

The
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To Be Both Midwestern and Hmong

Decades after they fought for the U.S. and took refuge in Wisconsin, immigrants and their children still struggle for acceptance.



Doualy Xaykaothao / T'xer Zhd' Khai / USA Today Network-Wisconsin / Boonak Ha' Eri / Wikimedia Commons / Zak Bickel / The Atlantic

DOUALY XAYKAO THAO | 7:00 AM ET | POLITICS

TEXT SIZE



The brothers gripped the sides of their small boat in fear and stared at the water in silence and shock. They were terrified their dad had been under too long.

It was 1989, and Samuel and Methuselah Thao were only 7 and 8 years old. Their father, Nou Vang, had taken them on a fishing trip to Pike Lake, a half-hour drive southeast of their home in Wausau, Wisconsin. It had been a

beautiful, bright day, but at sunset, something happened that the brothers would never forget: “We were in this little jon boat, and they were in this big speedboat,” Methuselah, now 35, said, describing a group of older white fishermen. “Those guys, they were driving really fast, back and forth, trying to tip our boat.”

As the wakes the speedboat churned out became more dangerous, the Thaos’ boat started to take on water and their fishing poles fell into the lake. “It was *bad*,” Samuel, now 34, said. “My dad jumped into the water, I guess to grab the fishing poles, and these guys are cruising around trying to drown us. I’m thinking, *Man, my dad better come back up.*”



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When Nou Vang surfaced—exhausted and gasping for air—he was outraged and all of their fishing poles were lost. Nou Vang’s heart was still racing as he pulled his sons to shore. He walked over to a nearby sandbar to call the police. But the bartender, who had witnessed the whole incident, put his hand over the receiver of the landline telephone and held it down.

“You’re calling nobody,” the bartender told him. But Nou Vang was undeterred. “I told him, ‘Please, please, don’t do that, I need justice,’” he said. “I need justice, because somebody did something awful, terrible, to me. I need justice.” To his relief, the bartender relented, and Nou Vang called the police.

But as he hung up, Nou Vang turned and saw the same group of fishermen from the speedboat approaching him and his sons on foot—now, with aluminum batons and a knife. “And they’re tapping their clubs like this,” Samuel said, hitting his hands. “I don’t remember any of the words they said, but I’m like, *How can I help my dad?* To me, it was racial—super racist. I was so little, I didn’t know what I could do, but I picked up these rocks.” Methuselah

did, too.

Nou Vang knew nothing good would happen next if they didn't leave, and fast, so he pushed his boys back toward their boat. The Thaos went back out on the lake, sitting helplessly on their boat, praying the police would arrive before the white men returned in their speedboat. The police came—and Nou Vang pressed charges.

A month after the fishing trip, he and his sons received a \$50 check in the mail from a local courthouse for new fishing poles.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, racial tensions between the native- and foreign-born populations gripped central Wisconsin. Less than a hundred years earlier, hostilities in that part of the country centered around immigrant populations arriving from Europe—Norwegians, Swedes, Italians, and Poles. This time, however, the new arrivals were refugees from Indochina, especially the hill-tribe group called the Hmong (pronounced “MOH-ng”).





oua Lee Moua, right, and veteran Xeng Xiong, burn incense in a traditional blessing
afternoon during the Hmong Vietnam War Veterans Memorial groundbreaking
athon County Courthouse in Wausau. (T'xer Zhon Kha / USA Today Network-

These nomadic people had historically lived in the mountainous areas of Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, and China. For generations, the Hmong didn't have citizenship in those countries and lived autonomously, in remote and isolated places. But, as a stateless group with no ties to—or protection from—the nations they roamed, the Hmong had long been persecuted and driven from their traditional lands. In the middle of the 20th century, when the CIA began to conduct covert operations to fight state-sponsored communism in the jungles of Southeast Asia, the agency found valiant, fearless fighters in the Hmong.

Nou Vang Thao, now in his mid-50s, was a young guerrilla foot soldier for the CIA, along with his father, uncles, and relatives. They risked their lives for a U.S. cause and allowed many American soldiers to return home to their families. Reports vary widely, but according to a number of [estimates](#), one-quarter of all Hmong men and boys—more than 50,000 out of 300,000—died fighting communists along the Laos-Vietnam border. An unknown number died trying. Some died in forests; others drowned in the Mekong River, bordering Laos.

Forty years ago, this year, Thao and his relatives were the first Hmong family to be sponsored by a Lutheran church in Wausau, Wisconsin. Tens of thousands of Hmong followed, direct from Thai refugee camps. Thao embraced the small, scenic city of Wausau as his new home. The area was mainly a dairy-farm community that was also known nationally for its paper mills and insurance company. Thao loved the Wisconsin River, which split the city in half. He wanted to love the people, too, but the locals didn't exactly welcome him. Despite being a war veteran, many people confused him with the enemy—assuming he was Vietnamese or, worse, Viet Cong. Thao says he sometimes had to remind people he fought for freedom, not communism.

“Even today,” he said. “People don’t know why the Hmong are in Wisconsin, and coworkers, they don’t care to know why we are here. We couldn’t stay in our country because of our involvement with the white man. We’ve given Americans 100 percent of our heart, but they’ve only given us 20 percent.”

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Thao, whose family in Laos were Christians, married a local white girl, Eileen, who for months thought he was Vietnamese herself. But she was smitten. “I told him, even if he only had a buggy and a horse, like the Amish, I’d still love him,” Eileen said. Eileen immersed herself in the Hmong culture, and now, she speaks the Hmong language as if she were a native speaker in Laos.

Today, the couple has five adult children. That includes their two oldest sons, Samuel and Methuselah—of the fishing incident—who both went on to learn martial arts, winning a number of tae-kwon-do state championships and numerous title belts, including Gladiator flyweight champion and Konquer the Kage featherweight champion. Nou Vang and Eileen Thao also have seven grandkids, and the pair attends church together without fail each Sunday in Wausau. (According to a local Hmong leader, about 70 percent of the Hmong population is Christian.) Eileen told me she wanted a fairy-tale marriage and she found it with Nou Vang Thao.

In the 1990s, the Hmong were fast becoming the largest ethnic minority in Wausau, making up more than 10 percent of the population. That spike posed

numerous problems throughout Marathon County, Wisconsin, for employers, schools, social-service agencies, and the police, as documented in 1994 by Roy Beck. He [profiled](#) the city of Wausau for *The Atlantic* and described a city that was once a “paradise” for native-born taxpayers, many of whom were frustrated about the “burgeoning community of immigrants” from Asia. Beck warned: “Even if the influx slows, Southeast Asians may become the majority population in Wausau well within the present residents’ lifetimes.”



Wausau celebrates its grand opening Saturday afternoon, May 7, 2016, in Wausau. (The Wausau Daily Network-Wisconsin)

Brad Karger remembers those days of suspicion and fear all too well. He moved to Wausau in 1988, to work as a human-resources director for the county. “I was aware of Hmong people, but until then, I had never met one,” he said. “I had no idea who they were or where they came from. My experience when I came here was the Hmong were here and in big numbers in Wausau. And a lot of people were trying to shape my perceptions of them early on.” Back then, there was still a great deal of opposition to the newcomers

from the locals. “And you could tell which side they were on,” Karger said. “If they pronounced it ‘HA-mung,’ that was a trigger. Those were the people telling me the Hmong were terrible people and were committing all kinds of atrocities, and we were better off without them.”

He said he remembers that one of his county detectives—a real character, kind of a goofball, but an honest guy—was called to a home on the east side of the river in Wausau. The complainants had accused their neighbors of *eating* their dog. “And of course the neighbor was a Hmong family,” Karger said. “And the detective, he’s writing this statement as he goes along. He says, ‘Blah, blah, blah, they’re pretty sure the neighbors ate their dog.’ And he says, at this point in the report, ‘Fluffy entered the door, between my legs, uneaten.’”

Karger said he was embarrassed about so many of the “untrue and harmful” statements about the Hmong, how they were lazy and were Viet Cong. He realized there was a lot of work to do, even in his own office. He started diversity training for his 700-plus employees; he had to get them to rethink how to help this refugee population who previously only knew an agrarian culture. “We intentionally went out of our way to hire Hmong people, to help them fill out applications, and to know them beyond a superficial level,” he said.

**“They’re not going back to Laos.
This is their home.”**

Today, Karger is the Marathon County administrator. He is invited to a handful of personal and public Hmong events annually. He often sits in on meetings with Hmong elders that are held only in their language. And he even participated in a Hmong dance-off recently when the community celebrated Hmong history month. “Nobody works harder than the Hmong,” he said.

“The facts are undeniable. The Hmong have started businesses. The Wausau World Market just held their grand opening. There’s a Hmong Chamber of Commerce. They’re not going back to Laos. This is their home.”

The newly elected mayor of Wausau, Robert Mielke, agrees. “When the Hmong came here in 1976, it was a transition,” he said. “But the neat thing about the Hmong—and Laotians and Cambodians—these people worked hard. They worked hard to assimilate.”

Patti Kraus, an administrative assistant who has worked for the Wausau School District for more than 20 years, also found the Hmong’s acclimation “very interesting and really neat to see.” She said she saw how difficult it was for them to come to Wausau, “how it was very hard for them to accustom to our ways and to be in our schools ... It was almost like they were dropped here, and it’s like, ‘Do it our way,’ which was hard.” At first, there were a lot of fears, Kraus said, “but I saw how they adapted and adopted our ways. I saw how the young, they wanted to learn and how the families wanted to be accepted.”

Mielke added that Hmong family life is to be admired. “The way they treat their families—they respect their elders,” he said. “That’s something that should be respected by everybody.”

Wausau’s Trinity Lutheran Church and School was the first to sponsor a Hmong family, the Thaos. A traditional Hmong tapestry hangs on a wall behind Pastor Gary Schultz’s desk. He told me the Hmong have been in the city for so long he doesn’t even see them as a minority group. “For us, there’s not a conflict,” he said. “But you’re going to have people who, when it’s any kind of race other than their own, are not accepting. They were raised with a set of values that aren’t to me what Christ would have us do, which is: We’re supposed to love everybody.”

One Friday evening, in February 2015, a group of teenagers made their way toward Dylan Yang’s house—triggered by an argument on Facebook. Yang, a 15-year-old Hmong American, and some friends were sitting on his porch when shots were fired at them. Dylan ran to his kitchen, got a large knife, and returned outside to see a fight happening in front of his house. His friend was being attacked by a 13-year-old boy, Isaiah Powell, who had a gun. Yang later learned that it was a BB gun. Yang went after Powell and stabbed him in the back twice. Powell later died from his wounds. Yang claimed that the fight was a racially motivated, anti-Hmong incident in which he acted in self-defense.

The episode has once again brought anxiety over the Hmong community to the fore.

Two decades ago, when racial tensions were at their peak in Wausau, Asian gangs were a real concern. There were drive-by shootings, gang fights, retaliations, and groups that targeted each other, creating disturbances and tagging property to mark their terrain.

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But, Wausau Police Chief Jeffrey Hardell said, that’s not the case today. “We do not have that, at this point, at the same levels, not even close,” he said. “In a year, we have very few incidents that have a gang component to it.” That includes, he added, the Yang case. “We feel like, if there was any gang ties, or affiliation, that that was not a major factor in the actual incident,” Hardell said. “We feel it wasn’t gang related.”

And yet, in local news reports, the crime is [described](#) as a fight between “rival gangs” or as [having](#) “gang-related undertones.” That’s not surprising to Kari Smalkoski, a researcher at the University of Minnesota and the author of a forthcoming book on Hmong boys and young men. “Racial stereotypes and gender roles of refugees and children of immigrants haven’t changed much,” she said. “They’re either labeled the model minorities, the nerdy types, or the gang members—even when there is no evidence.” Smalkoski has studied how Hmong boys have been ignored and forgotten in schools, while many Hmong girls have been praised and supported. “The racialized stereotypes often get in the way of understanding the complexity and nuances of young Hmong men,” she said.

“He’s just a child,” Annahli Vue, Yang’s mother, told me. She said Dylan had been bullied and was tired of being picked on. “The bullying had gotten so bad that Dylan asked to be transferred to a different middle school,” she said. But she told her son to be patient, because he was headed to high school. But the bullying didn’t stop. “My son had already been bullied for years by those same group of boys,” Vue said. “Our attorney told us, Facebook exchanges

between Isaiah's group of friends [and Dylan's] mentioned fights at the school, at the bus stop, and fighting under the bridge by the Boys and Girls club."

Like earlier generations of Hmong, the Yang family had moved around quite a bit. They lived in Texas, Oklahoma, and California's Central Valley, in Fresno. When crime became a problem there, the family headed to the Midwest, to Wausau, where on a clear day, visitors can see one of the tallest mountains in the state. "It seemed like a nice, quiet place to raise a family," Vue said. "We moved to Wisconsin for work and a better chance at life for my kids."

One of Dylan's favorite songs, by a Hmong American group, is "*Hmoob Lub Kua Muag*" or "Tears of the Hmong People." It's a small-scale version of the USA for Africa song "We Are The World." But instead of the artists singing about famine, they sing about the Hmong people and their past struggles living as nomads without a country of their own.

Juveniles can be charged as adults in Wisconsin based on the severity of their crimes. In mid-March, an all-white jury convicted Yang, now 16, of first-degree reckless homicide as an adult. Yang faces up to 60 years in prison; he will be sentenced in July. At the end of his criminal trial, as courthouse security led him away, Yang turned to his family and relatives, and said: "I'm sorry. I was defending myself, and I was defending the Hmong people."

"Race and ethnicity greatly influences perceptions," said Smalkoski. "Based on my own research and others' research, racial or culture bias can have life-changing consequences." She believes that, "in this case, [it did] for Dylan and his family."

Twenty years after Beck's *Atlantic* article on Wausau was published, Robert Mentzer did a [retrospective](#) for the local *Wausau Daily Herald* in which he called Beck's piece "not so much prescient as dated." Mentzer reported that the "predictions" in Beck's piece "didn't come true, and it's shot through with a sense of racial anxiety—*southeast Asians are taking over this fine white city*—that feels gross."

Mentzer also went back and interviewed Beck, who is now one of the nation's leading anti-immigration voices. "The attention I got for writing that article led to a lot of things, including a book contract," Beck said. What's more: "I formed a national organization out of that article." His nonprofit, [NumbersUSA](#), works "to get the numbers back down to a level where immigrants are valued and they can thrive." The group's motto is: "Educating Americans on the need for policies of controlled immigration for the national interest."

It's not a view that Mary Thao supports. And she's a numbers person, too.

Thao is one of the first Hmong American female CIOs in the United States. She works for the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians and is a newly elected Wausau School Board member, the first in two decades. “It’s been a long journey,” she said. “I didn’t become CIO overnight. It took years of building and being told I couldn’t achieve many things, living other people’s dreams. It takes a lot of perseverance and dedication. Sometimes that means no social life. I’m finally where I want to be.” For families like the Thaos, Mary’s success is part of a greater American story—one that’s in the national interest.

“Our way of life didn’t slip away,” wrote Mentzer. “The community got more interesting.” But that rosy image along with success stories like Mary Thao’s are complicated by cases like Yang’s, which demonstrate that race is still very much an issue in Wausau. That’s why, on Tuesday, hundreds of Hmong Americans held a peace march in downtown Wausau—“[to reflect, to heal](#),” and to raise awareness about the Yang case. After the march, the group also held a vigil for Isaiah Powell.

“First, my condolences to Isaiah’s family and prayers to Dylan that he receives a fair and just sentence,” said Yeng Thao—he’s Mary’s husband, a Hmong American born and raised in Wausau, and a professional bass angler. “I think, if Dylan wasn’t Hmong and was Caucasian, the verdict would have been different. We will never know.” At Mary and Yeng’s house, *The Economist* and *Bass Angler* magazines were piled up in a corner; their children played on smartphones and iPads. “All we can do is to teach our children and bring awareness to our community that violence will not solve problems but create more.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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