# Press-Telegrai 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.

### 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

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-

cable 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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■ In Basket/C2

Last-minute flier/C6

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## Business Monday PRESS-TELEGRAM/MONDAY, DECEMBER 11, 1989

### CAMBODIANS IN LONG BEACH

### BEYOND THE KILLING FIFLDS

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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

Cristina Salvador/Press-Telegram

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.



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.

### Fading business strip saved by the influx of immigrants



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.



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

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

#### By Susan Pack

Staff write

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

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### CAMBODIANS IN LONG BEACH

(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.

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.

#### Little Phnom Penh Cambodians transform Anaheim Street Shaded areas show Cambodian neighborhoods around Anaheim St. Street business district. Pacific Coast Hwy. N 15th St. St. 10th St. 6th St. Long Oran Oriza Obis 4th St. Beach 1/4 Plaza 3rd Mile

Press-Telegram

### Immigrants transform business strip

FROM/C1

street are owned by Vietnamese, Chinese and Thais who cater to Cambodian customers.

It's an exotic corridor, where the local dry cleaner sells Chinese herbs and "hypertension repressing tablets." Where markets sell red bean ice cream bars and greenleaf cakes. Where restaurants serve fried pig intestine with steamed rice.

It used to look much different.
"Anaheim Street had a lot of second-hand shops, a lot of bars, a lot more drunks," says Harry Boerner, past president of the East Anaheim

Street Business Association and owner

of ACT Electronics.

The old businesses catered to sailors, who not only drank in the bars but also furnished their temporary homes with items from the second-hand stores, says Boerner, whose own store has been at 2345 E. Anaheim for 27 years.

But about 10 years ago, the sailors began leaving and the Cambodian refugees began arriving. The immigrants moved into the central city, where they crowded into lower-priced apart-

ments.

They made Anaheim their business headquarters because it was close to their homes, says Alexander Peng My, program coordinator for the United Cambodian Community Inc. vocational center in Long Beach.

"They do not drive the car," he says.
"They do not speak English. To do
business with Cambodians, you have
to put it next to the Cambodian door."

Because they had no credit or collateral, the new business owners did not borrow money from banks. Nor did they receive zero-interest loans from the Small Business Administration. Contrary to a persistent rumor, the SBA has no loans earmarked for refugees — and no zero-interest loans at all.

Instead, most Cambodian business owners relied on savings and interestfree loans from friends and relatives.

"It is a family business," My says.
"They just put the money together.
The wife, husband, children, grandparents."

#### First market bustles

Among the first businesses on Anaheim was Mekong Market, a dim, bustling little store that lures customers from as far away as Ventura and Riverside to buy lotus rootlets, prawn rolls and pickled cat fish. It's at 2230 E. Anaheim, across the street from Salty's Saloon.

Opened in the late 1970s, the market was purchased in 1985 by Vou Thy Ken, a Cambodian who used to operate a market in Laos. Ken, who arrived in the United States in 1975, never received welfare.

"I'm here two weeks and start work-

ing," he says.

He worked in a factory, then painted furniture before he and his wife got jobs in an electronic assembly plant in Gardena.

"We save all the time," Ken says.
"Not spend. Work lots of hours. Take
home and work, too. Work at work.
Work at home."

In 1980, they bought a house in Gardena with their savings and money from friends. Ken's wife still works at the Gardena plant, where she now earns more than \$10 an hour, while Ken runs the store with his sister, brother and other relatives.

It's a grueling schedule. He's there at least 10 hours a day, seven days a week. Three days a week, he gets up at 3:45 a.m. to buy produce in San Pedro.

How is business?

"It's good, yes," he says. "Just ood."

Although his three teen-age children help out at the store, they don't plan to follow in their father's footsteps. "They go to computers," he says.

When asked what he enjoys about his job, he says only, "I happy to make a living."

Ken, 47, would like to earn enough money to buy an apartment building and retire.

"I like to have apartment to rent and then take a rest," he says. "Work hard when we're young. Get the money. Take a rest."

#### Anaheim's value soars

As Cambodian businesses have proliferated on Anaheim, sales have declined at some of the older stores.

"The makeup of the customer walking by has changed," says Brent Hunter, former president of the Long Beach Area Chamber of Commerce.

But, he continues, "overall, it is more viable, more active than it was. It's a resurgence of the area with different types of businesses."

"You really have to give them high marks for what they are doing," says store owner Boerner. "You have people coming here. They have nothing. They went to work, changed it around, and it looks like they succeeded. I definitely see it as more of a positive influx."

Since the influx began, property along Anaheim has become more valuable. Three years ago, United Cambodian Community Inc. paid \$490,000 for the block between Junipero and Raymond avenues, says Cambodian Business Association President Vora Huy Kanthoul. Today, it is worth \$1.3 million

"Without touching it at all, we have more than doubled the value," he says. "People are buying like crazy."

Retail space along the Cambodian corridor now rents for as high as \$1.75 per square foot, about the same as property near the Traffic Circle. On the other hand, retail space on West Anaheim rents for about \$1.10 per square foot.

The "rent spike" is not unusual for an area that caters to a specific ethnic group, says Sean Armstrong, sales associate for Matlow-Kennedy Corp., commercial and industrial realtors.

"Retailers pay a little extra to be there," he says. "If it wasn't for the Cambodian influx, rents would not be as high as they are."

But the increase in rents has been accompanied by an increase in competition, making it difficult for the family-owned businesses to survive, says Andy Anh, executive director of the Economic and Employment Development Center for Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese Communities.

The businesses are proliferating at a time when their ethnic customer base is not, he says. Fewer refugees are coming to Long Beach, and those already here are venturing beyond Anaheim.

"People become more mobile the longer they're here," Anh says. "They own cars. No longer are they restricted to the area where they live."

There is little interaction between mainstream and immigrant business owners. Only a few Cambodian business people have joined the chamber of commerce, which recently formed a task force to try to broaden its membership to include more ethnic groups.

"What we want to try to do is to link the business interests of Long Beach," says Curtis McCray, task force chairman and president of California State University/Long Beach.

Some Cambodian business owners say they work such long hours they simply don't have time to become involved in the chamber.

"You don't need the chamber to really succeed," says Kanthoul. "None of the businesses along the Anaheim corridor cater to a predominantly American clientele."

#### Two cultures merge

Down the street, at Battambang Restaurant, the two cultures merge. A silver disco ball sparkles in front of a mural of the ancient Cambodian temple of Angkor Wat. A 50-inch television shows Cambodian movies filmed in the United States.

It's a place where Cambodians who have succeeded in the Western world can slip away and return to the soothing familiarity of the East. They sit at white Formica tables in the spacious pink restaurant and eat noodle soup, drink French coffee and chat in their native language. On Saturdays, they attend elaborate wedding receptions and banquets.

Phal Tuy, 25, and his partner opened the restaurant last summer in an old auction house at 2501 E. Anaheim. Although his family brought gold and diamonds with them when they arrived in the United States in 1981, he says he struggled for success.

He worked full time as a supervisor at a plastic fabrication plant five days a week — and got up at 2 a.m. seven days a week to deliver newspapers. He borrowed money from relatives and bought a doughnut shop on Anaheim, where he worked from 4 a.m. to 6 p.m. seven days a week for two years.

"Then we save a little money," he says. "We decide to run this. To run your own shop is better than to work for someone."

He still works hard, from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week. When an employee failed to show up one recent morning, he had to bus the tables himself, badgered by impatient waitresses.

"I just want to get enough money so I can support my family," he says. "My brother, sister, mom and I send some money to my relatives living in Cambodia."

Tuy doesn't want to return to Cambodia.

"I love America," he says. "They have good government. If you work hard, you get money. You can do everything."

You can even buy a black Mercedes.

"We start from the bottom to the top," he says with a smile.