

The Novato Historian

The Quarterly Publication of the Novato Historical Guild, the Novato History Museum, and the Hamilton Field History Museum



Preserving Novato's History Feature Section

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July – September 2020

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Volume 44 Number 3

Hamilton Transit Center 1980-1983

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Jim Gildea worked for IOM¹ (Intergovernmental Organization for Migration) from 1979 thru 1994. He was a member of the original operations team at Hamilton, then Director of Operations, and finally, after the closure of Hamilton, became West Coast Chief of Mission for IOM following the retirement of his predecessor.

After the death of his friend, John F. Kennedy, a mourning mutual friend told Daniel Patrick Moynihan that they would never laugh again. Moynihan said he thought they would laugh again, it was just that they would never be young again.

I think I had a similar feeling sitting on the steps watching the last charter bus drive out of Hamilton Transit Center's (HTC) parking lot in June 1983. What must have been the 10,000th bus run was leaving with the last of 175,000 people who had overnighted at Hamilton. I did laugh again and my work at Hamilton was not the high-water mark of my life – I was lucky enough to have friends and family and another career in my future. But, as I watched the bus with a mixture of weariness and sadness, it seemed to me that the last project for which I would have youthful enthusiasm was over.

HTC opened on February 8, 1980, about a week late. The scheduled opening was February 1, but something or some combination of things caused a delay. Was it plumbing or electrical wiring or late arriving mattresses? 40 years later, I couldn't tell you.

When did the back story begin? Perhaps when the first U.S. advisors went to Viet Nam to help the French in 1950, or with escalations of U.S. involvement in the 50's and 60's. The fall of Saigon, Cambodia and Laos in 1975 was certainly the point of no return.

According to reports, approximately 120,000 refugees did flee Vietnam in April 1975, many of them in the last few days before the Communist takeover. Most were evacuated by U.S. helicopters, planes and ships to the Philippines and Guam. Even much of the Vietnamese Navy, ships and all, ended up at Subic Bay.

What can be considered this first "wave" of refugees mostly ended up in the United States, at resettlement camps. On the West Coast the government set up a



Southeast Asian refugee children at Hamilton Transit Center

resettlement center at Camp Pendleton in San Diego County. Something over 50,000 people stayed in this camp during 1975, with the greatest number present at any one time of over 18,000. By the end of the year they had been resettled throughout the United States, and the resettlement center closed.

What did Hamilton represent when it opened more than four years later? It was unlike Camp Pendleton, where refugees stayed for months, because the system had changed by 1980 and the refugees already had sponsors and destinations when they arrived in the United States. But it was like Camp Pendleton in that it was set up in reaction to a humanitarian crisis and closed down when its function was no longer necessary. The system of providing transit assistance to refugees to the United States did not end with Hamilton, but the magnitude of the operations just didn't require a dedicated national transit center any longer.²

After the arrival of 120,000 refugees in 1975, things slowed for the next several years, and the number entering the United States did not exceed 20,000 per year again until about 1979. Then, perhaps related to the Chinese invasion of Vietnam and just the overall repression and poverty of the area, things increased dramatically. The Southeast Asian refugees who survived their perilous escape attempts almost all ended up in camps in nearby countries, such as Thailand, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur and the Philippines. Those countries appealed to other countries, particularly the United States, to offer permanent resettlement.

And so, the United States began the enormous expansion of the Southeast Asian refugee program. The Department of State con-

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Family waiting for trip to final home in the United States

tracted with IOM (known then as ICEM) to handle the logistics. According to an early 1979 *Los Angeles Times* story, charter flights were bringing refugees from various locations in Asia to Los Angeles International Airport, which was, therefore, “Ellis Island West.” Within a few months Ellis Island West had relocated to Northern California, where it remained until the program had again subsided to much lower numbers.

From at least early 1979 to 1983, IOM/State Department contracted with charter airline companies to bring multiple charter planes filled with Southeast Asian refugees into the U.S. every month. These were subject to competitive bidding, and the airlines might switch every three or six months. The charter program existed because there were not enough seats available on regularly scheduled commercial flights from Asia for the greatly increased number of refugees. However, all during the period of the charter program, other refugees continued to land via scheduled commercial flights at various airports – on the West Coast, at JFK, Chicago and others.

Once the flights switched to Northern California they landed at Travis Air Force Base (later the landings switched to Oakland International Airport). Until the opening of Hamilton, the Travelodge in South San Francisco sufficed as a rather impractical and expensive transit center.

When I started working for IOM it was at

the Travelodge.

In the latter part of 1979, the man for whom I worked – and would eventually replace upon his retirement – began looking for a transit facility which would be more practical than the motel. The options were surplus federal facilities, and as I recall, the last two under consideration were Camp Parks, in Dublin, Ca., and Hamilton AFB. Hamilton was chosen.

The portion of Hamilton to be used had been shut down in about 1974, so a lot of renovation and repair was required. The facilities were to include three barracks, which could house up to 1000 people, and several outbuildings. The work probably consumed two to three months and was completed a week late (see above).

During this time of preparation, the locally hired IOM staff was involved in the exhilarating process of planning something that had never really been done before – certainly not by any of us. We had the experience of housing, feeding and transporting refugees from the Travelodge, but the logistics were changing dramatically. The Travelodge was almost within walking distance of San Francisco International Airport (SFO), the departing airport, but Hamilton was more like 50 miles away. And we were going to create a functioning system, with maximum comfort for the refugees, whereas the Travelodge operation was still in its scrambling-to-meet-the-emergency stages.

February 8 turned out to be my day to meet the charter, so I went to Travis and did the job we had all done quite a few times before. My colleagues manned the grand opening at Hamilton. When I arrived back after the last charter bus had come in, I found an IOM crew that had apparently had a great and exhausting time. Some things had not worked. I remember hearing about plumbing problems, but the system that had worked on paper had largely worked in real life. And having the press there was kind of interesting, too.

So it began. We still needed to see if the meal provision would work out, then if the system for busing refugees to SFO on the next two days would work. And we had more to do at SFO than we did under the old system. But who needs sleep? While all this was going on, our “transportation” section was

preparing for the next arrival, usually three or four days in the future. Rooms had to be assigned and a record kept on a big white board. If we didn’t know what rooms people were in, how could we get them to the correct bus? And when someone was held over for health or other reasons, the board had to indicate that too.

Some of the refugees would never stay the night, because they were local and would be picked up shortly after the charter arrival. All the others had connecting flights, and they would stay at Hamilton one or two nights until it was time to take them to SFO for their onward flights. And there were refugees arriving at SFO on commercial flights who, if they could not make same day connections, would come back to Hamilton for the night. We were probably well over 90% charter arrivees at the transit center, but there were the other refugees in residence, some of whom were not Southeast Asian.

We had our own security system, a linen contractor, and an excellent group of caterers, some of whom were former Southeast Asian refugees themselves. We had a charter bus company that was headquartered at the transit center. And many loyal volunteers. Public Health nurses worked at Hamilton on a regular basis. One year, according to a statistic I recently read, they saw 4137 patients with 1,354 follow up visits. When necessary, refugees were taken to Marin General hospital.

IOM had a core group of operations employees whose jobs ranged from scheduling transportation, providing care to the refugees and maintaining the facilities, among other duties. The “cycle” would begin when a charter manifest would come in, a few days before the arrival, showing who was on board (charter sizes varied, but always included hundreds of people) and where they would be going. This would be translated into an outward manifest showing how they would leave Hamilton and when. This had to be coordinated with the bus company, and with the operation at San Francisco Airport, which would have to manage getting everyone to their flights.

At the same time, care for hundreds of people had to be finalized. Catering would be arranged, staff scheduled,

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Temporary sleeping quarters for Vietnam War refugees

and the volunteer coordinator would contact the generous and willing community members who would help with a variety of tasks. Volunteer Coordinator was one of the most important jobs at Hamilton, and we had a couple of very good ones. We needed the help at busy times, and it was good to get the community involved. Some volunteers did an astonishing amount over the years. Thousands of hours, I would imagine.

At various times the charters were scheduled to arrive during the day or in the evening. Sometimes they would even be delayed (which was a headache for everyone). The refugees would arrive a busload at a time, and each bus left Travis when it became full. The refugees might speak Vietnamese, Lao, Khmer, Hmong, Chinese or perhaps other languages. IOM was lucky to have a number of interpreters on the staff who would provide refugee orientation.

One can readily imagine the refugees found themselves disoriented (no pun

intended) as they got down from a charter bus in the Hamilton parking lot. They had fled their homes months, or even years before, and lived in camps. Then they had started the long journey, probably riding on a plane for the first time. Perhaps they had taken a day long bus ride just to get to the plane. When had they last slept? They had gone through a baffling process at the airport in Asia, then another one at Travis. Their bus ride to Hamilton would have been through a freeway system like one they had never seen before. Of course IOM and others had tried to explain things to them along the way, but it is fair to assume that they were overwhelmed. And what about jetlag! ³

And so, in the next hour or two, as the buses arrived at Hamilton, the refugees were taken into a reception room where the events of the next few days were explained to them. They heard about the facilities and the meals they would be getting. After this the staff and volunteers took individual families to the rooms where they would spend the night. These were former barracks rooms, with as many single beds as could be accommodated.

One thing I learned is that our Western expectations are not always in line with reality. If we had a family of 10 arriving, we would give them 2 adjacent rooms because even 5 to a room seemed kind of crowded. Likely as not, when we went up the next morning to get them ready for their bus, or breakfast, they would all be in one room. They were probably astonished that someone was suggesting they split up the family given all the uncertainty and newness.

There was also the clothing room, where donated clothing was given to people who needed it. This was part of our volunteer program, and also usually featured diapers for the babies who often wouldn't have any. A preliminary job, before the arrival, was sorting through the donations and putting them in some sort of usable order, again a job often done by dedicated volunteers. We called one of them "Jack the Jacket Man" because of his name and his specialty.

Which is not to say that it was completely an IOM operation. The religious based Voluntary Agencies (VOLAGs) had a heavy presence at Hamilton and worked hard looking after the individuals sponsored by their agencies. The opening of Hamilton had in fact resulted in a diminishing of their role, particularly at SFO, but both IOM and the VOLAGs had important jobs in the system and got along -- most of the time.

And, to a degree, that is what we did for almost 3 ½ years. But that sounds like just a job. For me, and I know for a lot of my colleagues, it was much more.

It was the kind of work where your shift might be 8 or 12 hours, but where you stayed longer just to be around "the action" and your friends. Even if you were mono-lingual like me, you could help with the welcoming and logistics, and there was something unforgettable about just walking around a compound, whether the refugees were milling about or sleeping up in the barracks. Something was always happening or was about to happen. I don't know if it was "magical," but it certainly wasn't just another day at the office.

My job became a bit more bureaucratic than most of those at Hamilton, so my hands-on experiences were more limited than my colleagues'. But there are so many memories. One woman gave birth while under our care, though she delivered at Marin General. It has been reported that she named her son "Hamilton." Another "jumped the fence" because she wanted to live in Northern California, not where she was supposed to go, but in the confusion she left her child behind. Needless to say the resolution of that one was rather involved. One family left behind a jacket with diamonds sewn into the lining, which we discovered after getting frantic phone calls. There



Roll call and orientation for new arrivals to Hamilton Transit Center

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was nothing illegal about how they had brought in their savings, and it was probably not a fortune, but whoever was in charge of the jacket must have had some explaining to do. They got their diamonds back.

When a charter was in residence there were always lots of kids, often lining the fence around the compound. Many would try to practice English on you. Perhaps a thousand kids yelled "where do you go?" over the years as I walked past. Pointing I would say "I go there," which seemed to satisfy their expectations.

There was no way to know, in February of 1980, how long Hamilton would last or how busy it would be, but it turned out to be pretty much a bell curve. By my reckoning, we hosted something like 175,000 people, and the crescendo was August and September of 1981. That was a busy stretch.

In the United States, as I understand it, the President recommends a total number of refugees to be admitted for the fiscal year, which Congress then normally approves. These days, even before the changes wrought by COVID, the U.S. has been admitting a few thousand a year. In fiscal 1980, the approved limit was reportedly over 230,000, and wasn't missed by much.

The refugee program, like any federal program, operates on the fiscal year, ending on September 30. In observing the refugee admissions ceiling, it was normal for the Government operations overseas to be somewhat conservative because if, through some mistake, more refugees arrived in the U.S. than the ceiling allowed for, heads would probably roll. On the other hand, you didn't want to end the year with thousands of unused numbers and the camps still jammed with refugees, because those numbers did not carry over. For some reason, near the end of fiscal 1980 (August) the decision makers seemed to decide that there was a lot of space under the ceiling and a lot of refugees. So the tentative schedule we got for August was torn up and the number of arrivals was increased significantly. And August would pale in comparison to September.

As noted, we had capacity for 1000 people, which we had probably never approached, but the schedule for late September would require more space than that. So the contractors were



Woman and child getting checked by a doctor at Hamilton Transit Center

brought back in, a la late 1979, and refurbished one of Hamilton's hangars. This had been abandoned even longer than the original facility and required some work, but it was really more a clean-up than a renovation. That done, cots and bedding were spread on the floor. Following the arrival of the last refugees, early in the morning of October 1, we had full barracks and a good crowd bedded down in the hangar. After about October 2, we never used the hangar again, except . . .

Traditionally, as the new fiscal year began, there were no charters and almost no refugee arrivals of any kind for a week or two, so the transit center was quiet. One day, in early October, my boss rented a roller skating service, and the truck was driven out to the now empty hangar. The staff roller skated and socialized the afternoon away, before getting back to work.

And although we didn't know it at the time, we were roller skating on the cusp of the bell curve. 1982 was pretty busy, but winding down. It looked as though the charter program would end in the first few months of 1983, and with it our time at Hamilton, but the charters kept coming through mid-year. The staffing levels and, realistically, the enthusiasm, had been winding down along with refugee arrivals, and by mid-1983, IOM was back to using the Travelodge as a transit center, albeit on a much more limited level.

As noted above, this represented a shifting of IOM's operations, rather than an end. The SFO operation remained

busy and vital for many years. At one point IOM San Francisco had responsibility for transit operations in Seattle, Los Angeles and even Denver, as well as having an administrative office in San Francisco. Now, as I understand it, there is still an IOM office in Los Angeles, so perhaps they are again the "Ellis Island of the West" on a small scale.

So for 3 ½ years there was something very special going on at the former Hamilton Air Force Base, adding to the proud history previously created by the military. For the young IOM staff, it was what we now think of as a startup, where everything was being invented and re-invented on the fly, not for profit, but for the benefit of some of the world's most disadvantaged people. Many volunteers gave tirelessly of their time. And for the refugees it was their first taste of America.

I hope that more of this story will be told. The experiences of my colleagues, the volunteers, and the refugees themselves, could fill several books, even though the refugees spent only a short time at Hamilton. Perhaps some of the 175,000 former refugees could tell us about their Hamilton experiences. Knowing my colleagues' professionalism and dedication, I am certain the reminiscences would be positive.

¹ The currently named IOM, the International Organization for Migration, was known as ICEM, the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, at the time it opened and managed the Hamilton. ICEM began in the 1950s in response to post WWII refugee crises in Europe.

² In this sense it is comparable to Ellis Island. The functions conducted at Ellis Island were just shifted to other locations when it closed in 1954.

³ This is a generalization and not meant to be patronizing. Certainly there were refugees who were sophisticated, some of them had been professionals in their home countries. This latter characteristic may have been what forced them to be refugees.