

Celso Orense, 79, Founding Member of Filipino Laos Groups



Among the first Filipinos to arrive in Laos who stayed the longest there, Celso Orense died Aug. 18, 2003 at the Kaiser Permanente Hospital in Sunset, Calif.

He was one of a batch of about 35 Filipinos hired by the U.S. Embassy in Manila and flown to Vientiane in December 1957 to help staff the American aid programs in Laos, then known as the United States Overseas Mission. They were lodged in four houses in Nahaidio, a short distance from what would sprawl into a compound of offices of the United States Agency for International Development, the successor to USOM.

Celso, who previously worked with the U.S. Clark Air Force Base in Pampanga, and his colleagues arrived barely three years after Laos emerged as an independent nation from 61 years of French colonial rule. Like the French before them who imported Vietnamese bureaucrats from their Saigon and Hanoi outposts to assist in colonial administration, the Americans saw the need for Filipino expertise. At that time, Laos was woefully short of trained locals to help operate what would become one of America's all-encompassing economic aid program in support of its Cold War policies. (From its beginnings in 1954 to its end in 1975, U.S. economic aid to Laos alone, not counting the military portion, consumed \$861 million in 21 years).

"It was rough, those early days" Romy Pestanas, a USOM auditor, remembers. "We had to boil our water, we felt very remote from civilization. Celso worked in the Commissary. He would pass on to us meat products, fruits and canned goods that he was told to dispose of."

When Celso was transferred to the Motor Pool he supplied transport assistance to Operation Brotherhood, said Fidel Padayao, a former USOM administrative assistant. A group of 13 OB Filipino nurses and doctors had arrived a year earlier, doing outdoor clinic work on the That Luang grounds. These OB and USOM arrivals formed the vanguard of a Filipino community that would grow to about 900 by the mid-1960s as Air America, Continental Air Services and Eastern Construction Company in Laos hired Filipinos for their Lao operations. It was considered the largest concentration of overseas Filipinos at that time.

When they first arrived, the Vientiane capital had an estimated 60,000 residents, growing to 150,000 in the 1960s (There are now more than a half million, out of the total population of 5.3 million).

In January 1965, the Filipino Association of Laos was formed. The 1967 elections named Celso to the Board (for those who wish to remember, here are the other Directors: Ernie Felix, Air America; Nick Dolorfino, Dolorfino Construction; Dr. Adriano Torres, OB; Romy Pestanas, USAID; Nick Bustamante, OB; Ramon Romano, USAID; Deo Caro, OB; Bob Casupanan, Continental; Buenaventura Dola, ECCOIL; Capt. Isagani Blanco, Royal Air Lao. The officers were President Pete Assidao, ECCOIL; Vice President Narding Hilario , OB; Treasurer Seb Eusebio, USAID; Secretary Sonia Morales, OB).

Although living separately, dormitory-style, in their Nahaidio and That Luang compounds, the Filipinos had many occasions to mingle socially. Celso's favorite social hangout, by most accounts, was the Vieng Ratry Night Club because one roommate -- Casimiro Delfin, was the bandleader (his nighttime job; in the day he was a USOM accountant) and where he would croon his signature song "Jack The Knife."

"He was a very easy going, fun-loving person with a ready smile as soon as you met him, always followed with jokes," says Paeng Mapaye of USAID.

A new Communist government installed in 1975 terminated the foreign operations that employed the Filipinos. Most returned to the Philippines. Others dispersed to Australia, Canada, the Middle East and the USA.

Celso chose to settle in Los Angeles in 1975, followed the next year by his wife Bouchuay. A Thai and a former administrative assistant of USAID's Housing Department, she married Celso in 1966 in Vientiane. They have four children: Cherry, a businesswoman living in Thailand; Angel, a medical technologist in California; Celso, Jr. and Nancy, both registered nurses, and all residing in California. Celso has three children with his first wife from whom he is divorced: Raquel, Cesar and Glen.

In 1976, about 50 ex-Laos Filipinos, among them Celso, reunited into a group that they called Mekong Circle USA. It transformed into Mekong Circle International when former colleagues from around the globe joined the four past reunions. Indeed, Celso's last social was a gathering on June 22, 2003 of the Los Angeles Mekong Circle chapter that mapped out their participation in the fifth reunion in Chicago in 2004. We will miss him then as much as we do now.

By Pete Fuentesilla