

# MEKONG

## CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

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www.mekongcircle.org

## Welcome to the 26<sup>th</sup> Issue of our Newsletter



Xong Chao Beeson in front of the Sam Thong hospital and, standing at left, with the first highland tribal women who trained at OB Vientiane in 1961 -- Lee My Kia, My Low, Nha Lee and Chia Lee -- in front of the OB House in That Luang.

## Reliving Our Hmong Memories

Our biannual reunions have drawn members from far and wide. Our first reunion in 1995 in Baldwin Park, California drew mostly residents of the state because that's where many of us live. Then attendees for the succeeding events flew in from across the continent – New Jersey, New York, Florida, Pennsylvania, Texas, Illinois, Ohio, Oregon. Some members, unable to resist the tug of nostalgia (or to rekindle old flames) appeared from Australia, Italy, Canada and the Philippines. (Appropriately, our official association name is Mekong Circle International).

Then in October 2014 at our 10<sup>th</sup> reunion in Las Vegas, **Xong Chao Beeson** flew in from Alaska, our first attendee from that state. She is also a Hmong, one of more than a dozen tribal minorities in Laos's Lao-majority, six million plus population. Mekong Circle members are no strangers to the Hmong. Our first Operation Brotherhood medical-community development teams were stationed from 1957 to 1960 in three northern provinces – Sam Neua, Xiengkhouang, Phongsaly – their ancestral homelands since their migration from southern China. Some 45,000 of them had been living for generations in villages perched on their 3,000-ft high mountain tops and ridges. Medical teams trekked to their northern enclaves in Sam Neua, Ban Bane, Muong Sai, Sayaboury and Luang Prabang

That was the beginning of the decade when the civil war raged at its highest intensity. Tribal populations by the thousands, fleeing the conflict zones, trekked south. Driven out, village by village, they made their stand in 1961 in Sam Thong, about 300 miles north of Vientiane. Here they carved out their new heartland capital.

Two years ago, it was the typical remote cluster of Hmong huts. When we visited on January 9, 1966 on the occasion of their "Kin Chieng" new year festival, it had become home to about 5,000 Hmong refugees. Its rolling plains were criss-crossed with newly-bulldozed dirt roads. Several long, low buildings and quonset huts stood on the crests of the surrounding hills. Uprooted from their mountain forests and rivers and fields on which they had subsisted, they now survived on shipments of rice, clothing, cooking equipment from the Lao government and the U.S. Agency For International Development. By 1962, Sam Thong had become the northern base for USAID's vast refugee relief program, airdropping supplies to 140,000 refugees, mostly Hmong, across the northeast provinces, "totaling 40 tons per day" wrote **Fredrick Benson**, a USAID refugee relief field worker.

In Sam Thong, planes landed supplies on a dirt airstrip. In its remote location, virtually inaccessible by road, it was its lifeline. At one end of the runway a 150- bed hospital stood. In 1963 it was a thatch-hut improvisation, then built up into a wood-frame structure the next year. As the number of tribal sick and war-wounded patients increased, AID installed in 1965 x-ray, laboratory and surgical units as well as extensions for laundry and kitchen.

Soon, "it was a very adequate 250-bed hospital, well-equipped and well-staffed facility which also served as the main in-service nursing aide training site for Hmong and other tribal minorities," AID reported.

In 1961, Xong Chao, only 12 years old, was picked out from among the Hmong at the That Kao refugee camp in Vientiane to train as

a nurse to staff the hospital. Together with four other tribal women, they pioneered a new role for their people as the first Hmong nurses.

The Hmong men's sturdy legs, capacious lungs, hunting prowess, their masterfully crafted muskets are legendary. As for the women, marriages at ages as young as 14 were common. They helped till the fields, their infants bundled against the cold and strapped like knapsacks to their backs.

In their clan-based, patriarchal society, Hmong women were expected to devote most of their time to household chores, looking after their rosy-cheeked, chubby infants. Tending to the sick was the exclusive province of male medics or the male "shaman" herbalist-spirit-healer. Initiated by AID, a recruitment campaign for females to be trained as nurses met initial resistance from village male elders who wanted wives and daughters to stay productive at home instead of in a village clinic or in Sam Thong's hospital.

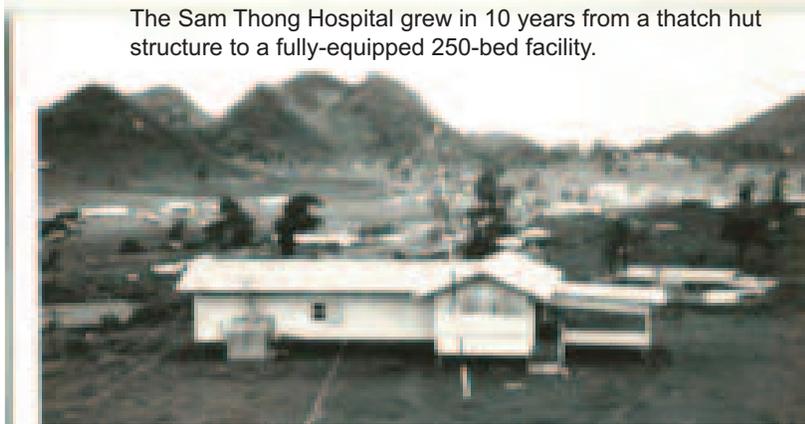
But the training program forged ahead "as the urgent demand for nursing skills created its own intensity and its own learning opportunity", AID reported. Xong Chao joined OB's practical nursing class in January 1962 together with four other tribal girls. They were followed by eight Lao Theung tribe members who trained in October 1962 for five weeks as field medics.

On a visit to her parents in Sam Thong, she was hired to staff the hospital and to train aides. Knowing Lao and English, "I could read the doctors' orders and was able to teach the other girls how to follow the charts.

"From 1964 to 1967, I was a supervisor of the nurses," she said in an email. "Actually they were more like nurse-aides as none of them had any formal training. I did on-the-job training" for locally recruited village women.

"I was also put in charge of surgery" she said. "In the U.S. we would have been called a trauma center. We were the first stop for wounded soldiers. I remember many nights falling asleep" in the ward "after 18 to 20 hours of surgery, my uniform covered with dry blood. I worked closely with a Filipino doctor Ben, I do not remember his last name, and a

The Sam Thong Hospital grew in 10 years from a thatch hut structure to a fully-equipped 250-bed facility.



male nurse Romy whose last name I do not recall either." Xong Chao was referring to **Benjamin Cala** and **Romeo Agbayani**, both OB personnel. They would be assigned for short periods to assist the Lao or American doctors at Sam Thong. Other OB personnel helping out were the late **Dr. Juan "Johnny" Reyes**, male nurses **Dickie Labao**, now living in Texas, USA and **Bert de los Reyes** who immigrated to Australia after Laos.

"Xong Chao was not only a nurse, she was teacher to some 20 local trainees. She spoke English and interpreted for our Hmong patients," Romy said, who now lives in Texas.

"It seemed that the helicopters never stopped coming with wounded soldiers," she said. For the one doctor and myself, the work continued" all the time. In addition to assisting in the Operating Room, I delivered babies and followed up visits in the villages."

Impressed with her performance, USAID Director **Dr. Joseph Westermeyer** brought Xong Chao in 1967 to the U.S. to further her nursing studies despite objections that she was needed at Sam Thong. In 1973 she returned to work in the OB Vientiane Hospital.

In the ten years that Sam Thong served as the medical hub for the extensive network of village dispensaries established by USAID in the tribal highlands of the north, its reach was vital. It served a mountainous, densely forested territory unreachable by the government's underfunded, understaffed health care system sorely debilitated by an on

going insurgency war. According to **Dr. Charles Weldon**, USAID's Public Health Division Chief during that period, some 800 medical auxiliaries were trained, 100,000 patients were hospitalized, and 450,000 outpatients were treated by this health care program.

"We worked until the job was done, in primitive conditions, no overtime, lacking food and time to rest," Xong Chao remembers the early years. On the morning of March 19, 1970 North Vietnamese guerrillas attacked the town, torched the hospital, destroyed warehouses and a school. Once again, the villagers were on the run, finding refuge at Long Tieng, about ten miles south. During the next four years, located on the strategic Plain of Jars of Xiengkhouang, this became the major logistical base of the U.S. "secret" war against the North Vietnamese incursions into Laos. Its residents numbering 40,000 at one time, composed the largest Hmong stronghold.

But it too fell in 1974 to the North Vietnamese during the final months of the war. (Some estimates put Hmong combatant casualties at 30,000, or 10,000 more Lao government troops, during the decade-long civil war). By the thousands, the Hmong scattered into the hills and forests, crossed into Thailand's refugee centers, to languish in concentration camp conditions. Over the years, about 250,000 were resettled in the USA. Large majorities live in California, Minnesota and Wisconsin. No doubt many among them had experienced the nursing, healing skills of Xong Chao and her fellow Hmong nurses.

Xong Chao now lives in Palmer, 42 miles northeast of Anchorage, with her pilot husband **John**, who also attended our Las Vegas reunion. She emailed that she is "very busy getting prepared for the coming winter. I put up 54 jars of different kinds of berries, jelly, most to be given away as Christmas gifts. I froze almost 30 lbs of salmon and hope to get to the mountains to go moose hunting. John is still flying for an oil company in the Bering Sea. Our second son Edward is getting married in October. He and his fiancée are also pilots flying for the US Navy, based in San Diego, California."

**Dr. Primo Guevarra** holds open air clinic in a Hmong village.



As we watch rivers of migrants and refugees spill out of the war-torn countries of the Middle East, they bring to mind a similar exodus of Indochinese 40 years ago. They found a

safe haven in the Philippines. The Lao were among them and they tell us their stories. (Photo below is the refugee camp where they built a replica of the That Luang temple.)

## A Refugee Camp Like No Other



Facial identities can be tricky. How many times have we, a Filipino, been asked – you Indonesian? Thai? Malaysian? Those are our closest ethnic look-alikes (rarely are we mistaken for Japanese, Korean or Chinese or Indian). But when you find yourself in a gathering of Laotians, as we have been several times, you are greeted as a Lao, that is, until you clasp your hands together to your chest followed by a small bow – that “nop” gesture — and say, “No, I am khon Filipin.”

Oh, kho thot, I’m sorry, you look like us, they apologize. Then their eyes sparkle and they tell us: you know, I stayed in your country, in Morong. We remember the history. That’s the town on the western shore of Bataan province in central Luzon, the Philippines. As wave upon wave of Indochinese took to the seas to escape the Communist takeover of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in 1975, the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNCHR) set up resettlement centers in the region. Many were confined to camps in Thailand where conditions were so harsh and inhospitable, the Lao we spoke to who stayed there would rather not talk about the months and years they lived virtually as prisoners. ( In much the same way, Japanese-American internees of the World War II incarceration camps set up by the Roosevelt administration

found the experience too painful or traumatic to talk about, even to their children).

Not so at Morong, said former Lao refugees there. In 2007. We met **Laxa Yabandith** of Minnesota and **James Sayavong** of Wisconsin at the second International Conference of Lao Studies in Tempe, Arizona. Both stayed five months in Morong with their spouses and children. **Thavisouk Phrasavath**, a filmmaker, bowed so deeply when we introduced ourselves as a Filipino at a 2008 screening of his Laos-USA documentary “Betrayal” in Manhattan, it was as if we had a hand for his good fortune to get to Morong after Thailand.

Opened in 1980 to hold 18,000 refugees, it had a hospital, libraries, schools, restaurants, markets, playgrounds and houses of worship for each ethnic group. The Lao had built a large replica of the That Luang on one part of the grounds. Filipinos conducted English classes. According to the UN, virtually all the refugees had confirmation to be resettled to other countries and that their sojourn in Morong was to complete bureaucratic processing and orientation, such as English language training to those bound for Canada, Australia or the USA. **Khin Thayravanh**, a former employee of the Lao Commission on Rural Affairs, who got resettled in Houston, Texas in 1980

learned his English in Morong and remembers OB **Dr. Basilio Ledesma**, during Bas’s assignment in Khin’s home province of Khongse-done.

By the time the Center closed at the end of 1990, it had processed more than 290,000 Indochinese – 182,567 Vietnamese, 70,240 Cambodians and 39,398 Lao and Hmong. According to Time magazine, three million fled during the decade after the Communist victories in the region. Over 2.5 million were resettled, over half in the USA. In one mass evacuation by air from Xienghouang in 1964, hundreds of Hmong refugees lived in army tents and under the parade grandstands of the That Luang grounds. A host of government and civic action groups tended to their needs, among them OB which was assigned to conduct public health campaigns.

“The mood was upbeat and positive” among the Morong refugees, the UN reported, knowing they will move on out of the Center. In contrast, the late **Rabieb Vilayhong-Roy**, a former OB practical nurse, encountered depressed Lao refugees while visiting in 1980 the Panat Nikhom refugee camp southeast of Bangkok. An 1976 escapee herself who had resettled in the USA, she was sent by her employer the Illinois Department of Public

Health's Refugee Program to survey the Lao at the camp.

"Their faces – men, women and children – were very unhappy," she reported. "Almost all who came to me mentioned suicide. They are having trouble coping with anxiety, depression, stress and emotional problems. The camp population is predominantly women and children. Many of the children are undernourished. A number came up to me and complained of insufficient food and water and their hope to come to the U.S. soon. Their situation haunts me constantly. It bothers me so much that I almost wish I had not come back to see their living conditions. I know that few will be accepted by other countries and they will never be able to go back home again." (Read Rabieb's report in the March 2005 issue of our Mekong Circle Newsletter).

Another former OB Lao practical nurse, **Chanpraseuth "Joy" Chanpraseuth**, escaped to

Thailand, into a refugee camp in Ubon. Resettled in Rockford, Illinois, USA in 1979 and working as a counselor for a city health agency, she had her own opportunity to help refugees of the Bosnian wars resettling in her state.

These anecdotes come to mind as we watch an epic migration of Muslim Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis endure starvation, suffer drownings and inhumane treatment to flee their war-ravaged countries for refuge in Christian Western Europe. Hundreds have died, evoking memories of desperate Vietnamese "boat" people, dying by the thousands in the South China sea to reach shores of "first asylum" in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

The Philippine government has offered to welcome another class of Muslim refugees -- displaced and persecuted minorities of the Northern Rahine State of Myanmar, pushed back in their boats by Buddhist Bangladesh,



Myanmar and Thailand. **Louie Ongsiapco**, a former OB administrative officer and now with the UNHCR, has been on site at the Bay of Bengal ("Still here, Pete, going on 12 years" he emails) struggling to serve their needs. He brings with him his experience in Morong.

## Serving In Harm's Way

*When Mekong Circle Filipino accountants first arrived in Vientiane December 1957 to staff USAID (then known as United States Operations Mission – USOM), a group of American volunteers with the International Voluntary Service (IVS) had touched base there earlier. In March 1956 they launched their agriculture, livestock and health programs in Phonsavanh in Xieng Khouang province.*

*Like us, they were young and adventurous and eager to apply their skills. In some places we worked together. As former IVS Frederic Benson tells it:*

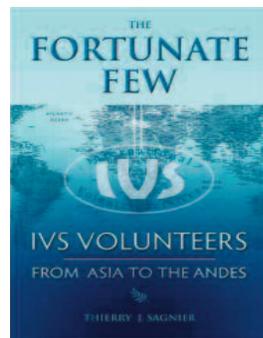
*"A Phonsavanh-based IVS nurse reported that 'friendly relations with Operation Brotherhood group at Ban Ban were continued throughout 1959...and that many pleasant social hours were exchanged.' Indeed one IVSer recalled that OB 'invited us...for a roast pig feast in honor of the national day of the Philippines.*

*"In 1964 an IVS nurse worked in OB's 14-bed hospital in Kengkok where she lived with the Filipino staff. Also in 1964...in Muong Phieng in Sayaboury province, both IVS volunteers and OB team lived in temporary bamboo shacks while a large dispensary, living quarters and a work area was completed. The operations at Muong Phieng were neither strictly IVS nor OB but were a combination."*

*A new book "The Fortunate Few: IVS Volunteers from Asia to the Andes" by Thierry J. Sagnier (NCNM Press, Portland, Oregon, USA, July 2015; also available from Amazon.com) includes chapters on their Laotian sojourn.*

Review by Gary Alex and Paul White

"The Fortunate Few" by Thierry Sagnier tells the stories of about a hundred of the 1400 volunteers that served with the International Voluntary Services (IVS) worldwide in Asia, Africa, Central America and South America. The individual volunteer stories show the commitment and an amazing appetite for adventure by everyday Americans from small farms and communities. Assignments to remote areas of developing



countries – especially in Indochina – took individuals into situations they had never dreamed of.

IVS was formed in 1953 at the instigation of the International Cooperation Agency (the foreign assistance agency that was the predecessor to the current U.S.

Agency for International Development, known as USAID). At a time when development assistance emphasized large infrastructure projects, IVS was seen as an important complement of people-to-people assistance to transfer technology, develop local capacity, and put an American face on foreign assistance efforts. The Cold War of course provided the motivation for the U.S. Government to support this global effort to win hearts and minds. For individual volunteers, motivations varied. Initially many served in part from a sense of patriotism and desire to help advance US interests and shared values in the world. For others, a taste for adventure, religious motivations, and a desire to "share their bounty with others" provided the rationale.

Indochina, mainly Viet Nam and Laos, but with a shortened program in Cambodia, was the major focus of IVS activities. Most volunteers served in those countries, and nearly a dozen volunteers died in Vietnam and Laos. About two-thirds of the book covers IVS in Indochina. Over a nearly twenty-year period (1956-1975) IVS was present in many locations throughout Indochina. IVS engaged in a wide range of projects there in public health, education, agriculture, animal husbandry, and community development. The IVS programs there in the mid-1950s pro-

vided inspiration for formation of the Peace Corps by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 who said “To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves...”

Many IVS volunteers – most of whom received training at the University of the Philippines in Los Banos — were posted in rural development teams and worked on agricultural programs that sought to bring benefits to rural people. Programs evolved into the Forward Area Team projects in Laos and the Strategic Hamlet Initiative in Viet Nam. Occasionally working at the village level in cooperation with other dedicated groups—including Filipino staffed Operation Brotherhood, a remarkable Asian-to Asian grassroots health and community development group—volunteers learned about and strived to fulfill the needs and aspirations of the people they served, in many instances ethnic minority refugees displaced by the war. Upon completion of their tours of duty with IVS, quite a few volunteers in Indochina were hired by USAID and continued in very similar work, with their experience there blurring between IVS and USAID programs.

However, as American military presence and role expanded in Viet Nam and the bombing missions in Laos intensified far greater angst developed within the IVS ranks. IVS staff and volunteers were divided in feeling—should they stay to provide what humanitarian support they could to ease the suffering from the

war? Or should they leave to avoid being a participant in war efforts? Ultimately, the situation deteriorated to the point that many volunteers in Viet Nam signed an open letter and resigned. IVS then phased out of Indochina, though attempted to re-engage years later with support to HIV/AIDS programs in Viet Nam and Cambodia and by sending a single short term volunteer to Viet Nam in about 2001.

The stories for Indochina especially—though these were not the only conflict situations in which IVS volunteers served—provide much room for thought as to the potential roles of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and volunteers in conflict situations. Clearly, in these areas need is high. Clearly too from the IVS experience there is high potential for dedicated volunteers to provide services that can promote stability and counter insurgency and unrest. There is need for such programs, but the question may arise whether this should involve volunteer programs. In addition to the philosophical issues of volunteer or NGO work in conflict areas, this may also put them in harm’s way. When funded by the government, this may be in line with the tradition of alternative service by conscientious objectors but the type of involvement needs to be clear to all.

“The Fortunate Few” highlights some broader lessons. Everyone interested in the rewards of volunteerism and the history of IVS effectiveness should know this story. IVS led to the cre-

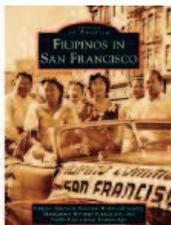
ation of the Peace Corps and a number of other international volunteer agencies. IVS volunteers carried out grassroots development and demonstrated the importance of this approach for sustainable development. During the course of their IVS experiences many lives were touched and the volunteers themselves were changed forever.

IVS left a legacy in the organizations it inspired, in the accomplishments of the volunteers in the educational, economic, and health programs they helped build, and in the impacts on the volunteers and their counterparts and students that stayed with them through their lives. We need to better understand our globalized world and its people. Hopefully, “the fortunate few” will inspire new generations to engage with others at home and abroad to make this world a better place. A must read for those interested in grassroots development, this inspirational book about volunteers who chose to become engaged in extraordinary humanitarian situations is a story that needed to be and has now been told.

*Gary Alex served as an IVS volunteer in Laos for four years (1968-1972) teaching agriculture and community development. Since IVS he has worked with USAID and the World Bank in agricultural development. Paul White was with IVS from 1966-1968 based in Sam Thong, Xiengkhouang province, then worked for USAID for 38 years.*

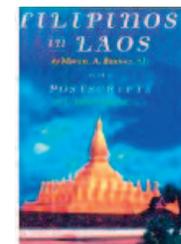
## Filipinos in San Francisco

As we begin laying the groundwork for our 11<sup>th</sup> reunion 2016 in Las Vegas, the organizing spotlight swings north to San Francisco, Mekong Circle’s northern chapter in California. In our previous 10 gatherings, Los Angeles, our southern chapter has been the hub of four reunions – two in that city as well as Anaheim and San Diego. It was in San Francisco that **Bik Marquez** initiated our legal incorporation during our July 2000 reunion there. He takes center stage again in 2016 together with co-chairs **Penny Villarica-Flores**, a



resident of San Francisco and **Menchu Domingo-Kirk** who lives in Berkeley. From this base, they will coordinate our Las Vegas event where it so happens more than a dozen Mekong Circle members reside. Among them are **Tom and Becky Tayaban-Ciborski**, who together with Los Angeles-based **Clem and Pat Gonzales**, and backed up by our organizing pros LA chapter members, pulled off our 10<sup>th</sup> reunion into a historic milestone. One of the more recent books that traces our roots in that city is “Filipinos in San Francisco” released in 2011 and available from Amazon. A slim book at 128 pages, it’s more of a photographic journal than a broad, sweeping history. But its introduction covers the major highlights of our immigrant history in that city.

## Filipinos In Laos



Amazon has also released in April 2015 the second edition of this book first published in 2004. Each of the chapters on the four major groups that compose our Association -- Air America, Eastern Construction Company in Laos, the USAID and Operation Brotherhood -- has been expanded with new information that became available over the last decade since the first edition. The 246-page soft cover book, priced at \$12 plus shipping and handling, includes indexed names of all Mekong Circle members cited as well as photos.

# Lost Churches United Many Lives

In the January 2011 issue of our Newsletter, a three-page section is occupied by a table listing marriages among Mekong Circle members. Over the 18 years (1957 – 1975) that we lived and worked in Laos, a total of 89 couplings were consummated. Some couples officially exchanged forever love vows at a Philippine church when they returned home. But the lover-ly feelings had percolated in Laos (translation: communal living and working under one roof in some of the most remote places under stressful conditions). It is also said that some couples, aware that employer policy discouraged marriages while on assignment, secretly sealed their marital status at document signing rites presided by a provincial Lao governor. Hence that 89-count in the table can go higher.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to celebrate....” is how these nuptial ceremonies commonly begin. And in Laos, the “here” has been the Notre Dame Church or the Immaculate Conception Church in Vientiane, the capital. Notre Dame, near That Luang was dedicated in December 1960, two weeks after a battle between a paratroop captain **Kong Le** and a general **Phoumi Nosavan**. The three-day savage war, pitting Lao soldier vs Lao soldier, was estimated to have killed 1,000 civilians. Mortars shattered buildings all over the city, Notre Dame church among them.

“At the dedication, the church walls were still riddled with bullets and shrapnel holes,” said **Fr. Matt Menger**. A tall ( six feet, three inches) Catholic priest from San Antonio, Texas, USA, he was the first American missionary from the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) religious order posted to Laos in 1956. His base parish for six months was at Nong Veng, a village about 100 miles east of Vientiane. He writes in his book “Slowly Climbs The Sun” — “the territorial limits of my parish extended many miles...3,500 hundred square miles... hundreds of small villages, ranging from clusters of ten to 200 huts...no hospitals, dispensaries...(I was the parishioners’) doctor, teacher, veterinarian, agronomist, dentist, advisor, mediator, priest and friend.” He was called “Khoun Pha” — the Reverend Father, also known as the Khoun Pha Soung, the tall

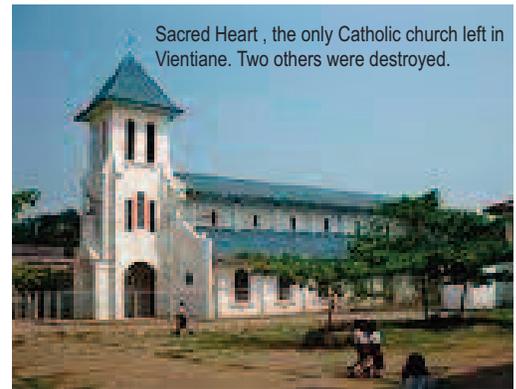
priest.

On some occasions, he was dispatched by his bishop to attend to Catholics beyond his parish. Such was the case in late 1957 “to proceed to Nam Bac as soon as possible. OB Hospital personnel requests English speaking priest.” When he arrived there, the OB team which he said was composed of four nurses and two doctors was staffing a 15-bed bamboo ward in this remote town of about 2,300 inhabitants in Luang Prabang province.

“The rich voices of the six Filipinos soared in unison ( singing Credo in unum Deum),” Fr. Menger writes, “as we celebrated the High Mass. Their voices were filled with happiness and gratitude. My visit to Nam Bac and the three-day retreat which I had preached for them marked the first time their hospital had been visited by a priest since their arrival two months earlier...Some 30 men and women from the village attended. Children squeezed in. Even a few dogs attended.”

Soon, as pastor of Notre Dame Church, his parishioners now included a number of English-speaking residents. By his count – 15 Canadians with the International Control Commission, four British diplomats, 52 Filipinos employed by the U.S. Operations Mission, the U.S. Information Services, and Operation Brotherhood, almost 400 Americans with various U.S. government agencies and engineering-construction firms. To build the Notre Dame church, Fr. Menger launched a fundraising campaign, borrowing a page from the natives—a multi-day “boun” festival, the same way the Lao do each year to maintain their Buddhist temples. As Fr. Menger described it in his book “In the Valley of the Mekong” :

“Word spread quickly among the Lao Catholics of the city. Soon they were dunning



the merchants, Catholic and pagan alike, for prizes, display booths and games. A team of Thai boxers flew up from Bangkok for an exhibition match, courtesy of the Royal Lao Army. Air tickets to Hong Kong and Saigon were donated for raffles. The Filipinos of OB and Eastern Construction Company in Laos, not to be outdone, came through with typical Latin zest. Happy, fun-loving people they organized bingo parties...skits and contests...costumed treader dancers...a beauty contest chose Miss Philippines of Vientiane. We had quite an international (building crew). There was Oja, a Korean architect...**Nick (Dolorfino)** a Filipino and Kenji were chief foremen; Dat, a refugee from North Vietnam was chief carpenter; Liu, a Chinese was in charge of the masons; Som Chan (a Lao) was chief of the many, many coolies. And the whole team was building a Roman Catholic church, pastored by an American, in the Buddhist royal kingdom of Laos. Real ecumenism !”

To serve an increasing number of parishioners, a second church Immaculate Conception was dedicated in 1965 on Km 3 along Tha Deua road. Both were razed by the new government in 1975 but it left standing the Church of the Sacred Heart, now the only Catholic church in the city, built in 1928. “

Many Filipino marriages took place in both churches,” emailed Fr. Menger, now retired at an OMI residence in San Antonio, Texas. He had invested 16 missionary years in Laos ( “In looking back, I realize it was probably one of the happiest periods of my life.”) It can also be said that in presiding over the life-altering nuptial rites, he set forth couples towards the next stages of their young, formative lives beyond Laos.

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**Rusty and Nemia Ramos** at their wedding November 21, 1969 at Immaculate Conception Church with Fr. Menger.

# Newest Baby Hospital Has Old Roots

There are places, long gone, that will remain embedded in our personal histories. "Lon moh Filipin" – the Philippine Hospital, also known as "lon moh OB" to elderly Laotians, is one such place that endures for Mekong Circle members who lived during a certain era in That Luang, in the city of Vientiane, where it once stood.

It was the first stop for hundreds of Filipinos arriving in Laos between 1960 and 1974. Opened in 1960, it served as the orientation center for weeks or months before their assignments to provincial outposts. For many of them, it was their first contact with a world that offered no real culture shock, having come from another Asian country with similar cultural ways. Yet because it was ground zero for their first overseas working experience, it hurt to see it disappear as it did in late 2002.

A former OB administrative assistant, returning for a visit after 35 years, hurried to that junction on Nongbone Road and Kaysone Phomivanh Avenue. Only the water tower, a haunting shape remained standing, looming over an empty space, Bulldozer tracks were still visible on the grounds where the hospital had stood. Pieces of porcelain, perhaps from the wash sinks of the Operating Room, stuck up from the upturned soil. He was told that the area will be turned into a park. The three-tiered pointed crown of the National Assembly building rose in the distance.

Before it was demolished, it had treated patients and served as a nursing and allied health skills training center for 40 years. It was renamed Setthathirath Hospital in 1973. Wrote the Vientiane Times in its February 20, 2001 issue "people feel a great deal of affec-



tion toward the old Setthathirath but it had become too obsolete." The news item went on to report that a new replacement, financed by Japan, would open that month some 15 minutes by car on the city's outskirts.

The old 60-bed Setthathirath was already closed but still standing when the late **Vitoy Naranjo**, his wife **Joji** and **Belen "Bing" Belicena** came visiting in 2001. In a photo taken at that time, a sign on the rooftop read "Ministry of Health Maternal and Child Hospital." Luxuriant hedges and bougainvillea stems ringed the open front verandas. It would be their last memento of a cherished past.

On July 11, 2015, it has been reincarnated as the Mother and Newborn Hospital. It has 180 beds and 50 "special" rooms. Mother and newborn have their own private room; an adjoining room is for relatives to stay in. Rooms are air-conditioned, have refrigerators and television. The Vientiane Times describes a facility that has "stepped into the modern medical world equipped with intensive care units, surgical theater, birthing wards, gynecological and obstetrics services." It will "employ 350 doctors and nurses and so far has recruited medical staff, many of whom have undergone training in Vietnam, France, Thailand, Switzerland, Japan, Republic of Korea and the United States". Located in Nongphaya village



At left, the Nongphaya hospital and at top the OB Vientiane Hospital opened in June 1960.

in the Xaythany district of Vientiane, it delivers 15 to 20 babies a day and treats 250 to 300 people in its outpatient department, according to **Dr. Bouvanh Saensathit**, the hospital's director-general.

During the Mekong Circle group tour of Vientiane in 2008, an associate of Dr. Saensathit gave us a tour of Mahosot's obstetrics wing, the country's premier general hospital. It was here where the old maternal hospital at That Luang took space after it was torn down (In 1973, OB Vientiane personnel **Jess Ramos**, **Ruben de los Reyes** and **Sining Limcangco** helped staff the unit). Tour members from California, former OB practical Lao nurses **Vanessa Thongma** and **Sue Malaythong**, now RN-trained veterans of U.S.-based hospitals, saw how the facility was a big improvement from the old Setthathirath MCH.

But for the mothers at Nongphaya MNH, their newborns emerge into a new world far removed from the lon moh filipin of a long time ago. They will join a generation of under 25-year olds, almost 65 percent of the 6.6 million population, who grew up after the 1975 Communist takeover of the country. They have no memories of the current past and our place in it. Those who do remember us are their grandparents, in their late 70s or 80s, their numbers and memories fading fast.

## Reaching Out via Ham Radio

Distances and times between Vientiane and Manila have been constant all the years we were there. They were always 1, 254.6 miles apart; by plane, an average of 2 hours, 36 minutes each way; by your wrist watch, an hour difference. By phone, dial the access codes and numbers, and you are instantly ear-to-ear with your mom, at some expense. By telefax, print messages wing their way across the South China Sea in minutes.

Then there's the ham radio. And **Ben Garcia**. He was an electronics technician at the United States Clark Air Force Base in Pampanga province, the Philippines, being interviewed in 1965 for a job in South Vietnam. "Fortunately" he says, he was hired instead to join Air America in Laos. Based in Vientiane together with pioneering Filipino Air America radio technicians, among them **Art Linchangco**, **Joey Juachon** and **Feliciano Roman**, they flew to provincial outposts to service



radio transmission stations.

While in Vientiane, Ben devoted himself to his lifelong hobby – scanning the airwaves, summoning anybody who can connect with his call sign, preferably somebody in the Philippines. In his apartment, he set up his system ( a 100-watt single sideband AM). Soon it became known that a ham radio operator in the Philippines can "patch" your Mom's telephone to Ben's ham radio in Vientiane. Voila – you are ear-to-ear with beloved Mom, freely bypassing the Lao PTT telecommunications fees.

"It's my free service" to my compa-

triot, he writes, referring to Filipinos with the US Agency for International Development, Operation Brotherhood (OB) and other agencies, most of whom, if not all, did not have telephone service in their quarters. OB's Vientiane office did have telefax and telephone connections with Manila. But in emergency situations, its administrators could knock on the door of another ham radio hobbyist in Vientiane. That was **Mr. Houmphanh Saignasith**, one of the founders of Junior Chamber (Jaycee) Laos which invited OB to Laos in 1956. He also happened to be a cabinet member of the Royal Lao Government as Secretary of State for Finance.

Ben moved to Iran in 1974 and resumed his hobby there till 1979. He went to Libya when the Ayatollah Khomeini launched his Iranian revolution that year, then immigrated to the USA. A year ago, he retired to his hometown in Balibago, Angeles City in Pampanga where he tends to his "malunggay" (known as moringga) medicinal plants.

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## **2016 MEKONG CIRCLE 11TH REUNION**

In this issue of our October 2015 Newsletter we have inserted a form that has information on our next reunion.

**October 20 & 21, 2016** (Friday & Saturday)

**Place : Las Vegas, Nevada, USA** (Hotel to be determined)

Please fill out the information requested and submit it as indicated. It will be the basis for determining the final details to organize another successful event.

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