

## Welcome to the 55th Issue of our Newsletter



Eighteen-month old Simone Demiar (middle) carried by unidentified woman. in Nam Bac. At far left is OB nurse Jeconias Demiar who adopted her in 1959. At far right is OB doctor Pedro Gonzales; kneeling in front is OB dentist Fred Reyes. Above Simone and Jecoonias in Florida, USA 2019.

## How An Adopted Lao Found A New Family

**Giving her up “because of our poverty”, her parents “wished her happiness and prosperity”**

In her history of medicine in Laos, "Limited Doses: Health and Development in Laos 1893 - 2000", Kathryn Sweet, an Australian international aid specialist, covers three eras that spanned 107 years of the country's health system. She starts with colonial Laos under France (1893-1949); independence in 1953 to 1974; and its successor, the Pathet Lao Communist regime's rule beginning in 1975 to the early 2000s.

"Limited Doses" is her clever but concise description of how these three political periods impacted Laos's medical history -- from colonialism, to post colonialism, a civil war and post war development struggles. This nation's experience of changing

foreign influence and domination, she argues, produced a "jigsaw" of limited doses unable to cure formidable challenges to widespread disease and epidemics. This is because each era administered "differing political, cultural and technical approaches to the delivery of health care" in pursuit of their particular agendas

The second era, when France gave up its Indochinese possessions of Laos, North Vietnam and Cambodia, is where Sweet focuses on the post colonial intervention of the United States which backed the Royal Lao Government against a Communist-inspired guerrilla Pathet Lao force. Over a 20-year pe-

riod, a massive infusion of U.S. foreign aid descended on an impoverished Laos. A feature of its public health program was the Filipino-staffed Operation Brotherhood which it began funding in 1963. To Sweet, it was an interesting case study in development aid.

OB is "unique in Lao (medical) history and perhaps in Filipino history, one non-governmental organization working consistently over 18 years, she wrote. Longevity was just one aspect. Add to that was its dimension, reaching beyond the wide reach of its presence. By Sweet's count OB Filipino volunteers, some 600 over that period were based in 19 different locations throughout the kingdom.

Now consider this -- each Filipino team of medical and village development technicians served their communities by living with them from a few months to years, many for more than a decade, mostly in remote locations. They were immersed in the timeless cycles and face-to-face participation in village life. At any one time, some 100 to 110 volunteers were on the ground with the locals, eating tam som, sipping lao hai, dancing the lamvong. It was a world so much like their provincial Philippine origins yet exotic in other ways.

Numerous Lao infants, welcomed at baci, delivered by OB nurses or doctors, and, have Filipino names given by their parents. There is Nang Lita (after nurse Lita Delaon); Thao Dignoy (after nurse Gilbert Abad). His Highness Prince Boun Oum, Inspector General of the Kingdom calls one of his daughters "Filipinas". The governor of Sayaboury province has a son named "Danilo" (after Danilo Infante, former OB chief of Planning and Construction); former Lao Ambassador to



Cambodia Chao Sopsaisana has a daughter "Vinsaya Manila". OB doctor Orlando "Bingbing" Alagar married a Lao princess in Pakxong, the first ever between host and visitor. When OB closed shop in 1975, three Filipinos brought their Lao wives to the Philippines and the USA-- Flor Saguisi, Roger Mabunga and Sergio Lapitan.

When Sweet presented a draft in 2015 of her dissertation at a conference in Manila, she said "Sadly, at this stage of Laos's socio-economic development, the main legacy of OB's assistance are shared memories. While some of the older generation of Lao remember the days of Lao hospitals staffed with Filipino doctors and nurses and nursing classes...Laos's progress in the health care sector and the passage of time is gradually erasing the traces of OB's presence..."

Indeed half of Lao's seven million inhabitants today were born after the departure of OB. Hence no memory at all or experi-

ence of their legacy. For one OB nurse, Jeconias Demiar's memory of his short Laotian sojourn lived on after he adopted a Lao child and raised her in the Philippines.

"I am looking at my picture right now," Simone Demiar tells me over the phone, calling from Casselberry Florida, USA recently while a rustle of papers can be heard. "These are my adoption papers. And I feel like choking as I read them again." The papers are in English, French and Lao. The English translation reads:

*"I am Mr. Maisoo, 24 year of age, a citizen of Laos, and my wife, Mrs. Fong, 24 years. Living at Ban Heui Heed, Nambac, Muong Ngoi, Luang Prabang Province, are the parents of a girl named SI-MONE who is now one year and six months old. We, the parents have nursed her insufficiently because of our poverty, and we cannot support the child to the best of her future.*

*We, therefore, offer the child to be the adopted child of Mr. JECONIAS LOPEZ DEMIAR for all her life. We agreed to give him the child on 30/3/59. From this day on we promise not to take back the child anymore.*

*We are glad and willing to give the child to her foster father.*

*We therefore bless them. Wishing them happiness and prosperity."*

Additional documents signed by the Luang Prabang provincial governor Khamphan Norasingh as well as the birth certificates of Maisoo and Fong sealed the adoption process. Simone says that her biological parents brought her to the OB clinic "to surrender me to Papa." They were accompanied by a grandmother and an older sister.

The clinic at Nam Bac was housed within an existing government dispensary. An advance group that arrived in September 1957 deemed it inadequate. Local officials agreed to build a larger building, donating labor and materials. Within three months a "modest structure of lightly locally available materials," provided essential services, according to Miguel Bernad's account "Filipinos In Laos" (2004) -- "a spacious" operating room, an adjoining "comfortable" scrub-sterilizing room, and a 15-bed ward.

There was one notable fact in Bernad's description. Nam Bac lies 60 miles upriver north of the royal capital of Luang Prabang, only 40 miles down river southwest of the Communist North Vietnamese border. Inhabited by 26,000 villagers within Muong Ngoi district, its strategic location, exemplified by the presence of a government army garrison, made it valuable real estate in the civil war competition for the hearts and minds of its residents. OB's medical and livelihood projects strengthened their loyalty to the government's anti-insurgency drive against the Pathet Lao and its ally North Vietnam. Nam Bac fell to the insurgents on January 1961.

Jeconias arrived in Vientiane sometime in 1958, was assigned to Nam Bac and served there for nine months. Bernad's history records its closing in October 1959 but does not cite the reasons. Volunteers, as many as 14, circulated in and out -- physicians, dentists, nurses, social workers, nutritionists, a fishery technician.

Simone says that her Papa "was a quiet man, not spontaneous, humble, did not talk much about Laos or Nam Bac". That he stayed only nine months instead of the usual year or two of the standard service contract may have something to do with living in Nam

Bac. It is in a remote, trackless place where supplies and mail take months to arrive. Logistical problems may have hampered sustainability. There were several other outposts -- in Muong Sai, Xiengkhouang and Ban Ban -- newly established in similar strategic locations that needed support.

Back in Manila, Jeconias returned to work with the 7th Day Adventist Manila Sanitarium and Hospital where his wife Esther Buscaino, also a nurse was employed. Immigrating to New Jersey USA in the mid-1960s, he was joined later by his wife. Simone. then eight years old, and two older sons. In 1978, the family moved to California where both parents worked at Adventist medical centers. He passed away on April 27, 2020 and his wife in September 2009.

While on vacation back in the Philippines, Simone was stranded for eight months, unable to return to the USA with her parents. Laos her original home had been taken over by a new Communist government. Her Lao citizenship may prevent reentry to the USA. immigration lawyers warned and proposed marriage to a Filipino (she was then 18 years old), permitting her to be sponsored by her father. No way she said. The U.S. Embassy intervened by granting her refugee status.

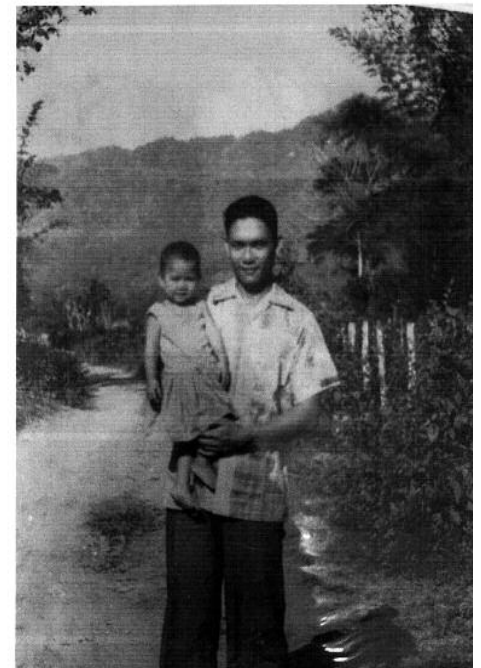
Simone says that her parents were Adventists who took their faith's missionary vision in the form of sabbatical leaves. In 1970, for instance, her family lived in Georgetown, capital of Guyana, South America.

"We lived there for a year, the only English speaking country in South America," she said, "Both my parents worked at the Adventists Davis Memorial Hospital in Georgetown. Papa taught the local nurses anesthesia nursing." Another time in 2012, she helped

managed for a year her parents' Adventist Institute of Technology in Simpak, Lanao del Norte province, Philippines, in the southern island of Mindanao.

Simone earned a Masters degree in May 2007 in Special Education in Phoenix, Arizona, then, taught at middle and high schools of various Seminole County Public Schools in Florida, USA. She retired in September 2024. In the eight years she spent in the Philippines, she picked up the national Tagalog language and her mother's Ilocano dialect.

"All my life, I have wanted to go to Laos, see my birthplace, maybe locate my biological mother, sisters and grandfather. Papa and I never had the opportunity. If I was offered the chance to take the trip, I would jump at it."



*Simone with father Jecomias in Nam Bac, Luang Prabang province, 1959.*

# Was Operation Brotherhood Counterinsurgents?

**Conceived initially as an emergency medical project, it was used for other purposes**

**Counterinsurgency** -- definition dictionary: "military or political action (taken by a state government) against the activities of guerrillas or revolutionaries" (or insurgents) who wish to overthrow or replace it.

Counterinsurgency (COIN) examples from Google:

"Successful COIN often involves military force, political maneuvering, and social and economic programs to win the support of the population and isolate the insurgents. Examples include the British colonial government's Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) now Malaysia against the Malayan Communist Party; the Philippines (1946-1954) against the Hukbo ng Bayan Laban Sa Hapon, or Huks; Colombia, in South America (1964-2016) against the Communist-inspired Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

OB was many things to many people. It was an emergency medical aid project impelled by humanitarian motives. It was a training platform to teach the Lao various basic skills in medical aid and nursing, home economics, food production, public health. It was a livelihood, village-level tool for sustainable solutions to underdevelopment such as poverty.

It was also a COIN strategy conceived at the dawn of the Cold War between competing ideologies. On one side was the West bias for liberal democracy, spearheaded by the USA, facing the East, inspired by Communism. The Asian flashpoint in the conflict was Vietnam. When France lost in 1954 the country's northern part to the insurgent Vietminh, many thousands fled to what was then South Vietnam. Driven to refugee camps and ravaged by disease, they sought outside assistance, mainly from the USA which backed the government. Here was a political propaganda opportunity to show off to the world what freedom meant to people fleeing Communism. Among the phil-

anthropic groups that responded were nongovernmental civic action organizations such as the worldwide Junior Chambers (known as the Jaycees). About 195 medical volunteers signed up; food, clothing, medicines, cash donations poured in. At the forefront of the Jaycee project were Filipino medical personnel. In 31 months, when the project ended in 1957, a historian tallied the healthcare outcomes -- "721,379 people treated in dispensaries and mobile clinics...7,862 hospital patients, 5023 surgical operations...197 Vietnamese trained in various skills."

A New York Times correspondent reported that the Filipinos "travelled in teams throughout the south, opened first aid stations, taught some public health. The idea was that Filipinos would be more acceptable to the Vietnamese than whites, they would adjust better, it was good for an anti-Communist Catholic Asian country to be ostensibly taking the lead in helping Vietnam."

South Vietnamese government troops provided security against the Vietcong insurgents, displaying visible proof that the OB effort was its doing. A United States Agency for International Aid (USAID) wrote that "the common knowledge by the people of Vietnam that the Free World (i.e. the Filipinos) is willing to assist the common people, will do more to inspire them to help themselves than any propaganda campaign." Forthwith, an infusion of aid funds in January 1955 expanded OB's reach beyond the refugee camps.

The OB Vietnam COIN model came into play when it moved to Laos in 1957. The scenario was eerily similar -- a new government, weak governance, impoverished people. An insurgent Communist movement, the Pathet Lao, allied to North Vietnam, spawned a civil war that bled the country. Jaycee Laos members who were at the same time high ranking

government officials, saw what OB accomplished in Vietnam and saw its value in their own country. As early as January 24, 1958, only a few days after OB's arrival, a telegram from the U.S. State Department, said in part:

"Subject -- Special Assistance Funds For Laos

*Ambassador Parsons (U.S. Ambassador to Laos 1956-58) has recommended that we immediately undertake a crash program of village-level political impact projects to make the villagers aware of (1) the Royal Government's concern with their problems and (2) the reality of American aid. Such a program would do much to counter the anticipated vigorous Communist campaign in the villages and the increasingly widespread criticism that American aid benefits the few in the city and is largely unknown to the rural population."*

The telegram added that examples of the projects envisaged were the drilling of wells in drought areas, bulldozing of simple roads linking villages, construction of school buildings, repair of pagodas, and the provision of medical aid and training facilities. Each project would be examined in terms of its immediate and tangible political advantages in a particular situation, would make maximum use of local resources and labor and would be relatively inexpensive.

It recommended a \$500,000 fund would cover the cost of two additional Operation Brotherhood teams for six months and other village-level projects over the next few months.

An earlier telegram June 2, 1957 from the State Department stated "we must somehow keep civic action and Operation Brotherhood in forefront of battle for progress in 10 loyal provinces." In another document on September 1957 from the Far East Division of International Cooperation Administration (the precursor

of USAID), an amount of \$250,000 seems to have been the portion from the sum above allocated for 1958 to pay for OB "salaries, transportation, costs, insurance, etc. " Evidently, OB's proved so effective beyond the six months of initial funding from State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency. Beginning in 1963, USAID assumed full funding at an average of \$1.32 million a year and stayed at more or less that level till its pullout in 1975.

Other COIN Laos components prominently featured Filipinos. In 1959, the U.S. Department of Defense contracted a Manila-based Eastern Construction Company (ECCOI) to recruit mostly former Philippine armed forces veterans. Their mission: train the Royal Armed Forces the craft of war -- artillery, logistics, ordnance, equipment maintenance. By mid-1959, about 103 technicians were on the ground. As part of the 1962 Geneva international agreement to keep Laos neutral in a fast expanding arena of

West and East combatants, all foreign military advisers, including ECCOI were told to leave.

Another Filipino group contributed a vital COIN role -- the aircraft engineers who maintained fleets of cargo planes chartered by Air America, widely known as the CIA's and USAID's airline. Two other chartered U.S.-owned airlines Continental Air Services and Bird & Sons flew "soft cargo" (mainly rice for refugees) and "hard cargo" (ordnance). Hired beginning in 1962, more than 300 Filipino flight, avionics and maintenance engineers were indispensable support to cross Laos's mountainous, densely forested trackless terrain, supplying USAID's economic projects and the CIA's paramilitary outposts.

Laos established a counterinsurgency department in its armed forces that it called Civic Action, While it worked closely with USAID to build schools, dig wells, open hospitals, and the like, the

CIA preferred the military option. For almost a decade, it rained bombs on insurgent targets. The massive air war failed and the Pathet Lao won. .

OB started out as a humanitarian effort that even the insurgents recognized as sorely needed in a country where the health care system was in tatters. During a reunion of OB members in Vientiane in November 2018, main speaker former Lao ambassador to France Yang Chanthalangsy delivered a history of OB Laos. Yes, he recounted, it was initially a CIA tactic to win hearts and minds, a COIN. We knew it but we needed it, referring to OB's holistic medical-social-economic template, echoing the sentiment of His Majesty King Savang Vatthana who told OB founder Oscar Arellano that "it is the type of assistance we welcome and which we would like to have more of because it is the kind of help that does not cause our country to lose honor."



## Those Were The Days

Latest documentary on Laos appeared last November on YouTube, a four-part series titled "Eyes Wide Open." The fourth is this "Big Trouble In Little Laos." Newly released archives reveal how the country became a bloody arena in a Cold War conflict where the United States Central Intelligence Agency, headed at one time by pipe-smoking Allen Dulles, was on its frontlines.

During our almost two-decades long stay in Laos in the early 1950s to the 1970s, there was no internet. No morning newspaper to scan headlines as we sip our coffee. No TV. The radio blared gibberish, because it was in fast Lao, our fluency with the language too slow. A mimeographed, stapled Lao Presse summarized world and government news, in French, a language that to us, Anglais-educated, may as well be Sanskrit.

If you were assigned to one of our remote provincial outposts, the horror of an information black hole was truly excruciating. In Vientiane, the capital, you could get Time magazine, the English language daily Bangkok Post and Bangkok Times, flown in from Thailand. In Sayaboury or Attopeu where you were cocooned in bucolic isolation, the Voice of America radio broadcasts brought the news beyond the trackless forests

and mountain ridges.

Although we were essentially offline about current Lao events, we were on the frontlines during the most momentous periods of its modern history. We were there when the last royal sovereign assumed his kingship in 1959, bestowing his royal patronage on our medical program. We were there when the various political and military factions of the postcolonial government -- the rightists, neutralists and leftists -- competed for power. We were there during six coups and countercoups, one firefight right around our That Luang residential neighborhood and behind our hospital on Phone Keng road. We attended to the casualties in their refugee camps and villages, of a bloody civil war. (By one estimate 200,000 Lao perished in a population of only three million.) And we missed by a few months the

march into the capital in 1975 of the victorious Pathet Lao insurgents who had ordered all foreign aid technicians to leave, including OB.

We were mostly in our late 20s and 30s then. Now in our creaky 70s and 80s, we are suddenly awash by the internet with the details of that history. In the 50 years since the end of the Second Indochina War that engulfed Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, formerly classified war files have been released and are online. Type "Laos" on the internet search bar and the word "secret" is always surgically attached to it. For us eyewitnesses on the ground, it was never "secret".

The most recent internet account, "Eyes Wide Open" released in November 2024, comes in four parts, listed on the opposite column. The first part "The Secret War in Laos: South-east Asia's Heart of Darkness Laos 1", 25 minutes long, reviews the 1890-1945 backdrop, as far back as during the first days of President John Kennedy. The second and third focus on Vietnam that you may wish to skip. The 4th part- "The Paramilitary CIA and the Seeds of a Secret War Laos 4", at an hour and 24 minutes, is rich in archival stuff, and has two features that set it apart from most "secret war" documentaries that now overflow the internet.

First, it has a transcript; second there are footnotes. Yet it does not drone on like a dense monograph from an academic journal. Call it popular history if you will, but it skillfully untangles the mess of that period. By the way, on the timeline, there are references on Operation Brotherhood on 25.28 to 26.40 as

well as related footnotes.

All in all, the series is a major accomplishment and the reader comments agree.

Laos1 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uv56Qj8CZS4>

Laos 2 - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNg\\_j4AnDe8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNg_j4AnDe8)

Laos 3 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uT1SpQ41Dwk>

Laos 4 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BD7axcbr1M8>

For a less scholarly dive into Lao Cold War history, log on to "Geography Now! LAOS", a documentary first uploaded to YouTube in 1998, it collected close to a million views by 2020. It has added some 400,000 more at this writing. What explains its surprising draw against cat videos and Kim Kardashian eye candy? Well, open it and see for yourself. Hike up your sinh or hold on to your receding hairline because, unlike "Eyes Wide Open", it gallops at a fast pace over its 12-minute, 32-second clip on Lao history, culture, demographics, current events, surprisingly covering all the major points in that short time. It could have easily fallen into a boring social studies lecture. But its zippy, hilarious, deliberately cool style was meant to engage those who hate history. And it succeeds superbly.

The video is part of a "Geography Now" series with episodes on the Philippines, Nepal, Cambodia, Singapore, Myanmar and other countries. Its archival sources drew Wikipedia, Atlas Obscura, National Geographic, PBS.

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## Gone With the Monsoon Wind

### Why moving images, when lost, tell more indelible memories

Sometime in 1960 a cinematographer was dispatched from Manila to shoot footage of OB's activities. He left developed rolls of 16 mm negatives that showed physicians doing their thing, nurses nursing, agriculturists digging, and so forth. The next year, a 23-year old journalist was given his first assignment -- edit the raw stuff into a 30-minute documentary.

His editing room was a screened verandah on the second floor of a French-style colonial building that was also the sleeping quarters of the OB staff. The golden stupa of the That Luang shrine was within sight. For weeks, he hand-cranked a small editing machine that spliced and glued together the negatives. He composed a script, spent hours at a government cultural office stocked with Lao music tapes to record sound effects. Then he shipped his first editing job to Manila for what was called post-production finishing.

Nothing happened. Today, 65 years later, nobody knows its fate. It is said that the cinematographer carried back with him the master film copy ran to some two hours. The master and edited stock would have composed the first film records

of OB's early years. Its loss was all the more disheartening because at that time, the digital smartphone and its magical video app had not yet existed. Nor the earlier tape camcorders which were invented in the 1980s.

Oh, but we have oodles of pictures, color and monochrome prints encased in scrap books that we pass around, to oohs at our biennial reunions. But these are still shot mementoes, not moving pictures. Imagine then our surprise when an OB YouTube clip pops up as we scroll aimlessly. One such clip appears in the feature about a 1969 medical trip along the Mekong River in the August 2020 issue of our Newsletter. Another is this 1963 clip <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/247401> shot by British Pathe. Only one minute and 18 seconds long, it records images of our hospital in Vientiane long gone as well as those at work of OB physicians Bill Comia, Tony Menez, Orlando Alagar, nurse Gina Perlada and our OB-trained Lao practical nurses Bounthan Oudom and Phensy Thampthong. All have passed away but here they are on 16 mm, cherished colleagues to touch our hearts again. Save it.

# Selected Resources About Laos and Mekong Circle

## Books

*“Laos”* 10th edition, September 2025. 312 pages. The latest in the renowned Lonely Planet series first published in 1994, it is much more than a travel guide. Apart from the usual lists of recommended shops, hotels, itineraries, maps, festivals, its essays on history, culture, do’s and don’ts advice, are authoritative. Available from Amazon.

*“A Short History of Laos - The Land In Between”* by Grant Evans; 2002, 252 pages. If the concise history by Martin Stuart Fox in the Lonely Planet 9th edition (June 2017) makes you want to know more, get this book from Amazon. Evans is an Australian anthropologist but this is pleasantly readable, not written in the dense style one expects of an academic dissertation.

*“Tragedy in Paradise”* by Dr. Charles Weldon, 1999, 284 pages. Contains two full chapters on Operation Brotherhood. He describes his experience managing the Public Health Program of the United States Agency For International Development in Laos which funded Operation Brotherhood beginning in 1961. Available from Amazon.

## Videos

The late celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain shot two episodes on Laos:

1) *“No Reservations Laos”* in 2008. The full 43-minute long video can be viewed at : <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2ifxwt>

2) *“Parts Unknown Laos”* in 2017 (Season 9, Episode 3) is at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1aDVCiUR>

*“The Mekong River with Sue Perkins”* Episode 3. In 2014, BBC sent its travel correspondent to do a four-part series on Cambodia, Vietnam, China. This one-hour Episode 3 is on Laos. View in <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2b2xfo>

## Mekong Circle Collection

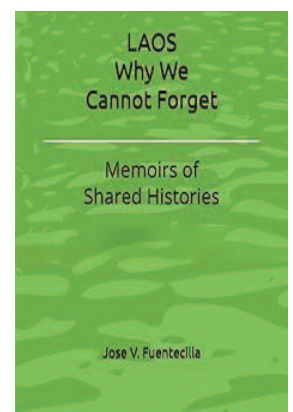
*“Filipinos In Laos”* , 256 pages by Fr. Miguel Bernad and Jose “Pete” Fuentecilla. Second Edition 2015. Traces the history of the major groups that make up our association: Operation Brotherhood OB Laos, Air America, Continental Air Services, Bird & Sons, Eastern Construction Company in Laos, USAID. Available from Amazon.

*“Goodbye Vientiane: Untold Stories of Filipinos In Laos”* 210 pages by Penelope Flores, 2005 .A compilation of personal anecdotes of their lives during their service in Laos 1957 - 1975. Available from Amazon.

*“Pioneers in Laos”* 20-minute documentary, produced in March 2018, describes the early years of OB Laos, from 1957 to 1960. <https://youtube/Krpp9mT1YGc>

*Laos: Why We Cannot Forget. Memoirs of Shared Histories* by Jose V. Fuentecilla (2022). Available from Amazon. 132 pages. A compilation of features selected from issues of Mekong Circle Newsletter 2004 to 2025.

**Mekong Circle website** -- [www.mekongcircle.org](http://www.mekongcircle.org). Includes archives of Mekong Circle Newsletter.



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