

## Welcome to the 45th Issue of our Newsletter



Vientiane, Laos, November 25, 2018 : Posing for the final gathering

## Closing the Circle of our Reunions

This month, two years ago, we watched our last Mekong Circle reunion fade away in a frenzy of wide angle frozen smiles. At a ballroom of the Lao Plaza Hotel in Vientiane, Laos, as hotel attendants began dismantling our reception setup for another event that would follow ours, the mood was still celebratory. It had been the 12th edition of a biennial tradition that started in 1995. On November 25, 2018, the cycle would end in a hectic, almost frantic chaos to memorialize the last hour on smartphone photos. Reunion participants clustered into photo groups, broke up to join yet other clusters, pulling, elbowing, sneak-

ing a spot, clamoring for their own phones to take the next shot.

When Steve Jobs invented the iPhone in 2007, little did he realize that some reunions would end this way. No “auld lang syne” by a band, no last hugs for old times sake, no misty eyes. Well, maybe, someone in that ballroom, will remember that all these moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain.

Our reunion scrapbooks however have kept these moments embedded under plastic sheets. There’s that posed assembly of 270 members – Filipinos, Thai, Lao -- on the picnic grounds in Baldwin

Park in Los Angeles. California, representing former expats of companies we worked for in Laos from 1957 to 1975. That day on May 20, 1995 was our first reunion, 20 years after our exodus from the kingdom, when all foreign aid technicians like us were told to leave by a new government. Then every two years, in late summer or fall, we gathered to relive those old times. There was much to relive – a common history and shared experiences. Living on the edge of conflict zones intensified the experience, forging friendship bonds of a lifetime, and leading in many cases to marriages – what else can be more life-changing.

Our 18-year sojourn in Laos were uncommon times. Mostly Filipinos, we were invited to share our expertise in public health, education, training, agriculture, engineering to a newly independent country, torn by a civil war that spilled over from the raging Cold War in neighboring Vietnam. We discovered an Asian culture and a people so similar to our own and also exotic in other ways. Many of us served in remote, rural regions, fully immersed in local village life. An adopted home. That's how a remarkable partnership was nurtured between our Lao hosts and us.

Our reunions were mostly held in hotels in various cities in the USA; once, on a cruise ship that sailed from Florida to the Bahamas; another time in Manila. They were three-day celebrations – an opening reception, a dinner dance, and sometimes a picnic or tours – to provide more time to reminisce on youth and adventure. Each reunion was always memorable in its own way. But there were two that stood out.

**Manhattan, New York, August 4, 2002, our fourth.** Aboard the double-deck 110-ft long yacht Paddle Wheel Queen, we glided for four hours on the sunset-dappled waters of the Hudson River. A warm breeze. Silhouettes of skyscrapers unspooling slowly from the river banks. Who would have dared, hardly a year after the 9/11 terrorist attack, that

167 celebrants would brave the lockdown, the anxious, fearful mood of the city, to leave the safety of their homes outside the state. They will come, no matter, **Marie Aguilos** of Queens, New York, assured the organizers. Nostalgia has no bounds, fueled by fine food and booze. She was so confident she advanced the \$10,000 deposit to book the yacht.

**Chicago, Illinois, August 6, 2004, our fifth. Hyatt Regency Hotel.** Chuang Chonthipe, dazzling in an eye-blinding green shirt, stood at the registration table. Yes, he proclaimed, I will be the first to greet my classmates from the Operation Brotherhood School of Practical Nursing. Twenty graduates from Vientiane, teenagers when they first boarded together and did their clinical rounds at the OB Vientiane Hospital as student nurses, now 35 years later, would be meeting each other for the first time together with their Filipino instructors. A class reunion folded into our expat reunion! A nostalgia overload indeed.

Some of these graduates rushed to the Wattay airport in Vientiane on May 29, 1975, when the final batch of 41 OB volunteers boarded their last flight out of Laos. Teary-eyed, they said “Sok dee, pai dee” – good luck, go well. Those were grim, uncertain times when a new Lao government took over and their futures were uncertain. Decades later, **Phousavong Praseuth**, class of 1965, flying over from Australia, was doing the chacha at one of our California reunions.

We were in our 20s or 30s during our olden days in Laos. By our first reunion, we had aged to our 50s. And by the 11th, now in our 70s, as aging became a biological imperative no life form can escape, we realized that we had to close the cycle. The number of attendees was dwindling. The 12th reunion, we decided, had to be on Lao soil, now or never, as age and deaths hobbled our attendance. Nothing can top coming full circle than celebrating it where our origins took roots. For some of us, it would be a return to the sounds and sensations of half a

century ago.

We wrote a day-by-day account November 21 to 25, of that last hurrah in the January 2019 issue of our Mekong Circle Newsletter that is online at [www.mekongcircle.org](http://www.mekongcircle.org). It began with a buffet reception at the Crowne Plaza hotel, a flurry of courtesy calls on high-ranking Lao government officials, the traditional “baci” welcome ceremony at the Philippine Embassy, lunch and dinners at city restaurants, the obligatory tours of landmarks including a museum that laid bare the horrific legacies of unexploded ordnance from a 30-year long war. Finally, on the fifth day, the photo pandemonium at the Lao Plaza. Throw in a visit to the bizarre Buddha Park stone statues, and the human crush of the annual That Luang autumn lunar festival, grandest “boun” in a boun-crazy country.

Other expat Laos groups hold reunions in various U.S. cities. International Voluntary Service (IVS), a U.S. government-funded Peace Corps type project, had more than 60 American volunteers conducting village development projects from 1956 to 1969. In some provinces, they worked with OB field teams.

**Frederick “Fritz” Benson** (Greensboro, North Carolina, USA), who joined IVS in 1968, presented an overview of IVS and OB joint projects at our 2014 reunion in Chicago. **Larry Woodson** (Topeka, Kansas, USA), who attended our 2004 Chicago reunion, spent 11 years in Laos, in education, agriculture and refugee relief, remembers an IVS reunion in 2006 with expats from the U.S. Embassy, Air America, USAID – the same groups which include Mekong Circle members. For 38 years after Laos, Larry kept the embers of nostalgia burning with his Khao Lao “Old Lao Hands” newsletter that tracked the post-Laos lives of his IVS colleagues.

As reunions go, we can say Mekong Circle had a good run, a dozen over 24 years, drawing from 100 to 320 attendees, from across the planet where our diaspora settled. California venues were preferred, five of them, because

that's the state where many found their second homes.

At a conference in Manila in 2014 on the history of medicine in Laos, **Kathryn Sweet**, an aid specialist with Vientiane-based Australian and Swiss technical assistance agencies, closed her presentation on OB's work this way:

"The main legacy of OB's assistance are shared memories. While some of the older generation of Lao remember the days of Filipino hospitals staffed with Filipino doctors and nurses, (Laos's)

progress in the health sector and the passage of time is gradually erasing the traces of OB's presence 38 years after its departure from Laos."

It will take some vigorous effort to erase them from our consciousness. English psychologist Dr. Constantin Sediki wrote "I think you'll benefit by nostalgia...Experience it as a prized possession. When (the torn lovers) Humphrey Bogart tells Ingrid Bergman in the wartime movie Casablanca 'We'll always have Paris', that's nostalgia for you. We have it and

nobody can take it away from us." Make that Saravane, Paksong, Sayaboury and 16 other field stations across the emerald kingdom.

**Bert Sobrevinas**, an OB artist who produced health instructional materials in the 1960s, emailed his thoughts of our Vientiane reunion: "Unfortunately, there is no rewind button in life, only memories. What we had was more than a reunion. I think of it as a celebration on the slice of life we all had."

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- 1995** Los Angeles, California, USA
  - 1998** Los Angeles, California, USA
  - 2000** San Francisco, California, USA
  - 2002** New York City, USA
  - 2004** Chicago, Illinois USA
  - 2006** Florida, USA / Bahamas
  - 2008** Manila, Philippines
  - 2010** Anaheim, California, USA
  - 2012** San Diego, California, USA
  - 2014** Las Vegas, Nevada, USA
  - 2016** Las Vegas, Nevada, USA
  - 2018** Vientiane, Laos
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Los Angeles, California, USA May 20, 1995: The first reunion



# Highlights of the Last Reunion Day

Here are selected photos from November 25, 2018, at the Lao Plaza Hotel, Vientiane, the fifth and last event of our five-day reunion. Photos of the previous day programs are in our January 2019 Newsletter (online at [www.mekongcircle.org](http://www.mekongcircle.org)).

We chose to highlight this last event because it memorializes the end of a 24-year tradition. We danced only one round of the lamvong because our three-hour reception slot was ending. Tom Jones' ballad would have been so appropriate to accompany the slow shuffle –

*“Try to remember the kind of September /  
When life was slow and oh so mellow /  
When grass was green and grain was yellow.”*

Or Roy Clark's song:

*“Yesterday when I was young  
The taste of life was sweet as rain upon my tongue  
I teased at life as if it were a foolish game  
The way the evening breeze may tease a candle flame  
Yesterday when I was young  
So many happy songs were waiting to be sung  
I ran so fast that time and youth at last ran out  
I never stopped to think what life was all about.”*



Philippine Ambassador(left) **Belinda Antes** with the former Lao Ambassador to France **Yong Chanthalangsy** with his wife





Photo display of our work in Laos



Above, **Sam Malaythong** (middle) with wife **Sue**. At right, **Rusty Ramos** and **Vanessa Thongma** doing the lamvong..



August 6, 2004, Chicago, Illinois, USA. First reunion of the graduates of the Vientiane OB School of Nursing marked during our 5th Mekong Circle reunion. The school graduated more than 100 Lao students from 1963 to 1969. Thirty five immigrated to the USA beginning in 1975. Some are shown here with their instructors and OB administrators.



# FROM OUR ARCHIVES



## 1965: A Memorable Year

By the mid-1960s, the Filipino residents of Laos had passed 900, most of them living in Vientiane, the capital. It was the largest Filipino expat community in Southeast Asia at that time, years before the start in the 1970s of the OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker) global migration. It is said that when three Filipinos find themselves together, they are compelled by evolutionary tribal genes to incorporate into an association. And so on January 1, 1965 the Filipino Association of Laos was inaugurated at a lavish party.

We have no record of its first officers but the second set, elected on December 25, 1966 for the 1967 term were: Dr. Pedro Assidao (ECCOIL), president; Narding Hilario (OB) vice president; Romy Pestanas (USAID) and Bayani Suarez (OB) auditors. Board members: Ernie Felix (Air America); Nick Dolorfino (Dolorfino Construction); Celso Orense (USAID); Danny Torres (OB); Leonardo Pestanas (USAID); Mon Romano (USAID); Deo Caro (Air America); Bert Casupanan (Continental Air Services); Buenaventura Dola (ECCOIL); Capt. Isagani Blanco (Royal Air Lao).

## More Pioneering 1965 Events

**August 28** – Continental Air Services, a U.S.-owned charter airline, begins Laos operations to fly missions for USAID. It hired Filipino technicians from Air America Laos and from the Philippines.

**September 17** – **Rodolfo Sanchez**, first resident consul, arrives from Myanmar to open a Philippine Embassy office in Vientiane. Prior diplomatic functions were handled by the Philippine Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand.

**October 26** – Ambassador **Felipe Mabilangan**, first resident Chief of Mis-

sion, presents his credentials to the King of Laos.

**November 9** – First Philippine participation in the November lunar That Luang Festival with a pavilion in Vientiane.

## War on Our Front Yards

**February 3-4, 1965** – We suddenly found ourselves on the frontlines of a two-day grab for power between two Royal Lao Army generals. One, Phoumi Nosavan, had been a participant in four prior coup d'état attempts to take over the government; his opponent Kouprasith Abhay, was the commander of the Vientiane military region. One battle front centered on the environs of the That Luang district where the Phone Keng army camp, located beside the OB hospital, was a prime target.

Mortar and artillery shells whistled above the hospital roof and exploded on the camp grounds. Shock waves shattered the glass planes of the Operating Room and the Dental Clinic. Patients cowered under their beds. Occupants of the two-story OB Annex apartment on Phone Keng Road sought shelter within the cement walls of the first floor bathrooms. Sixty residents, mostly civilians, died in the fighting. Abhay's forces defeated Phoumi who fled to Thailand.

OB personnel emerged unscathed unlike during another coup d'état in 1963 when an OB accountant, **Bienvenido "Neddie" Natividad**, riding a jeep, was fatally shot at a street roadblock by a nervous soldier. For a detailed account of how we were eye witnesses to the 1965 firefight, read it in the May 2007 issue of our Newsletter at our website [www.mekongcircle.org](http://www.mekongcircle.org). It's chock-full of

names of the lucky OB survivors.

As non-combatants, OB members were spared the carnage of the hostilities raging in the forested mountains of the rural regions that over the years killed some 200,000 Lao. But Vientiane city was the preferred arena of various coup attempts. By Wikipedia's count there six altogether from 1960 to 1973. .

A paratroop commander **Kong Le** (photo at left) triggered the first one in December 1960. A counter-coup by Nosa-van devastated the city in a four-day street battle that killed 600 civilians. Kong Le, by the way, commanded a garrison in Sam Neua province in the late 1950s, where friendship ties were nurtured with the OB field team members stationed there. When his coup held Vientiane for months, he assured his friends will be safe. Of 22 Filipinos who died in Laos during the war years, 10 were aircraft technicians with Air America.



## "Filipino Pioneers In Laos"

First uploaded on YouTube in April 2018, this 20-minute documentary has drawn 3,474 viewers. It is a joint production of Manila-based Masterpiece Media Inc. and the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane. Narrated in English and subtitled in Lao, it is the first digital record of a mostly forgotten history, spanning 18 years from 1957 to 1975, of how Filipinos and Lao, worked together on various development projects. (Read the May 2018 Newsletter from our website on how the video came about. To view it, type the title above on the YouTube search bar). It was shown at our Lao Plaza reunion reception November 25, 2018 as well as on Laos TV. A DVD copy was given to all reunion registrants.

Here's an excerpt from one comment posted 10 months ago by a viewer who identified as "Westside Connection":

“When I was growing up in Los Angeles, I remember a neighbor whom we call aunt because in Laotian culture, we call elder ones aunt or uncle out of respect. She was a side mistress to an older Filipino doctor when she was a younger in Laos and they had a kid together. But he already had a family. Somehow they reunited in L.A. and he would visit her once a week. She would cook for him. I remember he loved Lao food.”

Also uploaded two years ago, “Geography Now! LAOS” has drawn 987,910 views when we opened it recently. By any measure, it totally overwhelms in views those minute snippets



to half-hour travelogues about Laos that now flood YouTube. What explains its popularity? Well, open it and see for yourself. Hold on to your toupee or hike up your sinh because in only 12 minutes, it gallops at a snappy clip on Lao history, demographics, politics, culture. Despite the pace, it is engaging, factual and hugely funny in what could easily have been a boring social studies lecture. The video is part of a “Geography Now” series that includes the Philippines, Nepal, Cambodia, Singapore, Myanmar.

## Last Day Efforts to Save OB

The First Indochina War ended in 1954 when France lost to North Vietnam. The Second Indochina War stepped right in without missing a beat, pitting American, Thai, North and South Vietnamese and Lao/Hmong combatants. In 1975, it all ended within a month in stunning rapidity when one domino after another fell—South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos – to the Communists.

In Laos, the U.S. knew it had to pull out. The dominant Communists, intent on pushing out all Western influences, gave notice that all

non-governmental aid agencies should leave. USAID turned over the keys to its vast economic projects (roadbuilding equipment, warehouses, medicines, housing, offices, etc) to the new government known as the Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU). How will it turnover the USAID-funded OB program?

A confidential telegram from Deputy Chief of Mission **Christian Chapman** who was the highest ranking U.S. official in Vientiane from June 1974 to August 1975, revealed his efforts to keep OB in place. The telegram dated May 14, 1975 was transmitted to the State Department in Washington D.C. . The Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was listed among the addressees. Here is the full transcript:

“1. We have been very much alive to the problems confronting OBI operations in Laos, the difficulties of planning its future and the uncertainty of the PGNU’s attitude towards its continuance. Acting USAID’s Director Ramsey and chief of USAID’s Public Health Division, Dr. Kennedy, have been chasing Minister of Health Khamphai Abhay and Secretary of State Dr. Khamlieng Pholsena on the subject for some time. Fortuitously for him, Khamphai had to leave on May 8 for a W.H.O. annual conference in Geneva. Dr. Khamlieng, in a meeting with Dr. Kennedy, on May 12, equivocated. Today, before receiving reference telegram, this was one of the questions I raised with Foreign Minister Phoumi Vongvichit.

2. I cited OB as an example of the uncertainty of the present situation. The fact that the Filipinos were understandably very concerned for their security and it was impossible to give them any meaningful assurances unless the government took a clear decision that it wanted the maintenance of these hospitals and would provide the necessary security. I said there were six OB hospitals in Laos. The operations had been going on for twenty years. They had, I believed, pro-

vided important humanitarian services to the Lao people and very personally I deplored the prospects of closing one or all down. Phoumi answered that the PGNU appreciated the services and welcomed the maintenance of these hospitals. However he recalled that there had been some friction between Filipino and Lao employees. He said that Filipinos who worked in these hospitals should be told to respect and treat the Lao well. I answered that I could not agree with him more but that as far as I can determine there were only isolated cases of personal friction.

I closed the topic by saying that given all that has transpired over the past two to three weeks, it would not be enough for him to simply tell me that he wanted the maintenance of these hospitals but that the government would have to take positive actions to reassure the Filipinos and make possible the operations of these hospitals.”

In a followup telegram dated May 17 from Chapman, he closed with a comment:

“Leftist pressure applied to Doolley Foundation, World Vision, and now Christian and Missionary Alliance and Operation Brotherhood, it is likely to spread to all American VOLAGS (voluntary agencies in Laos) including Asia Foundation. In view of increasingly hostile political climate here it is probable all VOLAGS will have to close up shop.”

On May 27, 1975 an agreement was signed between PGNU and the American Charge d’Affaires that the A.I.D. mission would be terminated no later than June 30, 1975. Termination was completed on June 26 when the acting A.I.D. director departed Vientiane and an Embassy Diplomatic Note to that effect was delivered to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On May 29, 1975 the final batch of 41 OB members flew out of Vientiane on a Royal Air Lao flight to Thailand. When they first arrived in 1957, more than 600 had served in Laos.

# MEKONG

## CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

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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. Past issues of our Newsletter can be accessed from our website [www.mekongcircle.org](http://www.mekongcircle.org). (Click on "Resources".) Your comments are welcome. Send to [fuentecila@aol.com](mailto:fuentecila@aol.com) or write to the address on the first page.*