[< Decades After Clashing With The Klan, A Thriving Vietnamese Community In Texas](https://www.npr.org/2018/11/25/669857481/decades-after-clashing-with-the-klan-a-thriving-vietnamese-community-in-texas)

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SACHA PFEIFFER, HOST:

The Trump administration wants to turn down the heat on America's melting pot by creating policies that would slow the rate of even legal immigration. The president believes many foreign-born people are not assimilating to American society and are expanding the underclass. But what exactly does it mean to assimilate? NPR's John Burnett looks back to the 1970s, when large numbers of Vietnamese refugees settled on the Texas Gulf Coast. And he tells us how they've fared since then.

JOHN BURNETT, BYLINE: On this day 39 years ago, the Ku Klux Klan came to the fishing village of Seadrift, Texas. KPRC-TV in Houston covered the story and interviewed Louis Beam, the Texas grand dragon of the KKK.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: In Texas, the Klan is mobilizing against these Vietnamese fishermen.

LOUIS BEAM: If they are to have this state, they will get it one way and one way only, just like the Mexicans got the Alamo - by storm.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: The Klan says it'll hold a rally soon at which it'll set fire to a shrimp boat meant to represent all those owned by Vietnamese.

BURNETT: After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the US government helped 130,000 South Vietnamese resettle in America as political refugees. They were U.S. allies during the Vietnam War. But most Americans didn't want them in their backyard. Many Vietnamese made their way to the Texas Gulf Coast, drawn by balmy weather and fishing - a trade they knew well - only to be met by hooded Klansmen who told them America for Americans.

THE NGUYEN: Really, they don't like us - seems like discrimination. And they want to try to push us out. But we not give up easy.

BURNETT: The Nguyen joined the exodus from Vietnam and arrived in Seadrift in 1978 as a skinny, bewildered 21-year-old. He launched a crab boat in San Antonio Bay, whose placid waters are patrolled by pelicans and plied by sea trout and black drum. There was bad blood between the Vietnamese fishermen and longtime residents from the beginning, complicated by the language barrier. People were resentful. The newcomers were getting help from the government. Also, they put out too many crab traps, according to Diane Wilson. She's a fourth-generation fisherwoman in Seadrift.

DIANE WILSON: When the Vietnamese came and first started doing it, they would put 10 where there had been one. So they didn't know, and nobody told them.

BURNETT: Then tensions escalated. A local white crabber was shot and killed in a dispute with Vietnamese fishermen over fishing territory. Two Vietnamese were charged with murder and acquitted on grounds of self-defense. That's when the Ku Klux Klan showed up, and things got ugly.

WILSON: After the shooting, it was like (mimicking explosion). I know several houses got burned. Several boats were set fire to. And I think a large number of Vietnamese left because they were afraid.

NGUYEN: See, really, before, I didn't know about KKK or nothing. But it end up when you get killed - the guy get killed, they show up. You know, they burn two, three boats over here - crab boats. We left after that.

BURNETT: The Nguyen and other Vietnamese crabbers fled to Louisiana for their safety. But many came back to Seadrift over time, including Nguyen, who started a family there and opened a bait shop on the town docks. He still traps blue crab. In his packing shed, workers dump a chest of ice onto a table. The cold quiets down the crustaceans.

The Vietnamese fisherman have blended in. Forty years later, Seadrift is more a mosaic than a melting pot. Vietnamese is still spoken around town. And they celebrate the Lunar New Year. Vietnamese kids attend Seadrift School, home of the Fighting Pirates, alongside Anglo and Hispanic students. And everyone who makes a living on the bay is united against common foes - heavy regulations, ocean pollution and cheap, imported shrimp.

NGUYEN: Really, I say everything right now - we work together. We fundraise - all that. Like, church and all that - we together - the work. After hurricanes, we helped, all that. Yeah, we're good friends together.

BURNETT: A hundred and fifty miles up the coast from tiny Seadrift, Houston is home to more than 80,000 Vietnamese - the largest population outside of California. Like the Astros, the NASA space center and flooding bayous, the Vietnamese are now part of what makes Houston Houston.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: This is Radio Saigon - KREH 900 AM - Pecan Grove, Houston.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BURNETT: In addition to Vietnamese radio, street signs are in the native language. And the South Vietnamese flag - red stripes on a yellow field - flutters outside of pho noodle houses.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: (Speaking Vietnamese).

BURNETT: Thao Ha is driving us down Bellaire Boulevard, the main street of a sprawling district they call Little Saigon.

THAO HA: OK. So now you start to see, like, Tan Hoy (ph) Sandwich Shop. It's got Vietnamese language and English. And then Don's Cafe is a very popular banh mi shop.

BURNETT: Thao Ha came to Houston with her parents in 1975. She's a sociologist at MiraCosta College in California. According to her, the flinty fishing towns were not the only places hostile to Vietnamese back then.

HA: There was some racism, some bullying from the neighborhood kids. They told us to go back to our country and called us gooks and things like that.

BURNETT: Houston's Vietnamese community, like the one in Seadrift, offers a lens through which to view the current climate toward immigrants. Some immigration hardliners consider these enclaves too foreign. And the Trump administration wants to admit newcomers based on skills and education, not family-based immigration, which is how most Vietnamese got here.

HA: When Vietnamese came in '75 and '80, there was a governmental support. There were government programs to bring us here. And that's the complete opposite now, where it's doing everything that they can to turn away immigrants, to turn away asylum-seekers, to push out those who are already here.

BURNETT: After the war ended, Vietnamese refugees carried with them a fiery anti-communism. Like the Cubans before them, many became staunch Republicans. That political fidelity continues today. Steven Le, a conservative family doctor, represents Little Saigon on the Houston City Council. He supports Trump's aggressive border security.

STEVEN LE: You know, obviously, I think all countries should have borders and making sure that there's not a lot of illegal immigration, you know, happening.

BURNETT: But he doesn't think the president should slow down legal immigration. In fact, Le believes there's a way to make sure immigrants become part of the larger community.

LE: I find the easiest way to assimilate and to be proud that you are an American is actually make them a citizen - plain and simple.