

## Welcome to the 47<sup>th</sup> Issue of our Newsletter



Laos marked its 45th anniversary of independence on December 2, 2020

## How We Were On The Frontlines of Its History

On December 2, 1975 Laos proclaimed itself the Lao People's Democratic Republic. It was the finale of what their historians tell of a prolonged decades-long struggle for independence. It spans from French colonial rule beginning in the late 1800s, a short-lived Japanese occupation during World War II, the Cold War intervention of the 1950s and 1970s. During these periods, its people lived through various economic, social and political regimes – from monarchial to capitalism to socialism.

Filipino members of Mekong Circle first arrived in Laos in 1957. They served as development aid technicians, applying their skills in healthcare, education, training, agriculture, livelihood projects, in 19 provinces over 18 years. What is not too well-known is that during this period they were on the frontlines of the momentous events that led to independence day. At one brief point they were participants, teaching military skills

before a ceasefire agreement told them to pack up in 1962 together with other foreign military advisers. The rest of us stayed for another dozen years.

We were there when the last royal sovereign assumed his kingship and he bestowed his royal patronage on our medical program. We were there when the various political and military factions of the post-colonial government competed for power. We were there when this competition resulted in horrific blood-letting between the combatants. ( By one estimate, some 200,000 died, in a country of only three million inhabitants). We were there to treat casualties in our field hospitals, regardless of their ideologies. Most heartbreaking: many of the dying resulted from Lao killing Lao. We attended to their collateral victims in refugee camps and orphanages. We were noncombatants but we suffered 23 casualties ourselves, mostly

from accidents.

When the victors paraded in a celebratory march in Vientiane in August 1975 in a bloodless takeover, we had departed only four months earlier. So in nearly two decades, we lived through the birth of a new country and watched its growing pains. The Lao who remember our legacy are few and aged. The population, more than half born after we left, do not know our history. A new corps of Filipino technicians has stepped into our shoes as you will read in these pages.

At our 12th Mekong Circle reunion in Vientiane in November 2018, a Lao speaker at an event, one of the country's eminent historians, described in detail what we did for his country. It was really uplifting to realize some memories remain intact. We thanked him for the opportunity to serve his people during one of the saddest periods of their history. Laos has been at peace now for almost 50 years. We extend our wishes for a prosperous future and continued peace.

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## Laos Grows On You

*Our ties with the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane stretch far into the past. In 1965 when H.E. Felipe Mabilangan, the first resident Ambassador, took his post at its new chancery, we presented him with its official seal that our Operation Brotherhood (OB) artist and his trainees carved from wood. At that time, more than 900 Filipinos resided in Laos, the largest overseas workers in the region, prompting a permanent Ambassadorial posting. Normal diplomatic relations paused in the wake of the 1975 assumption of power by a Communist government and the Filipino population dwindled. Our Embassy in Bangkok represented Philippine interests in Laos through the 1980s and 1990s.*

*The 2000s ushered the return of Filipinos. In 2002 H.E. Mario Galman hosted the first batch of "Return To Laos" former expats, mostly OB. For some of the 17 returnees, it was their first visit after almost three decades. A second group of 27 expats was treated in 2005 to a garden party on the Embassy grounds by H.E. Elizabeth Buensuceso. H.E. Lumen Isleta succeeded her in 2011, and before her by H.E. Marilyn Alarila, then followed by H.E. Belinda Ante, the cosponsor of our 12th Mekong Circle reunion in 2018. That makes four successive lady chief envoys. The Vientiane diplomatic corps must have been struck with awe or bemusement.*

*Below, Madame Isleta recalls her first year in Vientiane. It has been edited for length.*

One year has come and gone so quickly.

Not a few people ask me whether Vientiane is a quiet post. By this, people usually refer not only to the place itself, but also to the workload. My usual reply is that life and work are what you make of it. I suppose if I just sat by and let things flow, Vientiane the capital would be classified as quiet.

I arrived on 6 November 2011 to assume my post as the new Philippine Ambassador to the Lao People's Democratic Republic. It was my first assignment as Ambassador. I was thrilled and anxious at the same time. But more than anything, I was honored to be given a posting in a capital that belongs to ASEAN, the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations – quite a prestigious posting. The Secretary of Foreign Affairs policy in the 21st century.

The trip to Vientiane was longer than usual, since travel arrangements that were made for me had me flying to

Ho Chi Minh city in Vietnam first before proceeding to Vientiane. The long hours however were compensated by a very warm welcome that I received from the officers and staff of the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane led by Third Secretary and Vice Consul Analyn de Leon-Ratonel, as well as my counterparts from the ASEAN countries – a distinct practice of ASEAN duplicated in practically all capitals of the world whenever an ASEAN Ambassador flies in to assume his new posting. That brief meeting with my ASEAN counterparts at the VIP lounge of Wattay International Airport was followed by a buffet dinner hosted by the Embassy staff and their families at the Mercure (formerly Novotel) Hotel.

Apart from my meeting Embassy personnel and their family members, my first encounter with the members of the Filipino community in Laos was with Ms. Shirley Go, the front office manager of Mercure Hotel who welcomed me at the lobby of the four-star hotel. Ms. Go has lived in Laos for more than 15 years. She was, as I came to realize, representative of the majority of Filipinos living in Laos – professionals who had come to work in Laos and had assimilated well into the local culture (learning to speak the language like a native too). They established for themselves quite a good reputation for hard work and initiative, and a pleasant disposition to boot.

The Filipinos in Laos number, as of last count, a little under 520. Of the total, 19 percent work in the mining sector (geologists, engineers, chemists, metallurgists, finance officers/accountants, etc); 16 percent are teachers; 11 percent are consultants (education, health, agriculture sectors); and 10 percent are connected with the hotel/hospitality industry.

There are also accountants, heavy equipment operators (most in the mining sector), engineers, household service workers, nurses, etc. We also have a sprinkling of volunteers (microfinance, agriculture, etc.).

One Filipino consultant, Dr. Benjamin Samson, an agronomist, is the IRRI (International Rice Research Institute) representative to Laos. Promoting new rice varieties, crop management and post harvest technologies is another Filipino consultant, Dr. Ruben Lampayan, a water management specialist.

A Filipina, Dr. Cecile Lantican, is the country coordinator for Family Health International, a USAID-funded project. She is the "go-to" person for any health concerns, particularly regarding communicable diseases in Laos.

Consultants, among them Dr. Bernadette Gonzales,



are very active in the education sector developing technical and vocational curricula. Mr. Tomas Africa, formerly the head of our own national statistical office in Manila, is assisting in putting together national census procedures.

Ms. Marilyn Manila of CARD-MRI conduct training on microfinance and financial literacy in various parts of the country. Filipino engineers are employed by Phu Bia Mining, one of the largest mining companies in Laos. They are also at work on the Xayaboury Dam, the hydroelectric project which will be the first main stream dam on the Mekong river.

Our teachers are in the forefront of teaching English to many young Laotians. They are numerous, in practically all the big international schools operating in Vientiane and elsewhere.

Ms. Illuminada Wiman has organized a group of them into a Filipino Teachers' Network (Filteachnet) that conducts seminars and workshops to upgrade their skills.

Filipinos are also in Luang Prabang, the UNESCO World Heritage site, center of Laos' tourism promotion success. Working in hotels like Amantaka, the six-star hotel of the Aman Group of Companies is Ms. Paulet Custado. At the high-end Maison Souvannaphoum is Mr. Daryl Miguel Miego, the four star hotel of the Banyan Group.

The good Catholic nuns of St. Paul, Sisters Jesse, Cora and Mila, administer to the spiritual needs of the sick, the elderly and the faithful in Vientiane. Our household service workers are in the household staff of foreign diplomats including Ambassadors who have expressed great satisfaction and appreciation for the service they render.

In my talks with Lao government officials, not a few have remarked, with evident delight, if not a pining for the past, of their memories of Filipino medical personnel and the Filipino hospitals of several years back. This connection has opened doors for me. The fond memories of Operation Brotherhood (OB), the friendships that had been established, the linkages that time nor distance could not erase --- all these are still etched in the minds and hearts of many Laotians.

I am quick to remind them that many Filipinos, not in the numbers that OB had reached, but potentially so, are still in their midst. Still lending a helping hand, still lending their talents, skills and expertise, still present in the lives of the Lao people. They are contributing to the national development of the country, molding minds, building bridges (literally and figuratively), and establishing friendships.

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## After A Decade, An Accounting

After World War II, Filipino soldiers played their part in the struggles of its Asian neighbors to emerge from colonial rule. They joined a multinational United Nations force during the Korean War. A battalion of military engineers called Philcag built infrastructures during the Vietnam War. In Laos, more than 400 Filipino military trainers with Eastern Construction Company taught Lao soldiers war fighting skills from 1959 to 1962.

Complementing these efforts on the civilian side, were Filipino village development teams composed of public health nurses, agriculturists, nutritionists, doctors, educators. When tracing their origins, the arrival of Operation Brotherhood (OB) teams in Saigon on October 14, 1954 has been datelined the starting point in Vietnam (see Mekong Circle October 2020). In Laos, it was January 7, 1957, the arrival of 13 volunteers in Vientiane.

But in marking almost 10 years of service in Laos, OB chose to celebrate the October date rather than January. Hence on October 14, 1964, there were elaborate events in Vientiane, Paksong, Sayaboury and Attopeu. Cultural stage shows; skits; prizes for "best looking hospital sections;" temple offerings; luncheons and lamvongs; field games for children; a fashion show; merit certificates to outstanding Lao personnel.

On that day, somebody decided to tabulate some personnel data. Here they are as listed in the November 1, 1964 issue of Balitang Laos : 112 Filipinos composed of 29 nurses, 21 doctors, 10 accountants, eight agriculturists, five dentists, five mechanic / electricians, four social workers, four engineers, four writers, three lawyers, three home technologists, two nutritionists, two artists, two secretaries, one pharmacist, one radio technician, one photographer, one teacher. Of the 112, the medical group comprises 57 percent; the service group 30 percent; socio-economic group 13 percent. Genders 41 percent female,

including two doctors a lawyer, and an accountant; four of the 29 nurses are male.

Average age 30 (youngest 21, oldest 57), half with less than two years of service.

There were seven field teams – Vientiane, Paksong, Attopeu, Sayaboury, Kengkok, Muong Phieng, Vang Vieng. Lao personnel, from practical nurses to technicians, totaled 263. Most completed formal training courses conducted by OB.

They would continue to serve for seven more years, terminating their operations in 1975 and handing over the facilities to a new government. This is perhaps its lasting legacy. The training programs produced a large cadre of skilled and semi-skilled that were in short supply. This allowed delivery of health care while the government trained its own corps of personnel.

"Health facilities do not disappear into exile when a political regime changes," said Laos-based development specialist Kathryn Sweet. "In fact the new (Pathet Lao) regime made use of the OB hospitals in Vientiane and other numerous provincial and district locations for several decades" until newer facilities replaced them.





## Return to the Beginning

November 7, 2002. I am on a train, an overnight trip from Bangkok, Thailand, rattling northwards to the border of Laos. The route is 386 miles long and will take nine hours to get there. I could have taken a plane, land in one hour at Wattay International Airport in Laos' capital Vientiane.

But stretched out on the train's window side seat, a long night ahead, watching the ricefields flash by, mile after mile, I welcomed the time to reflect on how and why I was on this train ride. It will be my first return to a country which I left 35 years ago in 1967. I was 23 years old then, excited at my first overseas posting to join a development aid program. Laos, a Southeast Asian kingdom, was among the newest country to emerge from colonial rule after World War II. In 1954, France granted it independence, along with its other Asian colonies, Vietnam and Cambodia, closing forever its Indochinese empire.

Laos was its poorest ward, had the smallest population, most underdeveloped. Indeed, its multitude

of ethnic communities had no concept that they belonged to a nation It was the least equipped to function as a state. Its resources – finances, education, health, infrastructure – were sorely inadequate to meet the needs of its people. Add to its woes a bloody civil war between the new government and a Communist-inspired insurgency hindered development efforts. Hence, external assistance, was vital to its existence.

The United States Agency For International Development (USAID) put in place an extensive aid program. One sector focused on health care, both curative (clinics and hospitals) and preventive (public health, training). It awarded a contract to a Filipino group called Operation Brotherhood (OB). I was hired in Manila to join its administrative staff, signing up for two years, the standard term. I stayed six years, 1961 to 1967, a precarious period for an isolated, besieged country.

## First Look, Getting Hooked

Vientiane in the 1960s, in the eyes of Western visitors and aid workers, de-

scribed it as "laid back", "sleepy," "slow-paced." An often said joke goes this way – the industrious, entrepreneurial Vietnamese plant the rice while the easy-going, unhurried Lao listen to it grow. Spend some time in the villages where most of them live and see how these clichés ring hollow. Living on subsistence level, they expend considerable effort to put food on the table. The difference with the Vietnamese is that the Lao know when enough is enough. Accumulating surplus material goods is not worth all the effort (and stress).

Indeed I found the leisurely pace of life utterly comfortable. Filipinos and the Lao of the lowland valleys share many cultural markers that raise the comfort level. Many of us grew up in provincial towns where the rhythm of life matched the placid pace of the Lao village. Examples -- their "bouns" (comparable to our fiestas); their Buddhist festivals (about as many as in our Christian calendar); the agriculture-based economy; the aversion to personal face-to-face conflict; the pleasant, warm temperament. It was this last trait that enticed me as much as that enchanting smile

when I first saw Seng.

Our Administration Building stands beside the 100-bed OB Hospital on Phone Keng Road in the That Luang district of the city. Incoming patients have to register at a window before entering the dispensary waiting area. She signs them up at that window. Soon, without any reason to walk by, I find myself shuffling past the window to exchange smiles, many times over the course of the day. Infatuation had set in.

### Reaching Minds And A Heart

The French colonialists treated Laos as a stepchild, preferring to build up the Vietnamese as their dependable local administrators of their regime. As a result, the shortage of skilled technical Lao help was dire. OB needed local auxiliaries for their Filipino health care workers to help staff the Vientiane and provincial hospitals. Very few were available. On-the-job training, for short periods, proved inadequate. OB decided that a two-year course in practical nursing would turn out the necessary numbers and sets of skills.

I was tapped to teach conversational English, in addition to my regular duties. Candidates underwent tests. A very heartening news, Seng made the first batch of 24. Lined up in their new, starchy white uniforms and blue aprons, their class photo represented the first Lao to undergo the country's first and only two-year nursing course. A classroom building rose in one corner of the hospital compound.

This was the setting that nurtured a relationship over two years. As a journalism graduate of American Jesuits who taught me English, I put together a syllabus in a breeze. I was astounded at how fast their 17- to-18-year old minds, with only an elementary education, could absorb the lessons. My outlines had to pick up the faster pace. What a delight to teach them! Such eager learners, hearing their vocabularies expand, the strings of spoken sentences lengthening by the day. In the process I was learning Lao as much as they were with English. We could switch languages with little effort. I felt an inspiring sense of accomplishment and visions of a teaching career.

Over the course of one hour a day of class room instruction, five days a week, an infatuation evolved into mutual affection. In due time, it was no longer possible to disguise from her classmates that the

teacher-student relationship between Seng and me had gone beyond academics. No snickers, giggles, winks. We were all adults. I was 24 and she was 18. At the end of each class session, as her classmates returned to the hospital ward for their practical rounds, she and I would linger for a few moments, for a short chat about nothing.

### The Weekend Visitations

Vientiane in the 1960s was less a metropolitan capital than a large town. Few amenities for its 60,000 inhabitants but its collection of temples, small shops, "samlo" pedicabs, aging French villas, lots of greenery, exuded a beguiling charm. It's far and away not the Bangkok or Manila and their hustling, traffic-choked consumer-driven hotspots.

The Nongduang neighborhood where she lives is about ten minutes by car from the city's commercial center. To get there, you take a "samlo" to its edge where it can no longer push into footpaths and dense shrubbery. Banana trees line the path to her house, their large leaves swaying, flapping in the wind.

It is the typical village wooden house, on stilts. On one end is the kitchen-dining area. An open walkway served as a bridge to the living-sleeping section at the other end. Enter the main door and she would be waiting, cheeks radiant, smile lustrous. A large window opened up to a view of the yard. If I arrive about noon, an older army major brother, his wife, her younger sister Chanseng would be seated on the floor around a low bamboo-straw mat table, having lunch. They would put their palms together to their faces, the prayer-like "wai" greeting gesture. The brother would stand up, we exchange wai's. Thank you for coming to teach my sister more English, he says. Ostensibly, the visits offered tutorial lessons. We both knew they were more than that.

Before the monsoon season, on one of those searing summer days, a sudden downpour dumps a drenching flash. We lean out the window, the sweet warmth of shoulders touching, watch the brown dusty earth turn muddy, inhale the clean scent of rain. Silently we listen to the soothing patter of raindrops on the tin roof. The banana leaves, glistening wet, snap in the wind. I will never forget those moments. Many years later, walking a suburban street of Queens in New York, the sky suddenly darkens, the rain pours in tor-

rents, then stop suddenly. Cool aroma from the wet pavement triggers those moments and I hear again the snapping banana leaves and the raindrops. And I am beside her.

### On Lao Soil, Once Again

OB terminated its program in 1975 in the wake of a Communist takeover the country. All Western-funded foreign aid personnel were no longer welcome and were told to leave. Six hundred OB Filipino technicians had served there in 18 years. At any one time, there were some 110 to 120 personnel on the ground. They dispersed around the planet, transplanting their expertise to the Middle East, Africa and other developing countries.

A large number of OB healthcare workers settled in the USA. Reliving their sojourn in Laos, they formed an expatriate association, Mekong Circle, that gathered in biennial reunions. The name invokes the 2,700-mile long river, originating from the northern highlands of China's Tibet, then meanders down Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, emptying into the Vietnamese delta of the South China Sea.

In 2002, a group of 17 Filipino, Canadian, Lao and U.S.-based residents traveled to Vientiane. For some, it would be their first return since their exodus four decades ago. During their week-long stay, a courtesy call to the Lao Minister of Health resulted in an invitation for them to resume their medical program. I was tasked to do the proposal as a Mekong Circle project together with the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane. I needed to be there to survey if it could be done.

As my train crossed the northeast plains of Thailand towards the Lao border town of Tha Deua, the flat landscape of what the Lao call Isan, the region their ancient kingdom at one time ruled, unrolled from my window. Here the residents feel more Lao than Thai. Seng and I would cross the river to shop in the facing Thai border town of Nong Khai, the gateway to Vientiane. Approaching it, the rhythmic cadence of the train wheels sounded – hurry, hurry, hurry. I have to look for her. The survey can wait.

So here I am in the city, charged up with anticipation, back after 35 years. Alas, it was no longer the city I knew. The more things change, the more it stays the same, so goes the old saying. It did happen with the Vientiane landscape. But what city

stays stagnant in this age of globalization ? And for that matter, who remains the same after three decades? I had married, brought up three sons, lived a suburban American life. I had aged into a 64-year old man, double my youthful Laos age.

Vientiane has transformed in many ways into a miniature Bangkok or Manila. I was a lost wandering soul, seeking vanished familiar places. Nongduang was no longer a village. Her home was not there anymore. And no one could tell where the family moved.

Where is our favorite soup-chi-noise restaurant, the roadside feh stalls, the cramped stores, the streets where we leisurely strolled, going nowhere. In their places, a modern city had sprouted – traffic, hotels, cell phones, satellite TV, and would you believe, a Lao driver wrestling a street sweeper, compliments of Japanese aid. A long-handled twig broom would have done a better job. And gainfully employed scores for the price of one mechanized cleaner.

Thank you Lord Buddha, the Patuxay War Memorial still stands, as garish as before. And the That Luang stupa, shining golden bright. I hailed a “tuktuk”, a Honda motorbike hitched to a passenger cart (samlo’s had vanished into Nirvana) and told the driver to go to the OB hospital site. My research said it had been razed to the ground earlier in the year. “It was very old” wrote the Vientiane Times report of its demise, a 42-year old landmark that “held a great deal of affection” by the residents and replaced by the new Japanese-funded Setthathirath Hospital on the outskirts of the city. “Pai OB hongmo That Luang” go to the OB Hospital, I told the driver. “Pai leo !” he said. It’s gone, torn down. No matter, I insisted. I had worked there for six years, I wanted to see its remains.

What remained was freshly dug up tractor tracks on an empty lot. Across the street, the Silver City housing compound for single American personnel (USAID, Embassy, military advisers) was ringed with a chain-link fence, heavily encrusted with weeds, hiding the interior from view. The driver said softly that “security” offices for the government occupied it. Inside, the American Clinic that hired Seng and another Lao nurse graduate attended to American patients. For a long while, I stood there, staring at the bare earth, imagining the ghost of a hospital. I used to sneak inside to bring her snacks when she was on night duty. The driver, idling his tuktuk on the chance that I will ride back, saw a guy going looney. How would he know the cascade of overwhelming memories ?

I stayed two weeks to do my survey, touring two city hospitals, Mahosot and Mittaphab, as well as Setthathirath, interviewing medical personnel, expatriate and local; a four-hour drive to Vang Vieng to visit the OB-USAID hospital there. On my last day, I boarded a barge anchored along the Mekong, a floating restaurant. The silhouette of the Thai side loomed across the waters. It was late afternoon, the setting sun on its countdown. Blaze of colors – gold, silver, brown, red – firing the waters – before it turned black as the sun disappeared beyond the Thai river bank. An empty Beer Lao in my hand, it was time to say goodbye again.

### The First Goodbye

Briefly, the situation -- her parents wanted us to stay in their country. I had other plans for us that did not match their wishes. We had to break up, but not in a snap. How do I dissolve a very emotionally invested formative experience ? Cut down on the home

visits. Fewer walks around town. Avoid contact. Unravel the bonds, one thread at a time. And so it went this way, week after excruciating week.

One day, I was crossing the circumference road of the Patuxay War Memorial. An open top army jeep came around. She was on the front seat with the driver, returning from her clinic shift. Our eyes locked. She smiled and waved weakly. As the jeep sped away, she looked back. That sad face is now indelible. We had stopped seeing each other over two or three months.

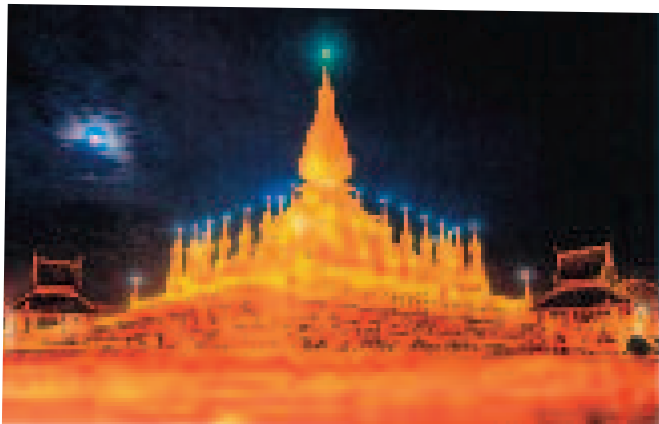
I remember my last two days, flying back from visiting one of our provincial outposts. Looking down the window, an undulating carpet of dark green forests stretched to the horizon; jagged mountain ridges; clusters of villages nestled on valleys; gracefully winding rivers. My last look at images I will treasure; a lovely people I will not meet again. Most blissful times ever. I must see her for the last time. It was only fair. It was the right thing to do.

I did not do it. I would not be able to endure the sheer grief. And shatter my plans to leave.

Days later, from my graduate student dorm at the University of Illinois in the USA, I wrote her to say I was truly, truly sorry to leave without saying goodbye. She wrote back and said she understood.

Years passed. Work. Marriage. Fatherhood. Laos and she had faded away. Then an unexpected call in 2004 from her sister Chanseng who had resettled in Georgia, USA. She said Seng was in England, married, with kids. Chanseng said Seng would have wanted me to know.

— J.”Pete” Fuentesilla



That Luang Shrine, Vientiane



Patuxay War Memorial, Vientiane



## Why Our 9th Reunion Was Noteworthy

We have celebrated 12 biennial reunions over the last 23 years, five of them in California, USA. Why do we keep returning to that state? Well, our colleagues there are the most welcoming, selfless, fearless, hardworking, faithful (stop already!) friends. Moreover, most of them have chosen to settle there after our Laos exodus.

Hence there are plentiful resources - hands and finances - to form organizing committees. Our 9th reunion, August 2-5, 2012 in San Diego, California,

will be remembered for something else.

Our Lao colleagues, for the first time, took charge. They felt their time has come to show their stuff. California is home to most of the Lao diaspora that fled Laos in 1975 and years after. San Diego alone counted 7,002 Lao in the 2010 census, ranking it fifth out the top 10 cities with the most Lao residents. And they have previous Mekong Circle reunion participation to bank on. In Chicago, the attendance of OB nursing graduates, their first school reunion, imbued the event with an extra dose of emotion. In Florida and the Bahamas, 57 of them joined our Caribbean cruise, al-

most 30 percent of the total attendees.

In San Diego, organizing Lao co-chairs were Khamy Siharath and Sam Malaythong. Sam welcomed the 200 attendees at the dinner dance at the Marriott Mission Valley Hotel with the national anthem played on his saxophone, perhaps the first time ever anywhere, on that instrument (did you expect the "khene"?). Dr. Sombat Senethone, the former medical director of the OB Hospital in Vientiane, in his address, said he missed Laos because he had to learn how to eat hamburgers. The buffet lunch's main course was....hamburgers.

# 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. Past issues of our News 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)*