

MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

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216-27 Spencer Avenue, Queens Village, New York USA 11427

www.mekongcircle.org

Welcome to the 23rd Issue of our Newsletter



What Makes A Reunion A Reunion

Mekong Circle reunions are always memorable for one reason or another. The first one in May 1995 in Baldwin Park, California is remembered because it was, well, the first. It set the pattern for others to follow: a reception and the welcome *baci* ceremony the first day (photo above), followed by a dinner dance the second day, then capped by a picnic on the third and final day. There have been nine reunions since then, once every two years, usually in the summer, at most times in a hotel and in a park for the picnic.

Reunion No. 4 in August 2002 broke the pattern. Reception and *baci*, as usual at a New York City hotel, but the dinner dance was aboard a large yacht that cruised around Manhattan island. No picnic. Someone got seasick, although we were on a river, not on the high seas, for heaven's sake !

Reunion No. 5 in Chicago in 2004 resounded with the delighted squeals and much hugging of the graduates of the Operation Brotherhood School of Practical Nursing, meeting each other for their first school reunion since the school closed in Vientiane, Laos in 1969. A school reunion within a Mekong Circle reunion — oh gosh and golly, it was too much!

Reunion No. 6 in 2006 started off the traditional way — in a hotel in Orlando, Florida for the reception/*baci*. Then the next morning, members sailed on the Royal Caribbean Line to the Bahamas for a three-day cruise, on board dancing and gustatory gorging. We stopped off on the way at Coco Cay, a private island owned by the cruise operator, for the picnic. An alcoholic concoction named Coco Loco plastered several of us there.

Reunion No. 7 in November 2008 broke the confines of the U.S. mainland (where most members lived) to join

their Philippine colleagues in Manila. At the end of the three-day festivities — (a spectacular stage show during the dinner dance; an elderly singer crooning “Tatanda Din Kayo” (You Will Grow Old); excursions to the Presidential Palace and the Tagaytay Lake resort)— 27 Filipino and Lao members flew to Laos for a week's look at Vientiane and Luang Prabang. It was, for most, their first return to home sweet home since they left some 40 years ago. Gawdomighty! How things have changed. Nonetheless, heart-tugging memories indeed for all.

Somsoy ! Congratulations !

And now we come to Reunion No. 9 in San Diego, California, at the Marriott Mission Valley Hotel, celebrated August 3, 4 and 5, 2012. Previous reunions registered from 167 to 310 attendees. Each event was steered by an Organizing Committee staffed mainly by our Filipino members, residents of the host city. For the first time, our Lao colleagues took charge of No. 9.

Accepting the challenge of organizing a reunion is no small matter. Our 500 members (those for whom we have addresses out of about 1,000) are dispersed across the planet. We are in our late 60s or early 70s, on wobbly knees and sustained by pills. Fixed incomes restrict faraway venues. The organizers must pool enough donations and seed money to meet initial expenses. The organization's treasury has meager treasure to donate.

Our California-based Lao members had one thing going for them. The state is home to most of the Lao diaspora that fled Laos in 1975. Indeed San Diego counts 7,002 Lao in the 2010 USA census, ranking it fifth out of the top 10 U.S. cities with the most Lao residents. And they have reunion history to bank on — in Chicago, 21 Lao turned up among the 310 who attended; in Florida - Bahamas, 57 joined the cruise, almost 30 percent of all the 179 members who boarded the ship.

In all the past reunions, Filipinos outnumbered the Lao. But in San Diego, the numbers turned around, more Lao than Filipinos among the 136 attendees. Our gatherings always had a strong Lao flavor – the *baci*, the *lamvong*, the glittering *sinh* gowns of the ladies. They are fitting reminders of our common past that each reunion reinforces.

Khamsy Siharath, co-chair with **Sam Malaythong**, of the Committee, let it be known during the dinner dance who did most of the heavy lifting among her Lao Committee colleagues – **Vanessa and Phaiboon Thongma**, **Sivilay and Chantha Sivongxay**, **Khamdy Sihavong**, **Dustin Khamtanh**, **Lisa Saythong**, **Phounsouk Sisouphone**, **Dr. Sombat Senethong**, **Laura and Sounthanm Phyaqueo**, **Sue Malaythong** and **Bouadeng Siharath**.

To you and to all other members of the Organizing Committee - **Clem and Pat Gonzales**, **Wilma and Fidel Padayao**, **Tony and Tacing Atienza**, **Jun and Claire Ilustrisimo**, **Greg and Juliet Esteban**, **Jojo and Joe Barcelona, Sr.**, – our most sincere congratulations for a truly splendid job.

Reunion No. 10 in 2014 – watch for details about a cruise. The Organizing Committee? Most likely, our most reliable, dependable, intrepid, selfless, God-fearing colleagues from California. They have a remarkable track record – Los Angeles did it in 1995, 1998 and 2010; San Francisco in 2000. Among other 2014 venues discussed during the Board meeting – Las Vegas, Texas, Australia, Canada, Laos, where we all have resident members. If any Mekong Circle chapter wishes to host 2014, let us hear from you. It's only 23 months away.

Is it all about lamvong-ing, hugging, and recalling the high-jinks of cohabiting under one roof in remote Lao towns? When we incorporated in 1975 in California and received approval to function as a corporation with Federal tax deduction benefits, we listed among our goals public dissemination of our Laos experience as well as educational and humanitarian work. We've done so and are still at it. We have published two books, issue Newsletters and maintain a website (www.mekong-circle.org). For five years (2003-2008) we funded from your donations (total \$10,500) a scholarship program in the Philippines that helped 16 disadvantaged women graduate from college. In

March 2011 we launched our Tribal School project. We donated to disaster relief funds in the USA (Hurricane Katrina 2005) and the Philippines (Typhoon Ondoy 2009). And so, as you glide in dreamy lamvong steps during our biannual get-togethers, we say kop chai.

What Happened In San Diego

Sam Malaythong rendered the Lao national anthem in his saxophone, unaccompanied by lyrics, perhaps the only time it was ever done anywhere. In his welcome address during the dinner dance, he greeted the audience in English, Lao and Tagalog (the Tagalog remarks, we were told, he read scripted in Lao).

●At the welcome *baci*, many sat on chairs around the *sukhuan*, the central offering urn. It was safer to sit there than risk dislocation of old bones when we rise from the customary sitting position on the hard floor. For the same reason, couch cushions from the hotel lobby were most welcome for those posing seated on the cement patio in front of the hotel entrance during the group photo shoot.

●**Kathryn Sweet**, flying in from Australia to interview us for her PhD dissertation on the history of medicine in Laos, was seen hopping merrily on the dance floor. Said **Joe Barcelona**, joking: "like a kangaroo." Among those who sat down for interviews: **Pat Gonzales**, **Khamsy Siharath**, **Sue Malaythong**, **Vanessa Thongma**, **Bik Marquez**, **Pete Fuentesilla**. In Manila last March she interviewed **Cecile Datu**, **Bing Belicena**, **Mely Sison**, **Ching Caldoza**, **Mel Granada**, **Eve Guevara**, **Jovit Revilla**, **Sonia Ballo**. In Australia, she met with two former OB Lao nurses, **Sripanom Silavong** and **Phousavong Sithipanya**.

●**Rusty Ramos** kept sneaking out of the ballroom to check on the names who posted their bids for Joe's two paintings displayed out in the corridor. Each time someone raised his bid, he wrote down his higher price. He won both paintings. The \$600 proceeds were donated by Joe to the Organizing Committee.

Also on a table outside the ballroom, we mounted a panel display on our Tribal Schools project in Mindanao, southern Philippines. Photos and text

described the status of our assistance to some 200 elementary grade children. Donation envelopes were on the table as well as colored flyers on the dinner tables.

●From Manila, **Jun Belicena** and **Cecile Datu** (newly resettled there from Los Angeles) arrived to represent Mekong Philippines to the Mekong Circle Board of Directors meeting August 4. Traveling companions were **Bing Belicena**, **Wilma Valenzuela** and **Manding Datu**. Manding and Cecile marked their 50th wedding anniversary during the dinner dance. One night in January 1961, while on assignment in Vientiane to construct the Wattay airport runway, Manding brought to the OB Vientiane hospital a fellow engineer, complaining of severe abdominal pain. Both worked for the U.S. Navy, Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. There, for the first time, he met Cecile. "My heart fluttered wildly... I went to visit my friend everyday,,,and my visits coincided with this lovely apparition's duty hours. Increasingly, I found her mix of quiet reserve and cheerful personality oddly attractive." Read more about this stupendous love story as related by Manding in **Penny Flores'** book "Goodbye Vientiane, Untold Stories of Filipinos in Laos."

●**Dr. Sombat Senethone**, former medical director of the OB Vientiane Hospital from 1969 to 1975, recounting his early days as a newly arrived refugee in the USA, studying for his licensure: "I missed Laos, my extended family, friends, the slow pace of life, the food. The worst part was I had to learn how to eat hamburgers."

●The third reunion day, normally a picnic in a park, was replaced by a buffet lunch August 5, at the Fountain Terrace overlooking the hotel pool. As expected no member took up the invitation to dip into the pool to show off their Olympic pectorals. The menu: vegetable salad and hamburgers. As members began leaving for the airport, **Vanessa**, the Committee treasurer, was frantically hawking leftover reunion souvenir journals for \$20 each. The Committee had a deficit to cover.

●The roll call of members who passed away during the last two years included **Puring de Jesus**, **Tony Mendez**, **Ernie Felix**, **Ray Yoro**, **Bob Monserrat**.

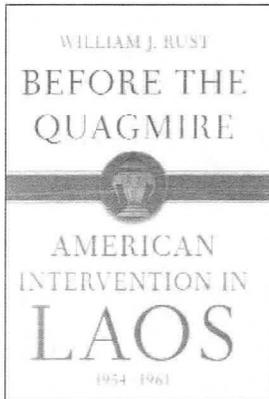
What It Was Really Like

After the current Lao government took over the country in 1975, a number of books emerged telling tales of U.S. government involvement there since the first diplomats arrived in 1954. Told mostly by military and CIA operatives, they memorialized stories of America's two-decade long, ultimately failed effort to keep the kingdom out of Communist hands. The Air America website alone has compiled more than 30 volumes of its exploits in Laos and Vietnam. Except for a handful of well-researched histories, many were intensely personal on-the-ground (and up-in-the-sky) accounts written for general readership.

Lately, as a result of the release of previously classified U.S. government documents, more serious works by historians and academics are now available. The main characters are no longer the airmen and village development workers of previous accounts. They are the desk-bound, high-level bureaucrats in Washington D.C's State, CIA and Pentagon offices. Declassified documents reveal how they were really the people in charge, framing the policies and directives that affected thousands of lives in Laos. Here are two volumes released in 2012 (both available from Amazon.com).

"Before The Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos 1954 - 1961" by William J. Rust (University Press of Kentucky, 323 pages).

Rust, a magazine writer, digs his hands into boxes and boxes of official correspondence between and among policy makers in Washington DC and Vientiane, to trace in chronological sequence the quagmire (the swamp, the sticky mess) that America got into in Laos. It all began in 1955 when U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles brought with him to Vientiane a \$2 million check that he handed over to the new Lao government. (In 1954 Laos became newly independent from France). The money would help fund the Lao armed forces, unpaid for months, to fight a rising Vietnamese communist-



influenced native Pathet Lao insurgency. Military aid rose to \$40 million before the end of the 1950s, approximately 80 percent of total U.S. assistance. By 1975 when the U.S. terminated its military and economic aid (the latter estimated at more than \$830 million), the Royal Armed Forces suffered 20,000 dead, 30,000 among the CIA-supported "secret" Hmong tribe guerrillas, and some 500 Americans (mostly Air America personnel). Civilian casualties "can only be guessed at but 200,000 dead and twice that number wounded would be a conservative estimate" wrote historian Martin Stuart-Fox.

What makes Rust's book fascinating reading are the verbatim exchanges of memos, slugging matches between feuding U.S. civilian and military bureaucracies – USAID, the State Department, Pentagon and the CIA. Each had its own game plan to win the war. At one time, while one side supported the Lao government, another was arming a Lao general marching on the capital to depose it. (Some 500 Filipinos

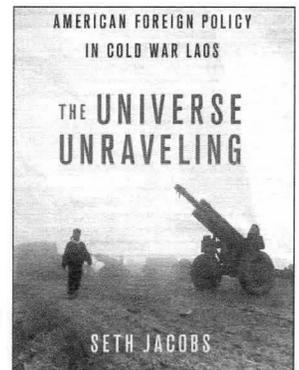
survived this 1960 Phoumi vs Kong Le bloody Battle of Vientiane); and in 1965, the OB hospital district in That Luang was a three-day battle zone, Phoumi vs Abhay (read OB eye-witness accounts reprinted in Mekong Newsletter May 2007 from our website www.mekongcircle.org).

Rust's thesis is that the quagmire is the U.S.'s own making. Obsessed with the messianic belief that a "neutral" Laos is the road to Communist victory, it unleashed its ample, formidable resources— military, economic, cultural, counterinsurgency, diplomatic – to keep the country in its sphere of influence. If Laos falls to these God-less commies, then South Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, will topple like dominoes, as the Cold War doctrine warned. The U.S. would fight to the last Lao to keep the government pro-US rightist, and as it turned out, to the last Hmong. By the 1970s, the tribe's depleted fighting force was fielding 10-year old boys. It reminds one of the steadfast U.S. support for Marcos during his brutal, dictatorial 1972-1986 martial law rule – "he's a s.o.b, but he is our s.o.b. because we need our Philippine bases."

Cocooned in the relative safety of the large towns along the Mekong River, Mekong Circle members were largely distant from all the war carnage. But our health and social workers saw first hand the miseries of refugee camps. Some of our doctors and nurses treated the war-wounded at Hmong's northern stronghold in Sam Thong. As we tended to our healing and teaching missions, we were really at the mercy of power movers in very distant places. From the pieces of papers in archival boxes, Rust has shown how vulnerable we were then, unbeknownst to many of us. And how righteous powerful men (they were all men), went totally blind with ideological fervor.

"The Universe Unraveling :American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos" by Seth Jacobs (Cornell University Press, 328 pgs).

In 1961, outgoing U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower passed on to incoming President John Kennedy a foreign policy bundle of thorns. Up there on the list, together with Cuba, the Dominican Republic, the Congo, Berlin and Vietnam, was Lay-os (as Kennedy pronounced it) during his first press conference on the subject, flanked by an outline of the country on an easel, showing red tints on large spots of the map. Obviously, the Pathet Lao, aided by their North Vietnamese allies, were winning this arena of the Cold War. We will not allow foreign aggression to take over Lay-os, he warned in a not too subtle challenge to the



Communist neighboring countries – China and North Vietnam. We will make our stand here, hinting at deploying U.S. ground troops on Laos soil. It had already done so in South Vietnam. A few hundred "advisers" there were already metamorphosing into thousands and thousands of U.S. combatants.

In truth, as Seth Jacobs, an associate professor of history at Boston College in Massachusetts, USA, found out from his research, Kennedy's advisers convinced him that Laos was no place for the U.S. to wage a conventional war. It was a "logistical nightmare" – deep valleys, triple-canopy jungle, lacking airstrips and all-weather roads – that America's mechanized forces would be nearly impossible to supply,

defend or transport in such a terrain.

But there was another reason. Let Jacobs say it – “The record of policymaking deliberations under Eisenhower bristles with complaints about how difficult it was to get Lao soldiers and politicians to behave like cold warriors or even to recognize that there was a war on. To American strategists, the Lao lacked every virtue desirable in an ally – courage, brawn, intelligence, maturity, acumen, morality, vigor – while possessing in abundance every shortcoming likely to render someone susceptible to red coercion: cowardice, feebleness, ignorance, childishness, injudiciousness, depravity, indolence.” His words? No, he paraphrases actual statements drawn from official documents of policy makers as well as the “prestige press” that parroted them. The Lao, they wrote, were “docile,” “apathetic,” “gutless,” “spineless,” “useless,” “feeble,” “dreamy,” “unprepared philosophically to defend themselves,” “lacking in discipline and morale.”

Jacobs, so incensed at what he considered outright racism, names names. Virtually every American, he says, in a position to influence U.S.-Lao relations between 1954 and 1962 – presidents, cabinet members, military leaders, Foreign Service officials, aid workers, missionaries, editors, publish-

ers, columnists and reporters, drew from the same grab bag of pejoratives to characterize the people they professed to be helping.” Kennedy, finally deciding that he would not shed American blood for people who would not fight for themselves (he called them “homosexuals”), agreed to the 13-nation 1962 Geneva accord that declared a “neutral” Laos. It pulled out its advisers (including some 500 ECCOI Filipinos teaching Lao soldiers). America would instead choose to make its stand with the South Vietnamese whom it considered made of aggressive, sterner stuff.

To his credit, Jacobs writes that not all Lao were battle-shy; only the royalists were. He also asks us to consider why they were reluctant warriors. Squeezed between much more powerful neighbors China, Vietnam and Thailand, it would have been impossible for Laos to adopt the pro-Western course demanded by Washington. “Neutrality was the only option for Lao patriots seeking to keep their nation intact, independent and at peace...(This) never got through to the Americans.” North Vietnamese fighters did not vacate; the CIA sneaked back to lead their Hmong “secret” army. A “neutral” Laos did not happen, never had a chance. In December 1975, the victorious Pathet Lao marched into Vientiane.

The Lao By The Bay

California has been one of the gateway cities to America since Laotians began coming here in large numbers beginning in 1975. Now there is a directory that tells how they have thrived in one city -- the San Francisco Bay area.

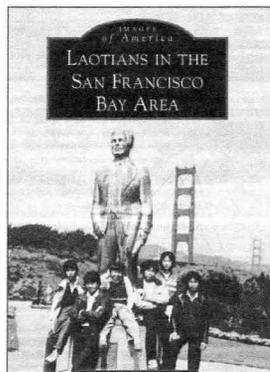
At 11,545 Lao living in the Bay, they are not among the largest settlers in the country. But in California, they outnumber those in greater Los Angeles (5,000 to 8,000), Sacramento (9,814), San Diego (7002) and Fresno (6,381). The 2010 U.S. census counted 260,073 Lao in the entire country. That includes the Hmong, 64,422 of them who have clus-

tered in Minneapolis-St.-Paul in the state of Minnesota as well as in Wisconsin. Seattle in Washington State and North Carolina are also favored places for the Lao immigrants.

The publishers of “Laotians in the San Francisco Bay Area” say that since the early 1980s, the area remains a hub for

their culture, history and community services. The book features photos of community leaders, associations such as the Lao Seri, the Laotian American National Alliance, Southeast Asian Cultural Heritage & Musical Performing Arts, and the Lao Khmu community from the East Bay.

Contact seachampa@gmail.com to purchase a copy



Laos Geeks To Meet Again

Scholars from around the world who hold a special affinity for many things Lao will exchange cards this year for the 4th International Conference on Lao Studies. From April 19 to 21, 2013, hundreds will gather at the University of Wisconsin (UW) in Madison, Wisconsin, USA. Mekong Circle presented a paper on our Laos activities at the first conference (2005 in Illinois, 350 participants) and at the second (2007 Arizona where we staffed a table with our liter-

ature. It was at Arizona State University where we met Larry Ashum, a bibliographer for UW who asked for (and has received, including some Balitang Laos issues) Mekong Circle



documents to add to the university's Southeast Asian studies collection. It has one of the most extensive such

archives in the country, among them 3,000 photos of Laos from 1957 to 1969. Take a look at 1969-circa photos of OB Vang Vieng and OB Sayaboury hospitals at <http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/SEAiT/Laos>. They are from the collection of an American anthropologist, Joel Halpern, who said that OB "was extremely important in bolstering the limited and fragmented Lao health system that existed at that time" (1960s). For those wishing to go the 2013 conference, log on to www.laos-studies.org/conferences.

SOME NOTABLE NOTES



Meet the New Team 2013-2014
Elected during the August 4, 2012 Board of Directors meeting, from left: Jojo Esteban, Vanessa Thongma, Jun Ilustrisimo, Pete Fuentecilla, Tony Sazon, Bik Marquez, Dick Abad, Tacing Atienza, Jun Belicena, Rusty Ramos, Sam Malaythong and Pat Gonzales. The Board had decided to drop the number of directors to 11 from 17. Not shown in photo is Sonia Ballo. Also elected officers were Nor Tapang, Joe Guevara, Vic Lagleva, Dickie Labao and Nhot Sihapanya

Old Reliables

Our largest U.S.-based Mekong Circle chapter -- Southern California's Los Angeles -- fresh from their triumphant hosting of our 9th reunion in 2012 elected its officers for the January 2013 to December 2014 term. President is **Juliet "Jojo" Esteban**, vice president **Tony Atienza**, treasurer **Fidel Padayao** and secretary **Clem Gonzales**.

If these names (and faces) are familiar, they should be. They are among the stalwart pillars of the same Los Angeles chapter that has hosted four of our reunions since 1995. And... will wonders never cease?... they have volunteered to do it again in 2014, in case our planned cruise to Mexico won't pull through. Our Las Vegas, Nevada members have expressed their willingness to do 2014 in their city, secure in the knowledge that Los Angeles members (a close neighbor) will probably do much of the heavy lifting for them. Our Nevada-based members are few in numbers, that's why.

A Cruise to Mexico or Las Vegas or Frisco

On a poster paper in one of the meeting rooms at the Marriott Hotel, Board members tallied the votes for the 2014 venue proposals -- Texas, Laos, Australia, Chicago, Manila, Las Vegas, an ocean cruise. A three-to-seven day cruise took the most votes, Las Vegas or San Francisco coming in as an alternates, in case a target of 100 minimum ship passengers are not signed up for an August 2014 sailing. The Mexican itinerary choices are Cabo San Lucas, Puerto Vallarta, Maxatlan, Catalina Island, Ensenada; boarding at any one of the following California ports: Long Beach, San Pedro or San Diego. The Board, and not a specific chapter, will take charge of the cruise project. It will mail out surveys to members to gauge tentative turnout.

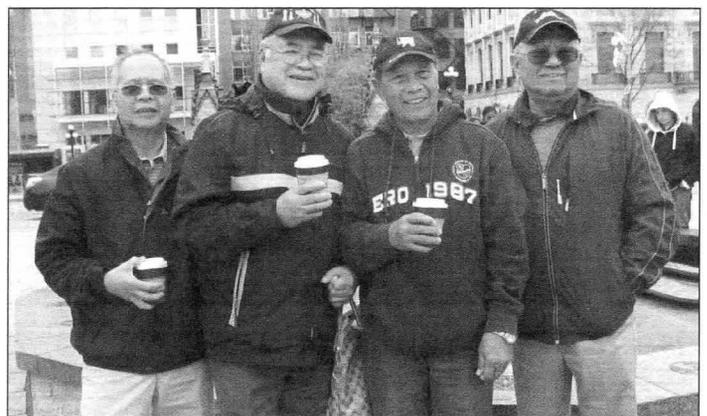
Update Mekong Circle Philippines

Our Manila-based affiliate has named a new set of officers: **Jun Belicena**, president; **Toti de la Paz**, treasurer; **Sonia Ballo**, secretary. Previous presidents were **Frisco San Juan** and **Dom Menguito** who led our 2008 reunion organizing committee there. Our Philippine colleagues have kept close relations with the resident Lao ambassadors posted in Manila, attending Mekong Circle reunions hosted by **Ben** and

Jovit Revilla in their Los Banos, Laguna residence. In turn, the Lao Embassy in Manila makes it a point to include our Filipino colleagues at receptions for visiting Lao dignitaries. Most recently, **Jun** and **Bing Belicena**, **Jeanne Menguito**, **Cecile** and **Manding Datu** were invited November 25, 2012 to a reception at the Lao Embassy by Ambassador **Malayvieng Sakonhnhinhom**. They met **Dr. Som Ock Kingsada**, deputy minister at the Lao government's Ministry of Health who told them he trained in surgery at the OB hospital in Vientiane under Drs. **Jose Sanchez**, **Raul de Jesus** and **Gil Cabrera**. One of the Ambassador's daughter attends De La Salle University in Manila. Among the other guests were some 14 Lao students at the agricultural college of the University of the Philippines in Los Banos, all friends of Jovit.

The Second Time Around

They gathered in March 2011 in Corpus Christi, Texas, these Mekong Circle buddies from their years as aircraft technicians with Air America and Continental Air Services in Laos. They enjoyed the reunion so much they said they should do it again. And so they did, from May 5 to 12, 2012, with their spouses, and across the length of breath of Canada -- Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Niagara Falls. They were **Art Linchangco**, **Nor** and **Brenda Tapang**, **Peping** and **Siony Mendoza**, **Vic** and **Violy Gopez**, **Gene** and **Ella Hernandez**, **Hernan** and **Thelma Aquino**.



On the road with hot coffee and warm comradeship, from left: Nor Tapang, Peping Mendoza, Art Linchangco and Jun Ilustrisimo.

TRIBAL SCHOOLS UPDATE



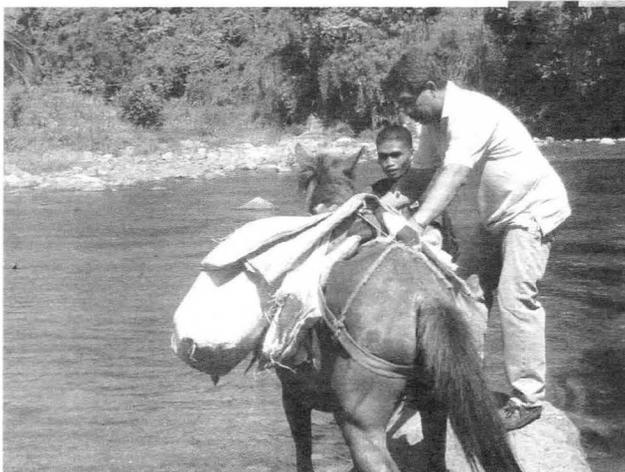
Sixth Graders Graduate

In an outdoor setting last year, on a bamboo and straw “stage” built just right for 19 children, they stand proudly on bare ground to mark passage to high school. They are among the 200 pupils in two schools in the town of Sta. Maria, Davao del Sur province, in the southern Philippines.

In March 2011, Mekong Circle adopted these remote elementary schools as its educational project. We have been sending cash donations and boxes of books and school supplies. Operated by a Catholic diocese, they receive no government funds and depend largely on donations.

Some 350 books have been shipped to the children as well as toys and clothing. In photo at right, children waved books and balls received in a shipment sent in September 2011. “One inspiring scene happened when the first box arrived in June 2012,” emailed Fr. Nestor Lisondra. “One kindergarten kid refused his bag of toys. Instead he cried and cried for one of the picture books. It made my day!”

From his parish post in Digos City, capital of Davao del Sur, he says his visits to the isolated schools are epic journeys “that can take three hours by jeep or a motor bike, then by horse and on foot.



It is quite muddy and slippery. Travel is easier during the dry season.”

Send your tax-deductible cash donations to Mekong Circle International, 1200 Bayhill, Suite 119, San Bruno, California 94006 USA. Tel. 650 589 3522. Fr. Lisondra can be reached at frneli22@gmail.com. His diocese office is at the Home of the Clergy, Aurora Extension St., Davao del Sur, Digos City, Philippines. This is the address to send your “balikbayan” boxes of books and school supplies. Telephone 082 553 5852

Tradition of Service Continues

Following in our steps: Filipinos in Laos 2013

Maria Lumen B. Isleta is the third consecutive lady Ambassador assigned to Vientiane. Elisabeth Buensuceso hosted our Mekong Circle group tour in 2008. She was followed by Marilyn Alarilla. When Ms. Isleta arrived, Vientiane was in the whirlwind of preparations for the November 5-6, 2012 gathering of the 9th Asia-Europe Meeting Summit. World leaders from 46 countries, including Philippine President Benigno S. Aquino III, would descend upon the city with their considerable entourages. (Indeed new colorful villas were being built to house them). The last time the capital girded for an international-scale conference was the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in 2004. President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo attended. We asked Ambassador Isleta to submit the experience of her first year in Laos. Below is an edited version of her memoir.

I arrived in Vientiane, Laos, on 6 November 2011 to assume my post as the new Philippine Ambassador to the Lao People's Democratic Republic. It was my first assignment as Ambassador. I was thrilled and anxious at the same time. But more than anything, I was honored to be given an ASEAN posting to which Laos belongs - quite a prestigious posting. Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert del Rosario has said that ASEAN is the bedrock of Philippine Foreign Policy in the 21st century.

A very warm welcome greeted me from the officers and staff of the Philippine Embassy led by Third Secretary and Vice Consul Analyn de Leon-Ratonel, as well as by my counterparts from the ASEAN countries - a distinct practice in ASEAN capitals that includes Vientiane, Laos whenever a member Ambassador arrives to assume posting. That brief meeting with my counterparts at the VIP lounge of Wattay International Airport was followed by a buffet dinner hosted by the Embassy staff and their families at the Mercure (formerly Novotel) Hotel.

My first encounter with the members of the Filipino community was with Ms. Shirley Go, the front office manager of Mercure Hotel. Ms. Go has lived in Laos for more than fifteen years. She was, as I came to realize, representative of the majority of Filipinos living

Laos - fluent in Lao, knowledgeable about the local culture, with good reputations for hard work, initiative and pleasant dispositions.

The Filipinos in Laos number, as of last count, about 520. Of the total, 19 percent work in the mining sector; 16 percent are teachers; 11 percent are consultants (education, health, agriculture sectors); and 10 percent are connected with the hotel /hospitality industry. There are also accountants, heavy equipment operators (most in the mining sector as well), engineers, household service workers, nurses.

Dr. Benjamin Samson, an agronomist, is the International Rice Research Institute representative to Laos, promoting new varieties, crop management and post-harvest technologies. A colleague Dr. Ruben Lampayan, a water management specialist, assists him in carrying out this work.

Dr. Cecile Lantican is the country coordinator for Family Health International, a US Agency For International Development -funded project. She is the "go-to" person for any health concerns, particularly regarding communicable diseases in Laos.

Consultants, among them Dr. Bernadette Gonzales, are very active in the Lao education sector, developing school and vocational curriculum. Mr. Tomas Africa, formerly the head of the Philippine National Statistical Office assists the government's census programs. A group of Filipinos that include Ms. Marilyn Manila train Lao rural women how to benefit from microfinance banking.

Filipino mining engineers -- geologists, metallurgists, surveyors, supervisors -- are among some 77 employed by various foreign-based mining companies.

Filipinos are building the Xayaboury Dam, the hydroelectric project that has recently begun construction, and which will be the first run-of-river dam to be built on the lower Mekong.

Our teachers are in the forefront of teaching English in practically all the international schools operating in Vientiane and elsewhere. Ms.

Illuminada Wiman has organized a group of teachers called Filipino Teachers' Network that coordinates seminars and workshops to upgrade English language teaching skills.

Filipinos are also in Luang Prabang, the UNESCO World Heritage site, that is the front and center of Laos' tourism promotion success. Working in boutique hotels like Amantaka, the six-star hotel of the Aman Group of Companies is Ms. Paulet Custado. At the Maison Souvannaphoum, Mr. Daryl Miguel Miego helps manage this four-star hotel of the Banyan Group.

The Filipino nuns attached to the St Paul Catholic Church in Vientiane -- Sisters Jesse, Cora and Mila -- attend to the spiritual needs and counseling of Filipino and Lao parishioners. Our household service workers are in the household staff of foreign diplomats including ambassadors who have expressed great satisfaction and appreciation for the service they render.

In my talks with Lao government officials, not a few have remarked, with evident pining for the past, of their memories of Filipino doctors and hospitals throughout the country during the 1960s and 1970s. This connection has opened doors for me. The fond memories of OB, the friendships that had been established, the linkages that time nor distance could not erase --- all these are still etched in the minds and hearts of many Laotians.

I am quick to remind them that many Filipinos, although smaller in number than the estimated 900 in the mid-1960s, are still in their midst, continuing to share their expertise. They are contributing to the development of their country, molding minds, building bridges (literally and figuratively), and establishing friendships.

Below: President Aquino, center, in Vientiane with Ambassador Isleta (third from right) and Filipino children dressed in Lao wear.



MEKONG CIRCLE

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Mekong Circle International was founded in 1975. It is a non-profit 501(c)(3) public benefit organization incorporated in the State of California, USA. It's founding members served in Southeast Asia as technicians and advisers in various fields, among them —education, public health, engineering, social work, aid administration and humanitarian work. An affiliate, Mekong Circle Philippines, is based in Manila. Comments on this issue can be emailed to fuentecila@aol.com