Bruce Johansen: It’s August 1, 2013. I’m Bruce Johansen. I’m at Ha Tien Grocery located at 353 University Avenue West in St. Paul. This interview is one in a series of interviews that I’m doing with business owners along University Avenue, also known as the Central Corridor. My project is funded through a State of Minnesota Historical and Cultural Heritage Grant. [Audio at bottom]

Today I’m interviewing one of the owners of Ha Tien, Ne Dao, is that correct?

Ne Dao: Yes.

B: Thank you again for accepting my invitation to be interviewed.

N: You’re welcome.

B: I’d like to begin at the very beginning. Where were you born and where was your husband born?

N: I was born in Cambodia and my husband was born in Vietnam.

B: And are those the places where you grew up?

N: I grew up there up to ten years old. We escaped to Thailand, so I lived in Thailand three-and-a-half years. And my husband in Vietnam, I have no clue, so we are different. So he was born there but I don’t know how old he was there before he left the country.

B: When did you end up in the United States?

N: In November 1979. So it was a while ago.

B: And did you and your family come straight to Minnesota?

N: We, when we first came to the U.S.. we went to Houston, Texas. We lived there for one year. And then we had friends and family in Minnesota, so we moved here. And we are here for good.

B: So since 1980?

N: Since 1980, yes.
B: Do you know when your husband arrived in the United States?
N: I think he said in 1981.
B: So roughly the same time.
N: Yes.
B: Did he and his family come directly to Minnesota?
N: No, he went to Texas also. He lived in Austin, Texas. And I don’t remember how long they lived there but...
B: Your husband ended up in Austin, Texas.
N: Austin, Texas and they, his dad was doing fishing. That’s what I heard. Got a boat and went fishing and to sell and make money but then. But then when the kids get to work with him the kids forget about school so the parents decided to move here. So that the kids get to go to school with nothing to distract them from not going to school and still make money.
B: So education was a real priority. And what kinds of work did your parents do?
N: My parents in Cambodia, they were farmers. Yes. So that’s all that I remember.
B: You don’t remember what they did once they moved here?
N: No, and after that, we came to Thailand and we worked whatever we had to, or for a living, for living in a camp. To get some money to spend. Otherwise, yes, they provided the food. But that’s it, no money to buy anything else. So they had to do whatever they had to do, day by day, to get paid. If you get to go to work that day you get paid, if you don’t, you don’t. So that kind of work.
B: It sounds like you had quite an interesting childhood.
N: Oh, a lot. I mean, it just, a very long distance from not having anything to get to this point. Yes. I thank God for that.
B: I’m curious to know how you got from where you started out to being the owner of this business.
N: I did not. I married my husband when his parents opened already down on University, too, on 800 University, close to Victoria. Yes, they opened prior to my marriage, it was like two years, already. So I was a cosmetologist. I cut hair. So after I had my second child, I couldn’t stand anymore. So I was staying home and my husband came to help his parents. And then after that they sold the place and they found this one and they bought this location. That’s when they didn’t want to have anything to do with it anymore and I got in. My husband was in from the old one, so after that I got in, and only my husband and I, and we started from scratch.
B: So his parents bought this store and do you remember what year that
was? Roughly what year?

N: I think 1980, '90, '95, we opened here in '96. We opened for business in 1996, so a year ahead.

B: So your parents took over from his parents in '96? Later?

N: No, from the beginning. They just bought the building to fix. It's when we fix everything because this place, this place was a restaurant. So it had so many levels. We had to fix the floor. So half of a year before we could open the place.

B: I'm trying to remember what restaurant it was.

N: Frogtown Dining.

B: Frogtown Diner, I remember that place.

N: Frogtown Diner, yes.

B: The attraction of this space over the one down the street was more space, or?

N: More space. It was more space. Nicer. Parking lot. Which is small, but for us, at that time, it was big. It was, everything was enough space for us.

B: I would think that for a grocery store a parking lot is especially important.

N: So we carry more items, everything, more vegetables. Everything bigger, longer freezers. Yes.

B: That must have been a big investment initially.

N: Yes, we- it took us over five years. From when we first opened, we did not have any income. We just like from month to month, just enough to pay our mortgage, our electric, and buy milk for the kids. For five years, yes, we sacrifice even cable. We have to cut off. It was bad, but it paid off, I think.

B: How large a staff did you have?

N: We had only employee, stocking. So we did everything ourselves.

B: Long days?

N: Everything ourselves, and even before the store opened, only my husband and I, two of us, stock these. We didn't have money to buy the products, so we got one case and put in it and it just like gone, it didn't show through the front, and we're like, 'Oh my goodness, it fits two cases here,' so yes, we did ourselves, and we have one employee, and later, like about three or four months, we hire one to do vegetables. So, yes.

B: How many people on staff now?

N: Right now we have about 20, 24.

B: That's huge. That's a big jump.
N: Yes.

B: Business has?

N: It has been increasing. After five months ago, after we fix, our remodeling. Yes, increased. I ended up hiring about four or five more employees.

B: Where do you find employees?

N: Sometimes through the families, friends. Most of my cashiers through their friends, because you know a lot of them are students, college students, so they just tell their friends when I need help and I just ask them if they have any friends. I think that if I go that way I feel more secure because I don’t know people. So most of them yes, families and friends.

B: What do you remember about University Avenue when you first encountered it? What was University Avenue like in the 1980s and ‘90s.

N: It was slow, not a lot of cars. I used to live on Charles. Marion and Charles, corner right there. I used to walk to Sears all the time. When I was in high school. I didn’t have to wait so long to cross the road. It was quiet. That’s all I remember. But now it’s a lot of cars. Busy. It’s busy.

B: And now there will be the light rail.

N: Yes, that’s going to be next year and I don’t know how it’s going to be like. It looks busy already and I think it’s going to get busier.

B: That’s the big question on everybody’s mind.

N: Yes, and every summer before they fix in the middle, I used to see a group of kids, because this is summer, a group of kids, they would cross to go over there and they would go to McDonald’s and coming back because they live over here. Now I don’t see them. I don’t see them because I think that it’s dangerous for them to cross.

B: It is harder to cross, isn’t it?

N: Yeah, it’s harder and it’s quiet but one thing that I’m happy about is the prostitution. I don’t see them. So that’s the best right now, that I don’t see them. Before they would stand around, they would just walk, back and forth, back and forth, and that’s all they do. They won’t stand in the same spot but they walk and we know what it’s all about, but now I don’t see them.

B: So that was an issue from the time you....

N: It was not an issue but it just bothers when they walk and they stand and get picked up, we see, you know, that’s just not good, but now it’s good that we don’t notice that particular person is working out there so.

B: That was happening in the ‘80s and the ‘90s?

N: Yes, or I would say before they fixed, before they started the construction along University. Yep, before that. So how many months ago was that, last
March, when they started, so a year, a year now.

B: Let’s talk a little about the renovation, because you’ve done a huge renovation. When did that take place?

N: We started in March, no was it in March? They closed our side, in April. I think it was May. May of 2012.

B: So about the time that construction was really.

N: Yes, we wanted to, we thought we wanted to do it at the same as them, so when they’re done, we’re done, too. But they got done first. So for us it took awhile. So when the road closed, we thought that’s a good idea. We thought that it’s a good idea because a lot of our customers just went passed, couldn’t get in. Completely closed. Couldn’t get in and when we get this done, if they didn’t get to come back, if their friends are coming, they would say, it’s a new Ha Tien. Everything’s new. That was our plan so, yes, it worked out very good.

B: I know from talking with Va-Megn (Thoaj at AEDA) and Isabel Chanslor (NDC, U7), that you’ve worked with them on the renovation.

N: Yes, Son did most of the talking, most of the planning.

B: Could you tell me a little bit about how all of that worked? Or should I talk with Son?

N: Yes, you can talk with him. He, I think he talked with Va-Megn and he suggested architecture, and that was the best architecture from the start to the end. I’ve never seen any architecture. We had the building extend, before we added an addition to it a little bit before, the architecture just gave us after he came down, we say we want this and this and he’s just like, here you go, but this one, he’s very helpful. Walked through with the people that, the plumbing, the electric, he’s the one that, subcontractors, he’s the one that was our eyes, our ears, because we don’t know, I know what we want, but when it’s empty like that, I don’t know where to put stuff.

B: What was his name, the architect?

N: I can't even say his name. S-i-s-c-h, something like that. Son’s got his name. He’s, he’s a good architecture.

B: The whole project took how long?

N: The whole project, from May up to I think, because the New Year is in February, March, almost a year.

B: And then you had a grand reopening?

N: Yes, a couple months after we got it done.

B: Was it last spring that you were a recipient of an NDC Entrepreneur Award?

N: Yes.
B: What was that like? What value does that have for you?

N: I didn’t go, Son went, with my son, to the dinner. I thought it was good. It was great that when we work hard, yes, we do work hard, we didn’t think that somebody was watching, you know. We didn’t think that somebody was looking and so, I think it was good, it was great. I think it help us to okay we’re doing this, not just ourselves. It is for community but then it’s good that they recognize how hard we work.

B: Congratulations.

N: Well, thank you, thank you. Especially my son. He went, and he go, I didn’t think people who have small business have this kind of thing, and I said, “Yes, they do.” So he was kind of surprised.

B: I would like to attend the next one. And who are your customers?

N: I have Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, people from Burma. Right now I have a lot of people from Burma because they’re new to the United States right now. Some of them, they can speak Thai and I speak Thai so I can relate to them. They have questions because most of them don’t speak English, yet. And they can talk to me, they can ask me, so.

B: Mostly residents of St. Paul?

N: St. Paul.

B: This area?

N: I have Brooklyn Park coming, Eagan, Burnsville, Woodbury, Shoreview. I think I have quite a few out of this area. They said that it’s convenient here. Most of them have been shopping here for years, since we opened. So we’re like their family, so they can say anything that they want. Or they just open the door and come in and ask do you have this, do you have that, so they don’t have to go and look. They feel so comfortable, I think, so comfortable with my husband and I. That’s what most of the people I hear, they shop here they say because of my husband and I. I’m like, okay, yes.

B: I was wondering what distinguishes Ha Tien from other grocery stores, and maybe that’s part of it.

N: I think the thing is over there that they don’t have owners there, they have managers, and you know, my customers, when they come in here, if they don’t see it on the shelf, they ask and they’re waited on. Like if you go to Target or Walmart, if you don’t see something, you just walk away. My customers don’t do that. They feel so comfortable that they know that we’ve got it, but no one take it out. So they kind of, ask us, and they wait. We go and get for them. I think that’s why. If they go to another store they don’t do that.

B: A completely different level of service.

N: Yes, so I think that’s the difference.
B: You’ve probably been in the business long enough that you’ve seen some of the kids of your original customers grow up...

N: Oh, yes, they from young kids to have their own kids now.

B: Is that fun to see that?

N: Yes, it’s fun and I tell them, “You know what, you might think I’m old but I don’t feel old.” I’m just like their parents. Most of our customers are they like that they come and joke around, talk around. Everyday, it’s just like that. It’s just like friends and family come to shop here.

B: Anything else from that first year in business? It sound as if five years were really a challenge.

N: Really, really a challenge.

B: Were you confident that you would succeed at that point?

N: At that time, I, I’m sure my husband felt that. This is something that he wanted to do. He never say he’s tired. He wanted to do so bad and he like to be his own boss so bad. Every night when everybody leave, he sit and face that way and watch, and I said, “You know, I think you should bring a bed here to sleep.” Because he think that when he work, use his heart, his dream, and he accomplish and he, he’s happy, that’s from his own hands, his own mind, he didn’t ask anyone to help him. So I think he had confidence for that, but for me at that time, the kids still little, young, and I was just behind him, just be here, help him with the business but there’s kids at home, so have to run back.

B: Were you living in the neighborhood?

N: We live in Vadnais Heights at the time.

B: So a bit of a commute.

N: The first time we moved there it was not. Everything was slow, less cars. We lived there for five years. That’s when my first kid went to kindergarten. I had to go, to get inside the house ten minutes before he got home and I open the door for him when the bus come. Five years later, I went at the same time, my kid was standing in front of the house waiting for me. This is not good, too many cars now.

B: Where did you move to?

N: So I went, I didn’t move yet, so I went earlier, which is like the time for kids from part-time cashiers did not come yet. So I had to go earlier than the time I used to go five years before and then after that we moved to Woodbury. So Woodbury, a little lesser traffic. Because the road’s a little bigger.

B: So that’s where you still are, in Woodbury.

N: Yes.

B: You talked about the disappearance of prostitution, more traffic on
University Avenue, the light rail’s coming in. Any other big changes outside the store that you’ve noticed? In terms of maybe the businesses that have come in? Who lives in the neighborhood.

N: I think you mean changes right now, that I notice?

B: Changes during the years that you’ve been in business.

N: That’s all I know. I know new people are coming. That’s it. I see new customers, new people, less people walking. I think I feel safer than before. I’ve been here for almost 17 years. Everyday I didn’t feel safe. I think that’s a big thing for me. Because I carry a purse, but all of my I.D.s in my pocket. Every day. Whatever’s in there, it’s not important. So that’s me for the last 16 years. I’ve been doing that because I don’t have time if something happened, I don’t have time, so I’m that kind of person, I’m protecting myself, but now I feel safe. Because I don’t see any weird people walking, so I’m okay. I only see neighbors that have been walking for years, yes, neighbors.

B: In terms of the construction, it sounds like you were smart, you did your renovations during the construction. How was your business affected by the construction?

N: It was very hard. The first three months when they close the other side, our business jumped up because if there’s any other store on the other side that they couldn’t get to they came here. We were like yeah, the construction’s helping us. For those three months. But after three months that’s when it just went down hill. They close our road and they went to the other side. So we had the entrance in the back. But our parking can fit only a few cars, and then it’s hard for them to go back to that road when there’s no access to the other side, and it’s hard to back up and a couple of them they have accident and hit each other. That was very inconvenient for them. And some that, a couple more, we got complaints that they were hit and gone and they had brand new car, so they couldn’t get in and it was, it went down a lot, I’d say 40 percent. And for a straight two hours each day we didn’t have any employees in the store, just us. And then also because in here we had to move all of the products to pack it up and put it away, too. So when they came here they didn’t have anything to buy. The products that they need, we pack it up. We couldn’t find. Even some of them who came and waited for us to find, but with so many boxes we couldn’t, and they left. We move, we work so hard. We move from aisle to aisle to put away and bring it back. It was very difficult.

B: And then everything quieted down outside the store and everything was put back in place inside the store.

N: When they opened the road we, in here, in the middle, like mud in the middle, and the dust all over. Usually at that time is our busiest time because of Chinese New Year. Every Chinese New Year we get business for a whole month. They shop every day, almost every day. And that was the slowest holiday ever.

B: Now that things are back in place, how is business?
N: Good, very good. I think that this coming year, I think that it’s going to improve a lot. We are confident that will be better, a lot better.

B: What makes you confident?

N: I think that we are mostly the kitchen it’s a little bigger, more space for them to stand, to buy food, it look nicer. Plus if a holiday is during Chinese New Year we sell a lot of fruits, we can sell a lot more fruits. More products for the New Year because we have space now and that's the part that I feel is going to be a lot better.

B: And the light rail?

N: I hope that with our lunch time that maybe some business people from downtown can come fast. I don’t know how fast it’s going to go. But they can just grab a sandwich and go back to their office, so that’s what I’m hoping for. But as far as my customers from this area, I think they still drive.

B: I know that Va-Megn and some other people have been trying to brand this area as Little Mekong. What impact do you think that will have on how people, especially from outside the area, think about University Avenue and the Central Corridor?

N: When it says Little Mekong it’s Asian Town, so hopefully that just the name of it will attract people to come check it out, the restaurants and grocery, and we have food to go, too, so when, if you do something when the train runs and then they have some kind of advertising that would sit there that might help, too. Yes. I think that can bring them to come and check things out.

B: It’s interesting to think about Eat Street in Minneapolis.

N: What?

B: Nicollet Avenue - they call part of it Eat Street.

N: Oh, I didn’t know that.

B: It’s been very successful at putting that part of the street on the map for a lot of people.

N: It says Eat Street? Okay, now I get it.

B: A lot of people have discovered the restaurants and shops along Nicollet because of that. I think that’s the idea behind Little Mekong, to put it in people’s minds that this is a different experience and now you can easily get there.

N: But I think Nicollet, they have more, I mean isn’t all the businesses kind of attached to each other, closer together?

B: It’s a smaller stretch.

N: So it’s convenient for them.
B: But there’s no light rail there. You can drive or bike or walk.

N: Also over here it’s closer to us.

B: What kind of foods do you have here?

N: We have, most of the products are from Thailand, so from Thailand a lot of ethnic people can use. You don’t have to be Thai to use that product so it’s good for anybody to use. And the vegetables, we have all kinds of vegetables. Produce, some particular vegetables for particular, say Chinese, Vietnamese they use something together there but like Thai, Cambodian, Laotian, Burmese, they kind of use the same, so eat the same, so we have for those particular people.

B: You have a really good deli back there.

N: Yes, we do, we do. Our sandwiches are so popular.

B: What are the most popular sandwiches?

N: Just the regular sandwich, alone, everybody like it, too. Because the bánh mì sandwich, usually it just dry, but for us, we have a special sauce, we call it se mí. A special sauce. When you put it in it’s kind of soft because the French bread is going to break apart, but when you put that sauce it’s kind of nice and soft. It’s easier to eat and the sauce is very good, too. So it gets very popular and I have customers from Hawaii, Hawaii, Alaska, when they come here to visit their family and friends, they try it and when they go home they get 20, 30, put it in a box to take home. Because we have people, I have one customer from Florida, he used to live here. Every year he comes to visit his daughter or his relative. Every time the plane lands, he would come here first. So, every year he does that. He move to Florida and just like the lady I just told you.

B: From Alabama.

N: Yes. She live here and now she move to Alabama and quite a few move to Vegas and still come and just like, “I’m here.” Yes, we have far, far customers for our sandwiches.

B: And are the sandwiches just sold in the store?

N: Yes, only in the store. Most of the people say are sandwiches are nice and fresh because we take their order and make them. Because many bakeries make them and put them in a store and you don’t know.

B: What are some of the other popular items at the deli?

N: At the deli we have chicken oyster, fried shrimp, ribs, oyster, and pad thai, they all very popular, too. Lunch time we get mostly people who work downtown St. Paul. So hopefully soon, Minneapolis, too. Downtown St. Paul, they come here a lot.

B: Even without the light rail they’re coming.
N: Yes, uh huh. And a few work at the Capitol, they work for the State.

B: And do you do catering at all?

N: No, no we don’t. Each day our breads, we make two or three times, weekend four times. So each time we can make 180. Each time go in the oven, 180 breads. Four times. And it’s gone. So right now we are thinking of changing our oven, maybe make it a little bigger. So we can sell more. To cater it’s kind of difficult. We don’t have enough supplies. We don’t have enough to do that. But like the bread, we do sell in some other stores. Every other day, like fifty breads. We do sell to them.

B: Which other stores?

N: I think it’s a restaurant like those Hmong Village. One guy, he comes in and gets from us only, to sell, a sandwich, too, but I’ve never been to his place. But he picks up about three times a week. Rochester, they just want to sell the bread. They just buy the bread from us. And Fargo, they pick up every week.

B: Do you have time to have conversations with neighboring business owners?

N: No. I’ve never been to any other stores. I never, no.

B: You have so much to do here.

N: Yes, because when it’s time for me to go home I just can’t wait to go home. To be at home. My home, even though I’ve lived there for 10, 11 years, it’s still new to me because I’m hardly there. So, no. But I other people, the other owner, they come and check us all the time. Our food, our price, whatever. And Son, my husband, he always says, “When I do something, I don’t want to check on others. They can’t figure out for themselves, why do they come to check us out.”

B: What’s a typical work day for you in terms of start time and end time?

N: So far I, morning, 9:00 to open, and about 4:00 or 5:00 I leave. Because Son, my husband, he doesn’t want to eat cold food. He working hard, he want to eat hot food every day, so I do that, to go home to prepare food, and we eat together like that every day, warm, hot, nice food every day. So he said, if you are working very hard, you don’t want to eat cold food. Or the same food. It’s got to be different every day.

B: Does he work a little bit longer?

N: Oh yes, he comes, he usually, because morning, paper work. Go to the bank, here and there, pick up food items for inside the kitchen, and what they need. He pick all of those up and then he comes here and then he stay and close. So everyday.

B: Closing is what time?

N: 7:00, but he gets home at 8:15. He likes to take it easy, like I said, he check things out, he loves this place.
B: Maybe I can get some pictures of the two of you. Thank you again for taking time to do this.

*This article is part of a Central Corridor small business oral history project funded through a State of Minnesota Historical & Cultural Heritage Grant.*