

Helping Disaster Victims and Publishing Books

celebrants, too groggy or foolish enough to bring along their checkbooks. You see, he was seeking donations for our first charitable project, a scholarship program, Iskolars Ng Mekong, for abused women living under the care of nuns at a dormitory in Quezon City, the Philippines. Said one surprised target: “he was practically pulling my wallet out of my trousers.” Over five years, members donated tax-deductible \$10,500 to help 16 women complete their college studies. It was also in Chicago that our second book was released “Goodbye Vientiane: Untold Stories of Filipinos in Laos” by Penny Villarica Flores.

Reunion No. 6



Reunion No. 8

Anaheim, California

September 24 – 26, 2010

It started off the traditional way, a baci-reception at the Florida Mall Hotel in Orlando, Florida on August 11, 2006. Then the next morning, 177 boarded Royal Caribbean Lines’ “Sovereign of the Seas” for a three-day cruise to the Bahamas. Coordinator Lewie and the late Pete Gonzales, of Kissimmee, Florida, short of Florida-based Mekong Circle members to help organize, hatched the brilliant idea of letting Tess Papa, a cruise travel agent handle all the details of booking members, reserving rooms for our functions, and sitting us all together in the dining areas. Our second day picnic was on the cruise lines’ private island, Coco Cay, a stopover on the way to Nassau, the Bahamas. We had a picnic shed of our own for lamvong-ing, guzzling Coco Loco, a concoction of mango, orange juice, papaya and grenadine liqueur. In the 110 degree heat, you needed gallons of it to cool off. The ship’s cooks and waiters, most of them Filipinos, served us our special orders of “tinola” and bowls of steamed white rice, dishes not on the regular menu. Pete and Lewie, it was reported, won big at the onboard casinos. Seb Eusebio of Las Vegas, Nevada was another winner of another kind – he and his clan of 22 relatives, the most ever from one family, joined the cruise.

Reunion No. 7



Reunion No. 9

San Diego, California

August 3 – 5, 2012

The November 7- 9, 2008 gathering broke away from the confines of the U.S. mainland when 179 members celebrated at the Renaissance Hotel in Manila. Mekong Circle has about a thousand members worldwide, a majority living in the U.S. Perhaps a third of the membership, residents of the Philippines, took on the challenge of showing off that they too can throw a memorable party. The souvenir program signaled what they were capable of – a message from the President of the Republic Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, no less, as well as from the Secretary of Tourism. Credit those to Frisco San Juan, president of our Philippine affiliate, a well-connected political figure who headed the organizing committee. Highlight of the dinner dance was a spectacular show of Philippine culture – songs and folk dances and duets by sopranos. We laid a floral wreath at the base of the Rizal monument, the national hero, at Luneta Park where a TV crew threw a question at Mekong Circle President Fidel Padayao, an insinuating query about what we have done for the Philippines. Fidel was ready with "Iskolars Ng Mekong." Left unsaid was our donations to the disastrous typhoon Ondoy victims of 2009 and the Leyte mudslide of 2006 in the southern Philippines. Excursions to the Presidential Malacanang Palace and to the Tagaytay Lake resort filled in the cultural delights. Then Bing and Jun Belicena hosted a dinner at their residence in suburban Paranaque. By the way, Mekong Circle Philippines is also registered as a nonprofit organization with the Philippine Securities & Exchange Commission. It has its own set of officers (Sonia Ballo shepherded the bureaucratic process), hold their annual reunions at Ben and Jovit Revilla's residence in Los Banos, Laguna. The Manila-based Lao Ambassador is always a guest, and

Our Lao Colleagues Show Their Stuff

and he insures that Mekong Circle Philippine members are on the invitation list for Embassy functions.

From Manila after the festivities, the second edition of the “Return To Laos” took off for Vientiane for members on their way back to the USA and Canada. Twenty-seven members who were not able to join the 2002 tour arrived November 4 for a week to see the country where a large part of their young lives, some 40 years ago, took shape. They may as well have landed in another planet, so much has changed. (Read diary in our website www.mekongcircle.org and click on the label “Return To Laos”) .What can stop the overwhelming flood of memories as they looked at some places still intact (the OB House; the Air America apartment); to hear the muffled temple drum and the crow of the rooster in the misty dawn, the monks emerging with their silver bowls; to stand at the banks of the Mekong River near Tha Deva, contemplating its waters, neither mystic nor majestic, just as muddy as ever; to slurp a fragrant bowl of feuj noodle; to gaze up at the golden spire of the That Luang rising to the bluest of a blue sky; to touch the lustrous red of the frangipani blossoms? (Okay, maestro, cue the violins, vibrato – "Babalik Ka Rin"). Mementoes they left were a laryngoscope set and blood pressure monitors, donated to the Mahosot Hospital. Several copies of our two history-memoir books were added to the titles at the Monument Books bookshop in Vientiane. And in one corner of the Philippine Embassy grounds, a memorial was unveiled (re-dedicated actually, because it was first put up there during the first visit in 2002). A plaque remembers Mekong Circle members – 17 Filipinos – who died on Laos soil, all in non-combatant circumstances. Eleven were OB volunteers, six were Air America technicians.

Reunion No.8

The camaraderie was emotionally high, as usual. And so was the weather, perhaps the defining feature for the 225 members who attended our September 24 - 26, 2010 reunion in Anaheim, California. Jun Ilustrisimo and Joe Barcelona headed the organizing committee. If you happened to turn on the weather forecast the morning of our picnic September 26 at Twila Reid Park, it said to expect a 100F heat wave for the entire Los Angeles region. It was 102F at the park in the shade. It felled Cecile Datu who had to be rushed by ambulance to the hospital. Many others sought refuge under trees or stood as immobile as stone statues., refusing to participate in “animal” games orchestrated by Jojo Esteban. To introduce a new twist to the hotel activities, a mini-festival of new documentary films with Laos settings was screened at the Anaheim Marriott Suite. Produced by German, Irish and U.S. filmmakers, two had never been shown in the USA. They drew a sparse crowd. Members would rather do some bonding at the bar or at the malls. Dickie Labao escorted Fr. Lucien Bouchard, of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, one of the Christian missionaries in pre-1975 Laos, for his first visit to Disneyland and Universal Studios. Fr. Bouchard trekked through valleys and mountains to visit our remote field teams in northern Laos. At the picnic, Bounthan Oudom who flew in from Vientiane sounded the call : “See you in Laos in 2012”. Impressed by a large turnout of some 50 of our Lao colleagues, she saw the opportunity to bid for the next reunion site.

Reunion No. 9

Instead we returned to California...for the 5th time, to the open, welcoming arms of our selfless, fearless, hardworking, faithful (stop it already!) colleagues. In past reunions, the events were steered by organizing committees mainly composed of our Filipino members because they happen to be the most numerous in their chapters. At San Diego for the August 3 to 5, 2012 reunion, our Lao colleagues took charge. They felt their time had come. California is home to most of the Lao diaspora that fled Laos in 1975 and years after. Indeed San Diego counts 7,002 Lao in the 2010 census, ranking it fifth out of the top ten U.S. cities with the most Lao residents. And they have reunion history to bank on – in Chicago, the attendance of OB nursing graduates imbued the reunion an extra dose of emotion; in Florida/Bahamas, 57 joined the cruise, almost 30 percent of the total attendees.

A strong Lao flavor always infused our reunions — the baci, the lamvong, the shimmering sinh gowns of the ladies – Lao and Filipino – (but as yet no samphot among the men). They are fitting reminders of our common past that each reunion reinforces. Organizing committee co-chairs were Sam Malaythong, Khamsy Siharath and Pat Gonzales. Sam welcomed the 200 attendees at the dinner dance at Marriott Mission Valley Hotel, with the Lao national anthem played on his saxophone, perhaps the only time it was ever done anywhere. Dr. Sombat Senethone, former medical director of the OB Hospital in Vientiane, in his address, said he missed Laos because he had to learn to eat hamburgers when he sought refuge in California. Instead of a picnic on the third day, there was a buffet lunch at the Fountain Terrace overlooking the pool. The main course: hamburgers. We had wished Tony Victa was around to hassle donations for our Tribal School Project (apart from a panel display and fliers on the tables). In March 2011, Mekong Circle had adopted two remote schools in Davao del Sur, southern Philippines, as our educational project. About 200 students from an indigenous population have been receiving our donations of books, classroom supplies, and cash. The fifth shipment we sent October 2013 also contained ninety-nine used tennis balls among the crayons, dictionaries, and encyclopedia. Why tennis balls? They serve as good padding and perhaps nurture our first world class Rogerio Federerico and Andres Magasti.

– by J, “Pete Fuentesilla

Reunion No. 10

Onwards to Las Vegas, Nevada, USA on October 17, 18 and 19, 2014.

History has served our reunions well. Let us see you there.

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MEKONG CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL 2014 REUNION LAS VEGAS, NEVADA USA OCTOBER 17-19, 2014

Reunion Remembrances



Reunion No. 1
Marriott Hotel, Baldwin Park, California, USA
May 20, 1995



Reunion No.2
Bonaventure Hotel, Los Angeles, California, USA
July 25 – 27, 1998



Reunion No.3
Embassy Suite, Burlingame, California, USA
July 28 – 30, 2000

Why We Cherish All Nine of Them and Look Towards No. 10

How do we count our reunions? Does “10” mean we are going to be a decade old next year? Actually, Mekong Circle is 38 years old in 2014, counting from March 20, 1976, when the first officers of Mekong Circle USA were elected in California. Filipino expats from Laos had been settling in the state for years after their exodus from Laos in 1975. When their numbers had reached a critical mass, their association, like a star-sun, ignited, followed by the formation of the planetary chapters.

By another reckoning (and here’s where the “10” comes in), our age dates from May 20, 1995, our first once-every-two years reunion. Okay, have you figured it out? Anyway, whether we are nearing middle age or coming of age as a juvenile, it is good to know that we have come this far to celebrate our 10th reunion or our 38th birthday. So, how do we remember the previous nine?

Reunion No. 1

Before the first one in 1995, there was a dark void. Then Narding and Bella Hilario of North Hollywood, California headed a committee of Los Angeles settlers that got together former employees in Laos of Operation Brotherhood, the U.S. Agency For International Development, Eastern Construction Company, Continental Air Services, Air America and other agencies – all 270 of them – in the Marriott Hotel in Baldwin Park. Before this event, there had been much talk over the years during their many potluck lunches in their homes that their next get-together setting should be outside their living rooms. And so we remember May 20, 1995 as our coming out party, Narding and Bella as the prime movers, seeding our universe with galactic reunions to come. Others remembered it too in their own ways. Philippine Consul General Emmanuel Fernandez, in his souvenir program message, said the event should serve as “rallying to the call of Philippine President Fidel V. Ramos to work in solidarity towards redeeming the promise of a new Philippines.” Khamchong Luangpraseuth, president of the Lao Mai Issara Institute, followed up, remarking that this historic occasion brought back memories of learning the “cha cha Filipino style and enjoying the chicharon, especially after a good siesta.”

Reunion No. 2

Our expats in Texas signaled their willingness to host the second one, then withdrew. Los Angeles came to the rescue, Pol Custodio, in the lead. There were 195 attendees on July 25 – 27, 1998 at the Bonaventure Hotel. It must be said at this point that throwing a big association party was not a big deal for Mekong Circle members. After taking root in their new adopted homeland, they had the years to assume leadership of local Filipino associations and to organize

From Potluck Brunches to Ballroom Lamvongs



Reunion No. 4
New York City
August 2- 4, 2004



Reunion No. 5
Chicago, Illinois
August 6 – 8, 2004

new ones. That meant organizing rounds of annual induction balls and anniversary parties. Pol, for example, organized the Filipino American Real Estate Licensees of Los Angeles in 1986 and the Cabiao Association of the USA in 1992. The expats could easily apply to partying the seasoned skills they brought with them as physicians, engineers, nurses, accountants, educators, technicians, administrators.

Reunion No 3

Reunion No. 3, in San Francisco...again in California! What’s going on? Truth be told, folks, our expats, as we said, knew how to organize parties. This gateway state of the West is home to the most number of Mekong Circle USA members, some 250 in 2000 from a count of the directory names in the souvenir program, which means not much heavy lifting would be required to fill the hotel ballroom with attendees, in this instance, 206 of them in the Embassy Suite in Burlingame on July 28, 2000. Indeed almost half of the attendees lived “from the immediate environ of the reunion venue” said Bik Marquez and Jojo Pablo, event coordinators. But they noted that a sprinkling of attendees came from far and wide – Tennessee, New Jersey, Washington, Florida, Pennsylvania, Nevada, New York, Texas, Montana, Ohio, Illinois, Oregon. And from afar – Australia, Italy, the Virgin Islands and the Philippines. Hence it was at this reunion that Mekong Circle USA had formally globalized into Mekong Circle International in membership and as a legal entity incorporated in California

Reunion No. 4

Its incorporation into a “public benefit corporation for charitable purposes” – standard legalese to be listed as a nonprofit organization – almost derailed Reunion No. 4 in New York city in 2002. A quarrel that erupted among our Los Angeles members about the manner of the incorporation dimmed prospects of California members flying to New York. That the quarrel simmered for almost a year is a long story by itself we will not get into because in hindsight it was the proverbial tempest in a cup of cassava coffee. What really panicked the New York organizers led by the late Sas Sayong of New Jersey was that the dates they picked – August 2, 3 and 4 – happened to be less than year after the World Trade Center attack in Manhattan and the launch of the U.S. global war on terrorism.

The city remained in a lockdown mood, anxious, fearful. Who in his right mind would dare wing across the continent to attend a party there? Not to mention the steep airfare and hotel costs (oh my, those hotel surcharges!) for Mekong Circle Californians whom the New York organizers depended on to compose the largest contingent of attendees for the first reunion on the East Coast. Moreover, New York unlike their California colleagues, was short-handed. Only 11 turned up for its first planning meeting on Sept. 8, 2001 at the Lemon Grass Grill where former OB Lao procurement person Walter Voradeth manned the cash register. Three days

Cruising A River, Then Crossing An Ocean

later that restaurant was crushed, under a heap, several stories high, of rubble from the World Trade Center collapse. Walter, that morning was home in Queens dressing up for work.



Reunion No. 6
Florida / Bahamas
August 11- 13, 2006

Yes, who indeed would dare come? 167 brave souls did. Was it the promise of a leisurely, four-hour sunset cruise aboard the double deck Paddle Wheel Queen yacht on the Hudson River around Manhattan, dining, dancing, sailing on sun-dappled waters, a skyline backdrop of skyscrapers gliding on the horizon, to catch a warm sea breeze on your receding hairline? (ok Maestro, cue here the “Blue Danube”, moderato). It certainly was a change from the usual hotel-based ballroom reunions of the past. Or was it to flaunt bragging rights – “I went, I survived, I had fun!” The organizers heaved a big sigh of relief when it was over; nobody fell off the yacht; only Linda Mendoza from Pennsylvania suffered seasickness (on the Hudson’s calm, non-oceanic waters, for heaven’s sake!) We were glad we had incorporated the association to shield us from personal suits.

Apart from the merrymaking New York 2000 initiated projects to fulfill the association’s mission to tell the world about our Lao service. Our website went online. Publication of a history book “Filipinos In Laos” by Fr. Miguel Bernad and Pete Fuentesilla

Reunion No. 7
Manila, Philippines
November 7 – 9, 2008



was announced. A return to Laos tour of 17 U.S. and Canadian based members left on November 5, 2002 for a week’s stay. For all of them, it was their first visit to Laos since 1975. A courtesy call on the Lao Minister of Public Health elicited an official invitation for the resumption of our medical programs. Another outcome – before New York organized, committee members (now numbering expats from Pennsylvania and New Jersey), rarely saw, spoke with or bumped into each other. They do now.

Reunion No. 5

Reunion No. 5 in Chicago (August 6, 7 & 8, 2004) resounded with the delighted squeals and much hugging of the graduates of the OB School of Practical Nursing, meeting each other for their first school reunion since the school closed in Vientiane in 1969. A school reunion within a Mekong Circle reunion – oh gosh and golly, it was too much. Chuang Chomthipe, (class of 1963) arriving from Hoschton, Georgia, was so eager to see

faces unseen for 35 years, he stationed himself at the registration table an hour before it opened. Altogether 20 former graduates, with their spouses and children, joined the 310 attendees at the Hyatt Regency Hotel. Credit for the large turnout, the most so far, went to the tenacious persuasion of the late Puring Roque-de Jesus of Oshkosh, Ohio. For two years before the event, her phone calls to points from Australia to Russia, reached out to members. You must remember her then in the Hyatt Hotel ballroom, the one in the stylish blue gown and white tennis shoes and a bandage above one eye, a 16-stitch gash under it, the result of tripping on her high heels; hence the switch to safer Adidas.

Our reunions are usually three-day affairs – a baci welcome ceremony and hospitality night the first day in a hotel; then a dinner-dance the second day; ending with a picnic on the third day. Chicago’s picnic was held at the expansive home grounds in Zion, Illinois of committee chairs Pete and Edith Paluay. It was also the hunting ground of former Mekong Circle treasurer Tony Vicia seeking unwary prey among the