

Becoming Texans, Becoming Americans: Vietnamese in North Texas Oral History Project

Charlton Oral History Research Grant Final Report

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The "Becoming Texans, Becoming Americans" Oral History project documents the stories of Vietnamese refugees who arrived in North Texas following the fall of Saigon in April 1975. The twelve oral history interviews conducted through the Charlton Oral History Research Grant from Baylor University's Institute for Oral History illuminate the particular challenges faced by Vietnamese refugees in the post-Vietnam War era and also offer a window into the process of immigrant integration.

This final report summarizes the background and focus of the project, the narrators, and some themes which emerged in the interviews.

Background

Today's highly integrated and thriving North Texas Vietnamese population is the latest chapter in a story that began as the Vietnam War ended and waves of refugees left Vietnam. From the first months after the fall of Saigon in April of 1975, North Texas became home to Vietnamese refugees, with many churches and other organizations sponsoring refugee families. Subsequent waves of refugees made North Texas their home, for reasons related to weather, family ties, or jobs, after initially settling elsewhere. Now, North Texas is home to the fourth largest Vietnamese community in the United States, with over a third of the Vietnamese people in Texas living in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex.

Focus

The interviews conducted for this project highlight the experience of Vietnamese refugees and their families as they integrated into neighborhoods, schools, churches, temples, and jobs. The focus of the project was to document and preserve the stories of the community and to understand the particularities of integrating into the social and economic landscape of North Texas. What were the challenges- in the workplace, in school, in housing- that Vietnamese refugees faced as they became Texans?

The project succeeded in documenting the experiences of Vietnamese refugees in North Texas. The oral history interviews revealed details about adult refugees' experience finding work and navigating the American workplace, child refugees' experience of integrating into North Texas school districts, attitudes about social class, and thoughts about identity.

Narrators

Since refugees arrived in North Texas as both individuals and family units, the narrators for this project were selected to represent a variety of ages at the time of arrival to the United States. Of the twelve narrators, five were young children at the time of their arrival, four were teens or young adults, and three were adults. This variety contributed to a more complete and nuanced understanding emerging over the course of the interviews of the different ways in which immigration and integration are experienced at different ages and stages of life. In addition, as will be discussed below, age at the time of arrival has clear implications on notions of identity.

Themes

Though the stories shared by each of these narrators were unique and particular to their own experience, several clear themes emerged from the interviews taken as a whole.

Survival

Despite the range in ages of the twelve narrators interviewed for this project, all recounted dramatic stories of escape and survival in their recollections of their departure from Vietnam and subsequent arrival in North Texas. As is typical of the refugee experience, departure from home for most narrators was sudden and uncertain. Most narrators recalled the confusion and lack of information about if, where, and when they would be able to settle outside of Vietnam.

Role of Language

English language ability clearly played a large role in the integration process for Vietnamese refugees in North Texas. In the case of the older narrators who were heads of households, the level of English language ability initially determined what type of work could be obtained. All of the narrators who came as adults described extra efforts they undertook, even while working full time to support their families, to improve their

English skills. For younger narrators, language learning came from immersion into the school system and peer relationships.

Workplace Experiences and Reflections on Social Class and Discrimination

Many of the narrators interviewed for this project came from middle class or relatively wealthy families in Vietnam. Upon arrival in the United States as refugees, they experienced a shift in social class, with many of the adults in their families taking on manufacturing, cleaning, and food preparation jobs due to limited language abilities. In exploring these questions of work and social class, the narrators emphasized the overwhelming desire to survive and sustain the family over any concerns about shifts in social class. Likewise, though narrators recounted experiences of racism and discrimination, the primary focus remained on family survival, economic advancement, and educational attainment for the next generation.

Small Kindnesses

Each of the narrators interviewed for this project related how specific experiences of kindness and generosity from individuals in the host community made a significant difference in their families' ability to adjust to and survive starting their lives over in a new and unfamiliar country. Small gestures of welcome, including strangers donating cars and motorcycles to their new Vietnamese neighbors to sponsor families driving across town to purchase large bags of rice so refugee families could feel more at home, resonate even forty-five years later.

Identity

The interviews conducted for this project illuminate the narrators' views about identity-what it means to be American, what it means to have Vietnamese heritage, and how they think about their own identities. One of the more interesting themes to emerge in these interviews was the way that the narrators' experience as refugees informs their experience as Americans. Narrators revealed a great deal of flexibility in thinking about their own identities, framing their identities as Americans around the ideas of freedom and opportunity. Also, narrators described the ways that their backgrounds in Vietnam and their lives in America have shaped their understanding of freedom, equality, and the rule of law.

Outcomes and Future Projects

This project will culminate in a museum exhibit and website. Each of the narrators interviewed for this project are being photographed by noted Texas photographer Byrd Williams IV. The resulting portraits, artifacts donated by the narrators, and audio clips from the interviews will be on exhibit at the Crow Museum of Asian Art in Dallas in the spring of 2020. The website will be developed to keep an online presence for the exhibit beyond its physical presence at the museum. Preliminary plans are being made for the exhibit to travel to a location within the Vietnamese community in Richardson or Garland.

In October of 2019, I will serve, along with two of the narrators from this project, on a panel entitled "Are You Good People?:The Vietnam War, Refugees, and the Politics of Asylum" at Collin College. The title of the panel comes from the words of Dr. Walter Nguyen, one of this project's narrators, as he described his rescue from a fishing boat as he escaped Vietnam. The event is open to students, faculty, and community members.

Finally, I hope to propose a paper for the 2020 meeting of the Oral History Association in which I can present this project and its outcomes.

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Finally, I would like to thank my narrators for sharing their stories with me and with future scholars. Each of these individuals revisited and shared difficult memories. Their stories are important and valuable in illuminating the experience of refugees, the process of starting a new life in a new country, and what it means to "become American."