Since 1948 The Minnesota Historical Society has used oral history as a means of recording important parts of our state’s past that may not be available in any other form. Oral history is especially useful in documenting the experiences of recent immigrants to Minnesota, who often arrive with few possessions, especially if they’ve fled civil war or strife. Without the letters, diaries, photographs, and objects the Historical Society traditionally collects, interviews may be the best way to document the lives and views of immigrants and refugees.

Minnesota has long been a destination for European immigrants, but since the mid-20th century Minnesota’s population has also been augmented by successive waves of immigration from Asia, East Africa, and Latin America. In the decades following the start of these migrations the Historical Society began sporadically collecting their stories.

The most extensive series of recent immigrant oral histories is that conducted with the India Association of Minnesota between 1993 and 2004. This four-part project includes interviews with over 50 Asian Indian immigrants and their American-born children. Most of these individuals emigrated from India in pursuit of educational and job opportunities in the 1950s and 60s, and in the interviews they discuss the difficult decisions to leave home and to stay in the U.S. permanently:

*Deep Shikha Gupta:* It has been very hard choice, even now. I think that is what you’ll find with most of the immigrants; we have that guilt always. Always, we feel guilty because I know I made a promise to my mother-in-law that I’ll come back. She was going to live with me and my husband... My mother depended on me a whole lot emotionally. So, that...
guilt is there, and that guilt would stay there. I don’t think we ever resolved that.

Other oral history projects consist of interviews with refugees, individuals who had little choice but to leave their home country and settle elsewhere. The Historical Society holds several projects conducted with Hmong refugees from Laos, and Khmer refugees from Cambodia, who fled war and persecution in the 1970s and 80s. Many of their stories include shocking and heart wrenching accounts of their escapes:

*Henry Nelson:* I run across jungles; across jungles that have a mine there along the borders. Khmer Rouge put the mines to prevent people from running out to Thailand. Many people died in the jungles. Many of them. I saw the bones there, the skeletons there in the jungle there.

Minnesota is also home to a small, tightly knit Tibetan community, and a 2004 project recorded interviews with 22 Tibetan exiles who came to Minnesota in the early 1990s from India and Nepal. A common theme in their interviews, as well as those done with Southeast Asian and Somali refugees, is the sad knowledge that the lives they led in their homeland are lost to them, but also the recognition that the U.S. provides opportunities that would not have been available to them otherwise:

*Thupten Dadak:* Now in Minnesota when I get out my door, I have to depend on, first, car and then gas, then insurance, all of this. So a lot of headache. But at the same time, the good part of America is that freedom, inner freedom I’d call it, which has freedom express our religion, freedom of speech. I think that’s a great value. Even though it’s busy and I miss part of Tibet or part of living in India, but still I keep the value and I try to be happy.

The Minnesota Historical Society continues to work with immigrant and refugee communities in the state to develop new oral history projects. Currently interviews are being conducted with Latino community leaders. And in 2009 the Society received a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to digitize and post online over 100 immigrant oral histories. You can now access these interviews through two new websites: *Becoming*
"Minnesotan" and "Immigrant Oral Histories." Take a listen, and learn more about the newest Minnesotans, through their own words.