

# MEKONG

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## Welcome to the 37th Issue of Our Newsletter



The Patuxai Victory Memorial in Vientiane honors those who died during the war years

## Remember Vientiane ? It Takes Some Effort

The best spot to take in an aerial view of Vientiane is to climb the 55-meter high Patuxai war memorial. Built between 1957 to 1968 as a copy of Paris's Arc de Triomphe, it stands on one end of Lane Xang, one of the city's main east-west avenues that leads to the That Luang stupa at the other end. Go up the spiral staircase to a platform where a panoramic view of that part of the city stretches to the horizon.

A tourist in 2017 describes the buildings, "all of which small and unimposing, seeming to disappear beneath the tropical foliage." Look west towards the commercial center, and another observer noted that the city "lacks a sense of monumentality associated with other socialist capitals, or perhaps to put it more accurately, it lacks of sense of socialist monumentality." In other words, Vientiane, the capital of a nominally Communist country, did not display the massive edifices – offices, apartments, plazas, memorials -- that occupy the former socialist capitals of Eastern Europe.

Look down from the platform – there's a large fountain, winding brick walkways, huge round concrete planters, cement benches. None of these were in place in 1961 when I first arrived at a time when the city was entering the era, beginning in 1955, of the American period that would last till 1975. Indeed it is said that Patuxai's cement, intended by U.S. aid for the airport, was diverted to build it. Guide books gleefully called it the "verti-

cal runway." True or not, the joke is symbolic of a time when the city underwent an enormous building boom as a result of gigantic infusions of American economic and military assistance.

Look, look, they have traffic lights," exclaimed Penny Villarica-Flores, returning for the first time in 2002, some 40 years after her sojourn in 1959 as a social worker with Operation Brotherhood (OB) in the remote northern town of Sam Neua. In the late 1950s, the city's 70,000 inhabitants coped with inadequate housing, poor communications to the provinces, deficient city water supply. Pedal-powered samlors had no use for traffic lights. At our OB Annex apartment in That Luang, three 55-gallon gasoline drums of water fed from a truck, and a plastic bowl was our bathroom. Another expat OB nurse Minerva Eresa-Will, joining our November 2018 reunion in Vientiane, seeing the jammed clusters of buildings - -"too many, all over" – was astounded at how only 10 years during her earlier visit, the city's landscape had sprawled its environs into village-like suburbs.

Why do I indulge in these remembrances of things past? In "Vientiane: Transformations of A Lao Landscape", (2007), three social scientists describe the history of a small out-of-the-way city in a small out-of-the-way nation. Vientiane's "urban past has rarely been an object of attention by scholars," they wrote. "Laos, in fact, is continually portrayed as a rural backwater marginal to

the dynamic trends affecting most of the Southeast Asian mainland." They traced the city's growth through three periods – French colonial (1893 to 1954); the American intervention (1955 to 1974); and finally as the Pathet Lao capital (1975 and onwards). The French chapter is titled "Land of the Lotus Eaters." The decadent term, said a British journalist, "conjured visions of long afternoon siestas spent with an accommodating Lao or Annamite (Vietnamese) mistresses. The scent of opium fumes mingled with the heavy perfume of jasmine never seemed far removed." French officials and army men generally considered Vientiane a "dead-end posting." But to other colons, it was an earthly paradise... "one vast Tahiti where life was not only comfortable but also stupefying boring."

The very few massive architecture of Vientiane serve historic milestones. The That Luang stupa, for example, recalls the past splendor of a 14th century empire. It is the national insignia that stood before the advent of the French. The Patuxai translates to the Victory Gate. During our time there in the 1960s, it always looked as an unfinished work in progress. Its unmistakable replica of Paris' Arch is said to aspire to the visions of Laos' French-educated elite. With the ascent to power of the Pathet Lao in 1975, it now memorializes the lives sacrificed for what they call the 30-year struggle against the French, the Japanese and the Americans. The "vertical runway" challenges is their way of challenging the agenda of the pushy American "colonizers".

The American period, titled the "Arena of the Cold War" chapter in the book, was of personal interest because I lived in the city from 1961 to 1967, right smack when the global war was at its coldest -- actually raging hot, in the case of Laos. People of various nationalities, civilians and combatants – Vietnamese (north and south), Lao, Thai, Americans were dying by the hundreds of thousands. Vientiane itself was spared the carnage, except for three short-lived, internecine coups and counter-coups among Lao military war lords. The mountainous, thickly forested hinterlands were the preferred bloody conflict arenas.

The "Transformation" authors write that the almost two-decade American flood of aid money produced a completely artificial air of prosperity to the city, bringing new goods and services, and fostering insidious corruption. It had devastating effects on the Lao economy, deepened dependency on the U.S. government. In two decades, it changed not only the landscape but the way of life of the residents in a way that 60 years of French occupation did not, according to the authors.

New houses, cinemas, a bowling alley, luxury car dealerships, nightclubs, pricey consumer goods on shops catered to a small, exclusive class of Lao army and political elite and expatriates. The majority of the city's population (156,000 by 1973), swollen by war refugees and provincial migrants drawn to aid-funded work opportunities, remained poor, existing on the physical and social fringes of the city. This played into the hands of the Pathet Lao who portrayed Vientiane as an American den of cor-

rupting influence on Lao culture and dignity.

We lived through this American period mostly as employees of Vientiane-based U.S. government agencies and contractors to American private companies. The pioneers were accountants from Manila, recruited in 1957 to staff the aid agencies, followed by Filipino health care personnel and technicians training the Lao armed forces. By 1965, there were some 1,000 Filipino residents. Arriving barely three years after the country emerged from French rule, we witnessed its enormous efforts to modernize in the midst of a civil war. Life in the city before their deployment to provincial outposts was a rite of passage. For many Filipinos, young and impressionable as they were then, it was as well a transformative experience that shaped their later lives after they left at the beginning of the Pathet Lao 1975 era. How else to explain the 110 marital couplings of that period between and among the Filipino groups?

American expatriates, the largest foreigners at 1,200 in 1973 (about 1,000 French) administering their vast aid programs, remember their sojourns vividly. "It was a super posting and the experience will never be forgotten," was one comment to a 2012 New York Times travel feature on the city. Said another "It is its own separate, authentic place, and how many places can you say about that? That's where its charm lies."

The stereotypical accounts of 1960s Vientiane, that it is "laid-back," "sleepy," "slow-paced" were true in many ways, and therein lies its charm. Bangkok, Hong Kong, Singapore, Phnom Penh were frenziedly modernizing. With the city's revenues close to bare, and American aid largely spent on pursuing the war, Vientiane took its leisurely time. And oh, how good those times were. So good indeed that groups of Mekong Circle members took turns to return and relish them. In 2002 there were 11; in 2008, coming together from the Philippines, Canada and the USA, 22 spent a week in the city and Luang Prabang. And for our 2018 reunion, 50 from overseas arrived to show spouses and children where their adventures of long ago began. In between these large pilgrimages, couples returned again...and yet again. I, for one, visited four times over a decade, and each time the city had morphed closer into Cubao in Manila or a mini-Bangkok. The endearing charm is wilting. The frangipani blossoms on some tree-shaded boulevards, the soft muffle of a drum from a temple, the steaming feh noodle bowls, the grass meadows of the That Luang grounds, a boat silently slicing the muddy waters of the Mekong – sure, there are still patches, glimpses, sounds, but fewer of them and fading fast. There's a telling comment from one reader that touched us during our November 2018 reunion. "I remember thinking that Vientiane would always be the place that I could say: 'Yeah, Vientiane is great but you should have been there when...'" Everything has changed and the pace of change is really fast." Said another: "I could go back in an instant if I could."

Maybe not. The Vientiane that you and I knew is no more.

-- J. "Pete" Fuentesilla

# Living and Surviving In A War Zone

During the 18-year tenure of Operation Brotherhood (OB) in Laos, its teams of health care and community development workers served across the entire length of the kingdom. From the mountainous highlands of the north to the Mekong River lowland valley towns and the forested regions of the south, they settled to dispense their services, some staying for a few months or many years. There is a table in the June 2019 issue (page 5) of our Mekong Circle Newsletter that lists the many places where the teams were stationed.

During its first year in 1957, out of six stations that opened, three closed. In the second year, eight were in operation, then three closed the next year. In 1960, only four stations stood – Vientiane,



Paksong, Attopeu, Sayaboury – while three were abandoned – Ban Ban, Thakhek and Sam Neua. Over the years, sites opened, then closed, in some cases reopened or relocated. Altogether there were 19 teams; only six remained

when OB ceased its program in 1975. In a war zone like Laos where various local and outside factions competed for territory, OB happened to arrive in the country when these conflicts escalated and found itself in harm's way. We were at the mercy of political and military shifts that moved us hither and thither.

The Sam Neua station is a case in point. It is the capital of Houa Phanh, one of two northeast provinces, the other Phong Saly, that the anti-government Pathet Lao guerrillas consider their strongholds. Reprinted here below, the first days of the OB there, as described by Fr. Miguel Bernad's "Filipinos In Laos" (2015) illustrate how a pioneering team planted its first roots in August of 1958 and its withdrawal when the Pathet Lao

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## SAMNEUA

Sam-Neua (also named Houa Phanh) was the farthest province to the northeast, situated in the mountainous country on the other (i.e. the eastern) slopes of the Annamite cordillera, looking towards North Viet-Nam. The capital of the province, the tiny town of Sam-Neua, was situated in a small valley cut into the hills by the Nam-Sam River. In French colonial days this isolated provincial capital had been connected by road with Hanoi to the northeast and with Ban-Ban to the south. But these and all other roads in the province had been heavily damaged in the recent wars. The road to Hanoi was passable only for 35 kilometers beyond Sam-Neua to the village of Xeng-Long. The road to Ban-Ban was passable for only 17 kilometers to Muong-Ham. Beyond these places the roads were impassable even by jeep: the bridges had been blown up, and logs lay across the roads to prevent passage. From Vientiane, Sam-Neua was accessible only by air; from many of the villages and hamlets, only on foot or on horseback.

A perceptive member of Operation Brotherhood, Rodolfo Severino Jr., has left us a description of the small town of Sam-Neua, "nestling cozily among the hills":

There are no roads out, except the one to Hanoi. There is one paved road, through the center of town, lined with Chinese and Indian shops selling American cigarettes, cheap French perfume, Indian cloth, Siamese trinkets, Japanese toys - all at fantastically high prices because of transportation costs. The only two-story building houses the governor's residence. The only other stone edifices are the post office, the government clinic, the army headquarters, headquarters, the Catholic church -- all relics of colonial times. A gleaming Buddhist shrine crowns the highest hill.<sup>1</sup>

Officially, the Operation Brotherhood station in Sam-Neua was opened on the first day of August 1958, although some members of the team had arrived before that date and others came later.

<sup>1</sup>"This Day Last Year in Sam-Neua" by R. Severino Jr., *The Philippines Free Press* (Manila, 24 Dec. 1960) p. 20.

The work began modestly: a public dispensary for outpatients, and two mall classes in English for adults. By the end of that first month, the team-leader and lone physician, Dr. Godofredo Banzon of Bataan, was able to report that a rhythm of work had been established "with efficiency, coordination and team-work" and that the morale was high "in spite of the stresses and strains that the team had to undergo."

The "stresses and strains" were due to several causes. One was the climate: rainy and cold. ("It's cold, cold, cold," was a phrase found more than once in the private diaries of the team members.) Filipinos are used to tropic-heat; but here they had to adjust to the cold dampness of the Laotian mountains. Even the architecture was not suited to the cold. As Severino described it:

Most of the houses are made of mud, their floors the bare earth. Coals glow in tin containers in the middle of the house, giving off precious heat and a glimmer of light. Children go to school carrying pails of burning coal to keep themselves warm in class.

Another difficulty was that of getting sufficient foodstuffs locally. Even fruit which could have been easily grown was scarce and very expensive. There was no icebox and food had to be bought from day to day. Food costs were high and the "kip" allowance for the team was insufficient for their needs. There was obvious need here for an agriculturist who could start the villagers on "self-help" projects towards greater food production.

Another source of "stress and strain" may have been the fact that it was frontier country, exposed to Communist attack and infiltration both from North Viet-Nam and from the home-grown Pathet-Lao.

There was also the fact that - in the beginning the team had no proper quarters for living or working. They lived, treated their patients, and stored their supplies, in tents. But this problem was already in process of being solved, even though it would take more than a year to solve it completely. The first building to be constructed was a house where the team members could live. The plans had been drawn up in Vientiane, and on 2 August construction began. It was a simple structure of local materials, but with cement footings and cement floor (the cement donated by the Laotian army) and galvanized iron roofing (40 of the sheets donated by the army, the rest procured from Vientiane). The construction was slow owing to the continual rains and to the fact that local labor was unskilled. But by October the team were installed in their new quarters.

captured the town on September 28, 1960.

Living in spartan living conditions, the team of physicians and nurses included agriculturists, nutritionists and social workers. They were to conduct not only a curative medical program, starting with a dispensary, but also to initiate ways to prevent the root causes of disease, such as poverty and unhealthy living conditions. They held nutrition classes for mothers, vaccinated children, demon-

strated improved food production – a holistic view beyond pills and vaccines.

The final days of the Sam Neua team are detailed by Fr. Bernad. On the morning of September 16, with reports that the Pathet Lao were closing in, a plane evacuated the women – nurse Susan Gaddi, nutritionist Rossini Fuentes and social worker Penny Villarica. Three male physicians remained – Juan Reyes, Teofilo Ocampo and Genaro Aguilar. To make a

long story short, one that is vividly remembered in OB's history, the doctors decided to flee by foot from the advancing Pathet Lao on September 28. The escape route to the nearest town of Ban Ban, some 184 kms away, is a hilly, muddy trek. Their feet bleeding from blisters, they were overtaken, captured, brought back to Sam Neua and held for three days unharmed, before they were released.

## Need A Primary Source ? Meet Fritz



If you have a grandchild, a niece or nephew who needs to do a class research paper on Laos, we know a terrific resource person who can lead you to primary archival sources. There's Wikipedia and there's Google, and then there's Frederick "Fritz" Benson.

Having worked in Laos, Fritz knows a lot about the country's political and military history than other Americans who churn out PhD dissertations and books about Laos without having set foot there. And while other Laos expats prefer to keep their deep knowledge to themselves, Fritz has published what he knows first hand and what he has found out in recently declassified documents. With the end of the Cold War, previously secret papers about the Indochinese wars have emerged. But there's still much that the U.S. Freedom of Information Act won't release. For example, our 18-year long service records in Laos with Operation Brotherhood (OB), Air America, the United States Agency For International Development USAID, Eastern Construction Company in Laos (ECCOI) are difficult to track. OB's entire records for that period remain missing. So Fritz did some

digging into USAID documents. (The agency funded our Laos operations). He presented his findings at our 2014 reunion in Las Vegas, Nevada. (see photo). Your young scholars can access them at the University of Wisconsin's Southeast Asian Images and Texts SEAIT website (<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/SEAIT.USAID-Laos>). On the same site, you can view images of OB's teams in Muong Sai, Nam Bac (taken in 1959), Sayaboury (1969), Vang Vieng (1969). It also archives hundreds of his photos.

Fritz volunteered to scan every page of our Mekong Circle Newsletters, all 19 issues from March 2002 to December 2013, a voluminous collection that we then produced into a CD. (A second volume, issues No. 20 to 37 will be forthcoming). We also digitized, again with his help, 46 issues of our Balitang Laos, a bimonthly newsletter mimeographed in Vientiane of our 1964 -1966 OB activities.

Fritz arrived in Laos in August 1968 as a volunteer with International Voluntary Service (IVS), a private version of the Peace Corp. We partnered with their young volunteers in some village development projects. After two years, he joined USAID's Office of Refugee Affairs as operations officer, assisting war displaced Lao and Hmong throughout northern Laos. He survived an attack of North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao in July of 1969 by hiding in the cellar of his quarters at Ban Talat, 40 miles north of Vientiane. "They thrashed all my stuff upstairs," he remembers a close shave with capture by the guerrillas.

After Laos and an MBA degree from Arizona State University, he travelled from 1977 to 1981 all over Asia while based in Manila. By then he had married Lith, a Lao from Luang Prabang.

"Our family expanded during our

stay. Both our kids were born in Manila, automatically Philippine citizens. During our weekends and holidays we spent our time driving throughout Luzon. I was addicted to photographing old colonial churches. And then there was bass fishing at Lake Caliraya.

"I spent a semester at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok for IVS language classes in Lao, then one month of agricultural training at the University of the Philippines, several days and nights spent in barrios and my introduction to 'balut'. What a great experience! We all reminisce about the good times we had in the Philippines and the many Filipinos we got to know."

Now retired in Greensboro, North Carolina, Fritz has completed several monographs that academics and your budding historians can access in the web. Here they are below. Fritz's email : [tamarind@infionline.net](mailto:tamarind@infionline.net).

"European Explorers In North-eastern Laos 1882 – 1893." Published in the Journal of Lao Studies, 2018.

"The Unraveling of the Geneva Accords Laos 1962-1964" Published in Indochina in the Year of the Dragon, 2014. Radix Press.

"Genesis of the Hmong-American Alliance, 1949-1962: Aspirations, Expectations and Commitments During An Era of Uncertainty" Published in Hmong Studies Journal, 2015.

"Indochina War Refugees Movements in Laos 1954-1975: A Chronological Overview Citing New Primary Sources". Published in Journal of Lao Studies 2015.

"Turbulence in Sam Neua Province, Laos 1953-1970." Published in Indochina in the Year of the Dog 1970 and Indochina in the Year of the Pig 1971. Radix Press 2019.

# A Temporary Home For Multi-ethnic Asian Refugees

*Today waves of desperate people are turned away. Years ago, the Philippines gave them shelter*

At a small film theater in Manhattan, I approached Thavisouk Phrasavath, a Lao filmmaker whose Oscar nominated best documentary “The Betrayal” was just screened in January 2008. It is a poetic narrative of his family who escaped Laos in the 1970s, then survived on the mean streets of Brooklyn, New York and his reunion in Laos two decades later with family members he left behind.

I said “Sabaidee”, my palms raised in prayer-like fashion to my chest, the traditional Lao greeting. He said “sabaidee”, surprised that someone who looked like him was among the mostly Caucasian viewers at the reception. No, I said, I am a “khon Filipin”. Oh, he apologized, then remarked that he spent time in the Philippines, his eyes sparkling at the memory.

He was referring to the town of Morong, in the northwestern province of Bataan, three hours bus ride from Manila, where in 1980 the United Nations opened a refugee center. Before it closed in 1990, the center was one site that housed thousands washed up on the shores of various southeast Asian countries, fleeing the end in 1975 of the Second Indochinese War. Morong accommodated more than 290,000 Indochinese – 182,567 Vietnamese, 70,240 Cambodians and 39,398 Lao.

“The mood was upbeat and posi-

tive,” among the refugees, reported the UN. They knew that the center was a transitory stop to their final destinations, having been approved for resettlement. They stayed an average of six months after arrival. In contrast, among the 2.5 million people displaced by the war, many languished in camps, mostly in Thailand, with hopeless chances of finding refuge elsewhere. Those held in Thailand described harsh, prison-like conditions. Indeed, the Lao who were resettled in the U.S. but spent prior time in Thai camps, were reluctant to tell me of a painful, degrading experience that they would not describe to their grown up children, evoking images of today’s Central American migrants, Afghan asylees, Iraqi refugees.

Morong had a hospital, libraries, schools, restaurants, markets, temples for each ethnic group. There was a thriving commerce in home-cooked food. In Thailand, guards sometimes stole their UN-provided food provisions, they said. A former OB –trained Lao nurse who visited one of these Thai camps reported cases of malnourishment. At Morong, Filipino staff taught English to those destined for the USA, Australia, New Zealand. Said Gaylord Barr, a former American Peace Corp worker, who worked there from 1984 – 1988 “What an amazing mix of languages, backgrounds and cultures, the

old hatreds and loyalties, the night sounds from the forest, the steam rising from the earth after a sudden downpour, the sound of children repeating an English phrase, the sound of prayers from a temple at sunset.”

The center was divided into ten neighborhoods, each one had 30 buildings, with 10 billets or living space each. Each billet could house six people or more. “There they cooked,” he wrote, “ate, slept, studied, worried, argued, fought, played, sang, loved, dreamed and made do with what they have.” Each neighborhood was numbered 1 to 10. Neighborhood 11 was the Cemetery. Ten years after it closed, Barr found it overgrown with weeds just as jungle foliage reclaimed the rest of the neighborhood’s facilities.

He has posted photos of that visit as well as dozens of the inhabitants, posing in groups, expectantly smiling for the next lives that await them. Take a look, dear Lao members, you may spot yourself among them at [www.bataan-blogspot.com](http://www.bataan-blogspot.com). In 1975, the agony of defeat divided Americans. Surveys revealed distrust and dislike at incoming refugees. But a more welcoming America opened their hearts. The Lao-American 2010 diaspora is estimated at 200,000, among them our Mekong Circle Lao colleagues.



*Clockwise from top : walkways between biliet buildings; residents in front of That Luang temple replica; entrance to a biliet; temple miniature copy. Each ethnic group built their own worship place and stayed in separate ethnic neighborhoods.*





At left, the newly named school. The thatch roof of the former building at right.

## Our Tribal Kids Now Have A Metal Roof School

We last reported that our second educational project in the Philippines has received government accreditation from the Department of Education some two years ago. You will recall that we adopted in March 2011 two primary schools located near the town of Sta. Maria, one in the village of Ilian and the other in Kitorok, both in the province of Davao del Sur in the southern island of Mindanao.

The villagers belong to the Tagakaolo, an indigenous tribe that inhabits a poor, isolated, very rural region. The schools are now named after the donors of the land they stood on – the Leonora Limboran Elementary School, and the Fred Maningon Elementary School. Before they were accredited, the salaries of the teachers came from donors, solicited by the Catholic Diocese of the City of Digos, the provincial capital, three hours away.

The villages' parish priest Fr. Nestor Lisondra, started the schools project. Over the years we donated cash and shipped school supplies for 200 kids. About 15 "Balikbayan" boxes have been shipped from the USA – grade school level reference books on astronomy, history, science, nature, geography, dictionaries, a 22-set children's encyclopedia -- close to 3,000 books. Other shipments crammed among the books included 140 stuffed toys, a new DVD player to view 57 Disney-ish educational videos, a microscope kit, wall maps, backpacks, crayons, drawing pads, children's magazines, pencils, globe maps, a slide projector.

It takes two months by ship for a box to reach Digos, then another full day by jeep or horseback on horribly rutted roads to the schools' mountain-top villages. A new priest now attends to the tribe. Fr. Lisondra has found another ministry. Let him describe it (slightly edited below) in an email we received Oct. 11, 2019:

*To date I am active with a medical mission of the Sisters of Mercy of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The beneficiaries are leg amputees. It started with one tribal school pupil Benjie who had a congenital defect on one leg. Friends in New Jersey led me to "Walk Free Philippines" sponsored by Physicians for Peace. I brought the child to the Philippine General Hospital in Manila for an operation and the fitting of prosthesis. He was accompanied by his mother. They stayed at the hospital for the whole month of December. There I met Dr. Penny Bundoc.*

*It so happened that a popular "Rated K" TV program interviewed Benjie and his mother. My name was mentioned. A teenage*

*amputee in Sta Maria, my former parish, saw the program and came to the rectory to seek help to bring him to PGH. I consented. But after several days, he came back bringing with him two more amputees, also seeking help. I was faced with the challenge of bringing several amputees to Manila. Then I remembered what Dr. Bundoc said that if I have 10 amputees, they don't need to come to Manila. The doctors will come to Davao instead. So I told the three amputees to find seven more. They did. In fact, the first medical mission had 43 patients. And the program snowballed. The next mission brought 75 patients, then 97, and the largest had 125. This year we move to Tagum with 126 amputees.*

Fr. Lisondra had visited New Jersey, USA earlier this decade on a fundraising drive for the tribal schools. Meeting with Filipino groups, among them Mekong Circle member Red del Rosario of Cherry Hill, New Jersey, he described the plight of the tribal kids, forging rivers and trekking long distances through hilly woods to reach the nearest school district. Their parents implored him to set up the schools. They erected a classroom made of bamboo and thatch roofing. We raised \$2750 as our first donation, then followed up with regular shipments of supplies and reading materials. There are photos in the February 2013 issue of our Mekong Circle newsletter, showing the schools, accessible from our website [www.mekongcircle.org](http://www.mekongcircle.org) (click on "Resources" then "Newsletters").

These newer photos on this page show that metal roofing has replaced the coconut palm fronds. But with government funding solely for teacher salaries, the kids have to obtain their own supplies of paper and pencils. Your donations help sustain them.

Make your check or money order payable to the Diocese of Digos, Account No. 129-3-03-500530-7 and mail to Metro Bank, Digos City Branch, Davao del Sur, Philippines. Fr. Lisondra's phone :082 553 5852. Email [frneli22@gmail.com](mailto:frneli22@gmail.com). Indicate "Tribal Schools Mekong Circle" on your checks.

Fr. Lisondra resides at the Home of the Clergy, Aurora Extension St., Digos City, Davao del Sur, Philippines



# Stuff You Must Know About If You Missed Them

Our Mekong Circle Newsletter began publishing in March 2002. Over the last 17 years, in 37 issues, we recorded events that were of monumental significance to members – the birth of a first child, marking 50 years of marriage bliss, celebrating a grandson’s karate championship belt. We shared a common experience in unusual times in Laos that also deserved to be told in essays, memoirs, anecdotes, histories about that kingdom where we

spent some of our transformative years. It’s a lot of narrative stuff. So we are picking out a number of notable features from these past issues that we thought are equally monumental markers of our Mekong Circle existence.

We start with the four histories of the major groups that compose our organization. Click on the links (in parenthesis) to open the issues that contain the specific features.

**Filipinos with U.S.A.I.D.** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/november\\_2003.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/november_2003.php))

**ECCOIL : A Remarkable Diversity of Skills** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/january\\_2004.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/january_2004.php))

**Filipinos with Air America, Bird & Sons, Continental** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/april\\_2004.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/april_2004.php))

**Filipinos with Operation Brotherhood (OB)** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/june\\_2004.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/june_2004.php))

**Marriages Among and Between Us. There were 112** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/january\\_2011.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/january_2011.php))

**Refugee Survival : How Our Lao Nurses Made It Here** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/june\\_2005.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/june_2005.php))

**Surviving Unscathed the Battle of Vientiane (1960)** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/may\\_2007.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/may_2007.php))

**A New York Reunion So Soon After 9/11 ? We Did It.** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/december\\_2011.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/december_2011.php))

**Vientiane School of Nursing Graduates** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/november\\_2003.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/november_2003.php))

**Things That Made Each Reunion Memorable** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/december\\_2013.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/december_2013.php))

**The Academic Archives Are Alive With Our Work** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/august\\_2016.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/august_2016.php))

**Filipino Newsmen’s Frontline Dispatches From Vientiane** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/august\\_2016.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/august_2016.php))

**Naming All Who Served With OB Laos** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/May\\_2018.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/May_2018.php))

**Making the Documentary “Filipino Pioneers”** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/May\\_2018.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/May_2018.php))

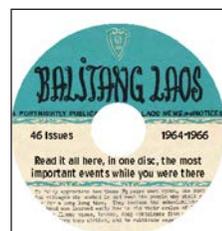
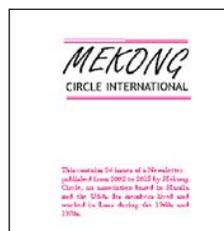
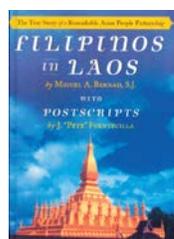
**The Old & New Regimes. We Lived Through One** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/june\\_2018.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/june_2018.php))

**What Our Early Years Were Like. The Good Times** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/august\\_2018.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/august_2018.php))

**Remembering Our Final Days, A Sad Ending** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/august\\_2018.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/august_2018.php))

**Diary of Our 12<sup>th</sup> (Last) Reunion** ([http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/january\\_2019.php](http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/january_2019.php))

A CD digitized the March 2002 to December 2013 issues (No. 1 to 24) and was distributed during our 10<sup>th</sup> reunion in December. (see below ). A second volume, No. 25 to 37 will be produced. Our website [www.mekongcircle.org](http://www.mekongcircle.org) has archived all issues (click on “Resources” then scroll down to “Newsletters”). Despite almost two decades of service in Laos, documentation of our work has been scarce. Hence we produced print and digital materials that we made available from our website. Among these are, from left below, a 20-minute documentary, a 246-page book; a CD compilation of our Newsletters; a CD of “Balitang Laos” a Newsletter that records our activities in Laos from 1964 to 1966; memoirs in “Goodbye Vientiane.”



# MEKONG

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*Mekong Circle International was organized in 1975 in California, USA. Its founding members served as technicians and advisers in education, public health, engineering and development aid. An affiliate, Mekong Circle Philippines, is based in Manila, the Philippines.*  
[www.mekongcircle.org](http://www.mekongcircle.org)