

## **Becoming Texans, Becoming Americans: The Making of the Vietnamese Community of North Texas**

### **Project Description and Purpose of Research**

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<sup>1</sup>. North Texas churches in particular countered a political climate marked by deep political divisions over the just-ended Vietnam War and anxieties over refugees' ability to integrate in American society. Multiple congregations welcomed many Vietnamese refugee families into their communities after the fall of Saigon in April 1975. Elite Vietnamese who had worked for the American government, including the military, dominated the first wave of refugees who escaped as U.S. forces evacuated Vietnam. Later refugees came from all economic classes. They included some of the approximately two million "boat people" who fled Vietnam in the chaos that followed the capture of Saigon by communist forces in 1975 as well as those who took part in the United Nation's Orderly Departure Program from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. North Texas thus participated in one of the largest refugee resettlements in American history.

Today, North Texas is home to a vibrant, successful, and fully integrated Vietnamese community, comprised of those original refugees and their children and grandchildren. Urban centers like Dallas and Arlington, as well as suburbs like Richardson and Garland, enjoy a rich network of Vietnamese institutions, including churches, television stations, radio stations, newspapers, cultural organizations, arts programs, and professional groups, serving a diverse Vietnamese population. The very nature of their migration makes the Vietnamese diaspora different than other immigrant groups in the United States; though the civil war in Vietnam was the ultimate cause of the flow of refugees from Vietnam to resettlement in the United States, distinct educational, class, and religious divisions are reflected in each wave of migration. Those differences shaped the opportunities and integration of the Vietnamese in the United States in general and in North Texas in particular.

The earliest refugees had held high government or professional positions in Vietnam, but they had difficulties finding similar occupations in Texas, in part due to language, professional requirements, and prejudice. Many moved to other work, including blue-collar jobs and management of small stores and restaurants. The

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<sup>1</sup> United States, Census Bureau, *The Vietnamese Population in the United States*, 2010, accessed May 5, 2018, [http://www.vasummit2011.org/docs/research/The Vietnamese Population 2010\\_July 2.2011.pdf](http://www.vasummit2011.org/docs/research/The%20Vietnamese%20Population%202010_July%202.2011.pdf).

boat people were even less prepared to enter the Texas job market and usually took up blue-collar occupations.<sup>2</sup>

The Vietnamese population in Texas, mirroring the trends in the Vietnamese population in the United States, is more heterogeneous in terms of education, social class, English proficiency, and income than many other Asian immigrant groups. In large part, this diversity is tied to the nature of this group's immigration story. Prior to the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Asian immigration to the United States was barred by the 1921 Immigration Quota Act. The 1965 law created a path to immigration for Asians, with visas for education and skilled work. As a result, many Asian immigrants who came to the United States after 1965 came with (or were pursuing) high levels of educational attainment and made intentional choices to create new lives in the United States. As refugees, the Vietnamese population that came to the U.S. in and after 1975 represented all ages, classes, and levels of education and, due to the sudden and traumatic nature of their departure from Vietnam, arrived bearing the physical and emotional toll of that journey and the burden of building a new life in an unfamiliar place.

Though efforts have been made to document the history of the Vietnamese in other states or in the United States in general<sup>3</sup>, academic study of this group in Texas is limited. Focus has been on the Vietnamese, primarily fishermen, who settled on the Gulf Coast and the larger Vietnamese community in Houston<sup>4</sup>. Outside of passing mention in the online church histories of St. Pius X parish in Dallas and St. Peter Vietnamese Catholic Church in Garland, there is little documentation of the story of the Vietnamese in North Texas. The experience of the Vietnamese who settled in North Texas is different than that of their fellow Texans in Houston and the Gulf Coast; this oral history project seeks to fill this gap.

Through oral history interviews, this project will capture and preserve the stories of the people who created this community—both the refugees and their families and the church and community leaders who facilitated their successful resettlement in North Texas. Using oral history to hear and tell the story of this community is a powerful path to understanding the challenges experienced by both refugees and community groups as they worked to integrate Vietnamese refugee families into the schools, churches, and local economy of North Texas. As the original matriarchs and patriarchs of the refugee families are reaching their seventies and eighties, it is important to record their memories of the experience as well as their reflections on their “American experience.” In addition, the perspectives of the children and grandchildren of these families offer the opportunity to understand the generational differences of the refugee experience as well as the way that

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<sup>2</sup> Handbook of Texas Online, Fred R. von der Mehden, “Vietnamese,” accessed May 5, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/pjv01>.

<sup>3</sup> VietStories is a Vietnamese American Oral History Project housed at UC Irvine and the First Days Story Project is a StoryCorps/American Experience project that preserves the stories of Vietnamese refugees and Vietnam veterans.

<sup>4</sup> See “Vietnamese of the Texas Gulf Coast Oral History Project” housed at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

the process of integration was experienced differently by the generations. Finally, the retrospective stories of community and church leaders who welcomed and supported refugee families will be a powerful testimony to the personal and local manifestations of international relations and federal immigration and refugee policy.

### **Previous Research and Plans for Interviews**

My previous research combines a scholarly interest in the factors that affect the integration of immigrant groups and a lifelong fascination with the stories of immigrants. As the child of immigrants and a long-time resident of North Texas, I have spent my life observing the courage, resilience, and grit of immigrants as they make their lives in a new place. I am particularly interested in the ways that language, culture, and religion interact to shape the integration process.

I am an experienced practitioner of in-depth interviewing, having used these methods in my doctoral research in which I studied the integration process of ethnic Japanese labor migrants from Latin America to Japan. In addition, my experience with interviewing and qualitative research methods is evidenced in my book *Opening the Door: Immigration, Ethnicity, and Globalization in Japan* (Routledge, 2002), for which I conducted in-depth interviews with a variety of subjects.

This oral history project will focus on Vietnamese refugee communities in North Texas, focusing on Dallas, Richardson, Garland, and Arlington. The interviews will target refugees arriving in North Texas between 1975 and 1985, their children and grandchildren, and the community and church groups that welcomed them.

Some of the areas that I will explore in the interviews include the following.

- Migration story
  - How did you get here? When? Were you resettled elsewhere first or did you arrive initially in North Texas?
- Initial resettlement experience
  - Were you sponsored? By whom? What was the experience like?
- Experiences with entry into the labor force in the United States
  - What kind of work did you do in Vietnam? What kind of work did you want to do in the United States? What work did you end up doing? What was the experience of finding a job as a refugee from Vietnam?
- Role of religion in the integration process
  - What role did church or faith play in your experience? Were you sponsored by a church? What type of interaction did you have with religious leaders or church communities? Has religion been a sustained part of your life in the United States?

- Role of social class
  - Did you transition from one social class to another when you came from Vietnam to the United States? What are your perceptions of the role of social class in Vietnam and in the United States?
- Experience as parents/students
  - What was your experience with the American school system? How did you navigate parenting in a new country? What were the challenges?
  - For narrators who came to the United States as young children...what was your experience as a Vietnamese student in school in Texas in the 1970s and 1980s? What were the challenges both academically and socially?
- Experience of language learning
  - Describe your experience in learning English? How important has language learning been in your integration process?
- Experience in housing
  - Where did you live when you arrived? What was the experience like? Were there many other Vietnamese in your community? What role did your housing circumstances play in your integration process?
- Experience with discrimination and racism
  - Describe any discrimination you may have experienced as you adjusted to life in the United States.
  - Describe your experience with other marginalized groups in the United States, such as African Americans, Latino/as, and other Asian American groups
- Experience/Engagement with politics
  - Are you engaged with local, state, or national politics in the United States? How engaged are you with the politics of Vietnam?
- Feelings surrounding identity
  - How do you think of yourself in terms of your identity? What does it mean to you to be American? What does it mean to you to be Vietnamese?

## **Proposed Outcomes**

Support from the Charlton Oral History Grant will allow me to conduct the interviews in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex and present them to the community in a number of ways. I would like to create a website and interactive exhibit, including recordings of the interviews, artifacts and photographs collected from the narrators, and archival materials. Ideally, this exhibit will be presented in conjunction with observations of the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of Saigon in April of 2020. The exhibit will be presented at either the University of Texas at Dallas (located in Richardson) or the Richardson Public Library, where I already have established relationships. Wherever the exhibit is hosted, it is important that the Vietnamese community is invited to be a part of the presentation of their story. I envision the website as being an ongoing project that will serve as a resource to both researchers and the larger community.

I will propose to present this research to the annual meeting of the Oral History Association in 2020. In addition, I intend to present this research at the annual Fulbright Association conference in Washington, D.C. in 2019 or 2020, the Fulbright San Antonio conference in 2020, as well as at the Texas Center for Working Class Studies conference in March of 2019 or 2020.

Finally, I hope that this work will lead to a larger project documenting the stories of immigrants to North Texas and the ways that immigration and immigrant integration have led to different paths to becoming Texans and becoming Americans.