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ARTICLE 4 OF 4 IN A SERIES

Imports buoy Thai villages, hurt Lancaster

County sales - Despite controversy, Hmong find home and friendship in their adopted land.

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

Fourth of a four-part series

Tshaj Sawm Huj is barreling down the highway in a tan pickup, gnawing strips of dried squid as he heads for the province of Phrae in northeastern Thailand to pick up an order of quilts for buyers in Pennsylvania and Ohio.

He has already stopped twice to stretch his back. It has troubled him for years, a legacy of his childhood labors in the bamboo fields where he worked after his father left the family. Day after day, he carried 180-pound loads of bamboo on his back, until two vertebrae fractured under the weight.

Those fields of his youth are a distant and bitter memory now as he speeds along this highway past rickety fruit stands, watery rice paddies and shops selling teakwood furniture. He has traversed this two-lane stretch regularly for more than two years since he abandoned farming for the quilt trade.

A green sign on a low wall marks the entrance to the village. The white characters are in the wavy Thai script, with an English translation beneath: "Quilts."

Signs like this are common throughout northern Thailand, but particularly in the village of Ban Pa Deang in the province of Phrae, where villagers learned quilting from a missionary in 1976 and have been selling quilts to tourists locally for years. But the American export trade has given the village and others like it throughout the region a whole new market, becoming the kind of economic engine poor communities dream of discovering.

Tshaj, a Hmong middleman in the quilt trade, pulls into the paved driveway at the home of Ratee Jaidet, one of his Thai contractors. They greet each other, their voices cresting and falling like ocean waves.

"Sawatdee khrap," Tshaj says in Thai. Hello.

Ratee used to work for a woman in the village — the proprietress of a shop called American Style Quilts. Then her husband died, compelling her to oversee her own crew as a way to earn more money.

"If no quilts, we would have nothing," she says through a translator, her dark eyes filled with ineffable sadness. "I am very thankful God gave me the opportunity to do this."

Her workers, friends and neighbors, gather daily in small groups at her home to quilt appliqued

tops. On this day, a quilt occupies the frame and the women sit side-by-side gossiping and giggling. They could be participants in an Amish quilting bee, except that they're sitting barefoot on the floor in capri pants and shorts. Bolts of brightly colored fabric stand against the wall like toy soldiers. A ceiling fan twirls the hot air.

Tshaj loads the quilts he's come to collect into the back of his truck. His wife, Xalia, is nine months pregnant and he doesn't want to dawdle.

Finally home in Chiang Mai, the second-largest city in Thailand and a three-hour drive from the village, he hugs his 18-month-old son and greets Xalia. She sits on the floor in a flowered sarong, sewing in the fading light.

She and her husband are the starting point of the overseas production of roughly 20 quilts a month. She cuts the fabric and appliques the designs sent to her by American Hmong contractors. Tshaj then takes his wife's piecework to the villages, where Ratre and others like her finish the quilts. Tomorrow, Tshaj will mail his latest load of quilts back to their Hmong contacts in America.

That a one-time Hmong farmer in Thailand is sending quilts to Pennsylvania Dutch country — the epicenter of traditional quilting for two centuries — seems incongruous. But this is what the handmade quilt industry has become in the last five years. Once a cottage industry dominated by the Amish and Mennonites, it is now a global melding of American and overseas labor.

It reached this point in circular fashion.

A small group of Hmong, a Laotian tribal people who fled first to Thailand and then as refugees to America after the Vietnam War, landed in Lancaster County in the late 1970s. Their arrival coincided with an upsurge in popularity of early American-style quilts. They brought their native skills to bear in adopting the art, forging partnerships with the Amish and Mennonites.

The Hmong, industrious and hardworking, quickly attained a middle-class lifestyle, in part from income Hmong women earned doing piecework for their Pennsylvania German neighbors. As years passed, however, profits thinned as they vigorously competed for a share of the market.

Seeking ways to make quilting lucrative again, they have followed the lead of corporate America: turning east to find cheap labor. In Lancaster County, a handmade quilt can easily cost \$400 to make and the best can sell for thousands of dollars. In Thailand, a quilt can be crafted for \$65 to \$80. The Hmong in Pennsylvania who import these Thai-made creations don't make as much per piece as they would by doing the work themselves. But they can turn a tidy profit by importing dozens without ever having to turn a stitch.

Most of these quilts aren't the breathtaking masterpieces found in Lancaster County's better quilt shops. Some of the colors clash with American aesthetics and the workmanship can be sloppy. But they're good enough to fool the unschooled eyes of tourists.

Now, these ersatz offerings are sold at Lancaster County quilt auctions, over the Internet and in some shops. Many shop owners have no idea this is happening. But in the last year, some have found out and are refusing to accept quilts from certain Hmong women.

Here is globalization at its best and worst. It has elevated entire Thai villages out of Third World squalor and has given Tshaj, who also is a Christian pastor, resources to travel to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam for mission work to help Hmong communities. But it also is threatening an industry built on authenticity and homespun values. It's one thing to buy a quilt labeled "Made in China" from J.C. Penney or Pottery Barn. It's another to travel the scenic roads to Lancaster County in search of a local handmade treasure and instead be sold an import.

"It's fraud," says Peter Seibert, president of the Heritage Center of Lancaster County. "It's stuff being peddled as high-end art and it's not. We see lots of tourists coming to Lancaster County who plunk down real money to buy an Amish quilt."

The Amish and Mennonites are as guilty as the Hmong, Seibert contends. For years, shop owners have hidden the participation of their Hmong piece workers, allowing tourists to believe the quilts offered for sale in the shops are made exclusively by Pennsylvania German hands.

"It's playing to the fact that no one will track it down," he says. "It cheapens the real McCoy. I know it's a market economy, but there's no regulation about this. Because of these two communities, we put on our white kid gloves and hold them above reproach because we think they're special in our society. I think the Amish and Hmong need to clean up their act."

Flooding the market

The Thai connection started about five years ago with people like Ka Sirirathasuk, a Hmong seamstress from Upper Darby, Delaware County, who went to Thailand to teach Tshaj's wife, Xalia — her sister-in-law — how to applique.

"I thought it would help her family," says Ka, who makes Amish-style quilts and sells them over the Internet.

This gave the Hmong couple entree into the quilting business and set Tshaj up as a middleman. Ka's mother-in-law, Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun, who also lives in Upper Darby, began placing orders and importing quilts.

Pang Xiong also introduced her stepson, who lives 380 miles north of Bangkok on the border of Laos, to the trade. About once a month, she sends him 10 plastic bags containing everything needed to make a quilt — fabric, batting, instructions and a mock-up of the design for his roughly 20 seamstresses to follow. She pays him \$150 for each quilt.

She also imports quilts from Quilts American Style, a small shop in Phrae.

Among the largest exporters to Hmong in Pennsylvania are Saksit and Jongkonlak Jinapanya, a Thai couple who have an open-air stand at the frenetic Warorot Market in Chiang Mai.

Jongkonlak honed her talents by following patterns from a tattered copy of "The Country Love Quilt" book co-written by Lancaster County's Rachel Pellman, who launched the applique quilt craze in the 1980s with her romantic pattern for Bride's magazine.

The couple say they now have 300 to 400 quilters under contract from various villages throughout Thailand. Their traditional creations — Double Wedding Rings, Broken Lone Stars and Rose of Heart — hang in the shadow of a banyan tree.

For years, the couple has sold quilts to tourists in Thailand. The buyers do a double take when they see the price: \$75.

"They really surprised and excited," Jongkonlak says through a translator. "When foreigners ask the price, they don't bargain."

But now, much of their stock goes to Pennsylvania, the land of greater profits. They ship 200 quilts a month there, says Saksit, barefoot and bespectacled in a stained yellow shirt and shorts.

He refuses to disclose the identity of the Hmong woman to whom the quilts are shipped, saying she asked him to keep her name a secret. Every few orders, he says, she changes her name and address. That is most likely because his Pennsylvania contact does not have an import license,

required to bring anything into the United States for commercial sale.

A new low

Such secrecy is why no one knows for sure how many Thai-made quilts are being sold in Pennsylvania. But the bulk end up at auctions such as the one in New Holland, a staple in Lancaster County for 15 years.

Here, in a stuffy garage off Route 23, hundreds of quilt tops, finished quilts and antique quilts are sold to top bidders every two months. Amish and Mennonite shop owners buy finished quilts to supplement their stock and tops to farm out to domestic quilters.

One sticky June day, women in dark dresses and stiff white bonnets and bearded men in straw hats pack the rows of folding chairs as auctioneer Alan Diffenbach opens the bidding on a quilt top in a staccato rap.

"Fifty, 55, 60, 65-is-all, 65-seems-a-little-cheap, help-yourself 65, 60-it-is, SOLD," he chants. "No. 142, Hearts of Rose."

Cindi Lee, a 32-year-old Hmong woman, gasps at the \$60 sale price, a new low. She is there on behalf of a relative — a woman whose identity she prefers to keep to herself — who has been importing quilts from Southeast Asia, a key reason auction prices have sunk.

Years ago, the going rate to applique a Hearts of Rose pattern — a heart-shaped wreath of flowers requiring thousands of stitches and hours of bleary-eyed work — was \$200.

Cindi, who has left the quilt business because it's not worth her time, concedes the Hmong must shoulder some of the blame for the deflated prices. The Amish and Mennonites, stewards of the industry, don't like it either.

"There's some hard feelings," says Todd Reinhart, operations manager for A&C Diffenbach Auction Inc., which runs the New Holland auction. In his role, Reinhart overhears the discontent in the voices of longtime clients frustrated by the changing times. "They feel like [the Hmong] are trying to take over a historical thing that's associated with Amish and Mennonites."

These feelings led the Gordonville Fire Company last fall to restrict the number of quilts for submission after Hmong seamstresses started dumping scores of appliqued goods at its regular fund-raising sales. Gordonville and other area fire companies use proceeds from these auctions to help defray costs for new trucks and equipment. But there were too few bidders for the bounty of quilts.

"They started bringing an ungodly number of quilts," said Ralph Shank, chairman of the quilt committee at the Gordonville Fire Company. "We limited it to 17."

Not only is this excess eating away at fire company profits, it's hurting the Amish and Mennonites, too.

Last summer, Hannah Stoltzfoos, an Old Order Amish grandmother who has operated a quilt shop from her home for the past 30 years, made a Country Blessing quilt after her 18-year-old grandson died from complications of an enlarged heart.

She planned to sell the quilt at auction to offset the hefty medical bills. Amish and Old Order Mennonites, who do not carry health insurance or collect Social Security, rely on quilt sales to cover such expenses as well as provide a cushion in old age and money to help their children buy farms.

In the past, auctioneers made special mention of charitable sales, sometimes boosting prices to \$3,000 or more. Not this time. There were so many quilts, imported ones, according to Hannah, that her offering was lost in the bidding shuffle.

She walked away with \$350 for a quilt that she would have sold in her shop for \$1,250.

Still heartbroken by her grandson's death, she blamed the Hmong for flooding the sale.

"They're taking over," she said.

A backlash in quilt country

Every July, collectors from as far away as Japan and Germany, some traveling by private jet or helicopter, come to the nine-day Pennsylvania German Festival in Kutztown, a pretty college town in Berks County on the northeast edge of Amish country. Visitors cram the fairgrounds to ogle and bid on the 24 quilts chosen "Best of Show" from more than 1,500 entries.

For years, the work of Hmong women has been accepted at the festival. Two years ago, a quilt that had been appliqued by a Hmong seamstress and quilted by a Mennonite woman earned a blue ribbon. But when quilt director Amy Lindenmuth revealed that alliance during bidding, she angered some onlookers.

One was a Vietnam War veteran, who was unaware the Hmong had fought on the side of the United States in that conflict. He complained to Lindenmuth that she was paying too much homage to Asians at a Pennsylvania German festival. The Hmong seamstress was upset, too, and asked Lindenmuth not to mention her ethnicity again, fearing it would hurt the quilt's value.

Lindenmuth was disturbed by the reaction on both sides. For years, she has guarded the bloodlines of quilts allowed entree to the festival. Imports are strictly forbidden.

At past festivals, experienced quilters only scrutinized entries for stains, missing stitches and other imperfections. But that has changed. Now they look for clues that a quilt has been made overseas.

"The fabric is usually the dead giveaway," said David Fooks, executive director of the festival. "Things can be copied but so much of the traditional Pennsylvania Dutch patterns are very distinguishable and unique. I've seen [Asian] attempts. The birds will look different, the flowers will look different."

Last year, Lindenmuth confronted several Hmong seamstresses about whether their quilts had been made overseas. They said no, Lindenmuth said, but "I felt they were not being truthful."

She told them to stay away.

"If they come back I may not put their quilts in for judging or on the floor," she said. "I don't think it's fair to the traditional quilters."

Considered one of the most prestigious in the country, the auction has a reputation to protect. It draws curators looking for quilts for museum collections, and last year, a jewel-toned quilt called Floral Delight fetched a record \$15,500.

That's not to say some imported quilts aren't slipping by the judges.

"I can't tell you that's not happening," Fooks said. "If the quality is there, if the sewing is there, if

the fabric is American-made, we're going to accept it on faith that it was made locally."

But in the better shops in Lancaster County, the good-faith word of a seamstress is no longer enough. To protect their reputation and the authenticity of their products, some stores no longer accept quilts on consignment from area seamstresses who show up with finished products.

Instead, they control each step of the process, doling out the work to contract seamstresses they know and trust.

"We insist on documentation," said Lori Martin, manager of Village Quilts in Intercourse. "We need to stand behind our quilts. To do that, I need to know where the fabric comes from, how they applique and piece."

At some quilt shops, Pang Xiong, the Upper Darby woman who is licensed to import quilts from Thailand, has become a pariah.

"Three shops don't take me anymore," she said.

Pang Xiong said that another Hmong seamstress revealed to the shop owners that she was peddling Thai-made quilts. A number of Hmong quilters disapprove of the imports as much as their Pennsylvania German counterparts and are dismayed at the impact on prices.

Nevertheless, Pang Xiong feels unfairly singled out because she knows other Hmong are still deceiving shop owners with imported goods.

"Many people done it, but they don't talk," she said. "I say, 'You liar.' They say, 'I don't care.'"

Some bonds aren't questioned

Outside Emma Witmer's New Holland quilt shop, a cardboard sign dangles from the clothesline where she displays her goods to grab the attention of passers-by.

"Who took/stole the quilt?"

Emma was pulling peas in the garden when someone made off with the \$500 blue and white Indian Wedding Ring quilt on display outside her famous store. The theft unnerved her. She'd never had a quilt stolen before, and she decided to take no chances with its replacement, booby-trapping the clothespins with upholstery tacks so would-be thieves would prick their fingers.

"It's anti-theft protection," she says, clearly pleased with her resourcefulness. "But," she adds, "I wrote 'caution' on the pins."

It is this gentleness of spirit, this tolerance, that has allowed Emma to welcome and acknowledge the artistry of the Hmong ever since her first encounter with a shy, dark-haired refugee who was looking for sewing work 21 years ago.

All this talk of foreign markets and imports and globalization puzzles and perturbs Emma as she goes about her daily business of selling these glorious creations. None of her quilts come from overseas.

It pains her to see quilts, a symbol of family, of security, of history, provoking divisions. After all, quilts were the thread that united these two cultures. To Emma, an Amish quilt is a Hmong quilt; a Hmong quilt is an Amish quilt. She has never been silent about her bond with the Hmong and her admiration for their skill. The shape of the quilter's eye, the shade of the quilter's skin means nothing.

"There's always some people who grumble about everything," she says, a shadow crossing her age-softened face. "There's competition — they make too many, but they would say we make too many. But that's human nature."

And what of Bee Kha, the young woman who came to Emma's doorstep all those years ago and opened the master quilter's eyes to the finery of Hmong stitchery?

On this April day, she is at Cedar Lane Dry Goods, a fabric emporium not far from Emma's shop. She is here to buy fabric for a quilt that will be auctioned by the Mennonite Central Committee, with the proceeds to help refugees worldwide.

She's surprised to hear that fellow Hmong have moved the process of quilt making overseas. But this has not hurt her business or her reputation as a prolific and adroit seamstress.

"I'm very busy," she says.

Anna Mae Horning, an Old Order Mennonite who runs Cedar Lane, greets Bee as she enters the crowded store. The two have known each other since Anna Mae, now 25, was a young girl scampering around her mother's skirts as she cut fabric and waited on customers.

One of Bee's quilt tops that she had on consignment, a burgundy and green Stars In Common, sold the other day for the respectable price of \$163 and another customer wants the same top but in different colors.

"That's a good one," Anna Mae tells her in clipped Pennsylvania Dutch cadence. "We need Bee. She needs us, but we need her, too."

Bee giggles, then quickly covers her mouth. She would never say it, but she knows it is true and her dark eyes shine brightly.

She has always known it is true. From the time Pearl Lapp, the Mennonite woman who took her and her family in when they were penniless refugees, saw Bee's talent in the beautiful needlework of a traditional Hmong story cloth. From the time Sadie Smoker, a member of Pearl's sewing circle, first asked her to sew for money. From the time she appeared at Emma Witmer's shop and shyly asked, "Can I sew for you?"

Almost 30 years ago, haunted by nightmares of endless flight from endless war, she found sanctuary in the eye of a needle and the thread of a community. She stitched together the pieces of her past and in the process built a life filled with everyday pleasures — tea with her old friend Pearl, cradling her first granddaughter in the warmth of her living room, and Sunday prayer at Hmong Alliance Church with her husband, Yia, at her side.

Along the way, she helped transform the quilt industry. But she gives this truth no thought. It does not matter.

On this morning, she steps out of the Cedar Lane shop into the bright sun. It is spring again and the fields are washed in a vivid green that transports her thoughts back to Laos. But only for a moment. She is too busy to ponder ghosts.

There is a quilt to make. Bee heads home.

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