

MEKONG

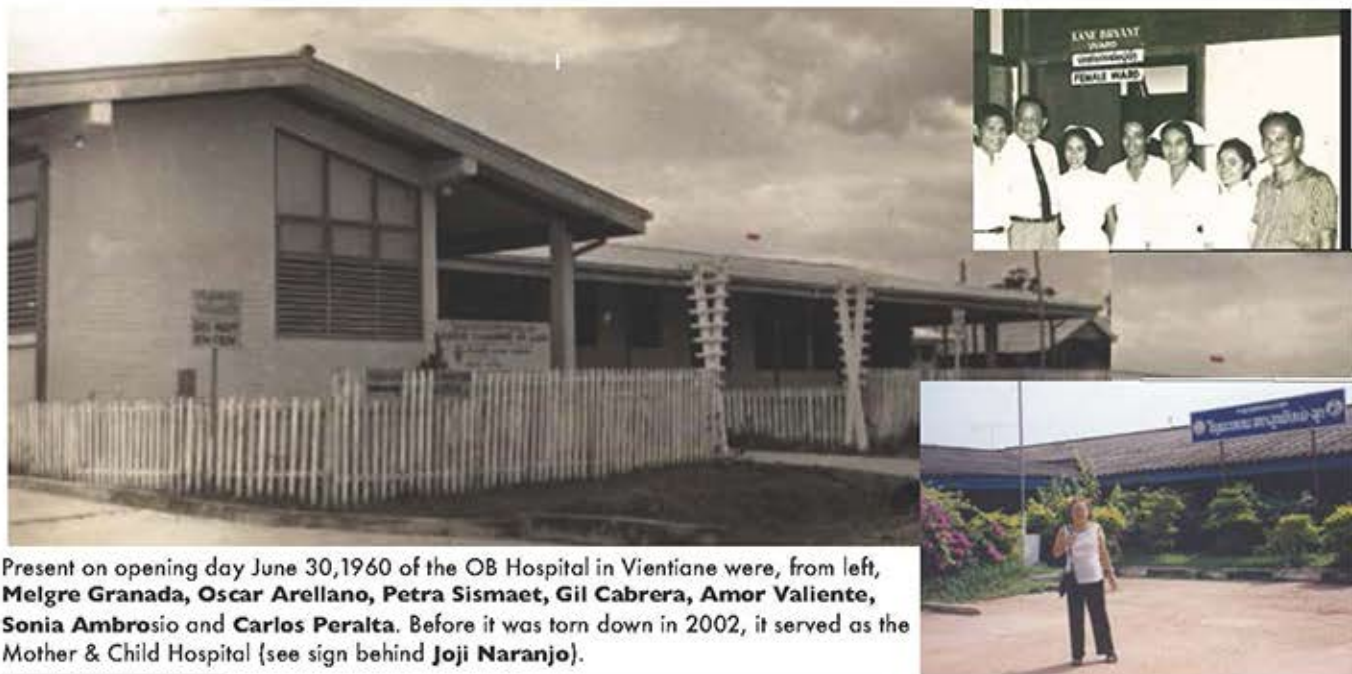
CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

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Welcome to the 32nd Issue of Our Newsletter



Present on opening day June 30, 1960 of the OB Hospital in Vientiane were, from left, **Melgre Granada, Oscar Arellano, Petra Sismaet, Gil Cabrera, Amor Valiente, Sonia Ambrosio and Carlos Peralta**. Before it was torn down in 2002, it served as the Mother & Child Hospital (see sign behind **Joji Naranjo**).

“Great Affection” for a Landmark, Now Gone

After six decades of colonial rule, France let go of Laos in 1954, leaving it with few health facilities for its three million inhabitants and fewer still trained personnel to staff them. There were six government hospitals in 1957 in the entire country in a survey by the United States Operation Mission (USOM) which initiated a public health program as part of its economic assistance.

But, “only the hospital in Vientiane can be considered moderately well-equipped by Western standards,” the survey said, referring to Mahosot Hospital. The survey counted 31 Lao physicians known as “Lao Medecins Indochinois – most of them have received their training in Hanoi or elsewhere in Indochina, considerably less than full medical training in the American or European sense.” The government reported 29 RNs in 1973.

Within a year of Operation Brotherhood’s arrival in 1957, the number of physicians increased dramatically, by 19 Filipinos and 30 Filipino nurses. By the close of its first year of operation, there were 44 Filipinos and included dentists, nutritionists and community development technicians. They were dispatched to provincial capitals to staff existing hospitals. Some set up clinics in government buildings, in army barracks, or wherever space can be cleared to erect a clinic — rudimentary, dirt-floor, open-type structures. Where a house was provided for the medical team to move into, sections were partitioned — a space to attend

to patients, the rest served as combined sleeping-kitchen-dining space. Tight and cozy, this was home and workplace under one roof until more convenient accommodations could be found.

On June 30, 1960, the first private 60-bed hospital opened in Vientiane, where Nong Bone Road met Phone Keng Road. During its construction, a sign said “Junior Chamber of Laos, Vientiane Jaycee Hospital, Jaycee Office, Operation Brotherhood Laos HQ.” The Jaycees of Laos had invited OB to transfer its operations from South Vietnam when it closed its two-year emergency relief for refugees program there in 1956.

Designed by Filipino architects **Carlos Peralta** and **Fruto Bingcang**, the hospital expanded over the years into 100 beds with intensive care units, pharmacy, dietary kitchen, central supply room, auxiliary services - laboratory, x-ray, dental, operating room. The adjoining administration building was designed by architect **Isagani Bautista**.

The hospital stood there for 40 years and became a landmark of sorts, locally called “Ohngmo Pilipin” — the Filipino Hospital. It was also known as “Ohngmo OB”, though it’s doubtful many knew what the initials stood for and the history behind it.

On August 30, 1973 it was renamed Setthathirath Hospital in honor of the 16th century Lao king who built the nearby



That Luang temple. In February 2001, an item in the Vientiane Times announced that a new hospital will be inaugurated on February 16 on the outskirts of the city called Dong Koi. It went on to say "the old Setthathirath hospital is at the heart of Vientiane municipality and people feel a great deal of affection toward it. However the building and facilities had become too obsolete to provide appropriate medical services for in-patients, which is why a new hospital was constructed with Japanese assistance." Responding to our email request for confirmation, it said that "yes, Setthathirath or OB has moved, because it was very old, and it was not large and not enough beds for patients. So they moved it. Now they call it Setthathirath, it will no longer be called OB." For a time before it was razed, a sign over it read "Ministry of Health, Maternal and Child Hospital."

The empty site is now a grassy field, the triangular façade of National Assembly in the distance, built in 1990. (Google Earth shows panoramic street views). Here once stood a portal through which hundreds of young Filipinos entered, their initial orientation to Lao life and culture before their assignments to their provincial outposts. It was also the clinical setting for OB's two-year course School of Practical Nursing and a training center as well for Lao auxiliary health care personnel – lab, dental, x-ray technicians – and where Lao physicians honed their skills beside their Filipino counterparts.

Our paper records of our 18-year service in Laos (1957-1975) cannot be located. But in the same USOM survey of 1957, it tallied the number of cases treated from January 1957 to November 1958 by the following medical teams – Vientiane, Pak-song, Attopeu, Thahhek, Xieng Ngeun, Nam Bac, Ban Ban, Sam Neua and Khong Island. Out of all new and followup 383,091 cases, Vientiane accounted for the most cases (97,209) or a quarter of the combined total. Another report in our possession counted during a six-month period January 1 to June 30, 1966 – 1,888 inpatients and 14,070 dispensary cases. The staff also held weekly clinics in four villages located seven to 11 kms from the hospital, conducting prenatal and postpartum care there. During that same six-month period, it trained for varying periods, from three months to a year, 11 nursing aides, two dental assistants, 24 rural medics and two lab technicians.

By May 1975 when OB pulled out on orders of a new Communist government that expelled all foreign aid agencies, only six locations were OB-staffed. The final roll counted 120 Filipinos and 550 Lao. In 2002, during a courtesy call on the Minister of Health by a group of former OB – Mekong Circle members, returning for their first visit after almost 30 years, he invited them to resume their medical program, then officially followed up with a formal letter. After some study, our association determined it did not have the resources, both personnel and fi-

nancial, to accept the invitation.

In her dissertation on the history of medicine in Laos, **Kathryn Sweet** noted that "the dimensions of OB's contribution to the health system of Laos went beyond the reach of its presence." Their hospitals, she said, were most often located in provincial towns, as opposed to the larger government hospitals in major towns. Medical teams were based in at least 19 different locations. Hence they delivered health care services to underserved Lao and ethnic populations essentially out of the government's help. Moreover their training programs produced a large cadre of skilled or semi-skilled health care personnel that were in short supply.

"Health facilities do not disappear into exile when political regime changes," she adds. "In fact, the new (Communist) regime made use of OB hospitals in Vientiane and numerous provincial and district locations for several decades until 2000."



Top left: Construction crew display sign at workplace. Top: Belen Belicena in 2001 in front of the Administration Building, adjacent to the hospital, partly shown at the left. The building was also torn down.

Above: Vientiane 1960s Staff, from left, Adriano Torres, Felix Romero, Basilio Ledesma, Nemio Altura, Cecile Salarda, Josefa Naranjo, Jovito Naranjo, (unknown), Ben Babasa, Concordia Alon, Rufinita Terciano, Alejandro Tantoco, Vicenta Calderon, Leovigildo Comia. Seated: Rinaldo Bacordo, Ramon Ortiz, Gilbert Abad, Jaime Hilao.

THEN & NOW

1957 - 1975

2018

When we begin tracing our Laos roots, we discover that they are intertwined with the early history of the country. Our first members arrived in 1956, only three years after the kingdom's birth as a sovereign nation from France's colonial rule. Two men, **Jovito Naranjo** and **Fruto Bingcang**, on a survey that year of sites where Operation Brotherhood (OB) medical teams would live and work, may have been the first Filipinos to set foot on some of the most remote places they visited over three months. It was not the most favorable time to go hopping from one place to another. A civil war was consuming the bare resources of a poor country. By the time the war ended in 1975, it had entangled outside Cold War powers, compounding the devastation inflicted on a powerless pawn. The Lao proverb – "when elephants fight, the grass suffer" – unfolded before our eyes. Hence our Laos 18-year (1957-1975) so-

jour must be viewed through the lens of a prolonged, ruinous conflict that cost 200,000 lives on both sides and twice that number in wounded, according to historian Martin Stuart Fox. Although many of us stationed in Vientiane were spared the carnage in the conflict zones, some of our provincial team stations were located in harm's way. A number had to be abandoned as hostilities intensified. Now that we are about to return to Vientiane for our reunion, we have the hindsight to see how the grass has survived. Here are selected snapshots of the state of the country during our time there, much of its spent in the city, and what transpired 60 years after the guns fell silent and our exodus. They were chosen also to serve as an orientation update, especially for our healthcare professionals who composed a large segment of our Mekong Circle membership.

CENSUS



In 1975, there were three million people, tripling to an estimated 7,126,000 in 2017; 33% are aged 14 and below.

The government officially recognizes 49 ethnic groups but the total number of groups is estimated to be well over 200. Over half are ethnic Lao or Lao Loum (lowland Lao who mostly inhabit the valleys along the Mekong River); 10 % to 30 % are Lao Thoeng (upland Lao, or lower mountain dwellers); the third most dominant, up to 20%, are Lao Soung (highland, mainly Hmong). Note that this classification loosely reflects the geographical altitudes at which the groups inhabit a mountainous topography, and by implication, their cultural tendencies. Our outposts, widely dispersed over many provinces, served large numbers of these groups, from the lowland Lao of the provincial capitals to the Hmong of the mountaintops.



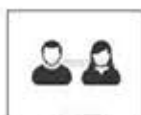
DEMOGRAPHICS

More than 70% of the population has grown up with no immediate knowledge of the recent past. Put another way,

they have no memory of our service. Those who do -- their parents and grandparents -- are a tiny minority, and fast fading away. It is a very young country, the median age is 23, comparable to the Philippines.

POPULATION

Even with a rising population (growth rate



of 1.21 %), it has one of the lowest densities in Asia, in relation to land area. Today as in 1975, 40% live in cities

along the Mekong River valleys, chiefly Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet and Pakse. Thus, the urbanization rate is low, most inhabitants still live in rural regions. Almost 10 % fled (about 350,000) after the Communist 1975 takeover, Vientiane and Luang Prabang losing the most. During the last couple of decades, this emigration trend has been reversed so that the influx of immigrants, mostly expatriate Lao, but also Chinese and Vietnamese, now exceeds the number of emigres.



EXPATRIATES

By 1961, Filipinos in Laos numbered about 500, most residing in Vientiane. Many

were employed by the American diplomatic and aid missions (as office support personnel); by the charter airlines Air America, Continental Air Services and Bird & Sons (as aircraft and communications technicians); and as healthcare and community development workers with Operation Brotherhood (OB). A large training group of about 400 technicians with Eastern Construction Company in Laos (ECCOIL) taught logistics and ordinance to the Royal Armed Forces.

By 1965, the Filipino resident population had risen to 1,000, making them one of the largest overseas Filipino communities in Asia at that time, prompting the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs to assign its first resident consular officer **Rodolfo Sanchez** and Ambassador

Felipe Mabilangan. A lavish party on January 1, 1965 celebrated the founding of the Filipino Association of Laos.

OB Filipinos lived in a two-story house on the corner of Phone Keng Road and 23 Singha from where they can see the silhouette of the That Luang temple spire. More staff took rooms across the street in a two-story apartment building with its wrap-around balcony. ECCOIL personnel occupied an apartment near Wat Simuang. Filipino employees of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) clustered in a compound in Nahaidio. Air America technicians shared an apartment on Rue Saccharine. The Philippine School of Laos opened in 1968, graduating 30 primary grade students before it closed in 1975.

By 1973, the United States missions had 1,200 American residents, including dependents; the French, about 1,000. Spurred by a massive U.S. economic and military aid program that began in the late 1950s, Vientiane's 70,000 residents experienced a huge influx of representatives from other nations -- embassy staff, military personnel, CIA cadres, aid workers, missionaries, businessmen, journalists and even a small contingent of hippies. After the government takeover, about 500 Soviet advisers were the new faces in town. By that time, the locals had already tripled to 200,000, drawn by the boom times of American aid-infused prosperity.

The Philippine Embassy closed in 1980 and for the next 18 years, the ambassador in Bangkok represented Philippine interests in Laos. When the Lao government shifted in 1986 from a

centrally controlled to a partial market economy, foreign investment, and with it, expatriates returned. In 2004, the Filipino influx reached about 200. When Philippine President Benigno Aquino III came visiting in 2012, a community of 520 teachers, consultants and engineers was living in Vientiane. And by 2016, there were 1,588, by the Embassy's count. Most were employed as teachers, mining engineers, office and hotel workers (see Mekong Circle Newsletter January 2017).



HEALTH

Half of the 597 Filipinos who served with OB Laos over two decades were

physicians and registered nurses. Count the auxiliary personnel – the medical technologists, pharmacists, nutritionists, health educators – and the proportion involved in curative medicine rises to 65% of the total. Their skills were sorely needed. Victim of benign neglect among France's three colonial wards (with Cambodia and Vietnam), Laos was not only the poorest, it was the sickest, had the least number of trained healthcare personnel.

In 1957, the health sector was in dire condition. Infrastructure, staffing, education, management, supplies suffered from meager financial resources. Conditions were especially critical in the rural areas where 65% of the three million people live and where many of the OB staff lived and worked during their contract terms. Malaria, for example, infected as high as 80 % of the population.

The state of the Lao health system passed through three eras – French colonial from 1893 to 1954; independence 1955 to 1975 (which encompassed the USAID – OB health programs); current post-revolution. Each period pursued policies that did not substantially lead to sustainable, progressive outcomes. But given the passage of time, health indicators have improved, albeit from very low standards. Here are some indicators from the United Nations and other sources:

- Infant mortality 49 deaths / 1000 births
- Maternal mortality 220 / 1000
- Life expectancy 64 years (42 in 1977)
- Physician density .49 / 1000 (2014)
- Hospital bed density 1.5 / 1000
- Infants no immunization, DTP 6% of one year olds
- Infants no immunization, measles 13% of

one year olds.

● Major infectious diseases : very high degree of risk from waterborne bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, hepatitis A, typhoid fever; and from vector-borne diseases (dengue fever and malaria).

The World Bank listed its own findings:

● "By global standards, Laos still has some of the most lagging population health outcomes associated with low access to health services..."

● "At the national and regional level, the number of critical care workers was maldistributed and low, just over half of World Health Organization recommendations, although share of public spending on staff was within global and regional norms."

Faced with acute financial shortfalls, the new government has depended heavily on international aid to invest in its health sector. Socialist countries, mainly the Soviet Union, provided technical and monetary assistance beginning in the mid-1970s. When Soviet aid dried up after its fall, new donors stepped in. The major multilateral lenders are the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Bilateral aid came from Australia, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Japan and Sweden as well as Vietnam, Cuba and China.

China has pledged to spend \$105 million to upgrade Mahosot into 600 beds. A ceremonial groundbreaking in December 2017 signaled construction to begin at the end of 2018, according to news reports.

VIENTIANE HOSPITALS



There are three public facilities (1) Mahosot, considered the largest (450 beds) and premier institution in the country, built by the French in 1910; (2) Mittaphab (Friendship) Hospital, used to be called the Soviet –Lao Friendship Hospital, started construction in 1981 and completed in 1987; (3) Setthathirath (formerly OB at its old site in That Luang), funded by Japan, relocated in 1973 about 8 kms. away. A 50-bed Mother & Child Hospital, built with Swiss government aid, opened July 2015, is about 12 kms. from city center.

In a major ideological move from total socialism, the government has allowed privatization of health services. As a result, 17 private hospitals and more than 1,000 private clinics as well as pharmacies and dental clinics have mushroomed all

over the country. Three private clinics in the city are foreign-owned, the others affiliated with foreign embassies. Here is a link to the hospitals and clinics operating in the city as compiled by the British Embassy in 2018. Their websites describe their scope of services. Copy the link below and paste to your browser.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/697998/Vientiane_Laos_List_of_Medical_Facilities_Feb_2018.pdf

At this time we are gathering information on several of the provincial hospitals which we helped staff. Over the years, most have been replaced. Photos of the new Vang Vieng and Sayaboury hospitals are shown in our 2014 Reunion Journal (www.mekongcircle.org; Click on "Resources", then "Publications", then turn to page 16.)



ECONOMY

The "30-year struggle" (1945-1975) is how Lao historians describe their

revolution against French, Japanese and American interventions. When a token force of Pathet Lao guerrillas marched into Vientiane on August 15, 1975, we, having left eight months earlier, were not witness to a victorious takeover of a city that was our home for almost two decades. The city, artificially buoyed by foreign aid, was awash in a free market of Thai and Chinese consumer goods, Japanese motorcycles, shops and restaurants. In 1974, there were six banks, nine hotels, and a flourishing collection of bars. The latest edition of Lonely Planet (2017) lists 35 hotels, among them American properties Crowne Plaza and Best Western.

That capitalistic pre-1975 bubble burst when the victors imposed a command economy that impoverished a people who were already destitute at the beginning of their 30-year struggle.

Although blessed with abundant natural resources, these remained undeveloped. The pursuit of the struggle was paramount. For years after the takeover, the commercial center was shuttered. A generation of Lao, many with needed skills to rebuild had fled.. (Today, in a country of seven million, there are around 600,000 living in the U.S., their remittances a not inconsequential contributor to the national income.)

When the government adopted a semblance of privatization in the late 1980s, the slow climb to recovery began. A New York Times visitor in 2009 wrote that "capitalism is making inroads. Vientiane's streets are filled with hallmarks of conspicuous consumption – Hummers, Mercedes and other fancy cars. Purse snatchings are on the rise, a sign perhaps that people have more to steal."

Twenty four Mekong Circle members who visited a year earlier was agog at the changes, remembering the late 1950s-scene. "Look, they have traffic lights," exclaimed **Penny Villarica Flores** (read her account below). A building boom has been going on since 2016, as many as 20 malls, according to the *Nikkei Asian Review*. The Morning Talat Sao mar-

ket of 2008 has been replaced by one that can compare with any in Bangkok or Manila (an over-malled city, by the way). To really appreciate the Vientiane of our past with its 21st century reincarnation, log on to YouTube, type "Vientiane, Laos" on the search bar and see for yourself. Oh My Buddha!

But looks can be deceiving. Sure, incomes are rising in the city, but the rest of this sparsely populated country remains poor. The labor force is 73 % in agriculture. Rural poverty is three times higher than urban areas, says the World Bank. So, if you happen to visit our former provincial outposts, you'll find them resolutely stuck in their pristine ways – thatched huts, roaming chickens, and rice-fields stretching to the horizon. One eco-

nomic study says that while the country has registered an outstanding yearly growth of 7 % to 8 % over the last decade, this "has translated into relatively small reductions in poverty. This is due to the disproportionate dependence for growth on the capital-intensive natural resources sector (mining, hydropower, logging) which does not translate into employment and household consumption."

About 25,000 people have jobs in the surging mining and dam building sectors. They employ more than 800 Filipinos as geologists, engineers, heavy equipment moving operators. They are the new faces of the "khon Pilipin" of the 2000s, outnumbering our physicians and nurses of the 1960s and 70s.

The Jewelry Was A Bargain

Penny Villarica-Flores joined 24 Mekong Circle members who visited Vientiane and Luang Prabang from November 12-16, 2008. She served with the OB team in the town of Sam Neua, Houaphan province in 1958. Here is her account written on November 25, 2008, upon her return to San Francisco, California. It has been slightly edited.

To me, Laos is still the jewel of the Mekong. The people remained the same, quiet, smiles, friendly to foreigners especially if you introduce yourself as a "khon Pilipin". My first request was to taste "soupe chinoise." The tour guide had no idea what it was. (Editor's note: the more well-known version is "feh"). None of the soup we had tasted the same. Has it mutated into some international fusion soup?

It was a nostalgic trip. We were bubbling with excitement as we viewed old sites and familiar grounds, then realized that some have evaporated into wispy memories best retrieved under a tree, gently rocking on a chair.

Armed with millions of kips, exchange rate 9,750K to a U.S. dollar; (Editor's note: it's 8,300K in 2018), we quickly dropped in at the Morning Market mall and zoomed in on the jewelry aisles. In 1956, a gram of gold was about \$7.50. Today, it was selling for \$356. **Ed** and wife **Edith Pasaporte** were haggling on a gold chain. **Fidel Padayao** showed me his gold chain medallion. "Look I got this when I first

came here in 1957. Now look at my new purchase. This pair now completes my return."

Peachy Holgado bought earlier a set of earrings, choker, bracelet and ring for \$250. "Can you help me bargain for a ruby set of the same", I asked **Manding Datu**. We haggled like mad. He told the lady seller, "if you agree to two-thirds less than what Peachy bought, we will take two sets of the ruby and the emerald." I asked myself, "why do I need two sets?" But that was Manding's clincher and we had a sale for \$300.

Vientiane had blossomed into a cosmopolitan city, vibrant, multi-story buildings, six-lane boulevards, motorized tuk-tuks, not the pedal-powered samlors. The shops offer more varied goods, cascading textiles of various weaves. I bought several silks for Christmas gifts. A change for the usual T-shirts I give. And considerably for less money.



The visitors jumped off from Manila after our November 7 to 9, 2008 reunion there on their return to the USA and Canada. For some, it was their first visit to Laos after almost 30 years. A diary of that trip is in our website www.mekongcircle.com. Click on "Resources", then "Reports". Click on "Return To Laos."

U.S.- and Canada-based members who joined the tour from Manila were **Edgar and Edith Pasaporte**, **Fidel and Wilma Padayao**,

Juan and Clarissa Iustisimo, **Arturo Linchangco**, **Vanessa and Phaiboon Thongma**, **Fe Casher**, **Rebecca Ciborski**, **Penelope Flores**, **Felicitas and Fides Navera**, **Oriando and Cecilia Datu**, **Jose Fuentecilla**, **Angelito and Estelita Datu**, **Minerva Erese-Wili**, **Leilani Holgado**, **Ray Zamora**.

The old Talat Sao morning market (far left) has been replaced by a multi-story mall. A three-headed elephant gold medallion (top) is a favorite Lao souvenir.



Keeping Up With Their Excellencies in Manila

Owing to the long history of diplomatic relations between the Philippines and Laos, it was inevitable that those ties would extend beyond the circle of diplomats. And so it happens with Mekong Circle.

Our Philippine office was officially incorporated with the Securities and Exchange Commission on April 4, 2007. But as early as 2001 it convenes annual gatherings of our members at the Los Banos, Laguna residence of **Jovit** and her late husband **Ben Revilla**. (We have close to a hundred Laos expats in the Philippines). A regular guest was H.E.

Phiam Philakone, the Lao ambassador to Manila who was reported to say he cannot allow himself to miss the "balut" at these sumptuous luncheons. He stayed at his post for five years, which is a lot of fermented duck eggs to savor. His successor H.E. **Leuan Sombounkham** who attended our Manila 2008 reunion replaced him as the distinguished guest of honor.

In 2011, H.E. **Malayviang Sakonhnhom** assumed her first ambassadorial posting in Manila. She made it a point that the guest list for important diplomatic events at her Embassy included Mekong Circle Philippines members. One



of two daughters enrolled at De La Salle College. She assisted in arranging the state visit of President Benigno Aquino, III to Laos in 2012 and officiated at the unveiling of a bust of the first Lao president **Kaysone Phomvihane** at the ASEAN Park in Intramuros, Manila on January 27, 2015.

When Philippine ambassador **Maria Lumen Isleta** assumed her post in Vientiane in November 2011, she made the rounds of courtesy calls to government officials. "The Finance Minister here mentioned OB and how, with a tinge of sadness in his voice, there used to be a Philippine Hospital in Vientiane. Indeed, OB has made a mark in Laos, which to this day, is fondly recalled and cherished,"

she wrote in a letter to us.

We invited H.E. **Song Soukhathivong**, Lao ambassador the U.S.A. to our 2012 reunion in San Diego, California. He could not attend but added "however I am so delighted to learn that members of your Association still have a good memory toward my country. Please be informed that Vientiane has changed a lot in recent years and that OB Hospital had moved to a new site with a new name Setthathirath Hospital. You are welcome to visit Vientiane!"

Mekong Circle Philippines president Jeanne Menguito (center) presented Lao Ambassador Sakonhnhom a plaque during a farewell dinner for her February 15, 2015 at the Menguito residence in Manila.

Vic Lagleva, our RN member from Menai, New South Wales, Australia emailed us to say that he is missing his name among the OB nurses listed in our May 2018 Mekong Circle Newsletter issue.

It's a good feeling to know that our directory is scoring nicely — only one down so far. Compiling the 597 names took some considerable effort because our OB files are missing. The primary list, put together sometime after we left Laos in late 1970s tallied 411 names. The number increased to about 500. Still more missing names turned up. In preparation for our Laos reunion in 2018, it was decided to scour all available sources to arrive at a full accounting. One source was **Fr. Miguel Bernad's** "Filipinos in Laos", completed in 1974 but never published until 2002. It is a detailed account of OB's work from 1957 to 1960. Happily, it con-

Is Your Name Missing?

tained many names. So did issues of "Balitang Laos" and "The Volunteer," published in Vientiane and issues of the U.S.-based Mekong Circle Newsletter which began publishing in 2002. The May 2018 list is the joint effort of **Joe Barcelona, Bing Bingcang, Ato Paglinawan, Grace Alforque-Papa and Peta Fuentesacilla**.

It is organized according to job titles that we arbitrarily chose. It occupies three columns over three pages in the 10-page issue which was emailed to you in April 2018. We urge you to look it over and alert us to any and all omissions. If you missed the issue, we will gladly send you a copy (email fuentesacilla@aol.com).



What You Need To Know

Let's stop once and for all the stereotypical, well worn-out labels that the Western press keeps attaching to Vientiane — "low-key Buddhist culture"; "relaxed"; "an easy going capital. No mobs of aggressive taxi drivers at the airport nor packs of begging youths, and hawkers who barely merit the name as they casually mind their stalls"; "undisturbed authenticity"; not a "turbo-tourist" destination; "only the trees, birds and an occasional mosquito around", and so on and on.

We have visited the capital three times, in 2002, twice in 2008, staying a week each time. What can we expect, come 2018 when we arrive for our reunion? Ten years ago, as Penny Flores observed during her visit, "the truth is, Vientiane has blossomed into a cosmopolitan city, vibrant, multi-story buildings, multi-lane streets, gallery of shops with cascading weaves of textiles," pedal-powered samplers gone, replaced by zipping hordes of Hondas and Suzukis. Another truth — Laos is much more than Vientiane. Here is a compilation of reading and viewing stuff that updates what you remember of your times there. To view the videos, copy the links to your browser.

Books, Magazine

"Laos" 9th edition, June 2017. 320 pages. The latest in the renowned Lonely Planet series that began in 1994, it is much more than a travel guide. Apart from the usual lists of recommended shops, hotels, itineraries, maps, festivals, (there's a zipline in a jungle reserve in Bokeo province!) its essays on history, culture, do's and don'ts advice, are authoritative. Available from Amazon, it also has an electronic version for your Kindle reader.

"A Short History of Laos - The Land In Between" by Grant Evans; 2002, 252 pages. If the concise history by Martin Stuart Fox in the Lonely Planet version above makes you want to know more, get this book from Amazon. Evans is an anthropologist but this is pleasantly readable, not written in the dense style one expects of an academic dissertation.

"Tragedy in Paradise" by Dr. Charles Weldon, 1999, 284 pages. Contains two full chapters on Operation Brotherhood. He describes his experience in running the Public Health Program of the United States Agency For International Development in Laos which funded OB beginning in 1961.

"Life After The Bombs" — The August 2015 issue of National Geographic (with Pope Francis on the cover) includes in this essay, 14 grand photos of Laos after our time. For example there's that stunning Vientiane promenade along the Mekong River. Single issue can be ordered from Amazon for \$7.95.

Videos

The late celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain shot two episodes on Laos:

1) "No Reservations Laos" in 2008. The full 43-minute long video can be viewed here :

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2ifxwt>

2) "Parts Unknown Laos" in 2017 (Season 9, Episode 3). View here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VlaDVCiUR_I

Don't call them those sunset-cruise-trekking -cooking TV shows. In all of his works, Bourdain contextualizes "stereotypes Americans might have about these cultures with lessons on American imperialism, political violence and dictatorial regimes." And of course those clips of "feh" and "khao phun" have never been shown in such luscious, savory colors.

"The Mekong River with Sue Perkins" Episode 3

In 2014, BBC sent its travel correspondent to do a four-part series on Cambodia, Vietnam, China. This one-hour Episode 3 is on Laos

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2b2xfo>

It's a funny, witty, look at the changes affecting the lives and future of the Lao in the rural regions. One reviewer said Perkins tackles the big issues — poverty, lack of educational opportunities, among them — "with a mixture of genuine curiosity and concern" but with light-hearted frivolity. It's an appealing contrast to Bourdain's style.

Mekong Circle Collection

"Filipinos In Laos", 256 pages by Fr. Miguel Bernad and Jose Fuentesilla. Second Edition 2015. Traces the history of the major groups that make up our association: Operation Brotherhood Laos, Air America, Continental Air Services, Bird & Sons, Eastern Construction Company in Laos, USAID. Available from Amazon.

"Goodbye Vientiane: Untold Stories of Filipinos In Laos" 210 pages by Penelope Flores, 2005. A compilation of personal anecdotes of their life during their service in Laos 1957 - 1975. Available from Amazon.

"Pioneers in Laos: Operation Brotherhood" 20-minute documentary, produced in March 2018, describes the early years of OB-Laos, from 1957 to 1960. Click here to view: <https://youtu.be/Krpp9mTlYGc>

To: Khiri Travel Laos

No. 130 Unit 8 Saphangmor, Saysethat District, Vientiane, Laos PDR

**Subject : Confirmation to Book with Mekong Circle Reunion Tour
Vientiane, Laos, November 21-25, 2018**

Full name: _____

Address: _____

Telephones: Home _____ Cell _____

Fax _____ Email _____

Names of companions attending with you and relationship

1. _____ Relationship _____ Tel. _____
(spouse, son, daughter, friend, etc.)
2. _____ Relationship _____ Tel. _____
3. _____ Relationship _____ Tel. _____
4. _____ Relationship _____ Tel. _____

Number of hotel rooms to reserve at Crowne Plaza: _____ Khiri Travel will reserve your room.

Date of arrival _____ (leave blank if not yet booked. Inform us of final flight details.)

Date of departure _____ (leave blank if not yet booked. Inform us of final flight details)

LAST DAY TO BOOK: SEPT. 29, 2018

Credit card (circle) Visa Mastercard American Express Other _____

Number _____ Name _____

Expiration _____ Security code _____

Package tour per person US \$517 + \$28.85 (5% bank fee) = \$545.85 x No. _____ of persons = _____

I authorize Khiri Travel to deduct this amount from my Credit Card account.

I understand this charge covers the 5-night, 6-day package tour per person and is inclusive of 5 nights at Crowne Plaza Hotel, double occupancy room, with free breakfast and a two-day tour of the city of Vientiane as well as a reception dinner arrival at the Hotel.

Signature: _____ Date _____

Email or fax this booking form to **sales.laos@khiri.com** Fax **856 21453 832**

Include a copy of the page of your passport that shows your photo and issue dates.

Khiri Travel Laos, Tel. 856 21 908 888

Stefan Scheerer, General Manager, Cell 856 20 599 40036 Emergency No. 856 20 5552 6840