



ສະມາຄົມ-ລາວ ອາເມຣິກັນ ແຫ່ງເມືອງ ແອລຈິນ

Lao-American Organization of Elgin, Inc.

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Mr. Vinya Sysamouth
 C% United Laotians Community Development or ULCD
 Lao Studies Conference
 PO Box 410874 San Francisco, CA 94141-0874

Dear Mr. Vinya Sysamouth;

On behalf of Lao-American Organization of Elgin (L.A.O. of Elgin), we'd like to congratulate you, the NIU Organizers, the San Francisco Bay Area Organizers, the National Organizers, and the Lao American Community of Elgin on your efforts in organizing this First International Conference on Lao Studies (ICLS). We sincerely hope that this historic event will succeed beyond your expectations.

We are glad to sponsor this event in the amount of \$1000. Furthermore, we will:

1. Word of mouth advertisement.
2. Distribute your flyer to our members and to anyone at various Grocery stores.
3. Authorize the Lao American Community of Elgin to use our name.
4. Assist the Lao American Community of Elgin on the Lao Cultural Night.

As you have elegantly stated that, " Not only will the meeting bring scholars together from all over the world, it will also **unite the people of the Lao Diaspora** who are eager to participate in a professional conference devotes **specifically for Lao Studies**". As part of Lao Diaspora (Lao refugees), we sincerely urge you to add another topic to the Lao studies, which is how to democratize our motherland in a **peaceful manner** through **reconciliation**. Topic needs to be researched, debated, discussed, formulated by **Scholars** and hopefully will be used as a guide. Perhaps it can be offered as an accredited course in which the papers can be presented on the 2nd Conference. Our compatriots shall have the right to enjoy freedom like we do here.

We also would like showcase the historical ties between the city of Elgin and the Laotian people on page 2. Today, several thousand Laotians refugees live in the Elgin and the surrounding cities of the Chicago area. Finally, we'd like to inspire the world with President Bush's quote, "Freedom is on the march".

Sincerely,

Executive Director
 Mr. Khamphet Ramangkoun

Chairman of the Board
 Mr. Thomas (Khamta) Chanthabandith

CHAPTER X - MODERN ELGIN **Reference:** ElginHistory.com - Elgin: An American History by E. C. Alft

The small, landlocked Kingdom of Laos was internally divided during the war in Vietnam. The Royal Lao government, which held the Mekong River region, was given American aid to fight Pathet Lao guerrillas in the mountains who were allied with the North Vietnamese. Mountain tribes, among them the Hmong, were recruited by the CIA to disrupt communist supply lines and gather intelligence for the U.S. forces.

When the U. S. State Department invited the city of Elgin to adopt a "sister city" in its People-to- People program of cultural exchange, the Laotian capital of Vientiane was suggested. That city's mayor, the governor of Luang Prabang, province and the inspector general of the ministry of the interior visited Elgin in 1966, and formal acceptance came the following year. Greetings were exchanged between city officials, books from Vientiane were received by the Gail Borden Library, and in the fall of 1967, photographs of Elgin, its products and city flag were displayed in Vientiane at the annual That Luang festival.

A civic banquet held in Elgin in 1968 invited Laotian students attending Southern Illinois University. Among them was Saysana Songvilay, who would later become a U46 teacher and head of the Illinois Lao Association. The featured speaker was Robert S. Zigler, a native of Elgin, who had served as a training officer in Vientiane for the U.S. Agency for International Development. The mayor of Elgin was later invited to attend a state dinner at Washington, D.C., in honor of the crown prince and princess.

Handicapped by the language barrier and unsettled conditions in Laos, further relations between Elgin and Vientiane dwindled to brief visits by Laotians who stopped off at O'Hare Airport on their way to Washington. The sister city arrangement had little or no connection with the later influx of Laotians.

The withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam strengthened the Communist Party in Laos. Late in 1975, businessmen in Vientiane began closing their little shops. One by one they slipped across the Mekong River to Thailand on the other side. With the Pathet Lao takeover that year, those Laotians who had been identified with American businesses and government agencies left their country in large numbers. Dwindling food supplies and fear of persecution increased the flood of refugees. They were crowded into Thai camps, where they were starved, robbed and assaulted while waiting for sponsors for emigration to the free world.

The first refugees from Laos to Elgin arrived in January 1976. They were Phet Oudom, his wife, Sonsy, and their son, Bounhasith. He had been a district manager for Coca-Cola and had served as instructor for the U.S. Information Service. This family and others were sponsored by a group of seven area churches, but most of the first wave came under the aegis of Elgin Community College, which was then coordinating local resettlement through a federal grant.

About 250 had already arrived when the YMCA assumed the resettlement function late in 1979 and the college turned to providing classes in English, drivers training, welding, machine tooling and plastics. Three Y contracts with the U.S. State Department prepared for the resettlement of 565. Y representatives met them at O'Hare and furnished food, essential clothing, temporary housing and counseling services. Not all of the refugees came to live in Elgin. A substantial number were located in Hanover Park, and there has been much secondary migration sparked by family reunification and job opportunities elsewhere. A YWCA project that began in 1979 offered social services, job counseling and placement, as well as training in consumer and survival skills.

The initial arrivals were among the better educated and more highly skilled from Vientiane and villages along the Mekong. Later waves were rural people, many of whom were illiterate in their own language. The refugees presented a sharp contrast to earlier Elgin immigrants, whose vanguard were usually young men seeking their fortunes. The Asians came in extended families, with both children and aged, and were dependent upon public aid. The federal government compensated state and local agencies for welfare and medical programs benefitting the refugees. Their religion was a mixture of Buddhism and a belief in the spirit world. Most of them were affected by malnutrition, disease and the trauma of the Thai camps.

It was difficult to maintain family unity when forced to live apart by the shortage of low-rent housing. The children learned American ways faster than their parents, leading to a generational conflict common to immigrants. But the Laotians were eager to learn and impressed employers by their cooperative attitudes. A small grocery opened in 1978, sold rice in fifty-pound sacks and took on the role of a social center. The first public celebration of the Lao New Year took place in April 1981 at the armory, where guests were introduced to the string-tying and water-sprinkling ceremonies.

The 1980 census reported 646 Asians within the city limits. This may have been an undercount. The school district's bilingual census taken in February 1982 listed 500 Laotians, 42 Vietnamese, 23 Hmong, and 24 Cambodians. A study by the Elgin Area Chamber of Commerce suggested that a saturation point in terms of support services had been reached, and recommended that future placements be limited to the immediate family members of those already here.