

## Welcome to the 30th Issue of our Newsletter



Vientiane residents waded through flood waters along Kaysone Phomvihane Ave., the Patuxay War Memorial in the distance, in August 1966 when the rain-swollen Mekong River swamped the city.

## Remembering The Great Mekong Flood Up Close

Images of Houston, a major American metropolis in Texas state inundated under chest-high flood waters from a hurricane that swept it during the last week of August 2017 stirred memories of another epic flood. Fifty-one years ago in 1966, also during the last week of August, Mother Mekong, the 2,730-mile long river that forms a large part of Laos' western border with Thailand, went "berserk", on a "rampage," caused "a major calamity" – to quote horrified descriptions from the Balitang Laos issue of August 31, 1966, a newsletter of Operation Brotherhood-Laos, mimeographed in Vientiane.

Normally, the river flows placidly as it turns around the capital. But after days of heavy rains, residents grew increasingly alarmed as its swollen, surging waters began to rise hour by hour. Soon enough, neighborhoods closest to the river banks were under water. Then residents of the business center found themselves wading through knee-high brown waters that rose to the waist.

Mass evacuation of residents in low-lying areas began. The That Luang district, the city's highest ground, was designated the closest refuge. Two wat compounds there served as shelters (but not the sacred stupa itself). It so happens that less than five minutes walk away from the stupa, OB members lived high and dry inside their apartments – the OB House and the OB Annex, from where they could view (and suffered the din) of helicopters and army trucks bringing in refugees and flood relief supplies. Nearby, also on high ground, staff members of the OB Vientiane hospital organized immunization teams against cholera and typhoid in the refugee camps.

House rules were laid down – conserve piped water (use rain water for baths); don't drink tap water (most likely contaminated by the flood). Stay indoors and catch up on your reading; play chess. Think of April and May, during Vientiane's heat waves, when the Mekong banks shrink to half their width, exposing swaths of dry river beds wide

enough for throngs of celebrants, launching bamboo boun bang fai rockets to the steamy skies, imploring the rain spirits to soak their parched rice fields. They responded with vengeance. In August 1966 Vientiane and August 2017 Houston, the monsoon gods opened the floodgates wide against us puny mortals

## Texas Members Safe From Hurricane

**Dickie Labao**, a former OB nurse who lives in Houston with wife Cely tells us that the hurricane floods did not swamp his neighborhood. But at the height of the storm, his hospital advised him to stay on standby at his home. If necessary, it would instruct him to get to a certain location where a boat or some kind of water-resistant vehicle will pick him up for transport to the Eastern Northwest Medical Center, seven miles away, where he is a charge nurse on the evening shift in the Recovery Unit.

No call was sounded. Nor was there any bad news from other Mekong Circle members who live in Houston or nearby cities. Texas experienced an influx of our members beginning in the late 1970s after our

Laos exodus. Among them : **Romy and Myrla Agbayani, Eula Altamirano, Angie and Concordia Alon, Pete and Melody Barsales, Alex and Grace Bernardo, Pon and Sattien Chantaraj, Mario and Auring Dulyunan, Pete and Naty Encarnacion, Theo La, Lucy Landrito, Dan and Baby Piniones, Khamkeo Somphet, Lolita Manahan Stark, Chato Totengco, Mario and Esther Urbano, La Xayavongsa.** Latest to move in: **Asila Palma Monserrat**, from Seattle, Washington to Dallas, a good distance away from the floods. Dickie, 72, moved to Houston in 1978. He worked in Laos from 1967 to 1975

He was elected President of Mekong Circle for the 2016-2018 term during our 11th reunion in Las Vegas, Nevada in November 2016. The 2014 2016 Board and other officers's terms were extended to 2018.



OB Sam Neua team 1969: Bac Bacordo (front row, left) with Danny Infante, Pilo Ocampo, Art Sanchez, Lino Mendoza. Back row, from left: Irene Diaz, Peachy Jose, Cecile Salarda, Diony Salazar, Fely Yader, Penny Villarica. Fr. Lucien Bouchard, in black, front, was a regular visitor.

## Dentists For All Hazardous Seasons

When **Rinaldo "Bac" Bacordo**, an Operation Brotherhood dentist passed away on December 28, 2016 at the age of 92, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, we remember a remark he said "When I command 'open' your mouth, everyone obeys. Even a King." He was referring to the times he was summoned by Lao sovereign His Majesty **Sri Savang Vatthana** to his

palace in Luang Prabang to do some dental work, not only on the King, but also to his royal children.

Dentists were almost always members of any medical team assigned to the field, in addition to physicians and registered nurses. In hazardous locations, they were usually male and expected to multi-task and leave last in case of emergency evac-

uations. Such was the case with Bac who joined the Sam Neua OB team in 1959, its northern most outpost, 35 kms from North Vietnam's capital Hanoi. The province was an intermittent battleground between Pathet Lao guerillas and government forces.

**Penelope Villarica-Flores**, a team social worker said that Bac "was the dentist cum procurement officer,





intact. For those of us who spent extended time there, embedded in their village universe, the images tug at the heart and stir indelible memories.

The paperback book is available from Amazon. A larger collection of hundreds of slides, from 1957 to 1969, also taken by Halpern, an anthropologist employed by USAID Laos is archived at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, USA. They are also online at <https://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/seait/laos>. Type "Operation

Brotherhood" in the search bar and up pops the OB Vang Vieng Hospital, circa 1969; and the OB Hospital in Sayaboury. Replaced by newer facilities in 2000s, they are digital remnants of memorable years spent there.

For the second collection published in 2012 (also available from Amazon) "Recollections Of A Hidden Laos" geologist **Linda Reinink-Smith** traveled extensively across the country, still dominated today by an agricultural economy. In 150 photos, the

book's introduction sets the stage of timeless beauty – "From the air, one sees mostly jagged, forest-covered mountains etched with unexpected waterfalls, glistening like milky quartz in all the green. Closer inspection reveals ethereal villages of grass-thatched huts from a past era clinging to high ridges and surrounded by misty grand vistas reaching into the distance." Ah, yes, we see it all again.

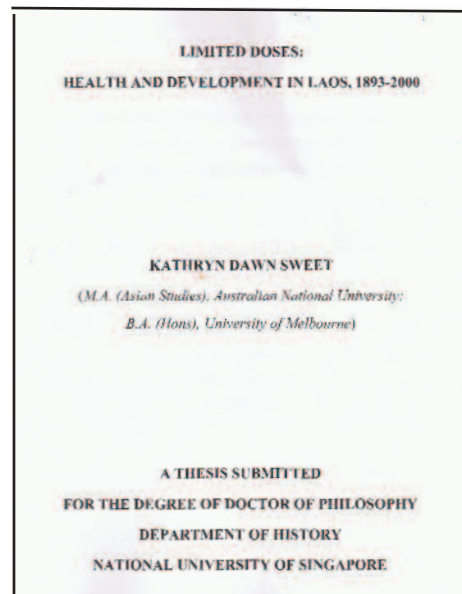
## Four Eras, 107 Years of Laos Medicine

There are two bound copies of a dissertation (303 pages) that were given to the library of the University of Health Sciences in Vientiane in 2016. "Limited Doses: Health And Development in Laos 1893 – 2000" traces the development of Lao medicine over four periods – (1) the colonial French era; (2) the post-colonial period that covers four health systems administered by the Royal Lao Government, Operation Brotherhood, USAID and the Pathet Lao in the provinces they controlled; (3) the system imposed by the Lao People Democratic Republic PDR (1976 to 1990); and (4) the later PDR period 1990 to 2000.

It is the first authoritative account of a topic close to our hearts, having participated in its second period during its formative years.

"You can see that the OB story is but one piece of much larger jigsaw puzzle," **Kathryn Sweet** emailed us in 2014. "However it is unique in Lao history, one nongovernmental organization working consistently over 18 years, and perhaps in Filipino history?" Ms. Sweet's dissertation, submitted in 2015 to the National University of Singapore as part of her doctoral degree in history, is rightfully unique by itself. To do just one period of this 107-year history

would be daunting enough; to cover all four was a massive undertaking. Consider that her field work on the OB period alone involved interviews with subjects living in the USA, Australia, France, the Philippines and of course Laos where at one time she was a senior program manager at the Devel-



opment Cooperation Section of the Australian Embassy in Vientiane. Among former OB personnel interviewed in the USA (conducted concurrently during our reunion celebrations) were **Pete Fuentesilla, Pat Gonzales, Khamsy Siharath, Sue Malaythong, Vanessa Thongma and**

**Bik Marquez.** In Manila she sat down with **Cecile Datu, Bing Belicena, Mely Sison, Ching Caldoza, Mel Granada, Eve Guevara, Jovit Revilla** and **Sonia Ballo.** In Australia, she met with two former Lao nurses, **Sripanon Silavong** and **Phousavong Sithipanya.** In France she talked with former Lao health ministers Dr. **Khamphai Abhay** and Dr. **Tiao Jaisvasd Visouthiphongs.**

When she traveled to Los Banos, Laguna province in the Philippines to interview nurse **Jovit Revilla,** she "met me dressed in a Lao sinh skirt."

"Basically, my argument evolved to say that OB's activities in Laos were many things to many people: counterinsurgency, humanitarian and developmental," she wrote in another email. "While OB seems to have been initially a political (counterinsurgency) effort on the part of the U.S., with a significant humanitarian aspect on the part of the OB staff, it is the developmental aspect that has been the most enduring in Laos, with OB hospitals in use until the early 1980s in many provinces, and some OB-trained staff remaining in government service."

In another email in 2013, she wrote "OB outgrew the counterinsur-

gency label in Laos because it stayed for so long and ended up developing considerable technical specialization not only in health systems but in rural health systems and nursing education. It actually became a forerunner of many 'international development' projects that are rolled out in the health sector by the more apolitical World Health Organization, United Nations Development Program and the like."

Summarizing all four periods of Laos' low health indicators and

poorly rated health systems, Sweet lays the blame on a number of factors, among them the decades of conflict, dependence on diverse sources of external assistance and conflicting donor agendas. In short, prescriptions based on "limited doses" led to stunting the country's health sector.

In the 18 years from 1957 to 1975 that we served in Laos as medical and technical aid personnel, one factor was paramount. The country had been enmeshed in one long ongo-

ing, debilitating conflict – against the French, the North Vietnamese, and among the Lao themselves (a civil war vs the Pathet Lao and internecine quarrels among generals). It was on a war footing at all times. Other priorities -- education, infrastructure, the economy, and so forth --were secondary. The wars consumed what meager resources the government had. Medicine, already pathetically underfunded and understaffed, was one war casualty.



**Raymond Conception**, (right) 34, a mechanical engineer from Legaspi, Albay province in the Philippines holds the job title of Business Process



Analyst at Phu Bai Mining in Phukam, Xaysonboun district, Vientiane province. He has been with the company for 10 years, as data analyst, component rebuild supervisor, maintenance planner. He is one of 50 Filipinos working at this site( photo above), some 100 kms. north of Vientiane city, and at another site for an Australian-based company mining gold and copper. In addition to seven other Filipino analysts with Phu Bai, the company employs Filipino engineers, geologists, metallurgists, surveyors and a chef.

In the 1960s, most Lao who encountered a Filipino assumed he or she was a Than Moh (doctor) or a Nai Moh (nurse). At any one time, there

## Dig We Must : Filipino Miners in Laos

would be 100 to 120 Operation Brotherhood medical personnel each year working in as many as ten sites across the country. Indeed over 18 years, out of more than 411 who signed two-year OB contracts over that time, 62 were physicians (including 14 dentists) and 118 nurses, of both genders, mostly in their late 20s or 30s. That's almost half (47 percent) of the total. Hence, it was easy for that Lao lovely lass to assume that the Filipino skinny office clerk she was exchanging glances with on the street was a Than Moh.

A survey in August 2016 by the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane counted 13 Filipino nurses, no doctors. There are 109 Filipino engineers of various specializations and 90 "mining-skilled workers." Count another 584 "heavy equipment workers", perhaps many operating mining machines. It's a large workforce in support of a local industry that accounts for 12 percent of government revenues and contributes 45 percent of export revenues since the country has limited domestic consumption of its mineral resources.

Laos was ranked as one of the most resource-rich countries in Asia. More than 570 mineral deposits

have been identified, including gold, copper, zinc, lead and bauxite. Hence it can look forward to more digging over the years. Thirteen government mines and 12 foreign-managed mines are conducting some 90 projects, from exploration to feasibility studies.

At Phu Bai, according to a 2011 Embassy report, the Filipinos "enjoy a fly-in, fly-out roster six times a year, free meals, free accommodations, training and development opportunities, free transportation from plant site to plant site, hotel and airport for their work breaks six times a year, career advancement opportunities, continuous training in cutting-edge mining operation technology and management systems."

Living isolated in remote camps, "there are few shopping malls to go to," Ray jokingly writes. But they have "a basketball court, a gym, tennis court, soccer field, badminton, volleyball, billiards, a music room, a bar and free wifi".

"Lao life and culture is rich," says Ray. "It is a laid-back country, soft-speaking people, a good country. But I still prefer to live in the Philippines if I can get the same financial stability I am receiving in Laos."

# Updates and News

## Remembering Bounthan



Lao nurses Sonevilayvanh Panyasli and Latsamy Vongnalath with Bounthan (extreme right) at our Las Vegas, Nevada, USA reunion Oct., 17-19, 2014.

At our 8th reunion in Anaheim, California in September ,2010, at our picnic September 26 in Twila Reid Park, the third day of our celebrations, everyone jostled for a group photo. A total of 225 members from all over the USA and overseas had attended, among them some 50 Lao-born U.S residents. Delighted at the large turnout of her compatriots, **Bounthan Oudom** announced : “See you in Laos in 2012 !”

It was a surprising outburst. At a meeting earlier, Association members voted to hold our 9th reunion in 2012 in San Diego, California. Perhaps she was not informed. But no matter. In 2018, she will get her wish. We will meet in the Lao capital of Vientiane for our 12 th biennial gathering. Sadly, Bounthan will not be present. She passed away April 30, 2017 in Vientiane at the age of 76.

She flew in for our Anaheim reunion, then returned in 2014 for our Las Vegas, Nevada event, bringing along two Lao nurses from Mahosot Hospital, the country’s oldest and premier hospital. Bounthan completed in 1961 our Operation Brotherhood Nursing Assistant training course in Vientiane before it was expanded into a two-year Practical Nursing course that began in 1963 from which she graduated.

More than a hundred young men and women completed the country’s only two-year nursing course. When a new government took over the country in 1975, many of its graduates, working with OB in the capital and in provincial hospitals, fled overseas. Bounthan stayed with the OB Vientiane Hospital till 1979, then moved to Mahosot, rising up the ranks to become Chief of the Nursing Department in 2002. She retired in 2007.

## Groundwork To Our 2018 Laos Reunion



Mekong Circle Philippines met May 19, 2017. Seated, left to right, Dom Menguito, Pete Fuentesilla, Eve Guevara, Pet Fuentesilla. Standing , left to right, Jeanne Menguito, Toti dela Paz, Sonia Ballo, Leny Guevara, Kaysy Lagleva, Vilma Fuentesilla, Kham Tolentino, Pete Lagleva, Angel Datu.

Members and officers of Mekong Circle Philippines met May 19, 2017 at Pho Bac Restaurant at Robinson’s Galleria in Ortigas, Manila. Top of the agenda – getting ready for November 24, 2018 Vientiane.

That’s the day of our first ever reunion on Lao soil. It is also the first day of the Lunar calendar marking Boun That Luang, the country’s grandest three-day festival.

It was decided that this event will be organized by three groups whose members reside in three places – Manila, Vientiane, and the USA. Each group will organize its outreach activities to their members in each location. Survey forms were given out during the meeting. The endorsement of the Lao ambassadors in Washington DC and Manila as well as the Philippine Ambassador in Vientiane will be sought. It is hoped that the close proximity of the Philippines to Laos would be a strong incentive for our Philippine-based members to attend.

At this time, organizing committees for each location, as well as an overall coordinator, have not yet been named. The itinerary of a group tour of 27 members which visited Vientiane and Luang Prabang in 2008 will serve as a template for 2018. We welcome your suggestions and nominations for organizing committees.

Many thanks to **Jeanne Menguito**, president of Mekong Circle Philippines, who together with her husband **Dom**, hosted the meeting at their restaurant and its tasty Vietnamese dishes.

**Please fill out and mail the reunion survey in this issue. We need this to do our planning.**

# Survey : 2018 Mekong Circle 12<sup>th</sup> Reunion

Vientiane, Laos, November 24, 2018

Dear Members and Friends:

We need your suggestions to organize this event. Our previous eleven reunions since 1995 were all celebrated in U.S.-based venues (except for two – in the Bahamas and Manila). That is because most of our members have chosen to settle in America after their sojourn in Laos.

Our 2018 event will be different. It will be the first time held on Lao soil, where our history began and to which we will return. And because time is no longer on our side, it may be our last opportunity to go back. So, by filling out this short survey, you can help make this event the most memorable ever.

At this time, rate your inclination to attend:

Will attend     May attend     Cannot attend

If attending, how many days can you stay in Laos: \_\_\_\_\_ days

If attending, how many persons, including yourself - \_\_\_\_\_(number)

Our standard program at our previous reunions consisted of an afternoon reception (first day); an evening dinner-dance (second day); a picnic (third day). Depending on attendance, we can organize a new program altogether; or an alternative one that reflects the historic nature of this event. What do you propose ? Here are some ideas:

Visit an important site in Vientiane (religious, historic, geographic, cultural)

Invite a renowned Lao person to deliver a presentation

Visit a particular place outside Vientiane. Name the town / city : \_\_\_\_\_

Your suggestion (s):

Tell us about yourself that will help in organizing the program:

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Years in Laos: \_\_\_\_\_

Employer in Laos:

Job Title:

Place(s) where you worked and lived:

Name : \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ Cell: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Please print out and submit by postal mail to either:

Bik Marquez – 903 Sneath Lane #125. San Bruno, California 94066 USA Tel. 650 589 3522

email [bikmarquez@hotmail.com](mailto:bikmarquez@hotmail.com)

or

Jeanne Menguito – 20 Barcelona St., Merville Park, Paranaque, M. Manila Tel. 918 991 7989

email [dom\\_1136@yahoo.com](mailto:dom_1136@yahoo.com)

You may also scan / copy this survey and email to the addresses shown.

Thank you for your cooperation.

# MEKONG CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

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Mekong Circle International was organized 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 education, public health, engineering and development aid. An affiliate, Mekong Circle Philippines, is based in Manila . Comments on this issue are welcome.  
(fuentecila@aol.com.)

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