

A Photo Essay of the Hmong Experience at Wat Thamkrabok in Thailand

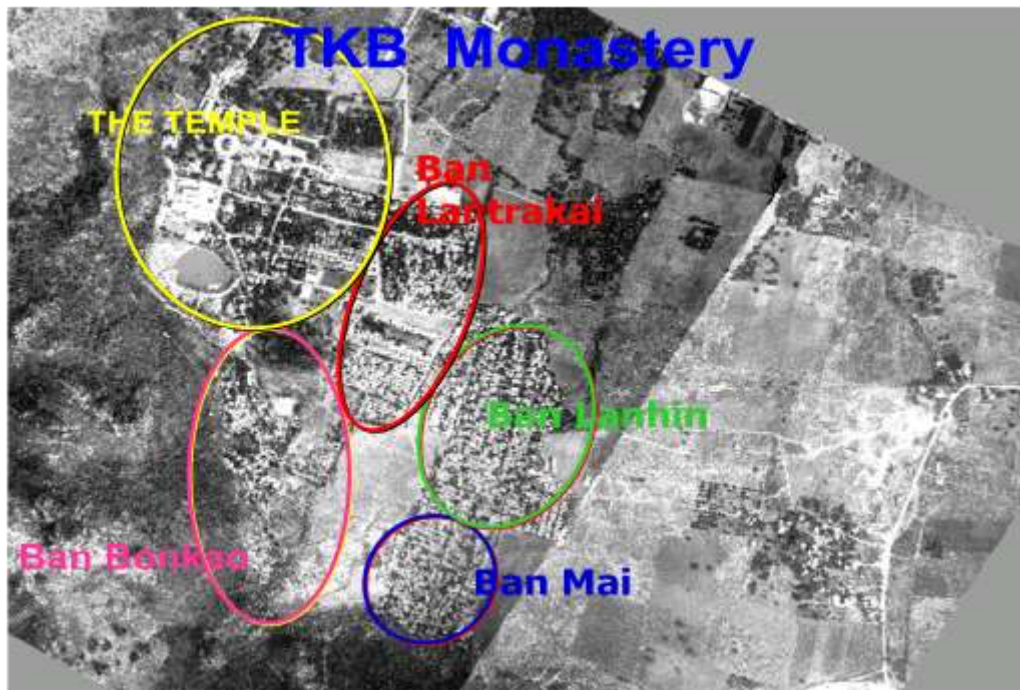
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ABSTRACT

In this photo essay, I share photos and information I gathered from my two visits to the Hmong at Wat Thamkrabok in Thailand in 2004 and 2009. The July 2004 visit was a part of a Fulbright Hays Study Abroad Project, and the January 2009 visit was a part of a study abroad course I led to Thailand. The photos capture segments of Hmong life inside Wat Thamkrabok. These life segments include living conditions, education, employment opportunities, religion, technology, and others. In addition to the photos, I included narratives to provide contextual information and to enhance the substance and significance of the photos. The descriptive information shared in this photo essay came from several sources: the observations I made during the visits, the data and information about the Hmong in Wat Thamkrabok that were shared by the Thai Authorities Task Force 546, and conversations I had with several Hmong individuals I met inside Wat Thamkrabok. My purpose for this photo essay is twofold: one, to share what I saw and to report on the information that was shared with me during my two visits to the Hmong at Wat Thamkrabok, in an effort to capture an important segment of Hmong history and to advance the understanding of the Hmong experience and two, to use the photos to enhance the descriptive data about the Hmong experience in Wat Thamkrabok.

Introduction



Aerial view of Wat Thamkrabok

The introductory picture provides an aerial view of Wat Thamkrabok. It gives a different perspective to what many Hmong called “home” for many years. How did the Hmong end up at Wat Thamkrabok, a Buddhist temple that is approximately 90 miles northeast of Bangkok, Thailand that was established in 1957, but eventually became a rehabilitation center for opium and heroin addicts in 1975? Where does the Hmong experience at Wat Thamkrabok fall in the context of Hmong history and experience?

The Hmong experience has been well documented in the last three decades, chronicling their migration from China to Laos, from Laos to Thailand and from Thailand to other countries such as the United States, France, Australia, and France (Yang, 1993; Yang 2008; Chan 1994; Lee, 1996 & 2007, Hamilton-Merritt, 1999, and Quincy, 1995). More specifically, studies and research have been conducted on various aspects of education (Vang, 2005; Lor, 2008; Lor, 2009; Lor, 2009; and Hutchinson, 1997), families (Xiong, 2006), religion (Conquergood, 1988;

Morrison, 1997; Yang, 2007, and Her, 2005) and cultural transitions (Lee, 1996 and Yang, 2003). Much of the existing research focuses on the Hmong experience in the United States, but emerging research also looks at Hmong in other countries such as Vietnam, China, Laos, French Guiana, and Thailand (Lee; Yang; Clarkin, 2005; and Lemoine, 2008).

In the mosaic of the Hmong experience, a group of Hmong ended up at Wat Thamkrabok, Thailand in 1997. In 2004, many relocated to the United States. Two important studies (Ngo, Bieglow, and Wahlstrom, 2007; and Grigolet, 2006) provide insight into the Wat Thamkrabok Hmong experience. Grigolet shares historical and political circumstances leading to their relocation to the United States, their life inside Wat Thamkrabok and their initial integration into mainstream culture in America. Ngo, Bieglow and Wahlstrom share research on their educational experience in Minnesota. Two task force reports (Xiong, 2005; Vang, 2004) provide additional information about their experience inside Wat Thamkrabok, their resettlement process, and the available resources and contacts to address their resettlement and transition.

One critical historical link the Hmong at Wat Thamkrabok have with Hmong Americans and the United States is their involvement in the Secret War in Laos. In the 1960s and 1970s, the United States Central Intelligence Agency recruited the Hmong to fight against communism, specifically against the North Vietnamese (Hamilton-Merritt). They fought alongside the US in this clandestine military effort (Hamilton-Merritt). When the United States lost the Vietnam War and pulled out of Southeast Asian in 1975 including Laos, the United States only airlifted a few thousand Hmong to safety in Thailand, while many were left behind. Those who were left behind had to trek to Thailand because they had become targets of the new communist regime. When they got to Thailand, they stayed in various refugee camps near the Thailand and Laos

border (Lo, 2001 and Hamilton-Merritt). Life in these camps was harsh, vastly different than what they were used to in Laos (Lo).

From the late 1970s to the late 1980s, many Hmong refugees in Thailand relocated to third countries such as the United States, Canada, France, and Australia, but many also chose to stay behind. From 1991-1993, with the closures of many Hmong refugee camps, thousands of Hmong chose to relocate to the United States, but again, many stayed behind. Those who stayed behind began to move out of the refugee camps and settled in various places throughout Thailand. Many of these Hmong families came to reside at Wat Thamkrabok in 1997 under the patronage of Abbott Chamroon Parnchand. The Hmong at Wat Thamkrabok included Secret Wars veterans, their children and their grandchildren. The monastery was divided into three sections covering an area of about 133 acres: monastery (24 acres), inhabitants' residences (16 acres) and Hmong community (93 acres). Life in the monastery changed when Abbott Parchand died 1999 (Grigoleit).

At the time of my 2004 visit, four groups were living in Wat Thamkrabok, but as indicated by the table below, not all the Hmong in the Wat are Lao (Hmong) refugees.

Group	Number of Families	Number of People
Assisted in Thai army during Cold War	140	1,136
Thai hill tribesmen	6	52
Thai Hmong and business interest groups	165	1,362
Lao Refugees	1,429	12,552
Total	1,740	15,282

Source: Task Force 546

Age Distribution of Population

0-3	3,040	20%
4-14	4,584	30%
15-18	1,545	10%
19-24	1,602	10.11%
25-44	2,598	17.01%
45-64	1,320	9%
Above 64	593	3.84%
TOTAL	15,282	100%

Source: Task Force 546

After the death of the Abbot, the future of the Hmong at Wat Thamkrabok became uncertain. From 1997 to 2003, according to the Thai Authorities Task Force 546, there had been a steady increase in criminal activities inside Wat Thamkrabok, especially drug trafficking. The dynamics made it a hot spot for drug traffickers and others to conduct illegal activities, which posed problems and challenges for the inhabitants and Thai authorities. So, in April 2003, the Thai government deployed military troops to oversee the Hmong. They set up barbed wire perimeter and restricted movement in and out of the Wat. The military troops were called Task Force 546, which was comprised of 176 men and with an addition of 42 other personnel serving as consultants, co-operative staff members, a database team, a public health service unit and anti-riot police. The mission of Task Force 546 was to 1) control and restore order within the Hmong community, 2) prepare for repatriation, and 3) prevent and suppress possible drug activities.

With much political and social unrest surrounding the future of the Hmong at Wat Thamkrabok, in 2003, an agreement was reached between Thailand and the United States to relocate these Hmong refugees to the United States (Grigoleit). Upon hearing the news, some Hmong fled the monastery. According to the conversations I had with a few individuals inside Wat Thamkrabok, many feared that the agreement was the Thai government's propaganda to eventually send the Hmong back to Laos. This was one of the reasons why the number of

Hmong in Wat Thamkrabok dropped to about 15,000 as shared by Task Force 546. Since many feared repatriation, they relocated elsewhere outside Wat Thakrabok, including northern Thailand and possibly back to Laos. For those who stayed in the Wat, many applied for and were granted relocation to the United States. The first Wat Thamkrabok Hmong families left for the United States in July 2004.

Methods

In 2004, I travelled with a Fulbright-Hays group made of Wisconsin educators to study Southeast Asia Heritage. During the study abroad, we stopped at Wat Thamkrabok. On the first day we met with Thai authorities and an African-American monk. In the meeting, they shared documented information about the status and conditions of the Hmong in Wat Thamkrabok. Also, we met with local Hmong clan leaders who shared their experiences in the camp and how the immigration process was coming along. After the two meetings, we were divided into smaller groups, and each Hmong community leader led and provided each group a tour of Wat Thamkrabok. During the tour, we visited the Hmong school inside Wat Thamkrabok, met the principal, some teachers and some students. We learned about the history of the school and its curriculum.

On the second day we visited Ban Tharn Thong Daeng School, a public Thai school, about a mile from Wat Thamkrabok, where most Hmong students attended. There we met Hmong students, Thai teachers, and administrators and observed several classes. We were told that many Hmong students stopped attending classes once they learned about the relocation to the US. Afterward, we again visited Wat Thamkrabok. Several Thai teachers came along. Once we got inside, we were grouped in pairs, and two selected Ban Tharn Thong Daeng Hmong students gave us a tour of Wat Thamkrabok. We saw various aspects of life inside Wat

Thamkrabok, including people doing paj ntaub, shaman rituals, graves, leisure activities, shops, people transporting water, and the supermarket where there were many Thai vendors. The vendor owners came and set up shops inside Wat Thamkrabok. One of my colleagues and I witnessed the sacrifice of a cow or “ua nyuj dab,” and we were asked politely not to take pictures. The walk between the alleys gave us an opportunity to see the open sewage system, inside people’s houses, kids playing games, elders sitting on porches, and the congested and crowded houses.

My second visit to Wat Thamkrabok was in January 2009. I led a study abroad course to Thailand, with seven students from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. Several students and I spent our last day visiting Wat Thamkrabok, five years after my first visit. Upon our visit, I noticed Wat Thamkrabok had transformed from a vibrant, congested community to a sparsely recognizable village, with about ten houses and thirty people remaining. Since there wasn’t much left, we spent about a half hour informally talking to several people, walking through the main concrete road, and observing what still remained—houses, scooters, water storage, clotheslines and other scattered miscellaneous items. I noticed where there were once houses, now stood overgrown weeds and trees. It was difficult to believe that five years ago there were about 15,000 thousand people living in this place. On this visit, I recognized Wat Thamkrabok only by the standing statue of the King and the sign “Wat Thamkrabok” in the front entrance. It wasn’t what I saw back in July 2004.

While on these official visits, I took pictures and gathered information about the conditions inside Wat Thamkrabok. The pictures capture certain segments of life and conditions inside Wat Thamkrabok, in July 2004 and January 2009. The information gathered and shared in this photo essay came from three sources: 1) a power point presentation by Thai authorities

(Task Force 546), 2) conversations I had with people I met during the two visits, and 3) my observations.

Several points and clarifications about the sources need to be noted. One, the 2004 information I share here was documented and given to us by Thai authorities after many Hmong had already left the camp; as such, there was one major discrepancy about the population inside Wat Thamkrabok that needs to be noted. According to Task Force 546, the population inside Wat Thamkrabok was documented at about 15,000. But conversational information during the visit revealed the population, before Task Force 546, to be in the range of 30,000 to possibly 50,000. Two, the individuals I had conversations with included the principal of the Hmong school inside Wat Thamkrabok, Hmong Ban leaders, three Hmong students, several Thai educators, and various Hmong individuals inside Wat Thamkrabok. It is also important to note Wat Thamkrabok was not an official refugee camp. Thus, people had to work, and they needed to buy the food, water, firewood, sanitation services provided by Thai vendors, and pay for medical care and education for their children.

This photo essay is broken down into these segments: entering and exiting Wat Thamkrabok, Making a Living Inside Wat Thamkrabok, Wat Thamkrabok Is Not an Official Refugee Camp, Technology Inside Wat Thamkrabok, Religions Inside Wat Thamkrabok, Educational Opportunity Inside Wat Thamkrabok, The Children Inside Wat Thamkrabok, Other Sights and Scenes Inside Wat Thamkrabok, and Inside Wat Thamkrabok 2009. My purpose for this photo essay is twofold: to share what I saw and to report on the information that was shared with me during my two visits to the Hmong at Wat Thamkrabok, in an effort to capture an important segment of Hmong history and to advance understanding of the Hmong experience and have the photos serve as powerful reminders of the Hmong experience in Wat Thamkrabok.

The content and information I share here is not intended to represent the Hmong at Wat Thamkrabok from their point of view. They are snapshots from my camera lenses and my perspective; the narratives are based on the information and experiences I encountered during the two visits. The pictures are numbered and titled for ease of reference.

Results

Entering and Exiting Wat Thamkrabok



Picture 1: Gateway to Wat Thamkrabok



Picture 2: Check Point

When we first arrived at Wat Thamkrabok in 2004, I saw a barbed wired gate and military personnel. We had to get through the barbed wire entrance (picture 1) and then the check point (picture 2) before proceeding to a building nearby for our meeting with the Thai authorities. The barbed wires ran around Wat Thamkrabok (pictures 3-6). To enter Wat Thamkrabok, individuals needed to have identification cards. Exiting and entering the Wat needed to be done between 6am -6pm. Exceptions were granted only in emergency situations. Employers who needed workers inside Wat Thamkrabok needed to inform Task Force 546 of available jobs at least one day in advance.



Picture 3: Kids and Barbed Wires



Picture 4: Strolling Along



(Picture 5: Man, Baby and Barbed Wires)



(Picture 6: Barbed Wires)

Making a Living Inside Wat Thamkrabok

According to Task Force 546, there were four ways to make a living inside Wat Thamkrabok. Ten percent (10%) of the population was involved in small business, ten percent (10%) specialized in needle work and handiwork (they did traditional Hmong paj ntaub and sent them to relatives in the US to earn income), forty percent (40%) were unemployed (some got financial support from families and relatives in the US), and forty percent (40%) worked in the labor market outside of Wat Thamkrabok (construction sites, concrete work, plantation fields, and rock quarries). The following pictures depict the various ways of making a living inside Wat Thamkrabok.

Small Business (pictures 7-12)



Picture 7: Products



Picture 8: Group Shopping



Picture 9: Store



Picture 10: Shaving



Picture 11: Welding



Picture 12: Painting Medallions

Needle Work and Handiwork (Pictures 13-17)



Picture 13: Elders



Picture 14: Group Sewing



Picture 15: Sewing and Babysitting



Picture 16: Machines



(Picture 17: Man Needling)

Labor Market Outside of Wat Thamkrabok (Picture 18)



(Picture 18: Boarding for Work)

These individuals were boarding a truck to go to work outside Wat Thamkrabok.

Wat Thamkrabok Is Not an Official Refugee Camp

Since Wat Thamkrabok was not an official refugee camp, no basic care came from non-governmental organizations. There was no running water, no sewage system and as stated in the introduction, people had to work, and they had to buy their own wood, sanitation services, water, medical care, and education for their children (see pictures 19-23).



Picture 19: H₂O Storage



Picture 20: H₂O Transporters



Picture 20: Bathroom



Picture 21: Sewage Truck



Picture 21: Open Sewage



Picture 22: Fire To Be

Technology Inside Wat Thamkrabok

The Hmong in Wat Thamkrabok were exposed to various forms of technology: cell phones, televisions, computers, video games, Internet and motor vehicles such as mopeds and scooters (see pictures 24-29).



Picture 23: Games



Picture 24: Computers



Picture 26: Movies



Picture 27: Family Rides Together



Picture 28: Working in Unison



Picture 29: TV and Royalty

Religions Inside Wat Thamkrabok

As shared by the Thai Authorities, three main religions were practiced inside Wat Thamkrabok: Buddhism, Animism, and Christianity, but I didn't notice any visible evidence of Christianity (see pictures 30-32).



Picture 30: Buddhism



Picture 31: Shaman



Picture 32: Shaman and Child

Educational Opportunity Inside Wat Thamkrabok

Since 60% of Wat Thamkrabok's population were 18 years of age or younger, education was important. Fifty percent (50%) of children were in school. Fifty percent (50%) could afford to pay for school. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of adults had formal education. The Hmong in Wat Thamkrabok had a higher level of literacy than earlier Hmong refugees (about 80% were literate).

There were three avenues for Wat Thamkrabok children to receive an education: 1) Thai school outside of Wat Thamkrabok—Ban Tharn Thong Daeng, 2) Hmong school inside Wat Thamkrabok, and 3) home schooling. Hmong students who attended Ban Tharn Thong Daeng School went to school Monday to Friday, from 8:30am to 3:30pm. Their first semester ran from May to October and second semester ran from November to March. Their educational curriculum was developed by the Ministry of Education. Areas of study included: Thai language, mathematics, science, social studies, art, health and physical education, Buddhist religion, work, career, technology and some English instruction. No interpreters were available. They attended grades 1-9 and had no opportunities for higher education.

The second avenue to receive an education was attending the Hmong school inside Wat Thamkrabok. The school was created and established in the early 1990s. Before the school was built, a secret school was established in one of the homes (Yang, 2004). Research informant Yang was a principal at the Hmong school. Thai, Hmong, English, French and Chinese were

taught. The enrollment started to increase and eventually it was too many to handle. When the monks found out about the secret school, they decided to build a school for about 1,000 students. Students started Hmong school at age 4-5 and finished at age 14-15. They attended school Monday-Friday. They got days off for Hmong New Year. The instructors at the school were individuals from the community with no higher education; some were as young as 15 years old. They had small classrooms with a large number of students. Each classroom had one chalkboard and benches. Typically, forty students per class attended school in the morning and another twenty to thirty students attended per class in the afternoon. Boys sat on one side and girls on the other.

The school had few resources. Parents paid fifty baht (\$1.25 US) per month per student. The school provided notebooks and pencils. There were no textbooks. Some posters with English alphabets and words were on the walls. The Thai and Hmong languages were taught, along with some mathematics. In primary grades (1st and 2nd grades), students were taught numbers, the Hmong and Thai alphabets, and verbal literacy in both languages. For upper grades (3rd-9th grades), students were taught phrases in Thai and Hmong and some mathematics. The dominant pedagogy included copying from the board, rote memorization, and little verbal practice. English instruction became a part of the curriculum when they learned about resettlement to the United States in December of 2003. English instruction was provided for adults as well.

The third avenue for children to receive an education was home schooling. Students were taught the Hmong language and some Thai, along with trades by parents. When we visited Ban Tharn Thong Daeng School, we were told many Hmong students stopped attending school when they found out about the resettlement. Students didn't feel the need to continue their education. The educational experiences at each school vastly differed.

Ban Tharn Thong Daeng School

Hmong students at Ban Tharn Thong Daeng School had desks, computers, and resources. They wore uniforms. The school was about one mile from Wat Thamkrabok (picture 36). Pictures (33-35) show the outside of the school:



(Pictures 33-35, Outside of School)



Picture 33: This is an outside view of Ban Tharn Thong Daeng School, about a mile from Wat Thamkrabok.

Pictures 37-40 show the types of classrooms the students were in; they had similar desks and resources as some classrooms in the United States.



Picture 37: Outside Classroom



Picture 38: These students were reading as we entered. Many students were not in attendance this day. Attendance had slowly eroded since learning of relocation to US.



Picture 39: Computers and access to the Internet were available to students.



Picture 40: Students wore uniforms. Boys sat on one side of the classroom and girls sat on the other.

Hmong School Inside Wat Thamkrabok

The educational settings of the Hmong school were vastly different than Ban Tharn Thong Daeng. Below is the exterior of the Hmong school (picture 41).



Picture 41: Front view of the Hmong school inside Wat Thamkrabok

Resources were scarce, with a few posters and chalkboards; students sat on long benches, divided by gender (pictures 42-53).



Picture 42: This was a secondary grade level class.



Picture 43: This was a primary class. Female and male students sat separately.



Picture 44: In this class, boys sat on one side and girls sat on the other.



Picture 45: Every class had a removable chalkboard.



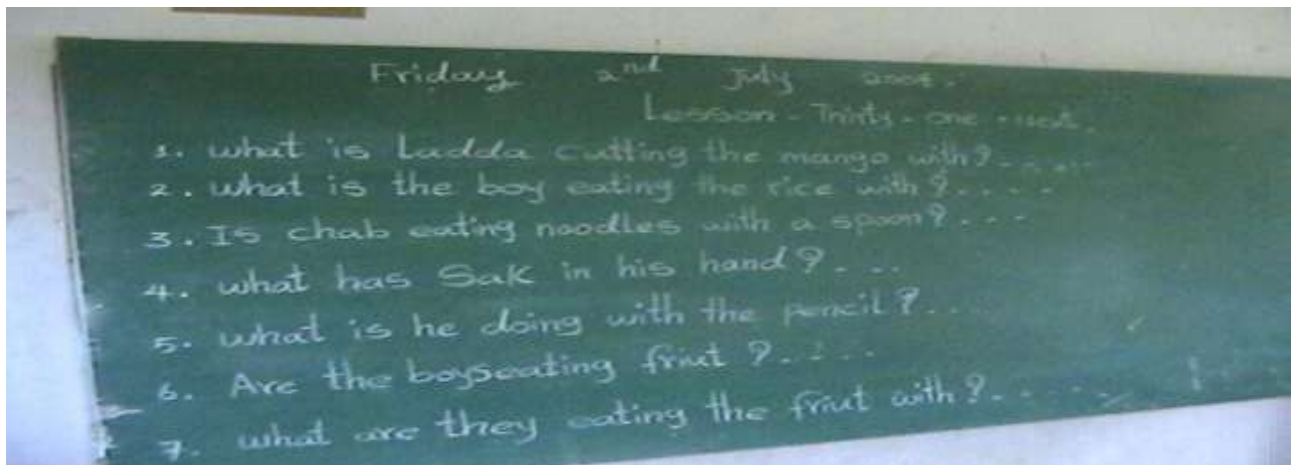
Picture 46: Students were busy copying lessons on the chalkboard.



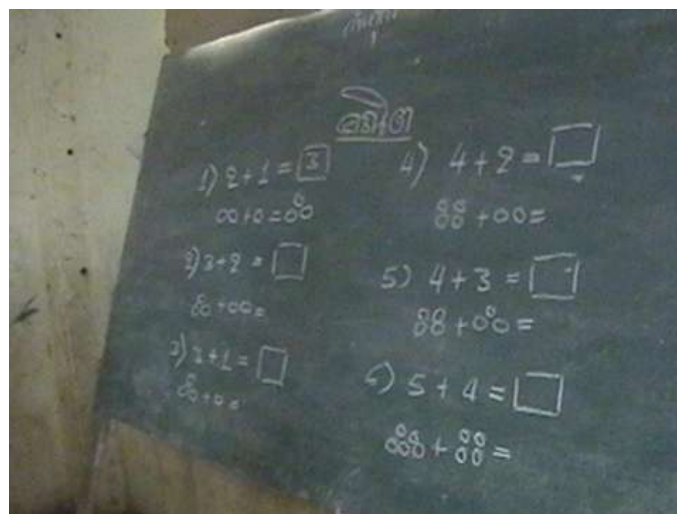
Picture 47: This was a physical education class being held outside of the school.



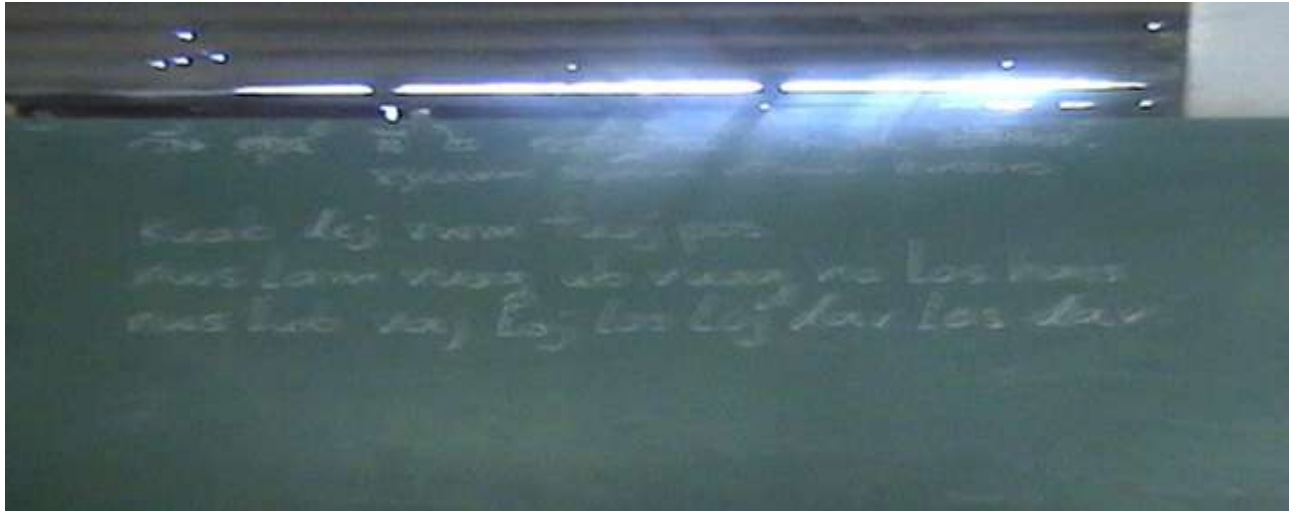
Picture 48: One of the few posters with English alphabets.



Picture 49: Students learned English as they prepared to come to the United States.



Picture 50: This was an elementary class. The lesson utilized numbers and circles for students to learn about addition.



Picture 51: In addition to English, mathematics and Thai, Hmong students also learned Hmong.

★ STATISTICS OF ENGLISH STUDENTS .

Time	class	M	F	Amount
6:00-8:00 A.M.	9	215	150	365
4:00-6:00 P.m	8	180	90	270
6:00-8:00 p.m	9	250	110	360
Total	26	445	350	795

Note.

(Picture 52: English Classes)



(Picture 53: Classroom)

The above chart (picture 52) provides an overview of the number of classes offered throughout the day. It included both primary and secondary students as well as adults who wanted to learn English in preparation for relocation to the US. Beneath the chart is another photo (picture 53) of the classroom. Boys sat on one side; girls sat on the other. The walls and benches were dirty. Some kids didn't have shoes.

The Children Inside Wat Thamkrabok

As we walked through Wat Thamkrabok, besides meeting students at the Hmong school, we saw children playing without much supervision. These pictures provide a glimpse and “at a glance” of their lives. They were riding bikes, babysitting, hanging out together, playing in the open field and alleys, and utilizing and maximizing the limited resources as toys and playgrounds that were a part of their daily lives. For these children, this was their way of life. They had little or no opportunity to experience anything else outside of Wat Thamkrabok.



(Picture 54: Looking Beautiful)



(Picture 55: Boys Being Boys)

Picture 56: Tire



Picture 57: Rocks



Picture 58: Double



Picture 59: Rooster



Picture 60: Alley Kids



Picture 61: Double 2



Picture 62: Babysitting



Picture 63: Babysitting and Playing



Picture 64: Hanging and Playing



Picture 65: Lasting Impression

Other Sights and Scenes Inside Wat Thamkrabok

These were other sights and scenes I observed as we toured Wat Thamkrabok in 2004 (pictures 66-78).



Picture 66: This was a kitchen inside a house. roads.



Picture 67: This was one of the main



Picture 68: Leisure and recreational activity.





Picture 70: Collapse

Picture 70 shows the remains of a house belonging to one of the first families that had left Wat Thamkrabok to the US. Their house was torn down to prevent others from moving in.



Picture 71: Alley, Open Sewage



Picture 72: Thai Vendor; Picture 73: Kids Playing; Picture 74: Sewage



Pictures 75-78: The streets of Wat Thamkrabok in 2004

Inside Wat Thamkrabok 2009

Pictures 79-86 give snapshots of Wat Thamkrabok in January 2009. It was once a vibrant community, now with about ten houses left. In picture 80 below, I stood in the middle of the main road. A dog stood in the background. Trees were beginning to take over what were once inhabited areas. In 2004, the streets were filled with people and life.



Picture 79: House in January 2009



Picture 80: The Researcher and Traveler



(Pictures 81-82)

Children used to play in these streets in 2004. In 2009, the streets were deserted; houses were patched up, waiting for the last families to leave for the United States. When we arrived at the Wat, a Hmong gentleman greeted us. He thought we were Thai. He gave us a tour around the few remaining houses. On the tour, I asked him, “Why there are only about ten Hmong families left?” He shared that most families had to stay behind because of medical reasons. Once that was taken care of, he said that they would leave as well, sometime in April 2009. He said that a few families would not be leaving; they chose to stay.



(Pictures 83-85)

The houses in these pictures show the deterioration. The bottom picture (85) shows the remaining concrete that was once a foundation to a house.



(Picture 86: Last Impression)

In picture 86, two UW-Green Bay students, our tour guide, and my sister stand in the middle of the main road through Wat Thamkrabok. Overgrown trees took over what were once houses, storage areas and shops. The streets used to be crowded with people, shops and life. Soon the place will be desolated; much of the Hmong experience at Wat Thamkrabok will only be preserved in memories, stories, and written documents.

Conclusion

It has been five years since the first Hmong families left Wat Thamkrabok and resettled in the United States. Many Hmong families relocated to various states including Minnesota, California, and Wisconsin. It is still unpredictable how they well they will adjust to their new environment. The challenges they face are in some ways vastly different than those confronted by previous Hmong Americans including those of education, employment and social transition. One of the new such challenges involves their intra-cultural relationships with other Hmong Americans who have been in the United States longer or are US born Hmong. Even within the Hmong culture, there will be differences in values and beliefs among various Hmong social classes. One of the positives they will experience is the many organizational resources and

services that have been put in place to help with their transition. It is critical that more research continue to be done on their American experience.

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