

**FROM THE MORNING CALL – Allentown PA**  
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## **ARTICLE 2 OF 4 IN A SERIES**

**A way of life woven from misery** - Hmong's flight from Laos to U.S. is first step in the transformation of the quilt industry.

Story by Kathleen Parrish Photography by Douglas Benedict Of The Morning Call

*Second of a four-part series*

At night, in a crowded refugee camp in northern Thailand, untold miles from the Laotian home she fled at a moment's notice in May 1975, Bee Kha slept on the raised wood floor of a hut and dreamed of America.

Maybe one day she would reach that golden, faraway land, but for now she and her family lived behind barbed wire in the red-dust squalor of Ban Vinai. It is where Bee bore the couple's second son, laboring on a bamboo mat while her husband, Yia, cooled her face with a paper fan.

The camp was nothing more than an endless array of thatched roofs. Ten families packed each makeshift concrete dormitory, with one unfurnished room apiece. Home. Sometimes it was so hot, Bee covered her three young children with wet towels. In the beginning, there were no toilets, and the stench of human waste hovered over the camp like a poisonous cloud. There was no nearby stream or creek to bathe in or wash clothes. The sole source of water was a solitary well in the middle of a dirt field; water was drawn with metal buckets, one of the few gifts bestowed on families when they arrived at the camp. The malaria-bearing mosquitoes were relentless.

"Baby die every day in camp," Bee said. "Lots of people sick. The same water you drink, the same water you wash your clothes, everything."

Food was scarce. Every three days, the Khas were given one raw chicken leg and two cups of white rice. But like most Hmong, Yia was resourceful. He supplemented the family's diet by hunting squirrels with a homemade crossbow and hiking to distant waterways to catch fish with a hook formed from a pin.

Bee and Yia were among the first wave of refugees to reach the camp. That is because Yia had been one of thousands of Hmong men and boys — some as young as 9 — recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency to fight a secret war against the communists in Laos before and during the Vietnam War.

The United States wasn't supposed to be in Laos. President Dwight D. Eisenhower had signed a treaty recognizing its neutrality. But his administration was fearful that if the tiny Southeast Asian country fell to communism, nearby nations would follow. It was the same "domino theory" that drove U.S. foreign policy throughout the 1950s and '60s and ultimately led to the protracted and catastrophic campaign in Vietnam.

From 1972 to 1975, Yia flew a T-28 fighter jet for the Americans, dropped bombs on the Pathet Lao — the Laotian communists — and won medals for accuracy. During this time, he became the personal pilot to Vang Pao, who had become the leader of the Hmong guerilla army. Other Hmong fought in the jungles, rescued downed American pilots and disrupted the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the communists' main supply line that led from North Vietnam through Laos and into South

Vietnam.

The Hmong were attractive targets for CIA recruitment. The insular hill tribe had a long tradition of resisting authority and assimilation. They were loners, needing no one, demanding nothing. In China, the land of their origin, they scattered into the southern mountains rather than be absorbed into the broader Chinese culture. They preferred altitudes above 3,500 feet — cloud country. That's where their primary cash crop, opium-producing poppy flowers, grows best.

Bill Lair, the CIA agent who first enlisted the aid of the Hmong, knew the ruggedly individualistic tribe would abhor the communist philosophy of subjugating the individual into the service of the state.

In the winter of 1959-60, Lair met with Vang Pao, then a colonel in the Royal Lao Army, who had the trust of the clans. It was clear to Lair that if anyone could organize the Hmong it was this man.

Vang Pao was a natural leader, canny in the ways of guerilla warfare, with a broad, infectious smile that melted the hearts of women — he had at least six wives— and endeared him to men.

On a cold December day high in the mountains in the heart of Laos, the two struck an alliance, cementing it with a stiff handshake: The United States would supply arms, and the Hmong would fight to defend their homeland.

### **A flight to safety**

Lair, who was called "Father" by the Hmong, was awed by the hill people's stamina. "They could run like the wind through the mountains," he said. He also respected their intelligence.

In those early days of their shadow war, the Hmong believed they had gained the respect of the American people. Part of that belief came from hundreds of quilts sent to them by the Plain People of Pennsylvania.

"They were beautiful, like my grandmother used to make," said Lair, who spent many a chilly night in the mountains of Laos beneath the layered fabric of a patchwork quilt. "They felt the American people were supporting them and the quilts were evidence. They knew they didn't come from the government. They were handmade. You could tell."

Exactly who sent the quilts is lost to Lair through the hazy veil of memory, but he still recalls their warmth and the gratitude of the Hmong who slept beneath them.

About 20,000 Hmong fighters died during the war, in addition to the civilians who perished and the 100,000 who were cast out of their villages in 1975 after Saigon fell and the United States pulled out of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The Pathet Lao, the victorious communist regime, considered the Hmong traitors and persecuted them for their alliance with the United States.

Many Hmong fled through the jungles to refugee camps in Thailand, a dangerous journey that took months on foot. So that enemy soldiers would not hear infants' cries, mothers gave their babies opium. Sometimes they gave them too much and the babies died.

The Mekong River — the final watery stretch of the exodus — proved most deadly. Few Hmong could swim and many drowned trying to cross on bamboo rafts or inflated plastic bags. Pathet Lao sharpshooters picked off many who managed to stay afloat.

Because of Yia's status in Vang Pao's army, the Khas were spared this treacherous passage. They were among the 2,500 soldiers and family members airlifted to the Thai camps.

The hot days seemed endless in the camp. Bee passed long stretches of time by embroidering the family's clothes with colorful stitches called paj ntaub (pronounced pan-dow) meaning "flower cloth." It requires focus and a steady hand to produce the intricate images that appear fine and fluid, as if colored by crayon.

She also embroidered story cloths, fabric wall panels depicting life in Laos and Thailand. These cloths chronicle the history of the Hmong, who were without a written language until 1950, when missionaries created one for them. Until then, they relied on oral storytelling and story cloths to preserve their heritage.

Some of Bee's panels told the story of the Hmong's flight to Thailand. Tiny stitches show her home in Longcheng in Laos — and steady streams of Hmong carrying children and elderly on their backs to Thailand.

She sold the cloths to relief workers and bought vegetables with the few dollars she earned. The dream of migrating to America — rumored by other refugees to be a land where giants roamed — sustained them. It was their best hope. They couldn't return to Laos, and they could not remain in Thailand because the government considered them illegal immigrants.

Many languished in Thai camps for years while awaiting asylum in the United States. The process, which involved churches and other nongovernmental agencies obtaining resettlement contracts from the U.S. government, was agonizingly slow. The last of the refugees, more than 15,000, weren't resettled until September 2005, 30 years after the camps opened.

But for Bee and Yia, salvation came comparatively early. The Mennonite Central Committee — the relief, development and peace committee of the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in Canada and the United States — began resettling refugees across the country in 1978. During the next eight years, Lancaster area Mennonite churches sponsored 30 Hmong families, including the Khas.

### **The kernel of an idea**

Pearl Lapp was sitting in the pew of Sandy Hill Mennonite Church, a modest brick and stucco one-story building on the border of Lancaster and Chester counties.

It was a Sunday in May 1978, and the pastor was exhorting the parishioners to sponsor a refugee family from Thailand. It sounded like a good idea, but Pearl wasn't interested. She had two teenage children, was active in the church and volunteered at a homeless shelter, among other places. She didn't need another charitable task.

Her husband, Mel, thought otherwise.

"They can stay with us," he told the pastor, after learning that the trailer the church planned to buy for the family would not be available until after their arrival.

Eight thousand miles away, Bee, Yia, their 4-year-old daughter and two sons, ages 3 and 9 months, excitedly began to prepare for their journey, thrilled to be leaving the wretched conditions of the refugee camp in which they had languished for three years. There wasn't much to pack. Everything they owned fit into one garbage bag and an attache case.

On June 9, 1978, the family boarded a plane for the United States, a two-day trip that ended in Harrisburg where they were greeted by Sandy Hill's pastor.

Bee was haggard, worn thin like sea glass; her dress was covered with urine from her baby. Hmong children ran naked in the camps, and Bee had never seen a diaper.

The Khas met their hosts the next day, standing in awkward silence in the cozy living room of the Lapps' ranch home outside Paradise, Lancaster County. "She is beautiful," Bee remembers thinking of Pearl, admiring her curly brown hair and wide eyes, so different from her own. No giants here, she thought, but my, Americans have big noses. Likewise, Pearl was carefully eyeing Bee and her family. "How thin, how frightened they look," she thought, "like lost little birds."

Pearl smiled, hoping her expression of welcome would melt their fear. Bee handed Pearl a wall hanging she had embroidered in the dusty refugee camp. Pearl gasped at its finery: stitches small as specks of sand, brilliant colors pulsing with life. Bee had a gift, Pearl could see.

Pearl sewed too. Not intricate story cloths, but quilts, like the famous Lancaster ones that fetched hundreds of dollars in tourist shops and at charity auctions.

Pearl didn't quilt for profit, only pleasure and philanthropy. She enjoyed the droning song of the sewing machine as she stitched together the fabric squares of the quilt top, each piece falling into place like a puzzle. She relished the camaraderie of her sewing circle as they engaged in the art of quilting: connecting the top, the batting and bottom with decorative hand-stitching.

As the six summer weeks the Khas lived quietly in the Lapps' basement slipped by, an idea formed in Pearl's mind. At first, it was no bigger than a mustard seed. But it grew and grew.

Pearl would teach Bee to sew quilts.

### **With eagerness, a skill forms**

The first lesson was on Pearl's enclosed porch. Bee didn't need coaxing. Her fingers itched with excitement the moment she beheld the sleek, white sewing machine.

"I want to try it," she said.

Pearl was happy to show her how. Soon, Bee was pulling the cloth through the machine with ease.

Pearl then taught her how to piece together a quilt, connecting scraps of fabric into stars, squares and complicated geometric shapes that mimicked the designs of the Amish. Once again, Bee excelled.

"My country, no sewing machine," she said. "Everything by hand, so here it not hard."

Other American skills did not come easily to Bee. She failed her driver's test four times. She finally passed, not by learning to read English, but by memorizing the correct responses.

She applied that same steadfast determination to quilting, and it wasn't long before her reputation as an expert seamstress spread through Pearl's sewing circle. A few weeks after Bee arrived, Sadie Smoker, a member of Sandy Hill, started a home-based quilt business. She asked Bee if she would applique a wall hanging of burgundy tulips and green leaves. Bee earned \$35 for her effort.

She was one of the first, perhaps even the first, Hmong woman to create an applique cover for a Mennonite woman to quilt.

"I needed people to help me," said Sadie, now 83, and a resident of Stroudsburg. Sadie knew she couldn't replicate Bee's perfect stitches.

Sadie sold quilts from her home but also found a ready customer in The Old Country Store, a quilt

and fabric emporium on Route 340, the main strip in Intercourse and the heart of Lancaster tourism. Housed on the spot of the area's first store, it was and still is a popular tourist place and a paradise for quilt aficionados searching for the latest designs or the romance of old ones. The Old Country Store sold Sadie's quilts on consignment.

In the 1970s, few Amish and Mennonite quilters knew how to applique. They didn't need to because there wasn't a demand for appliqued quilts.

Tourists preferred Sunshine and Shadow, Nine Bars and Double Irish Chain, patterns made famous in 1971 when the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City mounted an exhibit called "Abstract Design in American Quilts." The show was produced by Jonathan Holstein and his late wife, Gail van der Hoof, two New Yorkers who became enchanted with quilts during weekend jaunts to Pennsylvania.

They spotted their first Amish quilt at an antique shop in 1970 along Route 30 in Lancaster. It covered the springs of an old brass bed.

"It was the most amazing quilt I had ever seen," said Holstein, recalling the majestic scarlet and olive green Amish Bars masterpiece. "It looked like it had been made by a demented angel."

The shop owner wanted \$11 for both the bed and the quilt, but agreed to sell just the quilt for \$5.75.

The couple took it home to New York City and hung it on the wall of their apartment. Like detectives trying to crack a case, they searched the quilt for clues to its mysterious beauty.

It was perfect, Holstein said. Spare yet sophisticated, a garden of color framed in black, a stained-glass window washed in light that now hangs in a quilt museum in Nebraska. That the drab-garbed Amish had crafted it, despite the constraints of a religion that frowns on self-expression, was even more perplexing.

"How could these women, who did not consider themselves artists and who had no formal training in art, use color and form to convey complex emotions?" he said.

Holstein and van der Hoof decided to hunt for more and enlisted the help of an Amish woman, Hannah Stoltzfoos. She spread the word that an unusual couple from the big city was offering money for old quilts made from 1880 to 1940, considered the golden age of the craft.

Holstein and van der Hoof amassed about 200 of the bold and evocative quilts, and 62 of them were displayed at the Whitney. It was the first time bed covers had been displayed as art.

"It started a landslide of people searching for Amish quilts," Holstein said. The supply of antique quilts was quickly depleted, but that didn't diminish their appetite. If they couldn't have an old one, a reproduction — by Amish hands — was just as good.

Then in 1983, quilt design was revolutionized and expanded with the creation of a pattern called Country Bride.

Bride's magazine, required pre-nuptial reading for all American women, was refurbishing an old home in Lancaster for a newly betrothed couple. The couple wanted a quilt for the bed and asked Mennonite quilt maker Rachel Pellman, who then was managing The Old Country Store, if she would design it.

After several stabs with a drafting paper and pencil, Pellman and colleague Craig Heisey came up with Country Bride, a romantic motif of mauve and blue lovebirds, hearts and tulips. It

appeared in the June/July 1983 issue. It was a hit.

And the technique that so entranced the buying public — the artistry that created the lovely depictions in a way radically different from the traditional Amish approach — was applique.

"Lots and lots of people started coming into the store saying, 'Can I have the pattern for that?'" said Pellman, who has written several quilt books. "We started making Xeroxed pages of it and putting them in manila envelopes. We sold hundreds of them."

Suddenly, the hunt was on for seamstresses skilled in the art of applique. The Hmong were there, ready with the skill and eager for the work.

Sadie Smoker was among the first to benefit from the new demand for applique quilts. The Old Country Store placed an order with her for five Country Songbird quilts — a spinoff of the Country Bride pattern. Bee did the applique.

"Those quilts went like hot cakes," Sadie said. "I was really busy."

So was Bee. When she wasn't working for Sadie, she and Pearl would visit other quilt shops, trying to sell Bee's work.

"We went to every place that sold quilts," Bee said. "Amish people give me work. They help me. They don't mind where we come from."

That was true, but it wasn't the whole truth. It was one thing to outsource work to a Hmong seamstress; it was quite another to give her credit. The tourist paying \$700 for an "Amish" quilt did not want to see an Asian name on the tag.

One day, Pearl took Bee to a quilt shop on Route 340, where Bee's appliqued tops lay in abundance, brought there by one of her Pennsylvania German employers.

Pearl asked the shop owner if she would buy quilt tops directly from Bee so the Hmong seamstress could earn a greater profit.

"The lady said, 'No, these are all Amish quilts,'" Pearl recalled, but she sensed the woman knew better.

Bee did not confront the woman about her dishonesty. New to the country, she was grateful for the work. But her acceptance, and that of those who followed, created a culture of silence and denial that continues today. While the Hmong sew most of the applique that grace quilts, few in the industry acknowledge it. Sellers advertise quilts as Amish-made no matter how many Asian hands have taken part in their crafting. Some shop owners go a step further to protect their trade secret, forcing the Hmong to use back entrances and arrive off-hours to make deliveries.

In the face of such indignities, Bee kept sewing. At night, in the cramped, dim trailer that was the family's home after leaving the Lapps' basement, she put the children to bed and then sewed until her small hands ached and her eyes burned.

Their new surroundings weren't as primitive as the refugee camp, but they still had to rely on their wits and resourcefulness to survive. The children improvised, too. They didn't have many toys so they amused themselves by jumping into piles of Bee's fabric. The cloth also made a good tent, a princess dress, a superhero's cape.

Yia had found work as a machinist, but money was tight. The family grew onions, green beans and tomatoes in a small garden. Pearl bought their children clothes at garage sales and Bee dreamed. Not of America, but of Laos. The unconscious tumbling images were always the same,

tinged by heat and the remembrance of an empty stomach. Desperation. She was back in the camp. Her family was on a bus to the airport, but she had to stay behind. You can't leave, a faceless man told her.

No, no, I live in America now, she cried, her heart clenching in fear. Please, please, my children. No. I live in America.

On those nights, Yia stroked her hair, tucking dark strands behind an ear. "It's OK," he'd say softly. "We made it."

Bee, sweat-drenched and trembling, was not so sure.

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