



Peggy Peattie/Press-Telegram

The wedding of Wing-Ki Lee, left, and Vuthie Chek, is a time of spiritual renewal and celebration. At the Nov. 5 ceremony, the couple stand before the altar in their most showy clothing, while attendants distribute food at right for the ritual feast that symbolizes the unity now of an even larger family.

Carrying the burdens of loss and change, immigrants adapt

CAMBODIANS
IN LONG BEACH

BEYOND THE KILLING FIELDS

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First of six parts

By Janet Wiscombe

Staff writer

A 6-foot chain-link fence surrounds the small house on a street where graffiti mars apartment building walls and lawns are dead. Yet inside the yellow stucco home, an island of serenity has been created by a proper mandarin accustomed to beauty and civility.

Formally perched on a couch in the living room, Konthea Kang projects regal authority. Her pedigree shows in her dignified carriage, her simple but tasteful surroundings, her insistence on doing things nicely. She serves fresh pineapple juice and a platter of plums as though offering high tea.

It isn't surprising to learn that Kang was reared by an aristocratic family in Cambodia during the days when her sleepy country was ruled by king and marshaled by social elite. Like others of privilege, she grew up in a pampered environment. While village girls in the surrounding countryside harvested rice and lived by the seasons, she studied French, read Voltaire, played with Prince Norodom Sihanouk's children.

As the daughter of a supreme court judge, Kang lived in a majestic three-story home next door to



The will to survive: Konthea Kang, from left; daughter Terri Kontheary Nong, 23, with husband Siravuth Paul, 25; and daughters Visakha Nong, 20, and Sophorna Nong, 17.

To our readers

This year the Press-Telegram has focused on the 40,000 Cambodians who are trying to create new lives in Long Beach — from one man's courageous return to his homeland to the excruciating trauma suffered by thousands who escaped genocide. In this six-part series we continue by showing the successes and disappointments of these newcomers in a rich picture of their lives in Long Beach today and their future beyond the killing fields.

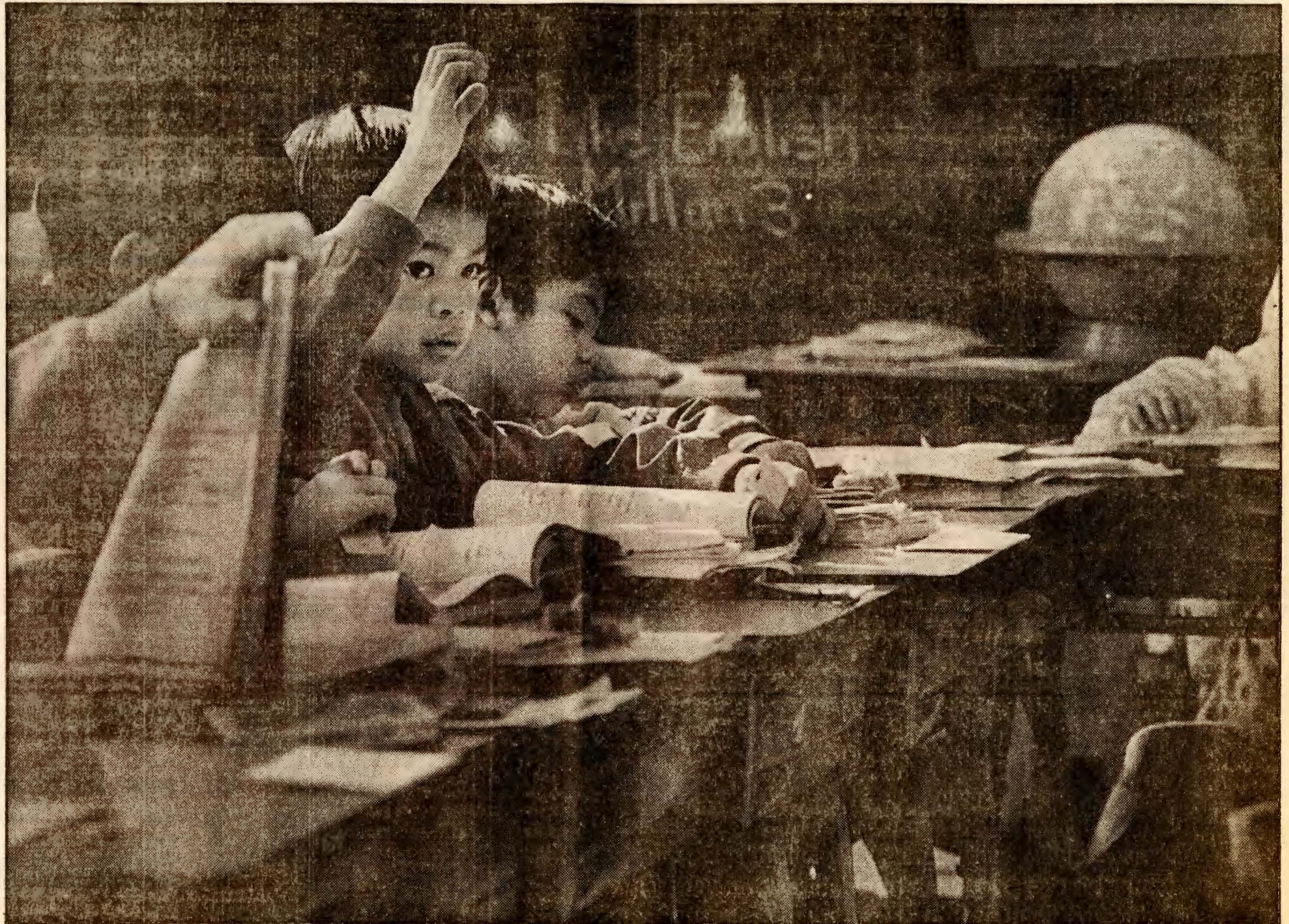
CAMBODIANS IN LONG BEACH



Konthea Kang
Triumph of a phoenix

“ I work very hard. I have many responsibilities in my job and pressures from the community. Sometimes I am so tired I want to kill myself. But I have responsibility to my family. You cannot stay at a low level. Life goes on. ”

—Konthea Kang



Peggy Peattie/Press-Telegram

Ratana Thach can answer a question in his second-grade class as Willard Elementary School, but many others cannot: Of the 5,907 Cambodian students enrolled in the Long Beach Unified School District, only a fourth speak English

fluently. Of the 621 Cambodian kindergartners, not one was fluent in English when school began this year. Of the 357 high school seniors, only one in three was fluent in English.

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CAFETERIA

Willard Elementary School's cafeteria sign is bilingual, one of the few noticeable outreach efforts by the school district.

Immigrants face new lives in new land with determination, pride

FROM/A 1

the governor's colonial palace in the city of Siem Reap. A staff of five servants and a chauffeur attended to the family's every need.

At 19, she married a lawyer who became a judge and later was "enlisted" in the U.S.-backed Lon Nol government as a high commissioner. On April 17, 1975, when Khmer Rouge revolutionaries began their slaughter of Cambodian "traitors," Kang was 29, a mother of five young daughters, a law student close to her degree.

Today in her Long Beach home, there is a photograph taken at her graduation. But it is not the picture of a young law school student. It is the picture of a mature, heavy-set, determined 40-year-old woman in a cap and gown taken at her graduation from Long Beach City College in 1985.

It is a picture of a widow whose husband and siblings were murdered, and whose parents and youngest two daughters slowly, agonizingly starved to death. It is the portrait of a woman whose life was stripped of every refinement — and all humanity.

Above all, it is a portrait of triumph over bare survival, a tribute to the noble resilience of the human spirit.

Refugees seek new home

Kang is one of 40,000 Cambodian refugees now living in Long Beach, the largest group of Cambodians in one place outside Southeast Asia. More than half originally settled in other states, but made their way here to live in a warm climate with others who speak the same language and share the same customs. In the past decade, an estimated 180,000 Cambodians have settled in the United States.

During the early 1970s, a few Cambodians came to this country for military and governmental training and never were able to return. At the time of Cambodia's collapse, another contingent of a few thousand "high risk" political and military personnel managed to flee. Members of this group

From the camps to Long Beach

Time in refugee camps

None	2%
Up to one year	21%
1 to 2 years	35%
2 to 4 years	24%
More than 5 years	18%

Year arrived in U.S.

1975	4%
1978-1980	13%
1981-1982	34%
1983-1985	39%
1986 to present	11%

The statistics in these charts represent the adult population of Cambodian refugees in Long Beach. They are based on a random sample of 206 individuals who were interviewed by the Press-Telegram in 92 households.

The percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding off of the figures.

SOURCE: Press-Telegram Survey

are called "The '75 People."

But the vast majority of Cambodian refugees who live in Long Beach came after 1979 — "The After '80s People" as they are known. Of these, nearly 60 percent spent more than a year in a bamboo refugee camp along the Thai-Cambodian border; 18 percent spent more than five years there.

They are survivors of the killing fields, those who, like Kang, managed to escape a nearly four-year gulag which murdered about 2 million of the country's 7 million people.

In its savage crusade to liquidate the bourgeoisie, the Khmer Rouge targeted the city people, those who could read or write or looked remotely like they could. Kang survived by pretending to be a peasant.



Chantha Seng, 7, is the only Cambodian in her second-grade class at Longfellow Elementary School in Long Beach, where language barriers as well as customs can

prove daunting. Yet not one certified teacher in the Long Beach school system speaks Khmer, although a state requirement calls for 91 such teachers.

More than 20 percent of those who settled in Long Beach are illiterate both in Khmer and English; only 10 percent speak English fluently, according to a survey conducted earlier this year by the Press-Telegram. Thirty percent can't speak English at all.

Nowhere is the impact of the language barrier more palpably felt than in the classroom. Of the 5,907 Cambodian students enrolled in the Long Beach Unified School District, only a fourth speak English fluently, the district reports. Of the 621 Cambodian kindergartners, not one was fluent in English when school began this year. Of the 357 high school seniors, only one in three was fluent in English.

Yet there is not a single certified bilingual teacher who speaks Khmer in Long Beach, despite a state requirement of 91.

There also is an acute need for Cambodian mental health professionals. The Press-Telegram survey shows that almost every Cambodian in Long Beach lost at least one and often several family members during the Cambodian holocaust. Not surprisingly, most of the Cambodians older than 40 suffer incapacitating physical and mental problems.

Yet there is not a single Cambodian therapist. When the Rev. Kong Chhean, a Buddhist monk with a master's in counseling, completes his Ph.D. in psychology next year, he will be the only Cambodian counselor with an advanced degree in the state of California.



Two Long Beach City College students look for the words that English teacher Joyce Toth wants them to read. The program is part of the Refugee Assistance Program.

Of all the recent refugees who've settled in the United States, none has had a harder time than the Cambodians.

Creating a safe island

Against this backdrop, the story of how the city's refugee population is faring — its prides, its embarrassments, its realities and challenges, is, above all, a tale of raw survival.

It is a story about a group of frightened people who landed on alien soil and transformed it into an ethnic island of safety. In only one decade, the entire landscape along East Anaheim Street, where most Cambodians live, has been completely converted from an American inner city-slum into a thriving Asian enclave. Along the

“ When we got here, the Americans at school laughed when we read. They laughed at the way ... we dress. The '75 People thought we were peasants. ... They didn't know how painful it was for us. ”

—Terri Kontheary Nong



Buddhists make offerings at the altar last month during Kathen Tean — the Ceremony of the Robes — at the large Buddhist temple on Willow Street in Long

Beach. During the ceremony, the devoted worshipers chant for a good, prosperous season.

Peggy Peattie/Press-Telegram



Cristina Salvador/Press-Telegram

Meas Nhim, left, and Soer Tan of Long Beach are residents of an apartment complex owned by the Buddhist temple located at 1239 E. 20th St. The rents help support the temple.

children than me'

impossible. History has trapped them



Peggy Peattie/Press-Telegram

A candle and incense are used during chanting at the Buddhist temple, 2100 W. Willow St. in Long Beach during

Kathen Tean — the Ceremony of the Robes last month. The annual ceremony marks the end of the rainy season.

'I want my children to be better than me'

FROM/A 12

sarong-clad traditionalists and smartly dressed moderns mingle in grocery stores where the flavors of mudfish and lemongrass fill the air.

On a typical day, college students and members of the burgeoning middle class, most of whom spent nearly four years in concentration camps, sip iced tea with condensed milk and talk politics in the many new restaurants where Khmer is the language of the day.

With donations of \$1.1 million from members of the refugee community, a Buddhist pagoda staffed by saffron-robed monks has been established out of what was once a union hall on West Willow Street in Long Beach. Two residential homes have been converted into smaller temples.

On Saturday night, Cambodian groups like the Seila (meaning "rock") Band perform in packed discos.

Like Kang, hundreds of Cambodians are swiftly and steadily fashioning new lives for themselves and families out of ugliness and despair.

"I work very hard," Kang says flatly. "I have many responsibilities in my job and pressures from the community. Sometimes I am so tired I want to kill myself. But I have responsibility to my family. You cannot stay at a low level. Life goes on."

Last spring, Kang received a bachelor's degree in social work from California State University/Long Beach. Since her arrival in 1982, she has learned to speak English, raised her three surviving daughters alone, worked as a program coordinator at Community Rehabilitation Industries and gone to school full time, bought a house and a car and taught herself to drive it.

One of her daughters is studying biochemistry at CSULB; another is a cheerleader and honors student at Wilson High School, who also is learning traditional Cambodian dance.

Scars, conflict surface

But for many refugees, moving beyond illiteracy and superstition, depression and terror, has been nearly

impossible. History has trapped them in a web of fear. They are physically and mentally ill-equipped to learn new skills and a new language some 17,000 miles and light years away from their rice-grown culture.

Prum Phom, a 37-year-old farmer with a wife and six children and a bullet-scarred body, hasn't been able to convert his knowledge of water buffalo and sugar cane into a marketable skill.

"I don't want people to look down on me," he says through an interpreter. "I had no school. I try to study. I have a hard time. I want my children to be better than me."

Then there is the community's collective character, a personality that has fostered both adaptation and ethnic pride and spawned bitter factions. One researcher likens the Cambodian power brokers to a pot of crabs: When one crawls up the side of the pot, another pulls him down.

Though there is a strong wish to keep conflict within the community family, deep philosophical divisions have created chasms between political camps, the haves and have-nots, the young and the old, The '75 People and The After '80s People.

In many households, customs have eroded. Family units have split up. Pride has been injured. Mistrust has taken root.

"Under the Khmer Rouge, we were treated like criminals," recalls Kang's eldest daughter, 21-year-old Terri Kontheary Nong. "When we got here, the Americans at school laughed when we read. They laughed at the way we talk, the way we dress. The '75 People thought we were peasants. Some abused the refugees. They didn't know how painful it was for us."

"We were victims from all sides," adds an educational consultant who wishes to remain anonymous out of fear of reprisal if he returns to Cambodia. "The Cambodians have been through a very hard time for 20 years. They had to lie and steal to survive. That left very serious scars that you cannot just wash away like laundry. They were betrayed by Sihanouk,

A candle and incense are used during chanting at the Buddhist temple, 2100 W. Willow St. in Long Beach during

Kathen Tean — the Ceremony of the Robes last month. The annual ceremony marks the end of the rainy season.



The annual Ceremony of the Robes marks the end of the monks' three months of sequestered worship. At that time, they come out from their devotions, and in this case come

to the home of Lamoou Pan on Dawson Avenue, where the monks attend chanting and services, but do not eat the food that follows.

Lon Nol, the Khmer Rouge. They don't trust anymore.

"When you have one bowl of rice and six people, you think no more, 'You are my father, my uncle, my son.'"

Still uniquely Cambodian

It's 9 p.m. on a Saturday outside the Battambang restaurant on East Anaheim Street. An off-duty policeman and a couple of security guards are on hand as sentries and parking attendants.

At the door, fancy-dressed customers, mostly young adults in their 20s and 30s wearing silks and laces and a few tuxedos, are lined up to buy \$20 tickets to a private party, one in a series of celebrations held in honor of Pchhum-Ben, a Buddhist festival in honor of the good deeds of ancestors.

Inside, about 300 guests are seated



Cristina Salvador/Press-Telegram

Monks who live at the back of the Buddhist temple on East 20th Street in Long Beach are, from left, Hem Ham, Meah Phou and Un Klok. Originally a house, the monks got a zoning permit from the city to use it as a temple as well.

CONTINUED/A 14, Col. 1

CAMBODIANS IN LONG BEACH

“ I do everything the best I can! No one can help how I feel inside. At work, no one knows who I am, what I was, who I used to be. Some people are happy here. I am so sad. **”**

— Pell Nal



Wedding rituals — and pranks — are both unique and universal. In this case, wedding guests tease the bride Vuthie Chek and groom Wing-Ki Lee by trying to

get them to eat two grapes on the same branch at the same time without using their hands.

Peggy Peattie/Press-Telegram

Knowing the language

Fluency of Long Beach Cambodians

Reading proficiency (Khmer)

Age:	18-24	25-34	35-49	50 and older	Total
Not at all	11%	13%	11%	23%	14%
Poor	4%	5%	6%	13%	7%
Fair	30%	26%	24%	21%	25%
Very well	20%	21%	23%	11%	19%
Fluent	35%	34%	36%	32%	35%

Speaking proficiency (English)

Age:	18-24	25-34	35-49	50 and older	Total
Not at all	0%	16%	40%	64%	30%
Poor	7%	26%	17%	14%	16%
Fair	19%	16%	21%	11%	18%
Very well	50%	34%	19%	7%	27%
Fluent	24%	8%	3%	5%	10%

Reading proficiency (English)

Age:	18-24	25-34	35-49	50 and older	Total
Not at all	6%	31%	49%	73%	39%
Poor	6%	24%	20%	11%	15%
Fair	35%	18%	14%	5%	18%
Very well	35%	21%	14%	5%	19%
Fluent	19%	5%	3%	7%	8%

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The groom literally gets groomed — so does the bride — as part of the wedding ceremony. A man and woman dance around Wing-Ki Lee, left, and Vuthie Chek, carrying comb and scissors for trimming locks of their hair. The bride's father, Khean Chek, in background left, carries perfumed bath water to anoint the couple. Each relative and friend takes a turn, mockingly, of cutting and grooming the pair.

Festive and community-minded

FROM/A13

at round tables set for 10. On each table, there are large plastic bottles of Coke, 7-Up, soda water and a fifth of Hennessy. The first bottle of cognac comes with the meal.

Generous platters of spicy shrimp and rice followed by large cauldrons of fish soup served over flaming Sterno are offered as the Amara Rock Band belts out, "Let's twist again like we did last summer," and, "You and me we got a groovy kind of love."

A revolving mirrored globe casts snowflakes of light over the crowd on the dance floor, a group that dances as comfortably to heavy metal as it does to cha-cha.

Yet it is the Khmer songs with the rock beat that transform the throng into a cohesive family. As familiar songs of love and country begin, couples form spontaneous group lines to share in a formalized dance pattern that is uniquely Cambodian. Graceful, circular wrist movements with fingers extended suggest the ritualistic rhythm and grace of another world.

Unlike their more serious and frugal neighbors, the Vietnamese, Cambodians are unabashed party animals described by sociologists as more expressive than instrumental, more community than family-oriented.

"Cambodians tend to be bilateral family units with more equality

between men and women and more emphasis on the nuclear than the extended family, than, for example, the Vietnamese or the Koreans," says Ruben Rumbaut, professor of sociology at San Diego State University and director of the Indochinese Health and Adaptation Research Project.

"They are more loosely ordered, less pious and obedient."

Unwanted influences

At 39, Samthoun Chittapalo is an affable, high-spirited reserve cop who makes it his business to know everybody in the community. His title is Asian Affairs Liaison Officer for the Long Beach Police Department, and he's the only Cambodian on the force. Until last month, when he was put on the payroll full time, he worked part time and earned extra money by providing security at elaborate Cambodian weddings and other social functions.

Moonlighting helped him provide for his wife and two children and to buy a few of the luxuries so prized among the more affluent middle class members of the community: Mercedes Benz, gold jewelry, diamond rings, electronic beepers.

Knowledge may be noble wealth, as the ancient Cambodian proverb instructs, but material pleasure is

hardly a sin.

Gesturing to a table of lighthearted, playful students spending an afternoon watching Cambodian videos on the big-screen Mitsubishi at the Pei Lin Restaurant, Chittapalo observes, "If they were Vietnamese students, they would be working. Cambodians are more relaxed. They aren't fast yet. They are easy. That's why they're easy to take advantage of."

"I worry very, very much that the blacks and Latinos are teaching bad things," he continues. "The Cambodians copy them. They carry big radios. They steal. They hit older people. Some carry guns. I think 45 percent of crimes are not reported."

"Cambodian culture isn't like this. We live at a corner. We clean our own house. We don't want to get too American. We are hurt by bad influences. Cambodians are peaceful and nice. They leave you alone. They want to live in their own world."

"But the family is not happy enough to be outgoing. They fear. They need consultants in every area. There is no one to lead them."

Like other community spokesmen, Chittapalo is concerned about what he calls widespread cheating — from the guy at the doughnut shop who rips off his employees, to the "translators" who serve themselves heaping helpings of the welfare pie, to the unscrupulous



Crystal Hul, 16, daughter of Nil Hul, executive director of the Cambodian Association of America, dances in the traditional style at the wedding of Wing-Ki Lee and Vuthie Chek in the banquet area of the Kim Tar Restaurant in Long Beach recently. Rock music and modern dance are also part of Americanized Cambodian youths.

pulous renditions of the time-honored "game" Ton Tine.

The game is widely played by members of all economic and educational backgrounds and often by women who traditionally hold the family purse. Players pool \$100 to begin. By the time it is over months later, the highest bidder pays off the investors and

gets the pot. It isn't unusual for winners to pocket as much as \$20,000 — and losers to be out several hundred.

Providing people are honest, Ton Tine is an honorable way for members of the community to help each other and raise money for busi-

“I want to help my people. I am Cambodian. I belong there. Many students think there is too much freedom in the United States. Too much freedom makes fake freedom.”

—Malay Nou



Frank Reyes and “Sam” Chittapalo address a Neighborhood Watch meeting, telling those attending that if someone comes to their doors claiming to be a police officer, ask to see identification and to call the police department if the

person doesn't produce such proof. Chittapalo observes: “Cambodians are more relaxed. They aren't fast yet. They are easy. That's why they're easy to take advantage of.”

Peggy Peattie/Press-Telegram

'Those who came after 1979 will not go back'

FROM/A 14

nesses, observes Than Pok, executive director of the United Cambodian Community Inc., a non-profit job training agency. Trouble is, the game is no longer played at a village level among trusted friends.

"The people who play don't know each other," Pok notes. "If they are cheated, they can't sue. They can do nothing."

"The community is progressing and getting better every day," he adds. "But my biggest concern is: At what ethical cost are people making money?"

There is, of course, nothing unique to the Cambodian community about cheating. Still, it becomes a more serious social ill when dealt to a population of Third World villagers who have no knowledge of their personal rights and are completely dependent on others for answers to questions as basic as, "How much is a bag of rice?" and, "What street do I live on?"

Mistrustful community torn

In August, a 19-nation conference convened in Paris to hammer out a settlement between the Cambodian government and the tripartite resistance over the fate of the Khmer Rouge. No agreement was reached.

In late September, the Vietnamese occupiers pulled out of Cambodia. With the chilling possibility of the return to power of the Khmer Rouge, a guerrilla force estimated at 30,000, mistrust and pessimism about the future of Cambodia hovers over the community.

For a generation of people who have known almost nothing but war, the continued lack of hope for peace and deep concern about escalating civil war is palpably felt. Still, leaders of the community in Long Beach — many of whom are regularly consulted by senators and White House officials — are no closer to political consensus than they are in Southeast Asia.

Then there are the differing political and moral attitudes surrounding what responsibilities the Cambodians in the United States should play in the future of their country. Many of the older '75 People say they would like to return to Cambodia to help rebuild the nation when and if peace is restored. Others have bought homes and sunk down roots and are torn between blood and adopted motherlands, the needs of parents, the needs of children.

Like many college students, Malay Nou would like to return to Cambodia after graduation. Nou, 25, is a pre-med major at the University of California at Irvine. "I want to help my people," he says simply. "I am Cambodian. I belong there."

"Many students think there is too much freedom in the United States," Nou adds. "Too much freedom makes me feel like I don't belong."



Adaptation to the new land can be traumatic. May Aun, 83, holds a photograph of herself, her three daughters and their families in a Thai refugee camp several years ago. Her oldest daughter, Chan Siv Mon, recently was imprisoned for killing her husband, who had knifed and beaten her.

But for many of The After '80s people, there is no longing to go home. In fact, there is antagonism toward those who do, a feeling that they do not understand — or even believe — how bad things can get.

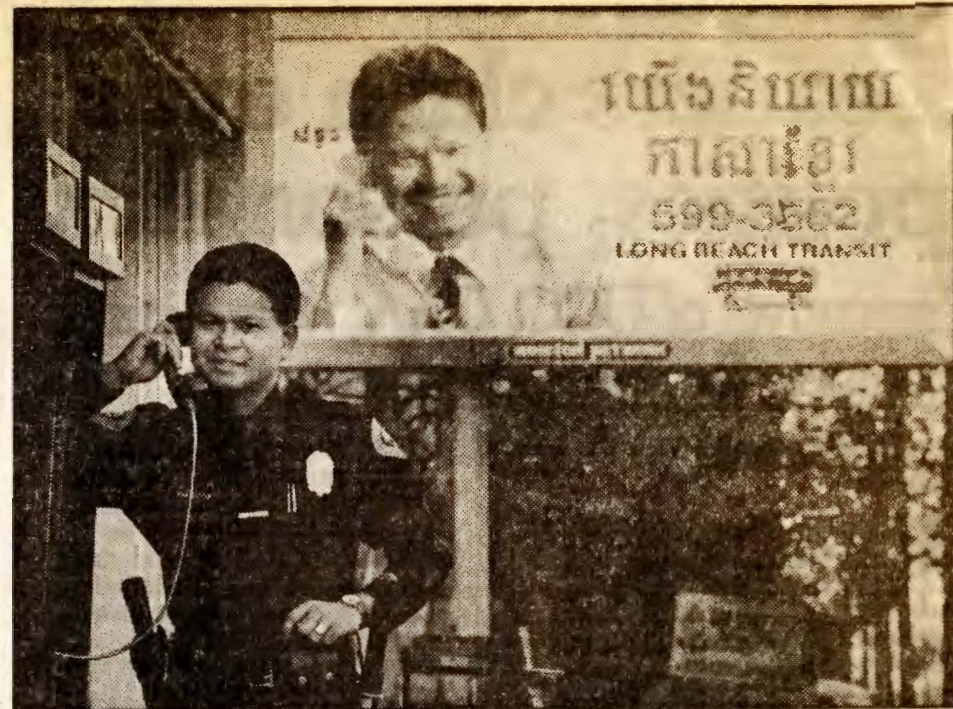
Kang's normally soft expression turns momentarily hard when asked if she'd return: "Those who came after 1979 will not go back," she says flatly.

For Pell Nal, a former general and respected community peacemaker, even overhearing a conversation about

Cambodia elicits more heartache than he can bear.

"Inside of me is too hurt," he says through a flood of tears. "I come here and try to do the best I can. I show I can be the dishwasher, the cook. I do everything to show people I am not only a specialist in the army."

"But I reach the point I cannot go on anymore," he continues with difficulty. "I am so sad. I was a commander. We lose the war. I was separated from my family. I cannot say hello to



Long Beach Reserve Officer Samthoun Chittapalo is the only Cambodian on the police force — and one of the few people in Long Beach on a billboard. This transit sign at Fourth Street and Walnut Avenue says, "We speak Cambodian."



Um Sath, who lost her entire family, has had trouble with Western ways. Now, at least, homemakers from Community Rehabilitation Industries have helped her learn Western survival skills and shed some of her isolation.

my wife. I cannot say hello to my six children. All killed.

"I never cry since I start to be a man. Now I cry a lot. I see children, and I cry."

"I try to do my best. People come back from Cambodia and talk. I do not have the courage to look at the picture. I just glance."

As the choked voice rises, the cry becomes a desperate anthem: "I do everything the best I can! No one can help how I feel inside. At work, no one

knows who I am, what I was, who I used to be.

"Some people are happy here. I am so sad."

Staggering change takes toll

In her work as coordinator of the Social Adjustment Vocational Enrichment Services, Kang acts as a bridge between two cultures with differing

CAMBODIANS IN LONG BEACH

“After what happened in Cambodia, no one believes anyone. ... Everywhere I go, everyone smiles at me — while sticking the knife in my back.”

—Than Pok



The executive director of United Cambodian Community Inc. is fed up with Serey Pheap, the Khmer-language newspaper run by 37-year-old dynamo Narim Kem, right, and his chief writer, Soth Polin, formerly publisher of Phnom Penh's

biggest newspaper. Kem admits to being the *bete noir* of the local Cambodian community, but says it's his duty to question the powers that be — including the UCC director, deriding him as “The Lord Than Pok.”

Peggy Peattie/Press-Telegram

A house divided: Leaders clash over politics, personality

Executives of UCC, CAA, newspaper
compete for status, prestige, power

By Janet Wiscombe

Staff writer

From the window, customers at the Pei Lin Restaurant on the corner of Raymond and Anaheim streets viewed a hastily made cardboard sign attached to a post at the edge of a parking lot. It read: "WARNING Parking is for Pei Lin Restaurant Only!!! Other Vehicles Will Be Tow-Away."

Until recently when the sign was taken down, the message served as an emblem of a bitter dispute within the Long Beach Cambodian community.

In June of 1986, the United Cambodian Community Inc., a stunningly successful \$2.5 million non-profit job training agency, set out to buy the parking lot and adjacent building as the site for its new headquarters. Tentatively called the UCC Plaza for United "Community" Center, the blueprints called for retail and conference space.

Following a misunderstanding with the owner of the Pei Lin over who could use the parking lot, however, construction of the \$2.4 million project became mired in mud.

Lines were drawn in the dirt between UCC and Pei Lin loyalists. Tempers flared. Lawyers were hired. A court case was launched. The UCC wound up buying the restaurant for

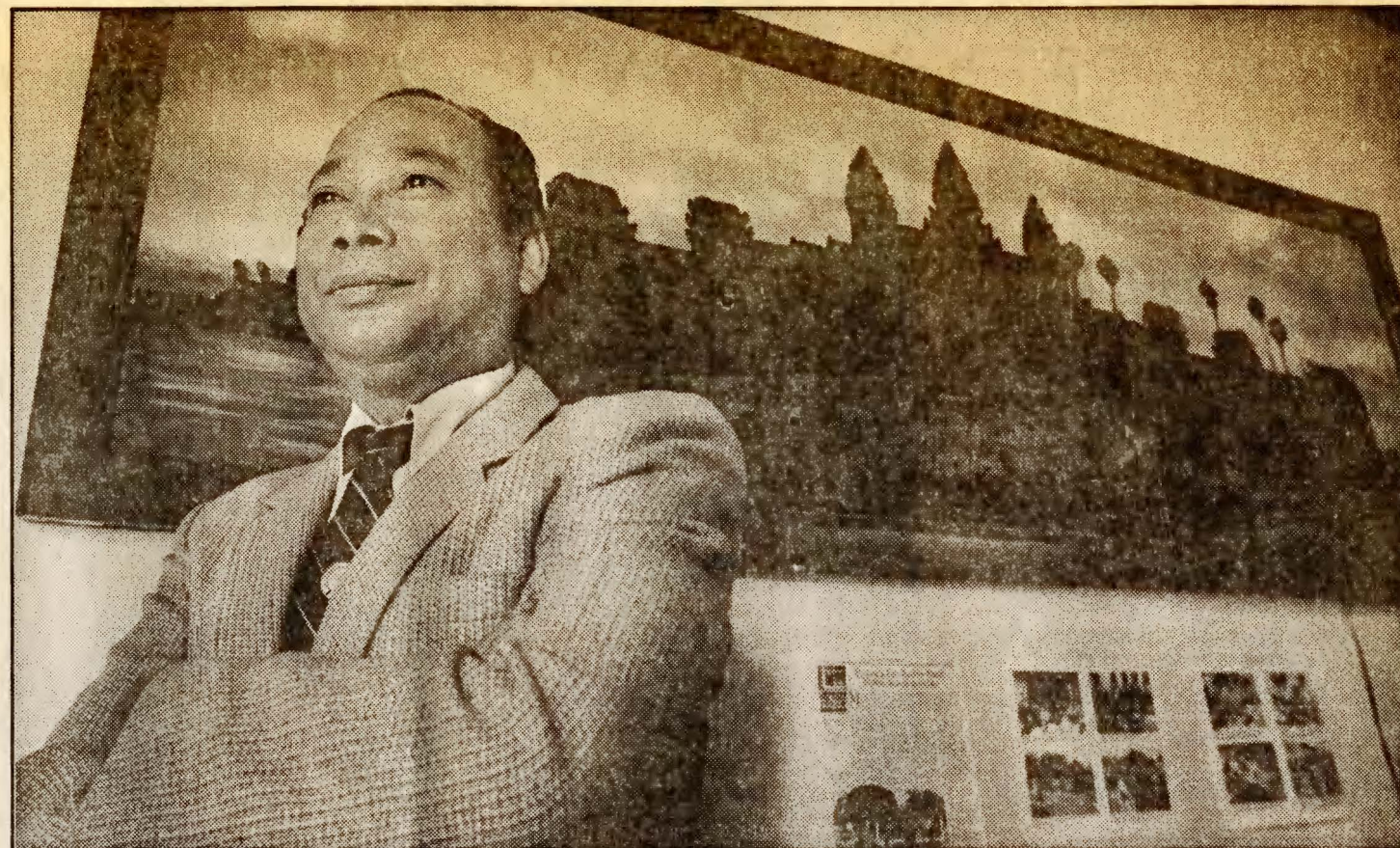
\$225,000 to get the parking lot.

Says embattled UCC executive director and unlikely restaurateur Than Pok: "I couldn't sleep for months. It's been a big headache. This is an example of the Cambodian way of doing business. Communication is breaking down. We aren't accustomed to lawyers and complex court systems. Trust broke down because of the strain and stress in the community."

Indeed, the strains of change within the Cambodian community are perhaps nowhere more evident than among those who, by choice and by fate, have assumed leadership roles. The pressures put on this well-educated group of Cambodians are enormous. They are called upon to act as official community representatives, purveyors of Western ways, nurturers of Eastern tradition, fund-raisers, hand-holders, philosophers, futurists.

But no matter how close they come to meeting these standards, decades of mistrust and suspicion toward politicians in Cambodia has left a mark on the community.

Pok was a member of a team of bright young Cambodian leaders chosen to come to the United States in 1973 for leadership and educational training. He was born in a poor village, orphaned at 5, reared at a pagoda by monks, and, against all odds, so excelled academically that he leapt



Cambodian Association of America's executive director, Nil Hul, a devotee of politics, was the first Cambodian to

run for elective office in Long Beach. The former colonel is contrite about having served in Lon Nol's regime.

frogged through the university and landed a prestigious job as secretary to the minister of education at 29.

By a miracle, most of his family members managed to get passage on the last plane out of Cambodia before its fall in April 1975.

He is a thoughtful, sophisticated man in his late 40s who laughs easily, wears good clothes, speaks excellent English, takes aerobics and is inundated with invitations to speak at conferences throughout the country. He identifies with the French romantics like Jean Jacques Rousseau and Guy de Maupassant out of what he jokingly calls his penchant for sadness and melancholia.

The Los Angeles Times recognized him as a rising star of 1989; the National Association for Vietnamese American Education presented him with an award.

"But I have NEVER received praise from the Cambodian community," Pok declares. What he has received is an ample supply of vociferous criticism from opponents throughout the community who call him a Communist and a womanizer, charges he flatly denies.

"We tend to destroy each other," Pok says, referring both to the community at large and more specifically to the long-standing battle between the UCC and the Cambodian Association

of America, a far smaller but more politically oriented non-profit agency.

"There is competition for status. After what happened in Cambodia, no one believes anyone. There is a feeling you must bring the other guy down. Cambodians never, ever praise anyone. No one is spared. Everywhere I go everyone smiles at me — while sticking the knife in my back.

"The Cambodians who came to the United States after 1980 resent the earlier people. They feel we left them behind. Pol Pot destroyed the trust between people. They were taught, 'If you are open and trustworthy, you

CONTINUED/A 17, Col. 3

Hope for happiness sown from the seed of sorrow

FROM/A 15

concepts of personal identity and the meaning of life.

She is well aware that the stresses of acculturation, combined with catastrophic personal loss, has destroyed the equilibrium between many people and family units. Bringing people together and reinforcing cultural beliefs are ways of re-establishing the concept that there is some order in the universe, some sanity amid staggering change.

She recently got two widows together, for example, both of whom

had been completely isolated and chronically depressed. Now the two socialize regularly.

"God bless you all who help," Um Sath, one of the widows, says through tears. "I am very grateful. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. God bless America. God bless you."

As people are brought together and familiar rituals preserved, members of the community gradually are feeling strong enough to venture further out into their new world, Kang says.

Among Cambodians, respect for the past and for ancestors, and accept-

ance of life as it is rather than what it could be, are basic themes of the Theravada Buddhism widely practiced. The religion has a strong karmic perspective based on reincarnation and the belief that good deeds bring a better life.

Then there are the folk beliefs, practices revolving around supernatural beings — guardian spirits, family spirits, ghosts, fortunetellers.

Small shrines and posters of the ancient temples of Angkor Wat are familiar sights in living rooms and small businesses throughout the com-

munity, and offer protective cultural reminders.

The fortunetelling business is booming. Folk healing practices help reduce feelings of isolation. Wearing amulets or string tied around the wrist, it is believed, keeps evil away and encourages healing.

"Coining" is a healing technique that entails scratching the surface of the skin with the edge of a coin to release harmful "winds"; "cupping," suction from a glass cup that leaves a bruise on the skin, is performed to draw out evil forces from the body.

But no matter how comforting such simple customs are, the grandmother with the large red "cupping" circle on her forehead usually lives in a household with a generation of people who increasingly are working 9 to 5, shopping in supermarkets and depositing money in banks rather than under mattresses.

"With cultural differences and more freedom, there are many problems," Kang observes. "The children learn to speak English. They are the

CONTINUED/A 17, Col. 1



Rival factions compete for power and prestige as community develops

FROM/A16
die.'"

CAA director longs to help

A mile from UCC headquarters in a shopping center on Atlantic Avenue, Pok's philosophical antagonist is seated at the executive director's desk at the CAA, located on the second floor of a sadly sagging building at Sixth Street and Pacific Avenue. His name is Nil Hul, and he is a consummate politician.

In 1986, he ran unsuccessfully for City Council, the first Cambodian to run for elective office in Long Beach. Last year the CAA's \$400,000 budget was slashed in half, and Hul's programs were seriously eroded because of federal cuts.

Despite setbacks, the articulate, fun-loving, 60-year-old community booster likes to talk about politics and culture and argues passionately for the rights of the refugee community. He exudes affection for his fellow countrymen and expresses remorse about his own culpability in the Lon Nol regime, a government rooted in rampant corruption and Hennessy diplomacy.

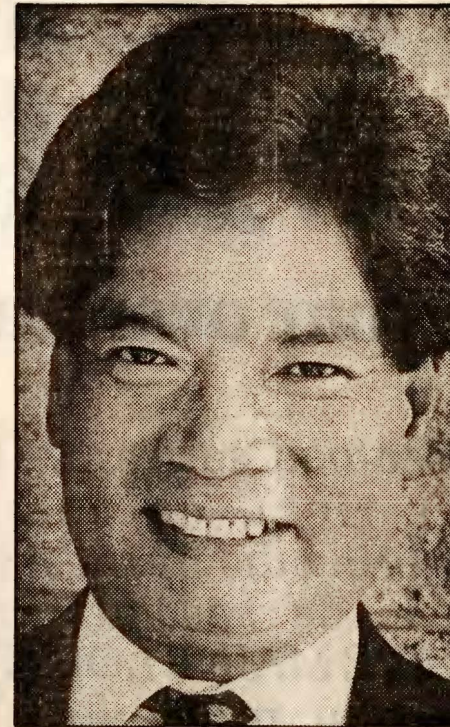
"I am so ashamed of the regime. I felt like a parasite," he says. "I let my people down."

By his own description, he is blunt and overzealous, two qualities that don't always endear him to his more reserved countrymen.

Hul first came to the United States for advanced language training in 1972, returned to Cambodia, and later fled in 1975. He'd been a colonel hand-picked by Lon Nol to serve as deputy commander in charge of logistics.

He still wears his winged brass Army belt buckle. Drawing on a Kool and grinning broadly, he says wryly, "I wear it because it reminds me to be disciplined."

Though he walks a tightrope between wanting to communicate the best examples of his culture — the value placed on family and on gentle, unhurried, non-competitive behavior, he also expresses concerns about the



Than Pok
UCC executive director

weekly newspaper published in Khmer script and read by 43 percent of the members of the Cambodian community, according to a Press-Telegram survey conducted earlier this year.

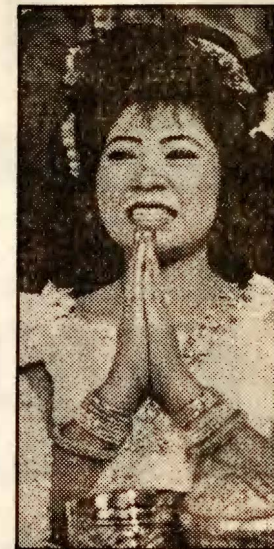
Editor Narim Kem and his chief writer, Soth Polin, a French-educated intellectual and former publisher of the biggest newspaper in Phnom Penh, insist they function as community watchdogs dedicated to openness and truth.

"I want to be a man who sees things," says Kem, a bright, 37-year-old dynamo who runs the shoestring operation almost singlehandedly and also is working on a degree at California State University/Long Beach in industrial engineering. "I love cold, and I love hot at the same time."

Maybe so. But Kem's archenemies, and there are many, insist his claims about members of the community are better suited for the gutter than for the newsrack.

COMING UP

Today



The 40,000 Cambodians who have arrived in Long Beach in the past 10 years seek an island of safety and success in their new homeland while they cope with the ugly scars from their past. For many, it is a story of raw survival as they try to overcome language and cultural hurdles. For the younger ones, though, America offers opportunities they cherish, and they are exerting the will to persevere.

Monday



The climb up the ladder of success often has been rough for many of the Cambodians in Long Beach. Some, like the restaurant and market owners, have moved up quicker. Many others, however, who are economically paralyzed by lack of language and job skills, rely on public aid for their livelihood.

Tuesday



Nearly a third of Long Beach Cambodians recently surveyed said they have been the victims of insults or physical attacks, manifestations of racism. But relations appear to be improving, as refugees make new friends and immerse themselves in the community, and as understanding replaces animosity.



Peggy Peattie/Press-Telegram

Editor Narim Kem at his desk: "I trust no miracle person. I'm proud of the Cambodians. I'm embarrassed, not by my people, but that my leaders are so stupid." Called a "troublemaker" and "Viet Cong" for his confrontational brand of journalism, Kem is studying for an industrial engineering degree at the same time he runs Serey Pheap ("Freedom") on a shoestring.

commander in charge of logistics. He still wears his winged brass Army belt buckle. Drawing on a Kool and grinning broadly, he says wryly, "I wear it because it reminds me to be disciplined."

Though he walks a tightrope between wanting to communicate the best examples of his culture — the value placed on family and on gentle, unhurried, non-competitive behavior, he also expresses concerns about the future of the community.

"The Cambodians keep to themselves," he says. "But as they start to integrate, they are catching social ills. Racial tensions are like a time bomb waiting to go off."

"In Long Beach, you can afford not to learn English and get along," he adds. "The vast majority of Cambodians are dreaming, living as though they are still in Cambodia."

"They are ashamed. They lived like animals. They dislike all top leaders. We need a new generation of peace to let our brains grow."

Like others in visible community positions, Hul says he's worn out, tired of bickering, tired of seeking acknowledgment from a society which offered him a home — but not always a haven.

"Understanding is forgiving," he surmises. "But the majority of Americans don't even know Cambodians exist. The city ignores us."

"Walking through the jungles of Long Beach is worse than walking through the jungles of Cambodia. There, you have a premonition of the tiger. Here, you never smell the tiger, but it will snatch anything."

With that, he laughs heartily, thoroughly enjoying the analogy. "Sometimes it seems I'm going nuts," he adds. "Man does not live by bread alone. I need respect and love and affection."

"I want to find the time to recoil, incubate and regain my sanity."

Paper criticizes leaders

Because of their high profiles within the Cambodian community in Long Beach and beyond, Pok and Hul frequently are singled out for scrutiny by "Serey Pheap" (meaning "freedom"), a

old dynamo who runs the shoestring operation almost singlehandedly and also is working on a degree at California State University/Long Beach in industrial engineering. "I love cold, and I love hot at the same time."

Maybe so. But Kem's archenemies, and there are many, insist his claims about members of the community are better suited for the gutter than for the newsrack.

Kem readily admits to being the *bete noir* of a sizable portion of the community, and is called "a troublemaker" and "a Viet Cong." He is accustomed to threatening phone calls and says he's feared for his life on more than one occasion.

He smiles at questions related to his reputation for editorial virulence and lights a British cigarette. "The leaders in Long Beach are failures. They do not represent the people," he declares. "I see dirty water in the throat. I tell people: 'A germ is there. If you boil it, it may get better.' Maybe they will understand that they get the disease because of the water. The germ in the water is money."

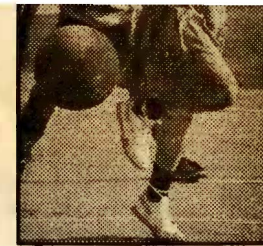
No matter how much people complained about Kem's approach to journalism, until recently no one seemed willing to take him on. Direct confrontation is considered un-Cambodian. Feigned compliance and the insistence on image and appearance is the accepted way, Kem says.

"I tell the truth," he maintains. "People don't like each other. They are two-faced. People die for saying the truth."

Following the paper's last blast against "The Lord Than Pok" as he was called, however, the UCC chief says he's had it. Pok and members of his staff are planning to publish what he calls a "newsletter," a publication "that will better inform the community instead of destroying people. It will talk more about the positive achievements of the community."

"Serey Pheap is all lies," Pok declares.

Retorts Kem: "I trust no miracle person. I'm proud of the Cambodians. I'm embarrassed, not by my people, but that my leaders are so stupid."



racism. But relations appear to be improving, as refugees make new friends and immerse themselves in the community, and as understanding replaces animosity.

Wednesday



For years, struggling Cambodian families have lived in small, overcrowded apartments throughout central Long Beach. But now, as many of these immigrants earn financial success, they are moving into more spacious residences in other neighborhoods beyond downtown.

Thursday



The Long Beach Unified School District, once geared for American-born children, now faces the challenge of educating thousands of Cambodian children, many of whom begin school unable to speak English at all. While many refugee students excel, others are caught between clashing cultures. Whether the system will serve them is an open question.

Friday



Many Long Beach Cambodians remain prisoners of their past, victims of psychological torture so severe that they have come to be known as The Lost Generation. Yet, most have created a collective nest imbued with religion and traditions, and an interest in their new land. Their future depends now on how well they move from the anguish of isolation to self-sufficient assimilation.

Progress made, but more services needed

FROM/A 16

translators, and they have the power. The parents forget their role. They use too much authority. The family has many problems."

Though statistics aren't available, those closest to the community say that domestic violence and divorce rates are rising sharply, and that about half of all Cambodian children come home from school to mothers who have been abandoned or widowed.

"We need family and health and outreach services," Kang says. "I just

want to see others get success. I want to see people improve."

Like everyone close to the community, Linda McKinney, former officer with the state office of refugee services and a consultant to the UCC, expresses both praise and concern when she reflects on the birth and early development of Little Phnom Penh.

"On the one hand, the community is fractured. There has been no healing process yet. The ongoing illness bothers me," she says. "But the Long

Beach community has made progress. There is a business community. There is youth development. There are cultural activities and ceremonies. There is persistence."

Above all, there is will. It can be seen in the eyes of the international pingpong player who volunteers his time as a coach. It can be heard in the voice of the second-grader who teaches her mother to count. It can be felt in the determined gaze of a widow in a cap and gown.

There is a Cambodian folk tale about a lady who wept because she

had so many misfortunes. She poured her heart out to Buddha who told her that her misery would go away if she would find a seed from a house that had never known sorrow.

The next week, Buddha found her singing happily. When the Enlightened One asked if she found the seed of happiness, the woman replied, "No, Blessed One. I went to every house seeking it and found no house that had not known sorrow. Everywhere I went, I saw troubles much worse than my own, and from these I learned that I do not have it bad at all."