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Interviewee: Susan “Susie” Miller
Interviewer: Hannah Soukup
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Hannah Soukup: All right, so today is May 9, 2019. I'm Hannah Soukup, the Oral History Curator here in Archives and Special Collections at the University of Montana, and I'm talking with Susie Miller about the Hmong Voices in Montana Oral History Project that she curated along with two other individuals and she helped to do the recordings. Thanks, Susie, for being here.

Susan Miller: It's my pleasure.

HS: Before we talk about the project, could you just briefly discuss your personal and professional background as it relates to the Hmong project?

SM: Well, the beginning of my interaction with the Hmong community, I've always lived outside of Missoula, but we were up the Blackfoot and I saw an ad that needed a tutor for the refugees from Laos—the Hmong refugees from Laos. I had less work to do at that time—fewer cattle [laughs]—and I thought I really needed to have a connection to these newcomers. I felt like that would be something I could donate my time for. So I met my dear friend Ia Vang at that time, and she's still my dear friend after all these years. I suppose that was 19 [1981]...what was the date? '80...I was living up there, and it was the early '80s, probably, '82 or something like that. The way we tutored was you went into the home of the person that you're tutoring, and I tutored twice a week for years. It was just wonderful. I mean, we were family friends and we were at an apartment complex—Council Grove on 3rd. Lots of the Hmong families lived there. Lots of extended families lived together, too, so the grandparents and the parents and the children and the grandchildren were all in a single complex or right next door. Aunts, uncles, people that they had grown up with in Laos, or that they had met in the camps. It was this community right there, and that was the beginning of getting involved with the community.

I had gone back to school, and I was studying the traditional costumes of the Hmong refugees here in Montana and how they used them in their present lives in Missoula, or Lincoln—there was one family up there. So it was the most rich and exciting period of my life really for many years. Anyway, that was the beginning, and then I realized that this was...what an opportunity for Montana to have these amazing individuals sharing our space and being part of the community. I'm a textile person from the beginning of time. In grade school, we learned how to use drop spindles and looms, and we learned how to shear the sheep that were at the school where I lived. It was part of who I am, to be interested in their textiles and this incredible craftsmanship and artistry that I was seeing in these traditional costumes that they wore. So that was the focus of my thesis¹ was on the traditional costumes and their use.

¹ *Traditional Costumes of the Lao Hmong Refugees in Montana*, 1988.

HS: Are you a native Montanan?

SM: No, I grew up in Illinois. Grew up in Illinois and moved West and never looked back.
[laughs]

HS: [laughs] That's a common story.

SM: I've been here since 1965 is when we moved when my children were babies.

HS: Okay. You had two co-curators who helped you with the project. One was Bounthavy Kiatoukaysy, or Vee, and the other one was Tou Yang. Can you talk about the first time you met Vee?

SM: Vee was part of the extended family of Ia Vang, who I was tutoring. So it was a natural...they were cousins, and so I met her after she moved here. Where had she been? Minnesota, perhaps, or her parents were there. Anyway, when Vee moved here with her husband, that was the connection. She's about the same age as my daughter. I soon saw that she's one of the wisest people I think I ever had met, and we all became friends and did lots of things together. Ia, Vee, and their husbands Cha Thao. Tou, I met because he also was very involved with cultural things in Missoula and Vee was teaching some classes—Hmong culture classes—and they would meet at that apartment complex, or nearby. It was the school...where was it?

Emily Dickinson, is that the name of the school that's off of 3rd and now it's Extended Learning? What do you call it? Anyway, it's classes you can take for adults is now there. Anyway, that's where...Everything was concentrated in that area of town. Tou was quite good at playing the qeej, which is kind of a mouth organ—very traditional instrument that's used in funeral ceremonies and in other things, too, but it's really important for the funeral ceremony and the sounds and the notes lead the soul of the deceased to the next world. Tou had never thought of himself as a cultural, you know, and then he really got into it. He was great. He interviewed some of the people, Vee interviewed others, and I would go with them to the interviews. Most of the interviews were in Hmong because the elders didn't speak English at that point.

HS: Okay. I know that the purpose of Hmong Voices in Montana was to document their culture in their own words. There was also a sense of urgency about the project because the Hmong community moves around a lot, and so you had people moving back to Minnesota or to Minnesota or other places. How did the Missoula Art Museum get involved in the project?

SM: I think the original thing was I had this idea that I felt, if we could explore this and have an exhibit of these amazing, amazing artifacts and textiles that I was seeing every time I'd go into one of their apartments, this would be really wonderful for the whole community. Laura Millin was kind of a new director, and I went to Laura and I explained kind of what I thought—the original idea of what shall we do—and she totally came on board. Oh my gosh! That museum, I

love...Now it's MAC [MAM], Missoula Art Museum. They're so community-oriented, and figured out funding for it. We had to write grants for everything because none of this is in the budget. They backed this idea 200 percent. To this day we still, when we see each other, we think, wow, that was so amazing. Vee and I [laughs], this is like the best parts of our lives was in this whole thing. It was very exciting, very wonderful. Vee and Tou were so conscious of always getting the opinions of the elders. That was bedrock. If there was something that needed to be discussed, they would get together. If it was in one person's...let's say Vee's father-in-law is a shaman, Kia Moua Tao, and if it was in his area of expertise, he could make the decision. It didn't take the whole community because he was the one so versed in the sacred and spiritual aspects of the Hmong community here. So that's how it was done—meeting with people with the knowledge. They primarily interviewed those people, but there were younger people they also interviewed who had an expertise in playing a leaf, for instance. You can blow on a leaf and create song, and it's a tonal language, so the way this went, those were words. They could be love songs. That's how they used it primarily with courting youth. They would play these love songs on...they had mouth harps that “wang-wang-wang”—you've heard the sound of these harps, I think—and then on a simple leaf. So there were different people that were interviewed for different reasons—for their expertise, for their experiences.

HS: But always with the support of the community and the elders.

SM: Yeah, just as an example. They did story cloths when they were in the camps. That was not traditional embroidery for them, but it became something, a way of making money to send to relatives. Those that got out of the camps and started a new life in the U.S. or other places would receive intricate embroideries from the camps, and they would market those and then send the money back to their families. Usually, it was within a family that they did this. We decided we should do a story cloth since they got here to Missoula, or tell the story of how they got here. We didn't know how to go about it. What goes on this quilt? What goes on this big story cloth? I have to say that this funding had come from Helen Capadoccia, who was very interested in textiles, and she was so helpful in providing funding for this project. There was other funding also, but that was really a huge boost because it took a lot of time and a lot of people's efforts.

We had a big meeting at Council Grove at the community meeting room. What should go on it? What did they find important? Made lists of things, and then they all decided what was important and a lot of it had to do with flying here. I won't go into so much detail because we'll never finish, but it included a lot of things that were very important to them: education, feasts, shaman ceremony, all these things that happen here in Missoula. Of course, leaving Laos—the airplanes that were there, and then being shot at when they were trying to escape on foot because there were no more planes, and then there was a big massacre on a bridge. There were suggestions of these things in the big story cloths that came from the camps, and this was sort of a continuation of “then what happened.”

Really, education, all these things are really, really important to them. Playing volleyball at Council Grove—there's a volleyball net and people hitting it over. Recreation, hunting and fishing here in the mountains around Missoula. Many, many, many different things. They voted on what they wanted, the elders all met, made decisions, and then the art museum had an art class for children, and a lot of the Hmong children went to it. Maybe it was for the Hmong kids, I think. One...what's his name? Do you have his name on there?

HS: Tou Yang?

SM: No, the young child [Kou Moua]—

HS: Oh, no I don't.

SM: —that did the best drawings and then he and his father [Yee Moua] ...It's in that catalog². I'm so sorry, right now I'm spacing it out.

HS: That's okay.

SM: I'm 80. I'm spacing out. [laughs] But anyway, he did these wonderful drawings. He drew, and his father drove him all over Missoula to look at all these different things so he would know how to draw what all these different things that were going to go on the thing. That's how it was done, and then a couple of the women stitched it very carefully with the embroidery. Another woman did all the edging around it with the quilted border that goes on. It was a real community effort. That was because the museum had this project. That was because...figured out backing for how to do this.

HS: That's wonderful. How did the Hmong community react to the request to document their culture and their history and what was the process for going about that? Did you initially approach them, or did Vee and Tou approach them?

SM: Well, we did it at different times, I think, but certainly, Vee and Tou were the key spokespeople for what we were trying to do. I always felt like it was their project. That was the whole point. At first we were saying...I don't know, we had some working title, "Speaking for Themselves" or something- I can't remember. But it ended up being "Hmong Voices in Montana," because that was the idea, was we wanted the interpretation to be through their eyes and not something that was superimposed by a different culture.

HS: Was the community generally supportive, or were they hesitant at first?

SM: They were really supportive. I think in some ways it was a healing for some of them. They had lost everything, and all the things they knew, like the traditional medicinal plants...The women that so deeply understood all of the healing practices using plants, it mattered again. I

² Hmong Voices in Montana exhibit catalog, published by the Missoula Museum of the Arts Foundation.

think, maybe too, there was depression from going from their busy lives and war—all the things they have been through—losing everything, losing their homes, and starting all over in the U.S. It was really hard for the men, particularly, I think. The women kind of kept going and kept cooking the meals and kept doing the family things that they do, and rocking babies. The older women were still embroidering, but the men had lost their roles. I think it was really beneficial for them to be able to recall and find that people really cared about what they really cared about, even though it was in the past in many ways. Kia Moua, the shaman, made the decision, “Yes, we are going to build a home, a Hmong home, inside the museum.”

I mean, we asked, “Is it possible to put anything?”

He said, “Yes,” and then he said, “That's really important, and we have to put the altar in there and I will cut the paper money for it. I will explain to everybody what's important and where the post goes.” The men all got together and built a Hmong home inside, and the women cooked food for them—traditional food. It just snowballed.

HS: That’s wonderful. What were the initial interviews like for you and for Tou and Vee? Maybe not having a background in interviewing.

SM: Oh, so awkward. I mean, it felt...because you worried about all the ‘ums,’ like I'm probably saying now. Very unprofessional, but Nicholas said, “That's okay! We're getting this information.” So it felt very natural, and these were all people Vee and Tou knew and were part of the community. I think the elders appreciated being looked up to and being the source of knowledge.

HS: And this is Nicholas Vrooman, the folklorist?

SM: Yes, from Helena.

HS: Okay, and can you just talk a bit about his role in the project?

SM: Well, the main thing was when he came over [from Helena], and it was the best thing that happened and it was early on when he came over and spoke with the community. He has such a genuine spirit. If anybody was afraid of ‘who's going to use this and what is it for?’ his talking in that warm-hearted way that he has, and being truly interested, I think was really key to do that early on before we did any interviews. That was really good. Big help.

HS: What were, if any, some questions or concerns that the Hmong community raised when they were approached about doing this project?

SM: I can't think of anything right now. [pauses] I'm trying to think. I can't really think of things, negative things, because they were so giving. The museum opened...they thought, “Well, it'll be really interesting to have the women embroidering at the opening.” We made it a permanent

thing, the whole time the exhibit was up—I don't know if it was six months or whatever. They had this upstairs room where all the women could talk and embroider and sell their things directly to anybody that wanted to come in. It became like a little community hub. [laughs] It was really fun, and they became great friends with Laura Millin, 'Sure, why not, turn everything upside down and let's do it.' It turned out to be really a refreshing aspect.

Also when we were hanging the show, Bob Hanamura from San Francisco helped design the...really did design the hanging of the show. He had this one thing...what did he call it? It's in the catalog. ["The Hmong-American Mish-mash"] Anyway, it's a living room and it's up on a stage, so you walk in, there's a Hmong living room in the museum. They started bringing things from home right and left. There was a TV in there, and there were all these things that were cross-cultural things that they had in their living rooms. During the show—this is so fun—oh, they had videos that were the kind of videos that Hmong family here would send to their relatives in let's say St. Paul, Minnesota, or Fresno, California. There were all these Hmong videos of all sorts of things like Hmong New Year, who knows what, music, contemporary music, whatever. You'd pop them in—these are back in the days of VCRs—pop it in, and then the kids would come in and the mothers may be sewing upstairs or working, and they [the children] would sit on the couch in the living room and flip on the Hmong video. It was really fun. Very interactive. They shared precious things to go in the exhibit. Things kept coming in. 'Would you like this?' It was a real sharing of...total generosity of spirit and of things that they shared during that period of time. It was really fun.

HS: [laughs] It sounds like it. What were some of the challenges with the project?

SM: Let's see... [pause] We had to raise money, and I didn't know how to do that. I could write certain things about what would be the reason that we were raising the money for this aspect of it and that aspect of it or for a catalog or for whatever it was. Laura brilliantly puts it all together and knows how to do it. Let's see, challenges. Okay, that was just a financial one, so we could realize our dreams and do it right. Have Bob Hanamura come up and help with this exhibit. Let's see...I'm trying to think...real stumbling blocks. Vee and I had to reinvent ourselves constantly, because it was a lot of work to get this all put together. I mean, she would translate, and I'd try to write it up. There were hours and hours and hours of behind-the-scenes stuff going on. It was hard work, but it wasn't stumbling around. You work on something until it feels comfortable, but I think having the kind of wisdom that she and Tou had, about how to go about it, was beautiful. They didn't make up these ideas by themselves. They always asked.

HS: The elders of the community?

SM: Always asked. That was key. I'm trying to think. I suppose people block out negative things, but I still look at it as a really great period of my life. Yes.

HS: I know you've talked a lot about how wonderful the project was, but would you mind elaborating on any parts of the project that really stood out for you as just part of that amazing experience?

SM: Well, this is a peripheral one that I haven't mentioned, but through the art museum they made the fifth-grader exhibit that all fifth graders in Missoula County and for many...hundreds of kids would come and see this exhibit. They had docents that would explain everything. Then they would go, at that time, over to the public library because there was no space. We'd walk over, and I'd teach them an art class that had to do with the things they had seen. I didn't know what to do because those embroideries—it was so full of embroideries. I mean, costumes and funeral collars and funeral jackets, just the most amazing display of things. You'd never know that there were this many things like this here in Missoula. Those intricate embroideries take months sometimes to make, so what do you do when you have an hour with fifth graders? [laughs] We ended up doing cut paper and laminating them like the reverse applique that were in the show. Because we were trying to have children really look and then see if they could make something that felt kind of like that. They did...you know how you fold paper and you cut out snowflakes? They folded the top piece of paper and cut out to whatever they wanted. Cut, cut, cut, and then glued it on to the other color underneath it. Then they could take markers or whatever they wanted and make little stitches or little designs on it—here, there, like the tiny little ones that are on the Hmong embroideries. Little squares.

They were so fabulous! They were really wonderful pieces, and especially when, at the end, you put them all up on the bulletin board and stand back, and there are all these. So in a way it was teaching...I think for me, it was that the community could come and really learn a lot, and the Hmong are the teachers, teaching what they're doing. Vee helped me at the class there. That was, for me, the most important thing, I think, was having them be the voice of...How could I be? I know nothing, really. The tip of the iceberg, even if you're studying it. You don't have the whole heart in it. You don't have hundreds of years of these things being passed down. Only the Hmong could do that, so for me that was the best part was the interaction between the community—they loved the exhibit. They could come—people could come when the shaman was in the house, in the shaman house—and someone would translate and he would be explaining what was happening. It was really a live time.

HS: So, you got to know Ia Vang before the project as well as Vee, and then you got to know Tou through the project. Were there any other Hmong community members with whom you worked closely or got to know well as a result of doing the oral history interviews?

SM: Oh, yeah. [pauses] Let's see. Vee and Tou were the consistent ones, and I didn't go to all their interviews, either, because I couldn't really communicate unless they were the next generation down. Then I could. Like Mary Yang, who was head of the Refugee Assistance Corporation, spoke English beautifully. Got the first grants to help everything, help the refugees when they first arrived. She also sold heaps of embroideries for them. I could interact with people that spoke English really well, and I could interact in the way of holding babies and

eating at their generous tables, that way—lots of different families—and going to the Hmong New Year and sitting with my Hmong friends.

There was a broader thing, but as far as being able to...It was always through costume that I communicated. They dressed me up in a traditional blue...They have blue stripes on their arms, striped Hmong [sleeves] from Sam Neua province with these enormous turbans that go round and round and round. They're very heavy. You have to keep your neck straight to keep them up there. They put the earrings on. They completely bind your head. It was very tight. My eyes, I think, were going out to the side a little bit from the binding of the turban. They put their jewelry, their silver necklace on me, and they had so much fun. It was like playing with a doll or something, dressing up someone.

Then they wanted sisterhood pictures of us standing together in the Hmong costume, and I was so touched by that. It was very moving because Cher Moua Thao, who is a wonderful farmer and gardener and was also related to the family, and Mai Lee who was la Vang's mother-in-law—beautiful embroiderer, exceptional work. Then to have the fun stuff, too. It was really fun. Then they wanted another picture—a very formal portrait—and you don't smile on these portraits. I probably did like a monkey or something, I don't know. But they are very serious in these portraits. The women said, "No, wait, we need our American outfits." So, they had slacks and blazers that they had, that they wore. They had those portraits taken, too, at the same time with me wearing whatever I was wearing, I don't know what it was, after we took off the costumes. I love those moments. They're quite wonderful. [laughs]

HS: [laughs] I was just wondering when you were talking about the textiles and then thinking about the oral history project, why was it essential that in doing the exhibit for the museum, that you also do an oral history project as part of the larger documentation of the community?

SM: Oh, how can you do it without the voice? I mean, there's no other way to get the thoughts and feelings and remembrances and knowledge from people without them saying it. They didn't have a written language. Eventually it became a written language possible thing, but none of the elders wrote. It's all in speaking, and it's the way their music notes are words leading the soul to the next life. You need the spoken word, and all their stories that go back. So many cultures, just as the Native Americans have their legends and stories that are the heart of the whole culture. That's why. Of course, it's such a tip of the iceberg what we did, because there's so much more than what we could cover in the little time we had. I think there are some stories in there, aren't there, in some of those tapes—the legends. Because they appear in the embroideries, and that was their one way of transferring that knowledge to a culture that didn't speak their language was to make it into a story.

They didn't draw pictures before, either. That's all new. They had symbols and they had mountains, but they were triangles. They had intricate pathways in their embroideries, and there's all sorts of animal knowledge and house knowledge and things that relate to their lives

in those embroideries. But we would not know what they're talking about until they finally did it--did trees and rivers.

HS: I was hoping you could reflect on the legacy of the project and its sort of long-term benefits to the Hmong community and to the larger Missoula and Montana community.

SM: So many of the people have died since we did it—the knowledge bearers. I know in different communities they have done different projects to try to keep the culture alive, probably the St. Paul and Minneapolis area, there a lot. I'm sure down in Southern California and maybe Fresno. Different places where I'm sure people have done the kind of thing that we wanted to do here. It gets lost, and when the memory of something disappears, that part of the culture is extinguished. There's such a richness to it. Maybe not the first generation that was born here would care as much, but then you start thinking, and then you realize when that baby becomes a grandmother, there's so many things that family members...I mean, if they can somehow preserve what they remember at that point in time, it may be just a speck compared to what went on, but it's huge. You see what... [pauses] I don't know.

I mean, I see their lives changing a lot, but they've always kept that strong family bond, the type of clan unity—lending to each other, gathering for funerals. They may dress differently than they used to, but that same solidarity is there of families and celebration. My friend, Ia, she sends me things via Facebook. It's about the only Facebook thing I answer, but they're so fun—videos of this and videos of that. They've taken on Valentine's Day. They have this big feast and everybody's so dressed up, and they do dances in costume, but modern costumes. They make it their own, which is a delightful thing to see. I mean, they've always moved on—that's been their culture. It's over 5,000 years old, I think. I don't know the very beginning. Probably scholarship has changed on that, but back when I was sort of studying, I think a 5,000-year span of time that the Hmong have been coming out of China—in China, and coming out of China, and then the diaspora. That's part of who they are—the diaspora and moving on. Wisconsin, California, wherever else they've gone. Yeah. Does that answer it?

HS: Yeah, absolutely. [laughs]

SM: I'm blabbing. [laughs]

HS: So, the last question I wanted to ask you was about, do you have any feedback or any suggestions for people who are considering doing a similar project, especially as it relates to documenting a culture different than your own and trying very hard to avoid any kind of cultural appropriation?

SM: Learn from the people. [pauses] You may have some really good techniques. We were total novices. But be passionate about what you're doing. I think a lot of it has to do with the human heart and giving and receiving. If it's kind of official business or something, I don't know. It's the friendships and the sharing tears and laughter. Lots happens in people's lives on both sides, and

you [pauses] you don't want it just to be a scholarly thing, because that misses probably 90 percent of the human interaction and learning from the strength of other people. I learned a lot from the strength of these people. I feel I received so much more than they did in any exchange that went on. It felt one-sided. Yeah. That's about it. [pauses] I just wish other people can have the experience because it's very beautiful.

HS: Well, thank you so much, Susie. I really appreciate this.

SM: You're welcome. Thank you.

[End of Interview]