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<http://www.cabq.gov/humanrights/public-information-and-education/diversity-booklets/asian-and-pacific-island-heritage-in-new-mexico/vietnamese-americans>

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Vietnamese Americans

The history of Vietnamese Americans is very different from that of most other Asian Americans. Immigration to the United States from Vietnam was virtually non-existent before the 1970s. The Fall of Saigon in 1975 would start an exodus from Vietnam that would eventually see the resettlement of 900,000 Vietnamese Refugees in the United States.

The Fall of Saigon

In January of 1973, a peace deal brought an end to nearly a decade of United States involvement in Vietnam. As part of this deal the United States would withdraw all troops from Vietnam, but would continue to provide aid to the government of South Vietnam. In March of 1973, the last American troops left Vietnam. However, this did not stop the fighting between North and South Vietnam. By March 1975, American aid to South Vietnam had decreased and the South Vietnamese Government had become increasingly weaker. It was at this time that the North Vietnamese forces started an offensive to take the whole country. It took only seven weeks for the North Vietnamese Army to crush the South Vietnamese forces and start the march to Saigon. (1)

In late April 1975, as the communist army from North Vietnam surrounded Saigon, panic broke out in the city. In the chaos, the United States began evacuating American citizens, Vietnamese who worked for the American Government, and eventually Vietnamese who could prove that an American would finance their evacuation and resettlement.

The last American helicopter left Saigon on April 30, 1975. That same day,

the communist forces drove into Saigon and captured the presidential palace. Saigon has been known as Ho Chi Minh City ever since.

When it became clear that there would be no further American evacuations, thousands of people from Saigon and other parts South Vietnam started swarming towards the shores in hope of procuring boats and fleeing the country by sea. Those who were lucky found U.S. military ships and were taken aboard. They would become the first wave of “Boat People.”

The “Boat People”

As the communist government in Vietnam tightened its reigns and economic conditions worsened, a second wave of people set sail in over-crowded boats hoping to make it to safety in other Asian countries. Many of these Boat People were merchants who were ethnically Chinese; others were Vietnamese farmers and fishermen. Thousands of people tried to leave Vietnam this way. It is estimated that as many as half of them died at sea. Those who survived were sent to refugee camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong. After a stay in the Asian camps many were admitted to the United States.

In the late 1970s, as a response to reports of mass drownings and piracy, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees negotiated an agreement for an “orderly departure.” Under this agreement, the Vietnamese Government allowed those Vietnamese who had relatives abroad to leave, however those without family connections in other countries still continued to leave by boat.

Amerasians

Another group of refugees who began to arrive in the United States during this time were “Amerasians.” Amerasians were children born to Vietnamese mothers and American fathers during the U.S. involvement in Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s. The Amerasians were treated terribly in Vietnam. Because the communist government of Vietnam still considered Americans to be the enemy, Amerasians, due to their half American heritage, were discriminated against and called “bui doi” or “the dust of life.” In Vietnam, Amerasians were not given access to basic education or jobs and many had to live on the streets.

In 1982, the United States Congress passed the Amerasian Immigration Act which allowed Amerasians to enter the United States as “immigrants” but

with all of the benefits of other refugees. After this, 100,000 Amerasians immigrated to the United States. (2)

Political Prisoners and “Reeducation Camps”

The last major wave of people from Vietnam to immigrate to the United States were former political prisoners. After the fall of Saigon, thousands of South Vietnamese were sent to “reeducation camps” where they were detained for many years.

Life in the reeducation camps was very difficult. The camps were essentially prison camps with sentences of an indeterminate timeframe. Internees were subjected to hard, dangerous labor and bombarded with political propaganda. (3)

Many of those detained in the camps were educated men who were former members of the South Vietnamese Military or had worked for the U.S. Government. These political prisoners were not allowed to emigrate from Vietnam until 1988 when the Vietnamese Government finally allowed them to leave through the Orderly Departure Program. One hundred thousand left to join family members in other countries.

Refugee camps

The United Nations set up refugee camps in many Asian countries for the waves of fleeing Boat People. However, conditions in these camps were not always good. Many of the Vietnamese who were evacuated or rescued at sea were first sent to these Asian camps to await sponsorship in the United States.

The refugees who were evacuated in 1975 were sent to one of four refugee or “relocation” camps in the United States: Camp Pendleton, California; Fort Chaffee, Arkansas; Eglin Air Force Base, Florida; and Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania. While conditions in the American camps were far better than the Asian camps, life for the refugees was not without problems. Boredom, lack of contact with the outside world, and the uncertainty of what would come next were major problems faced by refugees. Most refugees had to wait for weeks or months before attaining sponsorship and starting their new lives in America. Many refugees spent their days worrying about friends and family members who were left behind in Vietnam. Some refugees were trying to cope with extreme traumas they had experienced during the war or in their escape from Vietnam.

Sponsorship

A sponsor was an individual, organization, church, or sometimes even a state or local government that would commit to taking in a refugee family and providing them temporary shelter. The sponsor would also help the refugees find jobs, schools, and medical care and do whatever was necessary to help a refugee family become independent. The sponsors did not incur any financial responsibility for the refugees. Because the Vietnamese were categorized as “refugees” and not “immigrants,” they were entitled to government welfare benefits such as food stamps.

The Lives of Vietnamese Refugees

“The United States of America is a big country.”

-Introduction to the “Vietnamese Refugee Orientation Handbook” published by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in October 1978.

Life was incredibly difficult for Vietnamese Refugees. Some had the advantage of speaking English and knowledge of American culture. Most were thrown into a world where they did not speak the language, did not know the culture or customs, and had little means of survival without the help of assistance organizations.

Mutual Assistance Associations

A mutual assistance association is a grassroots, community-based organization that is run by and for the members of a particular group of refugees. These groups were usually based in small areas like cities or counties and were instrumental in helping refugees navigate American culture and society.

Role of Interpreters

Along with Mutual Assistance Associations, interpreters had a tremendous impact on the lives of new refugees. Refugees themselves, interpreters not only provided a vital language link between Vietnamese refugees and their new home, but also served as cultural intermediaries. The refugees who came to the United States were from extremely varied backgrounds. Some

were highly educated professionals; others were farmers and laborers with little or no formal education. The interpreters (some of whom spoke only broken English) were charged with much more than just providing basic communication. They would meet new refugees at the airport, sometimes in the middle of the night. They would help new immigrants through the process of applying for government benefits and registering their children for school. At times, interpreters would even take new refugees grocery shopping and show them how to use American appliances such as gas ovens. (4)

An example of someone who served in this capacity in the Vietnamese Refugee Community was Yen Nguyen. Ms. Nguyen had worked for the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. In 1975, she chose to leave Vietnam because she felt that it would be too dangerous to stay when the Communist regime took over. Ms. Nguyen worked as a translator and community worker for many refugee organizations and helped many of Albuquerque's Vietnamese refugees adjust to life in the United States.

Vietnamese in Albuquerque

Before the fall of Saigon in 1975, there were very few Vietnamese Americans in Albuquerque. The first Vietnamese immigrants to Albuquerque were recorded in 1972 when an American serviceman brought his Vietnamese wife and stepchildren to Kirtland Air Force Base. (5)

The first group of refugees started arriving in Albuquerque in April 1975. They were generally educated city dwellers who had owned businesses, worked in the government, or served in the South Vietnamese military. Many were able to find jobs in Albuquerque.

The second group of refugees were sponsored under a program called the New Mexico Indochina Refugee Resettlement Program. Under this program, the State of New Mexico directly sponsored about 500 refugees. Many of these refugees were considered "hard-to-settle" and were families of Vietnamese fishermen who had little education.

In 1977 and 1978, Vietnamese Boat People arrived in Albuquerque to join their families and made up the third wave of Vietnamese Refugees.

From 1975-1978, about 3000 Vietnamese Refugees were resettled in Albuquerque. In 1989, immigration to Albuquerque again increased after the Vietnamese who had been interned in “reeducation” camps were allowed to leave Vietnam. Many of these refugees were older educated men who had served in the South Vietnamese Army.

Many of the refugees who were originally resettled in Albuquerque, especially from the earlier groups, did not stay very long. Most left to join family in other states or to look for better economic opportunities. Those who did stay in Albuquerque faced difficulties finding jobs. As part of the refugee resettlement program, the United States Government provided refugees with welfare benefits. However, these benefits were not enough to live off of and were not intended to be permanent. In the late 1970s Albuquerque had an unemployment rate around 8.5%. A shortage of jobs and lack of language skill made it difficult for Vietnamese refugees to earn a living in their early years in Albuquerque.

Lack of English was by far the most difficult challenge faced by the refugees from all parts of Southeast Asia. Without even basic English skills, finding a job, renting an apartment, even buying food were very difficult. Classes for refugees in English as a second language (ESL) were taught at the Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute (TVI - now Central New Mexico Community College). English acquisition was a little easier for students in

Albuquerque Public Schools (APS). Because APS had an already well established ESL program for Spanish speaking students, the program was adapted to also teach Vietnamese (and other Southeast Asian) students. (6)

An example of someone whose life has revolved around language is Ann Tran. Before 1975, she, like most refugees, had a full life in Vietnam. She was a published novelist, English teacher, and college professor of American Literature. In April of 1975, Ms. Tran was evacuated from Vietnam. After spending time in a refugee camp, she came to Albuquerque and began working with the New Mexico Indochina Refugee Resettlement Program as a translator/interpreter/sponsorship liaison/English teacher. She also was a teacher of ESL for the Vietnamese refugees trying to learn English.

Because of her unique skill of fluency in three languages (Vietnamese, English, French), Ms. Tran has provided a vital language link between Vietnamese and English speakers both in the translation of written material and through spoken interpretation. Ms. Tran became a certified court translator in 1998 and travels around the state providing interpretation for Federal, District and Metropolitan Courts. She also has taught English, reading, and math at CNM.

Life as Vietnamese Americans

The United States and Vietnam normalized relations in 1995. Since then, immigration from Vietnam has come to resemble the immigration patterns of other Asian countries. The newest Vietnamese immigrants are usually family members of Vietnamese Americans who are already established in the United States.

Despite tremendous language and cultural barriers, Vietnamese Americans have succeeded in all segments of American society. They are business owners, professionals, community leaders, artists, writers, actors, and athletes.

Vietnamese Cultural Traditions

Although American holidays are celebrated by many Vietnamese Americans, most still maintain ties to their Vietnamese heritage.

The most important holiday in Vietnam is “Tet” or Vietnamese New Year. Tet falls each year between the last ten days of January and the first twenty days of February and is the biggest, most elaborately celebrated holiday in Vietnam. All of the activities surrounding Tet must involve happiness, joy, and good luck. In preparation for Tet, it is customary to clean and paint homes, settle old debts, and buy new clothes to wear in the new year.

Another important part of Tet is paying homage to one’s ancestors. Families will often visit the graves of their ancestors and leave symbolic gifts of flowers, food, and incense. A ritual is also performed the night before Tet where incense is burned and the spirits of ancestors are invited to join in the celebrations.

Traditional celebration of Tet can last anywhere from a day to a week. At the official start of Tet, people fill the streets and make as much noise as possible to ward off evil spirits. Adults also give children fancy red envelopes full of “lucky money.” Later a feast is held featuring traditional Vietnamese dishes such as banh chung (steamed sticky rice cake with pork stuffing wrapped in banana leaves), mut (candied fruit), keo dua (coconut candy), and keo me xung (peanut brittle with sesame seeds). (7)

Footnotes:

1. BBC News, "Vietnam War: History." British Broadcasting Corporation, 2005.
(http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/asia_pac/05/vietnam_war/html/introduction.stm)
2. South East Asia Resource Action Center, "Vietnamese Refugees." (<http://www.searac.org/vietref.html>)
3. Ginetta Sagan and Stephen Denney. "Re-Education in Unliberated Vietnam: Loneliness, Suffering and Death" The Indochina Newsletter, October-November, 1982. (<http://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~sdenney/Vietnam-Reeducation-Camps-1982>)
4. Tybel Litwin and Gim Wever. "Indochinese Refugees in America: Profiles of Five Communities. A Case Study." United States Department of State, 1980.
(<http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED223733>)
5. "The Vietnamese Community in Albuquerque" Art Alliances, Albuquerque Ethnic Cultures Survey.
(<http://www.abqarts.org/cultural/survey/viet-cs.htm>)
6. Tybel Litwin and Gim Wever.
7. BBC News.