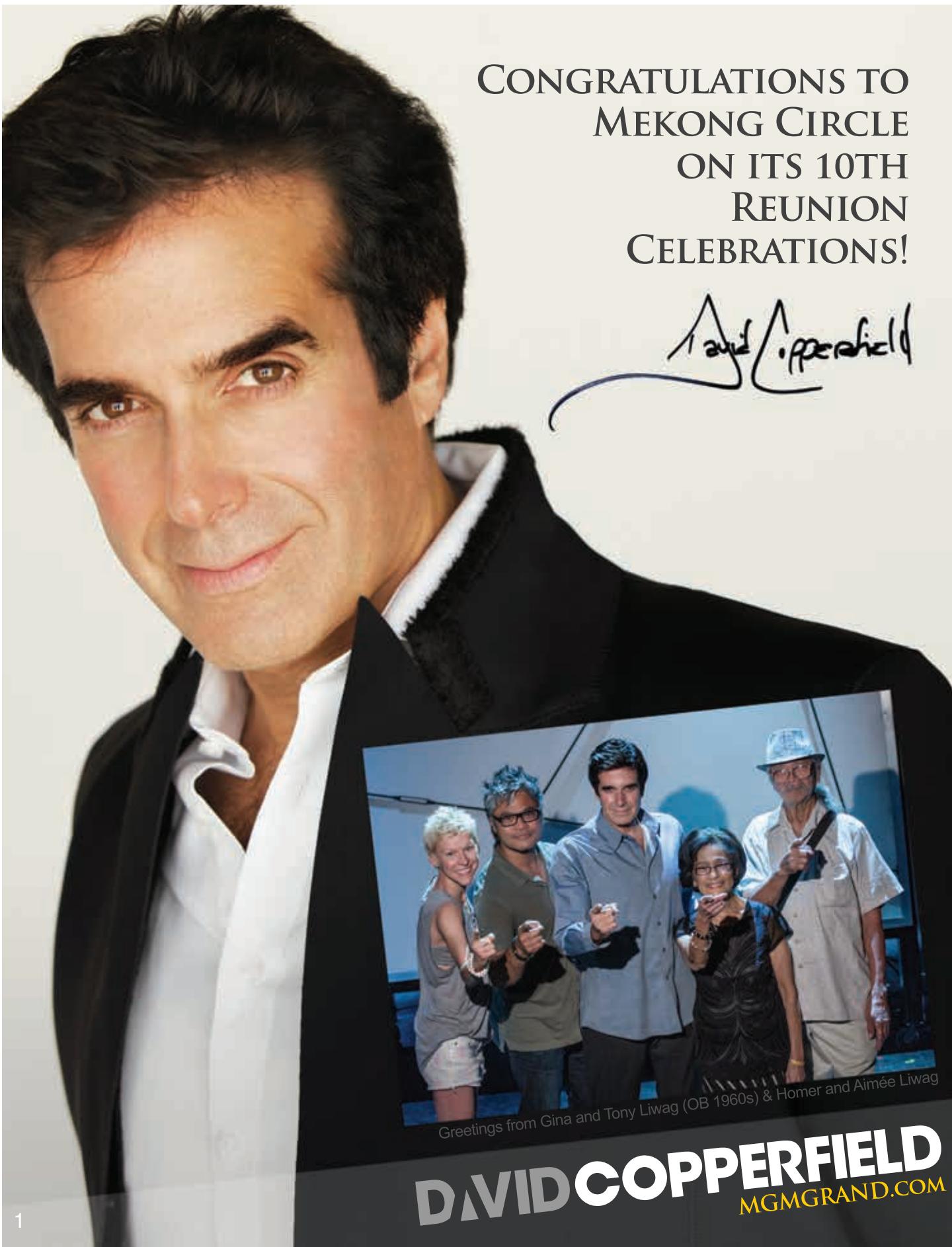




CELEBRATING OUR 10TH







Greetings from

**The Organizing Committees of our
celebration welcome you !**

This is the 10th edition of our biannual event. In previous reunions, the host is traditionally a one-chapter organizing body in a city where we can count on many members to do the organizing duties. This time, because of the historic nature of our 2014 reunion, two chapters of our West Coast region have pooled their prodigious resources -- Southern (Los Angeles) and Northern (San Francisco).

Indeed we are proud to note that out of 10 reunions, our California-based members have accepted to host with graciousness, industry and...courage (lots of it) -- five of them: twice in Los Angeles, once each in San Francisco, Anaheim and San Diego. This is a record that will stand for a long time. Much credit and our deep gratitude go to our committee members who have devoted time and financial help in making these reunions as memorable and enjoyable as each has been.

We thank you heartily -- members, friends and guests -- for joining us in Las Vegas.

Pat Gonzales

Committee Chair: Los Angeles

Bik Marquez

Committee Chair: San Francisco

Committee members - Becky Ciborski, Sam and Sue Malaythong, Clem Gonzales, Vanessa & Phaiboon Thongma, Tony & Tacing Atienza, Khamsy Siharath, Jun & Claire Ilustrisimo, Jr., Fidel & Wilma Padayao, Juliet Esteban, Chantha & Sivilay Sivongxay, Joe & Jojo Barcelona, Manding and Cecile Datu, Jojo Pablo, Penny Flores, Pol & Cita Custodio, Rod Reyes, Lito & Adoring Gomez, Jun & Ding Yoro Trinidad, Philip & Jessie Cruz, Seb & Lodi Eusebio.



Welcome to our 2014 Reunion Mekong Circle International

October 2014

Dear Member and Friends

Welcome to our 10th reunion ! Our celebratory gatherings, held once every two years, began in 1995. Hence this year's event marks almost two decades of our Association's life. So, to imbue the occasion with the historic flourishes it deserves, we thought this would be the right time to record on the pages of this Souvenir Program the more memorable events that marked our passage through the years.

Actually our Association was born in 1975, before it emerged as an incorporated body with bylaws and officers and membership rules (really no binding ones, it's open to all who like what we do). That's when a group of people, mostly Filipinos, migrated to California, USA after their exodus from Laos when a new government there drove away all foreign aid personnel. These displaced engineers, healthcare workers, accountants, administrators renewed memories of their Laos days at potluck lunches in their homes in Los Angeles. Picnics and trips to Las Vegas and birthday parties strengthened the bonds. When the reunions reached out to other expats who resettled across the planet, these periodic get-togethers attracted a wider circle of our diaspora. Voila – Mekong Circle International !

Laos is where we planted our primeval roots. And that's where we go back to trace the following histories in this Journal:

- The pioneers who arrived as early as 1956. Two of them roamed remote places where it can be said they were the very first Filipinos who set foot there;
- The string of Lao political upheavals that we lived through: the coups and counter coups, the evacuations, the accidental casualties among our ranks;
- The events that shook the world that went whooping past us during the 18 years we led cocooned lives in a kingdom where the next "boun" happening was more important;
- The state of the capital Vientiane where most of us lived and worked, what it was like then and how it has changed in 40 years;
- The new Filipino expats in Laos who now walk in our shoes: who they are and what they do;
- Remembering our past reunions, all nine of them, each a chapter in our ongoing history.

Forty years ago we were restless, childless, with no 30-year mortgage. We took on risks that would make our hair stand on end now. Some of us stayed a year or two. For others, much longer. Our sojourns defined a time and a place and people that shaped part of our young lives forever. Savor the memories. Enjoy our 10th reunion !



Pioneers

1956 October 20

An Operation Brotherhood (OB) survey team from Vietnam, upon invitation of the Laos Jaycees, arrives to choose sites where OB will transfer operations after it leaves South Vietnam. Jovito Naranjo and Fruto Bingcang, spend three months traveling to various provincial towns. They are perhaps the first Filipinos to set foot on some of the more isolated places.

1956 November

OB Vietnam Dr. Jesus Banzon, nurse Petra Duruin and secretary Josefina Figueroa set up a first aid clinic during the three-day That Luang festival in the city of Vientiane. The purpose was to gauge how the residents would respond to a foreign medical aid project staffed by Asians.

1957 January 7

The first team of 13 OB Laos volunteers arrives in Vientiane. Project is funded by the Philippine and Lao Jaycees.

1957 December 1

First group of Filipinos recruited from Manila arrive in Vientiane to help staff the United States Operations Mission, precursor to the United States Agency For International Development - USAID.

1957 Air America airline begins operations in Laos, hiring Filipino aircraft engineers.

1958 Eastern Construction Company in Laos (ECCOIL) military advisers, hired from the Philippines, begin training Royal Lao Armed Forces under a contract with the Program Evaluations Office of USAID.

1960 July 8

Seven members of OB, the first Filipinos, receive royal awards from King of Laos for their service to the country. They included three administrators, a nutritionist, social worker, nurse and a doctor.

1961 Filipino residents in Laos estimated to reach 500.

1964 August

Philippine Speaker of the House of Representatives Cornelio Villareal is the highest ranking government official to visit Laos.

1965 Filipino residents in Laos estimated at 900.

1965 January 1

Filipino Association of Laos inducts its first officers and Board of Directors

1965 August 28

Continental Air Services / Bird & Sons begin operations in Laos, hiring Filipino aircraft technicians



Rody Sanchez

1965 Sept 17

Consul Rodolfo Sanchez, first resident consular officer, arrives to open Philippine Embassy office. First resident Ambassador Felipe Mabilangan presented his credentials to King Savang Vatthana on October 26.



Pavilion at That Luang "boun"

1965 November

First Philippine Pavilion participation at the That Luang festival in Vientiane.

1975 May 29

Last group of 41 OB personnel flew out to Bangkok. A new Communist government had taken over the country and ordered all foreign personnel of aid agencies to leave.

1976 March 20

Mekong Circle organized in Los Angeles, California, USA.

1995 May 20

First reunion of Mekong Circle held in Los Angeles. Beginning in 1998, reunions are held once every two years in various cities.

2002 Nov. 3

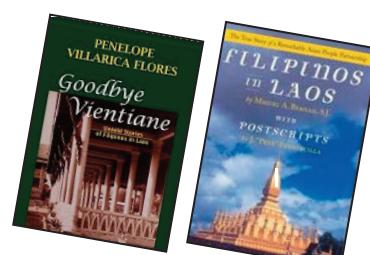
Eleven Mekong Circle members arrive in Vientiane for a one-week group tour. It was their first return since 1975. During a courtesy call with the Lao Minister of Public Health, he invited OB to resume its medical program.

2002 Nov. 7

Philippine Ambassador Mario Galman unveils on the Embassy grounds in Vientiane a plaque honoring all Filipinos who served in Laos from 1957 to 1975.

2004 August

"Filipinos In Laos" history book is released in Chicago, Illinois, followed by "Goodbye Vientiane" a collection of memoirs by Mekong Circle members.



2008 Nov. 7-9

Reunion in Manila, the Philippines, is the first held outside the USA.

2008 Nov. 12 – 16

Second group tour of 27 Mekong Circle members embark from Manila for a week-long visit to Vientiane and Luang Prabang.



The Old Days of "Bo Pen Yang"

It's among the first Lao phrases we pick up during our early years in the country. It can mean any thing from "Never mind" and "Let it be" to "Don't worry about it" and "Cool it Dude." The late Romy Pestanas, a Filipino accountant with the US Agency For International Development USAID who arrived in 1957 to work in Vientiane learned how to let things take its course at that time when "we had to boil our drinking water." It was a newly independent country, shortly after France, its former colonial administrator, let it loose from its Associated States of Indochina empire (along with Vietnam and Cambodia). By the time Romy left in 1975, the tap water was ok, there's a golf driving range, and the USAID compound included a clubhouse, a swimming pool, restaurant, bar, and an air-conditioned movie theater.

Such amenities were non-existent 18 years earlier when Romy and two other accountants — Seb Eusebio and Ernie Hernandez — arrived from Manila December 1, 1957 to staff the United States Operations Mission (USOM), the precursor to USAID. It was a hardship post that demanded the "bo pen yang" attitude. "We were advised in Manila that we need to be in the best of health, and was ready to accept risks," said Fidel Padayao, who arrived a week later. They lived in a neighborhood called Nahaideo, sharing rooms in a two-story apartment building, taking turns cooking their meals, and feeling they had reached the end of the world. They were the first Filipinos to abandon the comforts of their Manila homes for a long-term assignment in Laos.

They joined a USOM staff of five Americans in 1954. The aid mission faced a gargantuan task in taking over from the French. At a 1959 hearing of a U.S. House of Representatives committee, it said:

"Conditions in Laos were characterized by a primitive state of the economy...lack of (local) personnel trained in government and business affairs... The support of a relatively large standing army, the furnishing of essential civilian government services, were considered beyond the capabilities of Laos and hence were assumed by the United States. In this situation, it hurriedly organized in January 1955 an economic and technical aid mission to administer the various elements of a large-scale program."

And so, in a hurry to round up administrative help, USOM reached out to Manila where the call for accountants and other skilled office personnel was sounded. In due time, there were radio technicians, mechanics, rural development workers, teachers, agriculturists and a host of other technicians, settling down in Vi-

entiane. Romy, Seb and Fidel easily made the first cut among 35 applicants because as former employees of USAID in Manila, who else could be more qualified to transfer their skills to USOM Laos. Likewise, the Filipino engineers recruited from the Philippine-based U.S. Naval Base in Subic and the U.S. Clark Air Force Base in Angeles knew the stuff to run American supplied hardware in Laos. Other so-called "third-country nationals" (TCNs) were locally hired Thais and Vietnamese. Lao with the required technical and administrative skills were sorely lacking.

In the four-year period 1955-58, the U.S. economic aid program had cost \$166 million, financing some 20 projects, from teacher training to agriculture. It was during this same period that Air America and Eastern Construction Company employed Filipinos for Laos assignment. Thirteen Operation Brotherhood personnel had arrived on January 7, 1957. An estimated 100 direct hire Americans were staffing USAID from 1958 to 1960. By July 1959, 41 USAID Filipinos "occupied positions as engineers, automotive and diesel mechanics, electricians, accountants and clerk," said a report. "Their contribution continues to be of high order particularly in imparting to the Lao technical knowledge and skills about electricity, engineering, masonry, painting and carpentry." (By 1968, the official U.S. Embassy list of U.S. residents totaled 1,752 which included 450 USAID personnel, U.S.

Embassy personnel, 800 dependents, 240 mostly with Air America, 53 with Continental Airlines, 33 missionaries.) Elden Erickson, a U.S. Embassy officer 1956-58 said: "I was the economic section in Laos. No secretary, no typewriter, no window in my office. I was it. My only claim to fame there was that I decided what the gross national product of Laos was and it stuck for at least a number of years. I invented that."

It was also tough going for another diplomatic mission. Philip Malone, posted to a three-man British Embassy in Vientiane in 1959 lived a "rudimentary...hand-to-mouth experience...(living) in a bed-sitting room in a 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 bi-

cycle and go around to see persons."

The U.S. Congressional hearings of 1959, convened primarily to determine how American aid money was being spent or mis-



Entrance to USAID compound (1969)



All dressed up for a "Moro-moro" party

spent in Laos, uncovered “organizational weakness...minimum controls” in administering a \$50 million-a-year program. Most telling, the report found personnel morale “at a low ebb.” Among major reasons cited were “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.”

Let George Alba, former OB assistant project manager, tell how it was in 1958 Vientiane:

“We lived ‘barracks-style’ in the small house in Nong Douang. Downstairs was the clinic, a reasonably spaced 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 Bing Bingcang who had to scrounge for a bed by the little front balcony where he slept, the only relief during hot nights.

“Someone had fashioned for us a night table from an old shipping crate, the only piece of furniture one would see. We had a small 2.5 KVA generator that coughed dead at 10 o’clock, and that was that. To catch up with one’s reading or report, we used flashlights and candles. Or else, we would call (generator technician) Viring dela Rosa — “Please, one more hour.” The night sounds were horrifying — there were 10 of us snoring, groaning, muttering, thrashing in sleep in a ten-by-twelve meter room.

“Later, we transferred to a more spacious house. Since there was a water problem, we went around without a bath for days. Everybody smelled of lotion or sweat with lotion. Our white clothes turned beige after the first washing. Rain was a blessed event. Everyone stripped off to bathe in the rain.

“Everyone walked to the office, the market, to church, to Vieng Ratry, to the Post Office, to Lang’s soupe-chinoise shop.”

Most accounts by visitors describe Vientiane in the late 1950s (population about 50,000) as a “slow-paced” and “charming big town”, not really a capital metropolis. Those were the kindest complements when they compared it to the other “exotic” French colonial outposts of Hanoi or Phnom Penh. The “charm” exuded from the numerous Buddhist temples and the dilapidated, mustard-yellow stone government buildings, relics of the esthetics of colonialism. (Vientiane 2014 is sometimes labeled as Bangkok 50 or 60 years ago. Translation: less hectic, less materialistic, far fewer people - 210,000 vs. 9.3 million — and less pushy. For Edmund Williams, a U.S. Embassy political officer in 1976, a year after USAID pulled out, “the Lao themselves, if you had any dealings with them are among the most charitable, generous, warm, lovely people, absolutely gorgeous people.”

Most Mekong Circle members lived and worked in the city for the duration of their two-year contracts. If they and other expats found living conditions there as “primitive”, let them live for months on end in isolated provincial capitals as a good number of OB personnel did. In Vang Vieng, the nurse woke up by early light to rush to the



1960s expats at Wattay airport

market before the first patients arrived in order to purchase the day’s fresh produce before they ran out and team members risk going hungry for the day (no refrigerators). The Sayaboury team insured themselves from starvation by maintaining vegetable gardens on the clinic grounds.

Pol Daulo raised pigs and poultry. Two doctors and three nurses shared a house typical of Lao homes in the provinces — thatched roofing, bamboo slats for floor and sidings. They hauled their water from a well in a nearby Buddhist temple. An outback bathroom constructed of iron sheets had gasoline drums to store water. In Keng Kok, Dr. Pilo Ocampo did his laundry by the river. It was also the bathroom for the other team members. In Pakse’s cold climate, you get freeze-dried with the first dose of bath water from a pail. In Nam Bac, Dr. Alex del Carmen performed surgery on a dining table, lighted from a lamp salvaged from the headlight of a C-47 plane that had crashed at the end of the dirt runway, and to which he had rigged a 17-volt battery. At Sam Neua, nurse Abner Jornada baked bread that he would exchange for wine, butter, cheese and bottled pickles with Canadian representatives of the International Control Commission monitoring a ceasefire treaty between Laos’ combatants. Medical team trekkers to surrounding villages would meet along the mountain passes horse caravans carrying Chinese-made kettles, plates, matches, beer. Team members flying out to Phonsavan shared space with cackling chickens and ducks.

You were lucky to get an outbound plane every time. More likely it’s a full day or two on standby beside the airstrip — “your mind played tricks,” said George Alba. “After many, many hours, you thought the buzzing of a bee was the sound of a plane.” Air America electronic technician Jun Ilustrisimo was stranded for a week atop a mountain ridge in northern Vientiane, a helicopter unable to pick him up in the thick mist and foul weather.

Embedded in nurse Petra Sismaet’s memories are the trips on the Mutya Ng Mekong (Lady of the Mekong), a 40-ft long barge powered by a 50-hp diesel engine. For 50 days and nights in 1959, she, another nurse, two doctors, two Lao aides motored up the Mekong River, from Vientiane to Thakhek and Savannakhet and back, stopping by the riverbanks to do open-air clinics. They slept and ate aboard and were treated to the ageless panorama of village riverside life sustained by Mother Mekong.

Xieng Khouang, Pakse, Attapeu — in remote places like these where a dirt air strip and occasional deliveries by Air America planes provided the only lifeline to the outside world, Mekong Circle members have stories to tell of evenings when sleep came early after chess sessions and cricket sounds outside a very, very dark night. No internet broadband. Those were the days long gone but not lost, not ever. As the tragic lovers Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman told each other in “Casablanca” -- “We will always have Paris.” Make that Saravane or Ban Houie Sai.



Neutralists, Rightists & Leftists

The complex political history of Laos actually begins in 1953 when France granted it full independence. In 1955 elections were held and the first coalition government (between Royal Lao Government RLG rightists and the leftist Pathet Lao's Lao Patriotic Front LPF) was formed in 1957 led by Prince Souvanna Phouma. The following timeline, shortened in some parts, was put together by the U.S. Library of Congress in "Laos : A Country Study". The full study is available online from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/latoc.html>.

The study's timeline starts in 1958. Filipinos entered the Lao scene earlier when the U.S. began hiring them in 1956 for its vast aid programs. Operation Brotherhood's medical aid project began in 1957. USOM (predecessor

to USAID) and Air America recruited Filipino civilian staff and technicians. In 1958, some 103 Filipino military veterans with Eastern Construction Company (ECCOI) were contracted by USAID to train the RLG armed forces. In 1962 as part of the Geneva accords for a neutral Laos, all foreign military advisers — ECCOI, Thai and U.S. — were withdrawn. In 1975, when a new Communist government took over, all foreign aid programs, including OB and USAID, were told to leave. Filipinos lived through a turbulent, confusing 18-year period of Lao history that exacted 23 of their lives, most lost in non-combatant situations.

May 1958	LPF win partial elections for National Assembly.
July 1958	Souvanna Phouma government resigns following cabinet crisis caused by rightists.
August 1958	Rightist government of Phoui Sananikone formed, excluding LPF.
October 1959	King Sisavang Vong dies; Savang Vatthana succeeds to the throne.
August 9, 1960	Paratroop captain Kong Le (right photo) stages Neutralist coup d'état against rightist government, reinstalls Souvanna Phouma.
December 1960	In a counter coup, General Phoumi Nosavan captures Vientiane. Soviet airlift begins to Kong Le and Pathet Lao.
January 1961	Heavy fighting breaks out; North Vietnamese troops involved.



Plain of Jars, site of many battles



May 1961-June 1962 Second Geneva Conference; Neutralist, Pathet Lao, and rightists form a coalition government.

1963 - May 1964	Laos increasingly linked with developments in Vietnam; North Vietnamese troops fail to withdraw; Ho Chi Minh Trail expanded; second coalition government collapses; bombing by United States begins.
1968 - 1974	Fighting escalates between Pathet Lao and Royal Lao Army; Hmong hilltribes under General Vang Pao, with American CIA aid, resist Pathet Lao - North Vietnamese advances; RLG and Pathet Lao begin negotiations for ceasefire in 1972. U.S. ends bombing; third coalition government signed in September 1973

Aug 1974 - Nov. 197 Fighting resumes. Vang Pao flees to Thailand; senior rightist ministers and generals leave for Thailand.

December 1975 King Savang Vatthana abdicates; Lao People's Democratic Republic proclaimed.

Before the Pathet Lao proclaimed its new government, they had entered Vientiane as victors on August 23, 1975. One of their first actions was to rename a memorial that stands at one end of Lane Xang Avenue. Formerly known as Anousavali ("memory"), it's a copy of Paris' Arch of Triumph that we pass by on our way to the Talat Sao market or to town from our quarters at That Luang. It was built between 1957 and 1968 to honor the Lao who died in World War II and those who fought against the French to gain their independence in 1949. The Pathet Lao now call it Patuxai ("Victory Gate"). It is victory won at an enormous cost. A three-decade long struggle that entwined colonial, Cold War, and Lao bloodletting, it consumed some 200,000 Lao lives (30,000 Hmong) in a country with only three million inhabitants as estimated by historian Martin Stuart-Fox. It is sometimes described as one of the longest, lasting shooting war in Asia. It was never a "secret" war, nor a "sideshow" or a "shadow war" to the one raging in neighboring Vietnam. The Lao deaths when viewed "proportional to the population would be considered, I think, larger than the losses by any other country on the face of the earth," said former U.S. Ambassador to Laos William Sullivan. "It has suffered and suffered beyond the measure of other countries in bearing the burdens of try-

ing to defend itself."

We were largely spared the carnage of this multi-combatant conflict, involving Americans, Thais, South and North Vietnamese, Cambodians and, most painfully, Lao against Lao. But we were close-up witnesses as we attended to the wounded at field hospitals or the traumatized at the refugee centers. Some of our stations were in war zones. We slept with our evacuation bags all packed. Many times we had to abandon a number of our sites as the hostilities drew near.

When the fighting ended in 1975, some 10 percent of the inhabitants had fled, among them those with the skills to rebuild a war-ravaged country. Bare of both human and financial resources, it began a new life right on square one. Poor to begin with, it sunk deeper into destitution after ten years of authoritarian rule and failed economic policies. It will take a longer time to catch up with its neighbors which have recovered at a faster pace.

For an excellent historical overview of how a powerless Laos became a pawn by competing regional forces, YouTube carries a 1969 CBS News American television network documentary video "Laos: The Not So Secret War." It is 24 minutes long.



While We Were In Laos, the World Turned

Hey Dad, where were you when....? Well, my child, I was in Attopeu. That's a small town in southern Laos. We had no radio, no CNN, no BBC. Sometimes we got a copy of Time magazine or some newspaper clippings from Manila. But for most of our time in Laos, from 1957 to 1975 (if you stayed that long) we lived in a black hole of information. In Vientiane, copies of the English language Bangkok Post were available at Kaye Ando's store in Tha Deua. One day, we came upon a pair of government censors splashing black ink over Laos-related news items from its pages.

1957

- **Ramon Magsaysay, the 7th President of the Philippine Republic, dies in a plane crash.**

1960

- **Pope John appoints Jaime Sin third Filipino cardinal.**
- American U-2 spy plane, piloted by Francis Powers, is shot down over the USSR.
- Contraception pill is developed.
- There are 900 U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam.

1961

- **Philippine President Diosdado Macapagal is elected.**
- U.S. President John Kennedy takes office.
- Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin is first man to orbit earth.
- Cuba crushes invasion at Bay of Pigs of 1,200 anti-Castro exiles from Florida, aided by the U.S. CIA.
- East Germans erect wall between East and West Berlin.



Ramon Magsaysay

1962

- John Glenn is first American to orbit earth in a space capsule.
- Cuban missile crisis: USSR secretly transports nuclear missiles to island, then withdraws them after U.S. threatens retaliatory action that could have led to a nuclear war.
- Pope John XXIII opens Second Vatican Council.

1963

- Dr. Michael de Bakey of the USA implants first artificial heart in a human.
- President Kennedy is assassinated in Texas.



1964

- U.S. boxer Muhammed Ali becomes world heavyweight champion.
- British singers Beatles reach height of popularity.



1965

- **Taal Volcano in the Philippines erupts and kills 500.**
- **Ferdinand Marcos elected President.**
- Anti-Communist purge in Indonesia massacres 500,000, leads to Sukarno fall

1966

- "Star Trek" TV weekly science fiction show debuts in the USA and runs for three years.

1967

- The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is founded. Original members are the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. (There are now 10 members; Laos joined in 1997).
- Israeli and Arab forces battle six-day war; Israel occupies Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights.

1968

- **Communist Party of the Philippines is established**
- Lunar New Year "Tet" offensive by the Vietcong / Vietmnh in South Vietnam.
- U.S. civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King and U.S. Senator Robert Kennedy are assassinated.
- At Mexico Olympics, two American black sprinters raise black glove salute during medal awarding to protest racial inequality in U.S.
- U.S. troops massacre villagers in My Lai, South Vietnam.

- USSR invades Czechoslovakia to crush move against Communist dominance.

1969

- Three American astronauts land on the moon.
- Woodstock Music Festival in Bechtel, New York is attended by 400,000 people.
- First email message is sent from a computer at the University of California in Los Angeles to a computer at the Stanford Research Institute.

1970

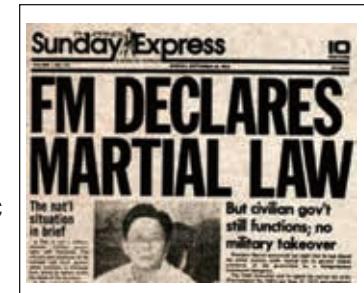
- **Pope Paul VI is stabbed by Bolivian painter disguised as a priest during his visit to Manila; he survives.**
- Computer floppy disk is introduced.

1971

- Pentagon Papers, classified documents on the U.S. conduct of the Vietnam War, are published.
- VCR tape recording machine is introduced.

1972

- **Marcos declares martial law.**
- U.S. President Richard Nixon makes unprecedeted visit to China and meets with Mao Zedong.
- Five men caught bugging Democratic Party office in Watergate building complex in Washington DC
- Last U.S. troops are withdrawn from Vietnam. During eight-year war, some 2.5 million troops had served in Vietnam. But fighting continues between South and North Vietnam.
- Eleven Israeli athletes at Munich Olympics in West Germany are killed by Arab guerrillas.



1973

- Vietnam War ends with signing of peace accords.
- Yom Kippur war between Israeli and Arab forces.

1974

- President Nixon resigns in the wake of Watergate coverup scandal.



1975

- Cambodian communists launch genocidal Khmer Rouge rule.

Note 1 -- On the Beatles - Marcos incident: on July 4, 1966 after performing at the Rizal Memorial Stadium, the Beatles stayed in their Manila Hotel, not knowing that their managers were not able to accept an invitation from Mrs. Marcos to the Palace so that the three Marcos kids could meet them. The Manila Times blew it up the next morning: "Beatles Snub President". Mind you, this was only a year after Marcos had just won his first term, he and Imelda enjoyed mass adulation. The electorate won't accept such an insult. The Beatles memoirs recall the results the next morning -- the hotel would not provide room service, won't handle their baggage. At the airport, the escalators were turned off, forcing their party to lug heavy broadcast equipment up stairs, and they encountered a "gauntlet of menacing mobs." The Manila Times wrote that they and their managers were "punched in the face... kicked in the groin...floored by an uppercut...thrown on the floor.." Back in London, George Harrison is quoted as saying that after a few weeks to recuperate for their U.S. tour, they will be ready to be "beaten up by the Americans."

Note 2 -- American movies were staples of our college days in the Philippines before we embarked on our Laotian adventure. Among the hits of the 1960s (that you may have missed while in Laos) -- Ben Hur, Cleopatra, Lawrence of Arabia, Dr. Zhivago, Psycho, Dr. Strangelove, 2001 Space Odyssey, Planet of the Apes, The French Connection, Dr. No (the first of the James Bond series that continued to the 1970s), and Clint Eastwood's "spaghetti Westerns." In the 1970s : Bruce Lee's martial arts films, Godfather 1 and 2, Exorcist, Jaws, Star Wars, Apocalypse Now, Saturday Night Fever , and the Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone) boxing series.

Note 3 -- Ducky Paredes, Laos expat of the early 1960s, wrote in his newspaper "Malaya" column of July 10, 2013:

"Long before the popularity of American songs and invasion of the Japanese karoake, it was Spanish and Pilipino music that reigned

supreme in the local entertainment circuit. In Manila, nowhere was this more pronounced than in the Ermita-Malate area, which up to the 50s and 60s, remained a strong bastion of Castilian influence. Although the joke is that my generation is now in life's pre-departure area, folks like me often find ourselves remembering those swinging yet lilting and graceful Spanish songs of yesteryears, when we were young as we relaxed in Manila's popular watering holes at that time, such as El Bodegon, Guernica's, Cinco Litros and Nina's Papagayo. Who can forget such songs as "Besame Mucho", "Guantanemera", "Pregunta a las Estrellas" and later "Historia de un Amor"? And the singers whose captivating voices wafted through the air -- Pilita Corales, Pepe Pimentel, the Trio Los Panchos, and of course the inimitable Julio Iglesias who married a Filipina."

Notes from the Southampton Nostalgia Scale

1. *Nostalgia has been shown to counteract loneliness, boredom and anxiety. It makes people more generous to strangers and more tolerant of outsiders. Couples feel closer and happier when they're sharing nostalgic memories. On cold days or in cold rooms, people use nostalgia to literally feel warmer.*

2. *Nostalgia does have its painful side -- it's a bittersweet emotion -- but the net effect is to make life seem more meaningful and death less frightening. When people speak wistfully of the past, they typically become more optimistic and inspired about the future.*

3. *Nostalgia levels tend to be high among adults, then dip in middle age and rise again during old age.*

4. *"If you are not neurotic," says Dr. Constantin Sedikides, a psychologist at the University of Southampton, England, "I think you'll benefit by nostalgicizing two or maybe three times a week. Experience it as a prized possession. When Humphrey Bogart says 'We'll always have Paris (in the movie Casablanca), that's nostalgia for you. We have it and nobody can take it away from us."*

(Source: "What Is Nostalgia Good For?" New York Times, July 18, 2013).



The New "Khon Pilipin"

When Rodolfo "Rody" Sanchez landed at Wattay airport in Vientiane on September 17, 1965, he was arriving as the first resident consular officer of the Philippine government. "There were no porters, no customs officer on duty. It was eerily empty," he said, nothing like what an "international" airport should look like.

He had received his orders to leave his post as political officer in Burma (now Myanmar) to open an Embassy in Vientiane for the incoming first resident Philippine Ambassador, Felipe Mabilangan. Burma itself was classified by the Philippine Foreign Affairs Office as "50 years behind times. What could Laos be?" he thought with apprehension. To play safe, he instructed his family in Burma to return to the Philippines while he checked out his new posting.

There was a reason for the forlorn look of the airport in 1965. No one, unless he had to, would wish to come for an extended stay. There was a civil war raging, a real hot war with people dying during this cold war period, pitting combatants and their proxies for control of a newly independent country. On one side was the Royal Lao Government, its patron the U.S. government, and allies Thailand and South Vietnam. On the other side: the insurgent Pathet Lao and its allies, North Vietnam and China.

The briefing notes on Laos he had read prominently cited Operation Brotherhood as a good source for Lao lifestyle orientation. So off he went to the OB office in That Luang.

"There I met my first Filipinos in Laos — Jovito "Vitoy" Naranjo, the project manager, and his assistant manager Bonifacio "Boni" Gillego, who jokingly told me that they mistook me for a drug salesman. Then and there I felt that Laos was going to be a pleasant assignment after all."

The assignment involved looking after the consular needs of "my constituents" — a sizable population of Filipinos employed by, in addition to OB, the United States Agency For International Development, the Eastern Construction Company in Laos (ECCOI), Air America, Continental Air Services, teachers, contractors — altogether close to 900 persons. They composed one of the largest expatriate groups in Laos and perhaps in

the Southeast Asian region at that time. Most lived and worked in the capital. Dozens, such as the OB medical teams, were posted in provincial towns along the Mekong river valley.

The Filipinos of the mid-1960s and 1970s were spared the carnage of the war zones outside the capital. Because this third-world city of 60,000 people had few amenities, they indulged heartily with communal celebrations, notably birthdays, in their quarters or in restaurants. OB members resided in a private house and an apartment in That Luang near their hospital. ECCOI personnel occupied an apartment near the Wat Simuong Buddhist temple. USAID Filipinos clustered in a compound in Nahaidio where 22 families lived in duplex residences. Marriages among and between the group members never seemed to stop. During the 18-year period of their sojourn, 83 couples took their vows — that's 163 singles. As a result marital "ninongs" and "ninangs" (godparents) extended the family ties beyond Laos after they departed.



Filipino engineers work on the Xayaburi Hydroelectric Project. Amb. Ileta is fourth from right.

Nahaidio "became a popular gathering place at the back area that was shaded by a big tree," remembers Connie de la Pena-Frias, "eating potluck lunches together. The camaraderie was close-knit and we treated each other like relatives". Employment contracts had loosened to allow spouses (and children) to join their husbands. A Philippine International School opened. On January 1, 1965 a hugely grand celebration marked the birth of the Filipino Association of Laos. Its lineup of officers included representation from all the major groups. It even found a

spot for the one and only Filipino pilot flying with the Royal Air Lao national airline.

For some of the men, mahjong, basketball tournaments between these groups and forays to the one night club in town, the Vieng Ratry, were welcome breaks. The all-Filipino night club band preferred the cha-cha beat to the lamvong. At the clubhouse of the American Community Association inside the USAID compound, another band of moonlighting Filipinos played American tunes in the recreation hall — Romy Pestanas with the harmonica, guitarist Fidel Padayao, Celso Orense with the maracas and Virgilio Conception on the drums.

At one time, about 25 men organized golf outings to the National University grounds outside the city environs. The make-believe "green" was mainly sand mounds and trees. They started with about half a dozen men playing three holes and sharing three clubs. They called their group the "All-In-One Golf Club." Rody had hoped golf would lure away men who took up cockfighting with fervor, but

which the Lao authorities frowned on because of the heavy betting. "I failed in that mission. Worse, I learned later after my term that an official of our Embassy was the most ardent 'sabungero' (cockfighting aficionado)".

The war intruded into their cocooned lives several times. In 1960, after a coup d'état by a Lao paratroop captain seized the city, a counter-offensive by a general resulted in a three-day pitch battle in

December within the city that destroyed buildings and killed an estimated 1,000 people, mostly civilians. In 1963 two Lao generals squared off their forces in an intramural fight for power. An OB accountant, caught in the crossfire, was killed by a rifle bullet at a street checkpoint.

In 1975 the close-knit world of the Filipino community shattered when the victorious Pathet Lao took over the country and ordered all foreign aid workers to leave. The Philippine Embassy closed in 1980 and for the next 18 years the ambassador in Bangkok took charge of Philippine affairs. In 1997 when Laos joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Philippines resumed appointing resident ambassadors, among them Mario Galman

in 2002 who launched the Balik-Laos project of former Filipino expatriates. Seventeen Mekong Circle members returned that year after 35 years to visit their homes of long ago that had shaped their youthful lives. During a courtesy call with the Minister of Health, he officially invited the return of the OB medical program. In 2004, another group of 27 members took their turn. By that time a new influx of Filipinos totaled about 200. A pioneer was Gina Alcando, a manager of the Novotel Hotel (now the Mercure). Laos had veered away from a socialist economy and Gina experienced its capitalist growth that slowly nurtured private enterprise and lured increasing numbers of Filipino professionals.

Nestor Deguman, together with his Lao wife Noi, opened a restaurant named, what else — “Mabuhay” — located, where else, — in front of the Embassy on Phontan Road. (It has since closed but in 2002 Noi cooked me up a passable “sinigang”). Pete de Leon was a consultant to the Electricite du Laos. Bless and Jun Miego managed hotels. Blesilda Calub headed an office of the International Rice and Research Institute. Tess Banaag and Luzviminda Balleteros run Lao garment factories. Kier Obiar works for a German company that lays communication networks across mountainous terrains. Filipino teachers staffed English language schools attended by children of the Vientiane-based diplomatic corps and non-governmental associations.

Ambassador Elizabeth Buensuceso welcomed the second Balik-Laos group with a garden party on the Embassy grounds. She came aboard for her first ambassadorial posting only a few weeks before Laos hosted the 10th ASEAN summit, barely enough time to prepare for the arrival of attending president Gloria Arroyo. The next year, she had to line up events to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. That took easier than she thought because her counterparts still held fond memories of the khon Pilipin (Filipino) tan mohs (doctors) and naimohs (nurses). They are old enough to remember OB. Today, half of the population is under 25 years, born years after the Filipino exodus.

“The Filipino community gets together during birthdays, anniversaries, national day, Christmas and other holidays,” she said. She also held prayer services at

her residence, “offering potluck fare of lechon, pinakbet, sinigang, biko, leche flan. On such occasions, (we) hold Bible studies and sing Christian and secular songs using the modern invention called the ‘Magic Sing’.”

Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) have discovered Laos. But, said Buensuceso, “because their contracts are already signed when they are in Laos, they did not pass through duly approved procedures and requirements of the Philippine government such as conformity with minimum wage rules and provision for medical and life insurance. Thus most of the problems they encounter stem from lack of safeguards on their work conditions.”



Filipino teachers are among the most numerous.

OFWs in Thailand, many of them English teachers, have chosen the Thai Embassy in Vientiane the most convenient for their “visa runs” to renew their work permits. While their applications are in process, they stay at Bahay Pinoy Guest House and Restaurant in Rue Bourichane, only 15 meters from the Embassy. Opened in 2008 by George Hiya, 50, a Filipino engineer married to Keutmy Phanphouvanna, a Lao, with whom he has three children, the six-room house’s restaurant serves adobo, sinigang and tapsilog.

Another woman ambassador, Marilyn Alarilla, replaced Buensuceso in 2009. And yet another lady, Maria Isleta, took her turn of tour duty in November 2011. Like Buensuceso, she was assuming her first ambassadorial post and then found herself in the whirlwind of preparations for President Benigno Aquino and his entourage, arriving for the 9th Asia Europe Meeting in Vientiane in 2012.

The Filipino community now numbered about 520. “Nineteen percent work in the mining sector,” she said. “16 percent

are teachers, 11 percent are consultants in education, health, agriculture and banking; 10 percent are connected with the hotel and hospitality industry. There are also accountants, heavy equipment operators in mining, engineers and nurses.

She named the more notable ones — Dr. Ruben Lampayan, a water management specialist; Dr. Cecile Lantican, coordinator of the non-governmental agency Family Health International; Dr. Bernadette Gonzales develops school and vocational curriculum for the Lao Ministry of Education; Tomas Africa, former head of the Philippine National Statistical Office assists the Lao government’s census projects; Marilyn Manila trains rural women in microfinancing.

A large group of some 77 Filipino engineers — geologists, metallurgists, surveyors, supervisors — are employed by foreign mining companies, such as by the \$241 million, Australian-owned gold-silver-copper company Phu Bai. Others are helping build dams over the Mekong River’s tributaries.

A measure of how the Lao reservoir of goodwill for the Filipinos remains deep is reflected in their outpouring of donations for the Filipino victims of Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) in November

2012. From an anonymous donor who gave \$5 to the Lao government’s \$50,000 donation, a total of \$247,843 in cash and pledges were given. The resident Filipinos themselves organized all sorts of fundraising events: Carlo Bacalla of Don Bosco Laos sold T-shirts at a bikethon; Catholic nuns Jesse Encio, Mila Azucena and Cora Jegillo of the Sisters of Charity sold stuff at a flea market; Bernadette Gonzales organized a “Dine For A Cause” at the Mercure hotel where patrons were serenaded and bought paintings by Lao artists, the proceeds given to the typhoon fund. Jo Mita’s pastry shop donated half of her store’s sales during the donation drive.

A full version of Rody’s memoir “Remembering Vientiane” can be read in the January 2004 issue of our Mekong Newsletter and can be accessed from www.mekong-circle.org. In the same issue, a returning expatriate describes how the city had changed after his 35-year absence — “How Charm Gave Way To Commerce.”

For a list of marriages, see January 2011 issue.



Books For Tribal Kids

In March 2011, Mekong Circle adopted two primary schools in the Philippines as its second educational project. As we mark our third year of sponsorship, we present this short report.

Among our Association's mission is to participate in projects that pursue humanitarian and educational goals. We are fortunate that both goals are being met in the same manner we did with our first one — the 2003- 2008 college scholarship "Iskolars Ng Mekong" for Manila female students cared for by nuns.

Some facts on the tribal schools:

Location

Two villages — Kitorok and Ilian — are about two hours from the nearest urban town of Digos, near Sta. Maria, in the province of Davao del Sur, southeast of Mindanao island.

Inhabited by the Tagakaolo, one of 17 tribes belonging to the Lamad group, one of which, the Tasadays, are the most well-known. The Tagakaolo translates to "from the headwaters or 'olo,'" meaning water. Together with the Tagakaolos of Sarangani province they number about 70,000. Located deep within a mountain range accessible only by foot trails, the

villages lack electricity and running water.



Schools

They opened for the school year 2008-2009 with 145 pupils and five teachers, from Grade 1 to Grade 4. The school year 2012-2013 enrolled 300 pupils. School roofs and walls were patched together by residents from cogon grass, the chairs from coconut trunks, the floor is the bare earth. Before 2008, schoolchildren had attended a public school a distance away, hiking across mountain trails and fording several rivers. Each trip would take an hour or more. During rainy days landslides and swollen rivers made the journey hazardous for the children. As a result, tribal leaders sought the help of Fr. Nestor Lisondra, a Catholic priest who visits the villages as part of his parish, in establishing the schools. His Diocese, based in the provincial capital of Digos, is sole provider of the schools' needs. For Fr. Lisondra, traversing the distance from the city to the villages is an epic three-hour journey by a jeep, a motorbike, a horse to cross rivers, and then by foot. In one instance, it took a dozen tribesmen to extricate the horse, loaded with supplies, when it fell off a footbridge.

Tribal Empowerment Projects

The schools are only one component of a larger program by Fr. Lisondra to improve the livelihood of the villagers. Ilian and Kitorok are among a cluster of 20 other Tagakaolo poor villages whose 1,000 subsistence farmers raise coconuts, bananas, potatoes and vegetables. It's tough to eke out a barely sustainable existence from arable land degraded from deforestation. Hence he has launched in 2010 a "Tribal Empowerment Project." One is a poultry farm that will produce 40,000 broiler chickens to a company that supplies the chicks and feeds and the market. Another is a nursery on a deforested land. With the help of a grant, it has grown in 2012 for distribution to farmers 15,000 cacao, 10,000 abaca, and 5,000 coffee seedlings. In 2013, seedling stock expanded to include guyabano and pili.

Farmers underwent training to manage the poultry farms and the nurseries.

For more details and photos of these projects, visit <http://philippinatribalschools.weebly.com/tribal-empowerment-project.html>. On this website, maintained by Fr. Lisondra's partners in New Jersey, USA also describes his other projects — medical missions, prosthetics for the disabled and teacher training. It also cites the work of two other U.S.-based organizations in New Jersey, in addition to Mekong Circle, which assist the tribal schools.



Mekong Circle's Focus: Books

Note that on the website above, the "Contact" page has listed Mekong Circle among the schools' U.S.-based providers and our contact information for donations. It reproduced a page from our

February 2013 Mekong Circle Newsletter regarding our last report on this project. Each school page, one for Ilian and the other for Kitorok, has extensive photos, illustrating not only the make-do school structures, but also village activities.

We began in 2011 with a \$2,700 cash donation from members. Over the months, we shipped regular boxes of supplies, once every two months. We carefully chose books appropriate to primary school levels.

Our first shipments were packed with titles for the lower grades. "They love children's books with lots of pictures. They do not have them here," Fr. Lisondra had emailed. "Everything is new to them. They always wonder about the pictures they see on books ('Pinoy, kasi'). They have not seen them here." Then we began mixing in several sets of reference books for all their grades when we saw a website photo (look for it in the link) of a skeletal hut labeled "future library."

The multi-volume sets covered grade school-level books on nature, science, history, animals, geography, astronomy, biography, children's dictionaries, and yes — Bible story books for kids. Close to a thousand books were sent in two years in six shipments, once every two months. Fr. Lisondra suggested toys. So lots of stuffed toys served as padding for other school supplies — boxes of pens, pencils, markers, crayons, children's magazines, colored paper, binders, school bags. Soccer balls, baseballs, basketballs, and an air pump. And at one time, 99 tennis balls (used) in their plastic cans.

To all Mekong Circle members and friends, many, many thanks from those kids in a place far, far away. Books are opening up their world. Please keep sharing.

Cash donations by check should be sent to Mekong Circle International, 1200 Bayhill, Suite 119, San Bruno, California 94006 USA. Tel. 650 589 3522. Email-- bikmarquez@hotmail.com

Ship books to Fr. Nestor Lisondra, Home of the Clergy, Aurora Extension St., Digos City, Davao del Sur, Philippines. Email -- frneli22@gmail.com. Tel. 082 553 5852



Mekong Philippines

On April 4, 2007, Mekong Philippines was officially born. In a set of documents that the Philippine Securities and Exchange Commission stamped with its approval, it named its first set of officers. The incorporators were Frisco San Juan, Domeng Menguito, Sonia Ballo, Jovit Revilla, Toti de la Paz, Jun Belicena, Fred Reyes, Bing Bincang, Ely Nadal, Fred Mendoza, Mike Palacpac, Eve Guevara, Ruben Layug and Johnny Asuncion.

The first officers were Frisco (chairman), Domeng (vice chairman), Sonia (secretary), Toti (treasurer), Belen Belicena (assistant secretary), Jovit (assistant treasurer). Even before it became a legal body, Mekong Circle Philippines had been getting together, beginning in 2001, their own annual reunions, hosted by Jovit and Ben Revilla at their residence in Los Banos, Laguna. With sons and daughters of these Laos expats attending, from 50 to a hundred would revel in a full day of nostalgia and native delicacies, such as "balut" and "pusit" and a cake with an elephant (not the live species). More than once, the resident Lao ambassador has been a guest who after serving in Manila for five years was no stranger to boiled duck embryo (it's also available in Vientiane). The current Lao ambassador counts Mekong Circle members in the guest list for official Embassy functions.

First order of business was organizing the 2008 reunion in Manila, our seventh, and the first outside mainland USA. Of the estimated 1,000 Mekong Circle members worldwide, about half live in the Philippines. And they turned up in large numbers at the

Renaissance Hotel for a three-day schedule of festivities — a rousing musical medley and stage show at the hotel, excursions to the resort town of Tagaytay, a tour of the presidential Malacanang Palace. Along with the reunions, our Philippine members have been generous in donating to our projects there, among them the victims of the Leyte province mudslides which killed 1,112 people (February 2006), typhoon Ondoy (September 2009), the Yolanda super typhoon (November 2013), our educational projects Iskolars Ng Mekong and the Tribal Schools in Davao del Sur province.

A major project that took the joint labor of Mekong Circle Philippines members and their children (whom we have been calling the Second Gen) was their compilation of about 500 photos of our Laos activities. In marathon weekend sessions at the Revilla residence, they classified, scanned and loaded into CDs a collection of photos saved by Eve Guevara. The archivists were Dr. Jojo Revilla, Tess and Leni Asuncion, Gene San Juan, and Werlit Guevara. Werlit says that they were sustained through the long nights by Jovit's Lao food and brewed coffee.

"We are quite sure that in the future, with the help of new technology, our Mekong Circle will have a library documenting all our works from the 1950s to the 1970s. There will be no need for a building or a room, simply a filing cabinet," writes Werlit. A number of these photos have been published in issues of our Mekong Newsletter.



Mekong Circle visitors from North America at times joined gatherings at either the Revilla residence in Los Banos, Laguna province (above) or at the home of Fred Mendoza in Balete Drive in Quezon City.



Some Highlights

In 24 issues of our Mekong Newsletter, we have recorded, since its first issue in 2004, events and people, both noteworthy and trivial (depending on your standards). We thought that on this occasion marking our 10th reunion, we take the opportunity to highlight a number of them that were not fully described, or only hinted at, in the previous pages or in the Reunion History insert. It would be helpful to dig out your past issues in order to get all the details. Or access them from our website www.mekongcircle.org

Group Histories -- We devoted four issues to trace the origins of the four major groups in Laos that compose our Association. Each issue focused on how our members performed their distinctive roles during their times there. Our USAID colleagues told their stories in the November 2003 issue; Eastern Construction Company in Laos in January 2004; Air America / Continental / Bird & Sons in April 2004; lastly Operation Brotherhood in June 2004. We did have members who were not "officially" employees of these agencies but who were in many ways a part of our Laos community. Their histories are compiled as part of our book "Filipinos in Laos" released in 2004.

Lao Nurses Reunion -- Between 1963 and 1969, the OB School of Nursing in Vientiane graduated six classes of students. The two-year course turned out 147 nurses in all. They helped staff our hospitals and clinics all over the country. A number were at the Wattay airport on May 29, 1975, teary-eyed as they bade us "sok dee, pai dee", goodbye and farewell, when we pulled out in the wake of a Pathet Lao takeover of the country. We had been their teachers, mentors and co-workers. It would all end forever that day. No, not quite. On August 6, 2006, twenty of these graduates came together during our Mekong Circle sixth reunion in Chicago, Illinois. It took months to track down as many of them as we could, because many joined the Lao diaspora of thousands who fled beginning in 1975 to places all over the planet. Thirty-six settled in the USA, two in Canada, two in Australia, three in France, one in England. The rest, unable or not willing to leave, stayed in Laos or moved to Thailand. Now, almost 40 years later in a ballroom at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Chicago, they hugged and hugged, not wanting to let go. Said nurse Fely Navera, one of their teachers, who had settled in Los Angeles, California, "The world is truly round. The ends do meet somehow."

International Conference Of Lao Studies (ICLS)-- When we incorporated our association as a non-profit organization in California in 2000, the legal papers stated that one of our objectives was to dis-

seminate information about our 18 years of work in Laos. A black hole had virtually devoured all knowledge of that history. And so we published two books and launched our website. Looking beyond cyber-space, we went to events attended by the kind of people who can propagate knowledge of our work -- scholars, academics, students of Lao and South east Asian history. At the first ICLS at the Northern Illinois University in De Kalb, Illinois on May 20-22, 2005, we presented our research papers and displayed our books. There were 350 participants from 16 countries, six of us from Mekong Circle. At the second conference at Arizona State University in Tempe on May 3 - 6, 2007, we networked once again among 225 participants. Since then we have noticed a spike of inquiries from our website. Three scholars are working on books and dissertations about Laos that will include our histories..

Giving Back and Reaching Out -- Another stated objective in our incorporation papers -- humanitarian work -- was to address that oft-heard remark -- "so you have done all these in Laos. What have you done for us here in the Philippines?" A majority of Mekong Circle members are expatriate Filipinos living in the USA. In 2004 we adopted 16 college-aged women living in a dormitory run by nuns in Quezon City, the Philippines (see picture below). All came from broken families and struggling to complete their college degrees. During four years, we funded each one's educational expenses, with a total of \$10,500 donations from our members. Details are in the August 2007 issue of our Newsletter. When this Iskolars Ng Mekong ended in 2010, we adopted the Davao del Sur Tribal Schools project that is described in this Journal. And as mentioned earlier in these pages we did our part in reaching out with cash donations to disaster victims in the Philippines and in the USA (the 2005 Katrina hurricane in New Orleans).



Top: Lao nurses class of 1963 with instructors and OB officers. Upper right: ECCOI radio technicians; right: Air America of the Airborne Line Service.





The first OFWs

The class of 1960 of the University of the Philippines College of Agriculture at Los Banos, Laguna province, celebrated its golden jubilee in 2010. To mark the occasion it



posted a page on the Internet. On it Melinda Marquez-Cuyano (left) wrote the memoir below.

We were all Class '60: Sabina Fajardo, Mely Cuyano, Bob Monserrat, Bert Reyes, Ernie Dimayuga and Bong Bolo.

Back in 1962, we had just finished our one year training at the Farm and Home Development Office of the University of the Philippines Los Banos when we were recruited by Operation Brotherhood Int'l. OBI was a Filipino manned international humanitarian mission to improve the health condition of the people which started in Vietnam and later moved to Laos. The arrival of our team in Laos marked the broadening of its mission from purely medical to include agriculture.

Our team was assigned in Paksong in the southern part of Laos. The place is similar to Baguio. It is cool, full of flowering plants and a variety of vegetables and other crops. It rained most months of the year that's why it is highly suitable for agriculture.

OBI-Paksong operated a hospital at the middle of the town. It had a complete medical facility with wards, emergency room, operating room, dental clinic, public health and dietary service. We also had our living quarters here, with a living room, bedrooms, dining room, kitchen, and radio room. To keep us warm in the evening during the cold months, we had a stove with burning charcoal beside our beds.

While the medical staff took charge of the medical services, our team set up a demonstration farm in one of the villages. We used this to show and teach farmers aspects of modern farming in crop production, pest control, raising pigs, chicken and other farm animals, and record keeping. We also trained agricultural trainees recruited from the villages. We had our own areas of specialization: Bob was in crops; Sabina, pest control; Bert livestock and Ernie, farm management. I was the home management specialist doubling up as the hospital dietician. Later in the project, Bong joined our team as farm management specialist.

As the home management technician of the team, I had classes with the mothers in the villages along Paksong and Pakse roads. I taught them how to plan and cook nutritious meals, proper child care, health and sanitation practices, and basic sewing. Children clubs were organized in the village schools. Our links to the villages were the OB trained health workers who were joined later by our trained agricultural

workers.

At our base site I supervised both the hospital kitchen with a Lao cook and the kitchen for the Filipino personnel with a Vietnamese cook.

During our first few months, we had our Lao interpreter. But our constant exposure and dealings with the locals forced us

and made it easy for us to learn how to speak Lao. Soon we were able to go on farm and home visits by ourselves. Socializing was part of our work. We were invited to various village and town festivities. We were obliged to sing, dance and even drink the local wine. We sipped wine through one bamboo "straw" or drank from one jigger for all the guests. Getting drunk became a part of being socially

accepted.

We celebrated Filipino festivities, birthdays, bienvenidas, despedidas and even had wedding receptions in our headquarters. Our guests were a mix of locals and staffs of other international organizations. Filipino food was always served during such functions.

To ease our homesickness, we had occasional R and R. We went to Cambodia and toured the famous Angkor Wat, shopped in Bangkok or passed by Hong Kong every time we went on home leave.

Except for minimal personal expenses, most of our earnings were sent home to support the education of our younger siblings and for other needs.

After four years, our team went separate ways. Ernie, Sabina and I went home while Bob and Bert stayed for a few more years at OB. Other UPLB agriculturists came after us.

Our years of overseas humanitarian work left a lasting impact on us all. The vivid images of children and families whom we served and learned to love remained in our memories, and we also learned to respect other peoples and appreciate cultural differences. OFWs with a mission, that's what we were.



Top photo, from left: Boy Bolo, Sabina Fajardo-Swift, Bob Monserrat, Mely Cuyano, Bert Reyes. At left are Lao villager trainees. Melinda at far left, front row Sabina at far right.



Then and Now

By 1966, Mekong Circle members had been in Laos close to a decade. In all that time, a war that was spilling over from Vietnam, was ravaging the kingdom so much so that much of its limited resources were devoured by it. What little there was left hardly built up what was already one of the most impoverished country in the region.

After ten years, the guns went silent. And the country began to rebuild, albeit from zero. One sector that stagnated or worsened during the war years was the state of public health.

In 1966, a network of seven government hospitals in seven provinces, with a total 1,581-bed capacity, served a population of 2.3 million. During the war years, Operation Brotherhood's six hospitals in five provinces, their combined 290 beds, and their Filipino and OB-trained Lao staff provided much needed backup health care services. Today Laos operates 150 hospitals (classified into four increasing levels of care -- district, provincial, regional and central) serving 6.6

million. In 1966, there were 10 Lao doctors (and 30 OB physicians had served there by then). By 2005, there were 1,283 Lao doctors and 5,291 nurses according to the government -- still far below the ratios that the World Health Organization recommends on a doctor/nurse per 100,000 people. Yet by these numbers, Laos has begun the arduous climb up from a deep hole.

One measure of what they have accomplished is to look at the hospitals that have replaced OB facilities in the decades since the government took over the country in 1975. Gone is the USAID-built and OB-staffed Vang Vieng provincial hospital of the 1960s. In its place, ground-level corridors fronted by luxuriant garden patios; electronic monitors galore in patient rooms; and Cuban doctors helping out.

Another hospital we visited in 2008 was the Setthathirath central hospital in Vientiane. When the OB Hospital in That Luang was razed to the ground in 2002, the government announced that the aging "Ion moh Filipin"

(Philippine hospital), renamed Setthathirath in August 1973 had outlived its usefulness -- it had stood there for 40 years. Wrote the Vientiane Times in its February 20, 2001 issue: "people feel a great deal of affection toward the old Setthathirath but it had become too obsolete." The news item went on to report that a new facility, financed by Japan, would open that month some 15 minutes on the city's outskirts. Compared to the OB Vientiane Hospital, it is a stunning incarnation, from the lobby to the conference rooms. Take a tour at <http://spotonlaos.com/place/vientiane-setthathirath-hospital>.

Laos' underfunded health care system largely depends on aid from international agencies (the United Nations, Asian Development Bank, the World Bank) and the foreign aid government agencies of Japan, Australia and Korea. An American non-governmental organization has been conducting Vientiane-based residency training for Lao doctors (www.healthfrontiers.org).



Left: Entrance to the Setthathirath central hospital in Vientiane.



Left: Lobby of the Setthathirath hospital. Top :the waiting room.



Left: Above Joji Naranjo in 2002 under the sign on the OB Vientiane Hospital that read "Ministry of Health Maternal and Child Hospital".



Above : the old provincial Sayaboury hospital. At left, the new one.



Above is the new Vang Vieng provincial hospital and below was the old one.



The Pakse Provincial Hospital (top) in 2014. At right was the OB House in the 1960s in That Luang, Vientiane about ten minutes walk on Nong Bone road to the hospital. It was the main residence of personnel from the 1960s to 1975. At the back were the dormitories of the student nurses. The building is now the office of the National Centre for Environmental Health and Water Supply. The sign on the wall, in English and Lao, said "Junior Chamber of Laos, Vientiane OB House, Temporary Jaycee Snack Bar."



Within a year of OB's arrival in 1957 in Laos, it had dispatched eight medical teams to various towns across the country — Paksong, Nhommarath, Thakhek, Muong Sai, Xieng Khouang, Ban Ban, Nam Bac, Attopeu. Some teams helped staff existing provincial hospitals; others set up clinics in government buildings, in army barracks, or in one part of the provincial governor's residence. Where a house was provided to move into, sections were partitioned — a space for the clinic, the rest served as the combined sleeping-kitchen-dining area. Tight and cozy, this was home sweet home for months, until more comfortable accommodations could be found or built.

Some clinics were rudimentary, dirt-floor, open-type structures. Over time, they grew into real hospitals, of which the Vientiane facility in That Luang was an example. Opened in 1960 as a 60-bed hospital, it offered intensive care units, a dietary kitchen, pharmacy, central supply room, auxiliary services — laboratory, x-ray, dental.

When OB Laos marked its 8th year in 1964, seven teams were stationed in Vientiane, Paksong, Attopeu, Sayaboury, Kengkok, Muong Phieang and Vang Vieng; 112 Filipinos and 263 Lao composed the personnel roll. Sara-

vane, Ban Houie Sai, Pakse and Khong Sedone opened in later years. These had full complements of doctors, nurses, home technologists, social workers, agriculturists, engineers, accountants. As civil war hostilities escalated, team personnel were shuffled when the Pathet Lao overran their towns. By May 1975 when OB pulled out, only six locations were OB-staffed. The final roll counted 120 Filipinos and 550 Lao.

In the provincial outposts, the hospitals stood steps away from the teams' living quarters. Thus home and work were 24/7 arrangements that transformed young lives. Extended communal living nurtured lifelong friendships that in many cases blossomed into permanent ties. During OB's 18-year tenure in Laos, more than a score of marriages occurred among team members (a few with non-OB, Laos-based Filipinos). When read or spoken, these remote places, mere dots on a map, spring alive, grab you by the heart and stir profound memories as fresh as yesterday. At our 2012 reunion's dinner-dance finale in San Diego, California, each ballroom table held the name of a Lao town. No doubt, there were members who knew exactly at what table to get soaked in waves of nostalgia for that night.



	1960 - 1980	2000 - 2014
Population	2.1 - 3.0 million (46% aged 0 - 14 yrs old)	5.3 - 6.5 million (31% aged 0 - 14 yrs old)
Country Name	Kingdom of Laos (1954 to 1975) (former old name: Lan Xang Hom Khao Million Elephants and White Parasol)	Lao People's Democratic Republic (beginning December 1975)
Tourists	800 (tourists allowed to enter beginning in 1988)	3,779,490 (2013)
Vehicles	59,781 (1985)	641,031 in 2007 (80% motorcycles)
Vientiane City	68,000 - 200,000 people (1958 - 1970)	783,032 people (2011)
Bridges across Mekong River	0	4 – between Lao and Thai crossings Vientiane and Nongkhai (2004) Savannakhet and Mukdahan (2007) Thakhek and Nakon Phanom (2011) Bokeo and Chang Rai (2013)

Almost half of Laos' population was born after Mekong Circle members left the country in 1975. The population almost doubled to over five million ,with 62 percent born since 1975. Add another 10 percent who were infants under the old pre-1975 regime. Result: more than 70 percent of the population has grown up with no immediate knowledge of the recent past, says historian Grant Evans. In other words, they have no memory of our 18 years of service there. Those who do, their parents and grandparents, are a dwindling, small minority. Official histories carry no records of our stay. A minuscule contribution – four copies of our book "Filipinos in Laos" and three copies of "Goodbye Vientiane: Untold Stories of Filipinos in Laos" that we consigned to the Monument Bookshop in Vientiane during our November 2008 visit were sold within a week.

Sources: United Nations, Laos Statistics Bureau, National Tourism Authority of Laos, Ministry of Public Works and Transport; Grant



Remembering

On November 25, 1968, an Air America C-46, under charter to the U.S. Agency For International Development, took off in mid-afternoon from Savannakhet on a northbound flight to Vientiane. On board were 28 passengers and crew, some of whom boarded in Pakse. A U.S. Embassy Bulletin said that "after takeoff from Savannakhet, (the plane) suddenly had trouble and lost altitude. The plane struck a tree, tearing off a wing and fuel tanks, which caught fire and burned. The fuselage flipped over and hurled into the ground, about two kilometers from the airstrip. The fuselage did not burn. This was about 1536 hours.'

Only two passengers survived. The 26 fatalities were Thais, Americans, Lao, French and Vietnamese. Five were Filipinos – Alex Claravall a civil engineer with the Overseas International Construction Company (OICC); Baltazar Reyes, a mechanic with Air America, and three personnel of Operation Brotherhood: accountants Noel Extremadura and Brigido Garcia and medical technologist Rodolfo Villaroman.

"Never before has tragedy struck so appallingly," said the Acting Director of the U.S. Aid Mission to Laos Albert Farwell. "They were doing their jobs and all knew their jobs were as dangerous as they were necessary, urgent, important and rewarding."

Dangerous it was for OB applicants who were advised that because Laos was a war zone those who were single were required to submit parental consent to go to

Laos if they were accepted. Indeed there was a preference for unmarried applicants. Except for one accountant who was shot dead by a Lao soldier at a street checkpoint in Vientiane during a coup d'état event, all of the other OB workers succumbed from heart attacks, drownings and accidents. In September 1960, the Pathet Lao detained two physicians and one dentist.

those, living and dead, who served in Laos from 1957 to 1975. The OB dead were Abner Jornada, Bienvenido Natividad, Aurea Joaquin, Violeta Salarda, Emmanuel Canonizado, Cesar Medina, Noel Extremadura, Brigido Garcia, Rodolfo Villaroman, Wilhelmina Comia and Sisino Azul -- altogether 4 nurses, 3 accountants, 2 medical technologists and two doctors.



when they overran the northern town of Sam Neua where an OB team maintained a medical outpost. They were released after three days. Some outposts were evacuated by plane a day or two before these were captured.

The Filipino casualties when tallied with previous fatalities in Laos amounted to 24 – eleven from OB, 12 Air America, and one OICC. A plaque stands in one corner of the grounds of the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane, honoring all

Air America casualties were aircraft mechanics Ray Castillo, Augusto Calderon, Baltazar Reyes, Ernesto Cruz, Montano Centeno, Jimmy Torres, Romeo Crisologo, F.C. Manalo, C. Pascual, Valeriano Rosales, Ernesto Cruz. Some maintained planes in Vientiane while others were based at Air America airfields in Thailand, principally in Udorn, but died on Laos missions.

Wrote Fr. Miguel Bernad, S.J. in his "Filipinos In Laos" history, released in 2004: "Because the Filipino people were poor and could not give as much material or financial aid as other countries, their contribution of personal service was often undervalued. Yet the expenditure of human energy and dedication, sometimes even unto death, can be as great a contribution, even if not easily quantifiable."



Top: Philippine Embassy Consul Raul Dado in front of plaque honoring Mekong Circle members which was dedicated on November 2, 2002 at the Philippine Embassy grounds in Vientiane by a visiting group of Mekong Circle members (left)



A Place To Train and Teach

On February 28, 1965, a team of volunteers arrived in Sapang Palay, in the northern Luzon island province of Bulacan, about 25 kms. from Manila. There were three doctors, two nurses, an agriculturist, a university business graduate, a nutritionist, two civil engineers, a social worker and a former Army captain. Opened in 1961 by the Philippine government as a resettlement community, the 752-hectare Sapang Palay was home for as many as 4,500 people, former slum dwellers in Manila displaced by building projects.

Resettlement areas had notorious reputations, and Sapang Palay's large unemployed, poor population, was one of them. Deedee Munson remembers the day they moved into two concrete white bungalows, built by the Philippine Housing and Homesite Corporation, to show off as "sample houses." The house had been repainted and the toilets fumigated.

"Outside, sweltering in the summer heat, a crowd had gathered watching us intently. In a guard post, a Philippine Constabulary guard sat fingering his carbine. Some residents were openly hostile and skeptical; a handful were enthusiastic that they were getting medical care at last. Our housemother cooked "pinakbet" and "paksiw na bangus" outside, pots set on three large stones and firewood gathered from our backyard. We had no table to eat on, so the men unhinged one of the doors, laid it down on four hollow blocks. As night fell, some of us laid out newspapers on the floor to sleep on.

"My feet hurt from walking up and down the dusty roads, gullies and ravines, reaching out to people and telling them not to be afraid, to trust us. The next few days, people came in droves in the clinic or in the mobile stations we set up in "sari-sari" stores and front yards. Without electricity, two oil lamps lighted our nights. Drinking water had to be boiled. The men bathed near the pump and fetched water for us."

For OB personnel bound for Laos, Sapang Palay prepared them for the rigors of team life in the isolated Lao re-

gions where they would be assigned. Various government agencies and civic groups banded to provide a range of community development projects. In May 1964 OB was assigned two communities -- Lawang Pari and Bagong Buhay.

"Whenever I went I could see men with tattoos which resembled Hawaiian polo shirts," said Greer Alforque, social worker. "I had no reason to fear them. They and their wives were active, unpaid participants in our activities, as drivers, kitchen helpers, bodyguards, helping out in our home visits and agricultural projects. The medical team averaged more than 100 patients a day, two or three night calls for at home child births.

A year after OB began work there, 22,190 people had received free medical services. More than 1,400 toilets were built. Of more lasting value were skills they learned. Two training centers were built. A 1966 report wrote:

"Three batches of trainees who attended classes in sewing, tailoring, hair beauty science, tinsmithing, bag making, shell and bamboo handicrafts have been graduated. Some have found jobs in Manila. Students of the bag making classes turn out 30 dozen bags a month which they sell to schools and tourists. More than 100 residents have attended classes in basic agriculture and livestock raising conducted at various barrios -- Bagong Buhay, Minuyan, Old Sapang Palay and Tigbe. Families of trainees who have begun cultivating vegetable gardens were visited twice a week by team agriculturists.

"At Los Banos, Laguna province where OB and CARE manage a 300-pig farm, 16 graduates of the agricultural

classes are undergoing a one-year course in livestock raising. Upon completion of their training, each will be loaned a number of pigs to start his own piggery at Sapang Palay."

Sapang Palay also provided hands-on community work experience for college students. It was called Junior Operation Brotherhood or JOBs. It recruited 29 students from 10 elite colleges in Manila to spend their weekends and summer with Sapang Palay families. They did "backyard gardening, dug ditches, built toilets. They accompanied the agriculturists" said Greer. Another group of students participated in a "University of Wheels" (UOW) project.

When Taal Volcano in Batangas province, about 50 kms from Manila erupted in September 1965, killing about 150 villagers, nursing students from Manila Central University went daily to help staff OB medical clinics. UOW outreach extended to inmates at the Muntinglupa Penitentiary where they collected handicrafts to market them. Under Greer's supervision, Centro Escolar University students interned to fulfill their social work academic requirements. Other UOW volunteers served the Manila slum areas of Santa Ana, Paco as well as in Muntinglupa. The concept said Greer was to "develop an awareness of the students' future roles in social and community development and the application of their academic knowledge to actual practice in the field."

Meantime, at the OB quarters, there was still no electric power. But they now had four oil lamps.



On the ground at Sapang Palay: front row, left to right: Primo Guevarra, Bert Reyes, Fred Reyes, Boy Bolo, Johnny Asuncion, Sapang Palay resident, resident, resident, Art Victoria. Back row, from left: Joe Barcelona, Bituin Gonzales, Arbella Avena, Greer Alforque, Cely Caraan, Mila Buenaventura, Flor de los Santos, Violet Agustin, Hernani Bamba.



My Life In Sam Neua

by Penélope Villarica-Flores

I arrived in the town of Sam Neua in 1958 knowing it was the farthest Operation Brotherhood station northeast of the country. There I held double positions. First, as the Social Worker of the team, and second as the nutritionist/ house manager. I went with the doctors and nurses on their hospital rounds taking note of the nutrition needs of the patients. Then I went with the field nurses who went into villages for public health services. After the rounds, I taught an OB kindergarten class.

Nang Ouy was my five-year-old favorite student. On cold winter mornings, when the fog rolled in and mists covered the grounds, she would come to school with a portable heater — burning coal nuggets in a tiny metal can, hanging from a wire handle. Our nurses, on their patient rounds, carried similar heaters, like purses. It was that cold.

What I never anticipated was that I would never have any occasion to wear my special outfits. I arrived with two special outfits in my luggage: first, a Lao “sinh” silk-wrap skirt. I must wear it on festive or ceremonial events I was told. The hems are woven with gold and silver threads in delightful geometric patterns and worn with a silver belt. The other dress is the Filipino Maria Clara “butterfly terno”, an ensemble of satin brocade and a top made of embroidered pineapple “jusi” fiber, an heirloom gift from my aunt. I would lose these when I left abruptly with only my toothbrush in my purse with the insurgent Pathet Lao guerrillas nipping at our heels (more on this later).

Boun Pee Mai is the New Year



Penny with her kindergarten kids

festival that lasts three days. Usually coinciding with the Christian Easter season, the New Year is marked by washing away past negative karma. Water is poured over Buddha statues and monks, sprinkled or doused on elders, parents, family and friends. I remember my first pee mai blessing. Suddenly, the hospital trainees splashed me all over with water. What a deluge of good wishes! Unprepared, I was at that time wearing a lovely dress shift. I bought the dress at Manila's Divisoria textile shopping area. It was the latest fad: polyester



Sam Neua (arrow) is the Lao town closest to the Vietnamese border.

“silk”. It clings to the skin when wet. Danny Infante, a team member, saw the result on my voluptuous proportions, was scandalized and worried the natives would react similarly. So he told me to change into another no-cling dress material.

I learned to dance the “lamvong”. The “lam” is a singing style where a story is told in song. “Vong” refers to the circular dance direction. I partnered with Pheng, my Lao cook and as we gathered in pairs, the couples danced counter-clockwise while responding to the instructions of the singer. The instructions may be quite challenging to follow while keeping the rhythm and pace of the circular movement.

My first time to attend a “baci” was during the inauguration of the classroom that OB constructed for my kindergarten class. This ceremony invokes good spirits to bestow on participants all the good things of life — health, material goods and the like. Baci is held to mark a birth, a journey, a new house, a wedding, entry into monkhood. The centerpiece is an ornate floral display on a large silver urn placed on the floor. Around this “sukhouan” are fruits, wine, paper currency, more flowers. Overall, it evokes a miniature temple spire or stupa. Our nurse trainees attached white cotton strings around it whose ends can be pulled out in single strands, then tied around your wrists in order to transfer the good blessings to you. A respected town elder led the rites using a mixture of Pali (ancient Indian) Sanskrit and traditional Lao chants to call on the good spirits. Soon after, the strings on my wrists posed a health hazard while I was washing vegetables in the kitchen. I cut them off to the aghast consternation

of my Lao trainees who told me I just cast off the good spirits from my soul and left room for the bad ones to take their place.

At the center of the town is the "talat sao", the morning market. Only the freshest of produce is served on the OB dining table. As chef /nutritionist and house manager. I got the honorific title "Mommy." So, I have much older surgeons, physicians, and dentists calling me "Mommy Penny."

A frequent visitor was an American Catholic missionary belonging to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Whenever Father Lucien Bouchard returns from his trek to the Hmong mountain villages of Xiengkhouang he never fails to drop by the OB house. He looked dashing with his blue eyes, black shirt collar and black pants, the traditional wear of the Hmong highland tribes that he visits.

After long mountainous treks with little food on the way, he looked forward to our invitation for dinner. He told us he always favored the Filipino chicken and pork "adobo" and the "arroz caldo" soup. For dessert, he loved "guinatan" made of coconut, rice stick wedges and sweetened bananas and yam. One day, he arrived with a fellow missionary, Father Jacques Brix who was holding something like a butterfly to me. It turned out it was a piece of his forefinger dangling on a small strip of skin. He was working on a sawmill and accidentally nearly sawed off his finger. He asked Dr. Pete Gonzalez to do everything he can to save his finger. Pete examined it carefully. However, gangrene had set in. He told Fr. Brix that he'd have to cut off the finger. Father Bouchard teased Father Brix saying: "Now, you won't be able to pick up with your fingers the fried crispy insect larvae delicious treat that we eat when we visit the Hmong villages."



The OB Sam Neua team in 1959, back row, from left: Irene Diaz, Peachy Jose, Cecile Salarda, Diony Salazar, Fely Yater, Penny Villarica. Front row, from left: Bac Bacordo, Danny Infante, visiting missionary Fr. Lucien Bouchard, Pilo Ocampo, Art Sanchez, Lino Mendoza.

In the evenings, we would have visitors, among them a primary school teacher, Mr. Xim Vichidvongsa . He proceeded to give me a primer on the political landscape of the country — the three ruling factions that vied for power over the country — the rightists or Royalists based in Vientiane, the neutralists headed by the current Prime Minister, and the leftist Pathet Lao (PL) who happened to be dominant in the northeast. There were armed scrimmages between the three factions all over the country, he said, especially in the northern provinces of Houphan and Xiengkhouang. Sam Neua, the latter's provincial capital is almost always a prime target by the PL. In 1960, the PL mounted a major drive to take the town. When they were 50 kilometers from town, a plane came in and evacuated the OB nurses. Three more planes came at a few-hour intervals. The next batches of nurses were evacuated. I refused to go. I firmly said I was staying if the doctors are staying, no way would I leave the post. Then, a plane landed and took off with dentist Bacordo and physician Cesar Medina, leaving me, with Dr. Pilo Ocampo, Dr. Johnny Reyes and Dr. Gene Aguilar. I told our OB administrators in Vientiane that by

staying with the remaining male team members, there would be no mass panic evacuation of the town inhabitants who looked upon us as a stabilizing presence. As the PL came closer, a small plane managed to land on the misty airport strip. We knew the American pilot whom we called Dutch. He shouted from the cockpit window: "I am ordered to take Penny who continues to be a stubborn and intractable bitch."

A few hours later, I found myself in Vientiane. I had just left Sam Neua never ever to return to the place that is etched vividly in my memory, having lived and worked there for four years. I didn't even have time to pack a bag. I left with only a purse and a toothbrush. Then I learned that the PL overran the OB compound. The doctors had left on foot to another town for possible pickup by plane. But the PL caught up with them. The doctors were released after three days in captivity. To this day, I contemplate what could have happened to me if I had stayed with them.

Penny is Professor Emeritus at the San Francisco State University, California. Her email is penelopevflores@gmail.com



Greetings from

Marie Aguilos

West Hempstead, New York USA

To my dearest friends of a lifetime!
We've come this far through
time and space.

Time once again to

REUNITE.

REMEMBER.

REJOICE.

--





Greetings from

Cora & Tony Sazon

West Deptford, New Jersey, USA



As we come together for our 10th reunion, it's so heartwarming to know that the bonds we nurtured these many years remain strong. Let's keep them unbroken for more years to come.



Greetings from

Linda Masibay

Nueva Ecija, Philippines

(formerly resident of Chicago, Illinois, USA)



Homeward Bound

Homeward bound, oh yes we are
after more than four decades of a
roller coaster-like life
the time has come for us to part.

Amidst the ups and downs
God has blessed us more
of what he willed for us
in his time, his terms
without a doubt.

Now then our thanks
and gratitude also
goes to everyone
of you who made life
for us a joy sharing of time.



Greetings from

Myrla & Romy Agbayani

MISSOURI CITY, TEXAS, USA

The Kingdom's million elephants are down to
several thousands and nobody goes around
anymore under a white parasol. But the
mountains we climbed and the villages we
visited are still there.

And so are the memories, how sweet they are,
even today, after forty years.





Greetings from

Vilma Valenzuela

NEGROS OCCIDENTAL, PHILIPPINES

To all my Mekong Circle
colleagues, to the Nang's and Thao's,
the Naibans and
Tassengs, and all those phi spirits that
dwell among the forests and fields of Laos
with whom I spent glorious times,
I give you my most sincere
kop chai.





Greetings from

Dick & Lily Abad

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, USA



The Scadrons



The Zabalerios



Gerrick, Lori, Angeliina



Greetings from

Minerva Will

PINELAS PARK, FLORIDA USA

Come, let us sit together and talk of
olden places, where the champa
blossoms and temple spires
marked our youth.

Let us now grow old gracefully
and do the lamvong.





Greetings from

The Pasaporte Family

EDGAR & EDITH OF POMONA, CALIFORNIA USA



Isaiah, Gabriel, Faith-Amina, Emma, Noah



Greetings from

**Reynaldo Zamora
and
Family
Ontario, Canada**





Greetings from

Anita & Bik Marquez

BURLINGAME, CALIFORNIA, USA



We come to renew friendships and tell stories. Here is our story – twin grandchildren Charles and Sophia Marquez.



Greetings from

Jojo Pablo

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA USA

WE SALUTE THE ORGANIZING

COMMITTEES OF OUR 10TH REUNION.

YOU HAVE DONE ANOTHER

MAGNIFICENT JOB FOR

THIS HISTORIC EVENT.

OUR DEEPEST APPRECIATION

AND SINCEREST GRATITUDE TO ALL.





Greetings from

Nemia & Rusty Ramos

FORT GIBSON, OKLAHOMA USA



Khong Sedone province, Laos, 1968. Among the Operation Brotherhood nurses who opened the hospital there, from left : Myrna Merritt, Nemia, Lolit Sevilla and Rusty.



Greetings from

Lodi & Seb Eusebio

LAS VEGAS, NEVADA USA



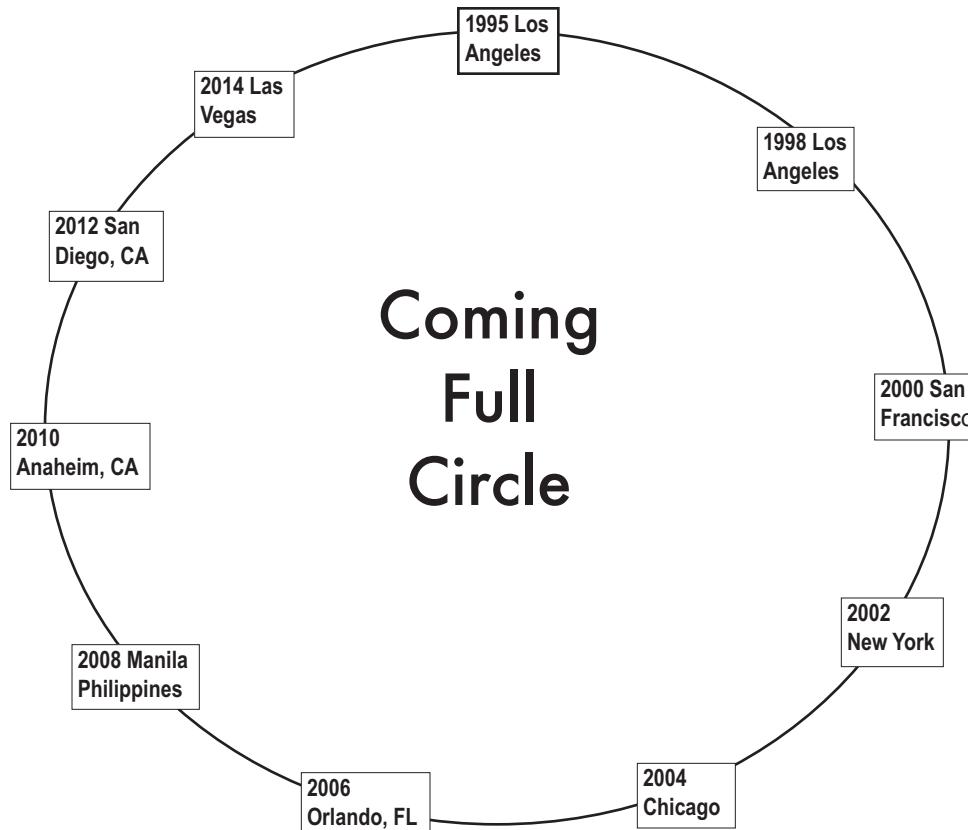
Our clan from California and Nevada. Lodi and I are in center, third row.





Greetings from

**Coming
Full
Circle**



Congratulations and Best Wishes To All Members
Manding and Cecile Datu
Taguig City, Metro Manila, Philippines

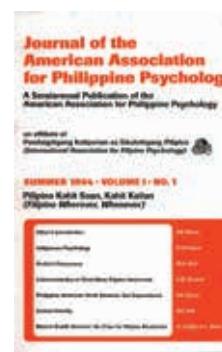
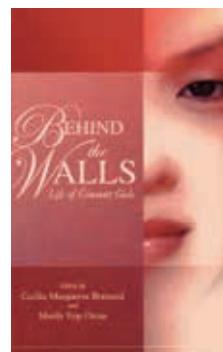
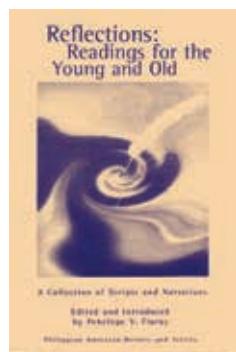
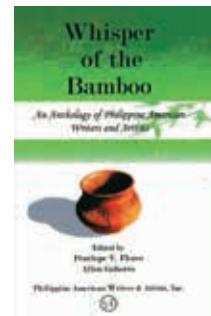
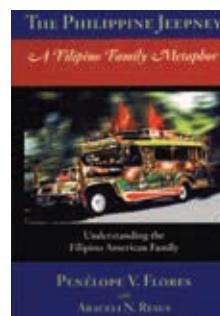


Greetings from

Penelope Villarica Flores

Operation Brotherhood 1957 - 1961.

Author /Editor of the following books and anthologies:





Greetings from

Sue and Sam Malaythong
MERCED, CALIFORNIA USA



We made it to our 10th reunion
and we look forward to our 20th
with much anticipated joy.
Let's all be there again.



Greetings from

**Fe "Pinky" Sabaot Casher
FOSTER CITY, CALIFORNIA USA**



**At our Mekong Circle reunions,
we mark the passage of time and
those lifelong memories that will
not ever go away.**

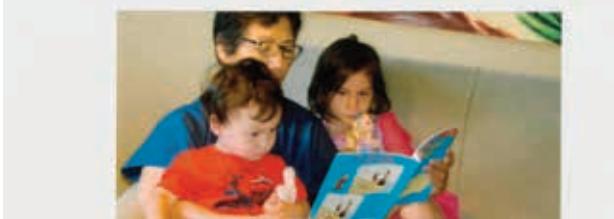




Greetings from

Rene & Vivian Dimaunahan

SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, USA



We have stories to tell the grandkids about elephants that fly in a place far far away where Mekong Circle lasting friendships were formed out of a common history.



Greetings from

Eric Labao

HOUSTON, TEXAS, USA



Eric, with KVSH race car driver Tony Kanaan, champion at the 2013 Indianapolis 500. Eric is Director of Sponsorship and Client Services for KVSH Racing. He is the son of Dickie and Cely Labao of Houston, Texas.





Greetings from

Ernie & Opie de los Reyes

MORTON GROVE, ILLINOIS, USA

**Congratulations
on our 10th Reunion.
Have fun and lots
of fortune
in Las Vegas !**



Greetings from

MEKONG CIRCLE PHILIPPINES INC.



Front row, left to right: Marites Granada-Santos, Letty de la Paz, Belen Belicena, Jeannine Menguito (President), Col. Frisco San Juan (Chairman), Sonia Ballo, Cecile Datu, Monique Granada-Morales. Second row: Manding Datu, Toti de la Paz, Jun Belicena, Gene San Juan, Dennis Belicena, Dominador Menguito Sr., Dominador Menguito, Jr.

**Lots of memories, lots of joy. Let's have
more in the years to come !**





Greetings from

The Illustrisimo Family

ANAHEIM, CALIFORNIA, USA



Jun & Claire



At left :Son Eric & family – daughters
Malaya & Kaya, wife Randa. Above, from
left: Tanya, Claire, Sandra, Malaya & Kaya
(granddaughters) Rinda, daughter-in-law.



Greetings from

The Philippine School of Laos

and from

Fe & Dale Foster

PALM SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA, USA



Fe and Dale



Visit from the Philippine Ambassador and Consul



Members of the faculty



Nursery & kindergarten class



Greetings from

Ilde & Pining Torres

SYLMAR, CALIFORNIA, USA



Pining (left), Pet Sismaet (from Sydney, Australia)
Naty Granada (Manila)



Celebrating our 50th Wedding Anniversary aboard the
Grand Princess Cruise ship with our children and
grandchildren



Greetings from

In loving memory of Bob Monserrat from his
wife Asil, children and grandchildren



Bob & Asil



Lydia Palma



Alex & Grace Bernardo



Rey & Irma



Gabriel, Isabelle & Joshua



GOD BLESS!
Mekong Circle International, Inc
October 17 to 19, 2014 Reunion



**Evermore, let us orbit our world
With Love
Tony & Tacing Buniao Atienza
Children and Grandchildren**





Best Wishes From

 **FREDA'S RESIDENTIAL CARE FACILITY
FOR ELDERLY, INC.**

FREDA ROBLES
OWNER / ADMINISTRATOR
CELL # (805) 714-7218 HOME (805) 928-5809

FACILITY #1 LIC. # 425801437 1017 SUGAR BUSH DR. STA. MARIA, CA 93454 (805) 928-7943	FACILITY #2 LIC. # 425801436 1100 GRAPEVINE RD. STA. MARIA, CA 93454 (805) 348-1155	FACILITY #3 LIC. # 425801435 1106 GRAPEVINE RD. STA. MARIA, CA 93454 (805) 922-9525
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Wishing All Mekong Circle Colleagues
a Fun Reunion ! Aloha !
from Steve and Sabina Swift

HONOLULU, HAWAII



Steve & Sabina



Leilani Swift Woodson family



Todd Swift family



Greetings from

Becky & Tom Ciborski

LAS VEGAS, NEVADA, USA

Welcome Mekong Circle Members
and Friends to our celebration
marking our 10th reunion. No
virtual social media can match real
hugs, face-to-face, hands-on
renewal of all the stuff that make
for lifelong friendships.





Greetings from

Geline Aberin

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA, USA

Congratulations
Mekong Circle California
for hosting another
stupendous, momentous,
glorious reunion.



Greetings from

Peachy Holgado

COLUMBUS, NEW JERSEY, USA

I extend to all of you the
blessings of the “baci” spirits –
health, prosperity, peace,
happiness and good
memories of the times we
were together.





Greetings from

Bon & Baby Datu family

QUEZON CITY, METRO MANILA, PHILIPPINES



**Best wishes to all our
colleagues. The best
of our years are
yet to come.**

Best wishes to *President Pat Gonzales* and all the *officers*
and *members of Mekong Circle International*



From
Mr. and Mrs.
Soledad and Hector Domingo



From *Crispin and Lolit Magsino*

With grandchildren: Gavin Luke, Zoë Grace and Adrienne Symone

Now At Your Fingertips: BALITANG LAOS

Operation Brotherhood (OB) arrived in Laos on January 7, 1957. Eighteen years later, on May 29, 1975, it ended its work there. Its first years were documented mostly in Philippine newspapers and magazines. A Jesuit historian, Fr. Miguel Bernad, in his "Filipinos in Laos" described those early times up to 1961. A sequel, in the same volume (released in 2004) picked up the story to the final years. A collection of memoirs—"Goodbye Vientiane" gathered by Penny Vililarica-Flores—gave voice to how we lived a small part of our young lives which in retrospect loomed large, even transformative for many.

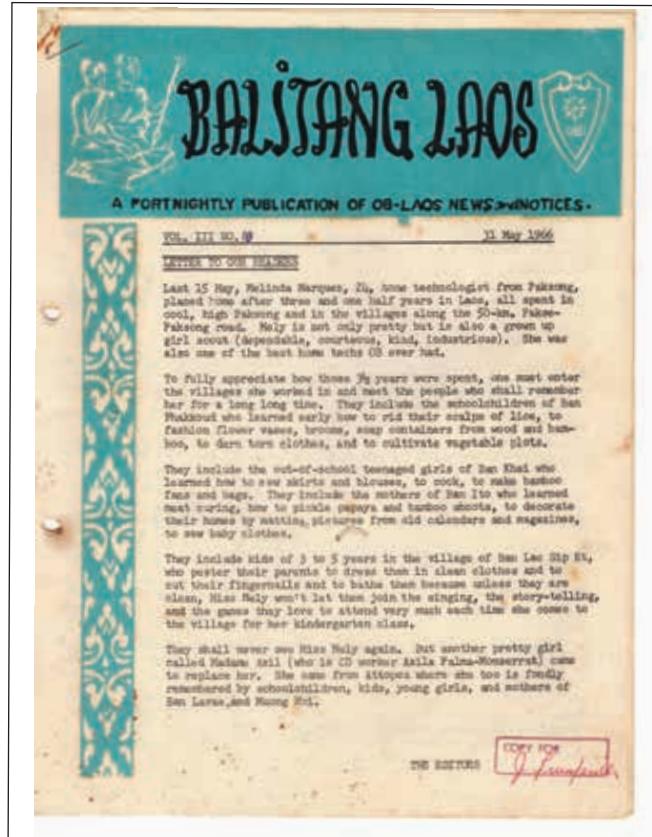
For other historians of our Laos sojourn, we invite them to leaf through another set of archives. "Balitang Laos", mimeographed twice a month, printed its first issue on **September 30, 1964**. Now, through the wonders of digital technology, they can scroll through issues here up to **August 30, 1966**. The editors wrote in that first issue: "Arrivals, departures, engagements, marriages, deaths, doings and undoings, here and in Manila, rumor and non-rumor, fact and fiction, anything, many things—even cartoons and art work—will be found here. That is our promise."

Indeed, in that first issue, they kept that promise. There were a lot of "doings" reported—training classes, opening of field teams, visitations, agricultural experiments, village surveys, facilities expansions, refugee aid, and on and on, detailed in 13 pages. A section widely sought after was "Talagang Balitang Laos" (Real Laos News, actually a sort of gossip column). Here's where those rumors and non-rumors abound. If you served between the periods covered by these issues, there's a very good chance to spot a tidbit about you. For one thing, every new personnel arrival has a biographical note about them. There are 46 issues altogether.

We have listed all the issues in chronological order. Click to open the issues that would interest you (most likely the years you served). "Balitang Laos", in its wealth of detail, is a valuable official record of our accomplishments. For all of us who did our part, it is a very personal history.

We acknowledge here with much appreciation and gratitude the work of Frederic "Fritz" Benson who scanned every page of our newsletter into this CD. Fritz was with International Voluntary Services (IVS) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Laos from 1968-1974. For a free CD copy, email fuentecila@aol.com

—J. "Pete" Fuentecilla (OB 1961 – 1967)





View to the east from Nong Bone Rd., where OB House still stands.

The National Emblem

Look everywhere, anywhere in Vientiane, and its golden spire thrusts into a blue sky and billowy white clouds. In calendars, billboards, t-shirts, wood carvings, paper currency and just about anything where its picture appears, the That Luang shrine is more revered as the nation's emblem than even its national flag. Neighboring Kam-puchea has the 12th century Angkor Wat on its flag, but it is a cultural icon, not a religious one.

The Lao overseas carry their deep affection to the shrine. Visit their homes, and more likely, a tapestry of the shrine hangs from a wall. More than 40,000 war refugees at Morong, Batangas, the Philippines, waiting resettlement in the 1980s to other countries built a replica of the shrine at the center. And during the World Expo in Shanghai that we visited in 2010, where 66 countries outdid each other in showing off their grandiosus, stunning national pavilions, the Lao government chose to replicate, not a "wat" as we expected, but the That Luang in miniature, about the size of a small truck.

We first saw its dark, small outline in the dusk of August 1961, through the wire screen of the second floor porch of the OB House at Nong Bone Road. From that distance (perhaps a seven-minute walk away) it did not look imposing. We were told that somewhere on its grounds, in November 1956, three Filipinos had set up a first aid clinic during a three-day festival – the pioneering team that would establish OB Laos. The next morning of that August day, we took a closer look. Surrounding the shrine were flat expanses of bare ground, some patches of grass, a few trees on the edges, a water buffalo grazing, a

"wat" nearby. If the grounds were gently rolling green meadows, with more shady trees, it would be a perfect place to lie down and contemplate the heavens. As it was, we needed an olive green "army" blanket to wrap ourselves, when, inebriated, we spent one night on its pebbly, dusty surface, to wake up in the morning, two mongrels eyeing us.

Flash forward to 2014. The site is now known as Sayasettha Park. Brick walkways wind here and there. King Setthathirath sits on a pedestal in the entrance, a giant sword on his lap. During his reign (1534 to 1572) he completed the That Luang in 1556. It has survived plundering Burmese, Siamese and Chinese invaders. The Thais left it in ruins in 1828. Google Map a satellite image and see how a swarm of houses have populated the surroundings. Come November, during three days of the full moon, Buddhist devotees will circle the inner court yard three times, bearing candles and flowers. From the courtyard, the shrine rises on three levels, to its pinnacle

147 ft high. Outside, thousands upon thousands will shuffle, shoulder - to - shoulder to enter its gates. These three days of the That Luang festival are in truth the biggest "boun" in a "boun"- happy country. It is a mighty struggle to get inside, and those who give up can detour into one of the many makeshift "feh" noodle shops. Cool down with Beer Lao, the best in Southeast Asia.

But if you make it inside, look up at the spire – glowing against a moonlit sky. It is a wonder to behold.

– J. "Pete" Fuentecilla





CONGRATULATIONS & BEST WISHES TO ALL



CARMEN "MENCHU" DOMINGO - KIRK

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA, USA

Educator & Anthropologist, Research Affiliate
Cordillera Studies Center, University of the Philippines Baguio
Baguio City, Philippines

*We remember the fiery frangipani blossoms along the Mekong and the
sweet fragrance of the national flower - the dok champa*



Mekong Circle International is a 501(c)(3) non-profit association incorporated in the state of California, USA. Founded in 1975, its members worked in various countries as engineers, health care professionals, administrators, community development, education, humanitarian projects. An affiliate Mekong Circle Philippines is based in Manila. Most of them worked in Laos from 1957 to 1975.

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2012- 2014 Officers
Patria Gonzales, President; Vincent Marquez, Treasurer; Pete Fuentecilla, Chairman; Tony Sazon,
Vice Chairman



Greetings from

The Gonzales Family

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, USA



Pat & Clem



Gene (in memory)



April



Glen & Brenda Gonzales, Brittney & Brennan