

# Press-Telegram

LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA, DECEMBER 11, 1989

## A SPECIAL REPORT



Kim Chhun fled the Khmer Rouge in 1975, bringing her mother and her six surviving children to Long

Beach. In 14 years she has purchased her own business, ensuring a secure financial future for her family.

Lynne Butterworth/Press-Telegram

CAMBODIANS  
IN LONG BEACH

# BEYOND THE KILLING FIELDS

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Second of six parts

## Inside

Cambodians have transformed a decaying corridor of East Anaheim Street in Long Beach into a bustling "Little Phnom Penh" rich in ethnic pride and commerce/C1



Cristina Salvador/Press-Telegram

Father of five Oeun Peov, 35, holding his youngest child, Samath, 1, struggles to make a life in America.

## Tenuous grip on American dream

By Susan Pack

Staff writer

**H**e seems to own the place, this confident young businessman with the vest, pleated slacks and beeper. He waves you back to his table and talks about earning his real estate license, investing in property, making money.

His English is almost as impec-

able as his attire, and you wonder why he still takes his coffee break at Battambang Restaurant on East Anaheim Street, why he hasn't moved on, joined the rest of the card-carrying capitalists in some upscale ristorante.

But Battambang is more than a restaurant to 26-year-old Phirak Keomeas. Battambang is the city in Cambodia where he watched the Khmer Rouge drag his father to his

death.

"They shot him, I guess," Keomeas says. "I never saw the body. There were so many of them, I couldn't tell ..."

Keomeas spent the next four years in rice fields, steps away from what he calls "death road." Escape, refugee camps, America at last, where he endured taunts from classmates

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# Business Monday

PRESS-TELEGRAM/MONDAY, DECEMBER 11, 1989

CAMBODIANS  
IN LONG BEACH

**B**YOND  
THE  
KILLING  
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នៅជាប់ឆ្នាយពី វាលក្រហម

“ I worked for the government, so I cannot go (to Cambodia) easily. I don't want to live over there. Just to visit. We are still afraid. ”

—Varin Nuon



Once the habitat of sailors and second-hand shops, Anaheim Street in Long Beach between Atlantic and Redondo Avenues has become a bustling business district, where commercial property rents have climbed to \$1.75 per square foot, about the same as property near the Traffic Circle. The new

mixes with the old, as in this section of the strip, where markets compete with each other as well as vie for space along with long-established enterprises. Of the 300 Long Beach businesses owned by Cambodians, about 100 are located on Anaheim Street.

Cristina Salvador/Press-Telegram



Nary Khou greets a customer who enters Grand Lake Market at 739 Anaheim St. last week. Khou helps her brother, Jimmy, who is assistant manager of the store.



Phou Misouk of Long Beach and his son Randy, 5, select oranges at Grand Lake Market on Anaheim Street. Many of the markets offer foods unique to Southeast Asia diets, with customers sometimes traveling from as far away as Ventura County.

# Fading business strip saved by the influx of immigrants

## Anaheim Street is thriving, renewed as Little Phnom Penh



H & H Video, at 779 Anaheim St. in Long Beach specializes in videotapes in Thai, Cambodian, Vietnamese and Chinese.

By Susan Pack  
Staff writer

**S**pend an hour in a video store on Anaheim Street in Long Beach for a quick take of Little Phnom Penh.

Mad Max and Beyond Thunderdome posters loom over a VCR showing a Taiwanese love story with Cambodian subtitles. Glancing at the movie is 45-year-old Sea Tea, who has taken a part-time job behind the counter of H & H Video after being stumped by the American automobile.

In Cambodia, he was a mechanic. But in Cambodia, hardly anyone can afford a car. They ride motorbikes. With small engines.

"Here, too big, too big," he says. "It's strange to me."

Especially when it is explained in a foreign language.

"I go to school to learn how to repair the automobile, but it is difficult for me, the English," he says.

The door of the shop at 779 E. Anaheim St. opens, and Varin Nuon, 46, breezes in with a videocassette in her hand. Tea slides it into the VCR, and monks appear on the screen. It is a home movie made by a refugee who recently visited Cambodia — and Nuon's two sisters, whom she hasn't seen in five years.

The first time she saw their faces on the tape, she says, "I cry a lot."

An agent for nearby Angkor Travel, Nuon has helped other local Cambodians return to their homeland. But she has not yet applied for her own visa.

"I worked for the government, so

I cannot go easily," she says. "I don't want to live over there. Just to visit. We are still afraid."

Pheung Be, an 18-year-old electrical engineering major at UC Irvine, strides into the shop.

"What kind of movie would you like today?" asks Tea.

"You have a dollar-a-day movie?" Be replies in staccato English.

Then she heads for the shelves of Cantonese and Mandarin movies.

"I don't watch many American movies," she says. "I need to learn my own language."

The video store is a microcosm of Anaheim Street, a once-decaying strip of bars and thrift shops that has been revitalized by Asian entrepreneurs and transformed into the hub of the city's Cambodian community.

For some, like clerk Tea, it provides a chance to earn a living in a land that still confounds him at times, a place where faltering English is the second language.

For others, like college student Be, it's a link to a tenuous past, a place where she can recapture her roots before confidently hurtling toward her American dream.

It's a place where home movies can be viewed and movies about home can be borrowed. It's an oasis in a foreign land — and a doorway to a new home.

Of the 300 Long Beach businesses owned by Cambodians, about 100 are located on Anaheim, generally between Atlantic and Redondo avenues. Many more businesses on the

# CAMBODIANS IN LONG BEACH

“ Without touching (the Anaheim property) at all, we have more than doubled the value. People are buying like crazy. ”

—Vora Huy Kanthoul  
Cambodian Business  
Association president



**Khlan Thi Dinh, left,** and Huthi Vuong, both of Long Beach, check out and return videotapes to H & H Video on Anaheim Street. Many tapes are commercial releases that have been dubbed into Cambodian, Chinese, Vietnamese or Thai.

Cristina Salvador/Press-Telegram  
Others have been made especially for those audiences, including videos of the homeland. Such enterprise is typical of the entrepreneurs who started many of Anaheim Street's firms, almost always with self-earned capital.

