

Welcome to the 41st Issue of our Newsletter



The Sayaboury Provincial Hospital in 2020 (left). It replaced the 1969 OB-RLG-USAID hospital at right which shows one of its wards (top photo)



Sayaboury : Entering Elephant Country

This is the third in a series tracing the origins of our field teams in Laos. We started with Ban Houie Sai in the May 2020 issue, followed by Paksong in June 2020. We now spotlight Sayaboury.

Why Sayaboury, out of the 19 places where Operation Brotherhood (OB) had set up field stations during its 18-year sojourn in the kingdom? According to our timetable, we had spent the second longest time there --15 years, from November 22, 1960 to May 1975; the longest was 18 years in Vientiane (January 8, 1957 to May 1975). Ban Houie Sai 's adventurers stayed the shortest, eight years (1969 to 1975). Because of shifting situations in a war zone country where territories change hands among combatants, field stations opened and closed. Volunteers from the Philippines came and went. We can say that at one time or another, Sayaboury hosted a larger number of them than at any other station except Vientiane.

Among the 17 provinces of Laos, Sayaboury is

noted for two things: it is the only one on the western side of the Mekong River which forms its border with Thailand. Secondly, it is home to many more elephants than anywhere else in the country. The total population, both captive and wild, is estimated at 1,500. That's down from 2,000 to 3,000 in the late 1980s, due to poaching and low birthrates. It's way, way down from the country's monarchical pre-1975 slogan – "Land of a Million Elephants and The White Parasol" – a number more myth than fact. Still they are a common sight, magisterially striding down the village roads. And like the That Luang stupa in Vientiane, the Lao elephant is a revered cultural symbol adorning temples and hotel lobbies.

Our official records have been missing since we left Laos in 1975. So, let's cobble some Sayaboury narratives from available bits and pieces. A chronology in an OB Newsletter "Balitang Laos" wrote that in October 1959 the stations in Luang Prabang province were pulled out – Xieng Ngeun after a 14-month stay,

and Nam Bac after two years. In the same month, Sayaboury was opened. The only reference we found was that a lone Filipino physician arrived that month to help staff a clinic and after a year he left.

An issue of "The Volunteer", another OB newsletter, published this in its August 1972 issue:

"In August 1959, an OB team headed by **William Beyer** (son of renowned Filipino anthropologist Otley Beyer) arrived in Sayaboury. It was composed of Dr. **Jose Abad**, male nurses **Kelly Killongan** and **Primo Viray** and Lao interpreter **Thao Khamchong**. His Royal Highness **Rattana Panya** (Chaokhoueng of Sayaboury) and **Col. Bounchan** (then captain and commander of Volunteer Battalion 14), took upon themselves the task of helping the team settle. A wooded area was cleared ... The villagers provided construction materials and pitched in to build a house which became the base of operations for the OB personnel who were then staying at (a school) the Groupe Scolaire in town.

"Exactly two years later, a (30-bed) hospital was constructed through the untiring efforts of the Chaokhoueng and **Col. Bounchan**. By 1962 medical activity had expanded to outlying villages, to Muong Phieng in the south and to Ban Nala and Tha Deua in the north. Mobile medical teams, composed of a doctor and a ward nurse, and sometimes a public health nurse or an agriculturist made regular visits to the outlying villages." A home technologist and a community development worker would also join the visits. Between February 1963 and January 1964, the team set up six dispensaries in some of the villages maintained with OB-trained medics. To reach more remote places, teams packed up supplies and sustenance that would sustain them for so-called "mobile" medical expeditions. One took five days in February 1963; another lasted nine days a year later.

Team members during this period were Dr. **Ramon Pablo**, his wife nurse **Jojo Pablo**, nutritionist **Gladys Cid**, accountant **Luis Tabano**, dentist **Benjamin Tagaro**, nurses **Eula Duruin**, **Thelma Palao** and medical technologist **Araceli Isidro**.

The opening of the hospital, dated 1961 in the "Volunteer" account above, was actually on July 27, 1965. As described in the July 31, 1965 issue of



"Balitang Laos", it was a grand affair attended by high ranking national and provincial officials as well as by representatives of USAID and OB. Construction began in June 1964. Its facilities included an operating room, a delivery room, x-ray and clinical laboratories, dental clinic, two private rooms and a dispensary. Flying to the opening event from Vientiane were **Houmpheng Prathoumvan** of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Dr. **Phouy Phouthasak** of the Ministry of Public Health, **Houmphanh Saignasith** of the Jaycees of Laos, and the following officials from the USAID – **Peter Cody**, **Dr. Russell Andrus**, **Dr. Charles Weldon** and **Dr. John Kennedy**. OB Sayaboury Team head **Dr. Orlando Alagar** and OB Project Manager **Jovito Naranjo** led the tour of the facilities.

An item in the November 30, 1964 "The Volunteer" noted the support of the local population for the project while it was under construction:

"Sayaboury town businessmen and merchants delivered 14 wooden beds this month as part of their donation to the new team hospital being constructed. Villagers donated a total of 70 wooden fence posts. One of the donors included **Thao Thitlit** who, last Nov. 21 arrived at the base station sometime before lunch and asked that his donation of a single post be duly received. Barefooted, he had walked from Ban Nala, more than six kms. away to deliver his donation." It was further reported that the posts were tree trunks, measuring four inches in diameter and eight feet long. Among the donors of the posts were residents of Ban Nasang, six kilometers south of the town, each carrying his trunk, inscribed with his name.

In time, integrating curative medicine with livelihood projects, the team set up demonstration farms to

teach farmers improved crop production techniques. For example, in three years, in a campaign called swine dispersal, 80 weanlings were distributed to villagers. The recipients, who were taught better livestock practices, returned a portion of the litter for further dispersal.

Eight years later, on the same site, a larger 65-bed facility was inaugurated January 20, 1973 to serve as the primary provincial level medical center. It was another tripartite partnership between the Royal Lao Government, USAID and OB whose personnel would operate it along with local staff. By that time, the Filipino lineup consisted of physicians **Felix Romero** (team head), **Reynaldo Padilla**, dentist **Adriano Torres**; nurses **Roberto de los Reyes**, **Eufrosina Limcango**, **Fe Nonan**; nutritionist **Erlinda Masibay**, medical technologist **Valeriano Handog**, and Fiscal/Supply Officer **Victor Capili**.

During the extended lifetime of the Sayaboury team, numerous members served there, some for months, others for years. In addition to those already named in this account, here are the others in this incomplete roster:

Physicians Sisinio Azul, Ben de Gracia, Teofilo Ocampo, Fil Acorda, Crispin Valiente, Mila Buenaventura; **dentists** Nelly Robles, Florencia de los Santos, Bac Bacordo, Fred Reyes, Ben Tagaro; **nurses** Benny Guzman, Marlene Jamero, Florence Omengan, Thelma Villamar, Virginia Guzman, Melanie Dumadaug, Nemia Altura, Dory Cabatuando, Manuel del Rosario, Violet Agustin, Puring Dayawon, Conse Sotio, Romy Agbayani, Flor Saguisi, Mary Degay, Sining Limcango, Guadalupe Goma, Chanthone Chinyavong (OB Vientiane School of Nursing graduate); **agriculturists** Felix Valera, Miguel Palacpac, Anacleto Paras, Fidel Tamayo; **medical technologists** Gloria Punzalan, Pete Tapia, Ernie delos Reyes; **community development workers** Manuel Galera, Renato Talatala, Luzbella Ramirez; **home technologists** Ching Caldoza, Linda Masibay, Tessie Mondragon, Tacing Buniao; **mechanics** Viring de la Rosa, Sandy Corcuera, Rey Zamora; **fiscal/supply officers** Oscar San Mateo, Denis Hebreo, Pol Custodio, Vic Capili; **administrative assistants** Mel Palma, Reynaldo Dandan.

Share with us your stories such as this one from **George Alba** on the next page.

Those Were The Good “Tabo” Days For the Boys and the Girls

Assistant Project Manager George Alba (right) remembers how it was like (from “The Volunteer”, August 1972, slightly edited for clarity:

“It was a rainy afternoon when I first visited Sayaboury sometime in June 1961. The whole team turned out to meet me. Team visits were rare occasions during the monsoon months. My particular welcome was like that of a long-lost relative, especially because I brought with me months-delayed mail and a few newspapers from home.

At the time the team was composed of Dr. **Juan “Johnny” Reyes** (team head), physician **Felix Romero**, agriculturist **Leopoldo “Pol” Daulo**, nurses **Catalina Mangabat** and **Narcisa Degawan**. They lived in a typical Lao house of thatch roofing with broad bamboo slats for floors and sidings. It had a tiny porch and two fairly large rooms and a small living room. A roofed-over area between the main house and the kitchen served as a well-ventilated dining room. Adjoining the dining room was another room which served as the radio-utility-storage-guest room.

There was no plumbing nor running water. Four big gasoline drums filled with water were for kitchen use, also for morning and evening ablutions. If one dared the cold, chilly mornings in Sayaboury, there was the bathroom in the backyard, an enclosure constructed of galvanized iron sheets partitioned for boys and girls. On each side was a gasoline drum filled with water, with a handy “tabo” (a cup) and convenient nails to hang things on. Until an artesian well was drilled in 1962, water was drawn from the deep well of the nearby Buddhist temple a few hundred meters down a hill.

Team members raised vegetables in their backyard. Pol had his small piggery. Chickens gave them fresh eggs for breakfast. The girls and the boys took turns doing kitchen duty. Others who



were free from work prepared special dishes. Invariably it was “adobo”, being the easiest to prepare. Oh, yes, in varying degrees of saltiness, depending on who cooked it.

Saturday was wash day. Everyone went down the hill to the well to wash their clothes. Through friendship, flattery or cajolery, the girls always ended up washing the best pants, shirts and particularly the “barong Tagalog” (Filipino formal dress shirt) of the boys.

The clinic was under the house, a portion of which was the operating/delivery room, and a corner was the dental clinic. Johnny doubled as the team dentist. I well remember him extracting a molar, his patient almost half out of the dental chair, groaning and grunting as Johnny tugged and pulled.

The radio transmitter and receiver sets were a BVC-191 of World War II vintage. The receiver was powered by a 2.5 kVa generator while the transmitter was hooked up to a 24-volt battery. These were salvaged sets repaired many times over and must have had several parts missing because the sound quality was generally poor.

At the time, we used radio call signals. Sayaboury’s call name was “Kalaw”; Vientiane was “Lawin”; Attopeu was “Pipit” and Paksong was “Maya”. Here is a typical radio exchange:

“Kalaw...this is Kalaw calling Lawin...Come in Lawin.. *sino ito* (who is this?)...Pipit? I am still talking to Lawin...come in Lawin....Kalaw...Lawin...I cannot read you...I’ll give you a long count for tuning...one, two, three, four, five, six...how do read me

now...go ahead....what?...please repeat...*ulitin mo* (say again)...over.” (Editorial note: these call names are Filipino words for various bird species – Lawin is a hawk; Pipit is a cuckoo; Kalaw is a horn-bill; Maya is a sparrow).

Finally after some long trying minutes, the message would get through, although these messages would often be unintelligible. Johnny would ask : “What did Vientiane say?” The reply: “I don’t know, could not understand. Let’s try tomorrow if the reception is better.”

Johnny, who developed into one of our best surgeons, was a frustrated carpenter and mason, I suspect. Same goes for his buddy Pol. They loved to saw, plane or just hammer things around. They built the OR/DR, the clinic, benches and stools, cupboards and shelves for the dining room. Johnny was a compulsive nailer. Everything he saw loose, he hammered down.

My visit to Sayaboury lasted over three weeks because of the weather. It was one of my most enjoyable visits, now that I recall it, having lived and worked with the team members.”

“Hey Pol, the pachyderms are going after our veggies gardens again!” (No, not really. Just an illustration that elephants are a common sight in Sayaboury.)



Some Memorable Highlights of Serving In Sayaboury

Sunday Lunches At the Homes of Our Locals



Erlinda Masibay, (left) nutritionist in the Sayaboury team, writing for “The Volunteer” February 1973 (slightly edited):

“In the latter part of 1970, we organized weekend picnics attended by our Lao personnel and the government health workers of the hospital. It was a ‘bring your own lunch’ event. But we had to stop these treks to out-of-the-way places when security conditions became risky.

So, we switched to lunches in the homes of our Lao personnel. We contribute the marketing costs in advance and request them to prepare local cuisine. They invite other Lao friends to join us. This isn’t a one-way affair, however. After lunching with several families on weekends, they in turn are invited to dine with us at the OB house, together with their friends.”

Senator Ted Kennedy Comes Visiting

From our email sent Sept. 21, 2009 to Mekong Circle members as our tribute to Senator **Edward Kennedy** who passed away on August 25, 2009. It described his visit in “Balitang Laos”, Oct. 31, 1965:



“There he sat on a sofa in the OB House, a youthful looking 33-year old, dark-haired, white baci strings around his wrists, flanked by Dr. **Mila Buenaventura** (on his right), nutritionist **Ching Caldoza** and nurse **Thelma Villamar**. U.S. Congressman **John Tunney** is beside Mila.

On October 28, 1965, three years after he was elected to the U.S. Senate, Ted Kennedy arrived by helicopter in town together with other Congressional members of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Refugees and Escapees. The day earlier they were touring refugee sites in South Vietnam. Now they wanted to see for themselves how the war between America and North Vietnam, spilling into Laos, had displaced and killed vast numbers of civilians. (By 1973, subsequent hearings reported

750,000 Lao, mostly Hmong, a third of the population, were uprooted into refugee camps).

In 1964, the USA had intensified bombing of Pathet Lao-held areas. Kennedy’s subcommittee was concerned with reports that the bombings, instead of winning the war, drove people from their homelands into dreadful camp conditions, generating Lao anger at America.

That was how Senator Kennedy reported his findings at Congressional hearings upon his return in 1965. In that year, he also authored the Immigration and Nationality Act that loosened visa quotas allowing many Filipino professionals to immigrate here as well as our close relatives. Indeed during his 46-year tenure with the Senate, apart from immigration reform, Kennedy had done more for the cause of civil rights, peace, education, affordable housing, women’s and workers’ rights than any other legislator. Before he died on August 25 at the age of 77, his Committee on Health, Employment, Labor and Pensions, passed the first draft of the massive healthcare reform act.

The “Balitang Laos” item contained this additional information:

Earlier, the delegation visited the Hmong resettlement camp at Ban Nam Hia. They were accompanied by U.S. Ambassador **William Sullivan**, USAID Director **Joseph Mendenhall**, Sayaboury governor **Rattana Panya**, Commissioner of Planning **Oukeo Souvannavong**, Director of Social Welfare **Houmpheng Prathoumvan**, and other USAID and U.S. Embassy officials.

At the OB House, his party had a light lunch of sandwiches and custard. He described his six-month treatment for a broken back suffered during a plane crash in the U.S. on June 1964. Inside the OB males quarters, team head Dr. **Orlando Alagar** had a close look at the device that protected the Senator’s backbone.

Sabaidee Pi Mai ! Pour It On ! It’s Hot

The steamy days of April when the dry season is at its peak are marked by three days that celebrate Pi Mai Lao – the Lao New Year. Along with visits to the local temple, playful dousing of water at each other is a gesture for good things to come their way for the coming year. It is also the occasion to gather with relatives and friends for that uniquely Lao “baci” tying of white strings around the wrists.

That was recorded in the “Balitang Laos” issue of April 30, 1966:

“Delegations from seven neighboring villages visited OB Sayaboury and offered a series of baci, wishing the team members good health and prosperity. Some 400 villagers headed by their respective “Tasseng” and “Naiban” (local leaders) came at different times from April 17 to 22. Villages represented were Ban Nato Noi, Ban Nato Nyai, Ban Wangkham, Ban Nalao, Ban Keng, Ban Nyai and Ban Pakhom. Earlier, from April 12 to 15, team members joined different village groups to call on the homes of local officials.”

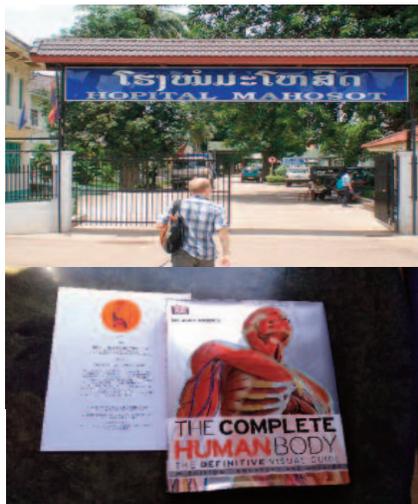
Two Nursing Schools Joined Hands

The severe shortage of Lao nursing staff that faced Operation Brotherhood became starkly critical when it prepared to open a 40-bed hospital in the That Luang district of the capital in 1960. It had some 20 Filipino registered nurses in 1959 but most were dispatched to newly opened field stations in the provinces, leaving only eight nurses for Vientiane. Anticipating a big surge of patients for a city with only one other general hospital, the government Mahosot, OB administrators explored the field stations to fly in “medical aiders” that they had trained. Attopeu and Paksong responded with eight Lao.

There were also plans to expand bed capacity to as many as 100 beds. That demanded more Lao to do bedside nursing but also auxiliaries to assist in the various services the Filipinos staffed – operating room, laboratory, delivery room, x-ray, dental, pharmacy, dispensary. The country had scarce trained personnel to draw on. A 1950 government survey counted 20 “basic nurses” who had only six years of primary education “plus a few years of extra training, including on-the-job practice”. It was time to think about a formal course to produce more qualified nurses.

Beginning in 1961, a two-year course in nursing opened in Vientiane, one classroom building within the hospital compound. By the end in 1969 of the last class, 147 were graduated to staff all OB hospitals. In the same year, Mahosot Hospital’s School of Nursing opened a six-month practical nursing course under the guidance of the United Nations’ World Health Organization (WHO). It was upgraded into a two-year nursing midwifery course and in 1969 into a three-year registered nursing course that graduated the country’s first 29 RNs.

OB’s school was directed by **Vicenta “Toots” Calderon**,



Top: Mahosot is one of three central hospitals in Vientiane. Bottom: Our gift to its Nursing School library is an anatomy reference book with our dedication page.

who has a Masters degree in nursing from Columbia University in New York. She was also Director of Nursing of the Vientiane hospital, picking those from her Filipino RN staff to serve as clinical instructors. **Cecile Datu** was her Assistant Director. Together with WHO’s Nursing Education Advisor **Phyllis Aldridge**, they developed an exchange program for their Lao students to observe nursing practices in each other’s hospitals.

The legacy of that partnership has endured over the years. A number of OB graduate nurses transferred to Mahosot when OB’s Vientiane hospital, declared “obsolete” by the government after 42 years of service, was demolished in 2002. They have

advanced in their nursing careers at Mahosot, considered the country’s premier health institution and, with 450 beds, its largest central level hospital. The late **Bounthan Oudom** became chief of its Nursing Department; **Sivone Urai Chandara**, now retired, was a head nurse. Two of our Vientiane-based organizers for our Mekong Circle 2018 reunion in Laos are Mahosot leaders — **Latsamy Vongnalath**, head nurse and **Sonevilayvanh Panysili**, deputy head of Pediatrics Nursing. **Douangchampy Vouthisouk**, a former OB nurse who showcased the cultural number at our dinner reception is Deputy Director General at the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. Latsamy, Bounthan, Sivone and Sonevilayvanh had attended a number of our reunions in the USA.

On November 23, 2018, during our courtesy call on the Minister of Health **Dr. Bounkhong Syhavong**, we presented a copy of “The Complete Human Body: The Definitive Visual Guide.” At 526 pages of computer-generated illustrations and microscopic imaging, and weighing 10 lbs., the reference volume was presented as Mekong Circle’s gift to the library of the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Health Sciences.

Picnic Lunch in the Forest Primeval

Kengkok, a rural town in the southern province of Savannakhet, where OB had a field station for 11 years (January 1964 to May 1975), recreational outlets such as a bowling alley was light years away. Never mind hot air balloons or infinity pools. Aha, but pristine woodlands beckon. So, team members indulge in picnicking. Here’s one outing as published in “Balitang Laos” May 31, 1966. — J. “Pete” Fuentecilla

The summer months are over and the rains will soon come. One clear morning the Chaomuong, (mayor) arrived in his jeep in front of our living quarters.

“If anyone is interested, he is invited to come with me

and eat in the fields,” he said. He is a lawyer who trained in France. He has beady eyes, wore baggy pants, a farmer with a wrinkled face tanned by the sun. We climb into his jeep, expecting to see a pile of picnicking stuff. There is only a large straw basket packed with kao niaw (steamed sticky rice); a hatchet, a roll of plastic twine, and a bottle of clear lao-lao (fiery rice wine). “We are going to fish for lunch,” he said. “I brought some fish hooks for you”.

We rode out of town, passing through one village after another, over cart trails canopied by tall bamboo groves. Chickens and pigs scurried here and there. The mayor waved at villagers busy with the chores of summer — the men weaving

bamboo mats, straw baskets, fish nets, cutting logs, watering vegetable plots. The women fetched water in gasoline cans or bamboo tubes; spun fabric in looms under their homes, gathered firewood.

The jeep cut across dry ricefields, bounced over crumbling mud dikes. We dart into trails that led into dense woods, that opened into more trails, then into more wooded surroundings. We bounced around for about an hour before the Chaomuong admitted that we were lost. We saw two human figures in the horizon and raced across the ricefields towards them. They were carrying muskets, hunting for game. They pointed their fingers to the horizon for the general direction of the river.

Crossing more ricefields, we got lost again. A girl in ragged clothes suddenly appeared from nowhere, in the middle of this wilderness! She said she knew the way to the river. This time the Chaomuong took no chances, offered her 50 kips to hop into the jeep as our guide.

The river, shrunken by the summer sun to half its width, flowed between steep banks. The Chaomuong knew we were exhausted from the bumpy ride and the heat, and weak with hunger. It was high noon. "You rest," he said, "and I will fish." He slid down the banks and disappeared around a bend of the river.

We deadened the hunger pangs with a few jiggers of lao-lao and started hacking away at the shrubs on the ground to clear a space to eat and stretch. It was after much hacking that we realized there were people on the other side of our clearing, out of sight behind thick jungle growth. We could smell something being grilled. We pushed through the tangle of bushes and branches towards them. In a clearing, there were five women preparing lunch for their men who were out fishing.

After a while, the Chaomuong returned, carrying a catch of three small fishes. Six men came with him and their more bountiful catch. The women took the fishes, scraped the scales off, pulled out inedible organs. They plucked sharply pointed twigs, pierced the fishes with them, propped them up against a stone here and a stone there, started and fanned fires under them. It was fascinating to watch how quickly and effi-

ciently they did their business. The baskets of sticky rice were suspended from tree branches, away from ants. On large stones arranged as stoves, kettles and pans boiled water. Bundles of various vegetables and spices wrapped in banana leaves were dipped in.

Smoke and happy banter floated above our clearing. Some of the men who earlier disappeared into the woods returned with stout long bamboo tubes. They split these lengthwise, cleaned out the hollow sections and dulled the sharp edges. Laid on the ground, small stones were placed underneath to prevent rolling sideways. Large banana leaves blanketed the ground. Spoons fashioned out of twine and banana leaves were placed beside each bamboo hollow.

The banquet table was ready. Each bamboo hollow section contained a cooked dish. We spoon out our portions right onto the banana leaves and ate with our fingers. The men rolled small banana leaf pieces into cup-like jiggers for the lao-lao. Suddenly, a stocky man walked out from the woods. Barefooted, chin bristling with whiskers, hair sunburned brown, clothes heavily stained with jungle grime. He clutched a cloth net and a wooden snare with which he caught two large birds. He sat with us as if he was expected. Behold, a true hunter-gatherer, emerging from the forest primeval! He gave the birds to the women who immediately plucked out the feathers. Some more protein of another species went into the kettles.

It was a most delicious lunch ever. We sang, took swig after swig of lao-lao, danced the lamvong, joked, laughed and laughed. It was a summer picnic to remember.

Photo above: Lunch on the forest floor today as it was in the 1960s.



Boat Race: Fastest Is Not Goal. Not Sinking Is

In October the river towns across Laos celebrate two events. The first marks the end of the rainy season in a religious festival called Boun Ok Vatsa ("the rains depart") when the Buddhist faithful flock to their temples. There they pray, offer food to the monks, socialize, and dance the lamvong. For the monks it is the end of a three-month long lockdown inside their wat during the rainy months when they are not allowed to travel.

The second event is an athletic contest the next day, called Boun Nam, or boat racing. In cities like Vientiane or Luang Prabang, both nurtured for ages by the rivers that bend around them, the races generate big money for vendors, big winnings for bettors and big attractions for the massive crowds. We found ourselves in the southern province of Attapeu, in its capital of the same name in the day of the races in 1966. OB had established a medical station there in 1958.

Here is an account, slightly edited, that was published in the October 15, 1966 issue of our newsletter "Balitang Laos."

A week before Boat Racing Day, October 11, 1966, provincial officials requested that OB join the event. Team Head Dr. **Pete Joaquin**, supremely confident in the powers and bulk of his muscles (abdominal) eagerly signed the participation papers. They will row against provincial chiefs – the Provincial Forester, the Chief of the Office of Posts and Telecommunications, the Mayor of Ban Lavae, the Director of Schools and several teachers. The OB team, in addition to Pete, were Dr. **Mon Ortiz**, dentist **Bac Bacardo**, agriculturist **Johnny Asuncion**, village health workers **Thao Saysamone**, **Thao Bounmy**, agricultural workers **Thao Phai** and **Thao Khambai**. Nurse **Dick Abad** was tasked to record with his camera the Great OB Victory.

Last year, an all-Lao OB team won second place. Now that the Filipinos were challenged to join the race, plans for victory were enthusiastically discussed over breakfast, lunch and dinners by the members, who as everybody knows, couldn't tell the difference between a canoe from a piece of log. Johnny wanted to trim the sides of the canoe to lighten its weight. Mon

demonstrated an intricate paddling technique that involved a three-count body motion. Pete wanted room for an inner tire tube beside him. Vitamins were to be consumed daily. Push-ups and weight lifting exercises were advised.

A canoe was rented (50 kip a day). Philippine-style paddles were carved because somebody remarked that the slim Lao paddles were not "water-engineered". Practice sessions were held three times in the late afternoon on the Sekong River. During the first practice session, the canoe turned round and round in circles because nobody knew how to steer properly. Johnny fell overboard during the second practice session. The canoe overturned during the third session because too much water kept splashing in from improper paddling.

As racing day approached, it became more important to stay afloat over the 700-meter course than to win. Reaching the finish line loomed problematic. During practice, most ceased paddling halfway down the course, exhausted. There was serious thought to replacing Pete and Bac with leaner paddlers. Spectators on homes along the river bank watched with amusement during the practice sessions.

Race day arrived cloudy but bright. Hundreds of spectators stretched along the length of the river banks that separated Muong May from Ban Sekamane. Ten boats from six villages will



square off during the all-day event. Long boats will race long boats. They seat 25-to 30 paddlers. In a bend of the river, they were warming up, slicing through the waters in smooth, sleek synchronized movements. Winners earn kip prizes and bragging rights. They will prance in groups through town and village roads, drumming and chanting their glory.

Starting and finish lines on the river were marked with small national flags stuck on floating banana tree trunks. The OB team, wearing green pants, the OB seal on white T-shirts, chicken feathers on headbands, drew admiring looks. The opposing team wore street clothes. Their race will open the day's event. At the halfway point, the OB boat, miraculously ! was still afloat. They furiously churned the waters with arm-snapping tempo, Mon yelling the cadence. Nearing the finish line, their boat starting filling up with water. Pete frantically bailed out with a metal biscuit can. With whoops and yells from the crowd, the other canoe crossed the finish line, a full canoe length ahead.

The losers took it all in good spirits. They told each other : "The other side had the swifter side of the current." "You were paddling tons of water into the boat!" "Next time, let's synchronize." "I went to sleep at two o'clock in the morning." "I told you we won't sink."

J. "Pete" Fuentesilla

How We Discovered the Buddha

As minority Christians in a majority Buddhist country, Filipinos in Laos experienced a religious shock of sorts. Our ancestors lived "nuong panahon ng Kastila", followed by "nuong panahon ng Kano" (and a short-lived "panahon ng Hapon".) The Spanish and American eras embedded in us a Christian landscape of European-style churches and a Jesus-centered ideology. Imagine our surprise when, during our sojourn in Laos, we learned parallels between the life of the historical Jesus and of Buddhism's founder Siddhata Gotama. Their life cycles are one example.

Mary was told of her son's Jesus's conception from an angel. Gotama's was conceived in a dream by his mother. Jesus was born during a trip in Nazareth, and his manger-birthplace was pinpointed by a star in the heavens that three kings on camels followed. Gotama was born under a tree, 800 years before Jesus, somewhere in today's Nepal while his mother was on a journey to her parent's home; heavenly apparitions occurred right after his birth. Jesus, at the age of 30, embarked on a three-year meandering teaching career before he was crucified. Gotama launched his at the age of 45, until he died peacefully at the age of 80. Those are the similarities. But we were surprised that he taught the non-existence of a creator God and an immortal soul, both solid Christian beliefs.

We live in a suburban neighborhood in New York City,



Bert Sobrevinas shows OB President Oscar Arellano in 1964 the wooden Buddha statue he and his trainees sculpted that was donated to a temple in Vientiane.

in Queens Village, about an hour south-east from Manhattan. Atop a hill on Spencer Avenue, only two blocks away, beside the untended wild growth of Poto-mogeton Pond, the New York Buddhist Vihara rises, looking like a recreation hall or a museum, and not the multi-tiered roofed, steeply sloped, mosaic encrusted Buddhist temples we see in Laos. Vihara is Sanskrit for monastery. But inside on the second floor, it assumes the traditional look of the spacious shrine hall of any Laos-based temple. At one end a large gold colored Buddha sits among a profuse assembly of flowers, urns, small flags, statuettes. Here during Buddhist holy days, scores of the faithful from the city's Sri Lankan immigrant communities and beyond come to worship. Colorful banners festoon the building's exterior to announce a major holy day.

The Lao loves his religious holidays, which are also occasions for feasting and socializing. One of its greatest is the Visakhabouxa or Wesak commemorating the birth and enlightenment of the Buddha. Held in May, it would be roughly the equivalent of Christmas and Easter celebrated together. It is one of nine festivals that we describe in a series in the 1965 issues of our "Balitang Laos" Newsletter, in chronological order, beginning with Makabouxa, in February. The series ends with the That

(Continued on page 8)

MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

216-27 Spencer Ave. Queens Village
New York 11427 USA

Discovering Buddhism...

Luang festival in November. (In 2014 we produced into a CD all 46 Newsletter issues that we distributed during our Mekong Circle reunion that year in Chicago.)

In Buddhist tradition, Makabouxa marks a day when the Buddha's 1,250 disciples converge at a place called Veruwan Rassakuha in India. What was extraordinary about this event was that each of the disciples came to the same spot, from separate places, yet each had received no summons, prompted to go by a voiceless command. At Veruwan, Gotama informed them of his death three months hence. Didn't Jesus also foretell his death ?

In 1965 we compiled the series into a booklet, "Festivals of Laos" in which we acknowledged the assistance of Mr. Kruong Pathumxad, Laos' Director of Cults, and his staff, and to the venerable Chaokanakhouengs (chief monks) of Attopeu, Sayaboury and Kengkok provinces. OB Filipino artist **Leila Lareza** did the color illustrations.

When the Communist Pathet Lao took power in 1975, it determined that its materialistic Leninist-Marxist ideology cannot be reconciled with the non-earthly beliefs of Buddhism. It closed the temples, harassed monks to attend educational sessions that glorified its socialist doctrine, discredited the three foundational pillars of Buddhism – the Buddha, the Dharma (his

teachings) and the Sangha (monastic order of monks and nuns).

After some five years, the suppression campaign failed. The Lao's faith stood as strong as their belief in the "phi", the spirit world that the non-believers of Nirvana and Karma likewise tried to eliminate but could not, which partly explains why the spirit-string -tying baci ceremony has remained intact today

There is a volume released in 2017 by Amazon with the same title as ours, authored by **Martin Stuart-Fox** and **Som-sanouk Mixay**. Martin was a former agricultural extension worker of USAID in Laos, a war correspondent and a professor emeritus at the University of Queensland in Australia. A scholar of many books about Laos, he contributed the concise, very informative overviews of Laos that accompany the Lonely Planet travel guides on the country.

I have not read their Amazon book but at 96 pages, compared to our 28-page compilation it should offer more information for those who want more. And dig his photo in the 2017 edition of "Lonely Planet – posing in full baggy, multi-pocketed safari attire, sunglasses, camera on a sling, scanning the horizons of Afghanistan and Bangladesh which he had covered as a correspondent. Okay, Martin, but have you trekked the wild hinterlands of Vieng Ratty in Vientiane in the 1960s ? Let's compare notes.

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. Past issues of our Newsletter can be accessed from our website www.mekongcircle.org. (Click on "Resources".) Your comments are welcome. Send to fuentecila@aol.com