

From Southern Vietnam to Southern Alberta: A Journey Beginning 30 Years Ago

By: SARAH AMIES

In the mid seventies, Louis Luu was a young man in south Vietnam with a bright future. Hailing from a family of landowners and married to Thao whose family owned a grocery business, life was good. However, the 1975 communist regime takeover put a sudden halt to dreams of prosperity as land and properties were routinely seized and threats of arrest and worse commonplace.

By 1979, Louis, Thao, and Thao's sister and brother had been forced to flee their homeland indefinitely. They left by boat and were shipped to a small Malaysian island to spend the next thirteen months in a UNHCR sponsored refugee camp. Conditions in the camp housing 50,000 refugees were terrible and food and medical services were scarce.



Both the United States and Canada agreed to open their doors to the Vietnamese refugees and for Louis and family the choice was an easy one. Louis remembered learning at school that Canada was a young, under populated country with a strong peacekeeping reputation. The deal was further sealed when Louis noted that the Canadian delegation alone stayed overnight in their camp. Louis recalls being strongly impressed by their friendly and humble attitudes.

Once the family had been accepted for settlement in Canada, Thao was pregnant with their first child and departure was further delayed by another three months in Kuala Lumpur until the child, a girl, was born.

They were destined for Montreal via Edmonton and by the time they arrived they were exhausted, confused and scared. There was no reception housing available in Montreal so they were accommodated in army barracks and provided with food but little else. When asked where in Canada they would like to live they had no idea so the government chose Lethbridge.

CIC representatives welcomed Louis and his family at the Lethbridge airport and took them to temporary accommodations while an apartment was secured. None of the new arrivals spoke more than basic English or French and through the assistance of an interpreter they were told that they would be supported financially by the federal government for a period of twelve months. During this time, they were expected to both learn English and secure jobs to support themselves. This was the extent of the settlement support services received and very quickly Louis and his family found themselves negotiating Lethbridge and its culture and resources on their own.

Initially community reception was very cool as Louis and Thao recall that the level of understanding of other cultures was not high. Further exacerbating the loneliness were the stark cultural differences encountered at every turn. It was very difficult to find anything familiar with which to comfort themselves.

However, luckily for Louis, the small town network sprang into action and within four months a knock on the door produced a farmer offering Louis his first job as a labourer and chicken handler. This stroke of luck however also signaled an end to the federal support since it was deemed that, with the job, Louis could support himself and young family. Thao also secured a job as a restaurant dishwasher but was treated badly by the owner who took advantage of her lack of knowledge of labour laws by overworking and underpaying her. Before long, both Louis and Thao found themselves working at the local York Farms plant but the loneliness and culture shock persisted as they contended with a life so very different from the one which they had known and loved. Louis particularly remembers those first difficult winters as he navigated dark and slippery streets and icy cold temperatures on his way to work on a bicycle.

Additional challenges were met upon attendance at the local Alberta Career Development branch to learn English. Louis found his time consumed with school in the mornings, work during the late afternoon shifts and assisting his wife with their young family.

Louis, Thao and her sister and brother-in-law were more and more motivated to work for themselves rather than for others and by 1983 they had scraped together enough money to purchase a small grocery store. The store's location has changed over the years and they secured their current location on a busy main thoroughfare on the Lethbridge's north side in 1989.

In 1987, Louis and family had also opened a restaurant purchased from a Chinese immigrant. Louis' sister-in-law assisted in the management of the restaurant until ill health forced her to withdraw her help and the restaurant was closed. Throughout this period, Louis continued to work at multiple jobs to subsidize their small business enterprises.

Louis' decision to expand his market was a risky and time-consuming one. He had become aware of the large Japanese population in Lethbridge and to reach future potential customers, he went through the phone book, identified Japanese names and corresponding addresses, created a flier advertising his shop, and hand delivered them throughout the city. His alacrity has reaped significant dividends. Once the ethnic communities within Lethbridge and area became aware of Louis' ability and willingness to locate and order "comfort foods" from around the world, the business took off. Louis now stocks foodstuffs from Vietnam, Japan, China, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Mexican and other Latino countries, and East India.

Louis and Thao can still be found daily at the Asian Supermarket on 13th Street North in Lethbridge. They attribute the success enjoyed by the family to a number of contributing factors. "Canada is one of the few countries on earth that can provide opportunities for success", Louis remarks adding that "we are just average hard workers whose focus has been on family right from the start".

Louis regrets not continuing schooling for himself but "survival took the place of my dreams". According to family and cultural tradition, they were careful not to set expectations too high and to be content with what they had.

Louis and Thao's three children have enjoyed the fruits of their parents' labours. All are grown now: one lives in France and runs a family store with her husband; her sister is completing PHD studies in Germany; and, their youngest, a son, is finishing up his fourth year at the University of Lethbridge and plans to continue in studies to become a lawyer.

Louis and Thao are comfortable in their life in Lethbridge. They enjoy a busy social life at their store and have many friends and acquaintances now. They have also continued the families' land owning practice and are thrilled to rent one of their locations to the local settlement agency, Lethbridge Family Services – Immigrant Services. Louis remarks that this is one way they can give back to the community, within which they started their new and safe life, as well as stay up to date on the latest new arrivals in order to start making arrangements to stock foodstuffs unique to whatever corner of the world they hail from.



Louis and Thao Luu's Asian Supermarket on 13th Street N, Lethbridge