

Looking to start a new life

by SUE LAFKY

At 38 years old, Long Song Saechao is going to learn to read and write.

He's also going to learn English and how to drive a car.

"It's hard," said Ay Choy Sae Lee, a friend from Laos who has been in the United States for a year and a half.

"It was hard for me too," he added. "It's a good thing I spoke a little English. Most often they don't. That's why it's quite hard."

"They can't do anything without help when they first get here."

Long Song, his wife and two small sons arrived in the United States a week ago. They escaped from Laos into Thailand about two years ago.

The Saechaos are learning to adjust to the peculiarities of American living through their sponsors at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Damascus. Their new home is a rented mobile home on Kelso Road in Boring.

Church member Chuck Carpenter said his congregation will help the family until it can manage on its own. The first task is to teach the Saechaos English.

"Long Song is smart; he should have no trouble learning," Carpenter said. "He knows that the more English he knows, the better the job he will get."

In Laos, Long Song spent 10 years in the Laotian Army — five years fighting and five years as a cook. Like many Laotians who had close contact with Americans, Long Song feared for his life after the communist takeover.

Ay met Long Song while they were both in the Army. There are more than 600 Laotians in Portland, Ay said. Some 21 families are members of Long Song's ethnic group, Yao. The Yao people migrated to Laos from Southern China about 150 years ago.

Long Song and his 28-year-old wife, Muey Kuang, escaped from Laos by crossing the Mekong River at night.

"He didn't think he'd be alive after the crossing," said Ay.

Long Song also feared he wouldn't see

his mother, who is still in Thailand waiting for a United States sponsor.

"As soon as he helps himself, he wants to bring his mother here," Ay said.

The river crossing was made during the rainy season. Thai authorities tried to force the family back into Laos, a move which would have guaranteed certain death, Ay said. The Saechaos were forced to hide in the forest for 16 days.

"It was a couple of weeks without food and without a mosquito net," said Ay. Banana leaves provided shelter for the family.

From the forest, the Saechaos went to jail for two months.

Ay, who worked after his escape as a

translator for a Christian mission group called World Vision, visited Long Song and his family in jail, bringing vitamins and medicine.

The disease-ridden prison was so crowded that people had to sit down in shifts, Ay said. "There were four persons for 1 kilogram of rice for a whole day. There were no vegetables," he added.

The Saechaos had one child and another one on the way.

What money the Saechaos smuggled out of Laos was confiscated by Thai authorities or used for "very expensive" food, which Thai women sold in prison.

From prison, the Saechaos were transferred to the crowded Chang

Khong refugee camp, in January 1978.

While in camp, Muey Kuang did embroidery work for the Thai government while Long Song took care of the children.

The Yao people generally are mountain dwellers who farm by clearing densely vegetated areas by burning and then use the ash as a natural fertilizer. They also are skilled at raising livestock.

Long Song did some farming in Laos and wants to farm again if he can.

That's his favorite work," said Ay. Long Song says that his rural home in Boring reminds him of Laos.

"The only thing I can tell is that it's a beautiful country," he told Ay. "And it's progressive."



MUEY KUANG Saechao and her sons, two-year-old Chep Song and one-year-old Sang Song have escaped from their war-torn Southeast Asia to the United States where they hope to make a new start in life.

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JEAN JENKINS, above, a contact representative for the Social Security Administration, discusses the family's situation with Chuck Carpenter, a member of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Damascus. Long Song Saechao, right, reflects on his future after leaving communist dominated Laos.



Photos by Kim Smith