

Welcome to the 49th Issue of our Newsletter

Memorializing Our Expatriate Laos Experience

This issue of our Newsletter, No. 49 in a series that started in March 2002, marks its 15th year of publication. We had not intended to publish this long. No 1 was a four-page flyer, on pink paper, 8.5 inches wide by 11.5 inches deep, issued to announce details of our Mekong Circle forthcoming reunion on August 2,3 and 4, 2002 in New York City. Without benefit of Facebook and email, reunion organizers relied on postal mail to send out updates. Why pink? Well, they thought it should make the flyer stand out from the clutter of junk mail they would receive. Subsequent updates – No. 2, No. 3 (on beige paper) No. 4, pushed them to beat deadlines for hotel reservations, souvenir program ads, registration fees – all the mundane details that make event organizing such an inspiring, soul-draining chore.

Then, with the reunion event closing in, it was decided that the contents should go beyond drumming up attendance. Issue No. 5 (January 2004) expanded from four to eight pages. With more space to fill, the creative juices percolated. Thus began essays, memoirs, histories, photos, artwork as well as the stuff that are the lifeblood of association newsletters – marriages, anniversaries, births (and deaths), new jobs, new addresses, etc.

These reports would hopefully entice face-to-face renewal of bonds forged over 18 years of living and working together in Laos. As well, they would generate more participants to our biennial reunions (12 all together since 1995, the last one in 2018).

Our 2014 directory has some 500 names and addresses of expatriate Mekong Circle members. Another 400 or so are unlisted, their whereabouts unknown. After their 1975 exodus from Laos, they scattered across the planet, in places as far apart as the Middle East, Canada, Africa, Australia and the USA. Most settled back in the Philippines. They have stories to tell of their times in the Kingdom that transformed their lives. **Bert Sobrevinas**, an artist with Operation Brotherhood (OB), now a resident in Canada, recalls his 1959-1961 sojourn: “Unfortunately, there is no rewind button on life, only memories.” He described them on a return trip with his wife **Irene Diaz** in 2006 to Vientiane that we published in the January 2019 issue (No. 34). In-

deed a large part of the Newsletters contain such shared experiences of a common history during unusual times.

Sabina Fajardo-Swift, an OB agriculturist now living in Hawaii, wrote me an email: “As I am moving forward taking care of my final affairs, I can’t help but reminisce the impact of my four years in Laos. Memorable years. Formative. I am what I am now, the experiences galvanized my core values.” The sentiment is not unique to us Filipinos. **Brett Dakin**, a 23-year old

American, volunteered in 1997 with the Laos Ministry of Tourism. “I know that my time in Laos was far more than a two-year break. It remains an integral part of my life today, here and now, and the person I have become; the way I think about the world and my place in it.”

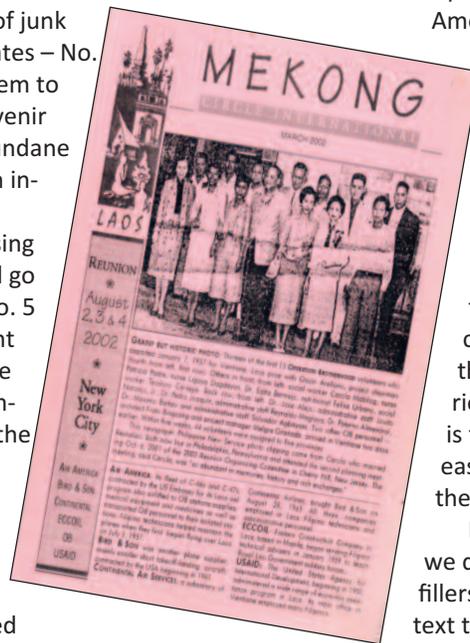
His memoir “Another Quiet American” (2003, Asia Books, Thailand) – no, it’s not that **Graham Greene** Vietnam War novel – recounts life in a country and among a people that beguiled us as well. Gathering those experiences from expats to publish in our Newsletter is the hard part of this job. The writing comes easy if the sources can be tracked, messages left, then wait futilely for responses until we turn blue.

Because our official records remain missing, we depend on these oral histories to provide the fillers we need to flesh out patchy accounts or context to a significant happening. Fifty years have passed since the last expat left Laos, among them

those who lived through the most momentous events of its history. And each year, they depart forever, one by one. Our sources fade away relentlessly.

We digitized the first 24 issues of the Newsletter into a CD that we distributed during our October 2015 reunion. Soon No. 25 to No. 50 will be ready for a second CD set. (Alert: issues No. 1 to No. 48 are accessible from our website www.mekong-circle.org). You can really help get us to get to No. 50. How? When an interview request pops up on your computer or seeks a return call on your voicemail, it’s not a scam. Please respond. We really want to hear from you.

At one time, a reader emailed “Get over it, for Pete’s sake! The past is over. Move on.” Sorry, my dear, No. 50 beckons. Memories are fading fast. Gotta get them memorialized.



A Note on this Index of Published Features:

he issues, in chronological order, skipped some years – 2008, 2009, 2010, 2014. What happened? Those years were consumed on finishing two book projects. As well as extensive travel. Plus inordinate time smelling the roses, taking life easy, no longer a slave to the clock.

In the process of putting the index together, we realized the reader faces an information overload, leading to a reader's block. So, to make it a bit easier for you, we are reprinting a page (see below) from the December 2019 issue (No. 37). It lists some of the more notable features you may wish to read first.

To retrieve one that may interest you, click on the link , shown in parentheses, to open it. Enjoy.

One lesson we learned from producing these Newsletters over the years: Mekong Circle members are not inclined to write about their Laos histories. They have their scrapbooks to show their kids and grandkids. Let others do the written memorializing, they say. Hence we are fortunate for our other publishing products -- "Filipinos In Laos" (2015, available from Amazon) and "Goodbye Vientiane" (2005,PAWA, San Francisco, USA). Get them to read the stories behind your photo albums.

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)

ECCOIL : A Remarkable Diversity of Skills (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)

Filipinos with Operation Brotherhood (OB) (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)

Refugee Survival : How Our Lao Nurses Made It Here (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)

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

Vientiane School of Nursing Graduates (http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/november_2003.php)

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Naming All Who Served With OB Laos (http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/May_2018.php)

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What Our Early Years Were Like. The Good Times (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)

Diary of Our 12th (Last) Reunion (http://www.mekongcircle.org/Sitepages/Newsletters/january_2019.php)

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Oh, What If The Walls Can Talk !



Oh, If Only The Walls Could Talk !

The OB House in the early 1960s (left) and in November 2018 shown above with 12th Reunion group, among them Joji Naranjo, Bert Sobrevinas, Minerva Will, Myrna Lachenal, Vic and Sining Capili, Gene and Ella Hernandez, Bert Reyes, Lollie Vinzon, Pet Fuentecilla, Rafael Mapaye.

When we arrived in Vientiane to join Operation Brotherhood (OB), the project had been on the ground since 1957. Fifteen volunteers arrived January 7 that year and they found that the two prefabricated houses at the That Luang district where they were going to stay were not yet ready for occupancy. No electricity. No bedsheets. No pillows. "The houses were quite small," and "quite crowded" for 15 people, according to Fr. Miguel Bernad's "Filipinos in Laos" history. "Water had to be fetched from a well some distance away."

They were temporarily billeted at Hotel Somboun from where they shuttled to their open-air clinic at the That Luang grounds. Let's remember that Vientiane at that time had just emerged from France's colonial rule. To call it a "city" of 50,000 souls would stretch the imagination. A report from the United States Operations Mission, the predecessor of its United States Agency for International Development (USAID) told of low morale from its incoming aid personnel because of "insufficient housing, overcrowding, lack of privacy, lack of essential facilities, e.g. medical care, household equipment, water, light, recreation, and restricted local market in foodstuffs." Worse, the new government faced a Communist-inspired insurgency, draining scarce development funds.

The British Embassy experienced similar culture shock. A diplomat described a "rudimentary hand to mouth ex-

istence...(living) in a bed-sitting room in small house in the middle of a rice paddy field. Since the phone system did not always work, the best way to contact somebody was to get on my bicycle and go around to see persons."

In 1958, OB found another shelter. Former assistant project manager **George Alba** described living " barracks-style in a small house in (the neighborhood) of Nong Duang. Downstairs was the clinic, a reasonably spacious dining room which also served as the living room wedged by the foot of the stairs. The entire floor upstairs was the sleeping quarters. To string up our mosquito nets, we had to climb over cots and beds. When a string snapped, it was like a whole tent falling on our heads. It had to be resourceful architect **Bing Bingcang** who had to scrounge for a bed by the little front balcony where he slept, the only relief during hot nights."

"Later, we transferred to a more spacious house," he wrote. To the best of our guesstimates (lacking verification from living witnesses) he could be referring to that building that stands today on the junction of 23 Singha Road and Nongbone Road. The compound of Wat Nongbone is across the street. And in the distance, perhaps a five-minute walk away, the golden spire of the That Luang stupa rises, the grandest, holiest Buddhist shrine in the country.

The building which became known as the OB House is not quite the

picture of the French colonial architectural legacy that the Laos guidebooks keep citing -- the two-story brick and stucco villas with pitched tile roofs and wooden shuttered windows. Those can still be found elsewhere in the city, in their distinctive beige or mustard color facades

. In 2008 when a group of 17 Mekong Circle members from the U.S.A., Canada and the Philippines visited Vientiane, their first visit in 40 years, the building was a sorry sight. The rooftop gutters sprouted weeds. Walls were stained with grime and badly needed a paint coating. Patches of grass grew from cracks in the cemented court yard. A sign on the fence facing the street labeled the site, in Lao and English, as the "National Centre for Environmental Health and Water Supply."

From the time OB occupied it to the day in May 29, 1975 when we exited for good, a period that may have spanned 16 years (starting from a guesstimate of 1959), the building was the first stop for incoming volunteers from the Philippines. Many stayed for months before they were assigned to provincial stations; others lived there longer to staff the nearby 100-bed Vientiane hospital. Here young female nurses, doctors, nutritionists, social workers, pharmacists, secretaries, shared upstairs rooms.

Male volunteers, mostly accountants and engineers, who slept in the downstairs rooms, were moved to an

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Outdoor lamvong (far left) in front of OB House. The apartment at left was called OB Annex. Beside it is Wat Nong-bone. The lower level is now occupied by retail stores.

apartment building diagonally across the street, that was named OB Annex. A mess hall could sit 35. Behind the house, OB student nurses lived in dormitories. The mess hall served as party room and where Hollywood movies were also shown in the evenings. In short, OB House was home sweet home for the Filipinos on their first overseas sojourn.

At any one time, OB had 100 to 120 volunteers in all its stations, about six sites during its last decade. When sites opened or closed, OB House served as the way station. The second floor space was expanded to accommodate more beds. A number of bungalow-style quarters replaced the student dormitories when the last batch had graduated.

"Of all the landmarks that remain of the old Vientiane, the OB House brought back the most profoundly nostalgic memories of my stay in this city in 1967 to 1968" said nurse **Pinky Saboot-**

Casher who joined the 2008 group tour. "As I saw the window of my old room, I could almost hear the shuttle van arriving from the hospital bringing us home from the hospital to the mess hall for lunch and dinner. Seeing the OB House again reminded me of some life-altering conversations that took place here forty years ago."

During our 12th reunion in Vientiane in November 2018, about a dozen of us stopped by the OB House. It had undergone noticeable changes. Glass panels enclosed the balcony. A red-tiled roof tipped with Naga water snake dragons covered the entrance. The courtyard that served during our times as a basketball court, an outdoor ceremonial setting for student nurses receiving their diplomas, a lamvong dance floor for anniversary parties, was now a parking lot for That Luang festival goers.

During our stop by, It was the third day of this

annual "boun", a bedlam of noise, color, and masses of merry-making humanity swirling all over the streets. We surged into the open door of the building and stepped up the massive stairway to the second floor. Posted on the wall, a multitude of charts and graphs about the city's water supply. A man met us, surprised at this sudden horde of visitors. "What's going on? What do you want?" Our Lao guide explained who we were and why we wanted so much to enter the rooms to survey our former bed spaces, occupied 30, 40, 50 years ago. Sorry, he said, the rooms are closed for the festival.

Visibly saddened, we assembled outside for group photos to show the folks back home. Look here, that's my window. Our workplace, the OB Hospital, a 10-minute walk away, had been razed in 2002. OB House is the only relic, still intact in Vientiane, of our 18-year service in Laos.

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". then scroll down to "Newsletters".)

Your comments are welcome. Send to fuentecila@aol.com