

**Name of Interviewer:** Lee Roy Calderon

**Method of Recording Interview:** Digital audio

**Language of Interview:** English

**Location of the Interview:** Vietnamese Seniors Association Office, Austin, Texas

**Date:** September 30, 2006

**Themes:** Vietnam, War, Immigration

**Name of Person Interviewed** (or pseudonym): Mr. Mai Nhon Tran

<i>Name</i>	<i>Transcript</i>
Lee Roy:	This is Lee Roy Calderon with Mr. Mai Tran. Sir, if you could please tell us some information about yourself. Where were you born, what year? And your experiences in early Vietnam growing up.
Mai:	My name is Mai Tran. I was born September 10, 1940, but my birth certificate says November, 10 1943, because we are in the French in World War II, and we had to move around. My parents had to lie to fill out birth certificates [unintelligible]. That's why I have to reveal my age. A lot of Vietnamese people had the same problem.
Lee Roy:	Where did you grow up in Vietnam?
Mai:	I grew up in Hue City, in central Vietnam. And Hue is the old capital of Vietnam when the French colony.
Lee Roy:	What was your childhood like? What sort of activities did you do growing up?
Mai:	I went to school. Then I had a Buddhist Boys Club at the Buddhist Temple.
Lee Roy:	Were you active in the Buddhist Temple?
Mai:	Yes.
Lee Roy:	Was that something your parents made you do? Did you enjoy it?
Mai:	Yes, my parents were Buddhist, and they liked me going to the temple.
Lee Roy:	Ok, are you still an active Buddhist now?
Mai:	Yeah, I still do it now. Yeah.
Lee Roy:	Ok, good. How were your parents?
Mai:	My parents have now passed away.
Lee Roy:	Growing up were they strict with you?
Mai:	They were. Growing up. They raised my life very good.
Lee Roy:	So you think they did a good job raising you?
Mai:	Yes very good at raising children.
Lee Roy:	Did you have any siblings growing up? Did you have any brothers or sisters?
Mai:	My family usually had four, but because we are in the earlier French colony, so now we have two. I and my sister, older sister. She's still in Vietnam.
Lee Roy:	Growing up, what was your daily routine like? What time would you wake up, what time would you go to school?
Mai:	I would wake up very early...around six o'clock in the morning. Because from my home to the Junior High School was about seven kilometers. I had to walk. But more than an hour just to walk.
Lee Roy:	What was school like?
Mai:	I went to Junior High School. Then to Hue High School. By then we had a bicycle. [unintelligible]
Lee Roy:	What sort of subjects did you learn in school.

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Mai: I learned the sciences. I liked sciences.

Lee Roy: Since it was a French colony, did they teach you French?

Mai: Yes. They teach French from the sixth grade, to the seventh grade. Then the eighth grade I passed to English. That's when I passed to English.

Lee Roy: Oh, so you were able to study English.

Mai: Yes I study English from beginning of...Junior School. I passed to English.

Lee Roy: What was your favorite thing to study in school?

Mai: Math.

Lee Roy: Math?

Mai: Yes. Physics, chemical. All the science.

Lee Roy: Were you part of any organizations in school? Or did you just go to school? Were there any extra activities?

Mai: Yes. Because in the school, you have study groups. Studyby groups. There were about 3 to 5 students. So, I was good in math, so I helped the other students. Then another student good at reading, writing, I learned from them. We exchange knowledge.

Lee Roy: That's an interesting way to learn in school Did you practice any traditional arts in Vietnam? Traditional dances?

Mai: Oh man dance? No. Because I'm a boy, no. [unintelligible] I don't enjoy.

Lee Roy: You don't enjoy? Ok. Aside from school what other sort of things did you do when you were younger? Did you ever work?

Mai: No. That time no work at all. After school, we play soccer at the field with bare feet. No shoes. Sometimes we play volleyball, but we don't have money to buy the net.

Lee Roy: And who would you play with?

Mai: Either my schoolmate or children in sam [unintelligible] group. Frineds.

Lee Roy: So, how was it like at home with your parents and your sister? How were the responsibilities? Did your mom cook while your dad worked?

Mai: Yes. My dad had to work. My mom would be cooking. My sister also cooking. I just go to school.

Lee Roy: How old were you when the war started?

Mai: Vietnamese war?

Lee Roy: Yes.

Mai: Vietnamese war very terrible. [Vietnamese translation] Began in 1945. That time Viet Cong was Viet Minh. So it start in 1945, when I was young.

Lee Roy: So 1945 is when a lot of things got started.

Mai: Yes. Then after that until 1954, we separate North Vietnamese Communist from South Vietnam...

Nancy: The country was divided.

Mai: Yes. Divided by [unintelligible]

Lee Roy: And which part of the country was Hue in? Were you in the North?

Mai: I'm South.

Lee Roy: So you stayed in the South?

Mai: I stayed in the South.

Lee Roy: Ok, How was the war like? What were your experiences during the war?

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Mai: The war? Vietnam war was terrible. After I passed high school, I go on to the school teacher, I have to join Vietnamese Army.

Lee Roy: So you were part of the army?

Mai: Yes. I was an officer. South Vietnamese army.

Lee Roy: What position were you?

Mai: The last one...[unintelligible]

Lee Roy: How did the war affect your family? Were you separated?

Mai: Yes, I was in the war so my wife had to work. I have to follow what my army told. Long time about six months before I see her again.

Lee Roy: So you were married when the war started?

Mai: Yes I was married.

Lee Roy: So what is your wife's name?

Mai: My wife named, Hoa, H-O-A, and last name is Tran, the same.

Lee Roy: And when did you get married?

Mai: I got married in 1968.

Lee Roy: Did you have kids?

Mai: Then, because I had to follow the war because the army, so 1971 I had my first child.

Lee Roy: So, you had your first child in 1971 because you had to serve in the army between 1968 and 1971.

Mai: Yes. [unintelligible]

Lee Roy: Do you have more children?

Mai: Yes I have four. I have four sons.

Lee Roy: When were they born? Your first child was born in 1971...

Mai: First one in 1971, then 1973, 74, then 76.

Lee Roy: So during the war you had to be separated from your family, because you'd have to go wherever the army sent you?

Mai: Yes.

Lee Roy: Did you do some fighting during the war?

Mai: Oh yes! A lot! Fighting would last sometimes, sometimes five times a week. Almost every week. Sometimes very [unintelligible], sometimes very light.

Lee Roy: And so, did you ever meet US soldiers?

Mai: Yes, I cooperation with US army. They helped me to [unintelligible] helicopter, and I helped to avoid the mines underground. So we helped together.

Lee Roy: So you worked together with the US Army?

Mai: Yes.

Lee Roy: What did you think of them? Were they helpful to you? Do you think they helped the situation in Vietnam?

Mai: I liked very much because they helped me very much. So I think that I still owe the American soldier. In my mind, in own way I owe them, because they fight for my freedom for my country.

Lee Roy: So, you really appreciate what they did.

Mai: Appreciate, what they...

Lee Roy: What do you remember most about that time period of the war?

Mai: The war, they have so many times very bad. So one time, I operationed with American army. So they call me, "Hey, oversee over there". Or we have to catch

to get them, but I saw some [unintelligible]. They stopped by the mine, very high in the bush. So we crossed. Easy to be bombed! Killed! S, that's why everytime I crossed the bushes, crossed the border, the line from the jeep, had to [unintelligible]. Be careful. We save their lives. Our lives. We saved the lives for the American life.

- Lee Roy: So, did you know a lot of people who were killed during the war.  
Mai: Oh yeah, a lot. Took lives every week. My fellow officers, my friend officers, and my soldiers. I saw death every day. [unintelligible]
- Lee Roy: So you were lucky that you were able to survive all that.  
Mai: I'm very lucky I survived all that.  
Lee Roy: Did you have family in the North.  
Mai: No we don't have any.  
Lee Roy: Did you have any family who were affected, or were any of your cousins or other relatives in the army, as well?  
Mai: My family, close family is no, but big family we have some. Some died in Vietnam War.
- Lee Roy: How long were you in the army? How long did you serve in the army?  
Mai: 1967 until 1975. But because we are school teachers. So I still under army, but go to school.  
Lee Roy: So you still did your work with the school, but you were part of the army?  
Mai: Yes, yes.  
Lee Roy: How was that like? Having to do both?  
Mai: Because school need more teacher to teach children, they send the top teacher. Educated went to school. Because [unintelligible] for the school teacher more difficult than officer.
- Lee Roy: Really?  
Mai: Yes. [Unintelligible] Because the war very dangerous, they want to save American, Vietnamese officers, they want to save their lives. [Unintelligible] [Conversing in Vietnamese: Training and schooling.]
- Nancy Bui: [Unintelligible] They want to save the educated...  
Lee Roy: So, they think that educations more valuable?  
Mai: Yes, yes...  
Lee Roy: What sort of things did you teach? Subjects?  
Mai: Math, and physics in the junior high.  
Lee Roy: Did you ever suffer any injuries or anything during the war?  
Mai: No. Very lucky!  
Lee Roy: Wow! Nothing at all? Wow!  
Mai: Yeah I am too lucky!  
Lee Roy: And what was it like when the North won, and the whole country was taken over?  
Nancy Bui: [Vietnamese translation]  
Mai: When the communists win the war, with them, the Communists were very happy with us very bad. The thing for the winning is the family, but it's very bad for the economy, and education, and control. Because communist destroy Vietnamese control, and they don't know that people were very poor.
- Lee Roy: So the whole economy suffered?  
Mai: Very bad after that.
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Lee Roy: Were you affected by that?  
Mai: Yes, of course. You know, we in the house had to sell everything for living. Some people had to sell a room. We have to live in one room for living, and sell because you cannot make money. So, because every benefit, Communist officer, Communist party took it. People supplied as slaves.

Lee Roy: Because you were in the army, were you scared about what'd happen to you and your family?  
Mai: I never think about my family. I think about my family of soldiers, family of officers. I never think about my family, but my family in the city [unintelligible] and I worry about finding ways to save their lives. For my soldiers.

Lee Roy: What was life like after the war and after you stopped serving?  
Mai: After war? So we have to re-educate in very far in the forest.  
Nancy Bui: Re-education camp, but really a prison.  
Lee Roy: So you were sent to a re-education prison?  
Mai: Camp prison, yes.  
Lee Roy: How long were you there?  
Mai: More than two years. But somebody is strong, but with me terrible, because two years is terrible.

Lee Roy: What sort of things did they do over there? Or what was it like?  
Mai: We have to do everything, but they supply the food very little.  
Lee Roy: So there wasn't a lot of food?  
Mai: No. We have to families, about a few months supply. If somebody has no supplies, medicine and food, it's easy to die. A lot of people suffer.

Lee Roy: So a lot of people ended up dying at the camp also?  
Mai: Yes. Lots. Because the family poor, and so many lack of support, easy to die.  
Lee Roy: So what else did they do at the re-education camp?  
Mai: Just means, we look like slaves. Nothing [unintelligible]. Like I say very terrible!  
Lee Roy: They didn't do anything but make you slaves?  
Mai: No. Just means to do farm, to raise crops and farm. And go to forest to cut the food for them and to build their homes.

Lee Roy: To build *their* homes?  
Mai: Yes. Because they destroyed a lot of famous wood and lumber.  
Lee Roy: What years were you at the re-education camp?  
Mai: I come in 75 until middle of 77.  
Lee Roy: And your whole family was with you?  
Mai: No my wife at home.

Lee Roy: So what were they doing while you were at the camp?  
Mai: My family, because they have to do anything, sometimes to sell stuff at the house to buy the food. And sometimes to work for them. One day money not enough to buy the breakfast for my children. They sell about the one pound of the meat [unintelligible]. Very little meat. They sell very bad.

Lee Roy: And were you able to see your family while you were at the re-education camp?  
Mai: No. Nobody can do it. Somebody can do have to pay.  
Lee Roy: So you were separated for over two years?  
Mai: Yes separate.  
Lee Roy: What was that like? Could you write letters or anything to them?

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Mai: No. Oh yes. Sometimes I have to write a letter to petition for my children and my wife, and sometimes what I needed. And it's something what kind of medicine, and sometimes I have to write to [unintelligible] to my friend in the camp and what he need to help together. Communicate to another family and my friend in the camp.

Lee Roy: So you can hear about your family?

Mai: Yes. And to exchange information with each other.

Lee Roy: And when you were finally able to leave the re-education camp, what was that like?

Mai: Because, my rank, officer is low, so about two and a half years. But captain and up is very low. Under captain is shorter. But captain and up...

Lee Roy: You were there for a longer time?

Mai: No, less. Because I am under captain. I'm not captain.

Lee Roy: And what was it like when you were finally able to go back with your family and your kids. What was it like to go back home after the re-education camp?

Mai: Oh! When I get home, I had to work anything to make a living. Sometimes I had to drive bicycle to make money. You know? Drive bicycle to carry passenger?

Lee Roy: Oh yes!

Mai: Sometimes, I have to look for someone. Have to sell wood in the home, merchandise in the home. I have to sell that to make money. In a flea market!

Lee Roy: Were you not able be a school teacher again?

Mai: No. [unintelligible] Everybody, every officer.

Lee Roy: So when did you finally leave Vietnam?

Mai: I leave Vietnam in July 1990, I escape by boat people.

Lee Roy: In 1990? July of 1990?

Mai: No. 1980. July 1980.

Lee Roy: By boat?

Mai: By boat.

Lee Roy: And where did you go?

Mai: Quingung in Central Vietnam.

Lee Roy: Where did your boat finally land?

Mai: After about one week, they land in the Philippines.

Lee Roy: How long were you on the boat?

Mai: About seven days.

Lee Roy: And what did you guys do to eat?

Mai: Terrible. Food, very little bit. Water, run out. And sometimes hurricane. It's terrible.

Lee Roy: And you went with your whole family?

Mai: Yes my whole family and my brother-in-law. Total was seven people.

Lee Roy: About how many people were on the boat?

Mai: About 54, 55 people.

Lee Roy: How were you able to find the boat?

Mai: They have the men who have contact with the boat owner. They buy the boat, how much. So they have to share how much to get on the boat.

Lee Roy: And how much did it cost?

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Mai: Because at my time, it can go about four, from 2 to 4 roh. Vietnamese roh. Equivalent about 4 or 5 [unintelligible] for one person. [Unintelligible]

Lee Roy: Where did you land in the Philippines?

Mai: I land in, near Manila, Philippines. Then they sent me to Palawan. Over there.

Lee Roy: How was it like the Philippines? Did they welcome you?

Mai: Yes they welcome. Welcome our people.

Lee Roy: Were you able to find a job or a home?

Mai: In the Philippines?

Lee Roy: Yes.

Mai: No we do volunteer. Volunteer at the camp because I teach for the children in the English and sometimes...

Lee Roy: You were a teacher again when you went to the Philippines?

Mai: Yes. Volunteer. Volunteer only. No money.

Lee Roy: And where did you live? Did you find a house?

Mai: The first time we go early so we have to go to the woods to cut the wood to build.

Lee Roy: So you had to build a house?

Mai: Yes we have to build. Somebody have the money to buy. To buy the Philippine, to make it, but we don't have money, so we have to build.

Lee Roy: What was it like while you were in the Philippines, as far as...It was a different language and a different culture. So was that hard?

Mai: Yeah different language, but not that hard. Because we do right and everything right is no problem. No problem with Philippine officer, and so we have no problems.

Lee Roy: No problem in the Philippines. So how about..were you able to make a lot of friends in the Philippines with your neighbors?

Mai: Yes, I have a lot, but long time I forgot. Some I still contact.

Lee Roy: How long were you in the Philippines?

Mai: About six months.

Lee Roy: So you were there for six months. And then what happened? Where did you go after that?

Mai: After that, living in Philippine camp, I apply and petition to go to American [unintelligible]. So I...

Lee Roy: So you were able to come to the US?

Mai: Yes. In March 1981.

Lee Roy: And where did you arrive in the US?

Mai: By airplane.

Lee Roy: By airplane?

Mai: Yes. Because a non-profit organization buy ticket for me. Families I pay back later. Pay back by month-by-month.

Lee Roy: So you had to pay them back month-by-month for your ticket. Where did you arrive in the US? Did you go directly to Austin.

Mai: Yes. I go to Philippine to Austin. And stay over here until now.

Lee Roy: And why to Austin?

Mai: Austin is very nice city. Clean city. I have duty for my children. So after my children grow up, all of them go to UT. And they passed.

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Lee Roy: Oh wow! All of your four sons went to UT? Wow, that's great! And how was it like when you first came to Austin? Were there a lot of Vietnamese people in Austin?

Mai: During that time, it's not too much Vietnamese, but I have a contact office with the [unintelligible Vietnamese(?)] museum in Austin at time. They helped us.

Lee Roy: So you had a contact in Austin? And he was able to help you out?

Mai: He helped me, then after that, after my family arrived, I had a job, my wife had a job, my children can go to school. I come back to help again. I volunteer.

Lee Roy: So you kept volunteering?

Mai: A long time.

Lee Roy: What was your wife's job?

Mai: In Austin? She work in the motor lab, semi-conductor.

Lee Roy: And where did your kids, did they go to high school in Austin also?

Mai: Yes. All of my children from elementary school. They go to UT and they passed. They graduate.

Lee Roy: What high school did they go to?

Mai: They have a scientist at the Johnson High School. A scientist program.

Lee Roy: And then they all went to UT? What did they study in college?

Mai: Ok, the first one is engineer, and the second try in the pharmacy, and the third one medicine, MD, and the last one engineer, electrical engineer.

Lee Roy: So do your children still live in Austin now?

Mai: I have two in Austin, and two in different place/

Lee Roy: Where did the other two move?

Mai: One in the Californian. Oakland, California, and one in Maryland. In DC.

Lee Roy: And do they ever visit Austin again?

Mai: At least one time a year. At least. Usually Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Vietnamese New Year usually.

Lee Roy: What was the hardest part about moving to the US? Was there anything difficult about moving to the US?

Mai: No.

Lee Roy: And you were able to speak English, right?

Mai: Yeah, I'm able to speak English, but my pronounce...

Lee Roy: Are you a US citizen?

Mai: Yeah I am.

Lee Roy: When did you become a US citizen?

Mai: 91...so five years after? 96!

Lee Roy: 1996?

Mai: Yes. Oh 86!

Lee Roy: 86? Ok, became a citizen in 1986.

Mai: 86, 5 year, 86.

Lee Roy: Do you consider yourself an American or a Texan? Or how do you think of yourself in that way?

Mai: Can you say that again?

Lee Roy: Do you consider yourself an American?

Nancy Bui: [Vietnamese translation]

Mai: I think I am a Texan.

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Lee Roy: You're a Texan. Do you see any similarities between your life here in the US and your life in Vietnam?

Nancy Bui: [Vietnamese translation]

Mai: Oh! The life in United States and Vietnam, a lot different.

Lee Roy: A lot different?

Mai: A lot! A lot better!

Lee Roy: A lot better in the US?

Mai: Yeah a lot better in US.

Lee Roy: How about today? What type of job and position do you have now? What sort of work do you do?

Mai: Now I'm retired. But before I am AMD semi-conductor. ADV Micro Devices.

Lee Roy: Oh ok. And you were a semi-conductor?

Mai: Yes semi-conductor.

Lee Roy: What sort of work do you do now with the Vietnamese Seniors Association?

Mai: Now I am the chairman.

Lee Roy: Of the VSA?

Mai: No, Vietnamese Senior Citizens and also a member of the military.

Lee Roy: What did you think of how the US policies during the war in Vietnam?

Mai: The policy. So I think it's good. But because it help us to fight the Communists, to freedom, to republic my country. But with me, I don't have any problems.

Lee Roy: Are you able to keep in touch with your sister or other family in Vietnam?

Mai: Yeah. I keep in touch with my sister and my relatives in Vietnam.

Lee Roy: Have you gone back to visit Vietnam?

Mai: Yeah I did about three or four times. And I've been here almost 27, 28 years.

Lee Roy: And you've gone back about 3 or 4 times? And what was that like? Did you enjoy it or were there bad memories.

Mai: I come back for the memories for family, but I don't enjoy anything over there. Because sometime pollution, dirt, crowded, traffic. Transportation terrible.

Lee Roy: About the transportation over there?

Mai: It's very crazy over there! How come they can go it? They want to pass, you have to head-on. It's crazy. [Unintelligible] You have to go here, you have to ahhhh!

Lee Roy: That's crazy.

Mai: It's crazy! So, we cannot go because very dangerous. [Unintelligible] very quick so it's ripe for the accidents. Accidents sometimes happen and they go away. They don't care.

Lee Roy: Oh wow. That's scary. How about your kids? Did you ever bring your children back to Vietnam?

Mai: Yeah I have one time because I want to come back to my place of birth. And I displayed my license so I took them one time.

Lee Roy: All four of them?

Mai: Yes four of them, but not same time. Different time.

Lee Roy: Ok, and did they enjoy going to Vietnam? Or what did they think of it?

Mai: I'm sorry. I don't know. Because they are different culture. They speak English and they don't know. So, they have to listen to my parent, me and my wife.

Lee Roy: So your children, did they ever learn to speak Vietnamese or did they just speak English?

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Mai: They can speak Vietnamese, but writing, reading , no way!  
Lee Roy: They can understand?  
Mai: Yes they can understand, but only [unintelligible] somebody because different accent. So sometimes difficult to understand.  
Lee Roy: So, now that you're here in Austin, do you see yourself living here the rest of your life?  
Mai: Yes, I think so. I stay here rest of my life.  
Lee Roy: You seem very happy to be in Austin.  
Mai: I'm very happy.  
Lee Roy: Alright, so that's all the questions we have. Thank you very much Mr. Tran for taking this time to speak with me. You have a great story, and I'm really glad you're able to share that with us.  
Mai: Thank you, Roy. And thank you to Nancy, helped me. Thank you very much.  
Lee Roy: Thank you very much, sir.  
Mai: Have a good day.

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Excerpts

**Subject: American Troops**

Mai: I liked very much because they helped me very much. So I think that I still owe the American soldier. In my mind, in own way I owe them, because they fight for my freedom for my country.

**Subject: Death in War**

Mai: Oh yeah, a lot. Took lives every week. My fellow officers, my friend officers, and my soldiers. I saw death every day.

**Subject: Leaving by Boat**

Mai: Terrible. Food, very little bit. Water, run out. And sometimes hurricane. It's terrible.

**Subject: Re-Visiting Vietnam**

Mai: I come back for the memories for family, but I don't enjoy anything over there. Because sometime pollution, dirt, crowded, traffic. Transportation terrible.

**Subject: Life in the US**

Mai: Yes, I think so. I stay here rest of my life.  
Lee Roy: You seem very happy to be in Austin.  
Mai: I'm very happy.

**Mai Nhon Tran's War and Post-War Experience:**

Vietnam War was terrible. After I passed high school, I go on to the school teacher, I have to join Vietnamese Army. I was an officer. South Vietnamese Army. Fighting would last sometimes

five times a week almost every week. [I] cooperated with U.S. army. They helped me, and I helped [them] to avoid the mines underground. So we helped together. I liked [U.S. troops] very much because they helped me very much. So I think that I still owe the American soldier. In my mind, in own way I owe them, because they fight for my freedom for my country. The war, they have so many times very bad. Easy to be bombed! Killed! Took lives every week. My fellow officers, my friend officers, and my soldiers. I saw death every day. I'm very lucky I survived all that. After war, we have to re-educate very far in the forest. Camp prison. We have to do everything, but they supply the food very little. If somebody has no supplies, medicine and food, it's easy to die. A lot of people suffer. Because the family poor, and so many lack of support, easy to die. Like I say, very terrible!

Mr. Tran's war story intrigued me during the interview. Oftentimes, the war story is told through the eyes of the American soldier, so Mr. Tran's point of view provides new insight into the Vietnamese experience of the war. The word "terrible" seems to sum up the entire war and post-war experience for him, and that is why I chose to begin and end the excerpt with those words. I tried to keep as much of Mr. Tran's words as possible, but edited a few sentences and added a few terms to make the section easier to read. His story is not unique, but is often a narrative that requires more searching in order to discover.

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