

**FROM THE MORNING CALL – Allentown PA**  
**April 25, 2006. Copyright – The Morning Call**

## **ARTICLE 3 OF 4 IN A SERIES**

**Prosperity amid a new set of trouble** - At height of demand, cheap quilts flood the market, bringing Lancaster County back to earth.

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

*Third of a four-part series*

Spring had come to Lancaster County, soft and warm as the velvet on a newborn calf's nose. Fields bloomed emerald, dogwood trees unfurled plumes of white cotton and Amish men traded the black hats of winter for summer straw.

The days pulsed with new life. Bee and Yia Kha held that feeling close, ingesting it whole and praying their luck would hold.

It was April 1984, moving day. After five years in a trailer with as many children, the couple had bought a three-bedroom ranch house on a wooded lot in the burg of Narvon. It wasn't very big -- Yia, in his good-humored way, said the family outgrew it the day they moved in -- but it was their own, the most concrete symbol yet of their slow and steady ascent from crushing poverty to the comfort of the American middle class.

Before the Khas unpacked, the Hmong pastor of their newly formed Christian church blessed each room to bring good fortune and cast out any evil spirits lurking in closets or corners. With memories of the Southeast Asian war they had helped America fight still searing their dreams, the Khas had suffered enough. They weren't taking any chances.

Nearly all the Hmong families of Lancaster were there to celebrate the Khas' housewarming. Many of them already knew the pride and satisfaction of crossing the threshold of a new home, because six years after the Mennonites had sponsored their desperate passage to the United States, the former Laotian refugees were well on their way to self-sufficiency.

They had found jobs in factories and machine shops and on farms, bringing an industriousness that delighted their American bosses. The Hmong rarely called in sick and never complained. Fast learners, they approached each task with the same single-mindedness that had made them such tenacious soldiers.

Yia worked as a machinist at J.D. Kauffman Machine Shop in nearby Christiana. The money wasn't great, but Bee supplemented the family budget with quilt work, putting away about \$25 a week. The extra income had helped build the down payment for the house; now it would help with the mortgage.

By this time, Bee was no longer the only Hmong seamstress practicing applique -- the art of stitching fabric illustrations onto cloth -- for the area's Amish and Mennonite quilt makers. Other Hmong women, equally skilled in that delicate art and eager to supplement their incomes, had witnessed her success and wanted a share of it. If Bee Kha could stitch her way into a new home, why couldn't they?

This prospect especially tantalized one woman: Bee's cousin, Lomao Moua.

Though they had been neighbors in Laos and shared a similar story of harrowing escape, Bee and Lomao couldn't be more different. Where Bee was shy and demure, gentle and warm-hearted, Lomao was shrewd and intense, fierce and self-confident, hardened by her flight from the communists who had vanquished her homeland. There, she had held an elite position in Hmong society. Her parents lived in a city, not the Laotian hills, and they owned a general store. Her uncle was the brother-in-law of Vang Pao, the leader of the Hmong guerilla army.

This status gave Lomao an opportunity few Hmong girls received -- not even Bee -- an education. At age 6, she began to learn to read and add numbers at a private school started by her uncle for his children and other relations.

That is where Lomao's confidence was forged, and she used it to become the most famous Hmong seamstress in Lancaster County, prosperous enough to build a grand home in Gordonville with a side entrance to her quilting business.

She started out in the same humble fashion as Bee and other Hmong, trudging from shop to shop with garbage bags full of applique covers, hoping for a sale. Before long she was sewing custom orders. She also tried to sell reverse applique, another traditional Hmong technique, but only Emma Witmer, the quilt shop owner who had opened her arms to Bee a few years earlier, would buy these squares. Most shop owners considered them too foreign, too exotic, too Hmong.

Lomao worked constantly. During the day she stitched mesh filters for commercial fryers at a factory. She didn't mind the stifling heat, but the dust was another matter. It floated through the air like dandelion spores, tickling her nose and covering her ebony hair in white powder. At the end of the day, she emerged into the sunlight, a specter in sweat pants.

She felt invisible. At one time, she desired nothing more than to slip past watchful eyes, to melt into the shadows and disappear. She had done it in May 1975 in Laos. In front of thousands of desperate, pleading eyes. Like her cousin Bee, she had won a place on an American transport plane out of the country because of her uncle's connection to Vang Pao.

Their departure had to be a secret lest it cause riots among those left behind, so she donned two sets of clothing and sewed four silver coins into the seam of a belt. As the car sped toward the airport at Longcheng at 3 a.m., she gazed out the window, hoping to remember the shadowy lines of wood huts, jutting rocks and mountains heavy with grass and trees.

In less than a year, she would be in the United States where once again she would spend a time in obscurity, though not for long.

Lomao and her husband, Vang, whom she met in the Thai refugee camp, resisted the commercial temptations of modern American life. The couple never dined out with their four children, not even at McDonald's, because \$20 spent in a restaurant could buy three days' worth of meat and vegetables at the market. They didn't go to the movies, and they didn't buy new clothes. They put their money in the bank for a new home, a modest car and cheap furniture. It wasn't conspicuous wealth by American standards, but it was grandiose compared with Laos. There, they had fashioned cooking utensils from gourds. In Lancaster County, they used electric rice cookers.

At night, Lomao cut and stitched fancy patterns until her eyes grew bleary and Vang called her to bed. It took two weeks to applique one standard-size quilt top and she earned \$90. She tucked some of the money away. The rest she sent to family in Laos.

By 1987, Lomao and most of a growing number of Hmong women in Lancaster County were working in the quilt business. Not only did they find work there, but with Mennonites and Amish in New York, Ohio, Indiana and South Carolina. Sewing didn't require fluency in English and, in

keeping with Hmong values, mothers could stay home with their children.

"There wasn't a single shop that didn't use Hmong," Lomao said. "Ninety-nine percent of the applique is done by Hmong."

Central to this growing, thriving Hmong community was its church. Early on, the congregants met Sunday afternoons at a Mennonite church in Hinkletown. In 1987, with contributions from the Mennonites, they built their own church, the Hmong Alliance, a modest white stucco building in Leola.

The church remains the hub of the community today. It has grown to 450 members, including the children and grandchildren of the original 30 Hmong families who arrived in the late 1970s.

For a year now, services have been offered in Hmong and English to accommodate the first generation raised in America. These young people are indistinguishable from their text-messaging, iPod-obsessed classmates. With no ties to the old ways, they are drifting further from the traditions and language of their parents. They are student athletes, Scouts, scholars, many of them bound for college or already ensconced in the working world.

They are American success stories whose fortunes are tied to the making of quilts. But success hasn't been the universal experience of the Hmong in this country.

### **Without support, a bleak vista**

Fresno, Calif., is a city in the San Joaquin Valley four hours north of Los Angeles. The Hmong who settled here during the same diaspora that brought the hill people to Lancaster are among the poorest people in the nation.

The Hmong who arrived in Fresno in the 1970s were as ambitious and industrious as their brethren in Pennsylvania, but something was missing: the economic safety net of the quilting industry and the hospitality of the Plain People. In Lancaster County, entire Mennonite congregations devoted themselves to the welfare of Hmong families.

In comparatively poor Fresno, such individual attention was impossible given the influx of tens of thousands of Hmong. Their arrival further strained a social service system overburdened by other immigrant groups. There weren't as many helping hands. Today, about 25,000 Hmong live in Fresno compared with about 500 in Lancaster County.

To make matters worse, they were greeted with suspicion and resentment by natives who did not know what to think of the primitive hill people. They watched the newcomers start cooking fires inside their homes and use the toilet to clean rice and concluded that visitors from the Stone Age had landed among them. Soon enough, fantastic stories of animal sacrifice, bride kidnapping and ancestor worship found their way into newspaper headlines.

In many ways, life on the West Coast mirrors that of the Thai refugee camps where the Hmong were interned for so many years. In Fresno, far from the tidy neighborhoods of central Pennsylvania, the Hmong live in small apartments or gloomy, crowded public housing units with peeling wallpaper, shabby mismatched furniture and squawking pens of chickens. Each unit is fronted by a garden slightly larger than a pizza box where the Hmong grow lemon grass, green lettuce, onions and an assortment of medicinal herbs used to treat everything from broken bones to menstrual cramps.

In Lancaster, some Hmong arrived as Christians, having been converted by missionaries. Others soon joined the faith. But in Fresno, Hmong have remained animists who believe that every object, even rocks, trees and stars, has a spirit, good and bad. Spirits are part of the everyday world. They can be appeased by slaughtering a cow or angered by stepping on the wrong rock. It

is a world of magic, sacrifice and ceremony suffused with ancient rituals honoring birth, courtship, marriage and death.

When Lomao's nephew got married in Fresno last April, the guests gave the couple hard-boiled eggs. The dinner -- a rooster and hen -- served as symbols of union. The bride, Chee Yang, bedecked in a traditional Hmong wedding costume -- a beaded breastplate over a long black tunic and green sash -- lit a candle to alert the spirit world that a marriage was taking place.

Then the elders of the clans sat down to negotiate a bride price over cans of Budweiser.

Funerals offer the same mix of ritual and celebration. When Sia Mee Her, a 77-year-old Fresno grandmother, died last year, mourners huddled around her casket for three days lest an enemy put something under her body, like a bone. That would cause trouble in the spirit world.

The Hmong in Fresno continue to struggle. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, half in Fresno County receive public assistance and 57.7 percent have incomes below the poverty line. Only 15 percent own their own home.

In Lancaster County, just 8.3 percent of Hmong receive public assistance and 7 percent have incomes below the poverty line. Slightly more than half are homeowners. From this vantage point, some Hmong are inclined to offer a surprisingly harsh judgment of their fellow countrymen, attributing their struggles to a refusal to embrace Christianity.

"The Hmong in Pennsylvania do so well because we are Christian," Lomao said. "We do not depend on the government. We raise our children with the mind to stay off welfare. We have nice homes and cars. Our God is an awesome God. He is the big ruler in our lives."

That didn't mean the Hmong in Lancaster were insensitive to the struggles of their brethren elsewhere in the country. They felt an obligation to help them and at the same time saw an opportunity to expand their thriving quilt business by using low-cost labor. Starting in the 1980s, they drafted their far-flung clanswomen into the quilt industry, sending patterns and fabric, thread and directions to sisters, aunts and cousins in California, Minnesota and Ohio. During visits to each other's homes, they offered advice on measuring the placement of fabric cutouts to create symmetry on the quilt's canvas.

This kind of outsourcing wasn't new. The Amish and Mennonites had long shipped work to out-of-state relatives and friends. While the image of one bonneted woman quilting by gaslight was still alive in the public's mind, the reality had become much different. With the advent of the demand for applique, the Amish quilt became the Hmong quilt, subsumed into the impersonal economics of supply and demand.

### **A Hmong shop on quilt row**

The Hmong's growing role in Lancaster quilting had always been hidden to maintain the mystique of an object that represented America's past. In the late 1980s, the stakes became even higher as quilts soared in popularity and tourists flocked to Pennsylvania Dutch country, hungry for a one-of-a-kind treasure.

So the Hmong -- in quilts as in war -- continued to toil in anonymity.

Lomao -- true to her independent, almost ornery nature -- was the exception. She did not want the Amish or anyone else telling her what to do.

In 1992, she opened her own quilt shop, Pennsylvania Hmong Crafts, in Intercourse. It was on quilt row on Route 340, four doors down from The Old Country Store, where the craze for

appliqued quilts started in the 1980s.

Lomao stitched most of the quilt tops herself, but sent some to her sister in Wisconsin. Like other shop owners, she used only Amish and Mennonites for quilting, because they are unsurpassed at the art of stitching together the three layers, just as the Hmong are masters at applique.

Through her store, she was one of the first to draw attention to the contributions of the Hmong to Lancaster quilt making.

"When I had my shop I tell my customers the truth," she said, narrowing her dark eyes defiantly. "The quilt top is done by me; the quilting is done by Amish. Sometimes they already know. Sometimes they don't care."

People started taking notice. She was commissioned by the United Nations to sew a quilt that was displayed around the world. Her face became a symbol of the Lancaster Hmong success story. She appeared in national publications and received a grant from Pennsylvania to study Hmong needlework in Laos.

Life was good, not just for Lomao but the entire Hmong community. The Lancaster quilt industry was raging, and the shops could barely keep up with the demand. Lomao's phone rang with orders from customers. They wanted Irish Chains and Daisy Chains, Country Bride and Country Love.

It seemed the whole world wanted to crawl under an authentic Amish-style quilt. Sleep would be sweeter, deeper and more serene.

But things were about to change.

In 1992, the same year Lomao opened her shop, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., was embroiled in a controversy over its decision to sell the rights to produce four antique quilt patterns to a firm that used Chinese labor to hand-stitch the designs. They might have been made by hand, but they were churned out by the thousands.

The cheap knock-offs flooded stores and infuriated quilters who felt the Smithsonian had belittled American history by authorizing foreign reproductions of the country's most cherished quilt patterns. In Lancaster, handmade applique quilts were selling for \$600, but consumers anywhere in America could now buy a Chinese-made king-size quilt for \$149 at J.C. Penney or Sears.

Quilting groups across the country protested angrily on the steps of the Smithsonian. Quilts had become more than bed covers. They were art forms steeped in historical and cultural significance. To put their creation in foreign hands, they argued, was criminal, especially when American quilters were hurting for business.

"It was an economic issue, a patriotic issue and a women's labor issue all rolled into one," said Shelly Zegart, a founder and president of The Alliance for American Quilts. "It created a ripple down the line. Every other company known to man jumped on the bandwagon and started having their quilts made in China and selling them cheap in catalogs and stores across the nation. It really caused the collapse, for a while, of the antique quilt market."

At first, the Smithsonian was unapologetic about enabling reproductions of the treasured designs. Its only mistake, museum spokesmen said, was not identifying the quilts as reproductions "Made in China."

Nevertheless, after more than a year of public criticism, the Smithsonian relented, halting overseas quilt production. But it was too late.

The patterns had been released and people had grown accustomed to buying inexpensive quilts.

Lomao's fledgling business was hit particularly hard. "Because I am Asian, they think I sell cheap imports," she said.

It was the first time the quilt industry had been touched by the rising winds of globalization. Lomao held on for five years. Then, in 1997, one of the biggest tourist attractions in Lancaster County, the Sight & Sound Entertainment Centre in Strasburg, burned down. The Christian playhouse had drawn roughly 700,000 visitors a year. Until it reopened 18 months later, tourism was severely depressed. The quilt trade, so dependent on foot traffic, also declined.

Lomao closed her shop the year of the fire and ran her business from her house, taking her quilts on the road to sell at craft shows along the East Coast.

Others, who depended on Amish and Mennonite shop owners for jobs, didn't fare as well. Some quit the business, returning to the steady but menial jobs from which quilting had rescued them, packing boxes at Pepperidge Farm or Tyson Foods.

Those who kept sewing worked longer and harder for less money. Hmong families kept coming from the refugee camps of Thailand and from other places in the United States. They joined the quilt trade, competing for ever-smaller slivers of profit.

For some, there was only one way to stay in business.

**kathleen.parrish@mcall.com**  
610-820-6627