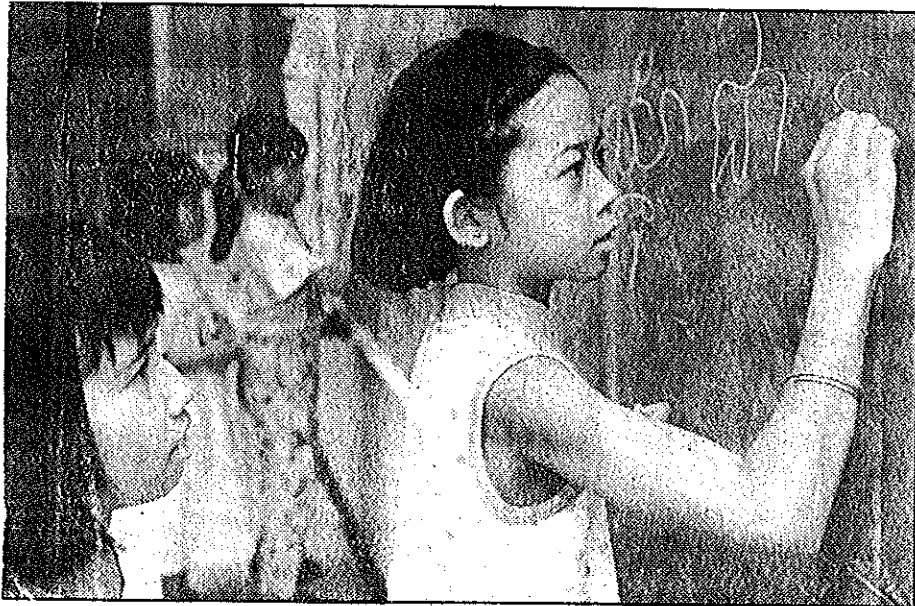


ORANGE COUNTY

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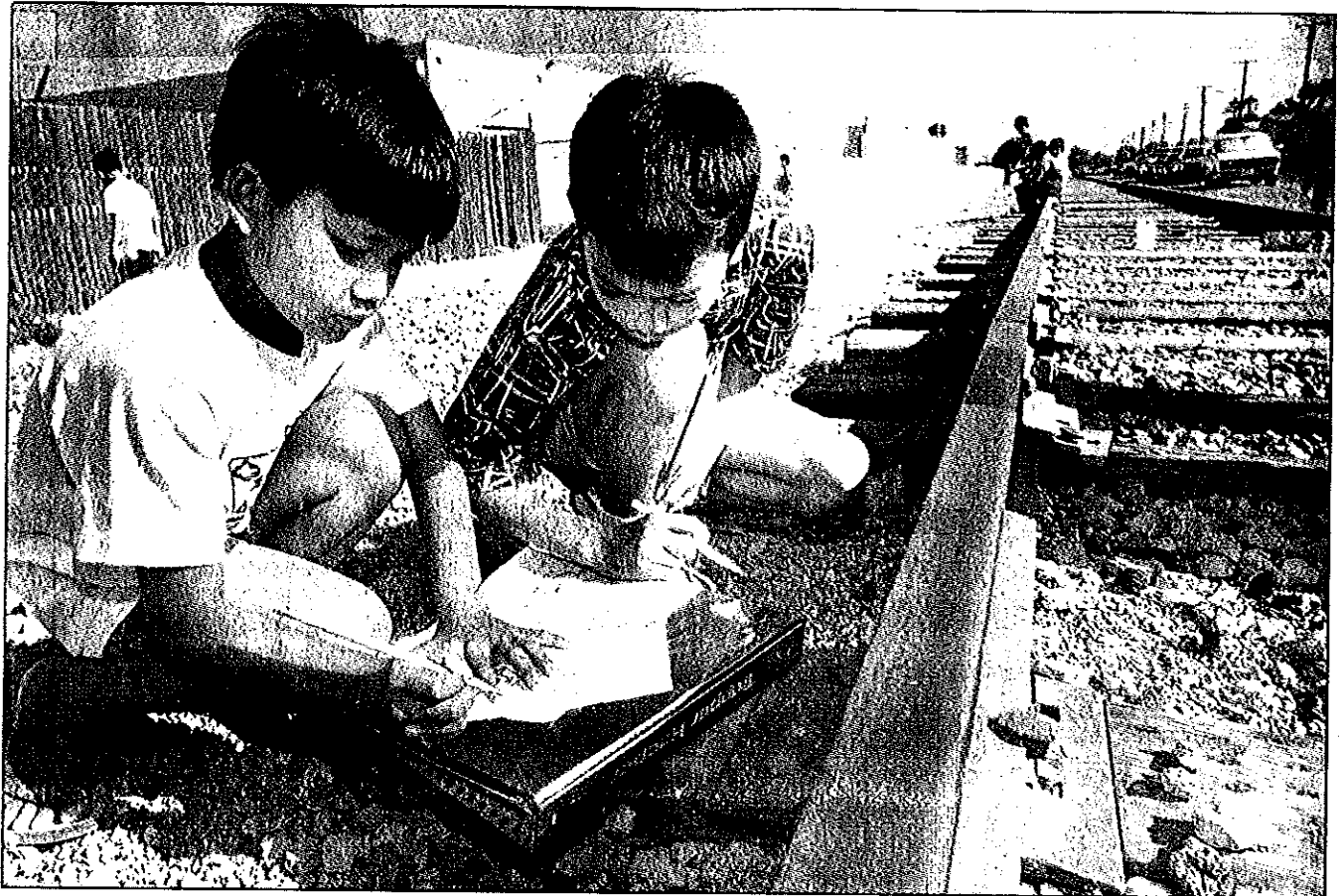
AUGUST 11, 1991



ELLEN JASKOL / Los Angeles Times

Teaching Tradition

The Cambodian Family Inc., a service agency in Santa Ana, has been helping Cambodian refugees adjust to a new land since 1983. Above, students Sodech Kim, left, and Sodasy Hok participate in an agency class on Khmer, the Cambodian language.



ELLEN JASKOL / Los Angeles Times

Rothy Soun, left, and Phat Wam wait for classes to begin; youths say it's important to learn Khmer as well as English.

Refuge on Minnie Street

Cambodian Center Teaches Tradition and Alternatives

By THUAN LE
TIMES STAFF WRITER

SANTA ANA—The first child came across the railroad tracks about 4:40 p.m. and sat leaning against the fence surrounding the industrial business complex.

Others followed moments later, and soon there were close to 30 children, some in long Cambodian skirts, most in T-shirts and shorts, all carrying notebooks and pencils. Their chatter and laughter filled the air until 5 p.m., when a counselor came out from the complex and led them inside to learn how to read and write Khmer, the Cambodian language.

This ritual happens each Tuesday during the 1991 Summer Youth Program, one of many provided by the Cambodian Family Inc. Located behind the Minnie Street neighborhood known for its concentrated population of Cambodian residents, the agency has been helping refugees adjust to a new land since 1983.

Most Cambodians came to America during the 1980s, said Rifka Hirsch, the executive director of the service agency. This wave of immigration occurred after Cambodian communists backed by neighboring Vietnam overthrew the Khmer Rouge government in 1979, starting a civil war.

Figures from the 1990 census show there are 147,411

Please see **CENTER, B13**



Woman in traditional Cambodian dress shops in Minnie Street area. Trucks carry everything from fish to candy.

ORANGE COUNTY

CENTER: Cambodian Refuge on Minnie Street

Continued from B1

Cambodians in the United States, 68,190 of whom live in California. About 4,000 settled in Orange County and 65% of them live in the Minnie Street neighborhood, a troubled area that has had problems with gangs and drugs, Hirsch said.

The Cambodian Family Inc. provides English classes and employment services for adults and offers after-school and summer activities to keep youths off the streets.

"They haven't come here and wholly found peace yet," said Hirsch, 49, who was teaching classes in English as a second language in 1982 when she became involved with the Cambodian community. "This time, it's survival in a dangerous neighborhood."

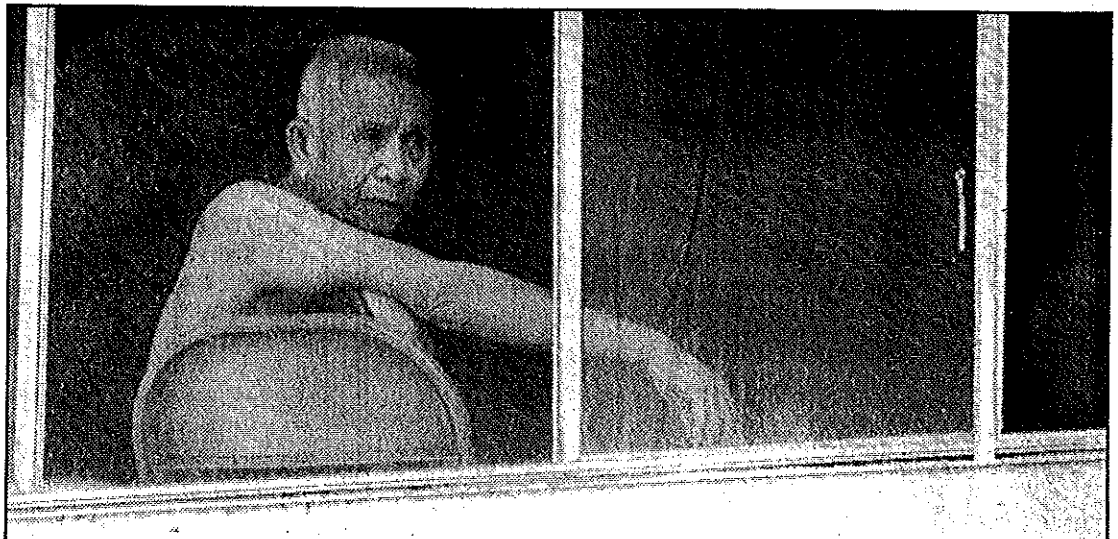
Children said the community center offers an alternative to Minnie Street.

"We rather come here so we won't get in trouble," 12-year-old Sokleap Troeuy said. Besides learning the Khmer language, she also has been a member of the center's traditional dance troupe, she said.

The effort to help this population started nine years ago, when a group of Cambodians rented a one-bedroom apartment on Minnie Street to serve as headquarters for the service agency, said 34-year-old Chea Lim, a co-founder of the group who now coordinates employment services and youth programs.

A year later, organizers received federal funding to rent a suite in the industrial complex on Wakeham Avenue. The agency then had four workers and a \$64,000 annual budget for programs aimed at the Cambodian community, Rifka said. Nearly 400 clients registered for assistance in fiscal 1983-1984.

Now, the agency has 45 employees and about 30 volunteers working in six suites, organizers said. The agency's budget for 1991-92 has grown to more than \$1 million and supports programs serving not only Cambodians but all other



ELLEN JASKOL / Los Angeles Times

Chun Mouth, 72, watches the scene below on Minnie Street; police say crime has decreased in the area.

refugee populations. The list of clients has grown to 7,000 adults and 200 children.

Of the agency's 10 programs, about half still serve Cambodians exclusively, said Irene Pham, projects coordinator. Among them are instruction in prenatal care, parenting and Khmer.

The community center is bustling with people and activities from Monday to Saturday, starting as early as 8 a.m. and sometimes lasting into the evening. During the day, job counselors and English teachers help newly arrived refugees, most of whom are Vietnamese, Hirsch said. After 5 p.m., the evening classes for Cambodians begin.

As 12-year-old Sophath Yem waited with his friends on the railroad tracks before going to Khmer class, he said it is important for him to learn both English and his native language.

Khmer "is important because we want to visit our country," Yem said. English "is important because we came to America."

The center also attracts youths

with sports and homework assistance, said 15-year-old Kly Oum as he sat with friends on a sidewalk on Minnie Street.

"It teaches kids to do better stuff," he said.

They were not the only ones outside on a balmy afternoon last week. Around them, other children played catch, elderly men gathered on the lawns of nearby apartments and women in long, flowered skirts bought groceries from two trucks carrying everything from fish to Asian candy.

The neighborhood is less dangerous than it was several years ago, Oum said, because police have increased patrols in the area and apartment owners have upgraded their complexes with more lighting and fences.

"There used to be drug dealers all over the place," he said.

Santa Ana Police Lt. Robert Sayne said drug peddling and gang activities have decreased by 50% in the last several years in the neighborhood. He also said the combination of increased police presence and the cooperation of

apartment owners has helped. But that does not mean the area is completely safe.

"Any place you have high-density housing, these problems come in," Sayne said.

Organizers of the Cambodian Family Inc. say bad role models are still very much a part of the neighborhood, and that is why youth programs are desperately needed. But they said activities need to be housed in a location other than the present industrial complex.

"The agency's growth takes time in hiring and training new staff and there's not enough time to find the right building," Irene Pham said.

For now, the children and their parents cross the railroad tracks to get needed services, and agency workers take some of the programs into the Minnie Street neighborhood.

"When they see us, they know us," Chea Lim said. "Sometime I walk through the community and little kids call after me."