

# Reunion Remembrances



Reunion No. 1  
Marriott Hotel, Baldwin Park, California, USA  
May 20, 1995



Reunion No.2  
Bonaventure Hotel, Los Angeles, California, USA  
July 25 – 27, 1998



Reunion No.3  
Embassy Suite, Burlingame, California, USA  
July 28 – 30, 2000

## Why We Cherish All Nine of Them and Look Towards No. 10

*How do we count our reunions? Does "10" mean we are going to be a decade old next year? Actually, Mekong Circle is 38 years old in 2014, counting from March 20, 1976, when the first officers of Mekong Circle USA were elected in California. Filipino expats from Laos had been settling in the state for years after their exodus from Laos in 1975. When their numbers had reached a critical mass, their association, like a star-sun, ignited, followed by the formation of the planetary chapters.*

*By another reckoning (and here's where the "10" comes in), our age dates from May 20, 1995, our first once-every-two years reunion. Okay, have you figured it out? Anyway, whether we are nearing middle age or coming of age as a juvenile, it is good to know that we have come this far to celebrate our 10<sup>th</sup> reunion or our 38th birthday. So, how do we remember the previous nine?*

### Reunion No. 1

Before the first one in 1995, there was a dark void. Then Narding and Bella Hilario of North Hollywood, California headed a committee of Los Angeles settlers that got together former employees in Laos of Operation Brotherhood, the U.S. Agency For International Development, Eastern Construction Company, Continental Air Services, Air America and other agencies – all 270 of them – in the Marriott Hotel in Baldwin Park. Before this event, there had been much talk over the years during their many pot-luck lunches in their homes that their next get-together setting should be outside their living rooms. And so we remember May 20, 1995 as our coming out party, Narding and Bella as the prime movers, seeding our universe with galactic reunions to come. Others remembered it too in their own ways. Philippine Consul General Emmanuel Fernandez, in his souvenir program message, said the event should serve as "rallying to the call of Philippine President Fidel V. Ramos to work in solidarity towards redeeming the promise of a new Philippines." Khamchong Luangpraseuth, president of the Lao Mai Issara Institute, followed up, remarking that this historic occasion brought back memories of learning the "cha cha Filipino style and enjoying the chicharon, especially after a good siesta."

### Reunion No. 2

Our expats in Texas signaled their willingness to host the second one, then withdrew. Los Angeles came to the rescue, Pol Custodio, in the lead. There were 195 attendees on July 25 – 27, 1998 at the Bonaventure Hotel. It must be said at this point that throwing a big association party was not a big deal for Mekong Circle members. After taking root in their new adopted homeland, they had the years to assume leadership of local Filipino associations and to organize

# From Potluck Brunches to Ballroom Lamvongs



Reunion No. 4  
New York City  
August 2- 4, 2004

new ones. That meant organizing rounds of annual induction balls and anniversary parties. Pol, for example, organized the Filipino American Real Estate Licensees of Los Angeles in 1986 and the Cabiao Association of the USA in 1992. The expats could easily apply to partying the seasoned skills they brought with them as physicians, engineers, nurses, accountants, educators, technicians, administrators.

## Reunion No 3

Reunion No. 3, in San Francisco...again in California ! What's going on? Truth be told, folks, our expats, as we said, knew how to organize parties. This gateway state of the West is home to the most number of Mekong Circle USA members, some 250 in 2000 from a count of the directory names in the souvenir program, which means not much heavy lifting would be required to fill the hotel ballroom with attendees, in this instance, 206 of them in the Embassy Suite in Burlingame on July 28, 2000. Indeed almost half of the attendees lived "from the immediate environ of the reunion venue" said Bik Marquez and Jojo Pablo, event coordinators. But they noted that a sprinkling of attendees came from far and wide – Tennessee, New Jersey, Washington, Florida, Pennsylvania, Nevada, New York, Texas, Montana, Ohio, Illinois, Oregon. And from afar – Australia, Italy, the Virgin Islands and the Philippines. Hence it was at this reunion that Mekong Circle USA had formally globalized into Mekong Circle International in membership and as a legal entity incorporated in California



Reunion No. 5  
Chicago, Illinois  
August 6 – 8, 2004

## Reunion No. 4

Its incorporation into a "public benefit corporation for charitable purposes" – standard legalese to be listed as a nonprofit organization – almost derailed Reunion No. 4 in New York city in 2002. A quarrel that erupted among our Los Angeles members about the manner of the incorporation dimmed prospects of California members flying to New York. That the quarrel simmered for almost a year is a long story by itself we will not get into because in hindsight it was the proverbial tempest in a cup of cassava coffee. What really panicked the New York organizers led by the late Sas Sayong of New Jersey was that the dates they picked – August 2, 3 and 4 – happened to be less than year after the World Trade Center attack in Manhattan and the launch of the U.S. global war on terrorism.

The city remained in a lockdown mood, anxious, fearful. Who in his right mind would dare wing across the continent to attend a party there ? Not to mention the steep airfare and hotel costs (oh my, those hotel surcharges!) for Mekong Circle Californians whom the New York organizers depended on to compose the largest contingent of attendees for the first reunion on the East Coast. Moreover, New York unlike their California colleagues, was short-handed. Only 11 turned up for its first planning meeting on Sept. 8, 2001 at the Lemon Grass Grill where former OB Lao procurement person Walter Voradeth manned the cash register. Three days

# Cruising A River, Then Crossing An Ocean

later that restaurant was crushed, under a heap, several stories high, of rubble from the World Trade Center collapse. Walter, that morning was home in Queens dressing up for work.

## Reunion No. 6

Florida / Bahamas

August 11- 13, 2006



Yes, who indeed would dare come? 167 brave souls did. Was it the promise of a leisurely, four-hour sunset cruise aboard the double deck Paddle Wheel Queen yacht on the Hudson River around Manhattan, dining, dancing, sailing on sun-dappled waters, a skyline backdrop of skyscrapers gliding on the horizon, to catch a warm sea breeze on your receding hairline? (ok Maestro, cue here the "Blue Danube", moderato). It certainly was a change from the usual hotel-based ballroom reunions of the past. Or was it to flaunt bragging rights – "I went, I survived, I had fun!" The organizers heaved a big sigh of relief when it was over; nobody fell off the yacht; only Linda Mendoza from Pennsylvania suffered seasickness (on the Hudson's calm, non-oceanic waters, for heaven's sake!) We were glad we had incorporated the association to shield us from personal suits.

Apart from the merrymaking New York 2000 initiated projects to fulfill the association's mission to tell the world about our Lao service. Our website went online. Publication of a history book "Filipinos In Laos" by Fr. Miguel Bernad and Pete Fuentecilla

## Reunion No. 5

Reunion No. 5 in Chicago (August 6, 7 & 8, 2004) resounded with the delighted squeals and much hugging of the graduates of the OB School of Practical Nursing, meeting each other for their first school reunion since the school closed in Vientiane in 1969. A school reunion within a Mekong Circle reunion – oh gosh and golly, it was too much. Chuang Chomthipe, (class of 1963) arriving from Hoschton, Georgia, was so eager to see

faces unseen for 35 years, he stationed himself at the registration table an hour before it opened. Altogether 20 former graduates, with their spouses and children, joined the 310 attendees at the Hyatt Regency Hotel. Credit for the large turnout, the most so far, went to the tenacious persuasion of the late Puring Roque-de Jesus of Oshkosh, Ohio. For two years before the event, her phone calls to points from Australia to Russia, reached out to members. You must remember her then in the Hyatt Hotel ballroom, the one in the stylish blue gown and white tennis shoes and a bandage above one eye, a 16-stitch gash under it, the result of tripping on her high heels; hence the switch to safer Adidas.

## Reunion No. 7

Manila, Philippines

November 7 – 9, 2008



was announced. A return to Laos tour of 17 U.S. and Canadian based members left on November 5, 2002 for a week's stay. For all of them, it was their first visit to Laos since 1975. A courtesy call on the Lao Minister of Public Health elicited an official invitation for the resumption of our medical programs. Another outcome – before New York organized, committee members (now numbering expats from Pennsylvania and New Jersey), rarely saw, spoke with or bumped into each other. They do now.

Our reunions are usually three-day affairs – a baci welcome ceremony and hospitality night the first day in a hotel; then a dinner-dance the second day; ending with a picnic on the third day. Chicago's picnic was held at the expansive home grounds in Zion, Illinois of committee chairs Pete and Edith Paluay. It was also the hunting ground of former Mekong Circle treasurer Tony Victa seeking unwary prey among the

celebrants, too groggy or foolish enough to bring along their checkbooks. You see, he was seeking donations for our first charitable project, a scholarship program, *Iskolars Ng Mekong*, for abused women living under the care of nuns at a dormitory in Quezon City, the Philippines. Said one surprised target: "he was practically pulling my wallet out of my trousers." Over five years, members donated tax-deductible \$10,500 to help 16 women complete their college studies. It was also in Chicago that our second book was released "Goodbye Vientiane: Untold Stories of Filipinos in Laos" by Penny Villarica Flores.

## Reunion No. 6

It started off the traditional way, a baci-reception at the Florida Mall Hotel in Orlando, Florida on August 11, 2006. Then the next morning, 177 boarded Royal Caribbean Lines' "Sovereign of the Seas" for a three-day cruise to the Bahamas. Coordinator Lewie and the late Pete Gonzales, of Kissimmee, Florida, short of Florida-based Mekong Circle members to help organize, hatched the brilliant idea of letting Tess Papa, a cruise travel agent handle all the details of booking members, reserving rooms for our functions, and sitting us all together in the dining areas. Our second day picnic was on the cruise lines' private island, Coco Cay, a stopover on the way to Nassau, the Bahamas. We had a picnic shed of our own for lamvong-ing, guzzling Coco Loco, a concoction of mango, orange juice, papaya and grenadine liquer. In the 110 degree heat, you needed gallons of it to cool off. The ship's cooks and waiters, most of them Filipinos, served us our special orders of "tinola" and bowls of steamed white rice, dishes not on the regular menu. Pete and Lewie, it was reported, won big at the onboard casinos. Seb Eusebio of Las Vegas, Nevada was another winner of another kind – he and his clan of 22 relatives, the most ever from one family, joined the cruise.

## Reunion No. 7

The November 7-9, 2008 gathering broke away from the confines of the U.S. mainland when 179 members celebrated at the Renaissance Hotel in Manila. Mekong Circle has about a thousand members worldwide, a majority living in the U.S. Perhaps a third of the membership, residents of the Philippines, took on the challenge of showing off that they too can throw a memorable party. The souvenir program signaled what they were capable of – a message from the President of the Republic Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, no less, as well as from the Secretary of Tourism. Credit those to Frisco San Juan, president of our Philippine affiliate, a well-connected political figure who headed the organizing committee. Highlight of the dinner dance was a spectacular show of Philippine culture – songs and folk dances and duets by sopranos. We laid a floral wreath at the base of the Rizal monument, the national hero, at Luneta Park where a TV crew threw a question at Mekong Circle President Fidel Padayao, an insinuating query about what we have done for the Philippines. Fidel was ready with "Iskolars Ng Mekong." Left unsaid was our donations to the disastrous typhoon Ondoy victims of 2009 and the Leyte mudslide of 2006 in the southern Philippines. Excursions to the Presidential Malacanang Palace and to the Tagaytay Lake resort filled in the cultural delights. Then Bing and Jun Belicena hosted a dinner at their residence in suburban Paranaque. By the way, Mekong Circle Philippines is also registered as a nonprofit organization with the Philippine Securities & Exchange Commission. It has its own set of officers (Sonia Ballo shepherded the bureaucratic process), hold their annual reunions at Ben and Jovit Revilla's residence in Los Banos, Laguna. The Manila-based Lao Ambassador is always a guest, and



## Reunion No. 8

Anaheim, California

September 24 – 26, 2010



## Reunion No. 9

San Diego, California

August 3 – 5, 2012

# Our Lao Colleagues Show Their Stuff

and he insures that Mekong Circle Philippine members are on the invitation list for Embassy functions.

From Manila after the festivities, the second edition of the "Return To Laos" took off for Vientiane for members on their way back to the USA and Canada. Twenty-seven members who were not able to join the 2002 tour arrived November 4 for a week to see the country where a large part of their young lives, some 40 years ago, took shape. They may as well have landed in another planet, so much has changed. (Read diary in our website [www.mekongcircle.org](http://www.mekongcircle.org) and click on the label "Return To Laos"). What can stop the overwhelming flood of memories as they looked at some places still intact (the OB House; the Air America apartment); to hear the muffled temple drum and the crow of the rooster in the misty dawn, the monks emerging with their silver bowls; to stand at the banks of the Mekong River near Tha Deua, contemplating its waters, neither mystic nor majestic, just as muddy as ever; to slurp a fragrant bowl of feu noodle; to gaze up at the golden spire of the That Luang rising to the bluest of a blue sky; to touch the lustrous red of the frangipani blossoms? (Okay, maestro, cue the violins, vibrato – "Babalik Ka Rin"). Mementoes they left were a laryngoscope set and blood pressure monitors, donated to the Mahosot Hospital. Several copies of our two history-memoir books were added to the titles at the Monument Books bookshop in Vientiane. And in one corner of the Philippine Embassy grounds, a memorial was unveiled (re-dedicated actually, because it was first put up there during the first visit in 2002). A plaque remembers Mekong Circle members – 17 Filipinos – who died on Laos soil, all in non-combatant circumstances. Eleven were OB volunteers, six were Air America technicians.

## Reunion No.8

The camaraderie was emotionally high, as usual. And so was the weather, perhaps the defining feature for the 225 members who attended our September 24 - 26, 2010 reunion in Anaheim, California. Jun Ilustrisimo and Joe Barcelona headed the organizing committee. If you happened to turn on the weather forecast the morning of our picnic September 26 at Twila Reid Park, it said to expect a 100F heat wave for the entire Los Angeles region. It was 102F at the park in the shade. It felled Cecile Datu who had to be rushed by ambulance to the hospital. Many others sought refuge under trees or stood as immobile as stone statues., refusing to participate in "animal" games orchestrated by Jojo Esteban. To introduce a new twist to the hotel activities, a mini-festival of new documentary films with Laos settings was screened at the Anaheim Marriott Suite. Produced by German, Irish and U.S. filmmakers, two had never been shown in the USA. They drew a sparse crowd. Members would rather do some bonding at the bar or at the malls. Dickie Labao escorted Fr. Lucien Bouchard, of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, one of the Christian missionaries in pre-1975 Laos, for his first visit to Disneyland and Universal Studios. Fr. Bouchard trekked through valleys and mountains to visit our remote field teams in northern Laos. At the picnic, Bounthan Oudom who flew in from Vientiane sounded the call : "See you in Laos in 2012". Impressed by a large turnout of some 50 of our Lao colleagues, she saw the opportunity to bid for the next reunion site.

## Reunion No. 9

Instead we returned to California...for the 5<sup>th</sup> time, to the open, welcoming arms of our selfless, fearless, hardworking, faithful (stop it already!) colleagues. In past reunions, the events were steered by organizing committees mainly composed of our Filipino members because they happen to be the most numerous in their chapters. At San Diego for the August 3 to 5, 2012 reunion, our Lao colleagues took charge. They felt their time had come. California is home to most of the Lao diaspora that fled Laos in 1975 and years after. Indeed San Diego counts 7,002 Lao in the 2010 census, ranking it fifth out of the top ten U.S. cities with the most Lao residents. And they have reunion history to bank on – in Chicago, the attendance of OB nursing graduates imbued the reunion an extra dose of emotion; in Florida/Bahamas, 57 joined the cruise, almost 30 percent of the total attendees.

A strong Lao flavor always infused our reunions — the baci, the lamvong, the shimmering sinh gowns of the ladies – Lao and Filipino – (but as yet no samphot among the men). They are fitting reminders of our common past that each reunion reinforces. Organizing committee co-chairs were Sam Malaythong, Khamsy Siharath and Pat Gonzales. Sam welcomed the 200 attendees at the dinner dance at Marriott Mission Valley Hotel, with the Lao national anthem played on his saxophone, perhaps the only time it was ever done anywhere. Dr. Sombat Senethone, former medical director of the OB Hospital in Vientiane, in his address, said he missed Laos because he had to learn to eat hamburgers when he sought refuge in California. Instead of a picnic on the third day, there was a buffet lunch at the Fountain Terrace overlooking the pool. The main course: hamburgers. We had wished Tony Vicia was around to hassle donations for our Tribal School Project ( apart from a panel display and fliers on the tables). In March 2011, Mekong Circle had adopted two remote schools in Davao del Sur, southern Philippines, as our educational project. About 200 students from an indigenous population have been receiving our donations of books, classroom supplies, and cash. The fifth shipment we sent October 2013 also contained ninety-nine used tennis balls among the crayons, dictionaries, and encyclopedia. Why tennis balls? They serve as good padding and perhaps nurture our first world class Rogerio Federer and Andres Magasti. – by J, "Pete Fuentesilla

## Reunion No. 10

**Onwards to Las Vegas, Nevada, USA on October 17, 18 and 19, 2014.**

**History has served our reunions well. Let us see you there.**

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## Celebrating A Historic Tenth

To mark its distinctive character it deserves and to entice attendees to our reunion October 17 to 19, 2014 in Las Vegas, we offered a historic flavor to the events. Organizing a 10th edition of a biannual event that began in 1995 posed some challenges. The ranks of our membership are slowly but surely being chipped away as age, wobbly legs, COPD and yes – deaths – have decimated our hardcore attendees.

As 1960s Lao expatriate **Ducky Paredes** said, most of us are bidding time in what is known as the pre-departure lounge. So the call to attend was not merely for sentimental reasons, it was existential – hey, come over, this maybe your last one before boarding. We were in our 20s during our times in Laos. Now in our late 70s, it is easy to dismiss another reunion – “I’ve been there once, twice...even three times...done it”. Moreover in this Internet age, forget a physical presence. The bonds formed in the Kingdom are conveniently nurtured with Skype and email and Facebook. **Becky Tayaban-Ciborski** disagrees. “No virtual, social media can match real hugs, face-to-face, hands-on renewal of all the stuff that make for lifelong friendships.”

And so on October 19, 2014 in Suite 1 of the Grand Ballroom of Bally’s Hotel in Las Vegas, close to 110 participants came “to reunite, to remember and to rejoice,” said **Marie Aguilos** of Hempstead, New York. There was much to remember. Eighteen years of our Laos experience and four decades after our exodus – how do you package all that in one evening of hugging and lamvong-ing among members who flew in from Laos, Australia, Canada, the Philippines and many parts of the USA.

Well, **Joe Barcelona** of Los Angeles brought a pile of thick binders. A monumental collection of photos, definitely a meticulous labor of nostalgia hard to match. And on the wall, we placed an array of more photos. “There I am” said **Khamsy Siharath** of Oceanside, California, pointing at herself, seated so solemnly with her OB Vientiane Hospital nursing class of 1964. She then proceeded to identify each of her 17 classmates, missing only one name.

A representative of the 1963 class, **Bounthan Oudom**, arrived from Vientiane for her third reunion appearance. While many of the school’s graduates emigrated, Bounthan opted to stay and worked with the country’s premier Mahosot Hospital in Vientiane. She brought with her two other Lao Mahosot nurses

**Latsamy Vongnalath** and **Sonevilayvanh Panyasli**, their first trip to America. What can you say about Las Vegas, we asked them. Busy with their cellphone cameras, they had to show the folks back home the dancing fountain waters of the Bellagio Hotel, surely a wondrous sight not seen in Vientiane or anyplace else.

In another historic touch, T-shirts each silk-printed with the logo of the last nine reunions (except one), custom-designed for each occasion’s theme, lined another wall.

We invited two speakers who framed a historical perspective to our work in Laos. In the early 1960s, **Dr. Karen Oines** of the Public Health Division of the United States Agency for International Development was one of only three pediatricians practising there at that time; the other was the late OB doctor **Laling Endriga**. Since 1991 her Minnesota-based non-governmental organization Health Frontiers has been conducting a pediatric and internal medicine residency program in Vientiane that has graduated 82 Lao pediatricians and 63 internists. Volunteers from Mekong Circle with medical experience are welcome to join.

**Frederic “Fritz” Benson**, a USAID Laos Office of Refugee Affairs officer in the 1970s, drawing from the extensive records at the University of Wisconsin’s Southeast Asian collection, described the historical ties between USAID and OB in Laos. OB’s official records remain missing in the Philippines. Hence the University’s USAID archives are one of the few sources for historians seeking OB and USAID references from 1969 to 1973. (They are available online).

But at the Las Vegas reunion, attendees could hold in their hands a small piece of our history recorded for the digital age. Fritz, working from his home in Greensboro, North Carolina and **Pete Fuentecilla** from Queens Village, New York, produced a CD that digitized 24 issues of “Balitang Laos” our Newsletter from 1964 to 1966.

The issues described in intimate details the work we did, if only for three years out of an 18-year long service, among a people and a country that transformed our young lives. At \$10 a copy, the CD sold at a fast clip. Paper versions of the Newsletters are hard to come by. A copy of the CD has been sent to Wisconsin, in case their archivists decide one day to open a separate Mekong Circle collection. A few more copies are left. For a copy, email [fuentecilla@aol.com](mailto:fuentecilla@aol.com).

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**Highlights** : 11<sup>th</sup> Mekong Circle Reunion  
Las Vegas, Nevada November 14, 15, 16, 2016 Flamingo Hotel and Casino

**Pink Flamingos** – Yes, the hotel has a flock of them, real ones, pink, not the plastic replicas you find stuck on the front lawns of suburban homes. And they do tuck in one of their skinny legs while standing at rest. They inhabit a landscaped space in a courtyard of gardens, ponds, trees, ferns, together with ducks, swans, turtles and huge hoi fishes. At one corner there's a wedding chapel where you can hire an Elvis impersonator to croon your favorite ballad of eternal love. But if the question keeps you awake – why do flamingos insist on resting on one leg. The answer: thermo-regulation. You see, a long naked leg exposes lots of skin to cool air and water. That sucks away heat faster than air. But, if flamingos tuck that same leg up into their down parka of their body, it stays toasty warm. Now you know. You can go back to the slot machines.

**Our New President** – When **Dickie Labao** (from Houston, Texas) was called to the dance floor of Laughlin II Ballroom to join the line up of newly elected Board members and officers of our association for 2016-2018, his face morphed into -- Whaa ! When ? How ? . A few hours earlier, in a sixth floor room at the Flamingo Hotel, outgoing 2014-2016 Board members and officers, elected him by proclamation our new leader. Without his prior consent. Without his knowledge. Without his ok. Talk of political backroom dealing. Nonetheless Dickie strode smiling forward to take his place on the line, his jaw no longer dropping, as the barrage of cameras clicked away. Later that evening, he raged at Board chairman **Pete Fuentesilla** – “That was unconstitutional ! This election system is rigged!” Pete noted that he was fuming through clenched, smiling teeth. Congratulations !

**The Power of the “Kwan”** – Board member **Vanessa Thongma** (Pasadena, California) missed the backroom dealing because she was frantically helping husband **Phaiboon** cancel all the credit cards in his lost wallet. The day before at our “baci” welcome reception, Phaiboon, acting as our “mor phon” ceremonial leader, called on the good “kwan” spirits to bestow their blessings on all the attendees gathered around the “pah kwan” flower-food-tray offering. Sometime later, his wallet was noted missing. The next day it was found. During the same occasion, **Romy Agbayani** (Missouri, Texas) was rushed, ashen-faced, to the hospital after a diabetic-related attack. The next day, he emerged at our dinner dance, in glowing complexion, albeit on a wheelchair. And who was not amazed when **Pol Custodio**, in comatose for four months after a vehicular accident in December 2013 in Los Angeles, appeared at the registration desk, in full health, to partake of the “kwan’s” continued blessing. Ok, you pagans, strike me dead if you do not believe that the “kwan” had something to do with these good turn of events. They must have been mightily pleased with the elaborate “pah kwan” offering, a labor-intensive artwork coordinated by Vanessa.

**More “Pah Kwan” Blessings** – So how else would you explain the good fortune of **Wilma Padayao** (Fontana, California). Her investment of \$40 dollars from our raffle drawing won her a jacket, a T-shirt, a silver Patuxay Memorial engraving, and a golden framed That Luang temple metal engraving. The latter is a gift from our five nurse guests from Mahosot Hospital in Vientiane, laden with some 15 baggages. How they were able to fit into the van of **Gina** and **Tony Liwag** (Las Vegas, Nevada) when they met them at the airport, only the “kwan” can explain. They were led by **Latsamy Vongnalath** and **Sonvilayvan Panyasli**, both of whom attended our 2014 reunion in Bally's Las Vegas. Both also led their group singing of “khomkulup Pakse” – the fragrance of Pakse rose, at our dinner program. By the way, if you delightfully savored our reception and dinner menu, credit goes to Gina and **Pat Gonzales** (Los Angeles, California). Try sitting down with Flamingo's catering manager without salivating as you mix and match from a 15-page menu of appetizers, main courses and beverages. Gina also served the empanada and the bibingka-like pudding (home-made) at our breakfast meeting in Pat's Flamingo hotel room.

**David Copperfield's Magic** – We had the good fortune to get a stage-side seat at David's illusion show at the MGM Grand, compliments of **Homer Liwag** (Las Vegas, Nevada), son of Tony and Gina. David took an ad in our 2016 reunion journal as well as in our 2014 journal. Take a look, that's all five of them (with Homer's wife) posing together, wishing us the best for our 2016 celebrations. As David's co-director, Homer's illusion designs, videos and photography have been featured in David's live shows since 1993 and several Emmy-award winning television specials on CBS. From a stage-side view, we thought we could catch the trickery behind the full-sized car, emerging on stage and the vanishing goose and the giant, roaring dinosaur skeleton. We could not. We had a photo-op

backstage with David after the show. We almost asked him if he would magically transport us to Vientiane, Laos in 2018 for our 12<sup>th</sup> reunion. Or me to his privately owned resort island Musha Cay in the Bahamas where a villa rents for only \$39,000 a night (minimum stay seven nights).

**Back To Our Roots** – Yes, from a survey form that we distributed during our dinner program, Vientiane came first among the venue contenders for 2018. Other locations in the list -- the Philippines, aboard a cruise ship, Australia, and Texas (this last one is the home state of our new president Dickie Labao, who may or may not be ecstatic at the outcome). Some factors that leaned towards Vientiane – a majority of our members reside in the Philippines, much closer to Laos than the USA; they'll find it less jolting on their aging knees for travel; our 2008 Manila reunion (our 7<sup>th</sup>) drew 179 members, many of whom could not make it to our U.S.-based reunions. We've had large group return trips to Laos that can serve as templates – 17 members in 2002; 27 members in 2008. But the real incentive to return to where our common past and shared experience had its beginnings is our mortality. When we gathered in 2016 for our 11<sup>th</sup> reunion, it has been 41 years after our remaining members left Laos. There were fewer of us this year than in our previous reunions. At the start of each reunion event, **Tacing Atienza's** roll call of those who have passed away gets longer and longer. Our past beckons while it is still very much in our present. Get your passports ready.

**Memories On Display** – Both the past and the present were much in evidence at Flamingo. Some 20 photos mounted on boards lined up on three long tables – images of us in our 20s, at work and at play, at various places in the Kingdom, living the adventure that transformed us. And then, years later, rejoining in reunions, now in our 60s and 70s, as shown in a thick binder that was passed around, table to table. A project of **Joe Barcelona** (Los Angeles, California) and **Jun Ilustrisimo** (Anaheim, California), the binder is a collection of photos from all our reunions that will be published in book form. Other memorabilia available for our fundraising (apart from the raffles) were the CDs we produced of our history – a disc that digitized all 46 issues of our Operation Brotherhood bimonthly newsletter Balitang Laos published from 1964 to 1966 in Vientiane. Another CD collected 24 issues (2002 – 2013) of our Mekong Circle Newsletter. Our 2016 journal was a departure from past souvenir journals. This time it's a photo-calendar-history. See attachment. If you want your own printed copy, **Bik Marquez** will postal mail you (\$ 14) plus shipping and handling. Call him at 650 589 3522.

**Some End Notes** – We are listing below all those who registered in 2016. Some were not able to make it in person (asterisks):

Penelope Flores\*, Rusty & Nemia Ramos, Dicknoi & Lily Abad\*, Tony & Cora Sazon, Bik & Anita Marquez, Marie Aguilos, Vilma Quarterman, Jojo Pablo, Ampie Malolos, Boni & Evelyn Alon\*, Romy & Myrla Agbayani, Tony & Tacing Atienza, Dolly Nano, Wilma & Fidel Padayao, Phounsouk Sisouphone, Ernie & Oppie de los Reyes, Pete & Pet Fuentecilla, Pol Custodio, Fe Casher\*, Jess Ramos\*, Vanessa & Phaiboon Thongma, Menchu Domingo-Kirk\*, Thelma Grio, Bert & Melanie Reyes, Nits Eusebio, Joe & Jojo Barcelona, Jun & Claire Ilustrisimo, Conse Sotio\*, Fely Navera\*, Pat Gonzales, Cely & Dickie Labao, Gina & Tony Liwag, Cynthia Mak, Linda & Cesar Mendoza, Bonnie Vongviseth, Sonvilyvan Panyasli, Latsany Vongnalath, Niddavone Onchaleunsouk, Manivone Sirivong, Sutthamma Panyasli. We acknowledge with great appreciation our donors – Fely Navera, Pining Torres, Linda Masibay.

-- by J. Pete Fuentecilla (fuentecila@aol.com)

