

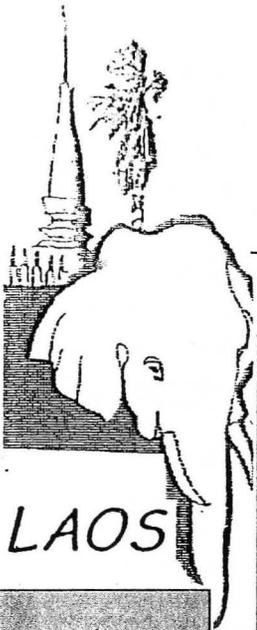
MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

DECEMBER 2007

145-60 Helma Ave., Hamilton, Ohio 4513 USA

www.mekongcircle.org



LAOS

Our
2008
Reunion
Will be
Held in
Manila,
The
Philippines

Nov.
7, 8 & 9

Hold
These
Dates!

Welcome to the 18th issue of our Newsletter !

And early greetings for the Christmas and New Year holidays. In this issue we continue with our series of places in Laos where we spent a part of our formative youth and experienced transformations (like getting married and sipping lao hai from their original fermenting clay jars). In the August issue, we began with Sayaboury. Read inside about Attopeu. This is all about revisiting in print what we will encounter face-to-face when we embark on our 2008 Laos visit.



In this issue we also revisit the lives of our colleagues, who after Laos, embarked on journeys that paralleled their Lao adventures. These took them to places, exotic like Sayaboury and Attopeu, but whose remoteness evoked familiar ground. They went to Burma, Nepal and Ethiopia. And what they did there continues a tradition of service we learned in the Kingdom.



Our Philippine colleagues celebrated their annual get-together November 10, 2007 once again hosted by Jovit and Ben Revilla at their residence in Los Banos, Laguna province. From the initial tally of responses from our reunion survey that we sent them, it is clear that a large crowd will descend, mostly from the USA. More heartening, many plan to join the Laos trip after the reunion (see insert). More details of our 2008 seventh international reunion in Manila were fleshed out. On Friday, Nov. 7, registration at the Renaissance Hotel in Makati, Manila, followed by a dinner reception. Saturday will be city tours and a dinner dance. Sunday morning is a Mass. The organizers left much free time between events for members to reunite among themselves according to their tribal affiliations. After all what are reunions for?



Indeed, that's a question to think about. Every two years we reunite, then disband to savor the memories. What to do between these re-bondings? Previous reunions were springboards for projects that invoke the humanitarian and educational goals of our Association's articles of incorporation. Mekong Circle members are blessed with a wealth of talents and resources that we have tapped for these projects (see inside). As we look forward to Manila 2008, let's think again about what else we can do beyond the feasting and the jokes and the hugs and kisses. Reunions are good for our Mekong Circle souls. There are other souls in the Philippines and in that Asian kingdom of our past for whom we can also do some good. Our earlier attempts for an OB return failed when our main sponsor the late Philippine Ambassador to Laos Mario Galman died in 2003. Another effort to field a one-week medical mission during the ASEAN summit in Vientiane in 2004 fizzled out. From these we have learned our lessons, one of which is to try again...and again. Let it not be said that Mekong Circle failed for lack of trying. We seek your suggestions (to webmaster@mekongcircle.org) or drop us a note (216-27 Spencer Avenue, Queens Village, New York 11427 USA).



A POET SAYS THANKS

Born in Vientiane, Bryan Thao Worra was six months old when he was adopted by John Stafford Worra, an American pilot. He sent us a book of poems last October with a handwritten note: "Sent with my great thanks to all of the men and women of Operation Brotherhood, and their families. I was born at the OB Hospital in 1973 and without you, who knows? This book might not even have come to be. So, kup chai lai lai with all of my best wishes to you for peace and prosperity."



Bryan's poems have appeared in several anthologies published in Australia, Singapore, Germany, England and the USA. Here's one from the Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement:

Capital

*Vientiane is a memory
I want to use the word buried
Locked inside my mind
So tight I barely get
Any visitation hours
 But Vientiane is
 More than a memory
She's alive
And so am I
She's just going on with her life
Shaking her head at
My foolish Romanticism
 A stale baguette
 Trying to paint her
 When she was a waif
While she sends me
A hundred worn photographs
Of her golden spires and muddy feet
I admit I've barely written back
Left to wonder who she's really become
And would have been
 Had I been there the way
 I always think I wanted to
As if this would make a difference
Worth mentioning in the mornings
Of the children born with no memories of me.*

We met Bryan in Tempe, Arizona during last May's Second International Conference of Lao Studies. At one panel session, he volunteered

to read, in a voice that melds Yul Brynner and Laurence Olivier, an excerpt from our Mekong Circle – **Penny Flores** book "Goodbye Vientiane." The audience, transfixed by either the voice or the excerpt ("How I Eluded the KGB" by **Casto Pingul**), bought all copies of the book that Penny had displayed. Bryan now lives at 514 Hopkins St., St Paul, Minnesota 55130 USA. For more about him and his latest book of poems "On The Other Side Of The Eye" log on to www.myspace.com/otosote.

THANKS FOR A LIFE SAVED THRICE

This reminded us of another thank you message, this time via email back in 2003 from Sinlap Sengsay:

"I know that no OB member would recognize me because I was not an important person. However I have a wonderful relationship with OB both as a patient and a partner. OB Paksong saved my life at least two times when I was seriously down with malaria. OB Vientiane revived my life once.

It was during the That Luang festival. I can't remember what year in the early 1960s, after I've been sick for more than a week in Pakse and without food except bottled water drink called "Green Spot" that has an orange flavor. One Wednesday I decided to hop into a C46 milkrun to Vientiane to enjoy the That Luang festival.

Unfortunately at the arrival at Wattay airport's Air America parking ramp, I stepped on the ground and passed out and awoke two days later at the OB Hospital. They took great care of me and I am alive today because of them. I learned weeks later that it was a **Joseph Flipse** who works for International Volunteer Service who put me in a taxi and accompanied me to the hospital. Joe, wherever you are, a BIG THANK to you too.

As a partner I was involved in a Lao development program (a private non-profit organization). I had several business contacts with a lady by the name of Sabina Bing. Not long ago, I read an article in my local newspaper about her advising Lao refugees in Hawaii about using insecticides in farming. Back in

Laos, I took my agricultural staff and villagers to visit OB's swine projects and to get advice from Miss Bing. I just cannot say enough nice things about the OB staff."

(Editor's note: Sinlap, Miss Bing was Miss Sabina Fajardo, an agriculturist with OB Paksong. She now lives in Hawaii as Mrs.

Sabina Swift. Her email: Sabina@hawaii.edu.)

VIENTIANE BY NIGHT CIRCA 2000s

In a drive to insure nightclubs close after midnight, a city Committee on Entertainment Management did a census this year. The count: 23 nightclubs and 26 karaoke bars (this in a socialist government that supposedly disapproves of Western decadence; in no other existing Communist capital in the world — Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam and China — are there so many such establishments for a small



In 2000, "Visit Laos" was the tourism slogan of the government. It dressed up the capital city of Vientiane, including the Vieng Ratty nightclub at its new location above.

city of 234,000). In the mid-1960s during the reign of a tripartite government of Communists, neutralists and rightists, the Vieng Ratty nightclub had a virtual monopoly on night time carousing.

Its heritage was alive in Senesouk Night Club, along Luang Prabang Road that we dropped into during a visit in 2002. There we saw a patron by himself, surrounded by three stunning hostesses, whom he had hired to pour him drinks and to dance with (Western music, invariably, from a live band).

Beside the club was a smaller one. Outside a swarm of motorbikes was parked. Inside, it was packed with the first generation children of the revolution, teenagers looking like 12 years, pumping up and down as if on pogo sticks, to thunderous, blistering techno-punk rock music. There was no room here, nor inclination to do the lamvong.

ROYAL FAMILY DENTISTS

The passing of **Cesar Leyran**, an OB dentist, on June 19, 2007 in Phoenix, Arizona reminded us of our close relations with the Lao monarch. His Majesty **Savang Vatthana** was our patron during our stay in his kingdom. Dur-

ing our 18 years of service he awarded 36 OB volunteers the royal Order of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol, in gratitude for their work. Among them were dentists **Danny Torres**, **Gene Aguilar** and **Bac Bacordo**, who once remarked "I can actually command a King

to open his mouth!" During his assignment in Luang Prabang in the 1960s, Danny can expect a summons to the royal palace to attend to the royal family which included grandchildren, grandnieces, grandnephews. The King first became Danny's patient in Paksong while he was still a Crown Prince.

REUNIONS, REUNIONS AND STILL COUNTING

The 7th reunion 2008 in Manila will be the first outside the US mainland. Well, technically, the 6th reunion 2006 aboard a cruise ship to the Bahamas, the Caribbean, was beyond the continental shelf. But its jump off point was Orlando, Florida, solidly on American soil. Here's a tally of our biennial get-togethers:

| | | |
|--------------------|---|---------------|
| 1. May 20, 1995 | Marriott Hotel, Los Angeles, Calif. | 270 attendees |
| 2. July 25, 1998 | Bonaventure Hotel, Los Angeles, Calif | 195 |
| 3. July 29, 2000 | Embassy Suite, San Francisco, Calif | 206 |
| 4. Aug.2 & 3, 2002 | Hotel Pennsylvania, New York City And on a yacht cruise around Manhattan | 167 |
| 5. Aug 6, 2004 | Hyatt Regency, Chicago, Illinois | 310 |
| 6. Aug.11-14, 2006 | Florida Mall Hotel, Orlando, Florida And aboard a cruise ship to the Bahamas | 179 |

The number of participants at the Florida-Bahamas event was actually higher because there were uncounted members who came to the Florida hotel reception but did not board the ship. Reunion festivities were programmed for two to three days, starting at the hotels with a reception and a dinner-dance, capped by a picnic the next day. New York dropped the picnic. Florida's picnic, on a Caribbean island owned by the cruise ship line, topped them all. It had snorkeling, paragliding, a private beach and that Coco Loco alcoholic concoction that lived up to its name.

Each gathering launched initiatives. San Francisco legally

incorporated our Association; New York started our website, published "Filipinos In Laos", launched the Iskolars Ng Mekong scholarship project and completed Balik Laos 2002 trip; Chicago compiled our membership into a booklet directory (more than 450 names) marked the first reunion of the graduates of the OB School of Practical Nursing, and announced the coming release of our second volume "Goodbye Vientiane."

Our colleagues in the Philippines have been celebrating their *annual* reunions since 2001, hosted most of the time by **Jovit** and **Ben Revilla** at their residence in Los Banos, Laguna and also by **Fred Mendoza**. They are putting together the BIG one in Manila from November 7 to 9, 2008. A sidetrip to Laos will follow.

Historically, these "official" reunions were preceded by informal lunches dating to the 1970s. The first was sometime in 1976, the year after we all left Laos. That was when ex-OB-Air America-USAID-CASI-Eccoil residents of Los Angeles, over lunch at Sonny Caro's (ex-Air America) house, decided on the name Mekong Circle. Among the founding members were the husband-wife teams of **Caro, Ilustrisimo, Padayao, Barcelona, Atienza, Macayaon, Pestanas, Eusebio, Custodio, Datu**.

"We had regular potlucks," recalled **Cecile Datu**, "camping, picnics, Las Vegas casino trips. Sometimes we would just get together and have lots of fun with 'pan de sal', corned beef and boiled corn." By the 1990s, venues moved to resort hotels, yachts and cruise ships. Potlucks no more, but pots of more fun, yes!

A picnic below on May 21, 1995 at the Santa Fe Dam in Los Angeles, California was among the celebrations of the first Mekong Circle reunion. A first reunion (bottom photo) of the graduates of the OB School of Practical Nursing highlighted the 2004 Chicago reunion.



Continuing A Tradition of Service

Penny Flores: From Kindergartners To School Teachers

As the resident social worker of the OB team in Sam Neua in northern Laos from 1958 to 1959, Penny Villarica Flores (right) took over the duties of teaching village children who flocked to the clinic that doubled as the classroom. "It was my first teaching experience," she said. During



her tenure, the classroom transformed into a permanent separate structure that could hold her class of 30 to 40 pupils, aged five to seven years old whom she taught five days a week, for three hours each time.



education to become teachers.

In 1973 she was hired by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to go to Kathmandu, Nepal. For two years she faced the daunting task of turning women with only a fourth grade

Puring Dayawon: Teaching Midwives And Nursing Migrants

Another former OB volunteer who lived and worked in Nepal was registered nurse Puring Dayawon (right). After two years (1964 – 1966) in Vientiane, Sayaboury and Kengkok, she immigrated to the US and taught practical nursing



courses at Jersey City, New Jersey schools and to disadvantaged youth in a Job Corps employment program of the State. After a short stint doing neonatal nursing in Florida, she joined the Peace Corp in 1997 in

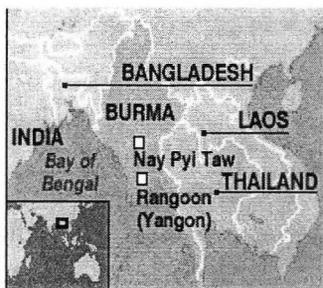


Nepal. "I was the oldest Asian-American serving" she said, who was 59 at that time. There she trained auxiliary midwives in the village of Kaligandaki for two years.

"Many times I thought, why am I doing this," she was quoted in the Gainesville Sun (Florida) newspa

Louie Ongsiapco: Rebuilding Lives In Burma

Louie's official biography on the website of the service agency where he is a project director tells of career changes that veer dramatically on several routes. After an AB degree in Philosophy at the Ateneo de Manila University and a Master of Arts degree in education at the same institution, he went into teaching, and then spent five years with OB Headquarters and the OB Montessori schools in the Philippines, including three months spent with OB Laos in 1972. He was charged with the suspension and eventual closure of the Philippine operations including the final negotiations with USAID for the separation benefits of the remaining OB personnel in Laos in 1975. Together with Dr. Pete Joaquin, Dr. Ben Tagarao and Dr. Diaz, he went to explore possible needs and opportunities



for OB in Mindanao, meeting t with the late Cesar Climaco who served with OB in Vietnam.

He then joined the banking industry, 20 years in human resources management. He was a First Vice President at the United Coconut Planters Bank, president of the Bankers Council for Personnel Management, president of the Per-

sonnel Management Association of the Philippines, Executive Director of Operation Smile Philippines, Chairman of the Refugee Assistance Foundation and Chairman of Community and Family Services International (CFSI).

Louie joined the Philippine-based CFSI in 1988. Founded in 1981, its mission is to "protect and promote human security, specifically the lives and well-being and dignity of people uprooted by persecution, armed conflict, and natural disasters." It assisted Indochinese refugees at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center in Morong, Bataan in the Philippines, Hong Kong, Vietnam, as well as other displaced people in Myanmar, West Timor and Timor Leste and Mindanao – in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UNHCR

The compulsion to serve, once it has taken hold, can sometimes be difficult to shake off. Take the case of three former Operation Brotherhood volunteers, who after their service in Laos, found themselves doing it again, in one form or another, in places faraway from home.

Then a consulting job with the Ministry of Education of Ethiopia brought her to its capital of Addis Ababa for three months beginning in December 2003. Her mission: to evaluate the curriculum of primary schools in the country. Survey forms were put together, interviews conducted, and extensive visits to village elementary schools where "entire classes in a Tigray province were held under the shade of a huge tree."

Ethiopians she met traced for her the historical roots of the country, the only Christian country in Africa, that lead back to Queen Sheba and King Solomon and a monastery where legend said the infant Jesus and his parents lived during their flight from Egypt, and another monastery where the Ark of the Covenant is said to repose. Her latest assignment was Indonesia, from June to December

2005, a year after the December 2004 tsunami devastated parts of the country. Again, the job commissioned by the U.S. Agency For International Development was teacher training. USAID told her the teachers lost to the tsunami had to be replaced as much as the school buildings that were destroyed. About 1,400 primary school teachers had to be taught within six months.

It has been a long journey from the schoolchildren of Sam Neua to Nepal and Indonesia. "I was lucky to be there when the need is the utmost," Penny said. Currently she is a professor at the College of Education of San Francisco State University in California awaiting the next call to places across the oceans. She can be contacted at 129 Buccarelli Drive, San Francisco, California 94132. Tel. 415 584 3962.

per. "It was difficult to get through to the students with the language barrier and I had to teach them without any modern training equipment." In addition, her quarters lacked running water, had patchy electricity, a plywood bed with a slice of foam for a mattress, and no heating during the freezing winter, she told the newspaper reporter.

Back in Florida, a letter from one of her students who had been accepted into a nursing program and pledged to serve in the remote countryside. "I feel like I've made an impact on these girls and made them feel they can make a difference by going out into the villages and passing on the information" they learned, she said.

Rather than return to bedside nursing in Florida, she joined the Farmworkers Health Service, attending to the health care needs of Mexican migrant apple pickers in central Florida and farms in Pennsylvania.

Retiring in 2000, and with her three children already grown and on their own, she volunteered to house and care, with government funding, orphaned children from infants to five years old. "They were medically at risk children" she said, nurturing them for eight years. When she ended her fostering contract, she adopted one of the children, now eight years old. Puring can be reached at 5412 NW 38 Place, Gainesville, Florida 32606. Tel.. 352 396 6432.

Contracted CFSI to assist 232,000 Myanmar Muslim returnees of Northern Rahine State (NRS) who fled to neighboring Bangladesh during 1991-1992.

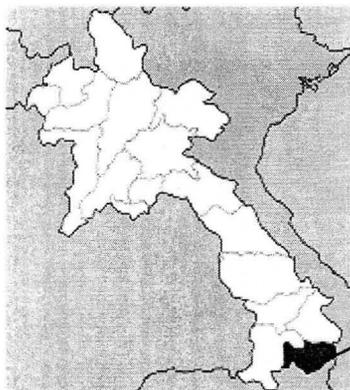
Already an impoverished country, the state's social indicators like infant mortality and literacy are among the world's poorest. "They remain on the edge of subsistence and renewed population movement," UNHCR said.

For the last four years, Louie has been based in NRS as Project Director. He leads a team of 258 persons comprised of 31 full-time project staff and 227 teachers, all from Myanmar. In 1999, he led CFSI's emergency assistance project in West Timor, Indonesia for East Timorese (now Timor Leste) refugees. Civil war had created 250,000 refugees in that region. His activities were cut short and staff evacuated when hostilities intensified.

Since 2003 Louie has been CFSI's consultant for UNHCR's community social services and education project in NRS which is located in the northern tip of the Bay of Bengal that serves as the border between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

"We provide basic education to the stateless Muslim population," he said. "About 80 % are illiterate with women highly isolated and with little meaningful participation in their highly conservative society. Many children are out-of-school. Local hospitals and health services are nowhere near the service capability of what OB operated in Laos in the 1970s. But the challenges continue to be great and also provide the intrinsic rewards that one remembers of OB's humanitarian spirit."

More information on the Myanmar project can be obtained at CFSI's website: www.cfsi.ph. Louie's email address is longsiapco@cfsi.ph.



In our August 2007 Newsletter, we began a series on some of the Laotian outposts beginning with the northern town of Sayaboury where many of us served. Let us now travel south to Attopeu. The intent is to summon up bits of history of the places that may form part of our Return to Laos 2008 itinerary after our Manila reunion.

ATTOPEU: BUILDING UP FROM A BAMBOO BARN

Attopeu from 1966 to 1971, is best known to the Lao as the most heavily bombed region of the country during the Second Indochina war of 1957 to 1975. The Ho Chi Minh trail, actually an extensive network of footpaths and truck-bearing roads, that cuts through the jungle border between Laos and Vietnam, down the province's eastern edge. As the main infiltration route of North Vietnamese soldiers and supplies to South Vietnam, they invested much blood to keep it open despite intensive, almost saturation bombing by the USA. One edge of the trail wove only 13 kms east of the town. Mekong Circle members tell of seeing flashes of light on the mountainous horizon during the evening hours, another sortie of B52s dropping their payloads on the trail.

Things were much quieter (and safer) on December 27, 1957 when Dr. **Pedro Joaquin**, nurses **Aurea Marinas** (who later married Pete) and **Linda Mumar** arrived in Attopeu in late afternoon after a whole day overland trip from their Paksong OB station. Days earlier, administrative office **Rene Maglaya** had discussions with the Attopeu Chaokhoueng (governor) about setting up a clinic in town. Now he gladly welcomed the medical team with feasting and introductions to the town's prominent residents.

They were shown to their quarters – a stone building, a substantial structure but without running water or electricity. They partitioned the rooms into a kitchen-dining area, a clinic, a six-bed ward, and a bedroom (a cloth screen between the genders).

On the first dispensary day, 86 persons were treated. Surgeries included cases of goiter, ovarian cyst and myoma of the uterus. One account said that the sick came in droves as news of the visitors' arrival spread and their ability to "make even the dying live." On the third day, royalty in the person of Crown Prince Savang Vatthana (not yet en-

throned as His Majesty the King) paid a short visit.

On January 1958, Dr. **Max Baltao**, nurses **Eve Altura** and **Sonia Zuniga** replaced the first team. In its second year, the team still fetched their water from the Sekong river, lighted their nights with a small, fragile 2.5 KVA generator, rushed eagerly to the town airstrip when small-Beechcraft planes brought their supplies and those precious letters once every two months.

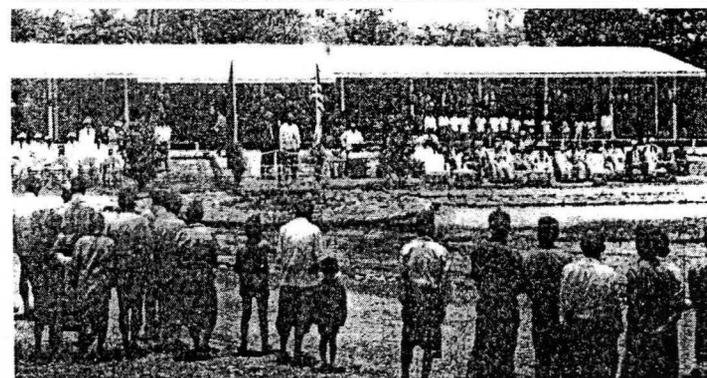
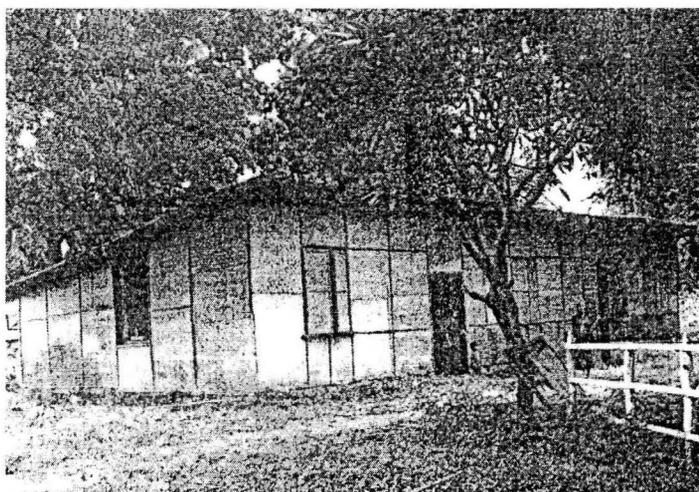
As the volume of patients increased, a barnlike structure was built beside their stonehouse to serve as the outpatient dispensary, the operating room and a ward for 15 beds. Hardened earth was its floor and woven bamboo slats (sawali) for walls.

Termite rot and incessant monsoon rains soon took its toll on the flimsy accommodations. The need for better alternatives was clear. And so the saga of how a new hospital, modern by its standards then, began to unroll in classic Lao time. Rounds of meetings by government officials and OB that began in 1960 produced blueprints and not much else.

For nine months nothing happened beyond the preliminary hauling of gravel and sand. In April 1961, civil engi-

neer **Daniel Infante**, sent as administrative officer by Vientiane headquarters, pushed for construction before the onset of the monsoon rains.

Construction began in May. The Governor's office, the army, the police, OB trainees pitched in even as shortages of cement and lumber intermittently halted work. By July the outer shell of the buildings took shape. By September all structures were finished -- hospital, dispensary, quarters for trainees and living-cooking space for watchers.



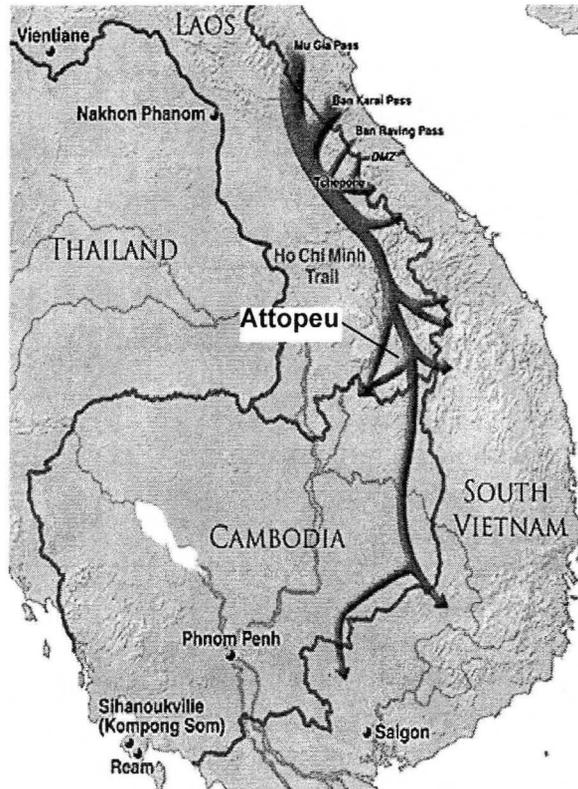
Bamboo slats and a hardened earthen floor sheltered the 15-beds of the 1961 hospital at top photo. Above, its replacement, the 25-bed hospital at its inauguration in 1964.

In October 1963 planning began for a more spacious 25-bed capacity unit. Previous experience learned from building the current hospital speeded up execution. Contributions from the community, both labor and materials, came in. A fund-raising boun raised 120,000 kip, a princely sum then. The army detailed carpenters as well as soldiers to haul sand and gravel, clear the site. Cement, hardware, roofing materials, construction equipment arrived from USAID.

On April 24, 1965, a thousand people attended the inauguration ceremonies. Dignitaries from the Royal Lao Government and USAID flew in from Vientiane. Monks blessed the new building. Five OB members – Drs. Pete Joaquin and **Teofilo Ocampo**, nurse **Gilbert Abad**, home technologist **Teofista de los Reyes** and assistant instructor **Souk Bounsong** received royal recognition awards. A luncheon followed in the OB House, then a boun in the OB compound in the evening.

As in all OB outposts, the medical facility – whether it starts out as a mere clinic or expands into a hospital – serves as the hub of a development outreach program.

Its spokes radiate to several segments of the community. Agriculturists develop demonstration farms to teach farmers improved food production methods, from vegetables to poultry to pigs; nutritionists gather mothers and young women for nutrition classes; public health nurses launch village latrine building campaigns, school immunization, sanitation. The hospital itself recruits local youth who after learning various healthcare skills as dental trainees, auxiliary nurses, surgical technicians, are hired as permanent help. (For a fuller description of these activities, see our



The Ho Chi Minh Trail (dark arrows) is actually a network of footpaths and roads that weaves through the provinces of Savannakhet, Sedone, Saravane and Attopeu.

William Deyer; **agriculturists** Artemio Sanchez, Felix Valera, Agapito Gonzalves, Juanito Asuncion; **technician** Boy Estrada; **medical technologists** Pete Tapia, Ernie de los Reyes, Manny Canonizado; **fiscal supply officers** Nic Nadal, Tony Victa.

On April 10, 1966, a boating accident on the Sekong river drowned nurses **Violeta Salarda**, **Aurea Joaquin** and **Manny Canonizado**.

book "Filipinos In Laos" by Miguel A Bernad and J. "Pete" Fuentecilla.

For 10 years until 1968 the Attopeu team did all that. In that year hostilities between the government, the Pathet Lao and Vietnam intensified to a level that necessitated the evacuation of the team. During that decade here are some team members who served there, in addition to those already mentioned. The list may miss some volunteers. And not all are in our Mekong Circle directory. If you have contact information, let us know:

Physicians Primo Guevara, Cesar Medina, Jose Datu, Jose Palisoc, Sisino Azul, Ramon Ortiz; **dentists** Gene Aguilar, Bac Bacordo, Fred Reyes; **nurses** Concepcion Partible, Nemia Altura, Francisco Ngitngit, Marcelo Kilongan, Cecilia Salarda, Narcisa Degawan, Leonor Macababab, Angelita Marinas, Violeta Salarda, Riz Galinado, Conse Sotio, Fenny Terciano, Thelma Villamar, Asila Palma, Lydia Conte; **nutritionists** Cecilia Carmona, Nila Ferrer; **team managers** Antonio Santiago,

No Internet. No Bowling Alley. What To Do?

In a remote outpost like OB Attopeu, there is no Mall of Asia or Se-caucus, New Jersey outlet to spend leisure hours. The volume of hospital patients is always heavy, considering the low state of health among the province's inhabitants, many of them tribal Lao Thung. And then there were training classes for farmers; refresher courses for army medics; agricultural extension work in vil-



Nurse Eve Altura-Guevara (right) with unidentified companion on the veranda of their Attopeu stone house.

lages; following up on distant village first aid clinics set up by the team; requests for English classes from the monks and town officials; vegetable gardening within the hospital grounds.

"We have proven (to the locals) that vegetables can be grown any part of the year, erasing their old concept that they can be raised only at the start of summer," reported **Danny Infante**. "Our present vegetable garden is the only one of its kind in Attopeu if not all of Laos. The whole town is flocking to OB daily to buy vegetables." If veggie, why not the region's rich wildlife for more income, the visionary **Oscar Arellano**, OB chairman suggested (actually commanded). And so a menagerie of sorts occupied one corner of the compound – alligators, peacocks, pythons. But lacking taxidermy skills, the project flopped. The children and watchers, anyway, had something to amuse them.

During weekends and evenings, there is chess, jigsaw puzzles, and any excuse to have a party (birthdays, visitors from Vientiane or the Paksong team) in order to dress up in the wildest costumes. Playing tricks on newly assigned team members is expected. Dr. **Mon Ortiz** acts as the team official interpreter—"Repeat after me: In Laos there are many Lao." Rivalry between Paksong and Attopeu took the form of sending each other elaborately packaged boxes, which may contain plain stones or a rotten egg or a dead snake.

On the whole, Mekong Circle members during their service in Laos from 1957 to 1975, were spared the horrors of what is known as the Indochina wars, named after the colonies once governed by France, comprising Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. There were two Indochinese wars, according to historians – the first from 1954 to 1956 between France and North Vietnam. The second from 1955 to 1975 entangled various combatants – North Vietnam (and their allies the Soviet Union, and China) against South Vietnam (and their allies the USA, Thailand, Australia, South Korea, New Zealand, the Philippines). The Vietnamese call this conflict the American War, in the same manner that they call the first one the French War. There was even a third, short war in 1979 between the reunited Vietnam and China over Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia.

Laos got engulfed, naively thinking it would duck the hostilities by proclaiming neutrality. Its role during the 2nd war was variously described as a "sideshow" or the "secret war" and the "shadow war". Presumably the one raging on its eastern border was the real bazongga. North Vietnam (which used Lao territory to funnel men and materiel from North to South) and the USA (which tried mightily to stem the flow) had good reasons to call it secret because both claimed they respected Laos' neutrality. Naturally, the secretive CIA hid its hand in managing a Lao-based 40,000-men Hmong guerrillas to fight a combined North Vietnamese-Pathet Lao force of 100,000 men. In truth, Laos was a hot war arena throughout the cold war 1950s to the 1970s.

Stationed mostly on the valley towns along the Mekong river, away from the fire-fights and bombing in the northern provinces and the Ho Chi Minh trail regions of the South, Mekong Circle members experienced little of the Laos war. One OB accountant was shot dead at a street checkpoint in Vientiane during a coup d'etat. Two Air America Filipino technicians were killed in an aircraft accident. Several official accounting of the Indochinese casualties list conflicting numbers. But whether on the low side or the high side, the numbers measure only the dead combatants. Civilians suffered immeasurably – the orphaned, the

ADDING UP THE CASUALTIES

The numbers measure only dead combatants. Civilian casualties are immeasurable.

First Indochina War 1946 - 1954 "The French War"

| | |
|---------------|----------------|
| North Vietnam | 500,000 killed |
| France | 89,797 |

2nd Indochina War 1955-1975 "The American War"

| | |
|-----------------------|-------------|
| N. Vietnam & Vietcong | 1.1 million |
| South Vietnam | 220,357 |
| USA | 58,256 |
| South Korea | 4,407 |
| Australia | 487 |
| Thailand | 351 |



Laos Front 1957 - 1975

| | |
|------------------------|--------|
| Royal Lao Armed Forces | 20,000 |
| Hmong Guerrillas | 30,000 |
| North Vietnam | 3,000 |
| USA | 500 |

maimed, the missing, the displaced (estimated at 370,000 refugees).

"By the time a ceasefire was declared early in 1973, over two million tons of bombs had been dropped on the Pathet Lao zone, or more than two tons for every inhabitant" wrote Martin Stuart Fox ("A History of Laos"). The destruction was horrific. Almost all the 3500 villages under Pathet Lao control had been partly or wholly destroyed. Loss of life on both sides can only be guessed at, but 200,000 dead and twice that number wounded would be a conservative estimate" (when the Lao census was estimated at a mere three million).

Sources: French Expeditionary Corps, Agence France Presse, US Dept of Defense, Hanoi government press release April 3, 1995, Australian War Memorial, Vietvet.org.nz, Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War. Source for Laos military casualties: Small & Singer in "Twentieth Century Atlas Death Tolls Major Wars"