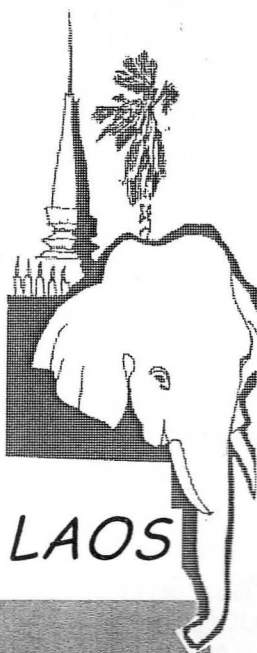


MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

MARCH 2005



LAOS

Our
2006
Reunion
will be
in
Florida
in July
or
August.

More
details
to
come.

SAMBAI DEE PEE MAI !

Welcome to a New Year for our association. By one count, this year marks our 29th year of existence. We begin from the day in 1976 — March 20, 1976 to be exact, — when the first officers of Mekong Circle USA were elected. There were about 50 Laos expats, who settled in California a year earlier after leaving en masse from Laos.

By another reckoning, we are 10 years old, counting from our first real reunion on May 20, 1995. Whether we are nearing middle age or still a juvenile, it is comforting to know that we have grown in numbers and in vision. The hugely successful 5th reunion in August 2004 in Chicago is just one testament to how far we have come from the days of potluck lunch gatherings.

At the Chicago reunion, your Board of Directors decided to continue publication of this newsletter. It's first goal is to promote our next reunion in 2006. Along the way, it will try to nurture the bonds that have kept us together.

A New Look: Have you visited our website (www.mekongcircle.org) lately? You should. Last summer, our webmaster, Associated Press reporter B.J. Reyes (based in Hawaii; son of Ohio-based OB nurse Melanie and OB agriculturist Bert Reyes) did a masterful overhaul of our site. Our website has not undergone a substantial revamp since its launching in 2001, except for a few tweaks here and there over the years. But this latest incarnation makes "navigating" its many links very "user-friendly". We invite you to look again at photos of our New York 2002 and Chicago 2004 reunions as well as photos of the OB That Luang Hospital; these latter are the last recorded images of a beloved repository of memories no longer physically there (razed to the ground in November 2002). Click also on the "Members" link, then to "View Guestbook" and read (more than 66 so far) what our colleagues with ECCOIL, OB, USAID, International Volunteer Service, Air America had to say about their Lao experience. Particularly touching are remarks of our Lao partners and their children. And as with all website guestbooks, there is always that plaintive, melancholic cry: "Can anybody tell me where _____ is?" Will someone go to the guestbook and help these lost souls to bond again?

A Fix-Up Look: That's what Vientiane underwent for most of 2004 as it prepared to host the 10th annual summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean). The media, as expected, has once again dredged up its over-used phrases to describe how an "impoverished", "secluded", "backwater", "failed Communist", "tiny", "sleepy" country faced up to the daunting task of caring for some 500 top level businessmen, 800 journalists, 1300 delegates, among them the heads of the states that comprise the Asean. In 1997, Laos gained membership in this 10-nation economic group (Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam). Never before has



Welcome to www.MekongCircle.org

The online home of Mekong Circle International

Latest News:

01-05-2005

Florida in 2006: An organizing committee headed by Dr. Pete Gonzales is in the early stages of formation to start planning for our sixth reunion in Orlando, Fla., next year. Two scenarios are being worked out: either a land-based venue or a cruise ship. Tentative date is July or August. It's not too early to start thinking of scheduling your 2006 vacation during these months. More details to come. All the latest details will be posted online.

01-04-2005

E-mail update: Happy New Year everyone! Mekongcircle.org is updating its master e-mail distribution list. Members should have received an e-mail asking them to confirm their e-mail address. If not, please send an e-mail to webmaster@mekongcircle.org

10-14-2004

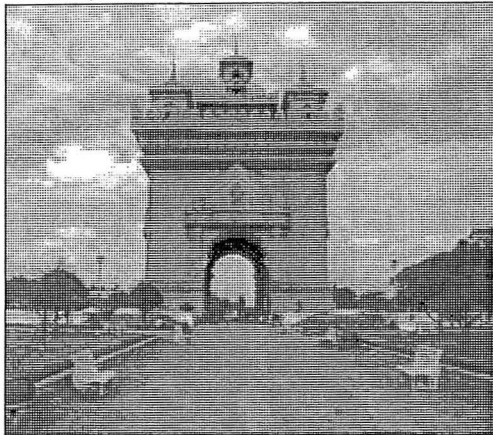
Organizational information: The Organization section has been updated to include Mekong Circle's Articles of Incorporation and organizational Bylaws.

[Click here for past updates](#)

Continuing a Tradition of Service

This Web site is dedicated to the men and women of Mekong Circle International, who unselfishly committed their lives to helping their brothers and sisters in Laos during a turbulent time in our shared histories. It is our sincere hope that you, the members of the Mekong Circle, will find this site useful for keeping in touch, catching up and sharing the facets of your lives with one another. Please take a few minutes to send this link to others, and before you leave don't forget to sign our guest book to share your

Laos gathered the region's leaders for a summit (including invited non-Asean "partners" India, Japan, Australia, China, New Zealand,



The grounds of the Patuxai War Memorial in Vientiane were landscaped into a park with a fountain.

South Korea, each of whom had sent its senior emissaries or presidents). But determined to show it has the will (although not the full financial capacity) to debut as a fully capable member-state summit host, Laos spared nothing in the final weeks to the Nov. 29-30, 2004 event. In addition to filling up road potholes, building fountains (you should see the newly landscaped Patuxay War memorial) repainting major buildings, the government told shop owners to replace ugly looking fronts; advised the phusaos to forego blue jeans and wear their traditional sinh; extended Wattay's airfield to land 747s; placed helicopters on standby to ferry dignitaries to its three major hospitals; built cottages to house the heads of state; completed a five-star hotel and two conference centers; cautioned nightclubs to favor Lao music; rehearsed and rehearsed and rehearsed airport arrival ceremonies and travel routes the dignitaries will take to their hotels. Oh yes, security. The city center was off-limits to most residents. Entering outsiders underwent body pat-downs on roads leading into the city. Indeed by mid-early November, no tourist visas were being issued to insure accommodations were sufficient for official visitors only. And to deter mischief-makers.

A Look To Next Year: Perhaps as a result of all this big to-do, our proposed one-week surgical mission to Vientiane had to be cancelled. We had planned to send a team of two Mekong Circle surgeons and three operating room nurses during the Asean summit week. A three-birds-with-one-stone concept, the mission would (1) follow-up on

a 2002 agreement between Mekong Circle and the Lao Ministry of Health to resume an OB health care program that ended in 1975; (2) serve as a goodwill gesture to honor Philippine President Gloria Macapagal's participation at the summit; (3) demonstrate and gain recognition for Mekong Circle's capability as a humanitarian, volunteer non-governmental organization. Thanks to Philippine charge d'affaires Raul Dado at the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane, we obtained Mahosot Hospital's verbal permission to perform the surgeries there. But an official written okay, still not transmitted by the second week of November, was lost in the frenetic runup to the summit preparations. We figured that since time had run out to put in place the mission logistics, even assuming we get the okay at that late date, it would be prudent to postpone the mission. Oh, there was a fourth bird we missed – that great That Luang festival unfolds in all its splendor during summit week. Bo pen yang, 2005 beckons. Keep those passports current.

A Look At Some Lao Histories: The latest book (not the newest) to come to our attention is "In The Valley of the Mekong" a memoir written by Fr. Matt Menger, of his years (1957 to 1967) as a missionary in Laos of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Fr. Menger officiated at the marriages of a number of Mekong Circle members in his Notre Dame Church in Vientiane. How his church was built is one anecdote in his book. To collect donations for its construction, he organized a Lao-style fund-raising boun. "Word spread quickly among the Lao Catholics of the city. Soon they were dunning merchants, Catholic and pagan alike, for prizes, display booths and games. The boun lasted three nights. A team of Thai boxers was flown up from Bangkok for an exhibition match... The Filipinos of OB and ECCOIL... happy, fun-loving people, organized monthly bingo parties which soon turned out to be the 'night of the month' for Vientiane. (They) added entertaining shows, skits and contests. Costumed toreador dancers entertained. A beauty contest chose Miss Philippines of Vientiane." And who was the chief foreman of the construction crew for the church? Filipino Nick Dolorfino. Oja, a Korean was the architect; Dat, a Vietnamese was chief carpenter; Som Chan was chief of the

many Lao coolies. Writes Menger "And the whole team was building a Roman Catholic Church, pastored by an American, in the Buddhist kingdom of Laos. Real ecumenism!"

In other parts of the book Fr. Menger recounts his visits to conduct three-day retreats for OB Filipinos enduring months of isolation at their remote outposts in northern Nam Bac and Ban Ban. Published in 1970, some of his vivid, hilarious encounters with Lao life are familiar stuff for us Lao expatriates yet they manage to arouse amusing insights when first described again. Fr. Menger book is available from amazon.com which says there are 14 paper back copies available at \$1.14 each. Matt (who has left his ministry) can be reached at 372 Oblate Drive, San Antonio, Texas 78216. We forgot to ask him whether one of the toreador dancers was also the winning Miss Philippines.

Another book (again, not newly published – it was issued in 1995 but only recently discovered by us) is "Codename Mule" by James Parker, Jr. There are numerous accounts of the CIA's so called "secret war" in Laos (secret because it was mostly unseen when compared with the openly evident and simultaneous war raging in neighboring

Vietnam). The Air America website alone lists 39 books on this "side show" conflict. Roger Warner's "Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos" (1995) and Kenneth Conboy's "Shadow War" (1995) are first class authoritative histories. What makes Parker's memoir fascinating is its focus on a specific piece of the Lao secret combat zone – the Plain of Jars. His book recounts a CIA participant's intensely personal, hands-on, on-the-ground account. For Mekong Circle members who served with Air America as visiting non-combatants to the Plain's CIA bases on Long Tieng and Sam Thong, Parker provides a highly perceptive picture (complemented with many black and white photos) of what daily life was like for him and a dozen operatives, each with a codename

CODENAME MULE

**FIGHTING
THE SECRET WAR
IN LAOS
FOR THE CIA**

James E. Parker Jr.

NAVAL INSTITUTE PRESS
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND

(Parker's was "mule") waging a see-saw battle with the North Vietnamese. There are the expected shootouts, deaths, blood and spilled guts. But what really endears (if that's the right word) is how each agent is not a James Bond at all, but very much human. Life at Long Tieng was world's apart from much of our Lao experience. Yet by sharing a time and a place together, mostly secluded, under one sky, Mekong Circle members and the mules endured some things in common. "Codename Mule" is also available from amazon.com.

For a visual perspective, in full moving color, of the Plain at war (from the early through the mid-1960s), get a VHS or DVD copy of "The Ravens" a one-hour documentary first shown on cable TV's Discovery Times in March 2004. A \$15 copy can be ordered from Lone Wolf Documentary Group, 10 Cottage Road, South Portland, Maine 09106. It is not based on Parker's book. It describes the exploits of American pilots flying one-engine small planes. Known as Ravens, after their radio call sign, they were essentially airborne forward air controllers directing air strikes. Flying low and slow, many were shot down and killed. Warner described it as "the best documentary on the Laos war yet made."

A Look Back: 40 years ago in 1965 was a historic year for Filipinos in Laos. On January 1, it inducted the first officers of the Filipino Association of Laos; on February 3, the Filipino community of about 900 survived a one-day army coup d'etat attempt in Vientiane; on August 28, Continental Air Services began operations there, staffed by many Filipino technicians; on September 17, Consul Rodolfo Sanchez arrived to open the first Philippine Embassy; on October 26, Ambassador Felipe Mabilangan presented his credentials to the King as the first Philippine resident Ambassador.

A Promising Look Ahead: for business, that is, for Laos-based entrepreneurs and like-minded importers in the USA. On Dec. 3, president George Bush granted Laos "normalized trade relations." Lacking this economic status (one of only three countries in the world, the others are Cuba and North Korea), a rattan chair imported from Laos is subject to 60% tariff at the U.S. border. The same chair from Thailand would

be assessed no tariff at all. Lao handmade cotton dresses are taxed 90% while such Thai exports enter at a mere 8% tariff. The legislation will open up more Lao goods into the U.S. market.

Now we can snap up that ornate handmade aluminum urn that is about as rare here as "padek" and Beer Lao.

VISITORS FROM THE PHILIPPINES:

■ **Eve Guevara**, former OB nurse (1959-64, Attopeu and Vientiane), arrived Nov. 2, 2004 in Los Angeles, California and given a welcome party (with son **Raul** and daughter **Leny**) by **Cecile** and **Manding Datu** at their residence, attended by, among others, **Jessie** and **Philip Cruz**; **Bella** and **Narding Hilario**; **Wattana Panutai**; **Racquel** and **Romy Pestana**; **Raquel Matila**, **Phounsouk Sisouphone**; **Carming** and **Gigi Aguilar**; **Josie Flores**; **Jojo** and **Joe Barcelona**; **Bounchuey Orense**; **Cita** and **Pol Custodio**; **Tacing** and **Tony Atienza**; **Ed Pasaporte**. Eve recently retired as administrator of the 39-bed Divine Mercy Hospital in San Pedro, Laguna, formerly the Midtown Hospital that her deceased (1975) husband OB doctor **Primo Guevara** and OB Dr. **Max Baltao** opened in 1971 to serve squatters resettled from Manila. But she continues to administer together with physician son **Ruel** four clinics in Laguna. Raul practices medicine in Wichita, Texas.

■ **Rene Mapua**, former OB accountant and wife **Lydia** arrived in Jersey City, New Jersey, first week of November 2004, together with the Rev. Msgr. **Juan R. Celzo**, parish priest of the St. Clare of Assisi Parish in Tigaon, Camarines Sur. They are on a fund-raising mission to renovate the 210-year old parish church. Rene heads the Renovation Committee. Goal is to raise 11,800,000 pesos within seven years. One million has been raised. Lydia, a pediatrician who had retired from her Bronx, New York clinic, leads medical missions to 23 barangays in Tigaon for indigent patients. To donate to the church project, send a check to Tigaon in the name of Saint Clare of Assisi (tel. 054 452 3004).

CONGRATULATIONS AND BEST WISHES TO:

■ **Rinaldo "Bac" Bacardo**, who was surprised with a party October 17, 2004 to mark his 80th birthday at an American Legion Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Principal organizer was his Lao wife **Joy** who invited lots of Lao friends, served loads of Lao food, presented the Philippine dances "tinikling" and "pandango sa ilaw." Dentist Bac joined OB in its first year 1957 in Laos and served there till 1975, its last year. Among the Mekong Circle guests: **Marie Aguilos**, **Cora** and **Tony Sazon**, **Edith** and **Red del Rosario**, **Wilma Valenzuela**, **Conse Sotio**, **Evelyn** and **Boni Alon**.

■ **Phikoun Ackathai**, former OB nurse, whose restaurant Thai 99 in Charlottesville, Virginia was judged Best Asian Restaurant of 2004 by C-Ville, Charlottesville News and Arts Weekly. It is located at 2210 Fontaine Avenue, tel. 434 245 5263.

■ **Greg Esteban**, on his 50th birthday anniversary May 29, 2004. He is the husband of **Jojo Pestanas**, daughter of **Romy** and **Raquel**, USAID Laos.

■ **Rod Reyes**, former USAID Laos shop superintendent and wife **Lydia**, former teacher at the Philippine School in Vientiane, who celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary May 15, 2004 in California. Five children, their spouses and 11 grandchildren attended the nuptial Mass by Minister **Diego Romulo** who also officiated at their 40th wedding anniversary.



MY VISIT TO A REFUGEE CAMP

by Rabieb Vilayhong-Roy

Editor's Note: The day came when we had to leave Laos. For most of us, it was on a plane jetting from Wattay airport. For our Lao colleagues, uncertain of their future after a communist Pathet Lao government took over the country in 1975, it was a flight of fear across the Mekong River, some in the dead of night, on a canoe, to the opposite Thai bank. The hazardous crossing was followed by several months, or years, in a refugee camp in Thailand.

It was estimated that 10 percent of the population or 350,000 Lao had fled the country. About 30,000 integrated themselves among their ethnic cousins in northern Thailand. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 69,050 Lao lowlanders (not counting Hmong) were penned into Thai refugee camps in 1978. By 1988, more than 170,000 Lao lowlanders were resettled worldwide; 113,186 found new homes in the USA, the others settled in France, Australia, Canada and other countries.

Rabieb Vilayhong-Roy, a 1965 graduate of the OB School of Nursing, fled on a boat across the Mekong from Vientiane in December 1975, clutching her four-year old daughter and a five-and-half year old son. A short time earlier, her husband, a police colonel, was among those rounded up by the Pathet Lao. After a stay in Bangkok as a refugee, her family was sponsored by Catholic Charities for resettlement in the USA, arriving in Chicago, Illinois in August 1976.

In 1985, she was sent by the Illinois Department of Public Health's Refugee Program, for whom she works, to visit a refugee camp in Thailand. Here is a condensed excerpt from her report:

The 141-acre Panat Nikhom camp is located 120 kms. southeast of Bangkok in the province of Chonburi. Established in 1980, the camp population fluctuates between 13,500 and 18,500. Seventy percent are Kampucheans, 24 percent Lao (lowland and Hmong) and six percent Vietnamese. Housing is constructed of bamboo or asbestos board with tin roofs. A number of buildings serve as offices, clinics, warehouses. UNHCR coordinates provision of food, charcoal, household articles, camp infrastructure. It assists foreign governments in the selection of refugees for resettlement.

A nurse, Carole Moran, with the American Refugee Committee (ARC), said I was the first former Lao refugee to visit.

Some 17 voluntary aid agencies provide language training and cultural orientation to prepare the refugees for their new life. There are vocational courses in typing, welding, electricity, auto mechanics, sewing and knitting. Some 1,950 refugees are employed as interpreters, office clerks, teachers, carpenters, electrician, medical assistants. They receive about 10 baht or 45 U.S. cents a day.

The camp population is predominantly women and children. Many of the children are undernourished. A number came up to me and complained of insufficient food and water, of their hope to come to the U.S. soon.



Rabieb in a photo of the 1965 graduation class of the OB School of Nursing, Vientiane,



The camp is an extremely busy place. In a single month, 7,000 to 8,000 refugees, many from other camps, are processed here as a transit center for pre-departure resettlement. Births occur at 60 to 90 infants a month. The ARC believes that a majority of refugees are mentally and physically ill and should not be allowed to go to other countries until they are well.

While at Panat Nikhom, I observed a large group of people confined inside a tall fence.

They were not allowed to roam about the camp as others were. They had escaped from Laos to Thailand in 1978, resettled to China in 1980, but found life there was not what they had been told. They had no jobs, no medical care and not enough food. They were so unhappy that all 303 of them began walking from China back to Thailand. Refused entry, they walked to Burma, but were also turned back to Thailand. Eventually they found themselves at Panat Nikhom. Their faces – men, women and children – were very unhappy. Almost all who came up to me mentioned suicide. They are having trouble coping with anxiety, depression, stress and emotional problems.

The situation of the refugees haunts me constantly. It bothers me so much that I almost wish I had not gone back to see their living conditions. I know that few will be accepted by other countries and they will probably never be able to go back home again.

I made the trip to Thailand in order to fulfill both personal and professional objectives, and to visit my family that I had not seen for 10 years. I was able to visit my family and to speak a familiar language once again. I feared that if I did not get to Thailand soon that I would not see my mother again. I also had mixed feelings while in Thailand. On April 10, 1985, I went up to Nongkhai, the border town across from Laos. I was so close to my homeland. But it hurt me deeply to see it and not able to go there. I saw my tears dropping.

Finally I turned my back on my former home and told myself that there is nothing I could do about this. I renewed my vow to make as good a life as I can in my adopted country, the USA.

Rabieb made good her vow. Arriving penniless in Chicago in 1976 with two young children to take care of, she was hired as an aide in a nursing home at \$2.45 an hour. Four years later, she began work as a public health specialist for refugees with the state government in Springfield, Illinois. She retired after 22 years. In 1992 she married Ron, an American computer manager. Her daughter is completing a college course in child development; her son is studying business management at a university. Rae and her husband live at 2035 S. Wiggins Ave., Springfield, Illinois 62704 (email:

ronroy3@insightbb.com

THE NEW KOHN FILIPIN

BY RAUL DADO



Consul Dado (second from left), with members of the Balik-Laos visitors in November 2002. Plaque honoring Filipinos who served in Laos from 1957 to 1975 at right was unveiled during the visit on the front lawn of the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane.

The only Catholic church in Vientiane is dedicated to the Sacred Heart. Its French-style colonial pink windows and brick walls are weathered by time. The year it was built -- 1928 -- is proclaimed above the entrance door.

On Sundays, the Filipino community gathers here. Several infants, mine among them, were baptized inside its gray walls, paint peeling from its surface. The church yard on these Sundays after Mass buzzes with latest news among the Filipino community. It's also the occasion to hear any official announcement from the Philippine Embassy.

Sacred Heart Church is managed by three Filipino nuns, Sisters Cora, Jess and Angela, of the Daughters of Charity, based in Thailand, who report to their direct superior, Bishop Khamse of Laos. They live in quarters next to the church where they also hold classes in English and teach the faith to the Lao.

A regular Sunday visitor is Gina Alicando, a manager at the Novotel Hotel, one of Vientiane's more modern business-class hotels, and a member of a worldwide chain of hotels owned by the French company Accor. Having arrived 10 years ago in Vientiane to join Novotel as an accountant, Gina has lived through the city's early makeover into the capitalist age when the Lao communist-ruled government junked its failed socialist policies in the mid-1980s and opened up to the world. She still remembers crossing the Mekong river from Thailand for the first time into a rudimentary immigration process that almost brought her to tears. A sister, Shirley, manages another hotel in Vientiane, Le Parasol Blanc, distinguished by its enchanting hanging garden ceiling.

Nestor Daguman was a seaman who found himself in landlocked Laos. Married to Noi Insisienmay, they operate the only Filipino restaurant in Laos called, what else, "Mabuhay" and located, where else, in front of the Philippine Embassy on Phontan Road. Nestor is everyone's "kumpare" and his restaurant offers good Filipino food for the hungry and the home-sick.

Linda Aspera is a Filipina-Lao, her father a former Filipino USAID contractor. She works as the Embassy's interpreter and trade officer. Pete de Leon is considered the dean of

the Filipino expatriate community. As a consultant to the Electricite du Laos, he advises the government on power management. Bless and Jun Miego are hotel managers. Aaron Inventor teaches English at the Dongdok State University. Blesilda Calub heads the International Rice and Research Institute -- Laos. Kier Obiar is a communications expert who follows the mud trails of remote regions, to lay down communications infrastructures for a German company, a vital job in this mountainous, sparsely populated country. Ken and Jomil Cruz have left for Cambodia, but have bequeathed a legacy of humanitarian work in and around Vientiane.

Lao garment factories are run by Filipinos such as Tess Banaag and Luzviminda Ballesterro. The best English teachers are Filipinos, exemplified by Ryan de los Reyes. Teachers Noemi Marciano, Mary Ann Acojido, Ruth Obtinario and Alvir Bantigue teach not only our children but also the children of the diplomatic corps based in Vientiane -- among them Americans, Indonesians, British as well as the Lao.

Like everywhere else, our Filipinas have charmed the expats. Marlene Bardsen is married to the Norwegian deputy chief of the Asian Development Bank office in Vientiane. Jovy Geoppert married the former German director of IRRI-Laos (the couple has since moved to Maryland in the USA).

Many of the almost 200 Filipinos in Laos are experts working for the Lao government or private companies. They lend to their jobs the special mix of talent and hard work that characterizes the overseas Filipino worker everywhere. Their contribution to enhancing the Filipino reputation was praised by President Gloria Macapagal during her visit to Vientiane on November 29, 2004 at the 10th annual summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Other Filipino dignitaries who came visiting were Rodolfo Severino, former Secretary General of Asean and who was at one time OB information officer in the late 1950s. On February 17, 2004, foreign affairs secretary Delia Domingo Albert visited. Her sister the former Carmen Domingo (now living in Berkeley, California) was a medical records librarian at the OB Vientiane Hospital. The past has a way of meeting the present.

The current crop of Pinoys in Laos have heard of Operation Brotherhood, of Filipinos with Air America, Eccoil and the USAID, who came here decades before them. They had the opportunity to meet these earlier pioneers when they welcomed in November 2002 a Balik-Laos delegation of these former workers for a one-week "sentimental journey". Returning for the first time to Laos from the USA and Canada, after leaving in 1975, the former expats were feted with a hearty, joyous salo-salo at the Embassy, organized by Ambassador Mario Galman (six months before he died). For one magical evening, the new and the old khon filipin savored shared experiences of Laos.

(Raul was assigned as Consul to Laos in February 2000. He lives with his wife Chelsea and two young daughters in Vientiane. The Philippine Embassy address is Ban Phonsinuane, Sisatanak District, Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic (email: pelaopdr@dfa.gov.ph).

THINGS YOU MAY HAVE MISSED AT OUR CHICAGO 5TH REUNION (AUGUST 6, 7 & 8, 2004)

BY J. PETE FUENTECILLA

ONE BRAINCHILD, ONE-HEADED ELEPHANT, TWO-COUNTRY ART

That chalk-colored souvenir you received during the Saturday Aug. 7, 2004 dinner-dance is the brainchild of **Puring de Jesus**. It is also the product of artisans from Laos and the Philippines. The original was a Lao wood carving from **Cecile Datu**. It was shipped to **Fred Mendoza** in the Philippines where University of the Philippines Fine Arts students produced five molds from it. Castings were made from stained plaster of Paris. Then each was affixed with a brass stamping of the Chicago reunion logo designed by **Tony Liwag**. The finishing touch: an abaca Bicol twine at the back to hang it. Don't do it. Your grandchild will snatch it from the wall and chew it because it looks like a large slab of tofu. So we advise that you encase it in a glass covered frame. It's too precious to be eaten.

LET'S WELCOME OUR VISITING "LAO MISSIONARIES"

As more than 50 Mekong Circle members disembarked from the chartered bus in front of The Church of St. Patrick in Wadworth Road, Wadworth, Illinois, the Rev. **Patrick G. Cecil**, the pastor, was expecting them. He was told they would come for the 12 noon Mass on that Sunday morning of August 8. Somehow he was also told they were Lao missionaries. And because priests cannot lie, that's what he announced to the American congregation as the Filipinos filled up the Church pews. You can forgive Fr. Cecil for the misinformation. Some members of his parish had just

returned that month from Piura, Peru on a missionary journey where they helped build 10 shelters and delivered food baskets to 300 families.

OFFICER, IT'S NOT US, IT'S THE KARAOKE, HONEST

Actually, it's the sounds from the machine that boomed all the way down the long corridor to the elevator. When Hyatt Regency Hotel security personnel knocked on the 30th floor Hospitality Suite on the morning (3 am!) of August 8, with orders for the merrymakers not only to pipe down but to vacate the premises, there were those who blamed OB nurse **Rusty Ramos**. He just won't let go of the mike. Others who kept hogging it were **Raul de Jesus** and **Lydia Palma**. Earlier, Rusty discovered his musical talent when he launched into "loy loy krathong" at the dinner dance together with OB lab tech **Manit Sanguansack**. "You gotta believe me!" he exclaimed excitedly. "The words of the loy loy krathong song that **Nouphit (Soukshamneut** — OB surgical tech at the Vientiane hospital) taught me, suddenly came to my brain. It was stimulated!"

ARRIVING LATE BUT IN GRAND STYLE FOR THE PICNIC

While the "Lao missionaries" arrived in a bus at the **Edith and Pete Paluay** residence in Zion for the Sunday, August 8 picnic, another group emerged from a white stretch limo. The passengers — Lao OB nurses **Phetje Sayasan**, **Sounthaly Lapitan**, **Chanthy Luangrath**, **Phikoun Ackathai**, **Rabieb Roy**; **Raul de Jesus**, **Pete** and **Pet Fuentecilla**. They were three hours late coming from Hyatt. A



Picnic Day, August 8, at the residence of Edith & Pete Paluay in Zion, Illinois. (photo by Joe Barcelona)

van chartered earlier never came. Raul decided the long wait in the hotel lobby can only be compensated with a limo. During the trip, the whisky flask was left untouched (honest!). Pete slipped a Lao CD documentary into the limo's DVD player. No one bothered to watch. Phikoun's stories as a newly arrived nurse in the USA were more interesting. Sample: a patient on her bed was frantically telling her: "I wanna puke!" Phikoun: "What? What?" Patient: "I wanna puke!" Phikoun: "What? What?" It was a new word for her. She was familiar with "vomit." You can imagine what happened next.

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN SO MANY LADIES WEARING THE SINH?

Perhaps the last time was in one of those pre-1975 glittering fund-raising "soiree de galas" we attended at the Lane Xang Hotel along the Mekong River. At our 2004 Chicago dinner dance, the Lao nurses (continued on page 11)





CATCHING UP AFTER SO MANY YEARS AT A SCHOOL REUNION

On the morning of August 6, 2004, about a dozen persons gathered for a meeting at a hotel suite in the Hyatt Regency in Chicago.

It was the first day of the three-day 5th reunion of Mekong Circle. It was also the opening day of the first reunion of the OB School of Nursing.

In the room were school alumni, their husbands, wives and children and former school instructors. The former students had occasion to meet each other earlier in the day or the day before. Now they were meeting to decide how to make more use of this historic get-together, to discuss a project they and Mekong Circle would carry out during the next two years before the next reunion in 2006.

In the middle of the discussions, the suite door opens. Malivanh Sananikone, class of 1965, enters. There are squeals of delight and a rush of outstretched arms, and lots of

hugging. Can you blame this outburst of unrestrained emotions after 35 years of separation?

Malivanh had come straight from her night shift at a nursing home in Chicago. For an indescribable moment she was again among schoolmates such as **Sivilay Sivongsay** (of West Covina, California), and **Rabieb Vilayhong Roy** (of Springfield, Illinois) and **Noun Vongphrachanh** (of Ontario, Canada).

There were other schoolmates who came to Chicago for this once in a long lifetime experience. There's **Chanpraseuth "Joy" Sayasouk**, (now living in Rockford, Illinois) her left arm in a sling from a dislocated shoulder who, despite the discomfort, persuaded her husband to drive her to the buffet dinner August 6 (but was in too much pain to attend the dinner-dance the next day). **Khambai "Tom" Rajavongsak**, 1965 class valedictorian, drove all the way from West Reading, Pennsylvania, arrived the night of the dinner dance, and did not find his name in the guest list. A small inconvenience for a man who joined the Lao Army Special Forces, taught hundreds of Lao army medics the skills he learned from OB, was imprisoned for six months in an Attopeu "re-education camp" by the Communist government, escaped across the Mekong River to Thailand by holding on to two banana tree trunks.

Someday, many more of these stories of perseverance, courage and loyalty will be told in full. In total, 20 former graduates came together for their first reunion. Together with auxiliary workers (**Manit Sanguansack, Satien Chantaraj,**

Viengsay Pathammaboun), their spouses and children, there were 32 of our Lao colleagues who came to Chicago.

Said Chuang (class of 1963) to Cecile Datu, his former teacher "I am very happy to see you again. It brings back fond memories of you and our experiences in Laos. I am so excited to be here and to see all of my schoolmates. I look forward to our next reunion."

Attendees at the first reunion of the OB School of Nursing (held concurrently with Mekong Circle's 5th reunion) and their current places of residence:

Class of 1963: Noun Vongphrachanh (Canada); Chuang Chonthipe (Georgia); Phetje Sayasan (Tennessee); Sounthaly Lapitan (Washington); Chanthay Luangrath (Tennessee).

Class of 1964: Khamsy Siharath (California); Phikoun Ackathai (Virginia)

Class of 1965: Syphone Phengnorasinh (Virginia); Joy Xayasouk (Illinois) Malivanh Thepsouvanh (Illinois); Rabieb Roy (Illinois); Khamba Rajavongsak (Pennsylvania)

Class of 1967: Sumatra Malaythong (California); Vanessa Thongma (California); Chanthalom Phouangmalay (Illinois); Khemphone Vongphakdy (Oklahoma)

Class of 1968: No attendees

Class of 1969: Sivilay Sivongsay (California) Phounsouk Sisouphone (California); At Photavath (Wisconsin); Chanthamalay Pathammaboun (Illinois).

There were 145 graduates altogether who completed the two-year course. Some returned to the provinces where they came from to staff the OB hospitals there. Where they are now (those for whom we have full addresses): 36 are in the USA; 2 in Canada; 2 in Australia; 3 in France; 1 in England; 2 in Laos. The rest have no addresses.



*Honoring the attendees (left) to the first reunion of the OB School of Nursing, August 7, at a dinner dance at the Hyatt .
(photo by Cecile Datu)*



Meet some former and newly elected members of the Mekong Circle Board: Standing, from left: Manding Datu, Vitoy Naranjo, Pete Fuentecilla, Rene Dimaunahan, Tony Sazon, Tony Victa, Dickie Labao, Vic Lagleva, Jun Ilustrisimo, Fred Mendoza, Narsing Erilla. Seated, from left, Raul de Jesus, Anita Marquez, guest Gina Alicando, Bik Marquez, Pol Custodio. For a complete listing of the new Board members, see below.

NEW OFFICERS & BOARD FOR 2004-2006

On August 7, the second day of our 3-day Chicago reunion, the newly elected officers and Board Directors for the 2004-2006 term formally met to review past activities and to discuss new projects.

ELECTED OFFICERS

President: Bik Marquez

Vice Presidents

Jun Belicena (Philippines); Danilo San Juan (Philippines); Jun Ilustrisimo (Southern California); Dickie Labao (Texas); Connie Frias (Canada); Narsing Erilla (Australia); Linda Masibay (Midwest USA); Cesar Mendoza (East Coast USA); Ernie Felix (Northern California); Rabieb Vilayhong Roy (Lao Community)

Secretary: Anita Marquez

Public Relations: Joe Barcelona

Information Technology: B.J. Reyes

Treasurer: Tony Victa

Membership Coordinator: Puring de Jesus.

Second Generation Representative: Anthony de Jesus

BOARD OF DIRECTORS: B.J. Reyes; Sivilay Sivongxay; Pete Fuentecilla; Red del Rosario; Tony Sazon; Pete Palu-ay; Pete Gonzales; Angie Angelo; Raul de Jesus; Bik Marquez; Jojo Pablo; Pol Custodio; Ding Yoro; Ciony Ljungar; Vic Lagleva; Fred Mendoza; Vitoy Naranjo.

CURRENT PROJECTS

At the August 7 meeting, the officers and directors resolved to continue the following projects:

■ Distribution and sales of "Filipinos in Laos" history book co-authored by Fr. Miguel Bernad and Pete Fuentecilla. Published in July 2004 and introduced during the Chicago reunion, the book can be ordered directly from the printer (see next page).

■ "Untold Stories" – a collection of personal anecdotes and recollections being compiled by Penny Flores from Mekong Circle members (see next page)

■ Mekong Circle Cookbook – recipes put together by Linda Masibay, Gladys Tabano, Ofie de los Reyes, Jocee Nantes, and Edith Palu-ay and put together

er by Puring de Jesus. It is ready for printing.

■ Medical Mission to Laos – the full proposal, prepared in 2002 in response to a request from the Lao Minister of Health, is seeking a financial sponsor from a government or an international aid agency.

■ Iskolar Ng Mekong – The first three college students in the Philippines have been chosen and a first check to complete their studies has been sent (see next page).

MEMBERSHIP CENSUS

We now have on our rolls names and addresses of 487 members. (We estimate there were close to 900 Filipinos who served in Laos from 1957 to 1975). Here's the breakdown as sorted by our membership coordinator Puring de Jesus:

For USA members, the number who reside in the listed states are indicated :

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Australia | 9 |
| Canada | 22 |
| Philippines | 85 |
| East Coast USA | 52 (Washington DC 1; Massachusetts 2; Maryland 1; New Jersey 18; New York 16; Pennsylvania 6; Virginia 8) |
| Midwest USA | 47 (Kansas 2; Iowa 1; Illinois 21; Indiana 1; Michigan 7; Minnesota 1; Missouri 2; Nebraska 1; Ohio 7; Wisconsin 4) |
| South USA | 13 (Florida 9; Georgia 1; Louisiana 1; South Carolina 1; Tennessee 1) |
| Southwest USA | 23 (New Mexico 1; Oklahoma 1; Texas 21) |
| West USA | 129 (California 117; Nevada 4; Oregon 2; Washington 5; Hawaii 2) |
| Lao Community | 72 Our Lao colleagues, mostly former OB workers, from all regions including Canada, England and France |
| Second Generation | 35 Our sons and daughters |

Copies of our membership directory are available from Puring de Jesus (Tel. 920 232 8210 or 513 868 9396) at \$6 per copy.

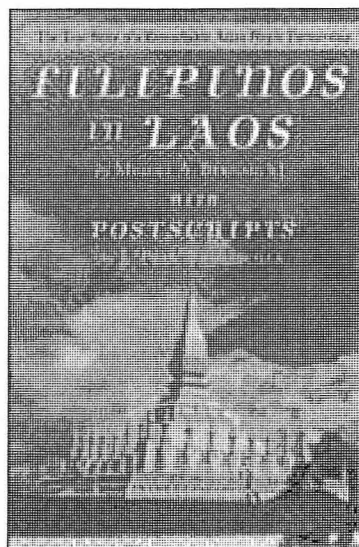
WITH THIS RING AND THIS BACI STRING, I THEE WED

Was it those breath-taking vistas of misty cliffs towering above shimmering Vang Vieng ricefields? Or that glorious riot of colors sparkling above the Mekong as the sun sets over its waters? Or perhaps that dazzling golden shine of the That Luang stupa? What is it about the country that catches the hearts of so many Mekong members they decide to marry right there in Laos. (Some fell in love with each other there, then celebrated the nuptials in the Philippines) Love, you say? How so old-fashioned, so corny! But anyway it happened. And according to a "Laos Marriage Chart" compiled by Penny Flores, there were 83 couples (that's 163 individuals) who did just that.

Charted in alphabetical order (from Gilbert Abad - Angelita Marinas to George Villanueva - Leslie Sevilla), it shows couplings between members of OB, USAID, Air America, ECCOIL, Continental Air Services, Canadian International Commission.

We wonder whether someone can chart unrequited loves or loves lost in Laos? Penny's marriage compilation will be part of her anthology "Untold Stories" soon to be published, and forms part of our publication projects.

NEW PRINTING PROCESS MAKES OUR BOOK ALWAYS IN STOCK



How? Traditional book publishers do press runs of any one title in the thousands of copies. Books By Bookends, the publisher of our book "Filipinos in Laos" employs a technology called "Print-in-Demand." If you want only one or two copies, his computerized system brings up the digitized text, pushes a button, and out comes a printed, bound copy, while you wait. That's why you have to call Dave Logan at 201 670 1440 or 201 445 0726 to tell him how many copies you want at \$20 each. Have you ordered your copy? Check out their website: www.booksbybookends.com



The TPMB Center in Murphy, Quezon City provides housing and skills training to its residents as well as educational assistance.

UPDATE: ISKOLARS NG MEKONG DOING WELL IN THE PHILIPPINES

We received a handmade Christmas card from Tahanang Paghubog Mo. Bonifacia, a social work foundation that manages a residential center in Quezon City for poor young women. If you will remember, this is our first beneficiary for our scholarship program. We are financing three college enrolled residents of the center to complete their schooling. The nuns who run the center report that our scholars -- Rona Quijano, Mary Grace Andes and Marie Ruth Alkonga -- are on their second year of their college studies in computer science and education at various schools in Manila. If you wish to donate to our Scholarship Fund, write out a check payable to Mekong Circle and indicate Iskolars Ng Mekong on the note line.

HOOKED ON LAOS? COME TO AN INTERNATIONAL TALK FESTIVAL

If you check out their website, registrants are signing up from all over: Thailand, France, Laos, Canada, and of course the USA. As of March 2, some 85 research papers have been submitted for presentation.

Organized by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies of Northern Illinois University, the conference, from May 20 to 22, 2005 in De Kalb, Illinois, will tap what is described as a "growing interest in Lao studies among a new generation of scholars." The organizers say that it is building on the momentum generated by the First Lao History Symposium held in the spring of 2003 at the University of California in Berkeley. The De Kalb event promises quite a heap of heady stuff for discussion, from history to botany, economics to archeology, music to linguistics and traditional medicine, and much, much more. The cultural activities at Elgin, a town close by with a large Lao population, will provide the obligatory Lao ethnic festivities.

Three Mekong Circle members will attend -- Penny Flores and Carmen Domingo Kirk from California; Pete Fuentesilla from New York. Last day for early registration is April 29. Call 815 753 1771. For more details, visit the comprehensive conference website: www.seasite.niu.edu/lao/laostudies. It has information on accommodations and fees, the preliminary list of registrants and the topics of the papers as well as details on the two-day program.

First International Conference on Lao Studies

Promote & Develop Lao Studies



ການປະຊຸມນາງຊາດ
ເື່ອງລາວສຶກສາ
ຄັ້ງທີ ໑

May 20-22, 2005
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb USA

The Center for Southeast Asian Studies of Northern Illinois University is pleased to announce the First International Conference on Lao Studies (ICLS) to be held on Friday-Sunday, May 20-22, 2005 in DeKalb, Illinois USA. The main objective of this conference is to provide an international forum for scholars to present and discuss various aspects of Lao studies.

The 2005 conference will feature papers on any topic concerning Lao Studies. Topics include all ethnolinguistic groups of Laos (e.g. Mon-Khmer groups, Hmong-Mien groups, Lao-Tai groups, etc.), the Isan Lao (Northeasterners of Thailand) and other ethnic Lao-Tai groups in Thailand (e.g. Lao Song, Phuan, Phai Tai), cross-border ethnic groups in Thailand, Vietnam, China, Burma, and Cambodia (e.g. Akha, Hmong, Khmu, Mien, Lao Phuan, Tai Lue, Tai Dam, Tai Deang), and overseas Laotians (e.g. Lao-American, Hmong-American, Lao-French). The conference will also include a Film Festival, art displays by various artists, and a separate Lao Cultural Night organized by the Elgin Lao community.



Agriculturists Sabina Fajardo-Swift, Roberto Monserrat and home technologist Melinda Marquez-Cuyno worked with Lao farmers in Champassak province, Laos, during the early 1960s.

DISEASE CONTROL BY BATTLING LICE AND LEECHES, RAISING PIGS AND CHICKEN

BY SABINA FAJARDO SWIFT

After 20 years as entomologist at the Bishop Museum, my current job at the University of Hawaii's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources is a welcomed challenge. The position requires fieldwork and meeting farmers, agribusiness and government agency workers associated with the job as Farm Safety Specialist. I put together a training program to reach non-English proficient immigrant farmers on pest management and pesticide safety. And you know what? one - third of my farmer clients are from Laos, the land of Bo Pen Yang! What an opportunity!

This unexpected job change exposed me again to a people I respect and like. Vivid images of four years as an agriculture volunteer in Paksong during my developing years gradually reappeared on the memory screen.

Operation Brotherhood International (a Philippine-based medical volunteer organization) realized after two decades of medical mission in

Laos that it was not enough that the Lao patient takes pills for fever and headaches and has surgeries to get well. The patient needs to take enough nutritious food to be healthy. They need a diet of fruit and vegetables and animal protein to prevent diseases and become happy, healthy productive citizens. In 1962, OBI Manila hired for the first time a team of agriculturists to send to Laos. It was a wise move!

It was August 1962. A young college graduate who flew Air France and stayed at a hotel for the first time, I landed in Vientiane wide-eyed and excited at the new things I saw and tasted. After a few days of orientation at the OBI Vientiane Headquarters, I flew by Air America to Pakse, final destination Paksong OBI Station at the Bolovens Plateau (elevation 3,600 feet). The agriculture team was composed of agriculturists Ernesto Dimayuga, Roberto Monserrat, Eriberto Reyes and home technologist Melinda Marquez Cuyno, the original team deployed for a year in Cabuyao, Laguna by the University of the Philippines Farm and Home Development Office.

The orientation process continued at OB Paksong – we met the mayor, the school teachers,

the Lao official in-charge of the military unit opposite the OB Paksong hospital; and visited the Lao agriculture office in Pakse. During village clinic days with Dr Mon and a public health nurse, we were introduced to village officials, and to the beverage that facilitate good development relationship – the rice wine!

One of the early visions I remember right after we arrived in Paksong was that of a visit to a coffee field along the Pakse –Paksong road and I had my first glimpse of Laos' Arabica coffee infested with scales (an insect) and the blackened leaves due to sooty molds. These scales produce honey that ants feed on that also triggers mold growth on the leaves and stems retarding growth.

Towards the end of my tour, I compiled a manual of insect pests of vegetables in the Paksong area. Looking back, I did not make the manual available in the Lao language, which is regrettable.

OBI Paksong recruited from villages with OB-trained public health worker young men we trained in basic agriculture who later were assigned in his home village. This new agriculture worker and the public health worker, formed a team in the village much like OB in its outreach and assistance program. During my last year in Paksong, I supervised the village ag workers with weekly visits and frequent consultations with the rest of the Agriculture Team for problems I and the ag worker could not handle. Can you imagine visiting rice farms walking on switchback trails and edges of mountains (the Lao Thoueng mostly practice slash and burn agriculture) several kilometers away from the road, exposed to snakes and mosquitoes! But most of all, I was fascinated with the beauty of probably undescribed beetles and butterflies along the trail! Looking back, I am glad I did not catch them for I later realized I am a conservationist and prefer to conserve biological diversity!

Perhaps it was OB Paksong's excellent track record in agriculture programs, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) funded a 6-month agriculture training of 15 young Lao men recruited from all areas of Laos. The Agriculture Team trained them using lectures, demonstrations, farm visits, and actual farm work

at the OB Demonstration Farm. They did not only learn basic agriculture – crop production, insect and disease control, raising pigs and chicken, and keeping records -- they also learned English. After the training they returned to their towns and villages and either became agriculture extension workers, worked in the Lao agriculture ministry or for USAID.

In Phou Maknaw where several farmers grew cabbage for the market and each family own several heads of cattle, I remembered extreme satisfaction after castrating my first bull using the cup method (after watching Bert Reyes did it many times). It became a joke at OB Paksong that male volunteers should watch out because of my castration expertise...! Then down the road from OB Paksong Hospital at Km 45, Mely Marquez Cuyno was consulted by the village teacher what to do with head lice infesting 100% of the school children. With my help, the public health worker and Mely conducted a delousing program for the school children. A simple brochure explaining the procedure was prepared and translated to Lao and later distributed to the children and parents. And

then one afternoon we demonstrated how to apply the 5% DDT powder mixture to scalps of children, later wrapped with a towel or piece of cloth to leave overnight. The next day, carrying soap and towels and clothes change, we took the children to a nearby stream where we shampooed hair and bathed. The procedure was repeated after one week to kill the newly hatched lice from nits unaffected by the insecticide. It was fun and memorable in the sense that a certain bonding occurred between these young people and these young OB volunteers swimming and having fun in the stream together! With DDT now banned by the Environmental Protection Agency here in the US and most of the world, I sometimes wonder if I harmed the children with the application of the insecticide!

I am scared of snakes and earthworms, unusual for an entomologist who dissects fat juicy caterpillars and cockroaches! But in Paksong, the greatest fear I had was not snakes or earthworms but the ubiquitous terrestrial leeches! As I walked in the hospital hallways, along the grassy sidewalk going to town for noodle soup, these tiny creatures on the ground and blades of grass swayed back

and forth ready to flick their black, elongated bodies to land on pants or skirt to further explore and settle in the privacy of my body. Here's a story on leeches that always gives me chicken skin: The late Manang Ding was a long time OR nurse. For several days she complained of a tiny foreign object in her nostril which she ignored until we noticed one day she was getting pale and anemic. She also had occasional nosebleeds. After a thorough nose check up by a doctor, an engorged leech lodged in one of her nostrils was discovered! Ugh!

The Lao volunteer experience fulfilled me with new philosophies in life that I ventured another volunteer assignment in Viet Nam in 1968-70 with the International Voluntary Services. I always say, once a volunteer always a volunteer.

I would love to work as a volunteer again - in Laos, in Viet Nam, in India, in the Philippines, anywhere where I hope to contribute something. Many people find it uncomfortable to work with immigrant folks or do volunteer work outside the comfort of home and language. They don't know what they are missing! It could change them for the better as it did to me!

(sabinaswift@yahoo.com)

Note: In addition to the volunteers mentioned in this feature (Sabina Fajardo-Swift, Ernesto Dimayuga, Eriberto Reyes and Roberto Monserrat), other Filipino agriculturists who served in Laos were: Rafael Araneta, Juanito Asuncion, Petronilo Barsals, Irene Batoon, Inocencio Bolo, Teodoro Cariaga, Francisco Collanta, Leopoldo Daulo, Ernesto Dimayuga, Deogracias Flores, Valentin Gallego, Agapito Gonzalvo, Casmiro Guieb, Miguel Palacpac, Anacleto Paras, Artemio Sanchez, Leodegario Santos, Fidel Tamayo and Felix Valera – 22 in all. (Please consult our membership directory and if any of them are not listed and you know their addresses, contact us so that we can include them in our mailings).

THINGS YOU MAY HAVE MISSED IN CHICAGO....

(continued from page 6)

and auxiliary workers, together with their daughters or wives - all 24 of them - shimmered in their dazzling Lao attire. **Satien Chantaraj** preferred an ankle-length black gown with a thousand flickering sequins. None of the five Lao OB men wore the leg-baring "sampot". But **Chuang Chonthipe's** metallic green shirt can mesmerize from 50 yards away. Not to be outdone, the Filipinas - **Cecile Datu** and **Penny Villarica**, among them - fluttered around with their Lao shawls and matching sinhs. **Rabieb Roy** said her elaborately embroidered, dark pink dress was worn only twice: at her wedding and at our Chicago reunion.

ALL IS FORGIVEN. JUST SEND MONEY ORDER.

Three sample copies of "Filipinos In Laos" were on display on a table outside the Columbus Ballroom during the dinner dance. At the end of the dance, one copy disappeared. We suspect one Mekong member among the 413 names listed in the Index of the book somehow found the missing copy in his/her bag. Whoever you are, kindly send a donation (an untraceable money order of \$20) to Mekong Circle and no questions will be asked. Kop chai and bo pen yang.

MISSED THE PHOTO DISPLAY, THE OTHER ONE?

We don't mean the panels set up outside the Columbus Ballroom - wow, pulling us back, back 30, 40, 45 years to the beginning of our Lao times, of pretty smiles, dashing good looks, faces full of promise, full heads of hair and slim abdomens. No, we mean Chicago's Millennium Park only a 15-minute walk from the Hyatt, a \$475-million open air

concert hall, fountains and gardens. Opened in July 2004, it also features some 70 color photographs, each about 4 ft by 4 ft, on metal stands along one of the walkways. They show family groups from around the world. Two shown were Lao families from Champassac province and a Lao refugee family which settled in Brookhaven, New York. All you Mekong Circle residents in Illinois, go ye and take a look before they dismantle the display. You'll enjoy the short stories about each family.

AN OFFER YOU CANNOT REFUSE

At the Paluay picnic, **Tony Vicia** was roaming around the grounds, seeking unwary prey. His targets - members too groggy and foolish enough to bring along their checkbooks in their pockets. That combination made them easy marks for his appeal for donations to our Iskolars Ng Mekong project. We were told that during the course of that afternoon, he made a killing, lots of it. Said one observer: "Kulang na lang na isyuot ang kanyang kamay sa bulsa mo!"

Mekong Circle
140-60 HELMA AVENUE
OHIO 45013 USA

**Florida, USA:
Next Site For
2006 Reunion**

An organizing committee headed by Pete Gonzales is in the early stages of formation. Two scenarios are being worked out: either a land-based venue or a cruise ship. Tentative date is July or August 2006. It's not too early to start thinking of scheduling your 2006 vacation during these months. More details to come. Check out our website (www.mekongcircle.org) every once in a while. Contact Pete 407 846 6131 for your suggestions.