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Joe Bee Xiong Family
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Joe Bee Xiong (sh-ih-aw-ng) came with his family from Laos in Southeast Asia to the United States (US) as a 
refugee. He became a Hmong (mong) American leader. He taught others about the Hmong culture. Joe Bee also 
helped Hmong Americans who were new to the US learn more about American culture in the US. He became a role 
model and hoped others would too.

Courtesy of the Eau Claire Leader-Telegram.
Early Life

His parents named him Bee when he was born in 1961. Bee had seven younger brothers and one younger sister. The family lived in a mountain village in Laos.

The Hmong often lived in dirt-floor homes made of bamboo, wood, and thatch. The homes did not have electricity or plumbing.

Everyone in the family worked. Boys like Bee gathered firewood. Girls helped cook and carried water from streams. Children helped in the fields once they were old enough.

Going to School

Bee attended school for several years until he was about 10 years old. He did not own a clock. When the sun hit a specific tree on a mountain, he knew it was time to go to school.

Modified from “Asia Location Map,” Wikimedia Commons.

Can you find the country where Joe Bee was born using this map?
Water buffalo plowed the rice fields. Bee was one of the best water buffalo riders in the area. He sometimes stood on the animal’s back as it plowed.

Children played games like tub lub (too loo) and kab taub (ka tao). Tub lub involved racing wooden tops on the ground. Kab taub involved kicking a woven ball in the air.
East of Laos, North Vietnam had been at war with South Vietnam since 1955. The US and some Hmong in Laos supported the people in the South.

The US secretly trained Hmong who supported the South as soldiers and supplied them with weapons. The US public did not know this. The Hmong therefore fought what was later known as the Secret War.

At age 12, Bee became a soldier. He and other Hmong soldiers blocked supplies and rescued US pilots who had been shot down.

North Vietnam won the war in 1975. The Hmong fled to Thailand to avoid being taken prisoner or killed. Many hid in jungles while trying to reach safety. Some hid for years.

Courtesy of the Chippewa Valley Museum.

General Vang Pao (left) poses with an American. Pao was the leader of the Hmong soldiers in Laos during the Vietnam War.
Bee and other soldiers led about 1,000 Hmong nearly 150 miles through jungles and across mountains to Thailand. 

The Mekong River divides Laos and Thailand. The Hmong snuck across by swimming or paying someone to take them by boat. Many drowned or were shot crossing.

Bee and the other leaders crossed first but were not allowed to return. The group had to find its own way to Thailand. Not all made it. Bee’s family did.

The Xiongs became refugees in Thailand in 1978. The refugee camp had long buildings with many tiny rooms. They had no electric power.

Bee’s family stayed in the camp for eight months. Families stayed for different lengths of time. Some were there for many years.

Bee learned some English there. He used this basic English to help his family come to the US.
Not all Hmong refugees came to the US. Some went to Australia, France, or other countries. The Xiong family arrived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on July 17, 1979.


Some Americans did not understand why the Hmong came. They sometimes demanded that Hmong Americans go back to Laos.

Bee attended school and learned to read and write English. He also met his future wife, Ta Moua (moo-ah).

Bee felt grateful to live in the US. But Philadelphia did not feel like home. There was nowhere to grow food or do things he enjoyed.

Photo credit: WPT Education.

Ta Moua loves dancing, especially line dancing. She has worked at the same company for 30 years (2018).
A relative called from Eau Claire (oh klaire), Wisconsin. Bee and his family decided to move in August 1980. “I saw the area as a place to fish, grow vegetables, and a place to hunt,” Bee said. He felt he would be much happier there.

Bee took high school classes in Eau Claire. He graduated in June 1982 at age 21. He later earned three college degrees.

Bee and Ta got married and had two sons and six daughters. A Hmong man receives an elder name from his wife’s parents when he marries and has children. Bee’s elder name was Joua (jh-oo-ah) Bee. He went by Joe Bee to make it easier for others who spoke English.
Serving the Community

Joe Bee served as a police officer for the City of Eau Claire and became the first Hmong American police officer in Wisconsin.

He next became a social worker to help families. Joe Bee later worked for the Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association to support the area’s Hmong Americans.

Joe Bee invested in homes and often rented to Hmong Americans who could not find a place to live due to prejudice.

To give others a voice, Joe Bee ran for and served two terms on the Eau Claire City Council, beginning in 1996. That made him the first Hmong American elected to public office in Wisconsin. Joe Bee learned how US government worked and shared that with Hmong Americans.

Joe Bee ran for the Wisconsin State Assembly in 2004 but lost. This did not stop him. He worked with others to end human rights abuse in Laos and Southeast Asia.
Meet Genie Lor

Fifth grader Genie Lor attends school in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. She is a member of her school’s Hmong Club, where she learns about Hmong culture and language.

Genie shared with us a little about herself and her Hmong heritage.

What do you like to do for fun?

I like to read. My favorite books are comics, and sometimes I like scary ones.

What is your favorite subject in school?

I enjoy math because I like numbers.

What are some things others should know about Hmong people or culture?

They should know about Hmong food. I really like Hmong food. My mom sometimes makes these Hmong sausages. I like them because they have peppers inside.

Tell about a Hmong tradition you enjoy.

I like Hmong New Year because you can celebrate it with a lot of other people. You can see people sing and dance there. People wear Hmong clothes, but sometimes they don’t want to, so they just wear normal clothes. I also like that there are toy shops at Hmong New Year.
Joe Bee was a master qeej (g-eng) player. He learned this Hmong instrument in Laos. He continued to play in Eau Claire and taught his sons.

He played the qeej, jaw harp, and flutes at schools and for the community. Joe Bee also demonstrated games like tub lub and kab taub to help others learn about Hmong culture.

Joe Bee and Ta taught their children to speak Hmong. The children also learned Shamanism, the traditional Hmong beliefs.
Joe Bee enjoyed playing soccer, fishing, and camping with his family. He also liked to travel to Laos. He passed away there from a probable heart attack on March 30, 2007.

His body was brought back to Eau Claire. A traditional three-day Hmong funeral celebrated Joe Bee’s life.

Joe Bee served as a role model. He showed how to be a leader while leading refugees in Laos and on the Eau Claire City Council. Joe Bee also taught the Hmong about US culture and the Eau Claire community about Hmong culture.

What can you do to help others learn? Serving others in your community will help build bridges across cultures, just like Joe Bee did.

Photo credit: WPT Education.

Joe Bee was a role model not only for his family but for others in his community and throughout Wisconsin. How can you be a role model for others?
Glossary

elder name (n): ........ name given to a Hmong man after he is married and has children

Hmong American (n): a Hmong person who relocated to the US from Southeast Asia

public office (n): a government job to which a person is appointed or elected

qeej (n): a Hmong instrument made of reed pipes used in funerals and rituals to communicate with the spiritual world

refugee (n): someone who leaves their country, especially because of war or other threatening events

refugee camp (n): a temporary place people live after fleeing their home country

Shamanism (n): a belief system led by a shaman who communicates with the spiritual world to help heal and guide people
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