

CHAPTER 4 HMONG MARKET VENDORS: LESSONS FROM A FOCUS GROUP

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 1975, many Laotian Hmong were granted asylum in the United States for their contribution to defending Laos from communist forces during the Vietnam War. When U.S. troops were withdrawn from Vietnam, the North Vietnamese persecuted the Hmong for their role as U.S. allies. The Hmong were forced to flee, first to refugee camps in neighboring Thailand, then overseas to countries with a dramatically different set of customs, values, and ways of life. Missoula was one of several areas in the U.S. in which the Hmong resettled. Originally introduced to the Missoula valley by Vietnam-era Hmong/CIA liaison officer, Bitterroot rancher, and Missoula Smokejumper Jerry Daniels, hundreds of Hmong refugees have since made Missoula their home. According to the U.S. Census, 207 ethnic Hmong were living in Missoula County in 2000.¹

The Hmong have a long history in agriculture. As a highland ethnic group living in Southeast Asia, the Hmong historically practiced swidden farming, which is the clearing and burning of small forested plots that are used for production for several years then allowed to fallow and regenerate forest cover while production shifts to the clearing of a subsequent parcel nearby. Upon their arrival in the Missoula area in the late 1970's, many Hmong employed their farming knowledge and skill towards cultivating backyard plots to help meet their basic household needs.

The Hmong soon began to fill their present day agrarian niche as they grew in number, became more acclimated to Montana's growing season, established ties with the Missoula Farmers' Market, and consumer demand for locally produced vegetables increased. Today, members of the Hmong community play a large role in the Missoula Farmers' Market, and they make up about 40% of all vendors.²

Little research has been conducted to understand Hmong farming concerns around the production and marketing of their crops in the Missoula area. To obtain a more complete picture of food production in Missoula County, researchers involved in the Community Food Assessment felt it was critically important to include Hmong producers in the project. Essentially, we wanted to ask the Hmong the same things that we were asking other producers regarding the factors that support their farming/gardening and those that threaten its viability. The methods and findings of our research follow below.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. Census 2000. Retrieved at: www.factfinder.census.gov

² Bradford, Kate. (2003). *Building social relationships, building business: A case study of vendors at the Missoula farmers' market*. Master's Thesis. Missoula: University of Montana.

STUDY METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

A Focus Group Approach

In order to maximize the participation of Hmong growers in the food assessment, we decided to conduct a focus group with them rather than attempt surveys or individual interviews. In part, this decision was influenced by the experiences of Kate Bradford who identified significant language and cultural barriers in her attempt to involve the Hmong in in-depth interviews during her study of Missoula Farmers' Market vendors. The decision was also greatly influenced by the advice of the Missoula Refugee Assistance Corporation (MRAC), whose staff recommended and agreed to help us in a group interview approach.

Focus group research offers a flexible, low cost and relatively quick way to explore the perceptions of an event, experience or idea held by specific groups of individuals.³ Focus groups typically consist of 5-12 pre-selected participants, one or two moderators and a note taker. These guided group interviews seek to confirm and/or challenge existing ideas, as well as uncover new information. Ideally, the social nature of the group interview encourages and draws out individual views and explores divergent opinions in a respectful and systematic manner. The group interview is taped and transcribed. Then, it is analyzed for themes and discrepancies, and may be used to develop recommendations and/or questions for further research.

Focus group interviewing creates an informal group environment where the conversation is gently directed, giving individuals permission to share opinions and perceptions of experiences. We hoped that the social nature of focus group interviewing would address and minimize language and cultural differences, thus increasing the information shared. The flexible nature of focus group research helped address the Community Food Assessment (CFA) researchers' limited cultural knowledge about Hmong traditions and communication styles. This flexibility was an attempt to encourage and allow for participation by Hmong growers and minimize possible power factors associated with the race, culture and education of the moderators. In this case, we had two moderators (one woman and one man), and a third researcher recorded notes and managed the equipment. This flexibility, however, presented some problems, as discussed below.

Data Collection

Typically focus group participants are unfamiliar with one another. However, certain work situations, rural communities and other groups with small numbers make this nearly impossible. Given the history of the Missoula Hmong community, it would be difficult to locate growers who are unknown to one another. Only one focus group was conducted so our findings only apply to that particular group of growers and not to the entire Missoula Hmong community. Nevertheless, the findings in this exploratory research provide valuable insights into some local Hmong growers' perceptions of market gardening, their

³ Krueger, Richard A. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. South End Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.

desire to continue growing and selling produce in Missoula, and some ideas of what might help or hinder the meeting of this goal.

The Missoula Refugee Assistance Corporation (MRAC) contacted potential focus group members and a translator. In a letter to the MRAC staff, we described the community food assessment (CFA) and the specific goals of our proposed focus group. Several follow-up meetings with the MRAC clarified our desire to learn more about Hmong gardening in Missoula and to identify possible factors that may facilitate or threaten their abilities to grow and sell produce here. The MRAC staff contacted area Hmong farmers, and found eleven men and women who were willing to participate in a focus group.

Researchers hosted the focus group in a location convenient and familiar to many of the participants. Several participants arrived late. To avoid offending members of the community, participants were included, despite their late arrival. While their understanding of the overall purpose of the group was likely compromised, their comments are considered helpful in developing a basic understanding of the issues and concerns around food production. All participants were familiar to each other and many were related, including the translator.

One Hmong woman translated at the interview. While this was essential, the translation process also posed several challenges. The nature of translation in general reflects a possible filtering and altering of the idea as expressed in the first language. Moderators attempted to address this by providing the translator with a copy of the questions prior to the actual focus group. Some clarification of questions and concepts were discussed prior to the group; however, there were several instances, noted in the findings, where direct translation of specific ideas or concepts appeared challenging, leaving doubts about the overall comprehension of the questions asked.

This focus group developed a certain ‘consensus’ style of translation, that is the translator often summarized the comments of an extended group discussion rather than providing individual translation of each statement made by each individual. This obviously inhibited the direct expression of individual ideas and minimized any appearance of dissent. This limited the moderators’ ability to probe further, clarify individual responses and search for all possible perspectives. The translator’s familial relationships with participants and her personal role as a grower and seller of produce overlapped into the focus group process as well. Power and communication issues that may be inherent within the relationships between participants due to family or cultural or other factors are unknown and present other potential limitations to the overall picture presented by data.

To help address concerns about translation, the translator met with the focus group moderators several weeks after the focus group was conducted. Through review of a typed transcript and the tape, the translator helped to clarify the content of recorded conversations that were not originally translated during the focus group. Further, the translator provided more background information about Hmong farming and went into detail about the history and relationships between the different focus group participants.

Analysis

The two moderators analyzed the transcript independently using content analysis. We identified common themes describing the participants' experiences growing and producing food in Missoula County. The common themes identified include: (1) the importance of gardening to the Hmong families, (2) motivations to sell produce at the farmers' market, (3) problems faced as a Hmong farmer in Missoula County, (4) use of unsold produce, and (5) gardening operations. It is important to note that generalizations cannot be made from this particular group of growers to the larger Missoula Hmong population, but these findings offer insights from which further study and recommendations can be developed.

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

The 11 participants consisted of eight women and three men who have grown and sold produce at the Missoula Farmers' Market, some for a few years and others for nearly 20 years. Introductions and relationships between participants indicated that a variety of age groups and generations were represented. Additionally there seemed to be a fair balance between those who own land on which they garden and participants who find other sources of land. One participant exclusively grew and sold cut flowers. It was noted by the translator that all other participants grew an assortment of produce and herbs similar to one another, both for market and personal consumption, including: carrots, onions, green beans, snow peas, sugar peas, potatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, cabbage, kohlrabi, basil, and chives. Several of these latter producers supplemented their gardening with the production and sale of cut flowers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GARDENING TO HMONG FAMILIES

Comments shared suggest that gardening is interwoven into some aspects of Hmong quality of life ideals. Gardening is described as a joyful activity, a healthful food source, an economic opportunity, and an important aspect of cultural transition. As one vendor explained: "Gardening is such an important thing for me and my family. We get to save a lot of money, from buying stuff from the grocery. In the wintertime, you still have some potatoes in the basement, green beans in the refrigerator, basil, whatever. So it's important for my life, especially in the winter."

"[Gardening's] important because for the Asians like us...It makes us happy when you walk through the gardens and see everything growing up, it makes us feel so happy and excited. Also food for our families, we are the kind of people who eat a lot of vegetables, so that is important to us. So always we are reminded of what we did in Laos, its not that much different here." ~ Participant

The cultural implications apparently are particularly important for older members of the Hmong community who may not speak English and who may otherwise lack productive social and physical activities.

“It’s difficult if you don’t have an activity to do. If you stay at home then insulation, depression, stress. During the summer time, if they [seniors] have farming or gardening to do, then they do an activity every day. Saturday you have something to sell, you get a little money to pay for gas or something...Most of our people have changed county, culture, regulation system, everything changing. For some of the younger persons, like my daughter, they are born here in the United States, they ok. They learn everything new, everything. They grow up and they say ‘my family here, they see only everything good. But all the elderly they are a little different. When they get here, it’s very different; stress. If they do [gardening] in the summertime, they feel better. For our people over 40, 50, 70 years old...they have a lot of problems: body aches, headaches, stomach hurting, shoulder, everything. If they do a little bit of gardening, then summertime they feel good, yea.” ~ Participant

MOTIVATIONS TO SELL PRODUCE AT THE FARMERS’ MARKET

The distinction between the themes of motivations for selling at the farmers’ market and the importance of gardening to Hmong producers seems to be subtle. The importance of gardening describes more the specific activity of gardening, whereas motivations to sell produce attempts to identify incentives that bring some of those producers to the farmers’ market.

According to the participants, selling produce at the farmers’ market provides a family activity and a work incentive. Participants identified both economic and social motivations. For instance, one grower explained that the money made at the farmers’ market helps offset increased costs of living in the winter: “In the winter I only do a couple of days a week of outside employment. I think gardening is important for me and my family...you can make a couple of thousand dollars in the summertime to help pay for heat and rent in the winter time, so it’s really, really important to me.” Another grower expressed a sense of community connection and appreciation by providing healthy food to people around Missoula.

“I see moms [at my office], and they ask ‘aren’t you a vendor at the farmers’ market?’ and I’m like yea I am. They say they just love coming there every summer because their kids eat healthy. I think that’s awesome. I love when people say that because you are not doing this for nothing. It’s actually helping people during the summer. They’re eating a lot healthier and it’s all organic stuff, none of that fast food stuff. They can have fresh vegetables right there for their kids.”

~ Participant

PROBLEMS FACED BY HMONG MARKET GARDENERS

The study participants stated a number of issues constraining their ability to continue their market gardening in Missoula County. Growing and marketing issues surfaced as the primary areas of concern.

Production Issues

Within this category, land access, time, costs of operating, and local biophysical growing conditions provide challenges for the Hmong producers.

While some Hmong farmers cultivate on land they own, others utilize land owned by other people. For farmers who borrow or rent gardening space, this creates a subtle form of land insecurity. Like many other Missoula County residents, members of the Hmong farming community may be limited by escalating land values and costs of property ownership. According to the participants, increasing subdivision appears to be influencing the availability of potential garden spots, and has resulted in several Hmong producers who rent garden space having to relocate to new garden plots on a regular basis.

“My aunt says she has had many plots over the years. She’d be farming on them for one or two years then they wouldn’t let her farm on them any more because they were going to be using that land to build up subdivisions or something. She felt that there were a number of times that it happened like that. She felt that it was such good farming land, they knew it was such good farming land, how could they not let her farm on it anymore...They’ve always got that fear that land is going to be taken away from them.” ~ Participant

Participants also mentioned that limited personal time, or specifically the need to dedicate their time to more lucrative employment, is a factor that impacts their ability to increase the size of their farming operation and fulfill larger market expectations. As one explained: “I have a full-time job, we can’t [garden] ten or twenty acres to provide...what Missoula County needs. So what you see at the farmers’ market that’s all we can produce for the two or three days [of our available time]. We can’t do any more than that....Gardening is kind of a little family business; it’s not a big one that can serve all of Missoula County, or Missoula City. It’s for whoever wants to buy it, whoever needs the fresh produce, something just like that.”

Increases in gardening expenses present another challenge to Hmong food production. As one participant put it: “Everything is so expensive so we can’t afford to do such a big garden, you know like a ten or twenty acres or so you can provide to a grocery, or especially the Good Food Store or Tidyman’s or those things you know.”

“I think that probably we need something to cover the crops, so you can be able to grow a little earlier, like starting in April, March and maybe the middle of March and April. So you need something to cover so it’s not freezing, to make it long enough. I think that’s a problem we have.” ~ Participant

Missoula’s short growing season and recent drought have also posed challenges to these market vendors’ ability to increase their food production in this region. As a participant explained: “A lot of Hmong have gardens here in Missoula where they’re able to irrigate their gardens from the local ditches. But for a lot of us...we usually don’t have enough water (for our produce) so we sit and we pray for heavy snow and lots of rain.”

Marketing Issues

Participants discussed a variety of marketing issues, including: time and vendor space constraints at farmers’ market, vendor competition, possible racial or cultural discrimination, pricing, and limitations posed by other area market opportunities.

Several participants expressed apprehension about their perception of the Missoula Farmers’ Market having grown little in comparison to the overall growth experienced in Missoula County. For instance, participants discussed how the farmers’ market’s restricted hours and the limited availability of vendor space pose significant barriers to Hmong growers’ ability to increase sales and reduce wasted produce. Participants indicated that a limited number of vendor spaces results in the exclusion of some farmers who arrive with produce to sell. Participants also noted that limited hours reduce their ability to sell all the produce they bring to market and can result in dissatisfied customers who arrive too late to purchase produce.

“A lot of customers complain, they complain, why you open for such a short time? Why do you not have enough space for people? A lot of people, not just people from here in Missoula, people on vacation from bigger states.”
~ Participant

Vendor competition may be viewed as that among the Hmong farmers and also between the Hmong and other local growers and regional producers. As one put it: “Competition with other vendors is because everybody’s selling the exact same produce. It’s just that everyone is selling the exact same produce – you are not just competing with your own people, you’re competing with Americans and everyone too. And you’re competing with local vendors and vendors from Hamilton and Ravalli County and from up north too.”

Participants seemed somewhat reticent to discuss perceptions of racial or cultural bias at the farmers’ market. However, a few comments that were later clarified by the translator reiterated observations made by Bradford⁴ regarding the subtle presence of racial or cultural tensions at the market. This highly sensitive, important topic is deserving of further investigation.

Considerations of the labor and time invested and their understandings of the value of organic produce cause Hmong farmers to feel that they are unable to charge prices that fully compensate them for their efforts. In

“The time is important. You have to pick every single radish, bundle them together and wash by hand. For myself, I’d sell it for ten dollars but at the farmers’ market I can get only a dollar, look at that.”
~ Participant

⁴ Bradford, Op. cit.

addition, they express concern that competing with the prices at businesses like WalMart seems futile. As the translator explained: “They don’t think the price is fair because it’s organic produce and its hand grown and its hand ploughed and everything...but the thing is... if you make the price any higher nobody’s going to buy it. And customers always compare to the store, oh like at WalMart, I can get this and this and this for this lower price.”

Besides the limits inherent in the Missoula Farmers’ Market, these local growers feel excluded by the purchasing practices of the larger retail food markets. Larger retail outlets’ need for a consistent year-round supply and large quantity of produce prohibits small Hmong producers from effectively establishing business relations and contracts with larger food outlets.

“[My aunt had a contract] with the Good Food Store, when it was still by Mazda dealership. She did, every summer she’d sell produce to them but it wasn’t enough. She’d make more off going to the farmers’ market. They wouldn’t pay her enough and she didn’t have enough produce to give to them, so it just stopped. We’ve tried and stuff but they want so much more than you can give them. When she did it, she had to call all of us, like all of her in-laws and stuff and help to actually get enough produce for what they were asking for...It just got hectic so she just stopped, we try to contact people but the only store that only does organic food is the Good Food Store...There is no other place that we could do it, plus there’s no other place except little market that you can sell your vegetables besides the farmers’ market.”

~ Participant

Use of Unsold Produce

Hmong growers identified unused or unsold produce as a problem. These producers find a number of ways to reduce waste, including donating the excess to the Missoula Food Bank, preserving food for their own use, composting, and feeding it to their chickens and farm animals.

“The [Food Bank] brings crates, and once their crates fill up then that’s it. And usually there is more produce left over than there are crates available. So a lot of the time we take the food and the vegetables and we just throw them away in the garden. Let them become our fertilizer.”

~ Participant

Gardening Operations

When asked how Missoula County’s population growth within the last decade has affected their farming, one participant expressed sorrow and frustration over the fact that so much of the County’s prime farming land is being developed. Another participant’s comments suggest that the small size of the Hmong’s garden plots in Missoula facilitates access to arable land and minimizes the negative repercussions of farmland development: “I would say that that question affects us a little bit but since we don’t farm on twenty or thirty acres, something like that, you can always find a friend or neighbor’s [property to farm on], so you can still have a small plot.”

We also asked participants about the potential of “severely” reduced access to land and the implications this would have for Missoula Hmong farmers in the future. Their response, combined with the history of the Hmong, would suggest a level of persistence and adaptation that allows them to continue farming under the most trying circumstances.

A number of farming strategies and practices were expressed during the focus group. These practices seemed to fall into three categories, including: land regime, garden planning and garden growing.

“They’d always find a way to farm. It’s not in them to just completely stop. That’s what they do, they garden.”

~ Participant

Land Regime. Local Hmong farmers own, rent, and/or borrow plots on which to market garden. The limitations and benefits of each have been discussed above.

Garden Planning. When planning cultivation, the Hmong have made use of conventional seed charts to adapt to the Missoula growing climate. They plant a variety of crops in hopes of attracting and increasing sales to customers. Further, they consider the previous year sales when planning a subsequent year’s garden, basing the proportions of a particular crop to be planted on how well it sold the preceding year. It is important to point out that there is typically little variation among the crops produced within the community Hmong of farmers we interviewed. The vegetables planted from year to year may vary but it seems that many Hmong producers grow the same variety of crops within a given year.

Season Extension. The Hmong interviewed expressed interest in gardening strategies that help extend the growing season. These include the use of small greenhouses for starter plants and small heaters to begin growing as early as possible. The use of family labor and composting of unused food were also noted.

SUMMARY

In Missoula County, Hmong producers play a vital role in local food production and are significant contributors of fresh, local produce to the Missoula Farmers’ Market and the Missoula Food Bank. A major objective of the Missoula County Community Food Assessment is to promote food security within the County through a better understanding of the challenges resident producers are facing. To help ensure that Hmong growers sustain current levels of food production and remain significant contributors to community food security, it is important to address the production, marketing, and, to some extent, farmland development issues identified in the focus group as affecting these market gardeners.