

## **Bamboo with Burned Names**

Through conducting oral histories, I learned about family members who lived in Vietnam during the war, and died as a result of the conflict. I wanted to honor their memory, by writing their names with a woodburning pen into pieces of bamboo.

One of these people is my grandmother's (Nguyễn Thị Thảo) father (Nguyễn Văn Thuyên), who died when she was 15 years old. He was a regular civilian, who made a living planting and growing rice. He was shot and killed by French forces, during French colonial times (1948), but it was a Vietnamese soldier, hired by the French, who killed him. The family had gotten word that French soldiers were headed in the direction of their village (Nghĩa Hương, Quốc Oai) since a nearby village had been burned to the ground a few days earlier, as the French were searching for insurgents. Everyone evacuated my grandmother's the village, hiding in the fields until the French forces passed by. My grandmother's father and cousin (Nguyễn Văn Vinh, 18 at the time) were the last ones to leave the village, to close the village gate. Just as they were leaving, before they could close the gate, they were both shot and killed. My grandmother says that they found their bodies just outside the village gate. And they were not the only ones in the village who were killed that day. There were several other people who lived in the village that were also shot and killed that same day (the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> month, 1948, Lunar Calendar).

These other two names are my dad's father, and my dad's little sister. My dad's father (Trần Văn Oanh) died when my dad was only 6 years old. There is a bit of mystery surrounding his death, but several family members insist that he was killed by communist forces. My dad's father was a journalist, who had written criticisms of the communist party. When he died, my dad's mother was pregnant at the time, and left by herself to care for 5 children and another one on the way. She had a psychological breakdown, and never recovered fully. The children were sent to live apart from each other in various locations, the neighbors, to aunts and uncles, anyone who would take them in, since she was unable to care for them. My dad's younger sister, Trần Thị Khánh, was sent to live with one of the neighbors. She was likely neglected by the neighbors, and ended up contracting an illness, probably cholera or another sickness that caused diarrhea, that is easily treatable. My dad said that he visited her one day, when she was 2 years old, and found her already unconscious on the floor. He rushed her, running, to the hospital, but she died in his arms and there was nothing they could do when he arrived. He was 7 years old when this happened. They were so poor they did not have money to do a proper burial or have a headstone, so he had to write her name on some cardboard, tied it to a stalk of bamboo and put it where she was buried.

My dad's little sister didn't die as a soldier, she was not shot by a soldier, she didn't die from bombs exploding, but her life was affected by the conditions that war brings about. In my mind, she is an innocent victim of the war. I don't know if people would "count" her in the estimated number of civilians killed in the war, but in my mind she and many others who died, not as a result of weapons, are still victims of the war, and I wanted to honor her memory.

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