

Wang Chou Vang

Most of the pertinent information regarding Vang appears on the attached report for the Chippewa Valley Museum, with a few exceptions.

Wang now lives in Menomonie:

Menomonie, WI

In October 1989 he had a serious accident in which his eyes were burned when a defective radiator part burst. His vision is very cloudy at present, and the extent to which or the rate at which his vision will return is not known.

When we visited Vang he had the "seesaw" (probably misspelled) described in the CVM report. He had also made another when, this time with a gourd for the soundbox over which was stretched the rawhide of a raccoon Vang had hunted here in Wisconsin.

Supplementary materials: 1) taped interview and index; 2) color slides and B&W photos.

Availability of instruments: Vang is not willing to loan one of his two bamboo flutes. He has trouble getting the right sort of bamboo and what he has got has often cracked under the extremes of climate in Wisconsin. Since he plays what he has, he is understandably reluctant. He is, however, quite interested in seeing Hmong culture receive recognition from a museum. Consequently he was extremely generous in donating the gourd/raccoon seesaw which I turn over to the Cedarburg Cultural Center with this report.

Special considerations: I think Vang would be a good performer in connection with programming for the exhibit. He could play the seesaw as well as his flutes.

CHIPPEWA VALLEY FOLK ARTS SURVEY

Field Report

Contact: Wang Chou Vang

Eau Claire, Wisconsin 54703

County: Eau Claire

Interviewer: James P. Leary

Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin 53572

Date of Interview: July 29, 1988

Place of Interview: Vang's home

1, 4, -6, E, 10

Photo Nos.: 4/32 -34

Slide Nos.: 2c/1-11

Skill(s) Documented: Instrument making, woodcarving, blacksmithing

Circumstances of Interview: Mai Yang set up this session (see Yang report) and acted as liaison and interpreter. Vang's English is quite good and he was also able to provide some useful drawings of pieces he has made; nonetheless it helped to have Mai Yang present to offer translations when necessary and to provide an introduction.

Biographical Information: A Hmong, born 1952 in Laos, Vang came to the United States in January, 1980, first settling in Elk Mound and then in Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Documentation of Skill(s): Vang can make and play both a bamboo flute and a bowed string instrument referred to as a "seesaw" [neither Yang nor Vang were certain how to spell the instrument's name in their language, so my spelling is phonetic]. He has made bamboo flutes before, but not in this country--partly because he has not had easy access to bamboo, partly because he brought a flute with him which is perfectly good. He has, however, made a "seesaw" in the United States. Unfortunately it was lent to an uncle. Vang described and sketched it for me (see Appendix A). The instrument has a wooden neck, roughly a yard long, two strings, and a sound box; it is played with a bow of bamboo, or wood, and horsehair. Vang was not certain what kind of wood he used for the neck here, but the strings were guitar strings, the bow was wood with a dozen or so horsehairs. In Laos, Vang would have used a pumpkin-like gourd for his soundbox, but he couldn't find one here and used some sort of metal cylinder instead (an ashtray or an outdoor lamp by the looks of it). The soundbox is covered over with deerskin (Vang has gone deer hunting in Wisconsin). Apparently the instrument sounds much the same with its metal soundbox, except that it created feedback when Vang played it through a microphone at a Hmong gathering in St. Paul, ca. 1983.

Vang learned to play the "seesaw" as a young boy. He reckons he learned by himself, but there were other players around. The instrument has been used traditionally in courting and in New Year's celebrations. Vang also recalls that, during wartime, he would play upon entering a Hmong village to indicate who he was and to show that he came peacefully. In this country he has not played

very often, aside from a little at home and the aforementioned St. Paul gathering. But he can still play and sing. I was able to copy a photograph of his St. Paul performance.

Vang may be able to retrieve his "seesaw" to loan for exhibit purposes, or he may be able to make another. He had carved a dragon's head neck which I was able to photograph. Should the instrument be available, it might be interesting to juxtapose it with Ray Calkin's one-string, bowed "Viking Cello."

Although he has had neither the time, nor the equipment, nor the economic incentive to practice his old country trade in the new world, Vang was a blacksmith back in Laos. He brought several knives of his own making upon emigration. They are used for general kitchen cutting and as skinning knives when deer hunting. They have aluminum handles with a wooden grip, while their blades are of steel garnered from car springs. This sort of carbon steel, interestingly, is exactly the sort preferred by American knifemakers (several of whom I documented for the Kohler Survey). Vang sketched three knives, an ax, and a bellows of the sort he used in Southeast Asia (see Appendix B). The knives he has on hand match examples 1 & 2 on the sketch.

I believe Vang would be willing to loan at least one of the knives (perhaps the one used in deer hunting could be lent just in time for the opening as the deer season ends). If a demonstration is planned making use of blacksmith Bob Becker, it would be very interesting to see if Bob might be willing to engage in a little comparative blacksmithing with Vang Vang.

TAPE LOG COVER SHEET

Wisconsin Folk Museum/for
Cedarburg Cultural Center
Mount Horeb, Wisconsin 53572

Date(s): November 1, 1989
Interviewee: Wang Chou Vang
Address: [REDACTED]
Menomonie, Wisconsin

Phone: [REDACTED]

Equipment Used: Nagra Mono
Stereo: no Dolby: no
Tape Brand/Length: Ampex 632
Amount Used: Side 1: half
General Subject: musical instrument
making
Fieldworker(s): James P. Leary, Lewis
Koch
Recording Location: Vang's home
Other People Present: Lewis Koch,
Vang's family

SUMMARY OF RECORDING CONTEXT AND TAPE CONTENTS

I interviewed Vang in 1988, although not on tape, in connection with the "Folk Arts of the Chippewa Valley" that Janet Gilmore and I co-curated for the Chippewa Valley Museum in Eau Claire. Since that session, I learned that Vang and his family had moved to Menomonie. The interview was held in the family's living room in the afternoon. Vang is recovering from a radiator accident which burned his eyes and his vision is very cloudy. Since Lewis Koch was engaged in taking pictures, I conducted a brief interview focussing on Vang's instrument-making and playing. Because he had no bow, he was not able to play the seesaw, but he did play tunes on two different bamboo flutes. One a small flute of roughly 18", the other much larger, perhaps 30", and fitted with a small plastic prescription pill bottle on the end which acted as a resonator. I recorded Vang with a Nagra open reel recorder and later dubbed the session onto cassette.

TAPE INDEX

Tape 1, Side 1

1. Vang holds the large flute, gives its name in Hmong (raj mplain), then plays a tune. [Good for DHD?]
2. Tune on large flute. [DHD]
3. Description of prior tune: I left my mother and father behind, and I'm lonely in this country and nobody helps.
4. Tune on the smaller flute, with baby crying in background (heard when he takes a breath). [DHD]
5. Explanation: I don't have father and mother now in this country and I feel so lonely. [DHD?]
6. To make a flute, cut some bamboo, measure it, divide by half and make holes in the upper half. When finished with holes, cut a notch with a sharp knife at the upper end to make a reed. Try it out and scrape away bamboo until the tone is right. Flute is side blown. [There is an echo here since I foolishly took off the headphones and the interview can be heard through the phones.] Some people make their flutes with six holes, Vang prefers five.
7. Back in Laos when single used seesaw (nkauj nog ncaag) and flute when courting. Never got in the house with girls, they stayed inside and the suitors were outside playing for their sweethearts. During wartime having these instruments important because they signalled that you were simply courting. "You can use the seesaw to tell the girl how much you love her." [Good quote for DHD.]
8. Wang has forgotten what songs he played for his wife. But he carried his seesaw and flute when it was dark. When he entered a mountain village he played the instrument to announce his presence.
9. On making seesaw in this country. Made them to sell in Laos. But left everything behind here. Difficult to find the soundbox. Has had to use metal pieces and gourds. Used wood in Laos. Here bought string at music store. Has used deer hide and raccoon hide from his own hunting for covering the soundbox. Sometimes carves an Asian bird on the end of the neck, aum vaag, and has also carved a dragon. A long neck makes for better sound.
10. Wang still has a dragon neck he's made, but it was packed away when they moved from Eau Claire to Menomonie.

End of Session.