

Lao Trip January-February 2009



The black lines trace our trip.

This is a trip report written by Howard Lewin and Bob Majoros describing our adventures on our second trip back to Laos from January 24th through February 27th 2009. On this trip we explored some of northern Laos. After a hiatus of over 30 years Bob and I decided it was time

to go back to Laos and reconnect with one of the most fascinating countries and its people in the world. Both of us had worked there, Bob for two years with IVS and me for twelve with IVS/USAID. We made our first journey in December of 2007. For a review of that trip click on the links below.

Bob's photos from the December 2007 trip and the January-February 2009 Trip

<http://picasaweb.google.com/majoros08/LaosTrip2007>

My photos from the December 2007 trip and the January-February 2009 Trip

<http://picasaweb.google.com/PiMai1938/LaoTripPhotos1207?pli=1>

December 2007 Trip Report.

<http://www.customwooddesign.com/laotripreporthowieandbob.pdf>

The January-February 2009 Trip Report

<http://www.customwooddesign.com/laotripjanuaryhowiebob2.pdf>

It hardly seems possible that a whole year has passed since our first trip back to Laos. But the calendar does not fib. On that trip we met a lot of great people, and on this one a great many more. Not just Lao, but Americans, Auzzies, Brits and other nationalities as well. It is wonderful to see that even though there have been many physical changes to Laos, the people have remained essentially the same. Their humor is the hallmark that makes them special. Their friendliness sets them apart from other countries, and their willingness to share what they have sets them apart from other countries and peoples who have more. Everywhere we went on this trip and last years we were able to sit and talk with the people, tell stories and have stories told to us about what was happening around them, and how things have changed and not changed. For both of us it was a very rewarding experience. While no longer totally fluent in the Lao Language, I can still communicate, and words seemed to pop up magically as I needed them.

Thursday-Saturday January 22-24, 2009

Thai Airlines took off on time and arrived, 17 hours later, about 30 plus minutes ahead of schedule at 6:00 am. in Bangkok In the boarding area, while we were waiting to board the plane, I had an interesting conversation with a shrink about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I told him about my brother's, he is also a shrink, cure for it. Write it out. Guy sitting next to me on the plane was a Cambodian returning home for his mother-in-law's funeral. He has a doughnut business in Hemet, California. The plane was packed, not an empty seat anywhere. Three meals not bad, well I ate them all, but as everyone knows my palate is not as refined as most peoples. I did not sleep, at least I don't think I did. Cleared immigration and customs, and the trip from the airport went without a hitch, before traffic, so did not need to take the toll road, saved 70 baht. Staying at the Federal, same as last trip. It is a very pleasant place, with a helpful staff and a good travel agent inside. It also has wifi although they charge for it. I asked them to consider making it one of the perks for staying there. The manager said that she would think about it. It is also well located near many restaurants and transportation links. The construction along the soi seems to have calmed down a bit from last years frantic pace. Several under

construction last year have been completed, but there is a new one going up right next to the hotel.



Soi 11 The Street The Federal Is Located On And Sukumvit Showing The Elevated Train. It is a bold attempt to solve the traffic problem, and it is exactly what is needed here in Southern California on the 405 freeway. Sukumvit is totally locked up during the daily “rush” hour.

I met Tom for breakfast and we discussed the drill press clamp. Going to try a different approach. Tom told me that there have recently been several massive lay offs in the manufacturing sector. Not sure how this will affect availability of machine time. We will meet again when I come back from Laos. He has a Lao machinist that seems interested in making parts only. Have scheduled a meeting with Richard for lunch. Meeting with Richard went well. Should have some input when I return from Laos. Different approach, major parts only. We will see. Bob gets in about midnight. Went to bed early and, amazingly, slept well and through the night. Alarm went off at 7:00 am local time.

Something I noticed last year and even more on this trip is that the Thai have understood my Lao. In my previous trips to Bangkok in the past, 30 plus years ago, the Thai either pretended not to understand or really did not understand, even though most of the working class in Bangkok were Thai Issan. I explained it to my own satisfaction in this manner. To admit that you understood Thai Issan or Lao was to admit that you were not educated, and that constituted a loss of face. There was also punishment in the schools of the northern Thailand for speaking Thai Issan. Well these days, since the vast majority of the population growth of Bangkok seems to be Thai Issan, Lao is generally understood everywhere which makes getting around much

easier, and in fact gives you the edge, as in being one of them. Their faces just light up when they hear you speak. Whether it is from surprise or delight I leave to your imagination.

Sunday January 25, 2009

Bob and I had breakfast at the German Beer House restaurant. His luggage did not arrive with him. Very nice, I had the farmers breakfast, 3 eggs sunny side up on a bed of roasted potatoes. This afternoon we will go to buy a cell phone for use in Thailand and Laos. Got the phone at MBK, a shopping mall filled with stuff a shopper from the States would feel quite at home in. Eight floors of merchandise, a shopper's paradise with a variety of goods and selections the likes of which you have never seen. I called Mac Thompson, on our new phone, to confirm lunch tomorrow. Frank Manley, a businessman in Thailand and Laos who has been in country for over 40 years, will make it and perhaps Tom Ward, USAID Laos and Thailand during the 60's.

Went to the Suan Pakkad, http://www.suanpakkad.com/main_eng.php which means cabbage garden according to the brochure in Thai, but which means vegetable garden in Lao. It is a museum containing the royal collection of Ban Chieng artifacts and other Thai historical memorabilia. It is really a fascinating place. This is a prelude to our visit to Ban Chieng on the way to Vientiane.



Suan Pakkad. This is one of the buildings in the garden. There are many. The entire complex stores a collection of Ban Chieng artifacts and other historical items collected by Thai Royalty.

Weather is hot, not unbearably so, but hot. This is the cold season, or at least it is supposed to be. Bob hopes to get his luggage later on tonight. Luggage will arrive about 3:00 am. Dinner at the German Beer House restaurant, Hard to walk past this place. I had bratwurst with potato

salad, sauerkraut, apple pie and washed it all down with a cold Singha beer. Excellent! Too much, as in full!

Monday January 26, 2009

Had breakfast at the hotel, then exchanged some money and bought a pair of swimming trunks. I might decide to go swimming, hotel has a swimming pool, although with my present physique not likely. Met Mac and Frank for lunch and talked until 5:00 pm.

Mac Thompson, tour guide par excellence, IVSer 1966-68 and USAID for a long time after that, and a resident of Thailand for over 20 years, has been going in and out of Laos as a representative of the Lao, Thai, Cambodian Brotherhood. <http://www.tlc-brotherhood.org/> It is an organization that donates funds for specific projects. Mac takes these funds directly to village leaders or school administrators for specific projects, like school renovations, latrine construction, new roofing, things that need doing but for which funds are not available. I am not sure of the exact number of projects funded so far, but I think it is well over 10. Mac is a one man NGO.

Mac had invited another guy to lunch who is from Oregon. He wants to bring his plane into Laos for “recreational” flying in Vang Vieng. Vang Vieng is the backpacker’s latest hotspot about 150 kms north of Vientiane. It is also an attraction for Eco Tourists. He lives in Oregon and has an airfield on his property in the coastal range: About one hundred acres in an isolated area. He has never flown here, I suggested that before he does that he contact people who have, Namely Les Strouse. Laos is not a safe place to fly in the best of conditions, weather, which can change in an instant, smoke, which is pervasive during the dry season, and mountainous terrain, which is always there, but not visible because of bad weather and smoke, These conditions made flying difficult even for Air America pilots. He was wondering if there was a flying club he could join in Thailand or Laos, and complained that no one would answer his emails. This all seems strange to me.

We had dinner tonight at an Italian restaurant up the soi from the hotel. Called Tom Ward, and will have lunch with him tomorrow at the Marriot Hotel. It was Tom who took the photo of the two Hmong girls, it is in my mind at least, the best photo to come out of Laos. I put it into my book. I have not seen Tom for about 40 years. Tom was the assistant area coordinator under Pop, until he was transferred to Thailand. Made our reservations for our flight to Udorn and the Ban Chieng trip on Wednesday. Used the travel agent in the Federal to set it up. They are great.

Tuesday January 27 2009

Slept pretty well and think I am over the jet lag. Will know better tonight. Mac suggested that we call Vichien to arrange transport from Udorn airport so I did. Vichien is a Lao American

retired and living in Udorn. Called Vichien and completed arrangements. He will pick us up at Udorn Airport and take us to Ban Chieng and then to Nongkhai.

Met Tom Ward at the Marriot Hotel. Spent about 3 hrs. talking about what we went through, and what it was like working for Pop. Bob went into China Town because he had never been, and later we had dinner at a French style restaurant across the soi from the hotel. While we ate our dinner, an elephant and its mahouts came sauntering by. If you bought a bunch of bananas they were selling, you could then feed them to the elephant, its trunk would curl around your hand and pluck the bananas and then put them into its mouth. Many people did. Now in any other city in the world, if you saw an elephant come sauntering down the street or even if you saw an elephant period, you would swear off alcohol and wonder what someone had put into your drink. But not in Bangkok, everyone took it stride. Makes you wonder.



The elephant's trunk is an amazing and delicate instrument. It can pluck a banana right out of your hand. Notice the smile on the elephant's face.

Wednesday January 28, 2009

Really tired, still not over the jet lag. I was awakened from a deep sleep at about 12:30 by a phone call from the front desk informing me that my two guests had arrived. Somewhat groggy and confused I asked what guests and wanted to know their names. After a few moments of consultation, the night clerk reported that they had made a mistake. It was the wrong room number. Could not get back to sleep after that. Fantasy time, wondered what I had missed.

We left the hotel early for our flight, and flew to Udorn. Virtually no traffic to the old International Airport at Don Muang. Passage was uneventful, and Vichien met us at the airport in Udorn, so off we went to Ban Chieng. What a joy to see. It was just a fantastic display of the dig itself and the artifacts they have uncovered. It took about 3 hours to see the exhibit but to fully grasp the size and scope of the dig, and to attain some understanding of its full meaning in

its historical context, will take a lot longer. We were not allowed to take photos. The site was originally discovered by Stephen Young when he tripped on a tree root in 1966. He was working on a degree in sociology and was doing his research there. As he lifted himself up off of the ground he noticed potsherds, and so began a dig that continues to this day. Stephen was the American Ambassador's son. The discovery of Ban Chieng and its artifacts has changed the entire paradigm of the history of the Mekong River's inhabitants. It has been an exciting journey for the anthropologists and archeologists, and the people of the Mekong River Valley. Their history goes back much further than anyone had previously thought. Just how far is still being debated. For more on Ban Chieng go to:

http://www.google.com/archivesearch?hl=en&q=Ban+Chiang+Thailand&um=1&ie=UTF-8&scoring=t&sa=X&oi=timeline_result&resnum=11&ct=title This is a google listing and a link page to even more stuff on Ban Chieng. There is a lot. I highly recommend visiting the dig.

Then it was off to Nongkhai where we crossed the Mekong on the Friendship Bridge and headed for Vientiane. It was the first time across the bridge for me, in fact it was the first time that I had even seen it. Pretty awesome. The Mali Nam Phu guesthouse has not changed, but there are changes in the neighborhood. A couple of new restaurants, some remodeled ones and a lot of new construction. Had dinner at the Opera Restaurant, which has excellent Italian cuisine and not surprisingly opera music in the background. Came back to the hotel and crashed.



What is fascinating about Lao construction is the scaffolding. It is made entirely of bamboo.

Thursday January 29 2009

Slept well, had breakfast at the hotel and then went to the Internet shop to catch up with the market and e mail. Then went over to Monument books to check up on the possibility of doing a slide show and to buy some maps. No one there to help me on the slide show, the manager is now located in another location. Will have to contact her tomorrow. Trying to find the church

Gerry and I were married in at Phone Xay on Nong Bone Road. Will try again tomorrow. Bob and I had dinner with Frank and Mike Carroll. Another guy joined us, Gerald Vely. He raises bees and is from Oregon. I asked if he knew Bill Rufener, Bill was an IVSer who taught at Dong Dok, and when he came home started a bee keeping business in Oregon. Gerald said he does. He is trying to get a business going here in honey and says that there is a great demand for it here in Laos and Thailand. He has applied for a business visa. I called Bill when I got home and confirmed that Gerald knew Bill. Gerald had in fact emailed Bill and told him about our meeting. What are the odds, bee keeper in Laos knows bee keeper in Oregon

Friday January 30, 2009

Had breakfast at the Scandinavian bakery place facing the Nam Phu. The fountain turned on just as we began to eat, just like last year. Then to the Internet place to catch up on emails and the market. Then to Monument books to get a couple of posters to display at the hotel and later at the Sticky Fingers. Called Erika, the new manager for Monument Books, to find out if we could do a slide show, she said yes, so I will arrive early to help set it up. Called Palamy and arranged to go over to her pharmacy at 1:00. I have a couple of books for her kids and 3 Rubric's cubes for them as well, all from Prany. Tonight we are going to have dinner with Frank, Johnny, and Charles Alton. Dinner rescheduled for Saturday. Palamy and Kong Sinh have invited us over for a Lao dinner. Sivixay is going to meet us at Palamy's house at 5:00 where I will present him with the back rest from Prany, my book and hopefully get some info on the best way to go to the north. Gave books and Rubric's cubes to Palamy for distribution to her kids. Met Sivixay what a great guy. He invited Bob and I over for dinner on the 6th. When I asked where he lived, he said, "I will pick you up." We also met Inthadom Arrchatath, Kong Sin's older brother. He works in the department of agriculture, and has published a paper on drying hay. He also has an MA Degree from Australia. Super guy too. What a pleasure to be invited into their home and partake in a great Lao meal. I am going to tease Prany about our discovery of a new fantastic Lao restaurant named Chez Palamy.

Saturday January 31, 2009

Spent the day with Penny Khounta. Went over septic tank designs for the schools at her house. It is a very nice Lao house built by her husband. Went to see 3 schools that the Women's International Group (WIG) has helped build privies for. These are three schools that I built from 1972-75. Two stories, cement block construction, with over designed trusses. Confirmed septic tank design. No leach lines, tank stores all and then gets pumped out. Went to see a woodshop that turns bowls. Very primitive turning tools, pieces of re-bar ground to a point that he uses as an inefficient scrapper. Wish I had brought my gouges. This is something that I can definitely help with. Then we went to see a cabinet shop that makes Mai Dou furniture. Even though the designs were kind of clunky, the workmanship and construction, is pretty damn good. First recent attempt I have seen at creating furniture for export. Tada was first, 40 years ago. Well maybe not for export per se only but for wealthy individual foreign customers living in Laos.



This is one of the schools funded by USAID and built by me sometime between 1971-75. Penny Khounta works with the Women's International Group which funds school repair projects. The school was in great shape.

Sunday February 1, 2009

We had breakfast and then headed for the Internet café. Hailed a tuk-tuk, and went to Khao Liew and walked around the yard and saw that it had flooded in August and that the rear wall had collapsed into the river. Khao Liew was the maintenance facility for the Public Works Division. The old buildings and all of the new ones that were built under my supervision are still there. Not used much today, mostly for a construction company park. My old office and warehouse are still there. A project that is to begin this year will restore and protect the riverbank. It is desperately needed because the city's water treatment plant is just down stream from our old facility at Khao Liew, and at the rate of river bank erosion, the plant will not be functional very much longer. I recently read in Frank Manley's news letter that the project is underway.



Going up the stairs to my old office in Khao Liew.

This afternoon Bob and I met Allister. He makes the journey to Laos during the English winter and has been for at least the past 5 years, since his retirement. I did not find out what he did for a living prior to that, but he indicated that he had enough if he lived simply. He has Parkinson's

and was having a bit of trouble because he had injured himself when he fell going down the ramp at the hotel. He felt that his disease was getting worse because of the fall. What struck both of us was that in spite of his ailment and knowing that there was no medical help to be had in Laos, he continually made the trip. He usually spent his day in the sunshine of the hotel's garden reading until drowsiness overcame him and then he would struggle up the stairs to his room for a nap. He purchased a copy of my book and spent the better part of two days reading it. He said that he enjoyed it because it gave him a perspective of the war years that he did not know about. He arranged for his return back to London because he felt that his body was not up to a longer stay. Apparently he did not have the finances to make a trip to Bangkok for medical attention. By the time Bob and I returned from our sojourn up north he had left. It is once again a reminder that health care and medical facilities are not readily available in Laos.

Went for dinner at the Sticky Fingers with Johnny Johnson who is a businessman living in Laos for a over 30 years, and who was a good friend when I lived in Laos 30 plus years ago. Frank Manley dropped by later after a dinner he had to attend. Mike Carroll came by to say hello. We are still trying to figure out how to attend the *Boun Sang/* Elephant Celebration in Sayaboury, and get all of our other travels in as well. Not sure we can do it unless we sleep in our car. I am not excited about that.

Monday February 2, 2009

Good News. Boun Liang, our driver, is from Muang Phieng which is the next town south of Sayaboury so we can stay there for the Elephant Celebration. We can also see the dam and bridge at Nam Tan. So this leg of the northern trip will be easier and more interesting than our previous plan. Tonight we plan to have dinner at the Tan Dao Vieng. It has moved from its old location on Samsenthai to a street between Samsenthai and Setthariathath. Word is it is not as good as it used to be, but we shall see. Word is correct. It was very bad and not even a shadow of its old self. Frank joined us there after attending to some Internet business. Did not have corn crab soup, and what we had for dinner did not even come close to its glorious past. At breakfast met a guy who is using GPS to locate all places of interest and post them on his web site with GPS coordinates on a virtual map. Both of us wrote down his name, but neither of us can find where we did. He even bought a book and went to my talk about it.

Tuesday February 3 2009

Kicking back. Had lunch and preparing myself for my book talk tonight. Not much to prepare for actually. Hip hurts a bit and had a short bout with the green apple quick step. Better now, much better. Lecture went very well, over 50 people attended. Very few attendees knew about what USAID had done during the 60's and 70's. Showed before and after slides and received many complements on my presentation. Lots of good questions. I was paid for all of the books, that Monument bought, so it was a pretty good night. Thanked Erika for arranging the talk.



Patrons gathering in the room where I gave the talk at Monument Books.

Bob and I have been invited to dinner tomorrow night by one of the attendees, you will never guess where, Ban Fay at our old house near the wat. We had a late dinner at the Sticky Fingers with Johnny and Frank.

Wednesday February 4, 2009

Lazy day. Had breakfast, read, caught up on e mails, checked market, had a smoothie and then took a nap. It was really a rough day. Tonight we have dinner with Elisabeth Preisig the author of "Kmhmu Livelihood" and other books. She is a linguist and working on translating Kmhmu cultural texts from Kmhmu into English. Martina Sylvia Khamphasith, another attendee at my talk might come too. She is the author of "The Bamboo Bridge, Experiences in Laos." She met her Lao husband in East Germany when he was a student there. Kathryn Sweet who lives across the road from where we lived also joined us. They were all at the talk about my book last night, and live near to each other. Elisabeth's Kmhmu assistant lives in our old house, and she lives in Mike and Onya's old house. The man living in our house allowed me to come and look around. It is exactly the same inside as it was when we lived there. The Teak floor is still there. Bob and I decided to walk back to the Mali Nam Phu, to burn off some of the meal, but a tuk tuk "hailed us," so we got in. Got back to the hotel at 12:00 am Wow, great meal! Great discussion.

Thursday February 5, 2009

Set out to find the Catholic Church where we were married. Decided to walk. Did not realize how hot it is. I have been told that it has been taken over by the Lao Government and is used by the Vientiane prefecture as an office building. I think I saw what looks like the right building, but could not identify it positively because it has been modified. I am narrowing down its possible location, to a group of buildings in a compound across the street from Sivixay's wife's construction supply company on Nong Bone Rd.

In yet another “Lewin Moment” (LM) as I have come to call them, it turned out that directly across the street from his wife’s shop, was the church that Howie and Gerry got married in. Now you have to understand that Howie started looking for this church on our last visit and we were continuing the quest on this one. Howie, as those who know him - however cursorily - will not be surprised to learn, remembers the exact location of nearly every bridge, school, well, dam, road, etc. he ever built while he was here. But the church he was married in? Not a clue. (Well, that’s not exactly true. He had a copy of his wedding announcement that had the “address” of the church on it. But, like many “addresses” here, it turned out to amount to a rather vague suggestion of which road you might start looking on to find the place.) We went all over town looking for it, asking around, getting directed to a variety of current and former places of more-or-less Christian worship. He had finally given up, resolving that it had probably been turned into some usage and was now lost forever in the mists of history. Then Sivixay pointed directly across the street and said, ya, that’s it over there. Turns out it had been converted into a police station. Bob



This was the Church where Gerry and I were married. It is now used by the prefecture of Vientiane and houses government offices.

Bob found Boun Liang our driver and he is ready for the trip. We can stay with his family in Muong Phieng for the Elephant Festival (Boun Sang). He says that the dam at Nam Tan is still there but the wooden bridge that Frank built was destroyed in a flood and has been replaced by a steel and concrete one. We shall see. Went to dinner with Kathryn Sweet an Aussie lady who has been here in Laos for 12 years. She was at the lecture, joined us for dinner at Elisabeth’s house last night and is the one who lives across the road from our old house. She speaks and writes Thai and Lao fluently and is well informed about Laos its people and culture. It is surprising just how much is going on: hydro-electric projects, mining, roads, manufacturing and how little most people know about these efforts. She recently wrote a review of Grant Evans’s

book, “The Last Century of Lao Royalty.” I was interested in having her work with Frank Manley on his newsletter. She explained to me that writing a newsletter, as I envisioned it would cause trouble with the Lao government. Foreign newspaper reporters are still not allowed in country without a short term visa and accompanied by a Ministry of Foreign Affairs escort, ie., there are no foreign based reporters in Laos. There are however, Lao accredited reporters in Laos. So anything Frank would write would be illegal, and he could get into serious trouble. End of Story. He can only use what has been printed in the Vientiane Times, so in a nutshell Frank is right and will only use what has already been printed in the Vientiane Times..

Friday February 6, 2009

Usual morning routine. Tonight we have dinner with Sivixay. We should have a clearer picture of what might be possible, and what routes to take for our northern excursion. Today, off to the gold and silver smiths, now located at the morning market, to see if there is anything of interest.



Samsenthai looking towards the airport from the street that goes to That Dam 1963-Samsenthai today looking towards Lang Xang. Showing the old Constellation Hotel, now called the Asia Pavillion, on the left.

We had dinner with Sivixay at the Lao Restaurant called Kua Lao on Samsenthai near That Dam, it means Lao food or Cuisine. Delicious. There was Lao Music and Dancing.

At the restaurant, the Kualao (meaning Lao cuisine), we had Mekong fish in a coconut based sauce which was very delicious, some sweet and sour shrimp, and a real treat – red sticky rice. It is a different variety from the usual one which is white. I only had it once or twice while I was here before, so I really appreciated it. Bob

During the meal there was a Lao orchestra playing traditional music and accompanying classical Lao dancers. (We haven't checked out the local disco for the more up to date version, but I don't feel any incentive to do so either.) I made a request for them to play Hak Bo Loum (love never forgets) which was at the top of the charts while I was here before and they did. It

really brought it all back. Bob



What a treat for us. In all of the time I was in Laos I never saw Traditional Lao Dancing.

Both Bob and I fell in love with our waitress. She is just beautiful and graceful. Before going out to dinner Sivixay took us to his home. It is beautiful with gardens and all kinds of fruit trees. We had coconut milk from his trees. Sivixay says that there are over 150 NGO's Non Government Organization's in Laos all with agendas with staffs and families. Coordinating these organizations is time consuming and frustrating because they all have their own program requirements. The government had a meeting today to sort out some form of organization and how to pursue what the Lao Government wants them to work on. Maybe we can help with this. He described how they work in villages, especially, those classified as poverty villages. There are over 2000 identified as such in Laos. The Poverty Reduction Program is focused in bringing those villages up to the national norm. Their procedure is very simple. They ask villagers what they think is the reason for being poor. Now why didn't we think of that? They do this by dividing the village, men in one group and women in the other. Then they ask what they need to get ahead. The results are then tabulated. It is a lengthy process but it is the villager's ideas and solutions. Micro loans, and local joint investment groups work well too. Commodities like cement, animals and education and training are also part of the investment by the government. Maybe this is where we can help, keeping track or offering technical advice on the various NGO projects, from the Lao Government's point of view.

Saturday February 7, 2009

Usual morning routine. Breakfast at the Scandinavian restaurant on Nam Phu circle. Then to the smoothie place on Samsenthai for computer/internet access. Really tough day. Getting ready for our trip tomorrow.

Sunday February 8, 2009

Breakfast at the Scandinavian place at 7:15, and on the road at 9:00 am. Phone Hong and then east to Ban Talat. I had spent some time in the 60's working out of Ban Talat on some irrigation projects. I stayed with Fritz Benson who was with IVS. It was during this time that I was given a tour of the Nam Ngum dam while it was under construction. We went into a diversion tunnel of some sort and then had lunch at the construction company's mess. The tour guide was Fred Carlson, Gus's brother. Fred was working for the World Bank as a construction inspector. The Nam Ngum dam is still awesome. Went over the ridge to see behind the dam and looked at the lake. Double wow, boats all over the place and fishing is very big. The boat landing is a very busy place, replete with several restaurants and boating facilities. Spent some time talking and joking with people who were also sightseeing.

We returned back to Phone Hong noticing that there was double cropping of rice. At route 13 we turned north and continued up to the Houie Pamon turn off, which is now called Houie Mok. Went out the Ban Xon road for about 10 clicks. Many of our Bailey Bridges are being replaced by concrete and steel ones. We asked if security was all right and we were told ok and safe. We had been informed by Mac of a recent fire at km. 33 on the Ban Xon road, at the beginning of the month. Noticed at the turn off stalls selling fish, and lots of it. This is where the Nam Ngum Lake reaches, and fishing can literally be done from the back porch of some of the houses on the lakeshore. When we were building the road, one of the requirements was that the roadbed had to be 50 feet above the highest level of the lake. It looks like we succeeded. Turned around about 10 kms. in and returned to route 13 then continued heading north for Vang Vieng.



Nam Ngum Dam

We are staying at the Elephant Crossing guesthouse/hotel. Owned by an Auzzie and her Lao husband. Highly recommended by Kathryn Sweet. The Hotel is very nice with a full view of the Nam Song river and the Karsts across it. All guests are required to take their shoes off before entering the hotel. I had no problem with that, but spent about 5 minutes the next morning trying to remember where I had put them. I was looking in my room, not downstairs at the entry. The karsts have not changed, and are still magnificent. The airfield when I used it last was surfaced with laterite, but it is now paved, as are the roads in town. The town has increased 50 fold, and has become a mecca for backpackers and eco-tourists. Lots of social interaction at numerous bars on the north end of town, and some guest houses and bars on the west side of the Nam Song. It is amazing to me how far the sound of rock-n-roll music travels in a rural setting at night. It brings back memories of the old Vientiane as I knew it 40 years ago.



This is the view from my room of the Vang Vieng Karsts across the Nam Song River.

Monday February 9, 2009

Left Vang Vieng about 9:30 and headed north, through Muong Kasi, the junction of route 7/4 at Sala Phou Khoun, and Xieng Ngeun. All of the towns we passed through have grown 10 fold or more. Stopped for liquid breaks. At one stop there was a tour bus from Chiang Mai. I had a friendly chat with a few of the ladies, some of whom invited me to visit them if I ever went there. We kept up the pace until we arrived in Luang Prabang, about 6 hours.

Lots of produce being grown for market, huge Cabbages and other vegetables, Lao brooms, for export to Vietnam, and some rice double cropping. Everywhere I look I see energy, and growth. New houses are going up all over. One thing both of us noticed, was the striking color of a paint called Tawny Peach. It seemed that it is the favorite choice for painting new houses. We asked someone why, and they told us that there were only 5 colors manufactured in Laos, red, blue, tawny peach, green, and black. Of the 5, tawny peach seemed to be the least discordant. People I talked with along the way are joking and laughing. The road is paved all of the way. The last time I drove it, from LP to Vang Vieng about 1966, it was a laterite surface and dusty with not much along it, and it took two days to get to Vang Vieng. I do not remember it being so twisty. The road is going to require a lot of maintenance, some of which is already underway. This is mostly because of the heavily over-loaded trucks using the road. Maintenance will become a bottomless pit unless the government deals with the overloading problem.

Biggest, most important and troubling thing we saw for the future is the extent to which slash and burn agriculture or swidden cultivation has denuded vast areas of forest. This is going to have a real impact on watershed viability, wild animal populations, erosion, and crop production. It will also increase road maintenance because soil is no longer held in place. I saw many places where landslides have impacted the road-bed causing some real washouts. For the most part vast areas are completely barren except for grass and low shrubs. There is little possibility that the native tree populations will grow to maturity and be of commercial value. As a comparison, when I drove the road in 1966, it was for the most part forested.



This scene clearly shows the extent of the damage caused by swidden agriculture. Photo taken north of Vang Vieng, but south of Sala Phou Khoun. It is pretty much the same all the way to Pakmong north of Luang Prabang and east to Sam Nuea and south to the Plain Du Jarres and beyond.

Luang Prabang is huge. It has grown far beyond my expectations. When I was here last it was just two main streets, now I can't tell how many there are. On the way in we passed a water bottling plant. We will have a better idea tomorrow. It appears that all of the roads are paved. World Heritage status is the major cause. Checked into the Hay Soke hotel, about ½ km. west of Phou Si, rooms were only available for 2 days. Then found, with the help of a Tuk Tuk driver, a great Chinese restaurant on one of the side streets far away from the back packers and tourists.

Tuesday February 10, 2009

Had breakfast and then located the old USAID office. It is now a beautiful guesthouse called Ban Lao. Mac found it a year or so back. Then we went and climbed the stairs to Phou Si. I don't know how many stairs there are, but it seemed like they would never end. "Never again," I told myself, I said the same thing 40 years ago. Finally, at last we reached the top. View from the top is spectacular, just as it was 40 years ago, all of Luang Prabang is spread out below. Wat Phou Si is a temple on the top of a large and tall karst that seems to have sprouted from the flats surrounding it. Met a retired English couple on holiday, they live in Portugal. After our descent, we discovered that the museum, the King's Palace, was closed on Tuesdays. We will have to come back tomorrow. Stopped and had a smoothie, then decided to have another. Bob took a walk to the right from the smoothie place while I proceeded down to the banks of the Mekong river in search of the house I used to live in. From its balcony I had tried to capture a Luang Prabang sunset, never quite achieving the perfection I sought. I found the house and it is still pretty much the same. I took a couple of river shots to compare with the ones I took 40 years ago and have a pretty good match. On the way back to the hotel I rediscovered the silversmith's shop where I used to buy items made by the King's Silversmith 40 years ago. He still makes things at age 75, so I purchased a beautiful pair of earrings for Gerry. Made by the hand of the King's silversmith.



King's Palace is now a National Museum. Full of Royal possessions.

The congestion around Phou Si and the Museum was disturbing. All of the side streets have guest houses, and on the main streets as well. The city is expanding rapidly to the west. Most of the old buildings have been renovated, and/or converted into guest houses. Most of the tourists seem to be backpackers. I overheard one sweet young thing talking to her mother on a computer at an internet café. She was trying to describe her latest meal and could just as well have been talking about going to a MacDonald's. There was nothing Lao, French or Asian about the meal she described. There are at least 3 flights a day coming from Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Vientiane, Siem Riep and pretty soon Hanoi. The airfield has been totally upgraded to accept these flights. This is certainly going to add to the above mentioned congestion.



On the left Ban Lao, the old USAID office and on the right another sunset from the river bank in front of my old house. It took a long time to get a good one. This one is a keeper.

Wednesday February 11, 2009

After breakfast went to Khouang Si falls about 30 kms. Southwest of Luang Prabang. This attraction was not available for us to visit when I was here in Luang Prabang 40 years ago because of security restrictions. Very beautiful, and it has become a very popular picnicking place for tourists and Lao alike. The water was of a very peculiar color of green. Not sure of the cause, perhaps because of the limestone dissolved in the water. There is also a mini zoo that is taking care of about 8 Lao bears. We had lunch there, at one of the many restaurants, mine was a tuna fish sandwich and fresh coconut milk, in the coconut.

We have had to rethink our travel plans because of the Elephant Festival. Will not be going to Hong Sa because we have discovered that the road from Sayaboury to Hong Sa to Luang Prabang is in bad shape. It would take about 4-6 hours to get to Hongsa from Sayaboury and 6-7 hours longer to take the north route to LP, and that does not include taking the road to Thasouang a road I helped build. That would equate to 2 extra days, days we did not have. So it looks like we will be going to Sayaboury for the Elephant Festival and then back tracking to Luang Prabang and then to the north. Hope to make it to Pakmong in one day. It will be long ride, but the road is good. From there we will swing east to Vieng Thong and then to Phone Savan and Xieng Khouang to see the jarres. Then the choice will be made to head due south (Mac did it a month or so ago, albeit with some difficulty,) and end up in Paksane through Muong Khao or to swing back west and head to Sala Phou Khoun and then south back to Vientiane down route 13. Had a wonderful dinner at a restaurant on the Mekong River, near where the house I used to live in is. Attempted some more sunset photos, still trying after 40 years.. We checked out of the Haysoke Hotel and into the Ban Lao Hotel.



Tat Khoung Si, just a beautiful place.

Thursday February 12, 2009

Did not sleep all night. An air conditioner was making the most god awful noise through out the night. Had breakfast at the Ban Lao, very nice, and met Linda and her sister SiriVanh, both daughters of Ouane Raticone the owner of the USAID office, and the Minister of Defense in our day. They are the present owners of the Ban Lao, and are expanding the operation. They both live in California, one in San Diego and the other in Chatsworth. Both had Bob Proctor as a teacher at the American school at Km. 6. We told them about the ASV reunion and gave them Frank Manley's phone number so they can get the details. Frank called and I told him about SiriVanh and Linda because they were in school with his kids. Went to the national museum which is housed in what was the King's Palace. There are very many interesting kingly artifacts. For a king he lived a pretty simple life. The palace when compared with other monarchy's around the world is not ostentatious and fairly simple, but compared to any Lao structure, it would have impressed the populous. Picked up Boun Liang's cold and sore throat because of the bad night's sleep.

Friday February 13, 2009

Left Luang Prabang for Sayaboury after breakfast. The road is in pretty good shape and while not paved from Xiang Nguen, we arrived at the ferry crossing at Pakkhon in one hour and ten minutes. We were about 35 cars back in the queue. Things were moving along very nicely until one of the big trucks got stuck on the ramp bringing crossings to a halt. It took well over 1 hour

to get the truck unstuck and up the ramp and then things started to move fast. When we finally crossed, our time from LP to Thadua, was 2 1/2 hours and when we finally pulled into Sayaboury it was mid afternoon.



Cars and trucks waiting to cross and ferry actually crossing.

We then headed south to Muong Phieng. Boun Liang stopped at a gas station, a relative of his, and asked a couple of questions so we went past Muong Phieng to Nam Pouy and made room reservations and unloaded our stuff. Nam Pouy is about 60 kms south of Sayaboury the town. The guesthouse is the only nice one in the area including Muong Phieng and its location struck us as kind of strange. What is a structure of this quality doing in an isolated place like this? The only business that we saw was a rather large sawmill. We are not sure why, but it seems strange to us.

Something about Boun Liang. It seems that no matter where we are he has a cousin, or a brother, or an uncle, or an aunt or some very good friend there. This was true last year as well when we went south. He comes from Muong Phieng so one would expect him to have relations there. That was who he had asked to find this place at Nam Pouy. Later the next day on our way back to LP he slowed way down and crept along the road as though he was not sure what he was looking for and finally stopped by a small shop in Sayaboury. A lady came running out, grabbed him around the neck and gave him a big hug. It was his sister whom he had not seen for sometime. She really gave him a mouthful for not letting her know that he was in the neighborhood. Everywhere we went Boun Liang had connections. This helped us immensely. Boun Liang is, verbal and friendly so he makes acquaintances easily. On our trip last year, after traveling about a thousand kilometers, I discovered that he had worked for PWD as a surveyor, and knew where most of the projects I wanted to see were.



The guest house south of Muong Phieng at Nam Pouy where we stayed. It seemed to us that this place was just a “bit” up scale from all of the surrounding available guest houses buildings. The only visible business there was a saw mill. I was told it cost about \$40,000 to build.

Then we went to Nam Tan. The dam is fully operational and all of the irrigation ditches and laterals are full of water and irrigating, at least it appears so, to its maximum hectarage. There was absolutely no sign of damage to the dam nor that it had sunk. It was a good feeling to see the dam functioning as designed. The wooden bridge however was gone. The villagers that I talked with told me that the bridge fell apart because of rusty nuts and bolts. Apparently the threads rusted so the bolts could not be tightened, and as the rusting progressed the bolts got looser and looser and the bridge lost its structural integrity and collapsed. We did not have galvanized or stainless steel split rings or bolts, we made the bolts out of smooth re-bar because the sizes we needed were not available for purchase locally or in Bangkok. The split rings came from Bangkok, were made of plain steel and we were lucky that Gus found a merchant that carried them. There seemed to be some rotting of the wood as well no doubt caused by the loose bolts and lack of maintenance. One villager said that a flood helped do the bridge in about 7 years ago. So the bridge lasted over 30 years, not bad considering its cost and severe weather conditions. Maintenance would have extended the life of the span and prevented its demise.

Cold and sore throat worse. Boun Liang assures me that his cold is getting better. So it seems that I have another two days of misery.



Nam Tan Dam 1969



Nam Tan Today. Even though the stream bed has silted up the dam is still diverting water into the laterals as designed and irrigating 2000 hectares of rice paddy.



Nam Tan Bridge with the dam in the background 1969



Nam Tan Bridge is gone, but the piers are still there. It lasted just over 30 years.
Saturday February 14, 2009

Got a late start to the Elephant Boun. My fault, because I did not realize that the numbers of people coming would in fact equal or exceed the numbers estimated by the government, so I thought leaving later would be ok. Wrong. Monstrous traffic jam, finally got a place to park and were able to see the elephants. Lots of elephant rides and elephant poop, otherwise just another Lao festival. If I had to estimate the crowd size I would say about 50,000 plus. There were very few Farangs, mostly locals. The count, number of elephants, was way less than the hundred elephants as advertised and touted by the Boun's promoters. Boun Liang said that the highest number he saw was 58. All the elephants had a number stenciled on their side. Cold and sore throat still with me, it is hard to believe that I have a sore throat when the temperature is in the nineties. Boun Liang says he is much better, so only a couple more days.

While we were walking around looking at the elephants we sat down on a bench in front of the local government administration building. The headman there was a friend of Boun Liang's, so we got an inside track about the fair. The fireworks show that was scheduled for sundown was on temporary hold. There was some fear by the Chao Khoueng's office that all of the noise might frighten the elephants and the last thing he wanted was an elephant stampede. Our discussion with this official went even further. No one knew if a stampede was a real threat or not, but to be safe it was decided to cancel the fireworks show altogether.

When I told him that I had worked in Sayaboury 40 ago he asked me if I had noticed a difference between then and now. My response pleased him. "A great big difference," I said.

One other interesting bit of info to come from him was that two bull elephants started to fight because some female elephants were in heat. For the safety of the spectators the bull elephants were removed from the festival. They had taken photos of the bulls mounting the females and were passing them around. Elephant porn right there in Sayaboury?



Loading and unloading passengers on the elephants.

Sunday February 15, 2009

Left Nam Pouy at 7:00 am in an attempt to beat the Boun Sang crowds and almost made it. Large traffic jam on the main road out of town because the elephants were crossing it. Got past that and decided not to have breakfast or coffee and head straight for Luang Prabang. Good thing we did because the ferry crossing at Thadua was jammed with cars. We were only 20 or so back but big trucks were there too. As we pulled in line over 100 more vehicles pulled up behind us, Two trucks buried their rear axles into the sand and had to be pulled out. We were pleased at our decision to pass on breakfast. While waiting for our turn to board the ferry and cross, an American woman, who had heard me talking and joking with the people, asked me where I had learned Lao. I told her that I had been in Laos before, a long long time ago. "During the war," she asked? She wanted to hear more, so we talked. She was one of those who demonstrated against the war in the 60's and 70's. She made no attempt to be open minded about what I was trying to tell her. Her mind was closed even after 40 years. Even the Lao government is more open minded than she is. One high ranking government official told me that we have to forget the past and concentrate on the future. She apparently cannot give it up.

We stopped in Luang Prabang for a well earned lunch, which was excellent, and then headed north along the Nam Ou. What a beautiful river. We pulled into Pakmong about 150 kms. north of LP around 4:30, found a guest house, with the narrowest stairway I have ever negotiated, and checked in. We had to leave our cases down below. So far the worst place we have stayed, but for 7.00 a night one can't be too choosy, and besides the other places were worse. The contrast between the guest house in Nam Touy, out in the middle of nowhere and Pakmong a busy road junction, made the mystery of why even more curious. One bad thing for me was the squat toilets. Tummy was in the way. I got down all right, but knees really complained trying to get back up. Mac is right, sit down toilets are a necessary requirement.

Pakmong is a junction of roads going east and west. West takes you to Oudomsay, Louang Nam Tha and Phongsali. While going east takes you to Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang. There were two women backpackers waiting for a bus. The driver of the bus that brought them up there and dropped them off told them to wait for the bus that went east. It was an all night ride to Sam Neua by bus. I confirmed for them, by asking the people in the restaurant we were in if that was the bus stop. All said yes, just be patient, it will eventually show up. They were not there the next morning so I assume that they got their ride.

Monday February 16, 2009

We left Pakmong at 9:00 am. Various people we talked with, in the restaurant the night before described the ride to Sam Neua as 4-6 hours. We arrived at Vieng Thong, about half way to Sam Neua, at 4:00 pm., and decided to rethink our plan to go to Sam Neua. The information we received the night before from travelers who claimed that they knew, was way out of line. Boun Liang was especially upset. "They all lied," he said. We checked into a nice guesthouse called the Souk Sak Hone Guest House. Instead we will go to Hin Tang about 30 kms. up the Sam Neua road, and return and head for Phone Savan, where the Hai Hin Jarres are, with a possible RON at Muang Kham. Hin Tang is a prehistoric rock construction consisting of some vertical slabs that seem to mark crypts and is estimated at several thousand years old.

The road to the Xieng Khouang provincial border from Pakmong is getting pretty bad. There are stretches that are down to the road bed and need immediate attention. The pavement is coming apart. It looks to me like it was poorly done in the first place, not enough tar was put into the mix, and it will be difficult for the Lao Government to maintain this stretch in Luang Prabang province. Financially it is going to be a bottomless pit.



Speaking of bottomless pits...This hole was at least 8 feet deep and growing.

There is a very hot, hot spring, here in Vieng Thong, hot enough to boil an egg in about 10 minutes. Bob went to check it out, and sure enough, lots of egg shells lying around to prove it. This has the potential of becoming a health spa, receiving guests from all over the world.



At dinner we met three German women who were knocking back shots of Lao Lao, saying that it was not as strong as its reputation had led them to believe. I tried to warn them of its lethality, but they just kept knocking them back. When we left they were still sitting upright, a rare accomplishment. A couple of other German travelers asked us for directions to the bus stop. We asked a Lao passer by where it was and he pointed to the south end of town.

The guest house owner built a little fire in front of his place to ward off the chill, so we gathered around for some hot tea, gossip, warmth and joking. It was into the low 60's. His wife told us about three Russian motorcycle biker types who came into town a few weeks before us. They became very drunk and disorderly. One them tried to ride his bike and in his inebriated state drove straight into a very large mud puddle on the river bank. The villagers feared that he would drown, so they tried to pull him out of the mud but they had to leave him there because he refused any help and fought them off when they tried. The villagers were afraid that if he died they would be blamed. There he slept getting eaten by mosquitoes. The next morning apparently showing no ill effects from the bites, mud and alcohol, he joined his friends and they drove off.

Tuesday February 17, 2009

We left Vieng Thong early and headed for Hin Tang, which is on the road to Sam Neua about 35 kms. from the junction at Houayphou. Hin Tang is nothing like Stone Henge, it seems to be strictly a burial site called the Huaphanh Menhirs and they are found in an area about 10 kms long on saddles in this general area. So far digs have not discovered any real evidence as to what the sites represent other than they probably were burial crypts. A few bones have been discovered. This posting gives some of the history of the Menhirs. Funds from the American

Embassy are helping to preserve the site. <http://adventurevacationtrip.com/northern-laos-loop-9-journey-day-5-2-xam-neua-to-phonsavan>



Hin Tang on the road to Sam Neua.

After an hour or so we retraced our way back to Houayphou and then south to Muang Kham. We are going to park here and set off for Phone Savan and the Jarres (Hai Hin) tomorrow morning. Boun Liang has been at the wheel driving steadily for over 10 days, on difficult roads and needs a break. We are out of the high mountains and almost onto the flats of the Plain of Jars. My travel estimates are way off because the roads are very twisty.

One thing that has struck us, I keep coming back to this, is the clear cutting by the hill tribes. This clearing is pervasive from Vang Vieng to Pakmong and east all the way to Vieng Thong and Sam Neua, and south all the way to Phone Savan. This cutting was not done for the timber. It was necessary so that villagers could plant a crop of rice. Unfortunately vast forests have been destroyed, far worse than the clear cutting by the Vietnamese lumberjacks. I don't have any solutions for this dilemma. Perhaps the government could hire the hill tribes to reforest what they have cut down and pay them so they can buy their rice and not have to cut down anymore forest? Their populations have soared because of better health care, putting even more pressure on the mountains. Cut family size, plant alternate crops perhaps.

They planted a lot of corn last year on guarantees that it would be purchased, and as it ripened the price of corn dropped like a stone and all of the buyers from China disappeared leaving the farmers with lots of corn that they had no way to dry and store. Most of it spoiled. Souk Somboun, my Lao language teacher from IVS days, is in Laos with one possible solution to the corn storage problem. He represents a company that has developed silos and drying equipment. This gives the farmer a great deal of control of when to sell his crop. If you sell right after the

harvest, prices are low because everyone is selling at the same time, and you are held hostage to that price at that time. But if you can store it you can wait until the price goes up later in the year. This would also make it possible for a commodities exchange to develop.

Developing storage facilities would also help in the crop substitution programs. That should interest the DEA drug enforcement people. Because of the corn debacle, opium poppy plantings have gone up. We were told that opium resin was going for \$2200.00 a kilo, a price I have no way of confirming. It seems to me to be too high. No pun intended. At that price it will be next to impossible to convince opium growers to seek substitute crops. That price will also help take the pressure off the cash crunch for the farmers, because many of the farmers had to borrow money to plant the corn, but it will play hell with the supply of opiates. That inventory is bound to go up.

The easiest and most obvious solution to the opium problem is to buy up the entire crop. Legalize it, not just in Laos, but Afghanistan, Pakistan, Thailand wherever it is grown. Buy it directly from the growers. Put the money into their hands. Treat it as any other agricultural commodity. Start cooperatives to make this easier on both the buyers and the growers. Spend the DEA's money on the entire year's production, and then use it to produce the exact amount of opiates required for medical purposes in the US, Europe and the rest of the world, then destroy the rest. Unfortunately Opium cultivation is only legal in Australia, China, the Czech Republic, France, Hungary, India, Japan, Slovakia, Spain, Macedonia, Turkey or Britain. Under international law, the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, those are the only countries that are allowed to produce opium for pharmaceutical use. (I recently read a blurb that the Australian government is hiring immigrant Hmong to help cultivate Opium.)

Perhaps rather than destroy it give it free to all of the addicts. We give them methadone, an addictive substitute, now so why not give them the real stuff and as much as they want. Try to educate them as to the consequences of their addiction, and then if they can't or will not come off of the drugs then, the more they shoot up the faster they become a statistic that the rest of the world, their families, and the US tax payers, do not have to worry about. I am tired, and I think many people are tired of pouring money down a "Black Hole." The drug wars would be over and crime would drop by over 50%. This would free up prison cells for murderers and violent criminals. The drug problem rests entirely with the United States and Europe. There are few drug addicts in those countries that produce them. Probably because it is used sparingly as a pain killer for the elderly. But mostly because they know the consequences of addiction, social ostracism and death. It is only in the West where incomes are sufficiently high that these drugs can be purchased and financial help be given to those who can no longer work. We treat it as an illness that given enough resources can be cured. I ask you, has this philosophy worked? Our drug addiction continues to grow. In the countries that produce them, mostly subsistence economies, you die if you cannot carry your own weight. There simply are not enough resources to support someone who cannot work. We are running out of resources too.

Turning corn into whiskey or white lightening is another alternative, but it is too labor and capital intensive. Firewood has to be gathered, stills have to be fabricated, water hauled, sugar in large quantities purchased, just a lot of preparation. Then it has to be bottled and shipped to markets. I am not saying that it can't be done, but a kilo of opium sits easily in a back pack, or on the back of a horse. By buying all of the opium, the onus of its production would be eliminated and legitimized giving the present farmers a valuable cash crop. One that they already know how to grow, and is suitable for the burned out Hai fields where nothing else wants to grow. This would do away with the need to create false markets for as yet to be discovered substitute crops of equal value. It would also create very large tax revenues for governments that desperately need income.

We met a Hmong American returning for a look see. He is partially retired from Minnesota and is thinking of returning to Laos to live. He left Laos when he was 22 and is a little uncertain about coming back, but wants to look around and get a feel for what he is in for if he does come back. He trained as a teacher at Dong Dok before he immigrated to the States. He thought he might hire on as a teacher until he found out the wages, about \$700.00 per year.

Wednesday February 18, 2009

Left Muang Kham for Phone Savan about 9:00 am. It was a miserable night. Roosters crowing, one was a basso profundo and the other an alto soprano, joined intermittently by the village dogs who just can't resist making a contribution to the choral cacophony. Their all night long addition to the night sounds of Muang Kham did not allow for any meaningful sleep. Additionally, it was the hardest mattress I have ever tried to sleep on with lumps in all of the wrong places. Can't remember the name of the place. Mental block?



Muang Kham guest house. Notice two bomb shells on the front entrance. Almost all of the buildings had bomb shells as decorations in front of them.

We arrived in Phone Savan about 11:00 am and located the guest house recommended by Mac, named the Nice Guest House, and it is. Best shower on the whole trip. Unloaded our gear and headed for the first of the Thong Hai Hin, (Jarres) locations. Incredible.

No one knows with any certainty as to what they were used for or what the symbolic meaning of them is. Suffice it to say they are large urns carved out of solid stone, it looks like metamorphosed sand stone, that is very hard, some being over 6 ft. in height and over 3 ft. in diameter. Some of the Jarres have carved lips that appear to be for fitted lids. There were some lids around, but for the most part they have all but disappeared. Most of the locations are on knolls that have a commanding view of the plain below. This would suggest, at least to me, some spiritual meaning, a place where the deceased could survey their domain. In fact many of the locations are or were military outposts during the war including trench works and craters from aerial attack. There was a cave that looked as though it was hewn out of the rock and used as a safe haven during the war. There were at least two bomb craters near the entrance. From the design of the Jarres and an estimate of the labor required to make them I would guess that it is the work of at least Bronze Age artisans. It seems to me, and I am not an expert, that the detailed lips and hollowing process would be beyond stone age tools. Bronze tools stay sharp and allow detailed carving.



As we stood on the top of the highest knoll, a woman was walking up from below. As she approached us she began to ask us a lot of questions about the site, and about us. From her accent we determined that she was Russian. She volunteered that she was with a group that had left her at her guesthouse because she had over slept. We thought this rather strange because no tour group leader in Laos is going to leave one of his/her charges behind. The government does not like that to happen. While we continued on our explorations, one of the park employees came up to me and asked me to ask her if she was going to pay. He said that she had snuck in with out paying. It turned out that she had charged into the site and would not pay. Our immediate supposition was that she was looking for someone to do it for her. She claimed that

her tour guide was supposed to pay. A policeman was called in to help and she simply said that she had no money. He let her go. The last we saw of her she was walking down the road. Bob saw her later on that night in town with a group of back packers.

Location #2 is Hai Hin Phu Salato. It was on another knoll about 11 kms from the first one. The girl taking money and handing out tickets was just a doll. There is a pine grove sheltering the Jarres and offering some relief from the sun. Most of the trees seem to be about 30 years old. Evidence for that is that some of them were growing out of bomb craters. The craters were from aerial attacks during the war. Some of these Jarres were carved square, and one was very long, about 8 feet, lying on its side. again this site was on a knoll overlooking the plain below.



From #2 we headed to Tad Lang water falls. The approach to this site, was through rice fields that would not be possible in the rainy season. This is more of a cascade than a sheer drop kind of thing, but nonetheless about a 1000 ft. drop in elevation off the escarpment. The Plain of Jarres' mean elevation is about 3000 ft. above sea level. It gets chilly here. We saw a lot of terraced rice paddies and some areas are simply flat. The plain seems to stretch for miles in all directions, but it is hard to tell because the smokey season is upon us and visibility is very limited. There is a lot of barren land, ie not much growing on it, just grass. (Just like parts of the Bolevens, just grass. It was only recently discovered why that was. Bauxite.) Some of it may be due to UXO's. But it seems to me that this amount of unused land is due to its infertility, because it was not planted in anything before the war. The PDJ is truly a beautiful place. We did not get to site #3 because it was getting dark, and well they all seem to look the same. For more photos on the Hai Hin go to. http://www.asiaexplorers.com/laos/thong_hai_hin.htm

Phone Savan is developing rapidly. Locals say that until 5 years ago not much had happened, but then things changed and development started in a big way. Not sure what the impetus was

or is, but suffice it to say things are going gang busters. Construction is going on everywhere, new houses, businesses, and infrastructure, and lots of Tawny Peach. During the construction of the Nice guest house, where we stayed, many military artifacts were uncovered while digging the foundations. These are displayed in the lobby. They include a recoilless rifle, mortar shells, bombies, ammo belts and bombs. Slept very well.

I tried to talk with a construction gang that was building a post and beam brick house, but got no response. They were all Vietnamese. The restaurant we went to at Mac's recommendation had good American style food but we could not talk with the host because he spoke Vietnamese and no Lao. It would seem that the Vietnamese are making further inroads into the Lao economy.

Right next door to this Vietnamese owned/American style food restaurant was the UXO (unexploded ordinance) information center. Is this a coincidence? They have gathered a lot of information on what is happening in regards to clearing the UXO and the dangers it presents to the population in general. One of the things I did not see was UXO clearing machinery. There are many machines manufactured in Europe and the United States that can clear mines and surface bombie fields rapidly. They can operate on fairly steep slopes as well. It seems to me that this equipment should be donated with operational teams to expedite the clearing of this very dangerous impediment to the expansion of the available agriculture producing land.

It appears that there are many more Jarres (Hai Hin) on the plain than was previously known. Villagers have realized the money earning potential from tourists who are willing to pay to see the Jarres, and many villages that have them but have never disclosed their whereabouts, are now doing so. The numbers have been increasing. I heard that about 3,000 are now known to exist and that number will undoubtedly increase. Don't you just love Free Market Capitalism?

Thursday February 19, 2009

We left Phone Savan about 9:00 am for Vang Vieng. Went through Muong Soui, a place that I helped build a very long airfield, and from which I began a 3 week bulldozer walk down route 4/7 cleaning up the road for use in 1966. Went through Sala Phou Khoun, which is now a very busy intersection. When I went through it in 1966 there was hardly anything there. Boun Liang showed us a place where a gasoline tanker went over the side. It was driven by a friend of his, who was killed when the truck blew up, after its plunge over the side. Boun Liang surmised that the driver lost his brakes because he was in to high of a gear on a downgrade. There was scorched earth for about 30 meters around the tanker but the mountains did not turn into an inferno. This is because burning underbrush every year is a natural occurrence. There is a lesson here: California keep the brush down! Easy trip, excellent road the whole way, traffic was light so we were there in just under 6 hours. Staying at the Elephant Crossing again. Such hardship. The weather down here has changed. It is getting hot. Up north it was chilly. Got on the internet and sent some e mails.

Still trying to come to grips with the devastation we saw from the slash and burn agriculture. One other thing on that is the number of kids we saw coming out of the schools up there. The population is exploding, and that means more pressure on an already overtaxed agriculture system. Bob and I have been trying to come up with some alternatives but that is already ploughed ground.

Friday February 20, 2009

Left Vang Vieng about 10:00 am and arrived in Vientiane at 2:30 pm. I had a great sleep. Trip uneventful. Took the Ban Keun bypass. Saw some of the irrigation systems I worked on in 1968 or so, still there but not sure if they are being used. I did see substantial double cropping though. Saw at least three saw mills and they had logs. Passed a furniture manufacturing plant, but did not stop. Stopped at the Mali Nam Phu and checked in. Then paid for the car and gave Boun Liang a nice tip for all of his help. Total trip was 2400 kms. If we include the road trip to Ban Chiang from Udorn to NongKhai we managed to travel 2600kms. or so.

Walked down to the smoothie place and sat down for a real nice one. Bob and I had dinner with Frank and Charles Alton at the Sticky Fingers. Charles was Peace Corps in Thailand, and is now an Agriculture Economist. Bob and I had a lot of questions about what we saw up north. We felt that population pressure is creating the problem, at least in part. To many kids because the farmers are still thinking that they need 10 to get 5. Public health has improved child survival rates. Today you only need 6 to get 5. When passing through many of the villages along the route we saw a lot of kids coming out of school and I mean a lot. High density equals low crop yields because recycling Hai fields too soon, 5 years instead of 7-10 reduces yields so more hai is needed to stay even. This is creating land pressure, and there just isn't anymore. He said that there are rice strains from Turkey that will produce much more rice per hectare thus relieving land pressure and the need to recycle land sooner than optimum. I don't know if this rice strain is glutinous, but even if it isn't, it could be hybridized at the International Rice Research Institute IRRI to be so. He basically agreed with everything Bob and I have observed on the trip we made up north. We also talked about double cropping rice as too expensive in terms of water utilization. This is something that I have been questioning for years. Farmers should be planting cash crops that do not require as much water so they can plant larger hectorage because the same amount of water would go much further. This is especially so when double cropping during the dry season when water levels are low. We also talked about the percentage of food gathered from the forest that is necessary to the Lao diet. I always thought this number was about 30%, Charles thinks it is closer to 50%. So the destruction of the forests will ultimately make the Lao much more dependent on imports to supplement their diet.

One last point on the effects of swidden agriculture. It seemed to Bob and I that Laos is not the only country in the world with this problem. Is there any research that has been done to find out what other countries are doing to solve or ameliorate the consequences of slash and burn

agriculture. Certainly this problem is not germane to Laos. What other countries have to face this and what have they done? Vietnam, Thailand, China, Myanmar, Madagascar.... just to name a few. I am almost certain that there are alternatives that need to be explored.

There has been a dramatic change in the weather. Very hot. Four nights ago we were sitting around a campfire at our guesthouse in Vieng Thong dressed in sweatshirts and jackets and now into the nineties. Of course we were at a much higher elevation then, and much further north.

Saturday February 21, 2009

Had breakfast at the Scandinavian restaurant then went and made our reservations for our flight to Bangkok on Tuesday the 24th. Plane leaves at 1:50 so need to be at the airport no later than 12:00. Arranged for transport to the airport by Asia Vehicle Rental, free to us, and then went to the morning market to shop. I bought some place mats that should do the trick. The market has a well established gold and silver trade, more than 100 gold merchants and an equal amount in silver. Who is buying all of that gold? Exhausted from our shopping excursion, I don't know how you women do it, Bob and I took a break at the fruit shake shop. Banana and Papaya are my favorites. It is very hot today. Well into the nineties. Made tentative appointment with Sivixay for Monday evening to share our observations on the trip. Had dinner with Frank and Penny. Frank pointed out that in the Vientiane Times today there was an article discussing many of the things we talked about yesterday with Charles Alton, namely the destruction of the forests and the consequences thereof. The article also made it clear that the Lao still obtain at least 50% of their diet from the forest, and that forest is rapidly disappearing. The impact of its disappearance would have far reaching implications. It was as though someone had tape recorded our entire evenings discussion. Maybe someone had.

Sunday February 22, 2009

Went for breakfast at the Scandinavian place. Guess who shows up, Jacqui Chagon and her husband Roger Rumpf, accompanied by Sombath and his wife. Brief greetings all around, then we were off. Jacqui invited us over for lunch on the 23rd. Bob went to buy the complete collection of Collin Cottrell's Dr. Siri Paiboun mysteries, and I went to the Internet shop. Later on we went over to Frank's place to get his latest rendition of his newsletter called LEMA Lao English Media Articles. Much improved and I think it has real possibilities in attracting subscribers. We became charter member subscribers. To subscribe go to fwmanley@yahoo.com

Dinner with Art Crisfield. Art came to the hotel and brought with him Souk Somboun, my Lao language teacher from 1963 who has just retired from the State Department and is back in Laos with some very interesting projects in mind. Talked about a lot of stuff. About the devastation up north, possible solutions to it, newcrop substitutes for income, building housing with all of the amenities for retired Lao Americans, silos and drying facilities for corn, the dictionary, just a lot of stuff.

Monday February 23, 2009

Breakfast, then off to the Settha Palace to buy a gift for Gerry, next to the internet place to send e mails to Tom and Richard in Bangkok. Checked to make sure our ride to the airport is on, it is and back to the Mali to cool off. Hot season is back, mid nineties.

We had lunch today at Jacqui Chagnon's and Roger Rumpf's place along the Mekong River at km. 4 Thadua road. A real Lao house. When I asked about the density of the Hmong along the roads, Jacqui says that most of the Hmong moved along the roads on their own. A Survey taken a few years ago with interviews of men and women demonstrate that it was the women who wanted to be closer to the roads, as it saved them time and much effort, and gave them access to education and health care for their kids. Others I have talked with disagree, saying that the government "encouraged" them to move.

It really makes no difference why they moved because the results are the same. Population density has increased to the point that the land is fast reaching saturation and unsustainable crop yields. I don't know what it is like further east off of the roads, so I have no way to judge or estimate population density. My guess is that any concentration along the road system would have the same affect on land viability. When I was there before, the hills people preferred to live on isolated mountain ridges which spread population densities over a wider area. This allowed for a sustained swidden eco system.

These villages are right on the road. The slopes of the mountains in most of the villages we saw were almost vertical. The front of the house was on the road, and the back was supported by poles 3 and 4 meters high. The view from the back window would be spectacular, but I hope no one walks in their sleep. The end of the dream would be a real nightmare.

Only 1/3rd of the Hmong joined Vang Pao, 1/3rd became neutralists and 1/3rd became PL. They are all equally represented in the various provincial governments. According to Jacqui so called attacks by Hmong along the roads north and east of Vang Vieng were "highwaymen," violent robbers, and not remnants of Vang Pao's army. When the Lao army went after these thugs, Vang Pao's propaganda machine went into action, claiming genocide. At least that is one scenario, and the one Jacqui believes to be the truth.

Had dinner with Sivixay tonight at a restaurant on the Mekong river. We were early so had our choice of where to sit. We chose a table on the rail with a great view of the Mekong and watched the sunset. When we ordered Sivixay ordered Pa Beuk. This is the giant Mekong cat fish that is on the endangered species list. When I asked him about it, he said, "they raise the fish at fish farms north of Vientiane on the Nam Ngum River." Years ago, I remember having it for dinner when I was in Pakse. It is delicious. They also produce fresh water shrimp. I had

wondered how it was that shrimp was on most of the restaurant menus in Vientiane and readily available at the morning market.

We discussed ways that I could help. I need to have a government protocol, ie an official purpose for being here. Perhaps an NGO could hire me or I could establish my own NGO. Need to talk with Jacqui, perhaps her organization could do it. Maybe even try and get on with USAID. Not likely. Can't start my own NGO, even though the requirements are fairly simple, but restrictive in that 70% of funds have to be spent on projects. Overhead cannot exceed 30% of funds allocated.

I told Sivixay that I was very impressed and amazed at what the Lao Government has accomplished. It is truly impressive, especially so, given the limited resources available for infrastructure development. From what I can observe, it appears that the government has not undertaken a lot of foreign debt, to finance most of the capital intensive projects. What they have done is to take an interest in those projects as a part of their contribution, with options to purchase a bigger interest using earnings from their present share at a later date. Very wise. So in an economic downturn, while income may come down, at least there is not a lot of overhanging debt as well that has to be repaid. Most Lao still have ties to their rural past and can return to their villages and become farmers or live with their families until the economic downturn ends. This scenario would not displace workers as badly as in Thailand or other more economically developed countries.

Certainly there are areas and villages that have yet to benefit from the rural electrification projects, road construction and other infrastructure projects, but they are working on it. Long Thieng was only electrified at the end of last year. The poverty reduction program is making efforts to bring villages left out of the loop, so to speak, up to at least minimum standards. It is difficult for people who arrive from the States or any other developed country to understand what it was like just 10 years ago to say nothing about 30 or 40 years ago. They only see what is there now, and try to compare our standard of living to that of present day Laos but they have no way to judge how far the country has come. Believe me, they have come a long way.

Tuesday February 24, 2009

Paid bill at the Mali Nam Phu, Boun Liang showed up right on time and we headed for the airport. Flight, Thai Airways 691 was delayed one hour, so our arrival in Bangkok coincided with the rush hour. Now I know that all of you who live in LA have a pretty good idea of what a rush hour is, and it is not something that makes you high for an hour, although it can certainly raise your blood pressure and is probably the cause of many a stroke. Here in Bangkok, take the worst case of gridlock you have ever seen in LA on the San Diego frwy, and multiply it by a factor of 5 and then you have some idea of what Bangkok goes through every evening between 4-7. It took us 45 minutes to go 1/2 km. That's 500 meters or 5 foot ball fields in rough numbers.

Thai Airlines charged me \$14.00 for excess weight, not a lot but irritating. Strange, on the flight over I was Ok, and on the flight to Udorn, weight was ok, and I am much lighter than when I came in. When we arrived at the Federal I checked with the travel agent who informed me that on International flights, economy class, the weight limit is a **total** of 20 kgs., not 30kgs. per bag. The 30 kg per bag still applies to business and first class, and to American Airline companies, or airlines who fly to and from the US. This change took place in April last year. Bob's bags feel heavier than mine, and yet his went through without a hitch. I will know for sure on Friday when I fly out. Anyway we are at the Federal and I have scheduled some meetings tomorrow on the drill press clamp and the next day, and one on the day after that. Hopefully something will come out of them.

On the flight from Vientiane was an American, at least he appeared to be, who had a great big white gauze patch over his left eye. He was obviously coming to Bangkok for medical attention. It looked very serious, and served as a reminder that good medical attention in Laos is still an iffy thing.

Wednesday February 25, 2009

We got up early and set off to the German restaurant for breakfast. Too early, they don't open before 8:00. After coffee at the Federal we went back to the German restaurant for breakfast. Bob is off to the museum. Appointment for today has been rescheduled for tomorrow, so I could have gone to the museum with Bob. Called Gerry. Mac called, we will be meeting for breakfast instead of lunch tomorrow. Appointment with Richard is at 10:00 am. tomorrow and Tom is scheduled for about 2:00 pm. Tomorrow is going to be a full day.

Read most of the day or at least tried to. Kept falling asleep. How relaxing.

Thursday February 26, 2009

Bob and I met Mac at the Federal for coffee and then went over to the German restaurant for breakfast. Bob is going to carry some stuff home for Mac. Meeting with Richard at 10:00. We decided to keep trying. He will seek another machinist, but one with a small shop. Met with Tom at 2:00 and there seems to be some light at the end of the tunnel. He has discovered that part of the expense was a doubling of the purchase price of aluminum. So at \$3.00 per pound our cost was actually at \$6.00 a lb. There are some businesses that feel that they are in the materials business not in manufacturing. Some of my competitors do the same thing. I, on the other hand, only charge for the cost of the materials and the costs in obtaining them ie., shipping and handling. This should greatly reduce the Drill Press Clamp's costs. Tom is going to have a prototype made, and he will furnish the materials. That should give us a firm idea of the actual cost.

We ate dinner at a Spanish restaurant up Soi 11 towards Sukumvit. The food was delicious. On our way back to the hotel, we witnessed an incredible vitality, an energy that pervades the entire Thai economy. There was street music, food carts, mini-restaurants on the sidewalks, outdoor restaurants, pedestrians of all walks of life and nationalities, just jammed. Cars, motorcycles, tuk-tuks, taxis, loud exhausts, more music from a band playing at one of the open air restaurants, and what is more amazing not one automobile horn was blowing, in spite of the near misses constantly occurring. It was an amazing scene of choreographed chaos.

Bob leaves tomorrow morning at 6:30 am so has to get up about 4:00 am for the trek to Suvarnabhumi International Airport. Good thing, at that hour in the morning, I don't think there will be any traffic. My flight is at 7:00 pm so I will have to leave the hotel at 3:30 pm. It means that I will have to pay a half-day's fee for my room, but I can't see getting to the airport 7 hours early, and it will give me a chance to take a nap and shower before heading out. Can't believe it is over.

Friday February 27, 2009

Paid my tab at the hotel and hired a cab to go to the airport. The traffic getting to the toll road was total gridlock, six blocks that took 30 minutes. I arrived at the airport 3 hours early, but I did not care, I was there. It was the same gate as last year, and it took off on time. Plane was full, I had, for awhile the only empty seat next to me. but some guy's TV did not work and he transferred into "my" empty seat. My fantasy of a good sleep evaporated because of a technical glitch in his in flight TV. Flight was only 14 hours long because of a very strong tail wind. When I landed at LAX/ Bradley International Terminal, and got through immigration and baggage claim and headed out the door, the outside temperature was a chilly 61 degrees. There was a mob scene at the entrance of people who had come to pick up arriving passengers. Six planes landed at almost the same time, which explained the long lines of people waiting at immigration. Called Gerry and it took her about ½ hour to get to where I was at terminal 4 because of the mob scene at the International Terminal. Understand that we live about 2 miles from LAX, and if you miss all of the traffic lights it normally takes just 10 minutes to get there. This morning February 28, on the way to my studio it was a chilly 52. Back already? I can't believe the time went by so fast.

More Photos at

https://photos.google.com/album/AF1QipN_74vXCnxstrjvEj5ddVpKeRKDzRKj11bbr8E