

A new home

Family walked two months for freedom

By Shirley L. Smith
Neighbor Staff Writer

It has been almost eight years since Sarin Phai left his home in Cambodia.

Although he says he misses his mother and brother who still live there, he has no desire to return to his homeland.

Phai decided to leave Cambodia in 1979 after the communist regime had successfully taken over the country.

Phai attends English classes in Hapeville, where he now lives. With the assistance of his instructor, Phai tells how he struggled to come to America and what life was like in Cambodia after the communists took control.

"My uncle, aunt, nephew, brother and cousin were killed by a (communist) soldier," Phai says. There wasn't enough food or medicine, he says, and over two million people died of starvation.

Before the communist invasion, Phai was a farmer, but then he had to become a soldier. He was shot once in the leg.

In a desperate effort to survive, Phai escaped through the woods at night with his children and his wife leaving his mother and only living brother behind.

"I walked for two months," he says, speaking matter-of-factly. The family survived by eating leaves from trees and making soup from crabs. Even though Phai travelled with a weapon, he says his journey was filled with

fear—fear that he and his family would be captured by communist soldiers and fear that they would be attacked by snakes or some other animal.

Phai and his family finally found refuge in Thailand. They stayed there for four years, he says. While there, Phai says, he helped out around the camp and studied English for three months.

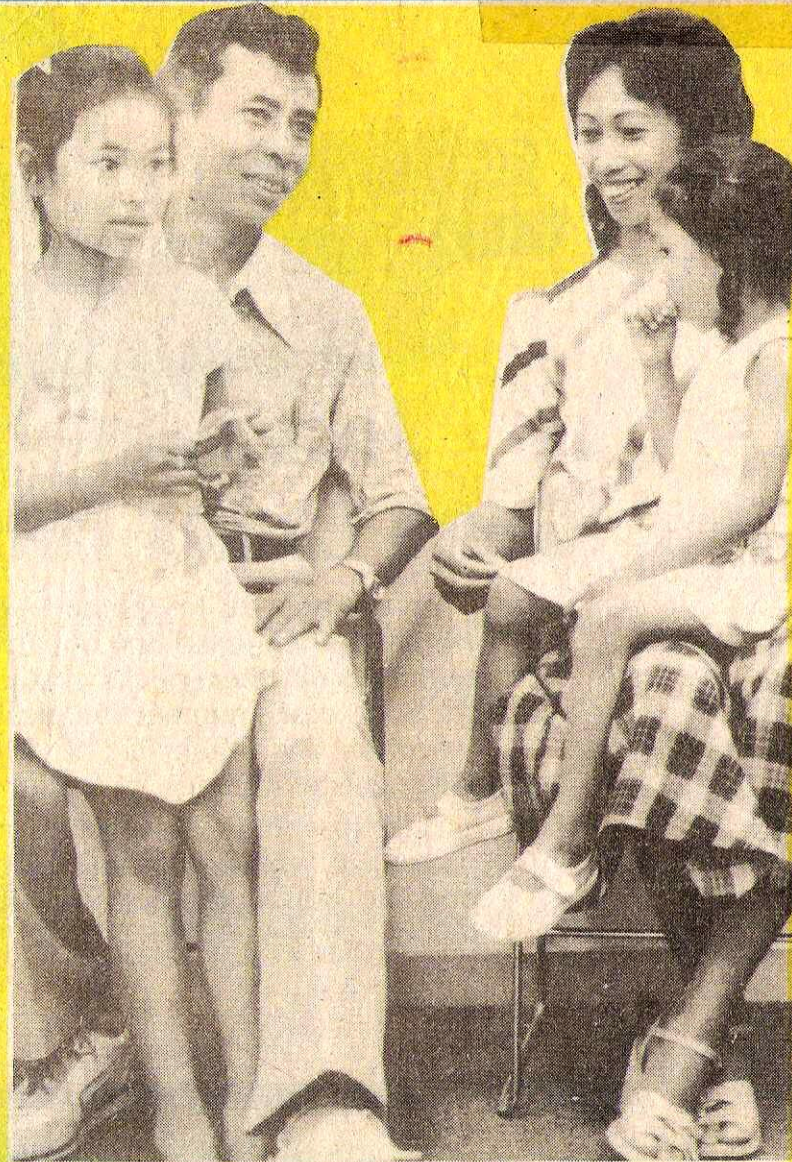
Phai had no problem remembering the exact day he came to America. "1985, July 1, came to America," he says without hesitation.

Most of Phai's days are spent at Hapeville library attending English classes. He likes to watch television when he is at home. He writes down what the people say on television and show it to his children when they come home from school, to make sure what he wrote is accurate.

Phai has three children now, the oldest one is 15-years-old. He was only seven when the family fled Cambodia. The other child is eight-years-old and was only a baby when the family left their homeland; he was kept alive by his mother, who breast-fed him throughout the two month journey.

Phai's youngest child is three-years-old and was born in the refugee camp in Thailand.

Phai says the most important things to him are learning to speak English fluently and learning to understand it and getting a job.



Staff photo by Henry Hall

THE AMERICAN WAY: Phai Sarin sits with his wife Heng Sot and daughters Sary and Rady.