

# MEKONG

## CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

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### Where Have All The Elephants Gone?

In August 2008, my wife Pet and I held on tightly, in a knuckle-white grip, the wicker basket strapped to the back of an elephant. We may as well be on a roller coaster on a theme park, not in a forest in Luang Prabang province, as the elephant swayed like a pendulum and plunged into huge puddles of muddy water and reared up around boulders. Any instant now, we were certain, the saddle-basket where we sat will snap loose, and we would tumble ten feet to the forest floor. Behind us, Sivilya Sivongxay and her sister, inside their basket atop another elephant were screaming their terrified heads off.

For some sinister reason, our elephant handler, had decided to take not the winding, leisurely, scenic route but the pot-holed Cross Bronx Expressway. At the end of the trail, we disembarked on a wooden platform tower, high enough so that we could look eye-to-eye with our elephant. Dark marbles on a huge deeply creased face. Mournful looking eyes – were they telling us – “end of the line for you my tourist passenger. Alas, for me, back to the Expressway, round and round, for hours on end, until one sad day, my knees will buckle and I will be one more extinct pachyderm”.

When Laos was a kingdom, from about 1353 to 1707, historians say it called itself the Land of a Million (laan) Elephants (saan), hence its old name Lane Xang. The parasol (hom) and its white (khao) color came later. In 1975 the Kingdom of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol – Lan Xang Hom Khao – ended, replaced by the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic. And Lane Xang’s royal symbol, the three-headed elephant shaded by the white parasol, became history as well.

People ask, were there really a million elephants in the land during Lane Xang’s reign? Most likely not. A 2014 survey by the University of Queensland (Australia) counted 480 domesticated or captive elephants. Elefant Asia, a French conservation group founded in 2001

and based in Sayaboury province, has estimated the total population, both captive and wild, at 1500. That’s down from 2,000 to 3,000 in the late 1980s. Smaller than the African elephant, the Asian species (smaller ears) has been estimated today at between 41,000 and 52,000 in their South and Southeast Asian habitats.

How Laos’ few thousands today dwindled from a million in 1700 years is hard to understand, even if that “million” is more myth than a real census. (Google says there are more sheep than people in New Zealand. And 50 to 60 million kangaroos vs. 22.9 million Australians. How many Lang Xang-ers to one elephant in the 14th century? Google cannot compute. )

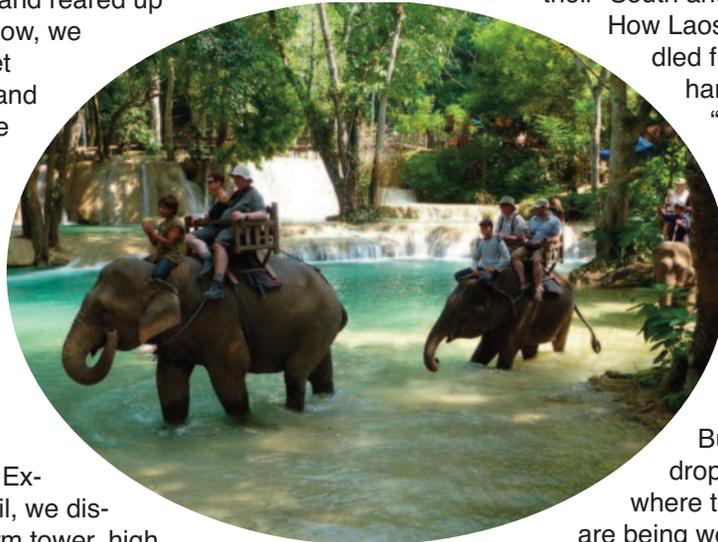
But their current numbers are dropping fast. In Sayaboury where they are most plentiful, they are being worked to death, hauling logs.

Elefant Asia says in their website that there are only two births for every 10 deaths of domesticated elephants. That is because elephant owners do not give them enough opportunities to breed. The Lao government has banned the capture of wild elephants. With demand for logs increasing, captive animals “are made to work at a furious pace. Overworked and exhausted, they do not reproduce”, says Elefant Asia. Illegal logging to China and Vietnam is rampant and difficult to control.

Moreover poachers reportedly kill ten elephants a year for their ivory tusks. As in other parts of Asia, in Laos the elephant is a revered cultural symbol, adorning temples, hotels and homes. It derives its special place in the Lao’s identity with its main habitat -- the virgin forested regions of the country -- vast, rolling expanses of dark green that stretch from horizon to horizon, like frozen ocean

swells, breathtaking panoramas of a bountiful natural resource. The Lao can rightfully proclaim: all this land is our elephant’s domain and is as much ours.

We had been to Sayaboury several times in the 1960s visiting our Oper-



The old (left) and the new Laos flag (adopted 1975)

ation Brotherhood hospital in the provincial capital. These magnificent creatures were a common sight, gently striding the village dirt roads on their way to or from their woodland workstations. There, using giant chain links wrapped around their bodies, they drag felled multi-ton tree trunks, hardly huffing or puffing. Lately, they have become the main draw to an annual mid-February Elephant Festival promoted by tourism officials and first held in 2006.

Thousands come to attend a village carnival focused on the elephant's value to the Lao's heritage, culminating in a parade. They are decked out in colorful braids and other assorted finery, lovely looking ladies on their backs, holding red paper umbrellas. As dozens of them shuffle in stately grandeur, they evoke illustrations in history books of their roles as Asian battle tanks by Lane Xang's warrior-kings during their conquering campaigns of neighboring kingdoms.

In 1975 after a communist regime took over the country, it unleashed a campaign to delete all traces of the previous royalist government. It forced the last king to abdicate and exiled his family to the northern "re-education" camps where they died. In time, his ubiquitous portrait as well as the symbol of royalty, the flag with the three-headed elephant and the white parasol, was nowhere to be seen. Woe to the artist or the architect or writer or the singer who dare invoke iconography of this recent period. Somehow the Elephant Park, three huge elephants heads on a fountain base, across from Mercure Hotel, escaped the censors. The capital abounds in royal symbolism, statues of the earliest kings – Fa Ngum, Chao Anou, Setthathirath, Sisavang Vong – anybody but Savang Vatthana, the last monarch. Apparently one of the last Marxist-Leninist

advocates of a classless society (along with Cuba, China, North Korea and Vietnam) could not entirely let go of its monarchical sentiments.

Mekong Circle members who lived in pre-revolution 1975 Laos had to own one of its most popular jewelry item. The elephant and parasol necklace was made from heavy intricately designed gold. Of the estimated 900 Filipinos who lived and worked there during this period, 20 members left with another memento they treasured most. They were awarded royal medals for their exemplary service – the Order of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol. Its prominent feature were the three heads.

Then crown prince Savang Vatthana was quoted during one of the awarding ceremonies on May 10, 1957 "I have personally observed your work in different areas. Operation Brotherhood is the type of assistance which we welcome and of which we would like to have more of because it is given and received with heartfelt sincerity and genuine goodwill. We wish that we could have more of this kind."

-- J. "Pete" Fuentesecilla, (New York)

*Note: In 1957, Laos formed its first coalition government, cobbling together the warring groups competing for power : the rightist Royalists, the leftist Pathet Lao and the neutralists. Commentators of that period likened it to the three-headed elephant logo and the Russian three-horse troika carriage. But while the horses pulled together one way, the Lao factions had irreconcilable agendas. The coalition will tear apart, they predicted. And so it did. They tried two more times over the years and failed. In the end, the leftists prevailed and established a one-headed government -- their Party, no other allowed.*

## Recording History in a Journal

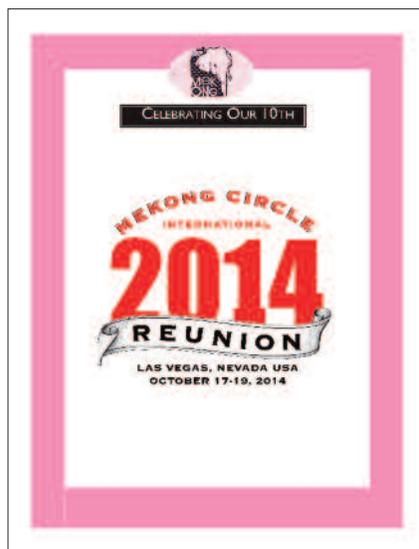
A reunion souvenir in the form of a journal program is a staple of these gatherings. And so it was in Las Vegas. But this time in 2014, the reunion organizers thought that if we made it this far, let's do a journal that traces our history from the Big Bang.

Laos is where we planted our primeval roots. And that's where the 2014 journal goes back to begin our association's genealogy. The sections of our 2014 Journal include:"

- The pioneers who arrived as early as 1956. Two of them roamed remote places where it can be said they were the first Filipinos who set foot there. One of them Fruto Bingcang celebrated his 90th birthday on June 1, 2013 in San Juan, Manila;

- The string of Lao political upheavals that we lived through: the coups and coun-

tercoups, the hurried evacuations, the accidental casualties among our ranks;



- The events that shook the world which went whooping past us during the 18

years we led cocooned lives in a kingdom where the next festival "boun" was the more important happening;

- The state of the capital Vientiane where most of us lived and worked, what it was like then, and how it has changed in 40 years;
- The new Filipino expats who now walk in our shoes: who they are and what they do;
- Remembering our past reunions, all nine of them, each a chapter in our ongoing history.

For those absent in Las Vegas to get the 60-page print copy, a digital version was emailed to all members. If you want a digital copy, email [fuentesecilla@aol.com](mailto:fuentesecilla@aol.com). Sorry no more printed copies we can spare. With the digital, feel free to forward it.

# Mission and a Dream Fulfilled



Sam Neua, 1959: first row from left Bac Bacardo, Danny Infante, Fr. Lucien Bouchard, Pilo Ocampo, Art Sanchez, Lino Mendoza. Back row, left: Irene Diaz, Peachy Jose, Cecile Salarda, Diony Salazar, Fely Yater, Penny Villarica

After eighteen years as a missionary in the northern highlands of Laos, followed by 28 years in the Borneo province of Indonesia, then a seven-and-a-half year stint as an assistant pastor in Miami, Florida, USA, Fr. Lucien Bouchard now rests a malaria-ridden body in a retirement home in Tewksbury, Massachusetts. On March 27 this year he turned 86, very happy that “dreams to be a missionary when he was younger had come true.”

A year after his ordination at the age of 26 as a member of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in June 1955, he was assigned to Laos, one of two pioneer OMI Americans. (French and Italian Oblates were there since the 1800s) From his base in the town of Sam Neua, capital of the northern province of Xieng Khouang adjoining what was then North Vietnam, his “parish” consisted of 10 tribal Hmong villages. Located on isolated mountain tops accessible only through heavily forested and hilly trails, he was in his element for two years, as he trekked from one village to another, living his missionary dream.

It so happened that in Sam Neua a team of Operation Brotherhood medical and community development workers lived and worked there. Fr. “Luke” was a regular guest at their birthday parties during which he was treated to roast pig “lechons and pork adobo.” He looked dashing “with his blue eyes, black shirt, black pants, the traditional Hmong wear,” social worker Penny Villarica-Flores remembers.

His Hmong converts would also roast a pig when his visits celebrated baptisms. “What a joyous day! Fifteen to 25 baptisms,” he said. “It takes 52 visits to complete the adult catechism lessons to prepare for their baptisms. We dance and sing. Then we have a feast. I would stay

the night. Then onwards to the next village in the morning.” On foot for one to four hours travel time.

It also happened that Xieng Khouang was hotly contested territory between the Royal Lao government and the Pathet Lao guerrillas, with the latter ruling over most of it. Government outposts with OB teams would come under attack. In 1960, the insurgents surged towards Sam Neua. A plane came in time to evacuate the women team members. Left behind, Fr. Bouchard and three other priests, together with three OB physicians, broke out into the forest to head for the safety of Ban Ban, a town six days away on foot.

Hardy trekkers, the priests made it. The physicians, one of them with feet bleeding from blisters, were overtaken and captured in a day by the guerrillas but were released after three days. While the Filipinos had their reputations for tending to friend or foe alike in their hospitals and thus can expect lenient treatment by guerrillas, the Oblates were fair game.

“They (the Pathet Lao) and we were doing the same work,” says Fr. Bouchard, “trying to win hearts and minds. We were competitors.” The Oblates consider December 8, 1885 the day when they founded the first mission station in Laos as the birth of the Catholic Church in Laos. Currently the French-founded order has 4,400 missionaries spreading the Gospel in some 70 countries including the Philippines. Before they were expelled from Laos by the Communist government in 1975, some 100 OMI missionaries had served there. Beginning with the 1954 civil war between the government and the Pathet Lao, 12 Oblate missionaries have been executed by the PL as well as five lay catechists.

They were targeted for choosing to convert Hmong who were strongly anti-PL.

Fr. Bouchard himself was on the hit list. In May 1975, returning to Vientiane “half of it was in PL hands already,” he said, “Immigration, the whole thing. So when I went to ask for my visa to get to Thailand, the guy didn’t know much about me, but maybe they found out after they saw my name and I got my visa, and that night they came to get me. The day I got my visa, I got the visa in the morning. I left at noon, I wanted to get out as soon as possible. It knew it was dangerous for me to stay. So I was very fortunate.”

Fr. Bouchard joined our 2006 Mekong Circle reunion in Florida and boarded a cruise ship for our three-day sailing to the Bahamas and served Mass. Surely, the ocean waves were quite a change from the landlocked jungle Lao landscapes that were his domain for months. During that time, he also served the tribal inhabitants of the southern provinces – Sayaboury, Attopeu, Paksong and Ban Houie Sai – dropping in for visits at OB sites in these places. In Florida he stayed at the Kissimmee residence of reunion organizers Lewie and Pete Gonzales. Pete survived the escape from Sam Neua.

As his first missionary assignment, Laos holds a special place in Fr. Bouchard’s heart. “It was my adopted country. I miss the people.” It remains dominantly Buddhist (60 percent) in an avowedly atheist country of 6.6 million people. Just as its Marxist government tried but failed to expunge Buddhism, it has not crushed the seeds of Christianity planted by the Oblates and other Christian orders. OMI estimates there are now 45,000 Lao Catholics as a new cadre of missionaries till the land.



This Newsletter issue being in some ways a look at our past, (never mind the future), we thought of rummaging through our archives (a fancy word for Manila folders and envelopes stuffed with 40-year old papers). News clippings. Photos. Letters. Email printouts. Negatives. CDs. Reports. Diaries. Magazine features. Journals. And on and on, what researchers would describe as primary source materials, and others would classify as mostly miscellany (translation: trivia) that may or may not prove interesting someday. Well, that someday has arrived. And here's a selection that you can judge as trivial or momentous.

## Oldest Mekong Circle Member

**Fruto Bingcang** celebrated his 90th birthday at a get-together in his residence in San Juan, Manila on June 1, 2013. "Bing", together with **Vitoy Naranjo**, spent October to December 1956 surveying sites for the first Operation Brotherhood teams that would relocate to Laos after their two-year program in South Vietnam would end. It can be said that they were the first Filipinos to set foot in these remote places, accessible only by plane. The first team arrived on January 7, 1957. In that year, eight other teams were dispatched to various places across the country, to the sites he and Vitoy had recommended. At the birthday party **Manding Datu** asked Bing how he managed to reach the nine-ties. He replied that each birthday anniversary he asks the Lord for a life extension of another year. Why one year? He laughed and left it at that.



## Golden Years And A Buddha

At the 50th wedding anniversary of **Bert and Irene Sobrevinas** on January 17, 2014, they invited OB colleagues of the late 1959-era to the Ilustrado restaura-



*Standing, from left: Bert, Ducky Paredes, Nita Bingcang. Front: Irene, Nati Granada, Jovit Revilla.*

rant in Intramuros, Manila. Irene, a nutritionist, is an OB Vietnam veteran, Bert an artist with OB Laos in 1959. Bert, 22 years old at that time, and his art trainees carved a statue from an acacia tree of the Buddha to offer to the monks in the That Luang neighborhood. During a visit 40 years later in Vientiane he was told the statue reposes inside Wat Sisaket among the centuries-old Buddhas in one of the most revered temples in the city. There, among scores of statues, he was reunited with his handiwork. He recognized the "distinctive features to verify it was my Buddha. Surprisingly it was well preserved, completely refinished and numbered." Truly, it is the only Buddha statue carved by a Filipino found anywhere. The Ilustrado reunion was attended by **Mila Von Heiland Lane** and her husband, **Manding** and **Cecile Datu**, **Eve Guevara**, **Fruto** and **Nita Bingcang**, **Nati Granada**, **Jovit Revilla**, **Ducky Paredes**, **Bing** and **Jun Belicena**.

## Pai dee, sok dee Madame Ambassador

Lao Ambassador to the Philippines **Malayvieng Sakonhnhom** will be leaving for a new posting in India. Mekong Circle Philippines president **Jeanne Menguito** and her husband **Dom** hosted a farewell party for her last March at their residence in Paranaque, Manila. Our Philippine colleagues are always in the Ambassador's guest list when she receives in Manila visiting dignitaries

from Laos.

## Rising From the Mekong Waters

Speaking of archives, whowoulda thought -- log into this site, and there we see it -- September 14, 1959 (56 year ago!) -- our **Mutya Ng Mekong**, pulling into the banks of a village. **Dr. Rodolfo Arreola**, nurses **Pet Sismaet** and **Jovit Revilla** disembarking, meeting villagers to do an open-air clinic. The "Mutya" (Lady) was a barge outfitted as a mobile clinic plying riverside villages for weeks on end. It was also the floating home of our colleagues who were treated to the ageless panorama of Mekong riverside life. The silent, black and white 16 mm. film clip is one minute, 10 seconds long, shot by a broadcast television crew WSB-TV station based in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Here's the site -- <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu>. Then type "operation brotherhood" in the search box. Rudy has passed away. And the Mutya has probably gone to barge heaven. But Pet (who now lives in Australia) and Jovit (in Los Banos, Philippines) can tell what an unforgettable adventure it was like.

## From Container Ships To Tribal Schools

We shipped this March 2015 our tenth box of supplies to the two schools in Davao del Sur, the Philippines. This is the fourth anniversary of our Mekong Circle educational project. In that time we have shipped close to a thousand books to two village primary schools in the hinterlands of Mindanao island in the south inhabited by the Tagakaolo tribe. The



300 pupils hold classes in classrooms made of "cogon" grass and bamboo. Remote, isolated and poor, lacking running water and electricity, the schools are funded by a Catholic diocese. Our first shipments were packed with picture reference books for the lower grades on astronomy, history, science, nature, geography, dictionaries, a 22-set children's encyclopedia. "Everything is new to them," said Fr. **Nestor Lisondra** (see photo). "They have not seen them here." You can view the kids' reactions on our website. Later shipments included boxes of crayons and pens, office supplies, children's magazines and backpacks. One shipment contained 99 used tennis balls, 140 stuffed toys, six fold-basketballs (and an air pump). More young adult fiction are now finding room among the reference books. In this tenth box, we crammed a new Samsung DVD player to view some 57 Walt Disney-ish CDs as well as a bunch of ladies bags for the teachers. The boxes take two months to reach the schools via container ship from the USA East Coast. Cash takes faster and is really most needed. Please send your checks to **Bik Marquez**, our Mekong Circle treasurer at 1200 Bayhill, Suite 119, San Bruno, California 94006 USA. They are tax-deductible.

## A Living Archive In Nepal

The 2015 edition of our "Filipinos In Laos" has been published, available from Amazon.com. See flyer. When it was first released in 2004 (this edition is out of print), the chapters on Air America, Eastern Construction Company, Continental Air Services and the United States Agency For International

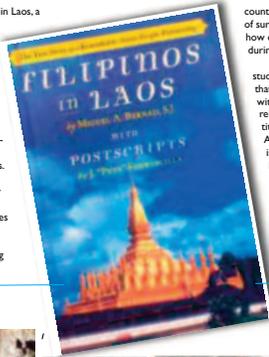


Art Linchangco at right in the 1960s with Joe Juachon.

## The True Story of a Remarkable Asian People Partnership

During the 1960s and 1970 in Laos, a long civil war and an external aggression consumed the meager resources of an Asian kingdom, leaving little for its basic needs. About a thousand Filipinos lived and worked there during this period to help as technicians in health-care, training, education, village development projects. They were young, adventurous and eager to apply their skills.

This book describes in fascinating detail the lives they lived and how they fell under the spell of a beguiling



country and its people. It tells stories of survival, service and dedication and how enduring friendships are shaped during uncommon times.

Their experience is a case study unique in development aid at that time -- of Asians partnering with Asians. It provides lessons still relevant and useful for today's practitioners of international relations. As the author Bernad said "there is much talk in diplomatic language about friendship among nations. That is friendship in the abstract. What happened in Laos was friendship in the concrete, not of one government with another, but of one people with another."



### Filipinos In Laos 2015 edition

Size: 5.5 in. x 8.5 in.

Softcover

246 pages

Includes index, photos

List Price: US \$12

To order copies: Amazon.com

"Certainly an interesting and overlooked piece of history. History written by Americans and Europeans has a lot about philanthropic activities of Americans and Europeans but not too much about such activities by Asians. So this but helps correct this omission."

— Dan North, New Jersey, USA

### Authors:

Miguel A. Bernad, S.J., a historian, was a professor at the Jesuit universities Xavier and Ateneo de Manila, both in the Philippines.

Jose "Pete" Fuentecilla is author of "Fighting From A Distance: How Filipino Exiles Helped Topple A Dictator" published by the University of Illinois Press, USA 2013. (fuentecilla@aol.com)

Development were rather skimpy and relied in most parts on oral histories from our members. These are the agencies that had employed them in Laos and now compose a large percentage of our Filipino membership. In the decade since then, more diligent searches through official documents have revealed much that we did not know then and that we have added to the new edition. At the same time we had reached out to new sources. One of them has been **Art Linchangco** of Ingleside, Texas (see photo). Art is unique among our living sources -- as a communications engineer, he worked for all three agencies, starting with ECCOI, then with the charter airlines Air America, Bird & Sons and Continental. (The late **Ernie Felix** of California, an accountant, was also employed by all three.) While in Kathmandu capital of Nepal last December to accompany his wife Donna on a short term assignment with the U.S. Embassy, he examined reams of employee information on the airlines that we emailed him to verify their authenticity. His memory, despite the high altitude, was thorough.

## Okay, Here's One Trivia

Nepal is one of 31 countries listed by the United Nations among the landlocked countries that are poor. Laos and Bhutan are the others in Asia. Their geographical location, marked by excessive distances and limited transport systems to seaports and major consumer markets, have constrained economic development. Laos, usually described as landlocked by six neighbors around it, is rebranding itself as a landlink. It is building more roads that will speed trade between the six countries, modern roads that will serve as crossing arteries. Moreover, in harnessing its part of the Mekong River and its tributaries, more than a dozen hydroelectric plants are online or are under construction. (Filipino engineers are helping build the Xayaburi dam). The plan is to supply the power to (and get paid by) her neighbors. Thailand, is a major customer. We will be the battery of the region, Lao officials say.

## Sabaidi Pi Mai

April 13 to 15 are the designated dates this year marking the Lao New Year. The Lao and their diasporas worldwide will attend to the traditional rituals of this festival. In countries where they have immigrated and settled in large numbers, the Buddhist temple "wat" is the focus of communal activities the way it has always been in their Lao villages for generations. The morning of the first day they bathe the Buddha statues with perfumed

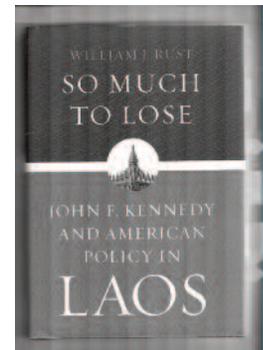
water; gently splash -- "purify" -- each other and the monks with water; return home for the spirit calling "bac" ceremony. The cleansing virtue of water, the festival's trademark, has been transformed by youngsters riding open top vehicles, in squirting duels from pump gun loaded with colored water, to the dismay of the elderly and the police. If you happen to be in California on April 4, the 8th annual New Year celebration returns to the Civic Center Plaza in Richmond. It's chockfull of food stalls, vendors, stage shows, parades, a gala evening. Enjoy a "khene" sonata and a blue suede shoes performance by Thavy Cheun, the Lao Elvis impersonator.

## 5th International Conference on Lao Studies

It is scheduled July 9 to 10, 2016 in Bangkok at Thammasat University. **Maria "Menchu" Domingo-Kirk** of Berkeley, California, represented us at the last one, April 10-11, 2013, at the University of Wisconsin, USA where she presented a paper on Buddhism. She had spent a month in Luang Prabang to do her field work. Mekong Circle attended the first conference in 2005 in Illinois and in Arizona in 2007. At both events, we presented our research studies and books. Menchu has found a new vocation after retiring in 2003 teaching in Berkeley, California. She is now an anthropologist with the Cordillera Studies Center at the University of the Philippines in Baguio after completing a Masters in social anthropology at the London School of Economics. And how do you keep busy, now that the kids are grown up and having their own kids? Well, **Tony Sazon** of West Deptford, New Jersey plays three tournament bowling leagues one day a week each or walks daily "rain or shine" often with his wife **Cora**. **Dickie Labao** grows various veggies in his back yard in Houston, Texas; **Clem and Pat Gonzales** of Los Angeles, California, go cruising; **Fidel Padayao** drives the grandkids to and from school in Fontana, California; **Penny Villarica-Flores** traipses around the world, visiting Jose Rizal's memorials for her Internet blog; **Pete Fuentecilla** walks alone the empty, silent suburban streets of Queens Village, New York, listening to the birds and inner voices.

## Kennedy And Laos

When did Laos become a world crisis? In 1961, according to **William Rust**, in his "So Much To Lose: John Kennedy and American Policy In Laos," released in 2014. It's his followup to an earlier book "Before The Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos 1954 to 1961" (that we reviewed in our Newsletter Issue of February 2013). As he did with his first history, Rust traces in chronological order how the quagmire (the sticky mess, the swamp) was inherited by Kennedy on the day he took over the presidency from Eisenhower. Two years later, after he was assassinated, a cottage industry of "what ifs" and "what would he have done about Laos" have flourished. Rust has concluded that during his short watch over Laos, he presided over a "U.S. policy that was confused and contradictory." On the one hand, he okayed a gradually escalating program of military pressure to demonstrate U.S. resolve against Communism in Laos. On the other hand, he did not want to take the initiative in military escalation. This was where things stood when the Soviet-backed 1962 Geneva accord to neutralize Laos collapsed as the hostilities resumed between the Lao government and the Communist-inspired Pathet Lao. With no feasible way to salvage the accord, Kennedy was faced with avoiding "hard choices between intervening overtly with US combat troops and accepting the 'loss' of the country to Communism. To his successor, Lyndon Johnson, Kennedy bequeathed not only an incoherent Lao policy but also military plans to taking the war to North Vietnam." From then on, events spiraled into chaos. Mekong Circle members were on the ground there during this period. (The book has a few references to ECCOI). All the Lao desired was to be left alone, away from an East-West conflict that in the end devastated and decimated them. It calls to mind the Lao proverb "when buffaloes fight, it is the grass that gets hurt."





# Celebrating A Historic Tenth

To mark its distinctive character, our reunion October 17-19, 2014 in Las Vegas offered a historic flavor in order to entice attendance. Organizing a 10th edition of a biannual event that began in 1995 posed some challenges. The ranks of our membership are slowly but surely being chipped away as age, wobbly legs, COPD and yes – deaths – have decimated our hardcore attendees.

As 1960s Lao expatriate **Ducky Paredes** said, most of us are bidding time in what is known as the predeparture lounge. So the enticement to attend was not merely for sentimental reasons, it was existential – come, this maybe your last. We were in our 20s during our times in Laos. Now in our late 70s, it is easy to dismiss another reunion – “been there once...twice...even three times...done it”. Moreover in this Internet age, the bonds formed in the Kingdom are conveniently nurtured with Skype and email and Facebook. **Becky Tayaban-Ciborski** disagrees. “No virtual, social media can match real hugs, face-to-face, hands-on renewal of all the stuff that make for lifelong friendships.”

And so on October 19, 2014 in Suite 1 of the Grand Ballroom of Ballys Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada, close to 110 participants came “to reunite, to remember and to rejoice,” said **Marie Aguilos** of Hempstead, New York. There was much to remember. Eighteen years of our Laos experience and four decades after our exodu -- how to package all that in one evening of hugging and lamvong-ing among members who flew in from Laos, Australia, Canada, the Philippines and many parts of the USA.

Well, **Joe Barcelona** of Los Angeles brought a series of thick binders. A monumental collection of photos, definitely a meticulous labor of nostalgia hard to match. And on the wall, we placed an array of more photos. “There I am” said **Khamsy Siharath** of Oceanside, California, pointing at herself, seated so solemnly with her OB Vientiane Hospital nursing class of 1964. She then proceeded to identify each of her 17 classmates, missing only one name.

A representative of the 1963 class, Bounthan Oudom, arrived from Vientiane for her third reunion appearance. While many of the school’s graduates emigrated, Bounthan opted to stay and worked with the country’s premier Mahosot Hospital in Vientiane. She brought with her two other Lao (non-OB) Mahosot nurses **Latsamy Vongnalath** and **Sonevilayvanh Panyasli**,

their first trip to America. What can you say about Las Vegas, we asked. Busy with their cellphone cameras, they had to show the folks back home the dancing fountain waters of the Bellagio Hotel. surely a wondrous sight not seen in Vientiane or anyplace else.

In another historic touch, T-shirts each silk-printed with the logo of the last nine reunions (except one), custom-designed for each occasion’s theme, lined another wall.

We invited two speakers who framed a historical perspective to our work in Laos. In the early 1960s, **Dr. Karen Olnes** of the Public Health Division of the United States Agency for International Development was one of only three pediatricians practising there; the other was the late OB doctor **Laling En-driga**. Since 1991 her Minnesota-based non-governmental organization Health Frontiers has been conducting a pediatric and internal medicine residency program in Vientiane that has graduated 82 Lao pediatricians and 63 internists. She welcomed any volunteers from Mekong Circle members with medical experience.

**Frederic “Fritz” Benson**, a USAID Laos Office of Refugee Affairs officer in the 1970s, drawing from the extensive records at the University of Wisconsin’s Southeast Asian collection, described the historical ties between USAID and OB in Laos. OB’s official records remain missing in the Philippines. Hence the University’s USAID archives are one of the few sources for historians seeking OB references from 1969 to 1973. And they are available online.

But at the Las Vegas reunion, attendees could hold in their hands a small piece of our history recorded for the digital age. Fritz, working from his home in Greensboro, North Carolina and **Pete Fuentesilla** from Queens Village, New York, produced a CD that digitized 24 issues of “Balitang Laos” our Newsletter from 1964 to 1966.

Written from our perspective, the issues described in intimate details the work we did, if only for three years out of an 18-year long service, among a people and a country that transformed our young lives. At \$10 a copy, the CD sold at a fast clip. Paper version of the Newsletters are hard to come by. A copy of the CD has been sent to Wisconsin, in case their archivists decide one day to open a separate Mekong Circle collection. A few more copies left are left. For a copy, email [fuentesilla@aol.com](mailto:fuentesilla@aol.com).

# From Paper to Plastic

Before Mekong Circle filed papers that organized itself into a legal body known as a non-profit corporation, it was an informal group of about 50 men and women, mostly Filipino immigrants, who gathered for weekend dinners in their homes in Los Angeles, California. Among the traditional Filipino cuisine of abo and pancit, there were a dish or two of Lao food — tum som's thin sliced papaya salad or ping lani's grilled chicken. These Lao staples were fond reminders of their days in an Asian kingdom where they had lived and worked, some for as long as 18 years from the 1960s to the 1970s.

In 1975 they were among nationals of foreign aid agencies compelled to leave on orders of a new Communist government. Many found new homes in America, bringing with them indelible memories of their Laotian sojourn. During their weekend gatherings, the retelling of those experiences evoked the stories told in a newsletter that recorded their work in Laos. "Balitang Laos" (Lao News), issued twice a month, was produced by a messy combination of stencil and an aging mimeograph machine. The expats in Los Angeles who kept copies treasured its



fading text and grainy photos — the onslaught of decades, humidity and bookworms on cellulose paper.

In July 2000, the expats decided it was time to incorporate under the rules of the state of California. Among its requirements — per claim a mission statement. And so it did, one of which was to propagate the history of their Laos experience. Two books were published, a website was launched. And a newsletter began publication — Mekong Circle Newsletter. Thanks to publishing software such as Microsoft's Publisher and Photoshop or Adobe's Quark, the paper's digital version also found readers on the Web.

Some Newsletter features resurrected Balitang Laos items of special relevance to their new lives in another land. But mainly the Newsletter recorded how Mekong Circle Filipinos, transplanted once, found themselves yet again as expatriates. A cultural historian John Dodier, would describe them as living "the sense of belonging to more than one history, for more than one time and place, for more than one past and future."

We have digitized both newsletters. The hope is that in their new incarnations as four-inch round polycarbonate plastic discs, our histories can last longer and shared more widely.



## MEKONG CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

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In 1975, Filipinos who had lived and worked in Laos, some for as long as two decades, were told to leave. Together with other nationals of foreign aid agencies, they had been expelled by a Communist-inspired insurgency that took over the country. Most of the Filipinos returned home, others retained their professions as engineers, teachers or health care workers in countries as far apart as the USA, Libya, Iran, Africa.

About 900 Filipinos had spent time in Laos during the 18 years that the country underwent tumultuous years of early independence, a bloody civil war, foreign aggression, and as a helpless, collateral victim of the Vietnam war on its eastern border. As a result, they carried indelible memories of those years formed during their impressionable youths.

When about 50 of these expats settled in the USA, the urge to re-live those times resulted in an association that organized bi-annual reunions. In 2002, regular publication began of a newsletter to record new lives transformed by their Lao experience. Along with the usual notices about past-Laos marriages, births and deaths, the issues memorialized living a culture so similar to their own and the exotic in other ways.

Twenty-four issues of this Newsletter from 2002 to 2013 are contained in this CD. An index of names and places for each issue provides a way to search for their places in this mini-history. It is produced as part of the celebrations marking the 10th reunion of their association Mekong Circle in 2014, a special 60-year anniversary of their arrival in the USA.

## MEKONG CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

This contains 24 issues of a Newsletter published from 2002 to 2013 by Mekong Circle, are contained on four CDs and the USB. The members list and index is also included in Laos during the 1960s and 1970s.

# MEKONG CIRCLE

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## **ALERT** **Our 2016 Reunion**

We are going back to Las Vegas, Nevada, USA. Our biannual event is traditionally held sometime between summer (July-August) and early autumn (September - October). The exact three-day dates have not been set. But Las Vegas where we last got together in October 2014 is definite. It will be at one of the major hotel-casinos along the main street downtown. We will keep you informed in reasonable time to make your plans for attending. In the meantime, we need your input in organizing this event. We have always depended on your voluntary help to put together another successful reunion -- outreach, fundraising, programs, venue, etc.

Mekong Circle International was founded in 1975. It is a non-profit 50 (c) (3) public benefit organization incorporated in the State of California, USA. Its 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](mailto:fuentecila@aol.com)