

## **Asian immigrants changing face of rural USA**

USA TODAY

September 10, 1992, Thursday, FINAL EDITION

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**Section:** NEWS; Pg. 10A

**Length:** 1286 words

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**Dateline:** TECUMSEH, Neb.

### **Body**

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At first glance, this town of 1,702, with its white porches, green lawns and rambling sidewalks, looks like any other in middle America.

But look again. At the gardens of exotic vegetables. At the shoes neatly stacked on doorsteps. At the children playing on the front lawns.

Tossing balls and jumping rope with the descendants of German **immigrants** whose families have lived here a century are the sons and daughters of Laotian refugees.

More than 100 Laotians moved to Tecumseh and surrounding Johnson County in the last decade - the first **immigrant** wave this corner of Nebraska has seen in more than 100 years and just one example of the profound **change Asian** immigration brought to hundreds of **rural** towns:

- Almost 2,700 Hmong, tribespeople from Laos, have moved to La Crosse County, Wis., where several Hmong clan leaders were resettled by church groups in the early 1980s.

- More than 200 Cambodians live near Bayou La Batre, Ala., a community begun when a few families moved from Mobile to make a living fishing in the Gulf of Mexico.

- About 1,000 Vietnamese live in Garden City, Kan., where the refugee population ballooned with the opening of two meat packing plants in the early 1980s.

The story of how these **immigrants** settled where they did is as old as the **USA** itself.

Historians even have a name for it - chain migration, which begins with the arrival of one family and grows as friends and relatives join them in increasing numbers.

The 1990 Census is full of such examples, many in big cities that long have been magnets for **immigrants** from all over the world.

But nowhere is the phenomenon more startling than in the towns that are now home to Southeast Asians, many of them refugees, whose numbers tripled from 330,660 in 1980 to more than 1 million in 1990.

What happened in Tecumseh is typical.

The town's immigration chain began 30 miles southwest in Beatrice, when a church sponsored a Vietnamese family. In 1980, the family moved to Tecumseh to work at the Campbell's Soup Co. chicken processing plant.

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Word traveled. Some of the family's Laotian friends heard about Tecumseh. Then, another Laotian family heard. Then, that family's relatives heard.

By 1985, Laotians were moving to Tecumseh from across the USA. And by 1990, Johnson County, with almost no minorities a decade earlier, was over 2% Asian. Today, Tecumseh's elementary school is 17% Laotian.

"They just keep spreading out the news," says the Rev. John Kounthapanya, a Laotian minister who serves the growing community.

The news is that Tecumseh is a town where adults who speak little English can find jobs, where children are safe from crime and gangs, where two ministers and a school superintendent work to ease inevitable tensions, and where prejudice, though commonly expressed in private, is rarely exhibited in overt acts.

Friends "told me this place better," says Soukanh Vongsaly, explaining why he moved here from Bellevue, Wash., four years ago.

Vongsaly, who like many Laotian adults struggles with English, particularly likes Tecumseh's people. "When they drive past, they wave. Very different over there," in Bellevue, a big Seattle suburb where food cost more and residents waved less.

To walk around Tecumseh is to wonder how a place that has been so insular so long, where out-of-towners draw stares and where restaurants close at 8 p.m., can absorb this much change so quickly.

So the adjustment hasn't always been smooth. Sometimes it is the Laotians' very Americanism that irks Tecumseh natives. In a town where many locals buy their automobiles secondhand, for example, the Laotians' affection for new cars has fostered false rumors that they're exempt from taxes.

Sometimes the language barrier is a reminder of the differences.

"The only time it bothers me," says county clerk Kathleen Nieveen, "is when I'm typing up a title and they're talking in their language. And then they giggle, and you think, 'Are they talking about me?'"

And sometimes small differences can be deeply felt.

"They've got some different habits," says Johnson County Commission Chairman Troy Walters.

"I rented to a Laotian family. When you walked in, you couldn't see much difference from anyone else's home, except in the dining room they had a huge white rug. That's where they sat and ate."

Walters praises the refugees' hard work and prompt payment of bills. But he worries.

"What would happen if every family here began bringing in one or two more families?" Walters says. "You have a language barrier. You have a different culture there altogether, and it's offensive to some people."

In high school, a few boys would chant, "'Chink, chink, go back to your own country,'" recalls Loy Senesourinh, 20, a graduate of Tecumseh High. But over the years relations have improved, and some of those same boys now greet her with friendly hellos.

An uncle who visited Senesourinh from San Francisco a couple of years ago couldn't get over how friendly it seemed here, she recalls.

"He said he'd just scratch his head and people would wave at him."

Counties with most Asian growth

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Here are the 25 counties with at least 1% **Asian** population in 1990 that had the highest percentage growth in **Asian** population between 1980 and 1990:

County/state	1990	1980	<b><u>Change</u></b>
Hamilton, Kan.(1)	28	1	2,700%
Johnson, Neb.	107	5	2,040%
Habersham, Ga.	512	28	1,729%
Buena Vista, Iowa	396	25	1,484%
Marathon, Wis.	2,499	184	1,258%
Finney, Kan.	1,203	100	1,103%
North Slope, Alaska	285	24	1,088%
Fayette, Ga.	1,053	97	986%
Gwinnett, Ga.	10,219	942	985%
La Crosse, Wis.	2,667	261	922%
Sheboygan, Wis.	2,061	219	841%
Rutherford, Tenn.	1,706	185	822%
Iberia, La.	843	97	769%
Camden, Ga.	405	49	727%
Ford, Kan.	663	84	689%
Eau Claire, Wis.	2,124	281	656%
Dakota, Neb.	358	48	646%
Collin, Texas	7,480	1,032	625%
Manassas Park, Va.	169	27	526%
Osceola, Fla.	1,637	284	476%
Manitowoc, Wis.	1,071	187	473%
Culpeper, Va.	292	51	473%
Burke, N.C.	794	145	448%
Outagamie, Wis.	1,904	351	442%
Del Norte, Calif.	450	83	442%

1 - Asians who moved to Hamilton County in the 1980s have since left

Source: **USA** TODAY analysis of 1990 Census

## Notes

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POPULATION TRENDS; See info box at end of text

## Graphic

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GRAPHIC; b/w, Gary Visgaitis, **USA** TODAY (Map, Neb.); GRAPHIC; b/w, **USA** TODAY, Source:U.S. Census Bureau (Bar graphs); PHOTOS; b/w, Jeff Beiermann, AP (3)

CUTLINE: AT HOME: 'When (neighbors) drive past, they wave,' says Soukanh Vongsaly, right, in his garden with the Rev. Dan Gonnerman in Tecumseh, Neb. CUTLINE: IMPROVED: Loy Senesourinh, 20, says in high school some students insulted her but now are friendly. CUTLINE: WORD'S OUT: The Rev. John Kounthapanya says Laotians come because immigrants 'just keep spreading out the news.'

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Subject:** IMMIGRATION (91%); REFUGEES (90%); CHILDREN (89%); FAMILY (89%); PRIMARY SCHOOLS (77%); MINORITY GROUPS (76%); CLERGY & RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS (73%); HISTORY (71%); RURAL COMMUNITIES (69%); RELIGION (68%); CENSUS (66%); EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION EMPLOYEES (63%); EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION (60%); SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS (60%)

**Company:** CAMPBELL SOUP CO (63%); CAMPBELL SOUP CO (63%); US CENSUS BUREAU (84%); US CENSUS BUREAU (84%)

**Organization:** US CENSUS BUREAU (84%); US CENSUS BUREAU (84%)

**Ticker:** CPB (NYSE) (63%)

**Industry:** PRIMARY SCHOOLS (77%); TRANSPORTATION SUPPORT SERVICES (66%); ANIMAL SLAUGHTERING & PROCESSING (66%); POULTRY PROCESSING (66%); MEAT PROCESSING & PRODUCTS (66%)

**Geographic:** NEBRASKA, USA (79%); ALABAMA, USA (79%); MIDWEST USA (78%); ATLANTIC OCEAN (77%); LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC (95%); SOUTH-EASTERN ASIA (79%)