

# Nicollet County, Minnesota The Faces of Immigration

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Jamie Pederson



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September 2006

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Jamie Pederson

Fort Ridgely  
Harkin Store  
Traverse des Sioux  
E. St. Julien Cox House



Nicollet County  
Historical Society

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**Nicollet County, Minnesota**  
**The Faces of Immigration**  
**September 2006**

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**Jamie Pederson**  
**Communities Project Intern**

# **Nicollet County, Minnesota**

## **The Faces of Immigration**

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## Author Biography



Photo: Kurt Hildebrandt

Jamie Pederson, a senior at Gustavus Adolphus College, has actively pursued an academic career that will shape her into the best possible social justice advocate. Last January she was privileged to teach English as a Second Language to adult students at the Lincoln Community Center in Mankato, MN; this experience spawned her interest in the recent immigrant and refugee communities living in Nicollet County. She was hired by the Nicollet County Historical Society, through the HECUA Summer Partner Internship Program, to research Nicollet County as a community with a focus on the effects of immigration. Through the documentation and preservation of various life stories from Sudanese, Somali, and Hispanic individuals, Jamie and the Nicollet County Historical Society hope to further integrate and unite our community.

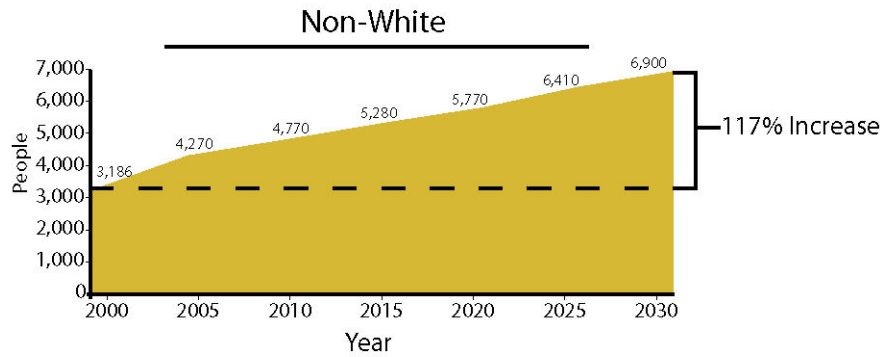
## **Project Details**

This specific project was designed as a summer project, but we hope the work Jamie conducts will also serve as a foundation for further research with regard to our ever-changing community demographics. She met with various community organizations involved with diversity and humanitarian issues. She also conducted recorded oral histories with certain Somali, Sudanese, and Hispanic individuals. These interviews are transcribed and preserved in this book; they will be represented at the Traverse des Sioux Treaty Site in St. Peter, MN. In the future, NCHS anticipates an interpreted exhibit at the Treaty Site representing the stories and history of immigrant communities in Nicollet County.

## **County Importance**

Using the graphs below as evidence, the population of Nicollet and Blue Earth Counties is continually expanding and diversifying. The diversity of culture in our counties and in our state is an asset to Minnesota culture and history. With further expansion and growth amongst the Minnesota immigrant population, the time has come for all communities to embrace cultural diversity through education, understanding, and acceptance. The graphs below represent Nicollet County as well as Blue Earth County; they were provided by the Greater Mankato Diversity Council.

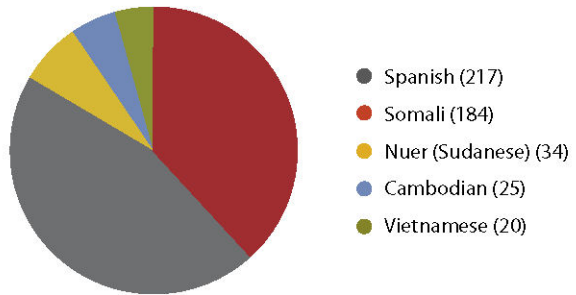
# Graphs



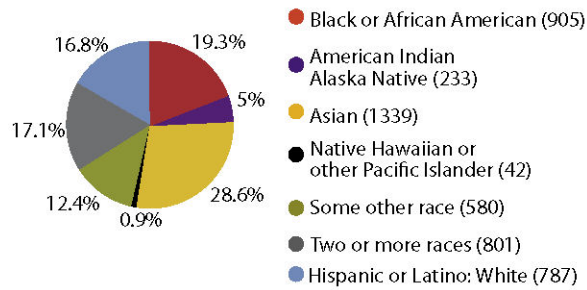
Home Primary Language Data  
2004-2005

Blue Earth and Nicollet Counties

Source: Census 2000 unless otherwise indicated.



### Minority Population Breakdown



Graphs courtesy of the Greater Mankato Diversity Council, 2005

## Key Terms and Definitions Used Throughout the Interviews

**Immigrant**- “A person who leaves one country to settle permanently in another” (<http://dictionary.reference.com>).

**Migrant**- “One that moves from one region to another by chance, instinct, or plan. An itinerant worker who travels from one area to another in search of work” (<http://dictionary.reference.com>).

**Refugee**- “One who flees in search of refuge, as in times of war, political oppression, or religious persecution” (<http://dictionary.reference.com>).

**Refugee Camp**- “Shelter for persons displaced by war or political oppression or for religious beliefs” (<http://dictionary.reference.com>).

**United Nations**- “An international organization composed of most of the countries of the world. It was founded in 1945 to promote peace, security, and economic development” (<http://dictionary.reference.com>).

**ESL classes**- English as a Second Language classes offered for those who do not speak or read English as a primary language.

**Lincoln Community Center**- A community center in Mankato, MN; the center offers ESL classes, Adult Basic Education, after school programs and much more to interested community members.

**Resettlement Form and Process**- “It is the historic policy of the United States to admit to this country refugees of special humanitarian concern, reflecting our core values and our tradition of being a safe haven for the oppressed. Following the admission of over 250,000 displaced Europeans, the first refugee legislation was enacted by the U.S. Congress-- the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. This legislation provided for the admission of an additional 400,000 displaced Europeans. Later laws provided for admission of persons fleeing Communist regimes, largely from Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, Korea and China, and in the 1960's Cubans fleeing Castro arrived en masse. Most of these waves of refugees were assisted by private ethnic and religious organizations in the U.S. which formed the base for the public/private roles of U.S. resettlement today. With the Fall of Vietnam in April of 1975, the U.S. faced the challenge of resettling hundreds of thousands of Indochinese using an ad hoc Indochinese Refugee Task Force, and temporary funding. Congress realized it needed to create procedures to deal with the on-going resettlement of refugees. In 1980, the U.S. Congress passed The Refugee Act of 1980, which standardized the resettlement services for all refugees admitted to the U.S. This Act incorporates the definition of "refugee" used in the U.N. Protocol, and makes provision for regular flow as well as emergency admission of refugees, and authorizes federal assistance for the resettlement of refugees. The Refugee

Act provides the legal basis for our program today. Since 1975, the U.S. has resettled 2.4 million refugees, with nearly 77% being either Indochinese or citizens of the former Soviet Union -- the two groups in whom the U.S. has had particularly strong humanitarian and foreign policy interests during the past three decades. Since the enactment of the Refugee Act of 1980, annual admissions figures have ranged from 61,000 in 1983 to a high of 207,000 in 1980. The average number admitted annually since 1980 is 98,000” ([www.acf.hhs.gov](http://www.acf.hhs.gov)).

**UNHCR (United Nations Highest Commission For Refugees)**- “The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was established on December 14, 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly. The agency is mandated to lead and coordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide. Its primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. It strives to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another State, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally or to resettle in a third country” ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)).

**ABA (American Bar Association For Immigration Law)**- “Immigration is both a legislative and a programmatic priority of the American Bar Association. The ABA House of Delegates has approved numerous policies that have enabled the ABA to be actively involved in the major immigration debates of the last two decades. On the basis of these policies, the [ABA Coordinating Committee on Immigration Law](#) advocates fair implementation of the law in both the legislative and regulatory arenas. The Committee also coordinates activities to improve the law, increase immigrants’ access to the justice system, and educate lawyers and the public about the scope and effect of immigration law developments” ([www.abanet.org](http://www.abanet.org)).

**IOM (International Organization for Migration)**- “An intergovernmental organization established in 1951, IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society” ([www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)).

# Historical Context

## Waves of Immigration in Minnesota

Europeans first arrived in Minnesota during the seventeenth century. Early explorers and entrepreneurs were interested in trading furs with Minnesota's resident Dakota and Ojibwe communities. Many French-Canadians were among the first Europeans in Minnesota and later became permanent settlers in the region. Further details of immigration to Minnesota are outlined in a survey of the state's ethnic groups, entitled *They Chose Minnesota*: "From the 1820s, when the first permanent white settlers arrived to live among the well-established Indian communities, until about 1890, the people who chose Minnesota emigrated principally from the British Isles, Germany, and Scandinavia" (Holmquist 3). Yet, by 1900 the number of Scandinavian immigrants far outnumbered those of previous mention.

During the first and second World Wars, few Europeans arrived in the area, but "larger numbers of Mexican and Mexican Americans, who traveled to the state as migrant workers, put down roots in St. Paul in the 1930s" (Holmquist 3). Understandably, after the war America and thus Minnesota became a haven for many displaced persons and refugees who were otherwise unwelcome in their own countries as a result of WWII.

Since this time, Minnesota has seen various waves of immigration, among those the Hmong, Somali, Sudanese, and Hispanic populations that are now a prevalent part of Minnesota culture. For most, immigration is a chance to live safely; sadly this chance is stolen from those hailing from politically and economically ravaged countries. As outlined by the Minneapolis Foundation in *Immigration in Minnesota: Discovering Common Ground*: "Minnesota is attractive to immigrants for the same reasons it is attractive to the rest of us: a strong economy, good quality of life, educational opportunities, and a thriving civic and cultural life" (Minneapolis Foundation 3).

Ultimately, Minnesota is continuing to grow and change; the new waves of immigration that effect and contribute to contemporary society differ from those of the past only in time. Minnesota, as well as America in its entirety, is founded on the principles and advantages of immigration; learning to embrace, accept and admire the continual additions to our communities will result in positive progression and growth regionally and nationally.

## **Interview with Patricia Mensing**

Lead English as a Second Language Instructor  
Mankato Adult Basic Education Program  
The Lincoln Community Center

### **What are your thoughts on the impact of the immigrant communities in St. Peter?**

In my opinion the immigrant communities positively impact St. Peter and the surrounding area. Along with the economic benefits, our schools and neighborhoods are enriched when immigrants share their new culture including food, music, art, clothing and customs.

Also, new immigrant communities tend to bring out the best in others. Many people who live around the St. Peter area are active in volunteerism and want to learn more about other countries and cultures. They help immigrants learn English and our ways of life through tutoring English and assisting with a variety of life experiences such as shopping, filling out job applications, sewing or working in the community garden.

### **Do you think the community is doing enough to recognize and assist our immigrant populations?**

Change always takes time but over the years I have seen progress made in diversity efforts. There are more festivals and community get-togethers along with on-going programs that recognize the immigrant communities and their needs. Non profit organizations, schools, businesses and churches are offering support in housing, jobs and education. However, the bulk of what is done depends on resources and funding from state and federal agencies so it is crucial that the public and policy makers understand and recognize the contributions of immigrants.

### **How many years have you been involved in educating immigrant populations.**

I have been educating immigrants for over 15 years as an English as a second language instructor. I can only imagine what it is like for the learners as they come into a new culture, leaving behind family, jobs and the country they have lived in for their entire lives. Adult immigrants and refugees have a great number of obstacles to overcome in order to become proficient users of English. Educational background, level of literacy in the first language, financial status, and family and job responsibilities are just a few. There may also be societal pressure to move into the workplace before they have learned adequate language skills.

### **Why did you choose this field?**

Teaching English as a second language to immigrant populations is a very rewarding field. Adult learners come to my class from all over the world with a wealth of

knowledge and experience and I am always learning new things about countries, cultures and life in general. Learning a second language is an amazing, complicated process and I enjoy the challenge of finding the approach and materials that will meet the needs of the learners and help them reach their individual goals.

**In your opinion what role does education play in the assimilation of immigrants, as well as in the lives of the educators?**

Adult literacy programs play a critical role in our changing and diverse society. Not only do they help learners to acquire the English skills needed to thrive in a new culture but in addition, they provide educational settings where adults and families from different cultures come together, work together, learn together, and respect each other's differences. They offer advocacy for immigrants by explaining the complexity and timeline for learning a second language to the people who complain about all the newcomers in our community. Educators can share personal stories about what they learn from their learners and it will help eliminate some of the misconceptions that others have when unfamiliar with other cultures

**Are there certain requirements to being a student at the Lincoln Community Center?**

Any adult, 18 years of age or older, can attend classes at the Lincoln Community Center. In addition to basic English, there are many other classes for immigrants including workplace English, citizenship, family literacy and civics education. Some learners are mandated to attend in order to receive public assistance. Childcare and transportation are provided but there may be a waiting list for these services.

## **Letter from Jack M. Geller**

President of Center For Rural Policy and Development  
St. Peter Community Center  
St. Peter, MN

To Friends of Nicollet County:

Located in Saint Peter, the Center for Rural Policy & Development is a statewide, not-for-profit, non-partisan, rural policy research center. As such, we are dedicated to the study of the economic, social and cultural forces that impact rural Minnesotans and the communities they reside in. Accordingly, the Center has been actively studying issues of diversity and immigration throughout rural Minnesota since the release of the 2000 decennial census. After all, if you want to study “rural Minnesota,” one of the most fundamental questions to ask is: Who is living in rural Minnesota and how is it changing?”

While many rural communities were well aware of the increase in racial and ethnic minorities for some time, the release of the 2000 census was an eye-opening event for many Minnesotans, as they learned that immigrants virtually doubled in population during the decade of the 1990s. Needless to say, rural Minnesota was not immune to these trends, as many small culturally homogeneous communities began to look and feel like truly diverse communities. This was especially true in south central Minnesota (often called Region 9), where we learned that more than 75 percent of all of the population growth in the region during the 1990s was attributed to the recently-arrived immigrant population.

These new Minnesotans have and continue to make a significant impact on our communities, our economy and our cultural life. Studies conducted here at the Center have documented that the economic impact of Latinos throughout the region exceeded \$490 million in 2001; and they contribute close to \$2 in state and local taxes for every \$1 expended on local programs. Clearly, the role of immigrants in the area’s workforce is significant and growing.

Educationally, the immigrant population is making a valuable contribution to the viability of our local schools. Data from the Minnesota Department of Education informs us that statewide school enrollment numbers have declined by close to 3 percent since 2001. This is true for both rural and metro-area schools. Simultaneously however, Hispanic enrollment has increased by close to 40 percent over the same time period. Certainly, the added enrollment in many schools has helped stabilize overall enrollment numbers; and in some rural districts the added enrollment has likely helped district officials avoid the sometimes painful discussion of school consolidations.

Finally and on a more personal note, is the cultural contribution a community receives as it becomes a diverse community. Such cultural transformations are often wrought with miscommunications, misunderstandings and cultural clashes. But overall research has consistently documented that diverse communities are more economically and socially vibrant places and generally grow faster than more homogeneous communities. Such

diversity better prepares our youngsters for the truly global world that they will live in; after all, a diverse population generates diverse ideas and diverse opportunities.

Several communities in Nicollet County and many others throughout the south central region experience this ongoing transformation every day. Communities looking toward the future would do well to embrace these changes and help prepare their communities to become welcoming, inclusive places for newcomers of all ethnicities, races and cultures.

Sincerely,

Jack M. Geller, Ph.D.  
President  
Center for Rural Policy and Development  
Saint Peter, MN



# Simon Tap

## Sudanese-American Man



Map provided by [www.mapsofworld.com](http://www.mapsofworld.com)

Simon Tap lives in St. Peter, MN and regularly attends the Lincoln Community Center in Mankato, MN for ESL classes. He is originally from Bentiu in South Sudan. Like others, Simon truly appreciates the educational opportunities available in America. When asked what he appreciates about America, Simon responded: “I tell you, being in America is safe. Ok? You are safe. And if you work hard you can get education...education that will lift you up later.”

*Oral History with Simon Tap*

Sudanese-American Man

Interviewed by Jamie Pederson

Lincoln Community Center, Mankato

June 2006

Jamie: Where are you from specifically?

Simon: I am from Sudan.

Jamie: What part? Southern Sudan?

Simon: Yes, Southern Sudan. Bentiu.

Jamie: Is it a small village?

Simon: Bentiu is a center...they call it a center, in an...it is not a program but it is more than a program.

Jamie: It is what?

Simon: It is more than the program...the center...because that they say is the county. The county is regional. They mean that a program and this program are only 11 or 20. But a program 14 or according to the area.

Jamie: How do you spell Bentiu?

Simon: Bentiu, is B-E-N-T-I-U.

Jamie: Is it considered its own country within Sudan?

Simon: A county.

Jamie: Oh, ok. How big is it?

Simon: Uhm...They measure it with kilometers per square...but it is very...the region is West of the Nuer tribe because the Nuer is divided into two by the River Nile. Some they are East and some are West.

Jamie: What tribe lives in Bentiu?

Simon: Many different tribes. There is the Dinka and there is the Nuer.

Jamie: How many different languages are spoken?

Simon: The tribes of the Sudan, they speak many different languages. The (name not understood) by themselves speak 99. The Dinka, they speak about 15 languages by

themselves and the Nuer are the only people that they speak one language. They should be the first largest community. And others are a lot of different tribes: Anuak, Shilluk, some of them I don't even know their names.

Jamie: So is it difficult to communicate with people from other tribes?

Simon: The other tribes, if you have not being with them before, you could not speak their language. Some of the communities in Mankato now, some of them, we only speak one language. Like Anuak...I only speak.

Jamie: You speak Anuak?

Simon: I only speak Anuak. When we speak together we have a common language. That is called Arabic. But when you go to the tribe it will be different.

Jamie: Really? You speak Arabic even in Southern Sudan?

Simon: Yeah, I went to school for that.

Jamie: Oh you did? How much school did you go to back home before you came to the United States?

Simon: I went up to 9<sup>th</sup> grade in Arabic and then the war broke out in Southern Sudan...so I run to Khartoum...been there for 9 years and when I came back the war is still and I went to Ethiopia for the refugee camp. And we stayed there almost about 8 years. But when I was in the refugee camp we get a response from the UNHCR...give us a scholarship and for those...they arranged that we would get out at once.

Jamie: They arranged what?

Simon: They arranged some money...because Ethiopia is not our country and they want to put us into school with children who are Ethiopian...and there you don't have any support besides the United Nations or UNHCR. That they called The United Nations Highest Commission for Refugees. They would give you a test in a group, when you pass you will be in that scholarship. I came out at 11<sup>th</sup> grade. I complete 11<sup>th</sup> grade in Ethiopia and 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Jamie: So you have your high school degree from home right?

Simon: Yeah.

Jamie: What was life in Sudan like before coming to America? How old were you when you left Bentiu for Khartoum and then Khartoum for Ethiopia?

Simon: I was like...uh...15. Yeah I was about 15 years old. Because we are born in a rural area, we don't have a birth certificate, but people identify you with your real

age...so I run to Khartoum. I been there 9 years and when I came back in 1992 I get the war is here and there is not stability and I went to the camp.

Jamie: In Ethiopia?

Simon: In Ethiopia.

Jamie: So, you were 15 when you left your county and then you were in Khartoum for about 9 years, so you would have been about 24 when you went to the refugee camp?

Simon: Yeah.

Jamie: How many years were you there?

Simon: Uhm...it would be like 7 years.

Jamie: Seven years in the refugee camp? Wow.

Simon: I had two years in the camp and three years of the scholarship and I came and had a settlement form. A settlement form they arrange for you, the United Nations. So, if you had that and the story covered your background...and you had that with your family or by yourself...you would get...

Jamie: So the settlement form...that meant that you could what?

Simon: You could take the uproad to other countries that need immigrants.

Jamie: So you had to wait when you got that card before they told you where to go?

Simon: Yeah, it was a process.

Jamie: So how did you end up here, in the United States and in Minnesota?

Simon: There is a form; they call it a settlement form. And the settlement form, you appeal it and you have interview. Some agencies, they do not take the immigrants. Like the ABA, (American Bar Association for Immigration Law) they came and gave you an interview and they take all your history and after you done with ABA, the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) will come...and the uhhh...the ABA when it give the uh...the interview, they will look on other historical texts so they gonna give you the pass and with it you have been permitted to go to the uproad.

Jamie: And then they tell you that you are going to Minnesota too? Did they make that choice for you?

Simon: No, they uh...after they give you the paper, that you passed, so there is some process that you do it, go to the America check for your blood, for the TB, or any other

disease, if they found that you are negative, they say “ok” and after that you go to the IOM, that is called the...the IOM is the International Organization for Migration. That will pay your ticket. These are the people that are responsible for your moving here and pay your ticket for the airplane. They will tell you that you go to...Chicago, and you go to New York, and you go to St. Louis, and you go to Minnesota, you go to Sioux Falls. And with one request they state that places need people.

Jamie: Did you come with your family? Who did you all come with?

Simon: Yeah...I came with my wife and I came with my cousin and my brother in law.

Jamie: Do you still have family back in Sudan?

Simon: Yes, all my family there and all relatives.

Jamie: Can you talk to them ever or be in communication with them through letters?

Simon: No, uh...we talk on through the phone and soon I met them in other country, like uh...Kenya has a border to the Sudan and some of my family they are there. I got other people in Khartoum and in Khartoum they have some communication like a telephone or whatever. I was talking with some people are in Uganda and some people they are in Ethiopia.

Jamie: So kind of all spread out?

Simon: Yeah, they are not in one place.

Jamie: So, why did you have to leave your country? Just because of the war that was going on?

Simon: There is so many different needs per person. War broke out is a big factor. Secondly, education. Education. And then once you get here in uproad, or in country...a developing country, whether you learn, you get a chance to help your people.

Jamie: So is that your goal...to educate yourself so that you can go back to Sudan and help people there?

Simon: Two different goals...Come here you can get a job and when you get a job, you assist those who are in other country by sending money back because they have no...they don't have food and they stay in a country...neighboring country. They don't have a job...they would depend on you.

Jamie: Do you hope to go back to Sudan some day?

Simon: If there is peace like we hope...the U.N. made the peace in Sudan. One day...not now.

Jamie: So what has life been like for you in America?

Simon: Life is ok when you have a job. But sometime when we don't have job, separation is very hard because any life is good when you have a job. Now I have been out about a year. I tell some agencies here but they don't call. And uh, all the...many companies they put their name in the agencies and they call through the agencies...and the manpower and the personnel. I fill like five agencies there.

Jamie: And none of them called you back?

Simon: They will call you for a one day or two days and then they will tell you that you are done. It is very hard now for us, even with the payment for the house.

Jamie: Have you had a different job while you have been here?

Simon: Yeah...temporary.

Jamie: Did you have a job when you were back in Sudan?

Simon: Yeah, for the mechanic and I work a lot in construction.

Jamie: What is your favorite part about living in America? What is really different from life in Sudan?

Simon: Different is you been secure. Ok? Different is when you have job, you free. You can do whatever you need. If you work hard, you can get education. Go to work and come back with one word today and one word tomorrow...that will collect itself.

Jamie: What is your favorite part about America?

Simon: What is that?

Jamie: What do you like the most? What do you like about being here that is different from home? You like that you can get an education here?

Simon: I tell you, being in America is safe. Ok? You are safe. And if you work hard you can get education...education that will lift you up later.

Jamie: And that is not the case back home?

Simon: We don't have that back home. We don't have that.

Jamie: Because of your schools?

Simon: Not a schools, and even the food because the country has been in a war, that is so many starvation, people are running everyday because no people working. That is why so many women and children they run back to exile. Those who will stay, they will be the men who fight back to the enemy.

Jamie: Who is the enemy?

Simon: The enemy will be the government who (word not understood) your rights. You call the enemy those on the rebel side.

Jamie: But who comes...and actually comes to the villages and harms people?

Simon: Uhm...the government. The government itself is oppressed rule. And when you try to protest for your rights, they will not accept it. Like the South and North. South they don't have opportunity for getting education and for getting construction for getting whatever they needed. And the North they are dominant for the rule and they don't give a share for the rule. Whatever the South needed they don't have a chance to get it for the...they are the people of the country.

Jamie: So the North has more food and they would give some of that to the South? But when the war is going on there is no way for the people in the South to get the food that they need?

Simon: During the colony, it was in the North more, and when they give the independence to the North. When they get independence...they get education among community and life in Sudan. So they educate themselves. There is some restriction, they create something called Arabic. They didn't speak the right language and many people can learn it. They use Arabic and Arabic is a...from the Middle East. And they are part of the Middle East and that is when they get chances.

Jamie: So what kind of food did you normally eat down in the South? Was it mostly from farming?

Simon: Sudan is a very fertilized country that many thing they will grow. They have sorghum.

Jamie: What is that?

Simon: Sorghum is kind of like a corn but corn is different...corn is part of the food they use for consumption. And sorghum too is a food they use for the consumption. Many...Sudan is very rich soil.

Jamie: So you can farm the land?

Simon: Yeah.

Jamie: Now, what goals do you have for you and your family? Do you have any children?

Simon: No... no, we separate from our children.

Jamie: You mean you have children back in Sudan?

Simon: I got one.

Jamie: So do you want to stay in America for the remainder of your life or do you want to go back to Sudan?

Simon: I didn't decided that yet...actually I didn't decided because life is going to change, to change, change...and if land in America need me, maybe I will not go back. And if I had peace in my country...become happy...maybe. I have no prediction for that.

Jamie: That is a really good point though. Life is always changing and you never know what is going to happen so... Well, is there anything else you want to add about your experience in America and your whole journey basically?

Simon: What I can add to that is to give observation...What I can have is...when we came here we safe, we walk. Many people they do appreciate because they give their life and they help their people back home. So, the war caused many natural disasters...even the water they bring will come into neighboring country to exile when they call you they will get \$50, they will get \$100, \$200, give them treatment and money to go back home and this will give them their life. And this kind of entity we don't have before. When you stay back home, when your people get sick, you don't have money and you don't have medicine, they will die in front of you. Now some people they get sent to help their people and some people get done and get education and later they gonna get their life.

Jamie: So you are saying you really appreciate everything you have because it is a lot more difficult back home and we should appreciate that we can get medicine if we need it and that we can get an education?

Simon: Here when we came we get food we get walk and water...you work hard, you go to school, you get your education. Besides that when you have your family back home and you have a job, they need help you help them too.

Jamie: So you can send money back home is what you are saying?

Simon: Yeah, always. For Sudanese...

Jamie: Thank you so much Simon. This has been really great.

Simon: Thank you.

Key terms and places discussed in the interview:

Sorghum- 1. An Old World grass (*Sorghum bicolor*), several varieties of which are widely cultivated as grain and forage or as a source of syrup.

2. Syrup made from the juice of this plant ([www.freedictionary.com](http://www.freedictionary.com)).

Bentiu, South Sudan- A county in South Sudan with a population of 660,000 ([www.unsudanig.org](http://www.unsudanig.org)).

## David Gong and Elizabeth Chuol Sudanese-American Family



(L-R) Elizabeth Chuol, Joch Gong, Poulrah Gong (3 other children not pictured), David Gong

David and Elizabeth are currently residents of North Mankato. Both attend the Lincoln Community Center for ESL classes during the regular school year. They, together with their five children, share a love of learning. David also teaches Nuer, their native language, to children; the cause is to help younger children maintain the ability to speak in their native tongue.

*Oral History with David Gong and Elizabeth Chuol*

A Sudanese American Family

(Also present Joich Gong and Poulrah Gong, two of Elizabeth and David's children)

Interviewed by Jamie Pederson

Gong Residence, North Mankato

July 2006

Jamie: When did you come to the United States from Sudan?

David: From Kenya.

Jamie: From Kenya?

David: When I come from Sudan I go to Ethiopia...after that Ethiopia to Kenya.

Jamie: To a refugee camp?

David: Yes, refugee camp.

Jamie: Where in Sudan are you from?

David: The name of our town is (word not understood).

Jamie: How old were you when you left Sudan for the refugee camp in Ethiopia?

David: At that time I been about 19 years.

Jamie: Had you gone to school until that point?

David: Yes, when I come in Ethiopia I finish school.

Jamie: Weren't you a pastor?

David: Yeah, before in Sudan I been in leader of a choir...after that I been in the Evangelist. Yes, when I be the Evangelists and I worked in Ethiopia to Kenya. When I worked in the church in Ethiopia to go to Kenya, after that I come to United States and in 1998 I get my pastor license. In 1998 I get my pastor license here in United States.

Jamie: How did you come to the United States? How does that process work?

David: Oh, the process is the government is called for resettlement. The government decides people they have problem and cut share away from country to go to another country. That is why when we go to refugee camp in Kenya the government in the United States, they transport the refugees. It is called a resettlement form...like migration...resettlement.

Jamie: Is it a long process?

David: A long process...been there about three years.

Jamie: How long were you in the refugee camp?

David: In the refugee camp I been three years in Kenya for refugee and I been long long time in Ethiopia. One day the war started in Sudan.

Jamie: And you are from South Sudan right?

David: Yeah, I been from South Sudan and my family been in South Sudan now.

Jamie: Oh, your family is still there now?

David. Yes.

Jamie: What was happening in Sudan to cause so many people to leave their home?

David: The conflict is between people in the North and people in the South. The people in the North are Muslim people. At that time they murdered...the government for the North say they need for the people to be Muslim people. Another thing is that people in the North don't need people in the South in their government and that they don't need to be developed. Like right now in the United States they have the education process and like people...building good road and building they don't have now.

Jamie: So they have education and development in the North but not in the South?

David: In the North but not in the South.

Jamie: Are most people in the South farmers?

David: Yes.

Jamie: Is that what your family did?

David: Yes. That is why the people in the South they fight because they need freedom and the land.

Elizabeth: This is like long time ago American people fight England...same thing because they own our land; they own everything and we don't want them to own...us. We want to be free. That is why some people move away from different country because of religion and you want to be treated better then you move to another country to be free. A lot of people come for to go to school, to come for life...that why a lot of people come.

Jamie: Were you two married before you came to the United States?

Elizabeth: Yes.

Jamie: Where did you meet?

Elizabeth: In Sudan we live in the same place and our families know each other because we from the same place. Our family know for long long time; I know him and he know me; I know his background and he know mine.

Jamie: So all of your family is in Sudan still too?

Elizabeth. Yes.

Jamie: When you two came to America did you come just the two of you?

Elizabeth: Yeah...The U.N. leave the refugee camp in Kenya and then U.N. come to give us the form and application, then we wait for a couple months, like six months, and then after that you get everything done you came here.

Jamie: Did you have any children when you came?

Elizabeth: Yeah, we had one...that one. (Pointing to her eldest son). He was five months at the time.

Jamie: Yes, that was almost ten years ago.

Elizabeth: Yeah, we came in 1994...I think, 12 years.

Jamie: Where did you move to first?

Elizabeth: Sioux Falls, South Dakota; and then we came here in 2002.

Jamie: Why did you make that move?

David: We come and we are needing to get an education. And we come here to school.

Jamie: Are there programs in Sioux Falls for ESL?

David: No, not like here. Some people go to Southeast technical and learn yourself for a long time...take a long time.

Jamie: What kind of jobs are here in North Mankato?

Elizabeth: In Sioux Falls, South Dakota it is better to get a job and easy to get a place to live for apartment...but here it is too hard. Too long time to get apartment and rent is too high too.

Jamie: Where do you work right now?

Elizabeth: I work at Mexican Village.

Jamie: And David?

Elizabeth: David work at McDonalds.

Jamie: When do you move to your new apartment?

Elizabeth: August 1<sup>st</sup>. It has four rooms...here too small.

Jamie: What has been the biggest challenge in moving to the United States?

Elizabeth: Too tough because when you leave your family or when you leave your country to go to another country everything tough, the language, culture, food, everything. Here in the United States...too tough.

Jamie: Do you cook the same kind of food here as back home?

Elizabeth: Yes, make the same thing here as back home.

Jamie: And what is that?

Elizabeth: Kup...cornflower mixed with water and leave there for one day. And the next day you roll into little balls and then you fry it with water and oil and you eat it with meat.

Jamie: Is it hard to find the ingredients for your cooking?

Elizabeth: No, we go to Wal-Mart and Cub Foods and Hy-Vee...the vegetables are the same, we just cook our way. But the first time is hard because we came in the snow and don't know where to go. We don't have transportation; we don't have any car.

Jamie: Do you prefer summer weather then?

Elizabeth: Yeah, but in America it is too hot.

Jamie: Is winter difficult?

David: Yeah, the winter is difficult but right now we are ok. If you live in place long time...we are alright now.

Jamie: What was daily life like in Sudan?

Elizabeth: We farmed...we grow corn, beans, and tomatoes. But mushrooms...we don't eat in Sudan.

Jamie: Did you have animals?

Elizabeth: We have cows and chickens...(Jioch quacks like a chicken).

Jamie: How did you make the choice to leave Sudan?

David: When the people they capture in the war right away and running...

Jamie: You ran away?

David: Yeah. When you leave a place you don't have a choice...because of the war they come in. No choice but to go to the refugee camps.

Jamie: Did you walk there?

David: Yeah, you walk to Ethiopia and Ethiopia to border you can go to Kenya.

Jamie: How long did you walk?

David: Three days...four days. In the South they have some people near and some people is not near (the border).

Jamie: Can you communicate with your family members who are still in Sudan?

David: Yes, sometimes they come to Ethiopia or sometimes they go to the North in Khartoum. Sometimes peace...is ok now. People communicate in Sudan now. When they have peace...they decide last year...the people they go to the North in Khartoum...you can communicate with them.

Jamie: Is the situation better in the North or in the South?

David: The situation is ok now but when the peace process the war go down...people in the South have a little government now. They live in (town); it is in the South not in the North.

Jamie: So there is a separate government in South Sudan?

David: Is the same government but...in the South they have one person who communicate what they are doing. The people of the U.S. have different government...

Elizabeth: It is like in the U.S. each state has a different governor and the senate...like that. They have different government but the same president.

Jamie: Do you ever want to return to Sudan?

Elizabeth: Yeah...a lot of people now they go back because you want to go back and help people you must go back. If you don't want...nobody say go.

Jamie: Is that your goal...to go back?

David: The goal when you need to help the people...in the South now they need a lot of work. And when you help you can go as American citizen.

Jamie: Are you both citizens?

David: Yeah.

Elizabeth: A year ago.

Jamie: Will you remain here then?

Elizabeth: Yeah, because we pay everything...we pay our money to be citizen. We want to be citizen for our kids because we want them to grow up here and go to school and do what they want. For us if we want to go back we can get job so easily...but if we want to stay here and care for our kids so they can go to school and grow up and go to college like you guys (nodding at me) then if you want to go back later you can.

Jamie: What about going back to visit?

Elizabeth: David went back in 2002.

Jamie: What was that like?

David: When I go back in 2002, there no peace...it was not good like it is now. It was scary place. No good water...hard times...darkness in the nighttime...no light. It is hard but when you go there and you have a family you be the same as them. You don't care if they have good water.

Jamie: What has it been like integrating into the community here?

Elizabeth: They are helping. The war start in 2003-2004 in Darfur. American people they always help if they see problem in other countries always there. We are welcome here because we are American citizens. A lot of Sudanese they go back to do American jobs because a lot of American people they go to Africa and have a lot of businesses to help the people. They need people...they go back now.

Jamie: So you speak Nuer right?

Elizabeth: Yes, that is our language.

Jamie: But there are many in Sudan right?

David: A lot of languages. They have different language and different tribes...about 25 languages. Some people from different tribes communicate in Arabic and English.

Jamie: Do you speak Arabic?

David: Yes I do. But some people communicate in English too. In Kenya they learn English...

Jamie: But Nuer is widely spoken right?

David: Yes, because people can learn it very soon. In Nuer we try to teach the children (here). We offer them now on Saturday for the kids...now in Mankato.

Jamie: That's really great that you have those classes.

David: Now in Ethiopia they teach English...and now for the Nuer. Some people in Southern Sudan they have a given language...people can communicate though.

Jamie: So are there ever other Sudanese students at the Lincoln Community Center that you can't understand?

Elizabeth: Oh, yes.

David: But we can communicate through the English.

Jamie: What is marriage like in Sudan?

Elizabeth: Everyone decides...you decide if you like the guy and then parents say. It is not like here in the United States with you guys...the man pays some cow or money but here in the U.S. you like your husband so you get married. At time when we have the ring...they check your background and the guys family and brother and sister have a party. The girl's parents cook the food. After that they make the wedding...it is big big one.

Jamie: How old were you?

Elizabeth: I was fifteen. But some people get married at different times like 17, 20, 21. Parents always need some cow or money though. My family tell his family how many cows they need...and husbands family tell you the day they need the cow or money. We stay there for a week because the family cook food...friends and family.

Jamie: Well, thank you Elizabeth and David for speaking with me.

Elizabeth: Thank you.

# Somali Immigration



Picture provided by [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)

Somalia is a country in the Horn of Africa, occupying an area of 246,550 sq. miles with a coastline of 2,000 miles running along the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden. The country is regarded as being quite homogenous, both ethnically and religiously; however, there are numerous tribes and clans which have been the cause of cultural dissonance for years. Membership in a particular clan is based on patrilineal blood lines and dictates one's role in society. However, because of the continual conflict and civil war between differing clans, many Somalis have been forced to leave their home country as refugees. Minnesota is now home to more than 60,000 Somali refugees. Minnesota has become a favored area of relocation because of quality of education, health care, and job opportunities.

#### Resources:

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## Jamila Said Somali-American Woman



Jamila Said lives in St. Peter, MN and works at Gustavus Adolphus College in the Custodial Department. She has recently moved into a new house sponsored by Habitat For Humanity and is content to stay rooted in the Saint Peter area. According to Jamila, “I like Saint Peter because it’s nice community...because we have college and not too much people.”

*Oral History with Jamila Said*

Somali-American Woman

Interviewed by Jamie Pederson

Folke-Bernadotte Memorial Library, Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter

July 2006

Jamie: When exactly did you come to Minnesota or the U.S. from Somalia?

Jamila: I can come in Somalia...in my country civil war in 1990 and 1991. In 1990...but I move in another country; Kenya. I go to the refugee camp in a couple while...like one year...I find my sister, she live in United States, in Virginia. I have that day five kids with my country civil war started. Then I moved refugee, I have five kids...then I lost two kids more. Refugee camps, we have a lot of problems for food, water...it is not good food. It is not healthy water, like a lot of kids died.

Jamie: So your kids could get sick and they didn't have medicine or enough food or water?

Jamila: Yeah, we have couple medicine but it's not enough. Not enough medicine, enough health stuff...that's why we passed away. I don't like remembering that day...

Jamie: So when you came to the U.S. you brought three of your children with you?

Jamila: No, after that I find my sister, and then I come talk to her on phone. Then I move in Nairobi. Nairobi is Kenya...capital of Kenya. Then I stay there five years because my sister she sponsored...for the sponsor process for coming to the United States with my kids and my husband at that time. And after that I get a process after five years...I stay there five years. I born in Kenya two kids again. Then I move to Minnesota...I mean United States. My sister that day, she lives in Wisconsin, Madison. I got to fly 24 hours. I was so tired that day.

Jamie: So you went to Madison, WI first?

Jamila: Yes, but the first flight I come to Nairobi, Nairobi to Amsterdam, Amsterdam to New York, New York to Missouri, and Missouri to Wisconsin. And then I stay a month because my kids and me, we don't have a lot of family Somalian. That's why I moved to Minneapolis because Minneapolis we have a lot of Somalian population there. And some of my family and friends live there.

Jamie: What brought you to St. Peter?

Jamila: Then after that...because I have five kids at that time, I move and I look for couple little towns because I like towns and not big cities because the United States is bigger than my country. Then I said maybe little town is better...in big city we have a lot of population, a lot of traffic.

Jamie: How long ago did you move to St. Peter?

Jamila: I come into U.S. in June 1998...now I think 10 years I stay here. I stay in Minneapolis one year and a half. Then I move to St. Peter...because before St. Peter I moved to Owatonna because I born another children. Then I find house or find...everybody said, "How many children do you have?" I say, "I have five children, me and my husband...so seven." They say, "Seven? Three rooms is not enough." I said "Oh my God, Ok." I find at that time Section 8 papers for low-income families. I get that paper for Mankato, I apply, then I look in Mankato a lot of apartments and they say "No, if you have seven, then no." I am so lucky because I live in Owatonna, same company we have in St. Peter.

Jamie: What is that?

Jamila: Lifestyle Company. Then they said, "Jamila, you got Section 8 papers?" I go to my manager in Owatonna I say, "I got Section 8 paper and I want to go to St. Peter." He said, "Who you find St. Peter, you are smart." I say that I looking everywhere and I like that town because we have college, we have not too much people. I come in here three or four days and I look in school stuff and I go grocery shopping because my friend, she lives here. I look in population here and I say "Maybe it is ok." Then I move. That day we move in 24 hours after tornado! I said, "Oh, my God!" My daughter said, "Oh my God, we don't have high school here...today we sat in kindergarten chairs!" I said, "Ok, it is not funny"... but the hospital is damaged and Gustavus is damaged.

Jamie: They did a good job of rebuilding. So you really like it here?

Jamila: I like St. Peter because it's nice community and then I want to go to ESL classes to speak English because that day I don't understand...I understand a little bit...but I don't speak very well. Then I started and ohhh..hard work! I said "Oh my God, you study another language!" I hope so I am doing hard work. I go to Mankato everyday and go to ESL classes.

Jamie: At the Lincoln Community Center?

Jamila: Yes...then I go there and some people are Somalian refugees and community we had will help you. Somalian families come in St. Peter, Mankato. That is why we got a bus...transportation bus. I like it because in St. Peter we don't have any. Then I...in St. Peter another year we come a lot of Somalian population and then I vote for notice because we have a lot of kids and my kids we go to school and I go to Mankato school...so hard. Then I traded the government in St. Peter...like school stuff. Then I am so lucky, I got a class in St. Peter. That day is 803 David Street...we got ESL classes for a couple days...like four days. I go to class 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003. Then in 2001, I go to Gustavus and I learn English a little bit. I got a before in program for welfare because I don't speak English or have a job...I have kids. So I take the welfare stuff and then after a couple years I learn English, I go to driver's license, I got a driver's license. I drive a car.

Jamie: When did you get your job at Gustavus?

Jamila: I don't remember...I don't remember any time. Bob Douglas.

Jamie: He helped you?

Jamila: Yeah, he's a nice guy. And couple of my friends because I am friendly! I speak English and I am so happy now. I learn English, I got a job, I got a diver's license, I drive in my car myself. Couple my kids graduating high school.

Jamie: I just think it is amazing how far you have come. You have only been here for 10 years and look at how much you have accomplished!

Jamila: Then couple days I want to go to technical college in Mankato for job training. I got a couple stuff in St. Peter, like certificates and my resume.

Jamie: Tell me a little about life in Somalia before you moved to the States? Did you live in a small town?

Jamila: No, I lived in Mogadishu.

Jamie: Oh, in the capital! What happened there? What was the war situation?

Jamila: The war situation was civil war. Civil war like tribe stuff. We started first, then everybody, we go outside. Some people are running, some people walking a lot. He die...some people walking someplace. Even we don't know where you go. That is surprise. The first time my daughter she said, "Where you go now?" I said, "I don't know." My town, my village, we started like couple blocks from my house like BOOM!

Jamie: Bombs?

Jamila: Bombs. A lot of people outside like, "What's going on?" I said, "I don't know." Then everybody running.

Jamie: You went to Kenya immediately right? How did you get there?

Jamila: My town, and another town we go the car. Then some people lost their kids, some people lost their wives. Some people went crazy asking, "Have you seen my kids?" I said, "I don't know, I can't see them." Please help. If you see some people cry...it is not feeling good. Then some kids they said, "I want milk; I don't want to walk; I need water and food...Where are you going?" We don't have anything.

Jamie: Were you walking or did you have a car?

Jamila: We were walking a couple blocks. After that I want to go in some of my relatives and I go to right away car. After another town it started again...BOOM. I want to walk...

Jamie: This started in 1990?

Jamila: Yeah, 1990.

Jamie: And did you ever have the feeling that maybe the fighting would stop soon or did you know it would be a long war?

Jamila: I know my country...some part of my country not good. My country...south, north, east, west. Now my country's North is a little bit ok. But in South is not good...still war.

Jamie: And you knew the war was going to go on for a long time?

Jamila: Every time we start a war and then stop it and then start another one. It is not good.

Jamie: Who was the war between?

Jamila: First was with tribes...now it is not tribes. Now some people like peace and some people don't like peace. That is why we started another fight. Some people want government and peace and other people don't.

Jamie: In Mogadishu did you live in a house or in an apartment?

Jamila: In Mogadishu is capital of Somalia and I live all my life in my mom's house.

Jamie: Did your whole family live in your mom's house?

Jamila: No my sister live in the United States. She go to college and my sister now she has two kids and her husband. She marry in 1994. The first time she talking to me she really really cried. She said, "I don't know if you are alive or not. Jamila? Are you sure you are Jamila? Are you alive?" I said, "I am alive, but two of my kids left..." She said, "I help you." She got the papers for the uh...sponsorship...from the Red Cross.

Jamie: In Somalia, did you go to school?

Jamila: I go to school until Junior High because then I get married.

Jamie: How old were you when you were married?

Jamila: Seventeen. Then my first baby I born in eighteen years. I am so happy because I get a lot of goals in St. Peter...I speak English, driver's license, good job and good place and Gustavus. I like Gustavus because a lot of kids at Gustavus will help you speak English...good tutors. I still remember a couple kids...they graduated a long time ago...but in my heart. The girl, she go to school, she graduate next year. She help a lot of the time. I want to go to class in one month for my citizenship...I am a citizen. Two years

ago, I go to London and I travel. I see my brothers, my uncle because I like my uncle and I can't see couple while. He lives in Liverpool. My brother lives London, my uncle Liverpool and my aunt and my two cousins live in Birmingham. I want to go there two years ago and my family says, "Oh my God, Jamila...I can't believe your hard work." I said, "Oh yeah!" I get a lot of goals in St. Peter. I like St. Peter...I like population in St. Peter. I help a couple people. I got another goal with my house...I moved in two months ago. I got a Habitat For Humanity House. It helps for church and stuff.

Jamie: How did you get that?

Jamila: I apply. My son, he go to school and he build a building in high school and then one day at supper...I said, "Oh Mohammed, he is so smart!" he said "Mom, try for Habitat for Humanity House because you got a rent and lot of kids and I have a lot of kids." He said "Will you apply?" He said I think we helps my teacher. He tell me to take the telephone and I take the telephone and then the girl, my friend, her name is Jessica and I said, "Jessica, do you know that?" And she said, "Oh yeah, Jamila you gotta try that."

Jamie: And it worked out?

Jamila: Yeah...I gotta questions. My teachers she says, "I like Jamila because she is all the time questions!" I said, "Yes, because I don't know nothing!" I take questions like what is that?...what that mean? (Giggles).

Jamie: How long did it take for them to build it?

Jamila: First time the high school kids...I started in 2005...May. Then we done in 2006...May.

Jamie: What was your favorite thing about your new house?

Jamila: I built it 300 hours! Every Saturday and every Thursday night I working. I work in Gustavus custodial. I work Monday through Friday eight hours. I start at 5 o'clock and go all day. Then after five days, Saturday I work my house and Sunday I work at my house with kids and laundry and cleaning...doing hair. I have two little girls. My youngest, she is seven years old. She speaks all the time in English. I say, "Don't lose my language!"

Jamie: Do you speak Somali at home with your children?

Jamila: Yes, all the time at home...my younger children at home we speak English...but my son and my two daughters we speak in Somali.

Jamie: I think it is so important for young kids to learn both languages.

Jamila: Then sometimes we laugh at me and they say, “Don’t say that mom! It is not right!” And I say, “Ok, teach me...” (Giggles). So funny, because kids if they speak another language we help all the people because sometimes we don’t speak right and they say “Oh, say that.” In my country we speak English but it is London English. I come here and I know some stuff like water. One day, I am so surprised, I want to go to grocery...or gas station I mean. I said “How much is ‘wata’?” He said, “What?” I said, “You know... ‘wata’?” He said, “It is not ‘wata’...water. I said, “Oh my gosh...different sound.” Couple stuff is different. Then I go to London two years ago and I said, “I want a water.” He said, “What? You’re from the United States huh?” I said, “Ok, wata!” (Laughing). I speak different language...I speak English but different sounds. I want cousin to come and visit my home in St. Peter. My cousin say, “Give me remote?” And my daughter, she so laugh. She say, “What you say Asha?” She say, “Give me remote?” You want a remote? It is different...I don’t know what this girl is talking about!

Jamie: What is your favorite part of your new home? Do you have a dishwasher?

Jamila: I don’t have dishwasher...I don’t have garage. I have little deck. Maybe I dream in my future we do that but it is not right away. I am so happy because I live in apartment for 10 years...that is why. I am so happy for my house. It is quiet and I got in my house...maybe some day we come to my house and we watch some of my culture stuff.

Jamie: I would love to.

Jamila: We have two part. The family room downstairs...we bring in my culture’s sofa and my culture and my religion stuff. A lot of United States people we like culture stuff like, “What is this?” Because you... “What is this chair? I don’t see before.” And then in my upstairs my living room we put in American stuff. They say “Oh Jamila, you are smart!” Some people like come in my upstairs and some people see my stuff.

Jamie: So what kind of food do you usually make?

Jamila: I make most rice...pasta because in South Somalia. South Somalia we got Italian people a long time before in what is it called? –The slave time. In slave time we have Italian people in South Somalia...Mogadishu...that part. In North Somalia we have England people. In North people we speak English more and in South people speak Italian. That is why some people that come the United States...Spanish people we talk fast because it is a little bit...Italian and Spanish a little bit close. My sister she helps a lot too. When we coming to the U.S. she says, “I know you are smart...but keep going.” And now she says, “Oh, Jamila...you are doing hard...good girl.” She older than me...she go to college...oh, she smart. She has bachelor’s, masters, and almost done with PhD.

Jamie: What does she do?

Jamila: She work in the W.I.C. program for women who are pregnant.

Jamie: Does she live in Minneapolis?

Jamila: Yeah, she's head in Minneapolis.

Jamie: And this is the sister who lived in the United States before and sponsored you to come over here?

Jamila: Yeah.

Jamie: Where do you do your grocery shopping here?

Jamila: Most before, like three years or four years ago, there is not shopping here. We had to go to Minneapolis. Now I am so grateful because I grocery shop in Mankato. They have three Somalian Halal. Halal means like...I am Muslim...my religion is Muslim...some people have religion like Christian people...if you making meat it is ok. But some people don't have religion and that means no Halal. Halal means that if some people have religion than that meat is ok.

Jamie: So meat has to be prepared a different way?

Jamila: Yes...a different way. Now we go to grocery store in Mankato. I am happy because all the time every month two times we go to grocery in Minneapolis and Minnesota sometimes in wintertime it is hard to drive.

Jamie: Do you feel a commitment and loyalty to St. Peter?

Jamila: Yes, I want to stay here. Sometime I go to vacation or watch my families because five my sisters and one brother there. In Africa. So hard to go to the Africa because it is very expensive...tickets and travel.

Jamie: But you would never want to move back permanently?

Jamila: No...no I am American now.

Jamie: What were the biggest differences when you first arrived?

Jamila: I am so happy the first time we arrived in United States because we have all the government. We help a lot with kids...school and welfare stuff. Because if you come to new country I said, "What are you going to do?" A lot of people so scared...U.S. but me I am so lucky because my sister lives here long time. That is why she helps a lot too.

Jamie: Was it difficult to get used to the traffic when you first came?

Jamila: Very different because like Minnesota...we coming first time to Minnesota...I am so scared for the snow. I said, "Oh my God...it is zero degrees outside." Because my country is like 100 degrees...hot. But it is not like humidity. We don't have humidity...my country is fresh...sunshine all the time. Raining like June, July, August. Rain a lot...green all the time. I can never see before wintertime. I so surprised. I said,

“Oh my God, you live here whole life?” We born in here two kids...one my son, he come to U.S. three years...then one daughter, she six years old. One day, we had the African Family night for my school. My son spoke and his name is Zachariah. He said, “Mom, Zachariah is a long name.” I said “So what are you called then?” He said, “Zach.” I said “Ok, if you like it.” He said, “My name is Zach...I am from St. Peter.” I said, “You from Somalia or from St. Peter?” He said, “Oh sorry, I am originally from Somalia but now I am from St. Peter.” A lot of Somalian people laughed. Then one day I am so sad for school...my first daughter, she go to St. Peter High School...that day...I don’t like that story...that day is September 11<sup>th</sup>. A lot of my kids is so scared because a lot of people is so mad. They said, “Oh mom, please drive me.” I said, “Why?” They said, “Do you see the TV? Please turn off the TV.” I said I can’t turn off the TV because I cook, I clean the house, I am coming back to school and then I start to cook a couple hours after. Because in Somalia we start lunch after...American people 6:00 supper right? But at that time I eat little bit...but I like to eat at 2:00-3:00...after that snack stuff. Then that day my son so scared. Then two weeks after, my daughter...some girl, she pushed and she speak for the...discrimination stuff. She said, “I don’t like your color. I don’t like you hijab.” Because she used this one (Pointing to her own hijab)...she started discrimination stuff.

Jamie: How old was your daughter?

Jamila: She was 11<sup>th</sup> grade...10<sup>th</sup> grade. My daughter, she so mad because she quiet girl. She said...another girl said, “Kadra is nice, why talking like that?” The other girl, maybe her parents were talking about that because kids...talking like that is not good. If you talking on TV, like war stuff, I turn it off. I don’t like that. That time, parents came because my daughter is mad and she start a fight...she scratched a lot of stuff. The parents is mad...big situation. The principal and social worker at school came in and talking. In conversation with girl he said, “What did you say?” She say, “I don’t like your color...” Then her parents say...go to seven days no coming school because we don’t talking that in school...is not good...that discrimination stuff. If you say that again, your daughter...maybe she go to court or big problem. Then Kadra said, “It’s not your fault. One day she stay home and then come back to school.” Then other family yell...bad situation for St. Peter...but I don’t like that.

Jamie: And your daughter’s name is Kadra?

Jamila: Yes...Kadra. Kadra means part of my religion. Kadra means very very close night...that night. That night everybody pray a lot and be close to Allah...God.

Jamie: Thank you so much Jamila. I really appreciate you speaking with me about your experiences.

Jamila: Thank you.

Key terms and places discussed in this interview:

Section 8 papers- A housing program that makes rental property affordable for low-income families ([www.livingcities.org](http://www.livingcities.org)).

Habitat For Humanity- “Through the work of Habitat, thousands of low-income families have found new hope in the form of affordable housing. Churches, community groups and others have joined together to successfully tackle a significant social problem -- decent housing for all. Today, Habitat for Humanity has built more than 200,000 houses, sheltering more than 1,000,000 people in more than 3,000 communities worldwide” ([www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org)).

W.I.C. (Women, Infants, Children) Program-“To safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutrition risk by providing nutritious foods to supplement diets, information on healthy eating, and referrals to health care” ([www.fns.usda.gov](http://www.fns.usda.gov)).

Halal- “A set of Islamic dietary laws which regulate the preparation of food” ([www.religioustolerance.org](http://www.religioustolerance.org)).

Hijab- “A scarf that many Muslim women use to cover their hair” ([www.religioustolerance.org](http://www.religioustolerance.org)).

Mogadishu- “Capital, largest city, and chief port of Somalia; population (1995 est) 525,000. The city lies on the Indian Ocean coast of Somalia and is a centre for oil refining, food processing, and chemical production; there are uranium reserves nearby” ([www.tiscali.co.uk](http://www.tiscali.co.uk)).





## Sonia Hernandez Mexican Woman



Sonia Hernandez will be a freshman at Gustavus in the fall; she and her family came from Mexico to Minnesota for opportunities and a quality of life not currently obtainable in Mexico. Hernandez is excited about becoming more involved with the Hispanic communities through student programs at Gustavus.

*Interview with Sonia Hernandez*

*Mexican Woman*

Interviewed by Jamie Pederson

Folke-Bernadotte Memorial Library, Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter

August 2006

Jamie: Where did you grow up?

Sonia: At the border with Mexico and Texas...like four hours from the border at Victoria Tamaulipas.

Jamie: How long have you and your family lived here in St. Peter?

Sonia: Almost four years ago.

Jamie: Why did you make that move?

Sonia: Because my dad came to work and then back to Mexico for the work and the other reason is that they wanted us to have better education and all.

Jamie: So was your dad working in the States and then coming home for short visits while you were young?

Sonia: Yes.

Jamie: What kind of work does he do here?

Sonia: Like factories.

Jamie: And what work was he doing in Mexico?

Sonia: Nothing...like staying certain time with us and then coming back...sort of like vacation for him.

Jamie: How long did he do that?

Sonia: Almost since I was little; yeah, it was hard.

Jamie: What about your mom?

Sonia: She stayed with us in Mexico.

Jamie: And now?

Sonia: She works at a factory in Le Center.

Jamie: Has the transition been difficult here?

Sonia: Yeah...the language and the culture is different from Mexico. The school is hard.

Jamie: Did you know English at all?

Sonia: No, no.

Jamie: How did you learn?

Sonia: I don't know; it is hard to explain. When I start school I was like I don't know what to do. I also had friends...like chicanos and they help explain to me because they know English and Spanish.

Jamie: What is a chicano?

Sonia: A chicano is like a person who is from Mexico but is born in the United States.

Jamie: Oh, so they know both cultures?

Sonia: Yeah.

Jamie: Did you go to ESL classes or did you just go right to a regular high school?

Sonia: I had ESL classes.

Jamie: And you were a freshman in high school at that time?

Sonia: Yes.

Jamie: Tell me a bit about life in Mexico?

Sonia: I lived in the capital of the state...Tampulipas is the state and Victoria is just the city...the capital.

Jamie: When you moved to the U.S...was it your first time out of Mexico?

Sonia: Yes.

Jamie: What was school like there?

Sonia: Well school is pretty much the same except that classes are outside and not indoors.

Jamie: How did your family actually go about immigrating to the U.S.?

Sonia: I don't really know much about that but you have to apply for a Visa and my dad had one before.

Jamie: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Sonia: We're four. I have a brother who is 23...the next one 17, and a sister, she is 13.

Jamie: Do you all live here in St. Peter?

Sonia: Yes.

Jamie: Are you excited to start school at GAC in the fall?

Sonia: Yes, I don't want to work in a factory all my life. I had to choose between work and school and they gave me the opportunity and I accepted. So now I am trying to save and then I'll start school.

Jamie: I think that is really great Sonia. You will see the benefits in the future.

Sonia: Yes.

Jamie: What are the educational opportunities in Mexico? Do most people have a college education?

Sonia: No...it is hard because it is expensive and no scholarships.

Jamie: What about the job situation?

Sonia: There are not a lot of jobs there.

Jamie: What do you want to study?

Sonia: Nursing...I took part time classes last year at Gustavus.

Jamie: I hear you have become pretty involved on campus?

Sonia: Yes, I belong to the OLAS group. I also belong to the AMIGOS program to ESL kids get used to the culture and give them free time from the school. We take them on field trips to the city.

Jamie: Where?

Sonia: Mercado Central on Lake street.

Jamie: How did you hear of these programs?

Sonia: I was in AMIGOS when I was in high school and OLAS belongs to the Hispanic cultures I guess.

Jamie: So when you moved to Mexico, you moved to St. Peter right away?

Sonia: Yes, he lived in Texas before and then we moved here.

Jamie: Do you network primarily with the Hispanic community?

Sonia: Yes.

Jamie: What would you like to share about your experience immigrating as a young adult versus that of your parents?

Sonia: It is hard for them because it is so different from Mexico and they don't accept...I feel used to the culture...more than them. Sometimes they feel frustrated because they don't understand. They are afraid that we become too involved...

Jamie: Is the rest of your family back in Mexico?

Sonia: Yes, I have like 45 cousins there!

Jamie: Do they all live in the same area?

Sonia: No...but in the same state.

Jamie: Do you ever go back to visit?

Sonia: I was back like two years ago. I love Mexico! I want to go back to visit as I get older.

Jamie: Are you an American citizen now?

Sonia: No...and my family doesn't know English...my parents.

Jamie: Do you have long-term plans here?

Sonia: Well, our plan was just to come for a year and now it has been four years and we are still here.

Jamie: You mentioned that the culture is so different here? How?

Sonia: Mexicans are so tight...I am not saying that you aren't...but...

Jamie: Right, your culture is more of a collective culture versus and individualistic culture like that of most American families.

Sonia: Yeah.

Jamie: Even here in St. Peter there tends to be a certain area where most Hispanic people live near each other.

Sonia: Yeah, I live there. Everyone knows each other. I love that...I am used to it. In Mexico it was like that.

Jamie: Well, do you have anything else you want to add about the Mexican culture here in St. Peter?

Sonia: Sometimes kids can feel excluded in school. You see groups of Hispanic kids only hanging out together. I don't think they feel like they can talk to everyone. I would like to see that change.

Jamie: Maybe that is something for you to work on next year as you become even more involved in programs to help with assimilation.

Sonia: Yes, I hope so.

Jamie: Well thank you so much for your time Sonia.

Sonia: Thank you.

## **Letter from Nancy Penn**

Director of Community and Family Education  
St. Peter Public Schools  
St. Peter, MN

“The times they are a-changin’ ...”--I think that Bob Dylan’s lyrics aptly describe St. Peter’s ethos of local immigration.

New immigrants continue to come to Saint Peter for many of the same reasons that attracted my husband and me: a strong economy, a quality of life including strong education programs, strong governing councils and leaders, investments in civic and cultural affairs, and a sense of safety and opportunity for growth.

Not so long ago St Peter’s diversity was named by whether you resided on the north-end, or the south-end of town, or named by which faith you practiced: protestant or catholic. I remember wondering when Latino families moved to town, “Why did they leave with-in months? Did these families find a better place to live, or did they leave because they felt they weren’t welcome in St Peter?” I also remember the school district scurrying to respond with services for ESL students, only to have the numbers of students diminish before their efforts were fully implemented. “Were we too slow, or were the families bound to leave anyway?”

Our community is now home to many new languages and cultures. I am still in awe with the Somali families who arrived in St Peter on March 28, 1998. They came with a sparse bundle of belongings to begin a new life, in a new town. The anxiety of moving day was minimized by the events of the next day, Sunday, March 29, 1998. That was the day that an F-4 tornado ravaged our town, devastating every normalcy that might have supported the new families. Regardless of the tragedy, the families stayed; they became part of the fabric of our community by joining us in our recovery and by celebrating our re-growth.

Many of Saint Peter’s immigrants have been well served by local volunteers and advocates. It was perhaps fourteen years ago that community and adult educators sponsored an opportunity for people to learn more about the new Latino families who were moving to St Peter. While the learning, interaction and food were well received, it was sparsely attended.

But things would change... slowly, ...and things continue to change:

- The League of Women Voters played a pivotal role in bringing ‘diversity’ conversations out in the open. The League facilitated several small community groups to raise issues of immigration, diversity and to learn the stories of recent immigrants and refugees.
- A year later, Bob Douglas recruited an improv group which challenged us to recognize our own prejudices, cultural fears and misinformation.
- Maria Alvarez has personally taken on the role of advocate, mentor and interpreter for Spanish speaking families. She continues to offer her time and talents to both the Latino and the English-only speaking communities.
- Our residents can now buy authentic Spanish foods and supplies at a thriving Mexican store.

- With persistent prodding from Martha Roest, the St. Peter Reads group has been committed to raising issues of diversity by recommending fiction and not-fiction books, with guided community conversations and studies accompanying each book selection.
- Gustavus Adolphus College hosts both cultural and human rights awareness events; the community is just beginning to take advantage of the dialogue and learning offered on the campus.
- The Human Rights Commission has worked with the City to offer many informational brochures and standard forms in both Spanish and Somali.
- This past spring we also presented the first St. Peter Human Rights Award to the League of Women Voters, recognizing their efforts to publish a handbook to support new citizens and voters.
- Jamila Said, a Somali immigrant, has recently partnered with Habitat for Humanity to purchase her family's first home in America.

The Human Rights Commission believes that the community will continue to find new ways to welcome new languages, customs, and people into its daily life. The benefits of our growing diversity will enrich our schools, community organizations, businesses and personal lives. I believe that the next 25 years will be defined by how we celebrate the abundance of our diversity; for “The times they are a-changin’...”

Nancy Penn  
Member of the Human Rights Commission  
City of St Peter



# Intern helping record new immigrant history

By Kurt Hildebrandt  
Staff Writer

*This series, which has Part 3 running today, is a collaboration among newspapers in Le Center, Le Sueur, St. Peter, Waseca, Janesville, Northfield, Lonsdale, Owatonna and Faribault. Next week's story at one man's struggles in coming to America.*

ST. PETER — For many college

students, summer can mean an internship which is supposed to help them pave the way for a career path of some sort.

What Jamie Pederson, a senior-to-be at Gustavus Adolphus College, is doing during her internship at the Nicollet County Historical Society goes well beyond that. Her work is helping to record the history of the lat-



Photo by Kurt Hildebrandt

**Jamie Pederson, an intern at the Nicollet County Historical Society this summer, stands outside Treaty Site History Center.**

See **Planting Roots**, Page 8A

## Planting Roots

From Page 1A

-est group of immigrants that have come to this area in the past 10-15 years or so — the Sudanese, Somali and Hispanic.

While much has been written and collected over the years about the first settlers to come to this area, very little has been recorded about the latest groups to call Nicollet County home.

"I got started on June 5 and every day there's something new to do, but realistically there has been no work done at all on this subjects so I've had to adjust my position along the way," Pederson, a native of Watertown, S.D., said. "Going to Gustavus and, in particular, working with professor Elizabeth Baer, who I first took a first-term seminar class on the Holocaust from, has really been a wonderful experience personally."

"Gustavus is a really service oriented school and this internship really ties into that."

Pederson's internship is a

paid position through a grant the Nicollet County Historical Society obtained through the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs' (HECUA) summer partner internship program. The internship with the Historical Society attracted a lot of attention, according to NCHS Director Ben Leonard.

"We had 26 applicants for this position and there many very well qualified individuals," Leonard said. "We're extremely excited to have Jamie doing what we think is very important work for our county."

"These groups of people are a part of our history, but so far very little has been done to record it. We've already seen success out of it and this will essentially lay the ground work for us to continue on with the research after she's completed her work this summer."

Pederson's role is to document and preserve various life stories from these three groups

with the goal of further integrating and uniting the whole county.

Her main focus so far this summer has been working with the Sudanese and Somali populations in the county and is now starting to research the Hispanic population in Nicollet County.

"While there are not huge numbers of people of these nationalities here, yet, there has been substantial growth in those numbers since 1990," Leonard said.

As part of her duties, Pederson meets with various community organizations involved with diversity and humanitarian issues. She also has met or will be meeting with individuals from all three groups to do recorded interviews.

"These interviews will be transcribed and represented at the Treaty Site here in St. Peter," Pederson said. "Hopefully, the final results will include an interpreted exhibit at the

Treaty Site telling the stories and history of these immigrants."

Leonard stated it's the Historical Society's goal to have information and exhibits available representing all the residents of the county and including this newest wave of immigrants is very important.

"They are part of our history and we want to be proactive in recording our history and Jamie's work is helping us do that."

Pederson has used her past experience and connections she obtained as a English as a Second Language teacher at the Lincoln Community Center in Mankato to aid in her research.

"The experience as an ESL teacher spawned my interest in the immigrant and refugee communities living here," she said.

One part of her work is establishing the reasons why these groups moved to this county. Similar to the early settlers to

this part of the state, many came looking for a chance at a better life.

"The Sudanese and Somali populations are considered refugees because most of fled governments and situations in their own countries that were very dangerous, and they endured a lot of hardships just getting out of their own countries," Pederson said. "The Hispanic populations have come for economic reasons, mainly searching for better paying jobs."

"The thing I've learned most in working with all three groups is that they are such unbelievable people. They are very hard working and very generous of their time and of whatever they have."

"Many of them have unbelievable schedules going to school all day and then working all night trying to get ahead. The best part of my work is just getting to know the people and

hearing their amazing stories."

Pederson has one more year in her studies left at Gustavus and plans on graduating next spring with degrees in Communication Studies and English.

As for life after Gustavus, Pederson is unsure about her future plans other than what field she wants to be working in down the road.

"Whatever I do, I want it to be grounded in social justice and activism," she said. "At this point I'm not sure if I will go to work after my senior year or go straight to graduate school."

"This position has really been enjoyable and rewarding and it's something I'll definitely be able to use, whatever path I take."

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# Historical Society focuses on immigration

## Project includes book, exhibit

By Dylan Thomas  
Free Press Staff Writer

**ST. PETER** — A Nicollet County Historical Society project aims to take a snapshot of how immigration is changing county communities.

Society intern Jaime Pederson is interviewing members of the three largest groups of immigrants in the county: Sudanese, Somali and Hispanic immigrants.

Later this summer, Pederson will collect their stories into a book, to be made available at the Treaty Center History Site in St. Peter. The historical society is also planning an immigration exhibit when the project is completed.

Nicollet County Historical Society Director Ben Leonard said the immigrants' stories are an important part of county history, but one that has been overlooked.

"It's been a good project, so far," Leonard said. "We've met some interesting people."

Pederson was reluctant to talk about who she interviewed or the content of her discussions until her work is published. But she said the Sudanese and Somali immigrants she interviewed often spoke of fleeing war.

"A lot of information disclosed in the interviews can be pretty heavy," she said.

A Somali woman told Pederson of leaving Mogadishu, the country's largest city, as bombs went off around her.

The immigrants talk not only about why they left their countries, but why they came to Minnesota and Nicollet County.

Pederson, a Gustavus Adolphus College student, said she became interested in working with immigrants

Please see IMMIGRANTS, Page A4

# IMMIGRANTS: Determined to overcome challenges

Continued from Page A1

after teaching English as a second language classes in Mankato in January.

That job connected her with area groups that work with immigrants, like the Greater Mankato Diversity Council. That organization and others will also contribute to her project.

If one common theme has emerged in Pederson's interviews, she said it is the determination immigrants have to overcome challenges like finding work and adequate housing. When they do settle in, many balance one or more jobs with school and raising a family, she said.

"My impression of the people I've been interviewing is what amazing individuals they are," she said. "I think it's a completely different mentality they have about life."

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