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# Table of Contents

- Introduction ......................... 2
- Early Life ............................. 3
- The Secret War ....................... 5
- In the US ............................. 7
- Serving the Community .............. 9
- Living Traditions .................... 11
- Conclusion ........................... 12
- Glossary ............................. 13
Joe Bee Xiong (sh-ih-aw-ng) once said, “There is nothing better than a role model.” He displayed this throughout his life in both Laos and Eau Claire (oh klair), Wisconsin.

He was a Hmong (mong) American who did not always live in Eau Claire. He was also not always known as Joe Bee; but as just Bee. He came to the United States (US) with his family as a refugee from Laos, a country in Southeast Asia. As an ambitious person, Bee strove to help serve the community by teaching the Hmong refugees about customs in the US as well as teaching people in the US about the Hmong.
Early Life

In late summer 1961, Chay Chong Xiong and May Lor Xiong welcomed their first child, a son they named Bee. Bee had seven brothers and one sister. The family lived in a mountain village in northern Laos near Phou Bia.

The Hmong typically lived in dirt-floor homes of bamboo, wood, and thatch without electricity or plumbing. Each person had a job. Young girls brought water from nearby streams. Boys like Bee gathered wood for fires to cook the family’s food. When old enough, children helped tend crops like corn, sugarcane, and rice.

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.

Can you find the country where Joe Bee was born using this map?

Modified from “Asia Location Map,” Wikimedia Commons.
Bee also hunted and helped care for the family’s chickens, pigs, and cattle. He was a fun-loving and adventurous boy who often stood on a water buffalo’s back while it plowed rice fields. Bee was one of the best water buffalo riders in the area.

After their chores, they played games like tub lub (too loo). They wound a string around a wooden top and threw it on the ground to see whose went farthest. Children also kicked a woven ball to play kab taub (ka tao).
The Secret War

War broke out east of Laos in Vietnam in 1955. North Vietnamese communists fought the South Vietnamese. The US wanted to prevent the spread of communism. Therefore, they supported the South Vietnamese.

Some Hmong did not want communism in Laos. The countries fighting in Vietnam were not supposed to send soldiers to Laos. Instead the US secretly sent Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agents to train the Hmong who supported the South Vietnamese as soldiers and supply them with weapons.

Children as young as 10 fought as soldiers. The CIA trained 12-year-old Bee. He and other Hmong soldiers blocked North Vietnamese supply lines on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They also helped rescue downed US pilots. The US public did not know the Hmong fought this Secret War.

The communists won the Vietnam War in 1975. The US left the region and ended the Secret War too. Hmong who worked with the US now had to escape Laos or risk getting sent to communist re-education camps or killed. Many Hmong hid in the Laotian jungles for years while trying to get to neighboring Thailand.

General Vang Pao (left) poses with an American. Pao was the leader of the Hmong soldiers in Laos during the Vietnam War.
Sixteen-year-old Bee and other soldiers led almost 1,000 Hmong about 150 miles to escape Laos. They trudged over mountains and through the jungle and enemy ambushes to the Mekong River. Those who made it to the river snuck across by swimming or paying someone with a boat to ferry them. Those who swam used bags, bamboo rods, or whatever they could find as flotation devices.

Bee and the other leaders crossed the Mekong River first to clear the way for the others. But Thai authorities would not let them return. The people waiting in Laos were forced to disperse and find other ways to Thailand. Not everyone made it. Bee’s family did.

The Xiongs became refugees in Thailand in 1978. They lived in the Nong Khai refugee camp, a fenced-in area filled with long buildings. Each had 32 8-by-10-foot rooms that each housed a family. Thatched huts housed more. The camp had no electricity.

At the camp, Bee learned some English. Hmong tradition required eldest children to lead the family. Bee used his basic English to lead his family through moving to the US.
In the US

After eight months in the camp, Bee and his family flew to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on July 17, 1979. Other Hmong stayed in refugee camps years longer. Hmong refugees also settled in Australia, France, and other countries.

“I saw the big city,” Bee said of his arrival. “All I saw were tall buildings. We were farmers and had no place to grow.”


In Philadelphia, Bee attended school where he learned to read and write in English. He also met his future wife, Ta Moua (moo-ah), there. Many Hmong refugees like Bee felt grateful to be in the US, but he wanted to live somewhere that felt more like home.

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

Bee took classes at Eau Claire’s Memorial High School and graduated at age 21 in June 1982. He went on to earn three college degrees: one in computer science, one in criminal justice, and one in business management.

Bee and Ta’s family grew to include two sons and six daughters. Hmong tradition requires a married man with children to take an elder name chosen by his in-laws. Ta’s parents settled on the elder name Joua (jh-oo-ah) Bee. Since Joua was challenging for some who spoke English to say, he called himself Joe Bee.

Courtesy of the Xiong Family.

Joe Bee’s family (from left to right): Cara, Shua, Pa Gnia, Lar Zeng, Ta, Lar Kong, Pa Koua, Pama, and Gaoly
Civic-minded Joe Bee became a police officer for the City of Eau Claire, making him the first Hmong American police officer in Wisconsin.

After five years, Joe Bee decided on another career path and became a social worker to help families better their lives. He supported Hmong Americans by becoming the executive director of the Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association.

Joe Bee purchased a small mall and rental property. Not all property owners wanted to rent to Hmong Americans, making housing hard to find. Therefore, Joe Bee often rented homes to Hmong Americans.

Next Joe Bee served two terms on the Eau Claire City Council, beginning in 1996. “I always felt that I could make a difference and help people have their voices heard,” he explained.

Joe Bee learned how US government worked and taught that to other Hmong Americans. He became the first Hmong American elected to public office in Wisconsin.

In 2004, Joe Bee ran for the Wisconsin State Assembly but lost. This did not stop him. He worked with Congressman Ron Kind to investigate human rights abuses 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.
In Laos, Joe Bee learned to play the **qeej** \( (g\text{-}eng) \) from two master players. He became a master himself and taught his sons. The instrument required they learn acrobatic moves to perform while playing.

He played the qeej and other traditional Hmong instruments like the jaw harp and side-blown flutes at schools and for the community. Joe Bee taught others Hmong games like tub lub and kab taub to showcase Hmong culture.

At home, Joe Bee and Ta taught their children to speak Hmong and practice **Shamanism**, the traditional Hmong beliefs.

Joe Bee demonstrated how to play Hmong instruments, including the qeej he plays here.

Lar Zeng and Lar Kong, Joe Bee’s sons, playing children’s sized qeej at the Hmong Music Festival (1994).
Playing soccer, fishing, and camping with his family were some of Joe Bee’s favorite pastimes. He also returned to Laos from time to time. While there with his parents, wife, and uncle, Joe Bee passed away from a probable heart attack on March 30, 2007.

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

From his days fighting for his people in Laos to his service as a council member in Eau Claire, Joe Bee served as a role model to build bridges across cultures. As his obituary stated, Joe Bee “believed that what people did not know about each other will not hurt them, but what people do know about each other will help bring them together with better understanding.”

How can you help others learn and understand something new? You can build bridges between people in your community and world just as Joe Bee did.

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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