes, by the bus it was arranged.
- DePue: When you left Saigon and you started this journey with your oldest son, were you afraid you'd never see the rest of your family again?
- Lam: It was, he thought about it a lot, and it was a risk he was willing to take at that time.
- DePue: How big, how many people went across the border with you?
- Lam: He didn't know. All he knew was that, "I just get on the bus, and then hopefully we get there safely."
- DePue: I would assume that many of the people who crossed the border in Cambodia were just going there for business, that they weren't trying to escape Vietnam, is that correct?
- Lam: He thought, you know, the thinking was that just a lot of them were salesman going back and forth, working, business trips.
- DePue: Now, as I understand, Cambodia is an occupied country, it's controlled by Vietnam at this time, is that correct?
- Lam: Yes. Correct.
- DePue: So did you feel any safer once you got to Cambodia?
- Lam: Again, it was just a risk. The fear was there all the time. And he could, any minute, think that he could have been arrested for it.
- DePue: Had you heard about the, what Americans call the killing fields, what happened to Cambodia after the end of the Vietnam War, with maybe one to two million Cambodians being killed by Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge? Had you heard about that?
- Lam: He's heard about it, but he didn't see during his journey over there. His trip was just wherever they took him, he'd be happy just to get away.
- DePue: It sounds like the entire trip was arranged. What happened after you crossed the border in Cambodia? What next?
- Lam: When he got there, the arrangement was for them to go on a boat in the middle of the night, then that's when they sailed to Thailand from that point.
- DePue: But were you on the ocean? Or on the, I thought you'd gone to Phnom Penh.
- Lam: There was a trip in between on the first bus to the boat, they had to change to another bus to go to another part of Cambodia before they got transported on a boat.

DePue: So you never went to Phnom Penh?

Lam: They stayed in Phnom Penh for one night.

DePue: So was the trip to Phnom Penh on boat or on a bus?

Lam: It was on a bus.

DePue: And then once at Phnom Penh, you got on a boat?

Lam: From Phnom Penh, they went to another small province. From that province, that's when they got onto the boat.

DePue: So when you got on the boat, was that on the ocean, or was that on the rivers?

Lam: It was in the ocean already.

DePue: Oh, okay. Where did you, where did you land in Thailand, then?

Lam: It was a small island. He doesn't recall the name in Thailand.

DePue: Tell me about the boat. How many people were on the boat?

Lam: Total of fifty-one passenger, and made of wood. It's a wooden boat.

DePue: How big was the boat?

Lam: About eleven, twelve meters in length, and maximum of two meters in width.

DePue: So this is a very crowded boat.

Lam: He said he was very weak at that time, so they put him where the motors, so everybody was pretty much packed in, it was small.

DePue: How long were you on the water?

Lam: One, about one day and one night.

DePue: Okay. So not a very long trip, then.

Lam: Not a long trip, but again, he can't seem to recall the name of the island that he stayed at.

DePue: Okay. What were your emotions during that time on that boat?

Lam: His biggest fear was being attacked by pirates and shot down by Thailand government.

DePue: Shut down?

Lam: He was afraid of being shot down, yes, sink.

DePue: Shut down or shot down?

Lam: Shot. Shot.

DePue: Sunk.

Lam: Sunk. Yes.

DePue: I thought Thailand was the place they were trying to get to, though.

Lam: He said that people heard in the news that Thailand would sink boats, and that's how he heard, so that was a fear. The rumor was, I guess was going around, that boat people would get sunk.

DePue: While on that boat, did you feel free to finally talk about your feelings about the Vietnamese government?

Lam: He said he couldn't say anything, he was afraid to say anything because, again, didn't know where they were headed.

DePue: Well, you got to an island. What happened after you got to this island, which, I assume, the island was Thai territory?

Lam: Big sense of relief once he boarded the island because at least that's knowing that he's already out the country, made it to his destination.

DePue: What then?

Lam: He said the island was inhabited by locals, but they were dropped at a location where there was nobody there, and they had to, the next morning, they had to go just scout the area to find coconuts, whatever they could find to find to feed off.

DePue: That wasn't quite what was expected.

Lam: Yeah.

DePue: Tell me then, how, what happened to get from this island to the refugee camp?

Lam: After three, four days on that spot where they were dropped off, officials from the camp came to take them back to their refugee camp.

DePue: What was the refugee's camp's name?

Khoc: L-A-N-G-N-G-O-P.

Lam: L-A-N-G, and then another word is, N-G-O-U-C, or U-P. Sorry.

DePue: N-G-O-P?

Lam: N-G-O-P.

DePue: Okay. I thought it, was this in Phanat Nikhom Province?

Lam: After a month on that, in that camp, that's when they got to go to the other location.

DePue: So this was, this Lang Ngop was only one month. Was that right on the border between Cambodia and Thailand?

Lam: It's deep into Thailand territory.

DePue: What happened at this first camp? What did they do with you?

Lam: The whole month they fed them bowl of rice with broth that's made out of, that's salt, which is pretty much just salt content, use that to eat the rice with.

DePue: Who ran that camp?

Lam: He said he didn't know, just that a group of people that worked for the city official, or the government and just kept them.

DePue: Government of Thailand?

Lam: Thailand, yes.

DePue: Did you see any Caucasians? Did you see any UN officials there?

Lam: All Thailand.

DePue: This doesn't sound much better than the prison camp.

Lam: Living condition was the same, but the morale to him and people who got there was a lot different, a lot better. There was hope now.

DePue: What happened then that because you to move to this other camp?

Lam: There was no reason except that once the Lang Ngop was full, then they transferred the whole group to a different camp.

DePue: Was life different at this new camp, at the Phanat Nikhom camp?

Lam: A lot better. More freedom, better food they were provided with, so definitely it was better for him.

DePue: How would you describe the camp? Let's start with your living quarters.

- Lam: They were divided this cement floor, and tents were built depending on the number of people in the group. There wasn't real tent, it was just plastic sheets that was put up to divide sections. If you had big family, then you would have bigger space, if smaller, then you were given a smaller space.
- DePue: It sounds like there had been entire families that were able to flee together when they left Vietnam, then.
- Lam: There were bigger families than compared to him.
- DePue: Were there also Cambodians who were there as well, that had fled Cambodia?
- Lam: Yes. Cambodians were also in the camp as well. Refugee.
- DePue: Laotians?
- Lam: Yes, Laotians too. I'm not sure, English translation, **haomum**. There were other people from different tribes in the mountains in Vietnam also were there too.
- DePue: No Montagnards? That's the tribe that Americans know about Vietnam. And I know there's tribal groups in Laos as well, so sounds like a little bit of everything.
- Lam: Yes.
- DePue: What was your diet like once you got to that camp?
- Lam: Every week they would portion a certain amount of food. Rice was plentiful back then, at that point, but they were given two small pieces, maybe a few inches of chicken, and two small fish they had to eat for the week.
- DePue: Were you able to have gardens of your own, or anything like that?
- Lam: No, they were not allowed to have gardens.
- DePue: Who ran the camp?
- Lam: It was a leader, there was assigned just one person that was in charge of the camp from the government.
- DePue: Is this a Thai official, then, who ran the camp?
- Lam: Yes, he said it was a Thai official.
- DePue: Were there UN representatives there?
- Lam: Yes, there were United Nations there too.



DePue: What was your expectations, then, once you got there? That you would be there for a short period of time, and that the UN officials would help you go someplace else? What did you think?

Lam: The rumors that went around that time was that the immigrants were shutting down from going to other countries. They were actually sending people back, but he still had hope that they would still allow him and the people in the camp to be going to other parts of the world.

DePue: The Thai government was sending people back to Vietnam.

Lam: The rumor was they're, yeah, they're shutting down borders, they're shutting down people from fleeing the country, so that was the fear, but the hope was still there, that he'd still be sent.

DePue: What I'd like to do here is look at a couple pictures. The one on the left is obviously you, Mr. Pham, and your son. Your son's name?

Khoc: **Hui Pham.**

Lam: **Hui Pham.**

DePue: And this is your family at that same time back in Vietnam, so those are the three younger children, is that correct?

Lam: Yes, that was the family back then.

DePue: What happened to your family when the officials suddenly discovered you were gone and your son was gone?

Lam: They were forced to pay fines for his escape.

DePue: But the family didn't have any money.

Lam: They were forced to pay, and the family had to borrow money from friends, close friends to pay up, otherwise they would constantly harass them.

DePue: What did your wife do for, to survive for a living after you left?

Lam: They had to go and try to sell drinks and try to make floor mats to live off that.

DePue: Did you have any contact with your family?

Lam: No contact whatsoever.

DePue: How long before they found out that you actually were successful to get to Thailand?

- Lam: Three to four months after he arrived safely, the person, the head of the person that arranged the journey, took this little password that he had, bring back to his family to let them know that he made it safely. So there was a code that they had, made an arrangement with the family.
- DePue: Wow. While you were in this camp, you were there for quite a long time, for several years, correct?
- Lam: Three to four years at the new camp.
- DePue: Were you able to work there? Were you able to make any money while you were in the camp?
- Lam: He had relatives in France, and once in a while they would send a hundred francs here and there back to the camp for them to live off.
- DePue: Was it your hope that you would be able to rejoin your relatives in France at that time?
- Lam: His hope was to go to America, thinking that only Americans would help save him and those people who were involved in the war, back in the Vietnam War.
- DePue: Why America and not France? I guess you answered it, but I'm still curious.
- Lam: His hope was that America had direct connection with the war, that was one. Number two was France didn't have anything to do with the war at that time, from his perspective, so that's why he was hoping that America would reach out to rescue him.
- DePue: Did you have a job while on the camp? What did you do to keep busy while you were in that camp?
- Lam: To keep busy he and other people, adults, volunteered to help educate the younger refugees that were there from Vietnam, help them with their school and keep them with math, but they had to do it behind close door because the Thai government didn't want them to do any education.
- DePue: Why wouldn't the Thai government want you to do that?
- Lam: They were not allowed. He just didn't know why it was not allowed. It was forbidden.
- DePue: It sounds like the Thai government did not like the existence of this camp.
- Lam: The Thai officials, government was not very friendly to Vietnamese refugees. Later on, when he came here he heard those who were in the country in Thai were not allowed to become citizens of Thai either, so there was a little.

- DePue: Was the, where did the food and supplies come from? Was that from the Thai government, or was that from international organizations?
- Lam: Most of the food were given by international organizations, but they had to go through the Thai officials before they got their camp.
- DePue: Well does that mean the Thai officials took their cut?
- Lam: He said obviously, yes, that's for sure.
- DePue: At what time then did you start to hear, or international officials start to talk to you about the next step? How long were you there before people came to start talking to you about what would happen after this camp?
- Lam: He said after three, four years, they renamed that camp that he was staying, he's been staying, a detention camp.
- DePue: It became a detention camp?
- Lam: Yep. That's what the announcement was, so no one was allowed to come in, so I think he's saying that's to deter more refugees from coming in, on board, and after that he was transferred to another camp.
- DePue: What was the name of the new camp?
- Lam: He doesn't remember the name of that camp, but it was north of that original camp, and it took a day on a bus to get there.
- DePue: Was this better conditions at this new camp?
- Lam: It was better as far as freedom to kinda wander around within the camp. The food was still the same, not any better, but still the feeling was better.
- DePue: But you've been in Thailand for three, four years. It sounds like you've made little progress to go anywhere else. You had to be feeling like nobody wanted you.
- Lam: Still very afraid. He heard that they shut down a lot of the camps and sent people back to Vietnam. His fear was if he would go back, he would go to prison again. So still live in fear at that time.
- DePue: So what happens next?
- Lam: After two years at the new camp, news spread that from the US Embassy, for those refugees who were willing to go back to Vietnam, once back in Vietnam, the US Embassy will have officials sent there to help them get papers and get sponsorship to go to America. That was the news at that time.
- DePue: Was there an option?

Lam: They had an option to stay, but both options were pretty much unpredictable, so they, he said, whichever at the time, he made that decision.

DePue: That's a tough decision to make, isn't it?

Lam: Yes, he says very tough. He said he had an incident where he got really depressed, didn't wanna, you know, didn't see there's any hope to stay at the camp, so he registered, he signed, he's one of those who signed to go back to Vietnam. But somehow paper got lost and he didn't know what happened after there.

DePue: At this, by this time had UN officials met with you? Had Americans met with you to talk to you about this?

Lam: They said they had an official that came to the camp and just made a general announcement, that you have a deadline to make your decision to go back to Vietnam. So he didn't know who it was.

DePue: No individual conversations?

Lam: No, no individual conversation.

DePue: When did you go back to Vietnam then?

Lam: After, total time right now, after six and a half years, didn't hear anything, he checked, found out that there were a lot of people like him were given tickets, airline tickets to go back, except for him and his son. So he didn't get to go and he was very depressed and almost giving up, so that's why ended still staying at the camp at that time.

DePue: But eventually you did go back to Vietnam, correct?

Lam: After six and a half years, finally he was called to go and interview with the Viet Cong, the VC. They interviewed him to see if he's qualified to go back.

DePue: Wait a minute. The Viet Cong?

Lam: Yes. They said, yeah, they had Viet Cong officials to interview.

DePue: You mean Vietnamese officials?

Lam: Well he called them Viet Cong at that time to interview him to go back. I confirmed that he said that's what they called them at that time.

DePue: That's not what they called themselves, though.

Lam: He didn't have any feeling toward them at that time. All in his eyes was they were Viet Cong.

- DePue: These people came to the camps in Thailand, or is this after he got back to Vietnam he had this conversation?
- Lam: They came to his camp to interview him. His biggest problem was the name that he had. So he had the original and the new name, so he had to contact some official to get rid of the old name, to give him the new name, new identity.
- DePue: Contact an official in Vietnam?
- Lam: Oh, he had to contact the official on the camp, at the campsite to tell them that this is not his, you know, to switch, get that new name and his new identity on the camp.
- DePue: It sounds then that you created new identification papers for your new name and your new birth date, is that correct?
- Lam: Yes. Correct.
- DePue: This keeps getting more interesting. And what did you think your chances were going back to Vietnam? Were you confident that the Americans would now work with you to get to the United States when you went back to Vietnam?
- Lam: He wasn't sure at all. He didn't have a belief that the US would come and sponsor him over. His only hope was that the new name he was given, the new identity, that would free him from his past. And he could use that to, you know, have a different future to survive.
- DePue: What do you think would've happened to you if you had gone back with your old name, your original name and identity?
- Lam: Hundred percent sure he would be put back to camp, or prison.
- DePue: What do you remember about – this had been six and a half years since you'd seen your family. Your children were from here, now to here. What was it like being reunited with your family?
- Lam: Big difference, but very happy. He remembered his youngest one was only six months.
- DePue: Well we've got a couple pictures here. You and your son in Thailand, and the earlier picture he was much younger than this picture. He's taller than you now. And that's Cory, your youngest daughter, in Vietnam. What strikes me about that picture on the right is there's a Christmas tree in the background. Were they, was the family allowed to celebrate Christmas by that time?
- Lam: That was in a church in Vietnam, at the Vietnam church.

- DePue: Well, you're now back, this is 1998 when you're back in Vietnam?
- Lam: Yes, '98.
- DePue: What did you do now?
- Lam: He went up to the mountains, start farming, planting coffee seeds and just to avoid being close contact with big city folks.
- DePue: Did your entire family go to Lâm Đồng?
- Lam: Just him, just Mr. Pham.
- DePue: This is an awful long time to be looking over your shoulder and wondering what your future's going to be. This is, like, fifteen, twenty years now you've been living like this. What's your emotions during that time then?
- Lam: He had to live in constant fear that, always worried every day that he might be back in prison. And if it did happen again, he would definitely not make it out because of his, his age and his health.
- DePue: But at this time, you have to let the officials know where you're at, or otherwise the Americans would never find you to work with you, is that correct?
- Lam: He, luckily he had his oldest, older son that went with him, he stayed in Saigon. He helped stay connected with the paperwork and so forth. It was just him that went away.
- DePue: Do you remember any meetings with American officials talking about your paperwork, and talking about the plans to leave the country?
- Lam: He first got the announcement that they wanted to interview him at the US Embassy, June or July, August of '98. When he first heard that, he didn't believe that at all it was true. It was the second time that they called him back for an interview that he was almost sure now that he was able to go.
- DePue: Does that mean you went to the US Embassy in Saigon?
- Lam: Yes, he had to go back to Saigon, it's called foreign minister, ministry.
- DePue: Consulate?
- Lam: Consulate, probably consulate.
- DePue: Okay. What did they tell you at that meeting?
- Lam: At the second interview he was interviewed by a Vietnamese official that worked for the US government. That person promised him that this is between

you and me, and at that point he was still very worried, afraid that this might be a trick to get him to say, but finally he gave in and told the truth.

DePue: The truth about his other identity?

Lam: Well, his, yeah, they asked him about his past. Yes. He gave his true identity at the time when he felt that he could trust that person.

DePue: Was this an American citizen of Vietnamese background, or a Vietnamese official.

Lam: Yes, he was from America. American citizens came back to interview. Vietnamese, American-Vietnamese.

DePue: Wow. Once again, wow. Describe, then, leaving Vietnam and coming to America.

Lam: He couldn't express in words how happy he was, the whole family, when he got the news that they were allowed to go to America. He was especially happy that, to think that Americans still thought about the soldiers that were left behind, so he was very happy that they didn't forget him completely.

DePue: Was there any regret that you're leaving the country of your birth, and the culture and the, you know, the place you spent your life?

Lam: No regrets at all.

DePue: At this time, you took your entire family, correct?

Lam: He left behind his oldest son, who was, passed beyond the age that they allowed to go with the family, so he, the oldest son were, stayed behind, had to stay behind for that.

DePue: Did the oldest son want to stay behind?

Lam: He said his oldest son was, mentally was just confused, lost, didn't know where he was supposed to go, so he just decided to stay, didn't want to come.

DePue: He decided to stay?

Lam: The son, the oldest son decided to stay.

DePue: Is he still there today?

Lam: The family helped when he decided to come over, but he's okay where he's at right now.

DePue: Did you have sponsors in the United States?

Lam: The sponsor was a Catholic church that sponsored him.

DePue: How did you get from Vietnam to the United States?

Lam: Flew a plane to Los Angeles.

DePue: How did you feel then when you first landed in the United States?

Lam: Fear is gone, very happy, very peaceful.

DePue: What were your first impressions of the United States?

Lam: His only worries were how do I start my life in this new country, but besides that, it was just filled with joy that he's no longer under communism control.

DePue: Did you stay in Los Angeles for a while then?

Lam: He didn't stay very much, just a trip to transfer over, just at the airport, and then they transferred to another plane to Utah.

DePue: Salt Lake City?

Lam: Yes, Salt Lake City.

DePue: Why Salt Lake City?

Lam: Because his sponsor was in Salt Lake City.

DePue: The sponsor, Catholics?

Lam: Yes, Catholic church.

DePue: Okay. The center of the Latter-day Saint church, got a Catholic church in Salt Lake City. That's interesting. That's ironic, I think. Do you remember your first meal then, once you got, got there?

Lam: He said first time it was hard for him to eat meat, it was a lot of meat. He had a steak and a burger, and he had difficulty trying to eat that after, not used to that kind of food.

DePue: Did you like it?

Lam: It took him a while to get used to that new food.

DePue: Once in Salt Lake City, where did you live?

Lam: After a while, the church, when he got there, the church rented him a place to live, and then within a month he got a job at the airport, Utah airport, working



cargo, in the back of the cargo just organizing utensils for airlines to bring up for flights.

DePue: Was your wife working at this time?

Lam: His wife got a job at a Vietnamese restaurant.

DePue: How about the children? How did the children adjust to their brand new life in the United States? I assume they were going to school.

Lam: They adapted right away to the schools. They went to school while they were working. They didn't miss much of Vietnam.

DePue: Did they know any English when they first got here?

Lam: Not a word.

DePue: How quickly did they learn the English language?

Lam: He doesn't remember. He said that he doesn't remember how long, but a lot quicker than the adults, but he did learn English at that time, too.

DePue: Did you know, how much English did you know when you came to the United States?

Lam: Majority of the time, he could read the language, understood it, but speaking the language was difficult.

DePue: You seem to understand English better than you speak English, would that be correct?

Lam: Yes, that is correct.

DePue: Did you take any English as a second language classes?

Lam: He took a little bit, but the problem was trying to make a living, so he had to be out there working instead of schooling.

DePue: Okay. Did you enjoy the work you did?

Lam: He liked it a lot because it was a new experience, could socialize, and freedom of speech now for him.

DePue: Did you feel that there was ever any discrimination against you or your family being here?

Lam: He didn't feel any of that sense, felt very welcome from the Americans.

DePue: Did it surprise you how Americans in general treated you?

- Lam: He was very emotional, very touched, the way he was kindly treated by the Americans. At his workplace he realized he had trouble understanding the language, communicating, but they were very welcoming and helped him every step of the way.
- DePue: Mr. Pham, do you have any funny stories about adjusting to American society?
- Lam: After a year in Utah, he decided to back to California, because it was a bigger population of Vietnamese there. He wanted to do something that pays more, so he wanted to become a gardener, which he did. The funny story was he had problems using the terminology explaining different types of species of plants and trees that he was trying to, you know, help them with the gardening, so that was his struggle there, but he enjoyed it very much. The funny story was that when he was gardening, his assistant who helped him didn't know how to set up sprinkler systems, so the person who hired him to do the gardening asked, "How long you been doing this," and he had to make up a story and said, "I've been doing it a long time," just to hide his trade. But he was thinking about that.
- DePue: Just twisting the truth just a little bit there. Was this North Hollywood where you were living at the time?
- Lam: North Hollywood, yes.
- DePue: Well, that's still a long way from Springfield, Illinois. How did you get from Hollywood to Springfield, Illinois?
- Lam: He moved here his, his son, who came with him, opened a nail salon, and his son needed family to help take of the kids, so they came back. The grandparents helped the kids while he was doing his business.
- DePue: I understood you lived in Ohio, though, for a short time as well.
- Lam: No, he did not.
- DePue: No? Okay. When did you move to Springfield then?
- Lam: The year 2000.
- DePue: Your son was running a nail salon. How old was he at that time?
- Lam: He can't recall how old he was exactly, but he had his, the son had family and kids.
- DePue: What brought your son to Springfield, Illinois?

- Lam: His son went to Ohio, where he was educated for the business, then he came here to open his own business.
- DePue: Your son went to college then?
- Lam: Trade school.
- DePue: Okay, okay. Now this shows that, preconceived notions, but why are so many nail salons run by Vietnamese?
- Lam: Two, two main things. One was that it didn't take a lot of overhead to start the business. He didn't have to invest a lot in school to get that, to get started. Number two is he thinks Vietnamese are very skillful with their hands, working with nails.
- DePue: Did you work then once you got to Springfield?
- Lam: He didn't work on his own, but he helped his son with keeping the store organized, any maintenance.
- DePue: Are you still working there now?
- Lam: Retired.
- DePue: Okay. Very good. Tell me, okay, we know what, I assume this is, your oldest son is still in Vietnam, is this your second son who is here running the nail salon?
- Lam: Yes, the second son.
- DePue: How about your other two children? Tell me about them.
- Lam: One of his children, she got an RN degree, currently working in Springfield at Vibra Hospital. The other one has a college degree in chemistry and looking to pursue further in her, her degree advancement.
- DePue: Are you proud of your children?
- Lam: Very happy and very proud of his kids.
- DePue: And you're a grandfather, I would assume.
- Lam: Yes.
- DePue: How big is the Vietnamese community here in Springfield?
- Lam: He's just guessing, but he thinks about a hundred fifty.
- DePue: Do the Vietnamese get together on a regular basis?

- Lam: Reason they don't get together very much in this area was, is that big generation gap, between him and the younger generation, like myself, so we don't know much about the history, so there wasn't, there's not much to talk about.
- DePue: Most of these, you said about a hundred Vietnamese in the local area, are they mostly boat people, or have they come over more recently?
- Lam: Very little, small portion of that, refugee, boat refugees like he was. Majority are later on, came over, different pack.
- DePue: What then did you miss most about Vietnam?
- Lam: He doesn't miss anything about Vietnam. The only thing that's holding him back, the tie is the son back there, but he has no regret leaving the country.
- DePue: You don't miss Vietnamese food?
- Lam: He doesn't miss Vietnamese food.
- DePue: Does that mean you can get Vietnamese food here?
- Lam: Yes, he can get it here, but he just adapts, so that he's used to American food, that he loves American food now.
- DePue: Are there Vietnamese TV stations, channels that you can watch?
- Lam: Yes, there's DirecTV, satellite, they can get Vietnamese channels.
- DePue: Do you watch quite a bit of Vietnamese TV then?
- Lam: He occasionally watch Vietnamese channels, but majority of the time he likes to watch American channels to learn more about the culture.
- DePue: Well, this last weekend, Mr. Pham, we had, I think, eight inches of snow. Do you miss Vietnamese warm temperatures?
- Lam: He rather take the cold, deal with the cold than the humidity in Vietnam, so he's used to it here, yes.
- DePue: Have you ever returned to Vietnam?
- Lam: Every year he would return to visit his son, make sure his son is okay with his family, so he still cares about him a lot.
- DePue: So going back to Vietnam, that doesn't worry you anymore?
- Lam: He's not afraid because now he's got a US citizen, he's a US citizen now.

DePue: When did you become a US citizen?

Lam: About ten years ago.

DePue: Okay. Describe that experience.

Lam: Very happy, extremely happy now that he's a US citizen. If Vietnam try anything on his pass, he knows that the US will intervene and help him, protect him.

DePue: Did you go to a ceremony here at the old state capital?

Lam: He went to Chicago for that. Yeah, Chicago.

DePue: Well, you've said that you don't miss much of anything about Vietnam. What do you most appreciate about being in the United States?

Lam: He's most appreciative for Americans rescue him into a free land, free country, that will always be part of his heart and joy that US, America gave him opportunity to be in this country. No more under communism, freedom from prison, freedom of speech. So that is his greatest appreciation for this country.

DePue: Okay. Mr. Pham then, today, you said you're a US citizen, but I wonder how you identify, how you feel, who you are. Are you still a Vietnamese? Do you see yourself as Vietnamese-American? Do you see yourself as American?

Lam: He will never forget his roots. His origin is Vietnam, from Vietnam, but his new home now is America, so.

DePue: What are your hopes for your children and your grandchildren?

Lam: His hope is that the kids, his children will have a bright future, very successful on whatever they choose to do because now they're in a free world. They're no longer under the oppression of communism, so that's his happiness and joy right there.

DePue: Would you be okay if your children or grandchildren decided to return to Vietnam?

Lam: He hope that that's not their choice. He doesn't like that idea.

DePue: Now, Mr. Pham, you just said that you appreciate the United States having freedom of speech and freedom of religion. You might know that current debate for many years in the United States is what to do about illegal immigrants, or undocumented immigrants, people who come to the United States without official papers, anything like that. Do you have an opinion about that subject?

Lam: His view is that, he hopes that, you know, this has been going on for a while. He hopes that one day our government will find a solution to take care of all the illegal immigrants that are in this country.

DePue: One, just a couple more questions. American society has always been about immigrants, and traditionally, immigrants come here and, the term that's used is melting pots. They become less Polish or German or Italian or Chinese or Japanese and become Americans, and adopt American cultures. But recently much of the debate has been about, we want to be able to bring people here and let them preserve their culture, multi-culture. Do you think America's better to have a melting pot or have multi-cultures, multiple cultures?

Lam: He personal feels that you still should keep your roots, tradition. However, everybody who came to this country need to think of this country as a whole, and what is good for the common, for the entire society of America, and not just think for themselves.

DePue: Well, I want to thank you very much, Mr. Pham. Do you have any final comments you want to make for what has been a fascinating interview for us?

Lam: He cannot express enough, words to thank the American country for taking him into their arms, and giving the freedom, giving the future that him and his children will have. And that, just could never be thank enough for what America has done for him and his people.

DePue: We're glad to call you a fellow American, Mr. Pham. And thank you for joining us for, I think, what's been a fascinating discussion about one individual's life and his journey to the United States.

End of session 2