

Festival doubles as reunion;

New immigrants rejoin their people at Hmong sporting event

Saint Paul Pioneer Press (Minnesota)

July 3, 2005 Sunday

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Section: LOCAL; Pg. 3B

Length: 412 words

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Body

Ying Xiong, 28, has attended the **Hmong Sports Festival** in St. Paul "every year for as long as I can remember." On Saturday, he took Tou Vang Hang, who had never been to the annual gathering, with him.

Tens of thousands from across the country flock each year to the **festival** at Como Park. In its 25th year, the **festival** has become a **reunion** for **Hmong immigrants new** and old. For Tou Vang Hang, it was a chance to run into **people** he hadn't seen since he left a refugee camp in Thailand in November.

"It's been a long time," said Tou Vang Hang, 19, of Madison, Wis., as Ying Xiong translated. "It's good to see them."

The latest wave of **new Hmong** refugees started arriving in the United States last year from a refugee camp in Thailand, Wat Tham Krabok, which was closing. Minnesota has been a destination for many of them, with an estimated 3,500 settling in the state.

Since arriving, the weekend's **festival** was the first time some had been surrounded by so many of their **people** and by so much of their language and music, said Kahoua Yang, Lao Family Community of Minnesota vice president.

Wat Tham Krabok originally held about 15,000 ethnic **Hmong** who fled Laos. The **Hmong** were persecuted at the end of the Vietnam War because of their involvement in the CIA fight against communists. Many have resettled in the United States since the 1970s. The **Hmong** population in Minnesota was estimated at about 60,000 before the latest wave of **immigrants**.

Chong Her Thao, 52, moved to Madison, Wis., from Laos about a month ago. At the **festival** Saturday, he smiled as he sat on the grass and talked with Cher Pao Thao, 64, who lives in St. Paul and came to America from Laos many years ago. The two met for the first time at the **festival**.

"We're talking about the difference between here and Laos -- how different it is," Chong Her Thao said as his relative Ying Xiong translated. "It's pretty modern over here, and it's pretty poor where we come from."

Mayor Randy Kelly addressed the crowd Saturday and said the past year of "transition of **new** arrivals to our community has been very, very smooth."

Some 20,000 **people** were expected for this year's **Hmong Sports Festival** at Como Park's McMurray Field, but a crowd count wasn't available Saturday. The **festival**, with competitive soccer, volleyball and other games, as well as live music and booths offering **Hmong** food and clothing, continues today.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: **FESTIVALS** (91%); REFUGEES (90%); IMMIGRATION (89%); **SPORTS** & RECREATION **EVENTS** (89%); **SPORTS** & RECREATION (78%); REFUGEE & RELIEF CAMPS (75%); VOLLEYBALL (73%); VIETNAM WAR (70%); MUSIC (66%); SOCCER (60%)

Industry: **FESTIVALS** (91%)

Geographic: MADISON, WI, USA (90%); WISCONSIN, USA (92%); MINNESOTA, USA (91%); UNITED STATES (93%); THAILAND (92%)

Load-Date: July 3, 2005

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