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## Guide to the Thomas Joel Wilson Files on Vietnamese Refugees

### Collection number: MS-SEA023

Special Collections and Archives  
The UCI Libraries  
University of California  
Irvine, California

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#### Descriptive Summary

**Title:** Thomas Joel Wilson files on Vietnamese refugees,

**Date (inclusive):** 1987-1989

**Collection number:** MS-SEA023

**Creator:** Wilson, Thomas Joel

**Extent:** 0.2 linear feet (1 box)

**Repository:** University of California, Irvine. Library. Special Collections and Archives.  
Irvine, California 92623-9557

**Abstract:** This collection contains Vietnamese refugees' stories written or collected by Thomas Joel Wilson, and letters from Wilson, as founder of Project Ngoc and chairman of Project Deliverance, related to the refugee camps in Southeast Asia.

**Language:** English

#### Access

Collection open for research.

#### Publication Rights

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#### Preferred Citation

### **Acquisition Information**

Gift from Thomas J. Wilson, circa 1989.

### **Biography**

Thomas Joel Wilson graduated in mathematics from the University of California, Irvine (UCI). In the spring of 1987, he initiated a new class, designed to let students earn college credit while becoming political activists on behalf of Vietnamese refugees. The class was inspired by the Santa Ana-based Project Deliverance and the San Diego-based Boat People SOS Committee, two groups seeking to help people who fled the Communist regime in Vietnam. The purpose of the class, Wilson said, was to mobilize support for people who escaped Vietnam only to be victimized by Thai pirates, warring factions in Kampuchea and Thailand, and a system that often kept refugees trapped in Southeast Asian camps for years. Wilson, a former elementary school teacher who was working at that time on a master's degree in mathematics, sought faculty support for the class because of his increasing awareness of Vietnamese refugees' problems. For years, close Vietnamese friends had told him harrowing stories about their escape from Vietnam. Known as "Project Ngoc" or "Project Pearl", the class was actually named after a young girl, a character in a short story Wilson wrote based on Vietnamese boat people's testimonies. That story, which Wilson photocopied and distributed on campus in spring 1987, was partly responsible for the success of the class.

Project Ngoc initially started as a course under Biological Sciences. Since University rules did not allow the students to write letters to representatives or raise money, they decided to help alleviate the tragedies by bringing the project beyond the limitations of the classroom and by forming an organization in the hope of realizing more concrete projects to assist the refugees. Students were sent to lobby at the capitol and volunteers went to refugee camps in first asylum countries. There Wilson met his future wife, Dinh Thi Kim Huyen, who had left Vietnam for Thailand in January 1988 and was detained in the Ban Thad refugee camp as an "economic migrant." She eventually helped Wilson to learn and translate Vietnamese when he was working in Site II and Ban Thad camps.

Wilson was also the chairman of Project Deliverance, an organization concerned with the plight of Vietnamese land refugees, from its inception in 1986. In March-April 1989 he founded a committee to produce a set of recommendations for the International Conference on Indochinese Refugees, which was to be held in Geneva (Switzerland) in June of that year. Thereafter Wilson became a Tustin High School physics teacher. Project Ngoc continued as a not-for-profit organization until it was disbanded at the end of the 1996-1997 academic year as a result of the resettlement or repatriation of most Vietnamese refugees.

### **Scope and Content of Collection**

This collection contains Vietnamese refugees' stories written or collected by Thomas Joel Wilson, and letters from Thomas Joel Wilson, as founder of Project Ngoc and chairman of Project Deliverance, related to the refugee camps in Southeast Asia.

### **Arrangement**

The collection arranged by form of material and then chronologically.

### **Indexing Terms**

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library's online public access catalog.

### **Subjects**

Wilson, Thomas Joel--Archives.  
Wilson, Thomas Joel--Correspondence.  
Project Ngoc--Archives.  
Project Deliverance--Archives.  
Refugees--Asia, Southeastern--Narratives.  
Refugees--Vietnam--Narratives.  
Refugees--California--Narratives.  
Refugees--Asia, Southeastern--Correspondence.  
Refugees--Vietnam--Correspondence.  
Vietnamese--California--Archives.  
Southeast Asians--California--Archives.

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Vietnamese Conflict, 1961-1975--Refugees--Archives.  
California--Emigration and immigration--Archives.  
Asia, Southeast--Emigration and immigration--Archives.

**Genres and Forms of Material**

Narratives--20th century.  
Letters--20th century.

**Index Terms Related to this Collection**

Project Ngoc.  
Project Deliverance.  
Online Archive of California.  
*Southeast Asian Archive.*

**Related Material**

The following collections in the Southeast Asian Archive contain related materials:

- Project Ngoc Records. MS-SEA016. Special Collections and Archives. SEA Archive newspaper clippings vertical file.
- Wilson's short story about Ngoc Lan is also available online through the website of the Vietnamese Boat People Connection (<http://www.boatpeople.com>).

Box: 1 : 1-2     **Refugees' stories**  
Box: 1 : 1         ***A Refugee's Story*, the narrative of Ly Ba Hung, with an introduction by Nhat Thien, circa 1980**  
Box: 1 : 2         ***Thuy and Ngoc Lan*, by Thomas Joel Wilson, correspondence, various typescripts, and related materials, circa 1987- circa 1988**

Box: 1 : 3-4     **Correspondence from Thomas Joel Wilson**  
Box: 1 : 3         **To the Vietnamese in refugee camps and detention camps at Donkrek, 1986**  
Box: 1 : 4         **To Dith Pran at the *New York Times*, 1986**  
Box: 1 : 4         **To the President Ronald Reagan, 1987**  
Box: 1 : 4         **To Nancy Reagan, 1987**  
Box: 1 : 4         **To Senator Edward M. Kennedy, chairman of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Affairs, 1989**  
Box: 1 : 4         **To the Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, 1989**  
Box: 1 : 4         **Unsent note, 1989**

Box: 1 : 4         **Letter from the Council for Refugee Rights at the Geneva Conference to Pope John Paul II, with attached note from Wilson,**